

I came and met your absence

"Another button?"

She clipped it on and did as she was told.

"Your mother will be proud," her father assured.

Hiding under the stairwell she repeated the words over and over, a mantra, a hymn, an ode. "Mother will be proud". The sound echoed in the narrow space, swirling around in hopes that clung together and fell apart like bats in the belfry, blind, hopeless, unable to escape and spread their wings. "Mother will be proud."

They'd search you out on face book she'd been told. They could find anything. Everyone. Anywhere. So she'd stopped using it. Switched off the computer. Unplugged the phone and thrown away the charger. They were everywhere. She wanted to be nowhere, a leaf slipping silently to earth, a cat cuddled on a car engine preying not to be run over if it started in her sleep.

She'd been waiting for him. A gentle tap on the door glass. It tingled away, the remains crashing to the ground. He could have walked straight through but he waited. In some ways he was a gentleman, maybe. Or he just knew there was no hurry. She had no where else to go. No one else to turn to.

She'd been expecting the ring. He'd been out there all along. All winter she had noticed his shadow, from behind the water laden shrubs, under the night glimpse of a street lamp flickering in the wind, or silently walking by while others stood guard. It was always the same long coat, dark, lean, scuffing off long black boots. She knew it was him because the second from last button was missing and the collar was slightly cuffed around the edges. He had a habit of clutching it, tugging it closer to his neck and then rubbing his nose with a long, slightly crooked index finger. When she was small she used do something

similar with her pink giraffe, all cuddly and tickly smooth wrapping warmth around her neck, soothing her chin as the cuddly toy knelt into her soft cheek and went to sleep. And the sharp grey hat was always perched between his ears, as if not sure which side to fall on.

Nearly summer now and he was still wearing that long coat. But opened, releasing the fleeting glance of a dark checked shirt, burgundy and grey seeping together over a gathering stomach. It looked rough and hard. She couldn't imagine putting her head against it as she did with her father. He too had a rounded tummy, but warm and soft, folding around her as she lay on his lap, her fingers reaching up to play with his chin, usually rough and raspy by night, a brash freshness that made her giggle. He'd let it grow into a beard once but that was too much, a kiss became a fluffy grey ball of fur. Her mother had said the same.

"Cut it off dear."

In the mornings, freshly shaven, his hugs were different, all soap and shiny skin but that didn't happen much any more. He no longer shaved every morning. She no longer went to school for that matter.

Lying together in a huddle on the sofa she let her father's chest and stomach rise and fall beneath her, a seaside of dribbles, of drowsy little waves soothing her back, massaging her neck. She'd started sucking her thumb again. Lying there, mouth throbbing, his breath in her hair, they watched repeats on the cartoon channel but rarely laughed. They had begun to seem a bit childish. But he wouldn't let her watch the news.

"You promised mummy would come and visit."

The light in the room flickered more vigorously as the advertisements boomed.

"I didn't say when."

"When then?"

"I don't know."

"Why did they take her?"

They'd had the conversation before. Maybe every night. It was like a going to bed routine without an established bed time or restful story.

"Your mother had ideals."

"What are ideals?"

"Big ideas."

"And why do you have to go away because you have big ideas?"

His hand stroked her hair, sliding down her cheek, briefly tickling her thumb as it slid from between her lips. He picked up a stray tear on her cheek but pretended not to notice. He held his own head back so she couldn't see the stains on his own cheek. He tried not to cry, to keep a calming tone, usher in comfort when all around was cold.

"Not everybody likes big ideas. Especially if they are ideals."

He wasn't sure if he was convincing himself or his child.

"It depends who has them. Some people are allowed to. Others have to fight."

"I don't like it when people fight."

"Nobody does."

"Are you sure?"

He wasn't.

"If you win it's all right isn't it?"

"Maybe."

He presumed so. He just knew losing wasn't all that good. He'd shared his wife's illusions but now they'd been torn apart it was no longer so easy, so clear that they were much more than small ideas gone wrong.

As she started to snore he put her into bed.

His whisker stroked her lip. He smelt of papa. A mix of rice, ground cereal and tobacco pulp and red wine. She dozed off. Her mother was so much softer, full of resin and care. She loved them both. It was hard to be left with just a half.

She'd seen him watching the house. And sometimes on the number 4 bus as they went to the commercial centre. He had long thin hands and a gentle smile, confused, as if he too was wondering why they were staring at each other. He'd sit at the back of the bus rustling a newspaper, peering over the top like a child playing hide and seek. Or he'd float past their window as her mother hustled, fussed with breakfast, checked last minute homework.

