

Will You Tell Her I Called?

For my eleventh birthday, at the beginning of March, Mick took us to Brighton in his Jaguar. Miller came too and people stared at us as we drove along the sea front; me and Miller waved from the back seat like royalty.

It was a cold day and the wind whipped along the beach, the sea ice-blue. Mum and Mick got their photo taken on the pier, behind cardboard cut-outs of a fat couple in bathing suits. They poked their heads through the empty holes and smiled for the camera like little kids. Mick gave me and Miller a pound each and told us to “have fun”. We ran up to the amusement arcades where we changed our notes for tens so we could play Space Invaders. We ate candy floss and dodged each other in the bumper cars until the money ran out, and then we went down beneath the pier, between the huge rusty legs that plunged into the water. We skimmed stones into the sea and when we were tired we sat down under the pier and watched the water crash against the shore.

Maybe it was something to do with being near the sea that reminded me of Dad, or maybe it was because Mick had been around for a while and it didn't look like he was going anywhere fast, but I suddenly realised I hadn't thought about Dad for ages. When I tried to remember him, remember what he looked like, remember his hair bushing out from his head, the sadness in his eyes, his big feet, it was like I couldn't quite get there. Every time I thought I could remember, the details slipped away. I held on to a stone and pressed it into my palm, trying to force an image of Dad back into my mind by thinking about one of the pictures I kept in the drawer by my bed, but it was no good. He was fading in front of my eyes, like an old photograph curling up at the corners. I couldn't even remember what his voice sounded like. Was that what happened? Could you forget who your

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own Dad was? If you hadn't seen him for long enough, could you pass your Dad in the street and not know who it was? The idea terrified me. I felt as if nothing was safe anymore, nothing could be relied upon. I tried to focus on something certain. Tried to imagine where Brighton was on my road atlas. But even that seemed shaky, like I needed the atlas in front of me to really believe it was real.

“Are you okay?” Miller asked.

I nodded quickly. I couldn't tell anyone about this. If I did I was scared it would become even more real. We walked away from the pier after that, crunching over the sandy-coloured pebbles. I resolved to pay more attention to Dad. To spend more time studying his pictures and remembering his voice. I had slacked off in recent weeks and it showed. I couldn't let that happen. I was thinking this when I noticed that Miller had stopped. I looked back. He seemed to be taking off some of his clothes.

“What are you doing?” I said.

He grinned. “Wait and see.”

He stripped down to his underpants. They were blue, the same colour as the sea.

“Miller! It's freezing,” I said. “What the hell are you doing?”

But he didn't seem to hear. He started to run towards the sea. “Stop,” I shouted. “You'll get ill. It's too cold.”

But he didn't stop. He kept going until he had reached the water, and then he plunged head first into the pounding sea.

I waited for him to come out, unable to move. I felt sure he would drown. He would go and there was nothing I could do about it. I watched the water,

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searching for his face. It seemed colder and darker than before. Where had he gone? I couldn't see him at all. Just icy water, choppy waves. Then suddenly he burst into the air and waved at me, his face a broad grin.

"You're mad," I shouted. "You're completely crazy. It's freezing out there."

He had begun to run out towards me, shaking his hair. Water flew off from his body, like a dog.

"But it feels good," he said as he stopped in front of me, grinning.

I looked at him.

"Well, it doesn't feel good to me," I said. "You scared me."

He put on his clothes again, sat down next to me on the beach and put his arm around me. "Sorry, Rae," he said. He had stopped grinning now. "I didn't mean to scare you. I thought it might make you laugh."

"I thought you had gone," I said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled something out.

"What's this?" I said.

"Not much," he said.

I opened my hand to find an acorn with two cups joined together.

"I found it in the park," he said. "It's good luck."

He had given me things like that before. A perfectly formed leaf; a heart-shaped stone; a bit of wood smooth as an egg. I kept them all in my special box where I hid things I didn't want anyone to find. I wanted to thank him but for some reason the words wouldn't come out. It was then I saw Mum and Mick, walking along the beach, arm in arm. Mum looked flushed and happy. I waved at them but they didn't see me. It felt like ages before they did. As they walked

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towards us I saw Mum was holding a bunch of flowers, red roses with long thorny stems, and I realised Mick was trying to tell us something but it was hard to hear with the wind blowing in his face.

“We’re getting married,” he said as they got closer, and although the sounds were all mixed up, and the sea was pounding, I knew what he’d said.

Mum didn't look at me. She was smiling and her hair was flying all over the place and her cheeks were pink. *She was getting married?*

“Can we go home now?” I asked.

Mum looked at me, shot me a flash of her eyes, but I didn't care.

“Is that all you can say?” She came towards me.

