



2019 Longlist

As Expected

by

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As Expected

Grief it seems, is a romantic emotion
How real it is I cannot tell
But as for where I am I have a notion
It is too light and clean for hell.

Nigel Cross, 1971

When we leave each fingerprint where it falls, the fingerprints build up, one on top of the other. This is new to me. I wipe the door-frame with a J-Cloth and the grey lifts off like make-up. The white paint that was always there emerges like a wintry morning. Now I know paint doesn't just turn grey over time. I'd never given it any thought. I am wiping away his fingerprints. I am wiping away the marks he has left, the proof of his life, the patterns of it. Suddenly the patterns are everywhere. I can work out the heaviness of his hand on the banister. I can see which parts of the house are important to him, unavoidable even; the light switches, the door handles. I can see the way he stumbles, reaches out, and a seeping cut he has forgotten on his finger leaves a brown red smudge on the edge of the door-frame. I clean one door, then see other markings on the nearest wall. There is a cobweb I hadn't noticed when I first vacuumed the house. There is blood on the carpet, old and dark as chocolate.

Sometimes there are no obvious patterns. Flecks of a 1970's shade of orange-brown look suspiciously like shit, but why would shit have ended up on the outside of the bathroom door, as opposed to the inside? I have learned that over time old blood can start to look a lot like shit, and vice versa. I have also learned that even after years, it is not impossible to remove these sorts of stains from the carpet. I have not yet learned how to clean urine stains off the bottom cushion of an armchair. I haven't learned how to erase the smell of someone.

He is sitting on the armchair I haven't yet been able to get to clean, slowly reading the paper that I bought for him in the morning, even though it is now the afternoon and he must have read it

through at least once already. He grumbles when I put his loose change into a pot so that I can clean the shelves. I haven't yet managed to get him to put on clean underwear, despite washing everything he owns. The day after I arrived I convinced him to put on a clean shirt. I have since succeeded in manipulating him into clean trousers.

Yesterday I took him to get his hair cut and sat behind him on a black leather sofa, laughing along with the hairdresser as he told her that it had only been six weeks since his last haircut. I listened as he told her how he doesn't get to see his two grandchildren very often as they live far away (he has one grandchild). He has his own narrative. This is the early stages of something bleak and prone to deterioration, something that might show up on a scan of his brain, but it is not the beginning. He has always been a liar. I stare at the back of his head as the scissors cut away the whitest parts of him. The hairdresser is kind, telling him he looks like George Clooney now and that isn't being a grandparent better than being a parent. He has no interest in being a grandparent, and he has been a useless parent for so long now that it is hard to pin point which memory of mine is sustaining all this love and causing me to be sitting here looking out over Salisbury's Market Square where families are ice-skating and buying huge German-style hot-dogs.

I am overwhelmed by the task ahead of me, the bloodstains I haven't even found yet, the fingerprints still waiting to be wiped away. I am stunted and squashed by his refusal to admit that the way he was living before I arrived is intolerable. It is becoming apparent that he is already forgetting what his existence was before I came. This is his reality now and he accepts it like a child. I try to be patient. I follow the patterns of dirt around the house to see where they will lead me. There is enough for me to do. There are cupboards I haven't looked in, shelves I haven't sorted, piles of bank statements and bills dating back to 2012. There is his armchair by the window in front of the TV, a mountain to be climbed, a challenge I will have to complete under cover of darkness.

I last lived with him eleven years ago. When I think back to it, which I am doing more often, it is always autumn turning into winter, snowing leaves that gather in piles on the wet ground and quickly turn to mulch, only seen beneath the swinging beam of torchlight, felt by boots, slipping and sliding. In this perpetually dark, in-between season place, there are memories stuck, and as I forget them, as they decompose in the piles of leaves, I lose something that might explain me to myself. I am

increasingly of the belief that all the clues are there, in that two year period of my life when it was just me and him, and often just me.

