THE BLUE TOMB

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We untied the little boat, my brother and I, and dropped it overboard into the still waters off the island of Vido, opposite Old Corfu port. Climbing down, we rowed ashore and at the beach stepped out into shallow water. Slimy pebbles, yellow with algae, slithered and clacked underfoot. There were no little fish, no scuttling crabs, no seabirds wheeled overhead, just a strange hush, broken by the phantom cry of a pheasant in the woods.

We pulled the boat up the beach and climbed over sharp volcanic rocks to reach a red earth path under pine trees. It was lined with coarse sage plants and wound round the edge of the shoreline like a bloody scar.

The air was stifling after the breezy sail we'd had from the Greek mainland. Two dolphins had come up at speed through the glassy sea, curving under the bow, turning their white bellies up to eye us directly. Above the sound of the hull slicing through water and the soft beat of the sail, we both heard their continuous chattering clicks.

When he was still small, my brother swam underwater for worryingly long periods of time. He'd stay in the sea long after I'd climbed out to sit by my mother, and I'd scan the shallows, waiting desperately for his glistening head to pop up. My mother would remind me then that he was born with a caul on his head which would protect him from drowning.

We walked past a broken wooden jetty and an abandoned house with empty flagpoles. To one side, a coloured map set in a frame promised an old English fort, a Martello tower, a scout camp and two seals, drawn in silhouette to the north of the island. Next to the map was a large bronze plaque, some kind of memorial, covered in Cyrillic writing.

My brother scanned the incomprehensible text. 'Aha,' he said. 'I see.'

Then we noticed the single French sentence at the bottom and leaned in to translate. *The Serbian people … are eternally grateful to the people of Greece … for interring those Serbians who died on this island … in The Blue Tomb*.

'Some kind of mausoleum?' I said.

'Could be,' my brother said, 'I couldn't find anything out about the island in the guide books. It was like it had been deleted.' He looked up the slope ahead. 'Shall we make for the fort? Should be nearby. It might take an hour to walk round the island. You up for that?' I nodded.

He started up the path, the familiar steady tramp, his broad back above strong calves. He was looking more and more like our father every day – the set of his jaw as he tied a rope, the shape of his head and shoulders above the water when he swam, the way he moved the same strong fingers on his beer glass as he spoke. I glanced back at the plaque, and at the very top noticed a small bronze boat with a boatman standing in the stern. He was ferrying a cargo of corpses, piled high, jaws agape, legs and arms hanging stiffly over the sides.

I ran up the slope and fell into step alongside my brother, saying nothing.

We hadn't spent a whole week together for years, what with work and all the children; just a snatched lunch or the occasional long weekend. When the kids were small and he was working in Michigan, we all stayed together in a log cabin on a lake. One afternoon, the two of us decided to swim to the tiny island in the middle – just us, alone in the world, in that great expanse of water with the loons crying overhead, the fathomless dark beneath and the light stretching forever above.

Our path narrowed. We walked in single file as we entered a dark wood. Fallen trees lay in contorted positions. Aloes strewed flaccid leaves across the forest floor. Sometimes a cypress or an old neglected olive broke the endless lines of pines.

'There be monsters in here,' he said, grinning.

We took monsters seriously as children. I guarded him from them when he slept in the big black pram outside the back door. On the label stitched to the edge of the net covering his pram was a huge white stork carrying a baby off in its sharp, pointed beak. I'd sit for hours glued to the back step, watching the sky wide-eyed with dread.

The wood ended and we walked into hot sunlight, out on to an open slope of spindly thistles running down to the sea. Thirty or forty seagulls rose screaming, tutting and wheeling, taking turns to swoop low over our heads. We walked quickly through air thick with their disapproval and the fishy smell of guano.

On we tramped through the heat. My brother's hair stuck to the back of his neck. He'd had a mass of soft brown curls as a toddler. There was an old ciné film of him climbing out of the paddling pool, his towelling nappy sagging against Michelin Man legs. With three older siblings, he'd acquired the necessary stubbornness of the youngest child, as well as a fierce determination to keep up with us, often resulting in injury. Once, I came out into the garden to see him in the final stages of sawing off the branch he was sitting on. He plummeted down and landed with a thump on the turf below, then rose stoically, dusting himself off. Later, when we were trampolining on our beds, he flew into a long mirror, leaving a cartoon outline in smashed glass. Even then he stood up smiling, until his thigh gushed blood. Our parents took him off to hospital for stitches, locking the bedroom door and leaving the rest of us peering through Bluebeard's keyhole, wondering if he would die.

