

The Verge

Was there a squeal of tyres? There should have been, or something like that – something to mark the event. A thrill, churning up your insides. Like fear, but better, more exciting. A rush.

‘I need to stretch my legs,’ he said, and you helped him out of the car. Then you drove off and left him.

You feel it now, despite the trembling. Out of your car – out of your life!

Actually, you can’t quite believe what you’ve done! Just got back in the car while his back was turned. And off you went.

Look, it’s a summer evening, for God’s sake. Not even dark yet. There’s a garage down the road. He can bloody well walk – well, just about. And it’s on a bus route. Someone’s sure to help him – someone always does. Not your problem anymore.

Here we are – dual carriageway. Foot to floor now, no way back.

‘What the bloody hell’s got into her?’ he’ll think, ‘Alzheimer’s, probably. Early onset. Forgot me! Just drove off and forgot me! Here on this verge, looking over a field of god knows what. The edge of the world, dipping down to the sea. Always forgets things, always has. Not the brightest stamp in the collection. Not like Carmen.’

‘If only you were bit more like your sister –’ he begins, and you wonder why this should still matter, as you chase a baby asparagus spear round your square plate. Everything has corners, you think, sharp edges.

‘You know, Carmen sent me a lovely –’

‘What would you like for dessert?’ you say. You know about Carmen’s card, because you sent it yourself from the post-box near her house. He studies the menu, then looks around him, his forehead scribbled with wrinkles, jaw tight.

‘Waitresses in jeans,’ he frowns.

‘That’s the owner,’ you say.

You turn on the radio. Someone’s found a dismembered body. They’re digging up a patio in Margate. Switch to cd: Jan Garbarek. Soprano saxophone, ice-cold emotion. You can listen to him all you want now. You’re free – a free spirit!

‘Sounds like an animal in pain!’ says a voice somewhere in the car. You look around. Nobody there. That voice was in your head. *His voice*.

You check the time. Only five minutes since you dumped him. In a field of – what? Cabbages, probably. Next to the perimeter fence of Manston Airport. Windssock indicating a southwesterly breeze. Warm for the time of year. Very little traffic. Just the odd Juggernaut thundering past to Ramsgate.

There’ll be repercussions though. Gloria.

You’d picked this restaurant for his birthday outing, checking it out first with Sandy. *Cajun chicken on a bed of mashed potatoes*. Menu in plain English, almost. No mention of *coulis*, no *jus* instead of gravy. Dad’ll like that.

‘It is nice here, isn’t it?’ you say to Sandy.

‘Very nice,’ she says as she takes your hand, ‘but that’s not the point, is it? I know you don’t want to hear this, but your father will never – because he can’t. Love you. It’s like a missing limb, a missing heart.’

A missing heart. Dad looks at your carefully chosen suit, shot silk, slate grey-blue.

‘Trousers’ he says, ‘you couldn’t have made more of an effort, I suppose.’

You feel it right here – that blow, in your solar plexus. Your smile a battle scar which has opened, and before you know it, you’re getting drawn in. Snagged on the same old thread.

‘But Dad – it’s Stella McCartney! Do you know how much this cost me?’

And that was in the sale.

But he’s already looking around him.

‘I like a woman to be feminine. Take your sister Carmen –’

Carmen wears old trainers and jogging bottoms, for weeks on end. She doesn’t look like anything much these days.

‘Come to think of it, why isn’t she here? Have you two fallen out?’ pointing his fork at you accusingly.

Best not tell him about Carmen.

Into the mouth of Chestfield tunnel, no turning back now. What will you tell Gloria?

‘He said he needed to stretch his legs,’ you’ll say. ‘I helped him out, then I got back in the car and drove off.’

Shocked silence. Gloria, the other carers, looking at their feet, avoiding each other’s eyes. Ashamed for you.

‘I didn’t plan it,’ you’ll say, ‘it just happened.’

There was an old man in a field, you say, limerick-style. There was a daughter just drove off ...

‘Your father,’ Gloria will say, sucking her teeth. ‘You left your own father. In a field of ... turnips.’

‘Cabbages,’ you’ll say, and she’ll shake her head.

Your latest therapist tells you that it might be better for you to stop this *making-an-effort* thing. This taking him out on his birthday. Leave him to stew, or just (which is more likely) forget you ever existed. Other people have said the same over the years. But they didn’t mean you should leave your 89-year-old father in a layby and drive off, did they? Parent-dumping. That’s abuse.

Toxic waste, you say out loud. Doing ninety-five now. Past Wraik Hill, then the A2, and then – home free.

‘I don’t think I can manage pudding,’ he says. ‘You go ahead though. It’s not as if you have to think about your figure. I suppose you’re past all that now.’

You smile to yourself, fingering your wedding ring from Sandy, which you have taken off and put in your pocket. You’ll soon be home.

‘I did it! I finally got rid of him!’ you’ll tell her, laughing.

‘If only it were that easy,’ Sandy will say, sadly. Careful! Up to the 100 mark. Points on your licence. *Disqualification*.

‘I hope you realise,’ he says wiping the corner of his mouth, ‘I won’t have much to leave you when I’m gone. And taking me out to dinner isn’t going to change that. Everyone should stand on their own feet. Like I had to.’

