Sacrifice

S. J. Bolton

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The corpse I could cope with. it was the context that threw me.

We who make our living from the frailties of the human body accept, almost as part of our terms and conditions, an ever increasing familiarity with death. For most people, an element of mystery shrouds the departure of the soul from its earthly home of bone, muscle, fat and sinew. For us, the business of death and decay is gradually but relentlessly stripped bare, beginning with the introductory anatomy lesson and our first glimpse of human forms draped under white sheets in a room gleaming with clinical steel.

Over the years, I had seen death, dissected death, smelled death, prodded, weighed and probed death, sometimes even heard death (the soft, whispery sounds a corpse can make as fluids settle) more times than I could count. And I'd become perfectly accustomed to death. I just never expected it to jump out and yell 'Boo!'

Someone asked me once, during a pub-lunch debate on the merits of various detective dramas, how I'd react if I came across a real live body. I'd known exactly what he meant and he'd smiled even as the daft words left his mouth. I'd told him I didn't know. But I'd thought about it from time to time. What would I do if Joe Cadaver were to catch me by surprise? Would professional detachment click in, prompting me to check for vitals, make mental notes of condition and surroundings; or would I scream and run?

And then came the day I found out.

It was just starting to rain as I climbed into the mini-excavator I'd hired that morning. The drops were gentle, almost pleasant, but a dark cloud overhead told me not to expect a light spring shower. We might be in early May but, this far north, heavy rain was still an almost daily occurrence. It struck me that digging in wet conditions might be dangerous, but I started the engine even so.

Jamie lay on his side about twenty yards up the hill. Two legs, the right hind and fore, lay along the ground. The left pair stuck out away from his

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body, each hoof hovering a foot above the turf. Had he been asleep, his pose would have been comic; dead, it was grotesque. Swarms of flies were buzzing around his head and his anus. Decomposition begins at the moment of death and I knew it was already mustering speed inside Jamie. Unseen bacteria would be eating away at his internal organs. Flies would have laid their eggs and within hours the maggots would hatch and start tearing their way through his flesh. To cap it all, a magpie perched on the fence near by, his gaze shifting from Jamie to me.

Goddamned bird wants his eyes, I thought, his beautiful, tender brown eyes. I wasn't sure I was up to burying Jamie by myself, but I couldn't just sit by and watch while magpies and maggots turned my best friend into a takeaway.

I put my right hand on the throttle and pulled it back to increase the revs. I felt the hydraulics kick in and pushed both steering sticks. The digger lurched forwards and started to climb.

Reaching the steeper part of the hill, I calculated quickly. I would need a big hole, at least six, maybe eight feet deep. Jamie was a fair-sized horse, fifteen hands and long in the back. I would have to dig an eight-foot cube on sloping ground. That was a lot of earth, the conditions were far from ideal and I was no digger driver; a twenty-minute lesson in the plant-hire yard and I was on my own. I expected Duncan home in twenty-four hours and I wondered if it might, after all, be better to wait. On the fence-post the magpie smirked and did a cocky little side-step shuffle. I clenched my teeth and pushed the controls forward again.

In the paddock to my right, Charles and Henry watched me, their handsome, sad faces drooping over the fence. Some people will tell you that horses are stupid creatures. Never believe it! These noble animals have souls and those two were sharing my pain as the digger and I rolled our way up towards Jamie.

Two yards away I stopped and jumped down.

Some of the flies had the decency to withdraw to a respectful distance as I knelt down beside Jamie and stroked his black mane. Ten years ago, when he'd been a young horse and I was a house officer at St Mary's, the love of my life – or so I'd thought at the time – had dumped me. I'd driven, heart wrenched in two, to my parents' farm in Wiltshire, where Jamie had been stabled. He'd poked his head out of his box when he heard my car. I'd walked over and stroked him gently on the nose before letting my head fall on to his. Half an hour later, his nose was soaked in my tears and he hadn't moved an inch. Had he been physically capable of holding me in his arms, he would have done.

Jamie, beautiful Jamie, as fast as the wind and as strong as a tiger. His great, kind heart had finally given up and the last thing I was ever going to be able to do for him was dig a bloody great hole.

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I climbed back into the digger, raised its arm and lowered the bucket. It came up half-full of earth. Not bad. I swung the digger round, dumped the earth, swung back and performed the same sequence again. This time, the bucket was full of compact, dark brown soil. When we first came here, Duncan joked that if his new business failed, he could become a peat farmer. Peat covers our land to a depth of between one and three yards and, even with the excavator, it was making the job heavy work.

I carried on digging.

After an hour, the rain-clouds had fulfilled their promise, the magpie had given up and my hole was around six feet deep. I'd lowered the bucket and was scooping forward when I felt it catch on something. I glanced down, trying to see round the arm. It was tricky – there was a lot of mud around by this time. I raised the arm a fraction and looked again. Something down there was getting in the way. I emptied the bucket and lifted the arm high. Then I climbed out of the cabin and walked to the edge of the hole. A large object, wrapped in fabric stained brown by the peat, had been half pulled out of the ground by the digger. I considered jumping down before realizing that I'd parked very close to the edge and that peat – by this time very wet – was crumbling over the sides of the hole.

