

Shallow Graves

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(Title and theme of ‘revenge’ prompted by Jennifer Patino, www.prettykooldame.com)

Hailey still looked beautiful, even on a cold slab. I nodded to the guy and signed the form. He looked almost disappointed that I hadn’t had to use the bucket he’d indicated. I’ve always had a strong stomach, however.

Her house looked sad as I pulled into my driveway. None of those tacky fairy lights on, the curtains uncharacteristically closed. She’d liked living in a goldfish bowl. Ironic, considering where she was found. I wondered what mess the police had made of her IKEA furniture with their fingerprint powder; whether those ludicrously pristine and springy carpets had boot marks on them now. Had they all worn those blue protective plastic things? I’m sure some of the big-wigs had tramped in without them. Well. You get off with things when you’re battle scarred, I suppose.

I kind of miss her. Yeah, she’s a pain in the arse and I don’t like being slagged off every day, but it’s too quiet without her. I even miss that stupid perfume she wears.

I wish her bimbo friends would just tell mum where she’s gone! She must have told *one* of them at least. They were never off the bloody phone, and she never left it *here*, so she must have been in touch with them?

It’s probably all some stupid thing they thought of to get publicity for her blog, or something...

Fashion she calls it. It’s just an excuse to be a real poser, get her cronies to take lots of shots of her with their posh cameras - and for her to get out of eating mum’s crappy dinners.

“Jack!”

“Yeah...?”

“Come down here, I want to ask you something!”

“Okaaaay...!” Mum has not got off my *case* since Mona went missing. She’s doing my head in.
“What?!”

“Are these yours...??” she was holding up Mona’s cigarettes.

“No! They’re Moaner’s!”

“Stop *calling* her that, Jack! And you *know* she doesn’t smoke. Why are you being such a little shit about all of this?”

“She does! ‘Appetite suppressant’, she says. C’mon, do I *look* like someone who’d smoke bloody menthols?!”

Mum sighed and sat down on the bottom step. “What the hell would I know; I’m only your mother.” To my surprise, she took out a fag and lit up. Right there in the hall. I’ve never seen her smoke before. “I suppose you’d not use this poncey lighter, anyway...”

“Where’d you find them?”

“In your denim jacket!”

“She’s such a *bitch*! Why’d she do that?! Dad would murder me if he’d seen them!” Mum blew a smoke ring, like some bloody professional, followed by another sigh. “You ok, Mum?”

She snorted. “Do I look it?”

I made her budge up a bit, and put my arm around her “Have you heard from Dad?”

“No,” a tear rolled down her cheek “the tosser. When are *you* leaving?”

“Eh...?”

“Well...it’s a pact, isn’t it? I’m just wondering, so I don’t get too many messages in tomorrow. Wouldn’t want to waste money, or anything.”

“I’m staying put” I said “unless you keep nagging me so much: *then* I’ll move to Gran’s. They’ll turn up, Mum. They always do.”

She snorted again, “Yeah... Do you want that stew or will I just call the Chinese again?”

Guess which one I went for...?

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Fiona wasn't as good-looking as her sister, but she was definitely the clever one. It wasn't just the glasses and the less confident manner. I got the unsettling impression she was taking everything in. Sizing my life up. I tried not to act nervous.

"So...you've been in Hailey's house, then? Did they leave a mess in there? Hailey always liked everything so clean."

"Yes, she did. Never understood why. We weren't brought up like that" Fiona tried for a smile, but she still couldn't look at me for long. "Did you know her well?"

"I met her when she moved in about 5 years ago. Her removal men were being rough with her 'sound system'. I went over to see if I could help."

"That's not how she told it" Fiona suddenly looked at me, and I didn't like what that look said...

"Pardon?!"

"You were harassing her, weren't you?"

"No!"

"Yes you were, she *told* me! Gifts and offers of nights out and..."

"Fiona! Calm down!"

"You *killed* her!"

"WHAT?!"

"You **KILLED** her! And I have proof, you bastard. I found your tie in her room!"

"Eh?!"