‘Dad,’ you say, ‘I don’t need your money.’ *I am an executive of an NHS Trust, have you any idea how much I earn?*

Money, always money. How much – how much am I worth? The trouser suit. This car! This sporty little number. *Step on the gas. I'm worth a lot, I'm worth loving.*

He almost made that little waitress cry, sending her back to the kitchen, wiping cutlery, fresh glasses. You had planned to leave her a big tip to make amends, then realised that she seemed to like him. Helped him on with his coat. Nearly gave him a kiss!

And it's true, people take to him, however rude he is. They think he doesn't really mean it; he's only pulling their legs. *So lucky, they say, to have a father like that.*

'I tell things how they are,' he says, 'and people respect me for it. I don't pussyfoot. If everyone were straightforward like me, there'd be a damn sight fewer problems in the world.'

'Want a bet?' you say out loud, because he is still there with you, wheezing on the back seat. You haven't shaken him off at all.

You'll have to disinfect the car, like a murderer. Put it up for sale.

Go faster. A hundred and ten, why don't you? No police around now.

Moon – fat moon, how can I get him out of my car, my life?

At least he never actually hit you, says Sandy, in your head.

Flies. Wings pulling off, you answer, your brain a jumble. Other kinds of pain.

The moon looks on, wall-eyed.

'Thanks for the lovely meal,' you say, as you give the girl your credit card.

'Oh,' he says with a harsh laugh, 'you'll probably put it on your expense account, won't you? That's where my taxes go.'

Your soft underbelly folds over to take the blow. Fat that you've grown specially, folds of adipose tissue. *Protection.*

'Everyone's at it,' he goes on 'Take that Gloria, always on the phone to somewhere or other. *That's my money you're spending,* I tell her, and she just laughs!

You try to apologise to Gloria but she grins.

'I told him I've got a special phonecard for Nigeria!'

Gloria calls him *Your Highness*, even tousles his hair. She must be some kind of angel.

But you – you're no angel, are you? Your own dad! An old man, in need of care. All confused, sitting there on the verge. In harm's way!

'Your father probably had a rough time, as a kid. Never shown love. Unhappy people find it hard to –'

Sandy's much too nice. Or perhaps she's trying to tell you that you're fifty-four years old, and isn't it time to move on?

'That's exactly what I'm doing,' you say, inside your hurtling box on wheels. 'Moving on.'

'Your father's not unhappy at all,' snaps Gloria, because now she too is in the car with you. 'He just didn't want to go out to dinner on his birthday. It's steak and kidney tonight, his favourite. He didn't want Cajun chicken on a bed of baby roast peppers.'

Faversham turn off soon, then a clear run. No going back. Moon keeping up with you, matching your speed.

Incident ahead. Drivers rubber-necking. Careful! People on the verge. Ambulance. Somebody hurt. *So easy to get hurt.*

‘Swerving all over the place. Where did you learn to drive? In a bloody field full of cows?’

Hang on! you think. It’s your father’s voice. It’s so real! Something must have happened to him, back there, on the verge. In harm’s way.

*

Moon on your right now, sky darkening, a clear sweep to the sea. Currents shifting, ruffling the shallows.

He doesn’t love you. He can’t. He doesn’t hate you, even.

He nothings you.

Road blurs. Blink quickly. Eyelids, windscreen wipers.

But now – shit! You don’t believe it. How can you be lost? After all these years, you could sleep-drive this journey.

Okay, you must have turned off early. Laundry Hill. Ruins of an abbey. Ghosts of nuns. Pegwell.

Remember the hovercraft in the 1970’s? How you went on a day trip to Boulogne with a friend, forgotten her name. Her dad was kind to you when you were sick. You were on the lookout, even then for a replacement dad, someone whose knee you could sit on.

You should stop and ask. *Have you seen this old man? Smartly dressed. Dapper. Just turned 89. It’s his birthday today.*

Nobody about.

Now you're listening out for ambulances, a millrace churning in your stomach. Real fear this time, not excitement. Your father – in the road. Splat! Double-splat. *He come out from nowhere*, says the Croatian lorry driver, in tears.

But perhaps he managed to swerve in time.

Let's get you into the ambulance sir. He's confused ... shine a light into his eyes. CAN YOU REMEMBER WHERE YOU LIVE?

Of course! Stupid people – old man spits, of course I can remember where I bloody live!

The paramedics jump back, confer in hushed tones. Loud hissing of radios. *My daughter*, mutters the old man. *Useless! Drove off – and left me!*

Faster now. Wayborough Hill, Laundry Road. This is it. You perform a handbrake turn in front of a screeching juggernaut.

The earth is dark here, although you can see the moonlight combing the sea. Here's where you parked. The verge. But no dad. Look closer. Scuffed Jimmy Choo's, sharp heels spiking into flinty soil. A lorry headlight picks out a silhouette – among the brassicas, a different kind of plant. A bent stalk with a head.

You take his arm. Which of us deserves to be rescued, you think, and which of us deserves to be left in a field of cabbages, staring at the moon?

'Where did you get to?' A frail voice, a quavering man-child voice in the dark.

You look across at the risen moon on the ruffling sea as if it holds an explanation.

'Let's get you home,' you say, as you ease him into the passenger seat, gently, and drive off.