Bad idea. I did not want to be trapped in a hole in the ground, in the rain, with a tonne and a half of mini-excavator toppled on top of me. I climbed back into the cab, reversed the digger five yards, got out and returned to the hole for another look.

And I jumped down.

Suddenly the day became quieter and darker. I could no longer feel the wind and even the rain seemed to have slackened – I guessed much of it had been wind-driven. Nor could I hear clearly the crackle of the waves breaking on the nearby bay, or the occasional hum of a car engine. I was in a hole in the ground, cut off from the world, and I didn't like it much.

The fabric was linen. That smooth-rough texture is unmistakeable. Although it was stained the rich, deep brown of the surrounding soil I could make out the weave. From the frayed edges appearing at intervals I could see that it had been cut into twelve-inch-wide strips and wrapped around the object like an oversized bandage. One end of the bundle was relatively wide, but then it narrowed down immediately before becoming wider again. I'd uncovered about three and a half feet but more remained buried.

Crime scene, said a voice in my head; a voice I didn't recognize, never having heard it before. Don't touch anything, call the authorities.

Get real, I replied. You are not calling the police to investigate a bundle of old jumble or the remains of a pet dog.

I was crouched in about three inches of mud that were rapidly becoming four. Raindrops were running off my hair and into my eyes. Glancing up, I

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saw that the grey cloud overhead had thickened. At this time of year the sun wouldn't set until at least ten p.m. but I didn't think we were going to see it again today. I looked back down. If it was a dog, it was a big one.

I tried not to think about Egyptian mummies, but what I'd uncovered so far looked distinctly human in shape and someone had wrapped it very carefully. Would anyone go to that much trouble for a bundle of jumble? Maybe for a well-loved dog. Except it didn't seem to be dog-shaped. I tried to run my finger in between the bandages. They weren't shifting and I knew I couldn't loosen them without a knife. That meant a trip back to the house.

Climbing out of the hole proved to be a lot harder than jumping in and I felt a fl ash of panic when my third attempt sent me tumbling back down again. The idea that I'd dug my own grave and found it occupied sprang into my head like a punch-line missing a joke. On my fourth attempt I cleared the edge and jogged back down to the house. At the back door I realized my wellington boots were covered with wet, black peat and I knew I wouldn't be in the mood for washing the kitchen floor later that evening. We have a small shed at the back of our property. I went in, pulled off my boots, replaced them with a pair of old trainers, found a small gardening trowel and returned to the house.

The telephone in the kitchen glared at me. I turned my back on it and took a serrated vegetable knife from the cutlery drawer. Then I walked back to the . . . my mind kept saying grave site.

Hole, I told myself firmly. It's just a hole.

Back in it I crouched down, staring at my unusual find, for what felt like a long time. I had an odd feeling that I was about to set off along a hitherto untrodden path and that, once I took the first step, my life would change completely and not necessarily for the better. I even considered climbing out and filling in the hole again, digging another grave for Jamie and never telling anyone what I'd seen. I crouched there, thinking, until I was so stiff and cold I had to move. Then I picked up the trowel.

The earth was soft and I didn't have to dig for long before I'd uncovered another ten inches of the bundle. I took hold of it round the widest part and pulled gently. With a soft slurping noise the last of it came free.

I reached for the end of the bundle I'd uncovered first and tugged at the linen to loosen it. Then I inserted the tip of the knife and, holding tight with my left hand, drew the knife upwards.

I saw a human foot.

I didn't scream. In fact, I smiled. Because my first feeling as the linen fell away was enormous relief: I must have dug up some sort of tailor's dummy, because human skin is never the colour of the foot I was looking at. I let out a huge breath and started to laugh.

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Then stopped.

Because the skin was the exact same colour as the linen that had covered it and the peat it had lain in. I reached out. Indescribably cold: undoubtedly organic. Moving my fingers gently I could feel the bone structure beneath the skin, a callus on the little toe and a patch of rough skin under the heel. Real after all, but stained a rich, dark brown by the peat.

The foot was a little smaller than my own and the nails had been manicured. The ankle was slender. I'd found a woman. I guessed she would have been young, in her twenties or early thirties.

I looked up at the rest of the linen-wrapped body. At the spot where I knew the chest would be was a large patch, roughly circular in shape and about fourteen inches in diameter, where the linen changed colour, becoming darker, almost black. Either something peculiar in the soil had affected this patch of linen or it had been stained before she'd been buried.

I really didn't want to see any more; I knew I had to call the authorities, let them deal with it. But somehow, I couldn't stop myself from taking hold of the darker linen and making another cut. Three inches, four, six. I pulled the cloth apart to see what was beneath.

Even then I didn't scream. On legs that didn't feel like my own I stood up and backed away until I came up against the side of the pit. Then I turned and leaped as if for my life. Clambering out, I was surprised by the sight of the dead horse just yards away. I had forgotten Jamie. But the magpie had not. He was perched on Jamie's head, digging furiously. He looked up, guiltily; then, I swear, he smirked at me. A lump of shiny tissue, dripping blood, bulged from his beak: Jamie's eye.

That was when I screamed.

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