

THAT SPARK OF THE BOY

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Hardly knowing what she was saying or thinking, she'd sat with her boy. He'd insisted on coming with her to the hospital, despite the hour and still in his pyjamas. She'd said to him,

'About our visit with Mr Awashi and his family today, it is better that you don't say too much to Daddy, if you don't mind. You don't, do you, darling?'

He had looked at her with those big bright eyes. People had said her eyes. 'But are you going to tell him?'

'Yes, of course, darling.'

'But I'm not to tell Daddy?'

'Not in detail, that's all. In fact I'd prefer you to leave it to Mummy.'

His eyes held hers, distrustful. He'd seen her earlier with Deepak. He was forcing her to ask, 'Do you mind?' Asking a boy of seven!

'What's going to happen to Vi? Will she die?'

'Don't say those words.'

'But they have to cut her leg off?'

She let out a sob, struggling to keep the rest of her torment and panic from him. Telling herself, if she let go, her boy would see her as he never had. It would sweep away his security. She must try to hold up.

'Only in the worst case scenario,' she managed to get out.

'I don't know what that means?'

He was the adult now, wary of her, questioning her. And this was almost more comprehendingly unbearable than what was happening down the corridor in the Emergency Ward.

'Adam,' she attempted to steady her voice, 'They will try and save Violet's leg. They are working to contain the infection, and will be doing everything they can to help her heal.'

'Will they ...'

'We have to trust that it's going to be all right.'

'And pray.'

She was surprised. 'That, too.'

'And can we see her now?'

'Not now.'

'Why not now? I want to see her. Have you told Daddy?'

Felix! There was so much feeling that came with this. She hadn't had a moment yet. But of course Adam was right.

'In a moment, darling, when I'm a little calmer ...'

'No, phone him now!'

'I will, darling, I will.'

Something cataclysmic was occurring inside her. She was heaved from her solidity: her feet were on cracking ice, there was black water underneath.

She tried to gather enough of herself to speak to Felix. But she just sat there.

‘Mummy, we’re going to phone Daddy,’ Adam insisted. He attempted to pull her to her feet.

She let herself be pulled. The blood ringing in her ears. She still couldn’t imagine what she would say, how she could possibly explain, but she knew Adam was right. Felix must come. She found the idea of him being there suddenly comforting. But as she headed down the corridor towards the public phone, she said to Adam, holding his hand tight – or was he holding hers? – ‘And you’ll remember, darling, what I said? Daddy doesn’t need to know all the details of our day, darling. The main thing is to tell him about Violet’s accident. The rest can come later.’

‘When later?’

‘When I tell you. Is that all right, my little man?’

It was his turn to sob. It was an odd sort of sound. One she’d never heard from him. He nodded, pointed to the phone. She picked up the receiver.

They’d avoided coming back to the topic ever again.

At 98-years-old, she was still sane in mind, lucid, with most of her faculties intact. Frail of body, though - well what can you expect? She only had one child in England: Violet. Violet had found this place in Eastbourne, and visited with reassuring regularity on Tuesdays and Fridays. She was a good daughter – and even – in the last years particularly – she dared to think, a close one. Violet and her children were her lifeblood, but, as was the way of things, it was her son Adam she mourned over, Adam she missed. And now that he was coming to visit in an hour’s time, she found herself both so longing to see his dear face, and so agitated she didn’t know if she could go through it again. Go through *what* exactly? Always that silly old mother’s hope that they would meet and connect in the old way: the knowledge that they probably would not. Judging by the last few years. And then afterwards, when he’d gone, a wishing she’d done more, said more, said something different. That he’d come back into the room and she’d have a little more energy to. To? *To find the way to unlock a door. Adam, my son –*

‘Yes,’ she said to the new care assistant who’d just asked her about the photo of the fair-haired little boy in a sailor suit. ‘That’s Adam, my son. Years ago. 1944, in Paignton, do you know it? Famous for its golden sands, or it was then. The children had been poorly for months, Adam with his asthma and never seemed to not have a cold or sore throat, and my husband had arranged for us to get to the sea ...’

‘What expressive eyes! Had you just arrived, he looks so excited doesn’t he? Couldn’t wait to get out of that outfit and run barefoot on the beach, if I know anything about boys.’