"Yes, your *tie*. You **STRANGLED** her, didn't you?" She suddenly grabbed a coffee table book on art and waved it above her head like a mad woman.

"No I did **NOT**! Fiona, you need to sit down! Jesus woman! You're going to bloody...**PUT THE BOOK DOWN!!!**"

It is a lot harder than one would think to wrestle a book off a determined woman without hurting her. They don't teach you that sort of thing in an all boys' school. Fiona had relented eventually, however, and we'd moved on to something stronger than tea to settle our nerves a bit. She was still glaring at me, though.

"So your name's *not* Paul? You're sure?" she said

I took out my driving licence and tossed it at her.

“I’m sure”

At least she had the decency to go red, but no apology followed.

“So, this Paul,” I said, to try and stop her coming up with more suspicious outbursts; “he helped her move in, too?”

“What...?”

“You *said*...”

“Oh yeah... No, he met her shopping and then followed her home a few days later”

“Oh...”

“Said he lived ‘round here”

“Oh. So you thought...”

“Well, you identified her body!”

“It was *me* who reported her missing”

“Oh.” She played with the tassel on my couch cushion.

“Yeah.” I sighed.

“Isn’t it supposed to be *family* that does that?”

“They couldn’t find you, and they wanted to know who she was quickly, or something, and I volunteered... I’m sorry.”

“I move around a lot. We weren’t close. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Yes.” I frowned.

“Outside?”

“I’d like to get on, actually. I have papers to mark”

“You’re a teacher?”

“Lecturer”

“Oh. Well. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

Tries to knock me out with part of my own library and calls it ‘bothering’ me! Maybe Hailey was the smarter one, after all...

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Dad was waiting for me at the back of the bus stop on Monday morning. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Pssst!” he said, like we were in a novel or something. I almost didn’t recognise him, on account of the beard.

“Whoa! Why are you skulking about like some tramp? You nearly gave me a heart attack!!”

“Watch your mouth!”

“Sorry!” I grumbled “Just wasn’t expecting to see you!”

“Yeah, well...don’t tell your mother”

“Why not?! She’s in a state. Do you know Mona’s missing?”

“What do you mean ‘missing’?”

“You know: *Missing*. Gone. Up and left without saying goodbye...”

“Watch your *mouth*!”

“Sorry...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dad asked, actually looking like it bothered him.

“Em...you’ve been ignoring your phone?”

“Oh. Well. I lost it” he said.

“Lost it?!”

“Yeah, lost it! It happens...”

Why do I have to be so closely related to such a jerk...?

“Ok...”

Dad looked like he wanted to hit me, so I put some distance between us. “You alright Dad? You look awful” he gave me the brows, and I resisted the urge to duck. “Well you *do*. Just sayin”

“I’m fine”

“Okaaaay”

“So where *is* Mona? Did she say anything? Is she with a friend?”

“No! Dad, we don’t know *where* she is.”

“Oh. Well...” he looked about, as if someone was about to jump out of the bushes or something. “let me know if she turns up”

“How?! Wear a red rose and meet you in a bloody café?! God, Dad. Just come home and comfort mum a bit. Whatever trouble you’re in she’ll help you sort it out...”

“I’ll...I’ll be in touch” he said, and looked around him in that shifty way again. “Here’s your bus. Look after your mum. I love you, son.”

And he hurried away.

I almost fell under the bus wheels in shock. Since when did *Dad* succumb to ‘Parental Feeling’? He must be in the poop up to his eyeballs this time.

I didn’t mention Dad’s visit to mum, and apparently we’d gone a whole week now with no word from Mona. What the hell was going *on* in our family?!

“Mum...”

“Yes??” she was savagely peeling potatoes and muttering to herself about *the price of vegetables these days*.

“Are you...ok?”

She just sighed and looked at the ceiling dramatically. “Would you STOP asking me that?! What have *I* to be ‘ok’ about??”

“*I’m* still here...” I tried.

She just threw me a look.

I could see she’d been crying. I never know what to say when women get all sappy, so I blurted out: “I’m sorry, mum. You’ve had it rough these past few weeks, and I wish I could sort it for you”

She started properly crying then. The big heaving kind of movie stuff. I wondered whether to just leave her to her potatoes and make a quick getaway.