“Stelle,” said Mick. “Leave it. Let her get used to the idea. Must be a bit of a shock, hey, kid?” Mum laughed as if she was never going to do anything to me anyway. Mick said what we all needed was a nice drink, somewhere to celebrate, and the two of them started to walk along the front. Me and Miller followed behind in silence; Miller had begun to shiver. I reached into my pocket and clasped my hand around the smooth roundness of the acorn Miller had given me.

Not long after the trip to Brighton I got the flu. I'd been off school for two days with a temperature over 100 when the phone rang. I was alone in the house.

Mum was at work. Vera out shopping. I heard it from my bedroom. The ring ran right through me like an electric current. I pushed off the bed clothes and stood up. Although it was the first day I had felt better, my feet were still shaky. I worried that I wouldn't get to the phone in time. I made it into the front room.

The ring continued, bright and clear, like a sign. I picked up the receiver.

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“Hello,” I said.

“Anna-Rae? It’s me. Dad.”

My heart quickened, my voice stuck in my throat. What should I say? What could I say to him? I felt like I did in my dreams, trying to move, trying to speak, but with treacle on my feet and cotton wool in my mouth.

“Hello. Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said. I could barely breathe.

“Hello,” he said again. “How are you?” He sounded very close, as if he could have been in the next room. And yet I knew then how far he was, how far he had become. He sounded like a stranger, someone I had never known. I wished I could do something about that, pull him back towards me, but I didn’t know how.

“I’ve been ill,” I heard myself say. It was the only thing I could think of.
“For two days.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Are you getting better?”

“A little.”

“That’s good.” He paused. The line sounded a bit funny after that, a crackle appeared that wasn’t there before. “Where’s your mother?” he said. “Is she there? I’d like to talk to her.”

“No one’s here,” I said. “Mum’s at work.” I thought about Mick and Mum on the beach in Brighton. How could I ever explain all that had happened since Dad had gone?

“I’ve tried to call you,” he said. “Many times. I miss you.” He stopped for a moment after that and then he said, “I know she doesn’t want to talk to me. But it’s important. There are things we need to discuss.”

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I held my breath. Mum had said she'd heard nothing from Dad. Why would she lie to me?

"When are you coming back?" I heard myself say.

There was a delay before he spoke again. I tried to picture where he was. It seemed to be another place altogether, over a line I would never see let alone cross. I shivered, suddenly cold in my bare feet. I could hear noises in the background. It sounded as if he was somewhere by a road. I heard cars pass. Maybe he was standing on a motorway, I thought, standing on a motorway by himself, lorries flying past. The thought terrified me. He wasn't safe there. He could get run over, squashed flat by the huge lorries. He shouldn't be there. You shouldn't be there, I wanted to say. I could feel my insides clench. I wanted to reach out, reach down the telephone and pull him away from the road.

"I couldn't hear you," he said. "It's so noisy here. What did you say?" he was shouting now to be heard above the noise.

"Nothing," I said, afraid to repeat the question, afraid of his answer. Nothing felt safe.

"I've done a lot of thinking, Rae," I heard him say. "Things are clearer to me now. I need to speak to your mother. Nothing's straightforward. Who can say who's to blame?"

I didn't know what he was talking about but suddenly all I could think of was Mick and his plastic hand. Mick and Mum, half-naked, on the night of the party. There was so much Dad didn't know. Was I supposed to tell him? Or to lie? Neither seemed right.

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“It’s beautiful here,” he told me then. “I’ve been painting again. The light and the heat. You wouldn’t believe. I wish you could see it.”

I wanted to ask where he was, what he had been doing. I wanted to ask when he was coming home. But I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. I was afraid I’d ruin everything and he’d hang up, leave again.

“I have a best friend,” I told him eventually. “His name is Miller.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Friends are good.” I imagined him nodding, his bushy hair wobbling on his head.

For a while after that neither of us said anything. I thought perhaps he had gone, but I kept standing there anyway gripping on to the receiver, my hand clammy and cold. Through the kitchen window I could see the buds on the tree outside, smooth and velvety like plums. I realised it would soon be a year since Dad had left. In a way I couldn’t understand, that suddenly seemed like the longest time possible, and nothing at all.

“Will you tell your mother I called?” he said suddenly.

“Yes,” I said. “I will.” Except I already thought that I wouldn’t. That she wouldn’t want to know and I didn’t want to tell her.

“Well,” he said. “I think that’s my lot. I’ll call again. I’ll see you again soon. I’m sure of it.” But he didn’t sound sure. He didn’t sound sure about anything, and I think he knew it. “Are you still there?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I am.” And then the line went funny, a loud static noise that seemed to cut through our connection. “Dad?” I kept saying, “Dad? I’m still here.” But he didn’t say anything else. He had gone. I held onto the phone for a long time before I hung up and went back to bed.