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Heartland

Neil Cross

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When I was very young, my mother suffered a prolonged melancholy. Her post-natal depression was compounded by grief for dead children and the sorrow of a long, unhappy marriage.

In photographs taken around this time, she's always smiling, wearing the short skirts and clunky shoes of the early 1970s, the plastic macs. Her hair is permed, dyed a harsh black. She stands on the seafront at Weston-super-Mare. I'm in the pram, a Victorian-looking thing, and I'm wearing a white, knitted cardigan with pearly buttons. My mother is either smiling or squinting into the sun. Behind the smile, she was thinking about killing us both.

One day, she positioned herself at the edge of a busy road in Bristol. She watched the traffic bludgeon past. She thought, Just one step.

The way she told it, it was a disconnected moment in a dark day, the clouds rolling over Bristol. Just one step. But suicide isn't one step: she went to that hectic road having decided to do it. She woke in the morning and brushed her teeth and put on her shoes and coat and changed my nappy and put me in the pram with the intention of deleting us both.

And there she stood, at the side of the road, with mirrors behind her eyes. She looked down at me, in the pram. I was tiny and helpless, she said, a baby with my name and my eyes, wriggling, wearing clothes she had knitted, and she couldn't kill me. So she wheeled me home, and we lived.

Five years later, she went out and didn't come back.

My oldest sister and I went to look for her. We went to the local shops, to Parker's Bakery where she worked, serving jam doughnuts and pasties and crusty bread. We

went there to see if she was late. But she wasn't; she hadn't shown up that day. Nobody knew where she was.

My sister and I walked round the shops. We wondered if Mum had gone to get some bread and milk, or perhaps some lamb chops for tea. But she wasn't down the shops. She'd run away. I thought of her, clasping her handbag, tottering in her shoes. Running and running and running.

After she left, I was sitting up in Dad's bed. It was morning; Dad was on his way to work. He crossed the bedroom in white underpants and a vest. He was carrying a towel. He wasn't tall, my dad, and he was stocky. He had a big, solid belly and a big, solid nose. He was a quiet and gentle man.

His hair was white: all the colour had drained from it when Mum left. You could see it in photographs. There we are, on a see-saw – him at one end, me at the other. My hair is long and blond, cut into a fringe. His is short, dark, neatly parted. He's wearing a suit and tie; his trousers have hiked around his shins and you can see his socks. He has one hand raised in salute, bent at the elbow. A year later and he's still smiling in photographs, but the colour has gone from his hair.

I said, 'Dad.'

He was distracted, getting ready for work.

He said, 'What?'

I told him: 'When you love somebody, really it's just their face you love.'

He stopped. He turned to look at me. His face became unfamiliar. He still had the towel in his hand.

He said, 'Sometimes, Sonner.'

Sonner was one of his names for me. Nipper was another. He hardly ever used my real name.

He put down the towel and began to dress. He wore a grey suit, a white shirt, a tie, aftershave. He worked for the Post Office. Had since he was a boy.

To most people, my dad seemed very jolly. At Christmas he put on the Rolf Harris LP and he danced around the room to 'Six White Boomers', a song in which Santa was forced by the Australian heat to use kangaroos instead of reindeer. We lined up and followed him. He did silly moves and we copied them. He sang loudly. He grew pink in the face. He laughed.

He never went to the pub. He socialized at the Post Office club on weekend afternoons, and often he took me along with him. He wore whites to play crown-

green bowling; a white-haired man, bowling a heavy black ball down a tended lawn. The ball was called a wood.

Crown-green bowling was tedious. The players maintained their posture long after the wood had left their hand; balancing on one leg with an arm extended, like elderly ice-skaters. In the air was a soft, Bristolian cackle and when the wood closed on the jack, there was the slow clapping of appreciative, wrinkled hands.

Usually, I took a box of Swan Vestas from a green-side table and followed the hedges that outlined the green, hunting ants. When I located a caravan of them – a dotted line undulating over the soil, carrying crumbs of cheese and onion crisps and pork scratchings – I lit a match. I enjoyed the sulphurous wink, sharp in my nose, then touched the burning head to an ant. Quick as burning cellophane, it curled into a husk, leaving a chitinous hollow that resembled a burnt match-head.

Sometimes, I singled out an individual. The train would halt, as if shocked by this arbitrary retribution, then hastily jerk into motion, moving round the smoking corpse. Sometimes I eliminated five or six of them in rapid and random succession. The train scattered like soldiers escaping an air-raid. Some of them still carried crumbs in their mandibles. I wondered if I was so big the ants couldn't conceive of my existence.

Dad liked football. Once, he took me to see Bristol City play at Ashton Gate. The rain bit cold and horizontal. We wore anoraks. The crowd was disconsolate and few. The players were more disconsolate still, and even fewer. They hobbled round the muddy field.

It lasted for ever. Football felt like damnation. My hands were chapped and the wind burned my ears. I was proud, because I was there with my dad. But I never went to a football match again.

Because I'd been a mummy's boy, there had always been a distance between me and Dad. But he tried to bridge it. He worked hard to make me laugh, even though his heart was shattered like a land-mine. He kept me close, tried to pull me closer. I orbited him like a moon.

But we didn't talk about love again, not even the day I was taken away from him. He was trying not to cry. His jaw was trembling. He just made sure my anorak was zipped to the throat. He said, 'Take care of yourself, Nipper.'

And I said, 'Okay.'

And that was that.