“Have you seen that two little kids found that girl?” she wailed.

“What girl?”

“Hailey. The pretty blonde that was missing; just 4 years older than Mona.”

“Oh. No, I hadn’t”

“Well they did. At Mook Beach where we used to take you. Remember? Mona used to call it ‘Moon Beam’ after one of her My Little Ponies.” Mum sniffed and wiped her nose *right* up her sleeve. It was impressively disgusting for a woman who has nagged me all my life about that sort of thing.

I was glad she was going to be boiling those spuds before I had to eat them.

“Buried in a sand dune” she went on “The poor kids will need counselling for the rest of their lives...you two used to love it there, and I always felt it was so safe...”

“Jeez.” I said, not quite sure where this was going.

Mum spun to face me properly. “I questioned that silly little bitch Kelly!” I didn’t like the way she was holding the vegetable knife, “got her to finally tell me where Mona is.”

“Did she?! Great!” I smiled, but soon figured out that this was not the right response.

Mum dived across to the kitchen table and walloped the paper at me “Great?! GREAT?! I’m worrying FOR A WHOLE WEEK that my daughter’s been murdered by some serial killer and her mother wasn’t there to save her; then I find out she just swanned off somewhere?! She going to WISH someone *had* finished her off when I get a hold of her!”

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Fiona was right: I wasn’t supposed to be there and it *did* make me look extra-suspicious (I suppose) but I just...

Fiona sat down beside me and told me she’d handed the tie into the police, asked them numerous (probably annoying) questions and done a few other things I wasn’t really listening to. I was wearing my sunglasses but I was sure she could see I’d been crying, because she fell blissfully silent after a while and stared out over the field beyond Hailey’s garden with me.

We could hear the stream that ran just behind the garden fence, and the bees in the lavender. I really should have been doing something a lot more cheerful with my Tuesday off, and I *definitely* should have been steering well clear of Miss Unpredictable to my left.

As if she could read my thoughts, Fiona said: “Jeffrey...I just wanted to say...I’m sorry about the other day.”

“Forget it” I said, hoping to just hear *water* babbling again.

“I can’t! I accused you of MURDER Jeffrey!! That was very wrong of me”

“You’ve apologised now though, so let’s just move on”

Fiona sighed. “Look, it’s a lovely day – why don’t I take you out for lunch to make up for it? I realise now that you *were* a gentleman with Hailey, but obviously cared about her very much. You’re a good guy. I feel terrible.”

I sighed back. “There’s really no need. But if it will put your mind at ease...” I hadn’t eaten much in the last two weeks, and the peace I usually found in Hailey’s garden was gone anyway. The optimist in my head reasoned that maybe if I had lunch with Fiona she’d leave me alone, and it was certainly worth a try...

Fiona picked a nice little cafe in the next town. Apparently she and Hailey had gone there when Fiona had been between jobs and visiting for a few days.

“I never saw you at Hailey’s,” I said.

“Yeah, we didn’t really get on as kids. I stayed in a B&B instead of at Hailey’s. Didn’t want her neighbours banging on the door, wondering what all the noise was about at 3am after one of us had had a skinful and picked a fight!” Fiona slowly stirred her coffee, intently watching the spoon go round. I imagined she was regretting that she wasn’t close with her only sister.

“Your mum must have loved separating you both! Did she have to use the hose? I was a bit like that with one of my brothers. He’s very respectable now though, has well-behaved kids and everything...” I stopped, suddenly thinking that may *not* have been a very tactful thing for me to have said. “Anyway, the menu looks good.”

“Yes,” smiled Fiona “can I recommend the club sandwich? Oh, good *lord*...!”

I followed Fiona’s stare across the road, to where a woman in her late forties was dragging another woman, who appeared to be in her late teens, down the front steps of the town hall. By her hair.

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“Son!”

“Dad!” I slowed down. *What the hell is this?* I thought. *I don’t see him for weeks, and then two days in a row!*

“Are you *sure* you don’t know where Mona is?” he hissed, and dragged me behind a big tree.

