
Opening Extract from...

The Son

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Translated by Adriana Hunter

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Chapter 1

Still looking for words
That say something
Where you look for the people
Who no longer say anything
And still finding words
That can say something
Where you find people
Who can no longer say anything?

Erich Fried

Dad is having new experiences. Like not getting through a day without crying for five full minutes, or three blocks of ten minutes, or a whole hour. That's new. His tears stop, start again, stop once more, then come back, etc. All sorts of varieties of sobbing, but not a day without any. It gives life a different structure. There are sudden tears; a single gesture, word or image and there they are. There are tears with no apparent cause, stupidly there. There are tears with an unfamiliar flavour; no halting breaths, none of the usual gurning, not even the sniffling, just tears flowing.

With him, it tends to be in the morning that he feels like crying.

On the eleventh day after I died, Dad went to take my duvet to the cleaners. Walking up the rue du Couédic, his arms laden with my bedding, his nose buried in it. He thinks he's smelling my smell. Actually, it stinks; I'd never had those sheets washed, or that duvet. Days I'd been sleeping in them, months and months. He doesn't find them offensive now. Quite the opposite: there's still something of me in those white depths he's carrying to the cleaners, like someone bearing the holy sacrament. Dad's crying with his nose in folds of cotton. He doesn't look people in the eye, makes detours, going much further than he needs to, turning right on to rue Obscure, walking down it, then back up, on to rue le Bihan, rue Émile-Zola, les Halles, four hundred metres instead of the one hundred it should take. He's making the most of it. He has one more fix of the duvet and finally opens the door to the shop.

Yuna the Wasted Talent is there, feeding coins into an automatic washing machine. Dad can't hang about. Condolences, etc. The manager – more condolences, etc. – relieves him of the duvet. Dad would have liked the exchange to last a little longer: a queue, a phone call from a customer, a delivery, a thunderstorm, just so it went on long enough for him to carry on breathing in the last dregs of my smell. Dad hands it over; he's losing it, losing it.

Back home, he finds the dog chewing my slippers. My smell's on them too. Come on, Dad, you're not going to squabble with Yanka and start sucking on my stinking slippers, are you?

How long will the dog go on recognising my smell? Worth checking in, say, three months: a hundred days, that's perfect, the usual state of grace for newly appointed heads of state. But the state of grace for the newly dead, the period when everything makes you think of them, when just mentioning their name makes you cry, how long's that? A hundred days, a year, three years? We'll have a chance to measure this objectively. How long will Yanka go on bounding over to my slippers to relish the smell of them and the leather? At what point will Mum and Dad stop searching reverently for the tiniest trace of me? How long will they carry on deliberately immersing themselves in things that make them cry? Will I go on presiding over every moment of their lives? Interesting questions. Go on, Dad, admit it, sometimes in between two sobs you wonder about all this too. But it feels obscene to think of the future; now that I'm dead, you've forgotten there even is a future.

And it's chaos in your new world. You're inheriting things, Dad, but these are no gifts. 'Sweet dreams, my love, your Nanie who loves you.' 'Good night, my little weasel.' It's one of the

nicknames my girlfriend gave me, and Dad's slightly embarrassed to come across it in the saved messages on my mobile. But he can't help himself: he delves, delves through everything I left behind. Her telling me she loves me, obviously he was expecting that. Having to work out that I called her 'my Nanie', ordinary enough. The nickname 'little weasel' bothers him. He'll have to do some research into weasels. Why did Marie call me that? Because I nibbled her ears, her lips, her breasts? Google says weasels are nocturnal. Is it because I stayed up till all hours?

Dad doesn't like nicknames. You'll never know why it was 'little weasel' – unless you admit to Marie that you read her texts to me. I'd be surprised if you dare do that any time soon.

Also found this evening, in the depths of the mobile, is this text dated 26 September, a month before I died: 'Star of redemption, good Lion, news: now in Reims, wonderful really seeing the cathedral.' Dad deciphers it feverishly. This message, he's sure, is about the trip to Amsterdam that I went on with Romain just before my death. I'd lied. I'd said we were going to Reims. Mum and Dad would have freaked if I'd told them I was actually heading for hash heaven – an inevitable project for a guy of twenty-one; you must have done the same yourself, Dad, forty years ago, didn't you? After Amsterdam, Romain really did go to Reims. I came back to Brittany to return the car we'd

had so much trouble borrowing. It was from Reims that Romain sent me that text.

Still, that 'Star of redemption' really is enigmatic. It'll be years before you allow yourself to ask Romain about it. For now, you're just inheriting puzzles.