‘Oh, he had plenty of that,’ Olga said dreamily, ‘nothing but building sandcastles and scrambling in rock pools for days on end. Of course the war was still on, but the beach was open. There was hardly anyone else on it. Just the children and myself and – one other family.’ She peered at the photo being thus addressed. Funny how you stop looking at things.

‘It must have been pretty perfect!’ declared Sophie, the care assistant. ‘You can’t get away from people nowadays, I sometimes wish you could. Mrs Hauser ...? Mrs Hauser ...? Am I tiring you?’

But Mrs Hauser was somewhere else. Thinking about an unexploded bomb lying in wait in toxic water for her toddler daughter who’d gone wandering off while she’d been sitting on the breakwater with Deepak Awashi for ten fatal minutes, his one good arm round her waist. That’s what Adam had seen when he’d come to tell her ‘Vi’s gone.’

‘What do you mean, *gone*?’ He was seven.

She looked again at the picture of him in its heavy frame. It had faded considerably, some of contours of his face and clothes were quite ironed out. But still an essence of Adam-ness extruded. Other images came into her mind: Adam in his teens, matching Felix with jokes till tears streamed down their cheeks; Adam playing Scrabble and entirely convincing them of words he’d made up till the delight in his eyes gave him away; from later still, him larking around in the kitchen, spoof-dancing with Violet – when was that? Then one from what seemed only a handful of years ago – though it must have been much longer, when she could still drive – of him positively striding through the Arrivals Hall at Gatwick on those long legs of his, hair awry, seeking her out in the crowd. And now it was as if he had come up close, as if he was standing in front of her, and her heart lurched. She must dress. Hurry, hurry.

‘Yes, that’s right, dear,’ she answered the care assistant, ‘he’s over from Canada, staying tonight with my daughter, Violet Marshall, you haven’t met her yet, have you? She’s an illustrator of children’s books, I must show you some of them, sometime. ... What’s that about Adam? No, my dear, a flying visit, I expect ...’

Immediately after graduating, he’d taken up an English lectureship at the University of British Columbia, where he got tenure and had been there ever since. For a while he’d had a girlfriend who both Felix and she became fond of, a nice steady sort of girl – a colleague of his. But then it was over, they never fully knew the reason, and he married a scatty divorcee ten years younger than him, with three daughters, tawny hair that looked permanently windswept, and an enthusiasm for anything that smacked of the alternative. She didn’t stay at home, no, not Maya. She didn’t cook his meals, or share the financial responsibility of caring for the five children, her three girls and the two boys of Adam’s and hers that followed. She could be critical of or angry with Adam, which had pained Olga on their visits over. Felix had thought her quite a girl, though.

After Felix's death, Olga had reduced her trips to every other year. On the alternate years Adam brought the children to England to stay at the old house. These times she'd looked forward to. But after the boys left home, the family holidays grew more rare. Eventually Adam's visits became a matter of a day here and there, on the way to or from a conference in Europe. Maya had accompanied him one year, the two seeming happier, even holding hands. 'I do wish you'd come over for longer,' she'd urged. Maya had said bluntly, 'He doesn't like England.'

'What?' She was shocked.

'You and Vi and the family, that's what he comes for.'

'Aren't there things you still miss?' she asked him. 'Places you enjoy revisiting?'

He sat silently considering it. 'Not any more, except that you are here, and Vi.'

'And Ben and Thomas?' Vi's boys.

'Yes, of course.'

'So nice if we could all be together,' she said longingly. 'At the old house, if Vi's up for it. Or we could rent somewhere for a fortnight. Some holiday place?'

'He says England gives him the spooks,' said Maya. 'That the countryside depresses him. That the moment he lands here he gets depressed. That's what he says.'

'Maya, you're not being tactful,' warned Adam.

'Oh, don't mind *tact*,' Olga said with some asperity. 'Far better the truth.' Still, this was startlingly unwelcome news.

Then she said,

'Well, I suppose that it's good that you've made your life so fully out there. And the children have done so well. Don't let's spoil the few days we have. Now tell me all about them, and about your work, I want to know everything ...'