“I’m going to miss my bus, Dad...”

“Answer the *question*.” He had a desperate look that I didn’t like. Plus he *stank* of booze now that I was nearer to him.

“Mum thinks she knows where to find her, but she hasn’t text me any info. I’m just off home to...” my bus passed the gate at that moment. I sighed. “well, I *was*...”

“You’re cutting school?” Dad asked. He’s a big one for going on about how I need an education, so I make something of myself, blah de bloody blah. “I have two free periods in a row then it’s only RME. Dad, you didn’t *hear* her. She’s going to *murder* Mona. Cos she thought she’d been murdered by the same person who murdered that other girl. You know, woman’s logic...”

“Who? Hailey?” asked Dad, as he gripped me tighter.

“I think that was her name? The one in the papers who was found...”

“...on Moonbeam” Dad said, a faraway look in his eye. “Mona called it that when she was little...”

“...after a stupid toy. Yeah, mum said.” I had begun to feel a little scared, along with nauseous at the unappealing aroma of my old man. “Dad...do you know more about this than the journos? PLEASE tell me you didn’t bloody kill her...?!”

Dad let go of me and walked to the next tree, wringing his hands.

“Dad...!” I’d started inching towards the gate. “What did you *do*?”

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“MUM!! Let *go*! I’m sorry, ok? I shouldn’t have left like that. But I had my reasons! MUM! LET GOOO!”

People are *looking*!” screamed the younger lady. (Though I use the term loosely.)

“Let them look!! I thought you were *dead*. The police kept going on about ‘free will’ and the fact your bank account had been cleared out...and you’d taken some clothes...that you are supposedly an *adult* now...but I worried about you anyway! What a sap I was! You’re just like your bloody father...” was the reply from her (apparent) mother.

I looked at Fiona, to gauge whether I should go over to try and mediate. Fiona was enjoying the spectacle, it seemed. Maybe it reminded her of home...

“Don’t you *dare*!” shouted the younger woman, pulling free of the older “I’m *nothing* like that tosser! I don’t know why you chose *him* to have kids with...why you put up with his drinking and gambling and him wandering off to stalk another woman...”

The mother looked hurt by this “another woman...?” she echoed, as I negotiated the busy road to get to them. There was a glaring contest for a few seconds, before the mother launched herself at the daughter.

“Ladies, ladies!!” I shouted, trying to startle them back into reality. (The one where they were having a brawl in broad daylight, and the mother was technically committing child abuse) They ignored me.

“Mona, you lying little cow! He isn’t seeing someone behind my back, he wouldn’t bloody dare...”

“Ladies!!” I tried again. Maybe they just *weren’t* used to applying the word to themselves?!

“I’m *not* lying! He was stalking her!”

“Hello! My name is Jeffrey.” I cut in “Mona, isn’t it?” I said to the daughter “and your mother’s name is...?”

“Sod off and mind your own bleedin’ business would ya?!” said both women at once, then burst out laughing.

It wasn’t how I’d hoped to break the tension, but whatever works in a pinch.

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“Nothing! Absolutely nothing! The poor girl...” Dad was crying now. *Dad*. I looked up in case a flying pig was about to float on by.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?! I think you need to sober up, for a start. Why don’t we go get some coffee from the van in the park?”

“Ok”

“Right” That had felt a bit too easy... “Ok then” I walked purposefully towards the gate, and could hear Dad following me, sniffing. I really hoped no one I knew would be in the park...

Dad collapsed onto a bench while I got the drinks sorted. He’d lost weight. Probably had been getting all his meals in liquid form recently. I tried to figure out how long he’d been gone now. Just over two weeks?

Hadn’t that girl gone missing around then? Why would Dad have remembered her name? He’s not really one for retaining that sort of information. He rarely uses mine, and he picked it.

Dad isn’t against violence, he does have a temper. We’ve holes in our walls at home, from rows he’s had with Mum when he’s been drunk. Mum’s never said he’s *hit* her but he’s shoved her and Mona about, down the years. They’ve had bruises from furniture and stuff.