And here I was, all these years later, still worrying about him. It was the way he'd carelessly mentioned the heart scan; how the consultant, looking at his results, had said, 'Well, you don't see one of those very often,' referring to the huge artery entering his heart, compensating for the tiny unformed one. Exactly the same as our father's. They were the same age now. The age Dad was when he died.

The path ahead split in two. We choose to go inland, in search of the promised fort. We scoured the woods but only found a broken line of lichened stones and several piles of rubble.

'Not much to recommend this place so far,' my brother said.

'No,' I replied, passing a rabbit, blinded by myxomatosis. 'Someone in the bar last night called it Execution Island, but wouldn't say why.'

We retraced our steps and arrived at a wooden *Scout Camp* signpost pointing downhill. There were empty cabins, rundown shower blocks, a BBQ area with mouldering plastic white chairs, and a long stainless steel oven rimed with green. Three male pheasants suddenly flew up squawking, making our hearts race. We stood watching their womenfolk trundle away through dead grass.

On the way down to the beach were clearings littered with strange structures where no grass grew. One, soaring into the air at an acute angle, was topped by the Serbian flag and held in place by tensely strung metal wires. Another, an oversized wooden ladder, lay shattered, collapsed on the floor, looking as if it had toppled under the weight of too many children.

The path climbed up and away from the shore. Broken wooden bridges set high in the trees hung aimlessly in mid-air. Long dilapidated walkways led off into open canyons. We stared at the fallen trees teetering over the edge of the vast grassy base of a crumbling Martello tower. Were children let loose on this island? Given deliberately dangerous structures to play on?

Keen to get away, we walked further uphill. On a high outcrop facing the sea was a giant cairn of stones, like a burial mound. We looked at it in dismay – and that was when we were disturbed by a sudden harsh cry. It came again, and again, echoing round the bay, insistent, urgent. A seal. We ran to the edge of the cliff and peered down along the shoreline, scanning the cliffs and the rock pools below. We

waited, listening. It came again – from a square wooden structure looking like a floating swimming pool way out in the bay.

It was trapped out there, enmeshed in a sea-cage, imprisoned in an island of water. I thought of it waiting for food, waiting to perform: to balance a ball on its nose, flip its tail, roll over, while wild tuna and dolphin sped past.

Dark thoughts hung about us as we turned from the coast and took the path inland. As it plunged downhill, I remembered how we had once snorkelled over the wreck of an ancient sunken ship, knowing that everyone on board had drowned. We swam over the rusting portholes greened with seaweed, like faces looking upwards.
And though the hot sun seared our shoulders and backs, a deathly cold had risen up from the ocean floor.

By the time we descended to the rocky shore and the sea, we were incredibly hot. We decided to cool off, to swim back to the yacht pulling the little boat behind us.

That night, as I lay in port, listening to the fish nibbling the algae on the keel, I thought about what we did not know as we swam back to the yacht but were told later that evening: that Vido was a hospital island where injured Serbians, fleeing from the war in 1916, were brought. That it was an isolation hospital where so many people died they'd had to bury them in the shallow sea, in what they called The Blue Tomb.

Five thousand bodies weighed down with rocks; rotting in blue waters.

We didn’t see the people who waded in carrying the dead in barrowfuls. We didn’t see the boatman steadying his boat as they piled them high. We didn't know. We decided to cool off, wetting our faces in the waters of the dead – swimming in that sea full of death-memory around and about us, licking at the ends of our hair, patting its fingertips on our necks.

The water was thick and full as we walked out into it, unaware of the finger bones, the small feet bones, the sloping shoulder bones lying

on the bottom, unaware of the eye sockets looking up from the seabed at our wavering sun-refracted bodies.

As I swam out pulling the little boat behind me, I turned to look for my brother. I watched him wade in and plunge underwater. I waited while the water he'd displaced rolled dashing on the beach and was sucked back in. I waited for him to come back up.

And eventually, when he did, his face was glistening, his eyes bright.

Alive.

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