When was that conversation about him not liking England? She had moved out of the old house by then, of that she was pretty certain. Felix was gone, buried in the Jewish cemetery in Hove, he wouldn't hear of Duddlescombe graveyard.

She must have been living in the highly ordinary but practical bungalow at the top of the village. But the views were spectacular, and it was warm and the floors were even, and it meant that she could go on living on her own until well after her birthday. With Violet popping in every day, or the boys when they were around.

Her ninetieth in Alfriston, that was a lovely occasion. And thinking back to that May, she remembered now that this is when it took place. A few days before her birthday. Adam was over, and he and Maya and she and her black lab were walking through the bluebell woods at Bates Green. Clouds of bluebells, she can still see them as they used to be (hopefully, still are) and their reflection in the various ponds. And that divine smell. She wouldn't be

able to smell them now, one of the many things you have to learn to live without, but she had then.

It had been an overcast day. You really want bright sunlight on the bluebells to get the full effect, and Maya stepping through the puddles had felt cold and regretted again that she hadn't brought a thicker sweater. She'd said something like, 'In Vancouver everyone's jogging and biking the ocean trails in shorts right now.' It was in the second week of May and in some of the sections of the wood the bluebells were past their best but in other more shaded patches they were in full bloom.

The rain hadn't helped. The rain and the mud.

'I should have borrowed your wellington boots,' Maya had said.

And in the café, 'I'm a woman for the wild places myself. Mountains, lakes, the ocean. Walking round these paths cheek by jowl with so many other dogs on leads and kids and things, I get a kind of cramped feeling however great the bluebells are. Sorry, Olga, but it's not my thing, though it might be some people's.'

'You always used to love the bluebells,' Olga said to Adam. 'I thought you'd want to see them since you are over at this time?'

He pressed her arm. 'I love seeing them, Mother, you know that. It was a good idea. Thank you. And are you ready for a cup of tea now? I remember how good their cakes are.'

She walked between them to the café. She used a stick and she wasn't fast, but she still walked, then.

After tea they went back to the bungalow and played Canasta. She was particularly tired that evening and Maya finished the meal she had partly prepared before they went out.

Adam, sitting with her over a sherry, had said, as he used to say often but hadn't for years,

'Don't mind Maya, Mother. She means well. She's just going through a bad patch.'

'Is she?'

'She's lost her bearings a bit since the kids have left home. Oh, she does all sorts of things, keeps busy, but you know – you know – women's stuff. I don't enquire too much.'

'Perhaps you ought to.'

Adam looked at his mother thoughtfully.

'... Anyway, don't take it on board, that's all I'm saying, Mother.'

'I'll try not to.' But there was something that was gnawing at her. Maya had said in the café that Adam found England depressing. *Adam*, not her. She wanted to ask Adam if it were true, but she dreaded him having to lie rather than answer in the affirmative if it was. And while she thought lots of things about her daughter-in-law, she didn't think that she would actually make this up.

She sighed a deep, sad sigh. Adam sipped his sherry. Outside the gulls circled and squalled. She suddenly felt terribly, terribly tired.

A few days after this it was her ninetieth birthday.

But rather than fading away, when the summer came she had got a whole new lease of life. Violet had set her up with an email account and she had taken a course to enable her to feel comfortable using it. She could email. She was capable of taking on board “the how” best in the mornings when her mind was at its most lucid, but the devil of trouble now was in being able to dream up something to write about: it was all much the same these days.

How hard to keep the link with this son of hers. Of course she didn’t go over there any more. It had been a long while, and a long while too since Maya had come here with him. That visit for her ninetieth may have been the last time. Now Adam came on his own. He didn’t stay with her. Well, he couldn’t here. But mostly he didn’t stay with Violet either. He preferred to use the flat that friends of his had in Islington, and he’d nip down for a few hours. And maybe again a few days later.

He brought a cake or flowers. Hyacinths or narcissi if he came at that time of the year. He gave her the impression that on his way to her room he had spent quite a time “interviewing” the staff on duty to make sure she was comfortable and not lacking anything extra he could provide. He would offer to buy her new bedsocks or a bedjacket. He would bring her his most recent articles, pictures of the now grown-up children with spouses and babies. Yes, she had great grandchildren over there she hadn’t seen.