There was that time, on the run up to Christmas a few years ago, when he gave me a black eye with his fist; but I'd been noising up Mum and pretty much deserved it. I told the girls at school I'd heroically stopped someone from being mugged, of course. Rosie Pennington got me under the mistletoe for that, and I didn't protest. But I digress...

"Here"

"Thanks son. Ahhhh, nothing like crap coffee to make you feel alive, eh?" he gave me a weak smile, but he'd still looked like the coffee tasted.

"Spill it, Dad. I'm starting to worry here. What is going *on*?"

"I didn't kill her, I swear" he said, and his eyes went all watery.

"But you know something..." I said.

"I know everything!!" He put his hands over his face "and I wish I didn't! Aw Jack, I've made a complete mess of all our lives, and I'm sorry."

The man had a point, and the honesty was refreshing but "what exactly are you saying, Dad? Can you explain all this properly to me? Are you in danger?"

"No"

"Are we...?" I asked, then suddenly thought: "is Mona...?"

Dad started pacing. "I don't know. I think I've done enough so that only I'd be incriminated. I'm surprised I've not been collared yet, with the fancy science stuff that they can do nowadays..."

"Incriminated?! Why, if you didn't kill her, would you want to make it look like you *did*!?"

Dad didn't answer me, and I started to get it.

Oh God, is this what my Father being noble looks like...?

I got the pair to agree to come over to the café and try to sort out their differences. Somehow this turned into me buying everybody lunch. That's where being a gentleman leads, apparently.

I was surprised by how quickly Fiona forgot about her 'terrible' guilt concerning the book incident, now there was drama at the table.

The mother was called Samantha, apparently, though we could call her Sam (now I'd bought her friendship, I presume). Her daughter Mona just sat there with her whole body crossed, it seemed; only opening her mouth to order. (The most expensive dish, I noted.) She'd tied her hair up in some sort of messy bun that seems to be the fashion these days, and put on a studied air of disinterest that really irritated me.

"So..." I started "why are you two arguing on such a lovely day?"

Sam jumped right in: "well, THIS young filly here just up and disappeared from the family home a week ago! No one could or *would* tell us where she was, there was no communication of any sort! So naturally, I feared the *worst*..."

Mona did an exaggerated sigh and pointed herself even further from the table.

"Don't you sigh at *me*! I'm just telling the truth! A murderer on the loose, as well. You've read about that poor Hailey girl who's all over the papers, Jeffrey, haven't you?"

Uh-oh.

"Yes, I have. Very tragic..." I said, shooting a look at Fiona which she completely ignored.

"Jeffrey was the one who reported her missing" said Fiona "and Hailey *happened* to be my sister"

"Oh dear God, I'm so sorry! How horrific! And here I am bringing it all up again" Sam grabbed Fiona's hand "how's your mum taking it?"

"Mum's dead" said Fiona, enjoying the attention a little too much, I thought. "It was just me and Hailey. Dad left us. He never looked us up again."

Sam's eyes filled up "all alone in the world! I hope you're looking after her, Jeffrey?"

I studied my coffee.

Mona suddenly joined the conversation: "do the police have any clues as to who did it?"

"I gave them one just this morning" said Fiona "heaven knows how they missed it when they went through her things after she was found..."

"What was it?" asked Mona, leaning really far across the table.

"A man's red tie" said Fiona, obviously feeling very important.

"A *red* tie?"

"Yes Mona, a red one. Why?"

“Oh...I just didn’t hear you properly, that’s all. When’s that food going to be ready, Jeffrey?
I’m totally *beyond* Hank Marvin...”

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I stood up and laid my hand on Dad’s arm to stop him pacing. “Please” was all I said.

“As soon as I saw her I knew who she was. She looked like her mother and your Grandmother rolled into one. No mistaking it. To think she had moved so close to me, after all these years!”

“Who, Dad?”

“Hailey, son. The dead girl on Moonbeam”

“So you *did* know her.” I closed my eyes and swallowed.

“Yeah. Well, knew *of* her. I got a letter...never mind. Anyway, I engineered a way to get talking to her, then she became a bit of an obsession...”