She didn't miss the homework. But school yes. She missed going out of the house. She hadn't been on the number 4 bus since before Christmas and now the evenings were getting longer and she was staying up later she would have liked to go out and do something, see somebody, hit somebody with a football or baseball bat, kick a coke can into the gutter or just jump and frighten the crows.

"How many buttons do I need to be like Mummy?"

You'll be special her father had told her. Put them on and everyone will stare. She thought she was normal. Maybe everyone was or maybe no one can be. So she wore the buttons proudly and let people stare and let fellow buttoners smile and nod in recognition.

Hiding under the stairwell she could see her mother out of the corner of her eye. Always there. They couldn't really take her mother away. And the kitchen full of men and women drinking wine, arguing about ideals she presumed. Her

father grinning as he stirred spaghetti for them all, the patient smile of a teacher who knew the lessons would never be learned. Books and papers and net books were pushed aside to eat, but never far from hand. Somebody would tweet, they would all stare at the responses and high five as they rolled in and stirred their revolutionary sauces.

Later the faces were glummer and gradually fewer. The food became scarcer. They seemed happy if they were able to tweet at all. She'd sit on a stool in the corner. They'd let her play on a borrowed laptop. She was going to get her own for Christmas. Then Christmas passed into spring and the idea seemed to become another ideal, long fought for, forever dangerously out of hand.

The brick flew through the window, followed by a bottle spewing fire. Their front room was destroyed and neighbours were increasingly absent, hiding behind doors, even the ones who had started to wear buttons.

She let him pin them on. One by one. Brightly colored stars screaming out for a sky.

"They're lovely," he said. She wasn't sure. She didn't really like being different.

From beneath his hat he would move them like chess pieces around their house. Delicate long fingers that seemed to nudge skeletons into action without needing more than a flicking wrist, the gentle stroke of his top lip as his eyes caught those who had to obey and left little doubt about the direction or intention.

Now, the only visit she was expecting was his. She knew her mother wouldn't be back and they'd taken her father so he couldn't lie to her any more. She was hiding beneath the stairs but he would know she was here. Blood trickled down her left thigh. Her mother would have known what to do. Maybe even her father. Nobody left to ask.

She could hear the metro rumble underneath. Outside were all the familiar houses her neighbours inhabited. She could just run out and look for them but she wasn't sure they were still there. Nobody played with a girl with buttons anymore, except those with their own button. But they kept disappearing. She'd disappeared under her stairs. She nibbled some bread she'd brought from the fridge. She waited. She imagined steps on the stairs overhead but she knew he would just come in through the broken front door.

Her father had promised mummy would visit. He'd also promised he would never let her go. But they had cracked his head with a gun and he hadn't even time to break his promise. They'd insulted him with some name she didn't recognize. He'd protected her too well. She'd never understood the buttons, but knew they were more than a fashion option.

Her visitor had watched on as the police barged in. He hadn't entered the house but she could sense his presence, the delicate fold of a cuff as his hand gave an indication, his finger touching his nose. Her father hadn't time to find her: his eyes spun into a bloody curl as he stretched out to grab her hand.

From the darkness of her cupboard she could sense the shadow at the door. Her visitor was here now. A tap on the broken glass. A glove sliding the panel through its frame. A ray of light scuttled across the carpet, seeping with dreaded efficiency into her feeble retreat. She braced herself. Then went out to meet him.

"Come home with me."

His voice, for the first time, deeper than she'd expected, colder than she'd hoped, freezing the embers of hope.

He led her to the upper deck of the number 4 bus. Her stomach was sinking, emptying itself through the floor below, right out into the street. His hand held hers. She avoided his eyes, not that they were easy to find. The hat covered them but not the hairy ears. She stared out at wet streets, rapidly losing their familiarity. She'd never been further than the shopping centre. Familiar

signposts fell far behind as the traffic lights soaked past. She didn't know where the number 4 ended.

"You can take them off now."

Slowly his fingers plucked them clean. It had been that simple all along.

The buttons just popped off as his nail briefly scratched her left breast. Her nipple tightened, shriveled in goose pimples. They came away just like that. If only her father had known.

Slowly, cautiously, efficiently, he peeled away the last one and opened up a new life.

She wished there were no ideals, no funny names and languages making everyone different. A world where buttons could be normal. Her father had told her they were but she had always known they weren't. They were a way of painting her out, identifying and emptying houses, smashing families with a blunt axe of fear. We are all normal he'd promised, but it wasn't true. Her mother had the wrong ideals. That was the problem. They'd inherited a misfitting coat that needed funny buttons.

Sometimes the stairwell cupboard was still attractive, hidden below the real world. But if her parents were ever let return they'd be visiting an empty house, a couple of colored buttons on the floor, a gaping absence. At least her visitor fed her well. But she still resisted clutching his hand. She wasn't sure what she had been saved from, or for.

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