My maternal grandparents were named Claude and Rose. They ran a tobacconist called The Sweet Basket. My mother, when she was still a schoolgirl, worked behind the counter.

Alan Gadd was a telegram boy. He rode a GPO motorcycle and wore his helmet at a cheeky angle. Girls liked him.

They met in 1947, two years after the great tribulation. These children in Box Brownie black and white. My mother wore her fringe backcombed over her school beret, because that's the way girls wore their hair. Alan's hair was dark, brilliantined. He smoked Players cigarettes. He had a girlfriend called Connie Stevens, but on school mornings he walked my mother to the bus-stop, wheeling his motorcycle. And in the afternoon, he was waiting at the same bus-stop, to walk her home again.

My mother's two best friends were called Sheila and June, and they liked Alan, too. So when he took his girlfriend to the cinema, poor Connie Stevens, my mother and her friends followed them. First, they went to the cinema. Then they shadowed Alan and Connie to her doorstep. They watched as Alan kissed her goodnight and waited until she went inside. Then Alan met them and walked them home, too. My mother's friends each got a goodnight kiss. My mother, the last and his favourite, got two.

Her name was Edna. That's not a name for incautious youth, not even what passed for it in 1947, five years before the end of rationing and ten before Elvis Presley rolled his hips on 9-inch television screens, thick as cider bottles.

I have heard her called Eddie, sometimes Ed. That sounds better. It's easier to imagine a besotted girl with backcombed fringe and a school beret who's called Ed or Eddie. So that's who Alan loved: a girl called Ed, who worked at The Sweet Basket.

On their first date, they went to see Easter Parade. Alan did his National Service in the RAF. They married at St Gregory's Church in Horfield, in 1951. Before that decade ended, they had three children: Clive, Linda and Caroline. And that's almost as much as I know about Alan and Ed.

I know he loved her. He loved her when that Box Brownie boy and girl were long gone, bloomed into Polaroids and middle-age and unhappiness. I know he loved her, because she made his hair turn white.

Alan and Edna, troubled and sorrowful, remembered when their children were small. Perhaps more children would restore that lost happiness.

I was born in 1969, when Ed was thirty-nine years old. Before me came a number of miscarriages. Others followed.

I wasn't unwanted. The children who almost followed me were to provide me with companionship, a brother or sister my own age. But they died, and whatever needed fixing in the marriage did not get fixed.

My mother hadn't been faithful to my father, nor he to her. But those stories aren't mine to tell. I only saw their consequence.

One day, when I was four years old, the wife and daughters of my mother's lover rang the doorbell. When my grandmother answered, they forced their way inside. They kicked my grandmother to the floor. She was in her seventies. They grabbed fistfuls of her hair and dragged her along the hallway. My sister was eight months pregnant. They punched her in the swollen belly. When she fell to the floor, they kicked her. They grabbed my mother. They kicked her and clawed her and punched her. They ripped and tore at her clothes. They tore hanks of hair from her scalp.

One of the women shoved me into a room. I screamed and punched the door. Outside were terrible noises, like the excited howling in the monkey house.

When it was over, I let myself out. My sister, my mother and my grandmother were sitting on the stairs, on different levels. They seemed drowsy, pulling out wispy handfuls of hair.

Not long after that, my mother's lover attacked my father in his own living room. He was much bigger than my dad. This time, there was no room in which to lock me away, nor any time to do it. I cowered in the far corner, behind the TV. I screamed into my hands. I watched the strange man punching my dad.

When we visited Dad in hospital, he was in a wheelchair. He said, 'Don't worry, Sonner: I'm all right,' and he patted my hand. My sister was crying and so was I.

A spray of Dad's blood dried high on the living-room wall, near the comic statuette of a knight with a drooping sword. On the base of it was inscribed: Once a King, Always a King, but Once a Knight is Enough.

I don't know what kind of husband Alan was. He worked for the Post Office until he retired. Notoriously, he was careful with his money, but Mum always used to laugh about that, even years after she left him. Perhaps he was dull, but all husbands are dull – and, anyway, it wasn't adventure that Ed craved. It was a certain kind of love, the kind that doesn't last four children and twenty-five years.

Being in love, being loved, made her feel good. It inoculated her against unhappiness. Even when their marriage was long dead, she often talked about that telegram boy in his cheeky hat, his GPO motorcycle, about poor Connie Stevens and cheeky kisses on doorsteps. Thinking about those children, young and in love, made her happy for a while. But the seeds of unhappiness multiplied inside her like a virus. It always came back.

So when I think of them together, I choose to think of them as teenagers, waltzing at the Locarno, or at the Empire, dancing past the stage where a young Archie Leach once stood, spellbound by an image of his coming transmutation. I think of Alan and Ed as tentative, as excited and shy: no more than avatars of the parents they became. Fireflies in a bottle. Full of the future.

Their marriage has evaporated, all twenty-five years of it. It ended more years ago than it lasted. They're old now. Those years have dissolved into a ghost haze, through which walk their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

But sometimes I can't help but think of that black-haired woman at the roadside, thinking, Just one step. Or of the soul-broken man that Alan became, straightening my anorak, zipping it to my throat while my mother, an outlander, waited at the door of a hired car, flanked by police officers. She was waiting to take me away, to a different city, a different world.

Dad swallowed and he said, 'Take care of yourself then, Nipper. Take care of yourself.'

And I said, 'Okay.'

All these things braid in the telling. Become one.