When people asked Dad what his star sign was, he used to snigger. He said he couldn't give a flying fuck what he was – the scales, the crab, the virgin – even less what his ascendant was. He would add that he did know one thing, the name of his descendant: 'Lion', me. Now that I've died, Dad hasn't got anything: no ascendant or descendant.

At 12.45 on 29 October 2003, I had an appointment at the university department for preventive medicine. The problem is, I died on 25 October, four days earlier. When did I make that appointment? That's what Dad wants to know. He's seen that card twice, perhaps even three times, since he started diligently sorting my papers into some understandable order. 'University preventive medicine' – that was all he saw on the small typed card I'd kept: 'University preventive medicine, 29 October, 12.45 with Mrs …', followed by an ellipsis, not giving the name.

When he finds this card, he's in the turmoil of his first proper week of mourning, when the ceremonies are over and the friends have left. Solitude, that's when death really begins. Dad's spent the day sifting through my things, crying between

phone calls, constantly blowing his nose without the excuse of a dust allergy. He resigns himself to throwing away my old school books from Year 11 and Year 12, after meticulously rereading their accumulations of uselessness, just in case, somewhere between an English lesson and a maths lesson, I'd left some note or drawing, something personal that would act as a message to him. He finds nothing, no signs, nothing but the wafflings of a pupil who wasn't really listening to a boring teacher. After hours of frantic searching – and I could actually call it prying, Dad; okay, so I'm dead, but really – he now suddenly notices, right at the bottom of the appointment card that's been bugging him, a detail jotted in pencil, by hand, in tiny writing. A barely visible piece of information, but an essential one: I didn't have an appointment with just any old doctor who happened to be free that particular day for just any old annual check-up; I had a very specific appointment with 'the psychiatrist, Mrs Le Gouellec'. Written like that, discreetly in pencil: 'the psychiatrist, Mrs Le Gouellec'. A handwritten note in someone else's writing, not mine. So I'd definitely asked to see the psychiatrist of my own accord.

That changes everything.

Dad's gripped by a feeling of anguish he's had before. One that niggled him as soon as I died. He thought he'd driven it away, but here it is again, like a thunderbolt. It all comes back up to the surface. For some time now he has been carrying

within him a firm conviction, like a form of madness, and now it erupts once more: the immeasurable power of the subconscious. A manic belief in desire and the soul. I live because I want to. Therefore I die because I … A madness that daren't even finish the sentence.

Dad has already asked himself a thousand times whether I really did die because I was struck down by sheer bad luck: a nasty microbe comes along and there you are, you're dead. Was it actually because I lowered my guard for a moment? One minute when I didn't want to live quite so much, and *bam!* Dad has always believed, or rather speculated with varying degrees of clarity, that it would take only one moment without vigilance for the forces of death to take hold of him. A second's inattention to life, and everything goes up in smoke. Officially, he doesn't really believe in a death wish, but even so, he *does* know a thing or two about it; in all of us – well, in him, at least – there are forces that can destroy the most robust life. So he wonders whether that was what I did for those few days, subconsciously, however much or little I wanted to: left the door open to my own destructive forces.

For as long as he can remember, Dad has felt that every day spent living is like an active decision to live. Hence his vitality, I suppose. Now that I'm dead, he takes every possible opportunity to yell 'Long live life!' He feels he's got to shout it manically: 'Long live life! *Fiat lux!*' Does it help, you mad old

git? Every death then poses the question of what that person did or didn't do for it to happen or not happen. Our own death would be the final – and of course irrefutable – example. Constantly deciding to live, having to make the decision afresh every day, bellowing 'Long live life!' in the devil's face. Until the day when you allow yourself to remain silent, and it's the death of you. Dad's yelling to himself. My appointment with the department of preventive medicine reignites all his delirious thoughts. What was going on inside my head three weeks ago to make me want this appointment, and risk death?

For several days Dad had finally started moving away from this theory, as if his madness no longer had a hold on him. He wept with joy when he saw from the dial in my car that a few hours before I died, I'd filled up with petrol. A tank full of fuel means a life full of plans, doesn't it? Similarly, he felt there was proof of a desire to live in the subscription to the newspaper *Le Monde* that I'd only just taken out (the first issue was delivered to my letter box in Rennes the day after I died). I wanted to read *Le Monde*, to know about the world, so surely I must have had plans for a life? I'd also just subscribed to Rennes Opera House at the student rate. You don't subscribe to a newspaper or an opera company, you don't fill up with fuel when you want to die. The Grim Reaper had culled me, that's all there was to it, and there was nothing Dad or I or anyone else could do about it.