My school was over an hour's bus ride away, down the Chalke Valley in Salisbury, the bus stopping in every village on route to pick up other school children. I woke up in darkness and returned in darkness. The sun rose over the first hill the bus crawled up. It set over Salisbury Cathedral just as the bus left the city behind. I kept Wellington boots in the stone bus shelter in my village to wear back to my house. The stream would flood and in the dark it was impossible to see how much of the lane it had overwhelmed. Probably this didn't happen very often. Maybe I only left my boots in the shelter a couple of times. I remember once getting off the bus in daylight and joining the boys on the farm playing cricket. It stands out, that one, against the ones with sideways rain and leaves on the wind and Dad shouting at me to take the dog out and me shouting back that I won't be told what to do by a drunk because drunks don't get to demand respect from anyone, especially not their daughters. I took the dog out anyway, but secretly didn't go down the lane and stood stubbornly in the garden instead, the torch aimed down at the floor, the dog looking up at me hopefully before giving up and peeing in the rhododendrons. The wind was very loud and maybe I cried a bit.

What did we do each night? Did he cook? Did I? I do remember cooking bolognese sauce and when he was too drunk to get out of bed I didn't bother cooking the spaghetti and just ate the mince with cheese on top on my own in front of the TV, but maybe that was another visit, when I didn't live with him anymore, before Mum left him. Mum always packed the freezer with ready-made lasagnes, macaroni cheese and fish cakes for me. It was before these things had glaring labels telling you how bad they were for you. I expect I ate them. Dad cooked me carbonara once which had always been my favourite but this time it was an insult to my earlier memories of it, this time his carbonara was undercooked pasta and raw egg and he looked at me blankly when I put it in the bin, not as though he didn't know why I didn't eat it, but as though he didn't know me at all.

I would speak to Mum on the phone in the evenings, maybe every evening, but probably not. The conversations we had are not memorable so I presume we never said anything. I don't know if I complained, if I asked her to come back. I don't think I did. She had to work in London during the week. She was the only one working. I understood that. I don't resent the choice that was made for us.

On Fridays Dad picked up Mum from the train station. He drove drunk. I don't know if I worried about this. I don't know what I did while I waited for them to come back to the house. He always got there. Mum always got into the driver's seat at the station, no hesitation, no decision to be made. Once when it was me picked up from the station, climbing the hill back to our village, Dad let the car swerve on the other side of the road. I shouted and grabbed the wheel. Sometimes I would let him drive me places even when I knew he was drunk. If I hadn't I would have been trapped.

Mornings were important. Dad made the effort to get up and see me before I went to school. He wore stripy nightgowns and slippers and drank black coffee. Our interactions were brief because I stayed in bed as long as I could and tended to skip breakfast. He was lucid, present. He said goodbye. When the bus didn't turn up because of a fallen tree, or broke down just outside the village, Dad drove me to the train station, or all the way to school, because he could, because he had nothing else to do that day, because he was sober. I wish I could remember more of the evenings he was sober. There must be more than I think. There were two whole months of no drink after he came out of rehab, but I can't remember any of it. I can't even remember the first time I realised he had relapsed and what that felt like.

Dad the alcoholic is the quiet, brooding, slope of a mountain. Hard on the inside, scuffed on the out, capable of crumbling into your hands. But this is just one idea of him, sculpted by our separation. I also see him as soft and shapeless, almost delicate. His mouth forms sentences and speaks them, head swaying with the moving current of his thoughtless thoughts, looking at you through the water. Mostly he just sleeps in the dark. It is better this way. When he tries to speak to me drunk it only makes me angry. He gets angry too. He is not drunk, he shouts. Guilt is his enemy and he won't be made to feel it.

It was just us for two years, until I finished school, except the weekends and holidays when Mum came by train and Dad managed not to kill himself or anybody else on the way to get her. It feels a very private experience, this time of mine and his, even more so because it doesn't mean anything to him now, it has not stayed with him, it would not have even if he could remember how old I am, or where I live. Every day I went to school and I didn't know how to explain my life to other people, so I didn't. In the days I did what other people did. I had friends and sex and love. In the

evenings I walked the dog and then stayed in my bedroom, sometimes smoking a joint out of the window and then eating a whole tin of biscuits.