“This isn’t sounding too good, Dad. Did mum know about her?”

“No...” he looked at me “it wasn’t like *that*. But Hailey *is* the reason I left.”

“Go on.”

“Well, I wasn’t too clever about ‘engineering’ meetings after that first one, and Hailey began to get a bit freaked out. I’d found out where she lived y’see and...well, let’s just say I made a pig’s ear of it.”

“Ooooh Dad” I sighed “I’m still not feeling any better about this. Did she go to the police?”

“No, but I heard her talking to her sister about me on the phone one night...”

“From our house, somehow, with your new superpower no one knew about, yeah??”

“No, I was, um...listening through the open kitchen window.”

“Dad!!!!”

“She didn’t *see* me, son!”

“Hardly the point...?!”

“Do you want me to tell you, or not?”

“Carry on”

God, my Father is a prize plum.

“So, yeah, I realised how I must be coming across to her” said Dad

“Go figure...!” I mumbled

“So the next time I saw her, I decided to come clean about knowing her mother 23 years ago and how we had grown close and...”

I stared at him.

“So Hailey was your...?”

“Yeah”

“So she was my...?”

“Yes” Dad looked down at his feet.

“Did Mona get the wrong end of the stick...?”

“Just slightly”

“Oh God, Dad!”

“Yep...!”

Sam’s appetite seemed to be without limit. She blamed it on Mona’s disappearance not letting her eat for a week, but her waistline told a different story.

Mona picked at her food, regaling Fiona with tales from a fashion shoot she had been attending before her mother “pulled me the hell out of there and probably set my blog success back a few months.”

Sam guffawed, and by way of rejoinder pointed out that Mona was lucky she’d not been knocked *forward* a few months for pulling a vanishing act.

We were all gathering our things and preparing to go our separate ways, when Sam’s phone rang.

“Well, well, well: he’s still alive after all!” Sam said, showing the screen, emblazoned with the caller’s ID, to the three of us; before answering with a big “you’ve got a *nerve*...!”

“Dad!” mouthed Mona, looking pale.

Fiona was staring at me, also looking kind of peaky.

“Um, your Dad’s name’s Paul, is it?” I asked Mona, as casually as I could manage.

“Yes.” She said, while sitting down heavily (which you think would be difficult when you’re fashionably waif-like)

“Ah.” I looked back at Fiona, who was regaining her colour rapidly, and frowning.

“...ok I’ll meet you at home, but you’d better have a damn good explanation for why you’ve not been in contact for *over a fortnight*” said Sam.

“Can I offer you ladies a lift home?” I asked Mona.

Dad was shaking when he got off the phone.

“Well, you kind of deserved that reaction” I helpfully pointed out to him “And you ‘lost’ your phone, yeah?!”

“Well, what was I supposed to say by way of explanation for making myself scarce?”

“Oh I dunno...maybe ‘Mona’s in trouble, Sam. You’re not going to like what I am going to say next, but we’re going to have to pull together?’” I said

“Well, I’ve called her now. Hopefully we can go and get Mona together, once we’ve talked”

“Knowing Mum, she’s already *found* her and dragged her home. Did Mum say where she was when you called?”

“Nah, just that she was in town, so it would take her a while to get a taxi etc. She didn’t say she’d found Mona.”

“SHE doesn’t know YOU know Mona’s missing. More than my life’s worth to tell Mum I saw you the other day...!” I reminded him.

“True”

“If we hurry, we can catch the next bus.” I said.

I wasn’t expecting Sam’s house to be in a decent neighbourhood, so I was pleasantly surprised when we pulled in and saw closely-clipped grass with flowers around the edges, pretty lace curtains at the windows and a double garage with a basketball hoop outside. Books and covers, indeed.

“Don’t get too impressed now” said Mona, obviously reading my mind from the passenger seat “they’re mortgaged up to the hilt”

Sam sighed. “Would you like the tour, Jeffrey?”

“Ooo! *I* definitely would!” simpered Fiona “I’d love a house like yours, Sam, when I finally settle down!”