Then they would run out of steam. She could sense Adam’s mind moving delicately around what he could tell her. She had very little to tell him. She savoured what she could, an incident that had struck her as funny, or something on the news – she still listened to the radio – if she could remember long enough.

What do you want for your children? He had become a full professor. He had published books and articles. He had had a long marriage that against the odds had become less tempestuous and settled down as the years went by. And she was an odd one, Maya, not always easy to take; but she’d opened him up, she and Canada, to possibilities that probably wouldn’t have materialised here. All that hiking they used to do, the skiing, their summer cabin on – what was the island called? When she looked at him sitting there opposite her she tried to deduce – *Are you happy?* Wouldn’t she know if he wasn’t? But something – that spark of the boy – had gone from him. She couldn’t find it any more, the old Adam, the real Adam, or what she thought of as the real Adam.

She couldn’t touch him, find him. Was he different with others? With his friends? He must be.

She sometimes had the impression that while she and Violet had grown closer with the passing years, Adam, returning, liked her less. But was that just an old woman’s imagining, or was it an embarrassment with her ageing? No, it was more than that –

She remembered when he had last been over, sitting in the small armchair by the window, over there. And she had been sitting opposite, not far away, in her relaxer by the bed. And she had wondered, *are you happy?* And found the answer unfathomable. She would know, wouldn’t she, if he wasn’t?

And by the obvious signs he had lots to be pleased about, his family, his books, a marriage that had held against the odds. And as far as she could tell the bond had grown stronger as the years went by, just as it had ultimately done with herself and Felix. He was still skiing, and they still had their cabin on – she knew just where it was, she could position it on the ferry route between Vancouver and Victoria ... but the name ... oh the name ... it was like having one of those floaters in your eye, tantalising, elusive.

She thought about him, Adam, how lithe he was. How he and Maya swam regularly at the local sports centre. How he hadn't had an asthma attack in years, or any allergies, he said, since he'd moved over there. Pender! She pounced on it, pinning it down, the name of the island where they'd built a cabin. When Maya wasn't acting up or making someone or other uncomfortable, she and Felix had enjoyed their summer visits to Pender. She could see it all, the green and dastardly cold sea – and so clear. The sand dollar shells, the log-strewn beaches, the seals following them when they went out in the boats. The salmon and the oysters they used to barbecue ...

But she was getting off track, it was Adam, her passionate boy, she needed to get back to. And how that passion of his had dispersed somewhere along the way. Maya had bags of it. She was difficult, but she was alive. Violet was alive, too, but her own dear son, you couldn't quite touch him, know where you were. Was it just her? Or had Maya somehow subsumed all the passion there was to have? It made her sad this, and she must turn her mind from what you can't change, can't be helped, you can't even see all your way around. We are all egocentric in our recalling of events, she reminded herself.

Yet she couldn't help wondering whether the kernel of the change hadn't occurred further back, when she'd inadvertently made him complicit at the time of Violet's accident. Was the effect of that period in their lives, after all, as pivotal in shaping Adam's personality as it was Vi's? Or more so, because whatever he'd experienced went underground? Certainly he was more watchful with her for a while, but still, to appearances, the same boy. *You wouldn't have known.* Violet was the one whose physical and emotional traumas took up the space – and how kind he was with her through her multiple operations. Yet had one small part of him been compelled to grow up before he was ready? And did that partly explain, later in adulthood, his passivity with Maya, his distance from her?

She suspected something along these lines, even if it wasn't all of it. She'd probably never know for certain. And even if she did, she couldn't change it, not now. It was – what happened. The regrets you live with, however many years it takes you to face them.

When Sophie returned, she was sitting quite still. 'Mrs Hauser, your son is here, he's popped over to have a word with Matron. ... Is there any help you need?'

'No thank you, Sophie, dear, I can manage.'

She combed her hair, made her way to the recliner. Discovered she was steadier now. Ready to see her son's face appear around the door. And she

thought, with a blessed burst of energy – well, they may not have anything to say to one another today, they just may not. Or they may find something, after all. *You just never know.*