Now, in Dad's red-brick house in Salisbury, in a bedroom that looks like mine, with all of my childhood possessions, but which I never slept in before the age of twenty, I go back there, and all I find are short autumn days and empty rooms. Dad is asleep again. The phone is ringing. And isn't crying alone such a hopeless, demoralising thing? I'm doing it now, here, every day, and it makes me want to dig my fingers in and pull it all out. I want to cry hard and fast in someone's arms just until the closeness of them makes me stop, remember myself, dry my face. Maybe I hate crying alone because that was all I could do back then. There was nobody to stop me with their closeness. There was nobody to stop me doing anything. And the rest of it? I know it all happened, school, friends, relationships, but it doesn't mean anything to me now. It's as if all that time I thought I was living the life of a sixteen year old, hurting others, hurting myself, none of it was real. I don't even know any of those people now. I left them. I placed Dad in the background, and lived the way I was expected to. But he was never really in the background. He is everywhere and nowhere, always. The painting is of me in the garden in my wellies with the dog looking up at me. You can see my wet skin and feel all of the useless love in my very young flat chest.

Why am I here again? This is not a question I actually ask. I don't question it. What I do is repeat information for him. I write notes on bits of paper and pin them to a cork board that I have hung in the kitchen. Pinned on the board are important phone numbers, including my own, and instructions for how to use the washing machine. I remove the DVD player because he cannot distinguish it from the TV. I stick a note on the mirror in his bedroom, 'put on clean clothes'. The next day it is gone because he doesn't want to be reminded that he can't remember to put on clean clothes. Every single day I cook meals and clean up afterwards, and it does not occur to him to ask me if I need help, to question why I am doing everything. It is as though it has always been this way.

I used to want to know where the man and the alcoholic began and ended. I wanted to know who to blame. Now I simply need to know if there is any part of the man left, or if he has been buried under the avalanches of crumbling mountainside. If I found any traces of him left alive, would I recognise them? I recognise his selfishness, his delusions, his lies, but someone might tell me that this is memory loss, this is not your father. This is not my father, and yet, he's been this way since I was

twelve years old and I held him while he cried, not because he was grieving, but because he was drunk and it was what he felt like doing. I have always been irrelevant to him until I am looking after him. But is that really true?

I don't have to do any of this.

When I was fourteen he told Mum that he wanted to die and he wandered out into the night. It was also autumn, maybe, with apples rotting in the hedgerows, the drains overflowing and the stream bulging. I remember Mum holding the phone receiver when she asked me to go and look for him. She told me that he said he wanted to die. And then she said she was calling the doctor. I think. I don't remember now. I've always thought this is what she did whilst I went out with a torch to look for him. But why would she call a doctor? What would the doctor do? Would a doctor answer the phone at that time of night? I don't even know if it was night or just an afternoon in winter. I imagined helicopters searching the hills for him. I imagined him sheltering under trees. I imagined him dead on the hillside. I walked around the village and searched the churchyard, then when back to the house. When I got back I saw his boots outside the front door. His raincoat was slung over the kitchen chair. The house was silent. The spare room was dark and full of him.

I have no faith in doctors when it comes to anything other than a broken arm, or something else they can see in front of them.

We go to his GP to pick up his blood test results and the receptionist tells us that they haven't arrived yet. There's been some problem at the lab and test results have been delayed. She asks if he is also waiting for CT scan results. Dad is not sure but yes he is.

Yes he is.

She appears to get the results up on a screen in front of her but I can't believe this is the case. There are people in the queue behind us. This is not the ceremonial unveiling I was anticipating. I don't feel ready for the news. Where is the doctor? Dad has already forgotten that the scan and blood tests even took place. She looks at the computer screen.

As expected.

What?

As expected.

What does that mean?

No further action required.

What was expected in order for them to be able to say, 'as expected'?

I'm afraid the rest of the results don't mean anything to me. I'm not a doctor.

THEN WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT THEM?

The following day after multiple conversations with different receptionists, I manage to get a doctor to agree to phone us back and speak to Dad about his results. Of course they cannot speak to me. Data protection. Protecting no one in this case. I can guess most of what they say from Dad's reactions, and what I miss he fills in for me afterwards. Apparently the scan revealed his brain to be as expected for a man of sixty-five.