Yes, a nice stalker’s house, Fiona. Definitely top of the lifegoals. I thought to myself.

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I’d sat at the back of the empty top deck with Dad, and talked in a low voice. I still had questions.

“So did Mona follow you one night or something?”

“I suppose so. I’ve not talked to her since, but she burst through the French doors like something possessed that night and...” Dad swallowed “we fought. I tried to tell her that she’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, y’know? But you know how she can be...”

“Yeah” I said

“So Mona’s throwing things at me and Hailey’s trying to calm her down. I’d been drinking white wine with Hailey, and it’s not really my poison, so I wasn’t too steady on my feet - Mona lamped me one and I hit my head.” Dad rubbed a spot on his hairline, which I could now see was pretty colours. “Must’ve been on the coffee table or something. Anyway, when I opened my eyes again Mona was gone and Hailey was...Hailey was...”

I patted Dad’s arm again “so you buried her on the beach” I said.

“Yeah, well it was the early hours of the morning and my car was just around the corner, so I wrapped her in the rug and...God, she was only 23, Jack. She should be out there dancing. She told me she liked dancing...” Dad was really crying by then, and I had to remind him to keep as quiet as possible. “I never got to take her to Moonbeam, son. I thought she’d like it there, you know?”

I’d let him lean on my shoulder for the rest of the bus ride. He’s an all-round prat, but I really felt sorry for him.

We got off a stop early, and I lent Dad my shades. He can still pass for a good looking guy, I suppose, even when he stinks and hasn’t shaved for a while. I’d found some hankies mum must have stuffed in my schoolbag, and he’d arranged his face a bit better. Still, I was sure the retired

neighbours would still be shocked that I was bringing some lout into the street with me, because of that stupid beard.

We were later than we'd said we'd be, and there was a strange car in our driveway, but no one answered the bell (I'd thought maybe we should ring instead of me just waltzing Dad in after all this time. Mum didn't know I was with him and...yeah. Awkward.)

Dad and I were swithering about what to do, walking towards the car to try and see whose it was, when we'd heard Mum's voice from the garage.

"The grand tour!!" Dad and I smirked, then knocked on the garage door.

Sam frowned and yelled "is that you, Paul?"

"Yes!" said some male voice.

Sam flicked the switch near the garage door, telling the voice to move or he'd get knocked out. Mona went and stood in the doorway leading back into the kitchen. Fiona and I watched as this purported stalker was revealed to us from the shoes up. I remember that he at first appeared to have four legs.

"Jack!" Sam said, in obvious surprise "why aren't you at school?"

"Free periods and RME, which is a waste of my time..." the smaller male outside the garage responded.

"And where did you pick *this* one up?" Sam continued, "God Paul, you smell like you've been dunked in meths."

"Hello to you too!" said the infamous Paul, while striding into the garage "don't be alarmed!" he said to Fiona and me, with an attempt at a cheery smile "I do live here, I've just been away..." he'd extended his hand to us, but neither of us shook it. We could smell what Sam meant, and didn't feel like touching the source of that stench. Paul then spotted Mona, skulking in the shadows. "Mona..."

Mona looked absolutely petrified.

What has this man done to his family to make his womenfolk react to him the way they do? I thought to myself.

"I didn't mean to...I'm sorry that I..." said Mona

"Mona, not here..." Paul said.

“But that’s her *sister* behind you, Dad! Have you no shame?” cried Mona, starting to shake.

Paul looked closely at Fiona which, understandably, made her wrinkle up her nose. “Yes, you look like your father” he nodded, “I can see it in the shape of your eyes. You have your mother’s jawline, though. No double chins for you.”

“EH?!” shouted Sam from the front of the garage. Nobody responded.

“You stalked my *mother*?” Fiona asked

“No. But I had an affair with her. 23 years ago” said Paul. “Your father had been beating her up particularly badly...and I saw the bruises. We got talking. Your mother was so beautiful...”

I don’t think the women in the garage with us had been expecting him to say that. They all started shouting at once. Jack sat down on a large pot, and I went and closed the garage door, praying it was at least partly soundproofed.