Did they ask about your drinking?

No, why would they?

Because you have alcohol related brain damage which is a form of Alzheimers, because you failed the memory test and they prescribed you thiamine which is what doctors use to treat people with alcohol related brain damage.

This has nothing to do with alcohol.

What is it then?

Old age.

You are not old.

The doctor did not say anything about alcohol.

No she didn't. She didn't say anything about it at all. It is not the same doctor who did the original memory test, prescribed him thiamine and put him forward for a brain scan. I found a letter from the memory clinic that said they couldn't treat him for his memory loss because he was still drinking. I took him for an appointment at the local substance abuse charity and he came back with some printed out forms including a table with targets to work towards, one of which was to work towards drinking no spirits at all, and beer only after six. He got back from the appointment at two in the afternoon and drank a can of Guinness in five minutes. I buy him Guinness each day because without medical support he could die if he goes cold turkey. Sometimes I hide some of the cans to try and keep him down to three a day without him realising. It's a small victory. Doctors, hospitals, memory clinics, social care, charities. It's a maze and we are headed in not out.

Sometimes I do hate him. I won't pretend I don't.

I was told to be careful of my expectations. Mum said this, then my sister. What do I ever expect? I expect him to be dead at the bottom of the stairs. They are narrow and steep and he has fallen before. But lately he has taken to removing his slippers before he goes up them because the slippers have no backs and are a hazard. He does not want to die that way. I expect him to be in his bed, the house in darkness, the smell of rotting food leaking from the fridge. I expect him to come to the door when I arrive, his glasses slightly bent from where he has sat on them. He hugs me, pleased to see me, no idea of how long it has been. I expect him to try to deceive me, and maybe succeed. I expect him to be what he has been for more than half my life. I expect him to leave me traumatised in some way, the sight or smell of him. The knowledge of his body wasting, unthought of, because I was not thinking of him, for weeks. I call but he doesn't pick up the phone. This is normal. He forgets where it is. He ignores it. He lives in a reality where a ringing phone demands no reaction. They didn't need to warn me about expectations. But hope.

Hope's another thing. Hope framed and contained by what is truly possible, what has happened before can happen again. He has shown a will to live. He does not want to lose his mind. I did not expect this. To be asked, how much do I love him? How much am I willing to sacrifice for this man? What if I say, nothing? I see his face when I try to get to sleep. I feel his hair between my fingers like pieces of cloud. Sometimes, now, here, his face pleads with me for help. Other times he hates me as much I could hate him if I really let myself. My hope is that he is not completely lost to me yet.

On the morning of the day I am leaving he gets upset because he thinks the TV is broken. Not for the first time I find him pointing the phone at the TV, pressing furiously. I think about putting labels on the phone and the TV remote, but then I look at them both and think they are quite clearly a phone and a TV remote. This isn't a label situation. This is total disconnect with reality.

I have filled the fridge with cooked meats and vegetables, and things he can eat raw or cook easily on the hob or in the microwave. He is way past 'preparing' a meal. I have put a sign on the dishwasher 'broken - don't use'. I have put a reminder on the cork board to collect his new glasses from Specsavers, and to collect his blood tests from the GP - if they ever arrive (blood = normal, no signs of self-abuse, trauma, no impact on family members, no cause for guilt or shame, no forgiveness

needed, atonement unnecessary, recovery pointless, death unserious, keep going, it will all be fine, you are killing yourself, everything is as expected). What is it that they need to see? What can I show them? I wish I could stack up everything that is broken like china, build a tower of now useless cups and bowls and say, look, this is what's left, what am I supposed to do with all of this?

But will they ask, what are you willing to do for him? How far will you go?

And what if I say? Nothing. Nowhere. What did you expect, Dad?

About the author

Originally from Wiltshire, Madeline Cross now lives in Edinburgh where she works for a youth homelessness charity and is writing her first collection of short stories.

Her stories have previously appeared in Tangerine Magazine, Structo, Litro, Rattle Tales, The Honest Ulsterman and the Mechanic's Institute Review.