Sam hit Paul first. “What the hell?! You had an *affair*?!”

“Ouch! A year before I met you, Sam! We’ve only been together twenty *two* years.”

“Dad! You went on a date with the *daughter of your ex*?! What kind of sick, twisted...?” shrieked Mona, looking like she was going to throw up “then you **KILLED** her!”

“What?!” Paul spun around and looked at his daughter “I wasn’t on a *date* with her, we had things to talk about!”

“What things?” screeched Fiona “you were *so* stalking her and trying to date her. She told me!”

“That was a misunderstanding. She didn’t realise my true intentions...” said Paul

“Which were, exactly?” I asked, unable to help myself.

Paul stood there, swaying a little with his eyes closed.

“Go on Dad, tell them” said Jack, into the silence.

“I was...am...she was my daughter. I wanted her to know that” I could actually see tears welling up in his eyes.

The bastard had the cheek to stand there and cry for her after what he’d *done*? That was the moment I got angry.

“You complete and utter...!” I’d closed the space between me and Paul pretty fast, but Jack managed to get between us.

“He didn’t kill her!” Jack shouted “Mona! Tell them! How can you stand there and accuse dad when you *know*? You *know*...”

“Jaaack...!” wailed Paul “Don’t!”

“All I know is, she was alive when I left, and Dad was out cold. Then when I looked in the window an hour or so later, Dad was standing over her, crying, his purple tie was on the floor beside them and...and...a few days later she turned up *dead* on our beach!! And Dad had been home, packed and left... *Our* beach, Dad. How *could* you!” Mona was doing something Hailey always referred to as ‘ugly crying’. I couldn’t make out what she said after that.

Sam was standing transfixed, probably in shock after all this crazy information. Jack had scooted me into a corner by this stage. Paul was just staring at his distraught daughter, swaying gently. Fiona was hugging her knees to her chest on the concrete floor, and seemed to be *smiling*. I remember feeling we all probably needed some sort of psychotherapy.

“Purple tie?” I said. “Fiona, wasn’t the tie you found *red*? What did you do with the purple tie, Paul?”

Paul kept staring at Mona. “Mona...I came to and *found* her like that! I thought you had...?”

Mona’s eyes widened. “Of *course* I didn’t, what do you take me for?! I left Hailey worrying that you had permanent brain damage or something. She was fretting about calling the ambulance and I panicked and got out of there. I didn’t *hear* an ambulance so I kind of thought you’d probably woken up...I went for a walk around the neighbourhood to calm down, and when I looked in later and saw you I thought you’d decided to shut her up so Mum wouldn’t find out, and maybe I was next...!”

“Oh my God!” said Sam “I can’t take all this! How was this madness going on and I never caught wind of it? Jack, did you know?”

“I only got some of the story today, when Dad came to see me” said Jack, finally letting me go.

“I didn’t kill her, Mona. I’d waited years to meet her. I cleaned up for *you*. I wanted to protect *you*...” Paul turned to me “to answer your question, I binned the purple tie in town. It would have had both mine and Mona’s skin cells on it, I couldn’t leave it.”

“So where does the red tie fit in, Fiona?” I asked, looking down at where she’d been just a few minutes before. She was standing at the kitchen door now, tossing a rather large knife hand to hand and looking straight at Paul.

“Red, purple, who cares.” Said Fiona. “he did it. Sitting drinking white wine with her, telling her how special she was, how pretty. You and she were the reason my father left us. I was only four years old, Paul. A girl still *needs* her father at four. You both took that away from me!!”

Fiona suddenly lunged at Paul, grazing Mona's arm as she did so. Jack pulled his father out of the way in the nick of time, I clumsily threw an old welly boot in the general direction of the knife, and Sam did a kind of sliding rugby tackle which made Fiona buckle at the knees.

There was a sickening crack as Fiona's skull hit the concrete, and blood started pooling almost immediately. Sam and I sprang into action with our first aid skills, but she was already gone.

"Shit, what are we going to do?" asked Sam.

Paul and I looked at each other, then around the garage for tarpaulins, spades, and anything else that might come in useful.

THE END

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