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Opening extract from

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THE FIRST SLICE



They had to have an ambulance outside the church in case someone fainted. Men with green armbands directed the traffic. Someone had written 'FULL' in red on a sign and hung it on the entrance to the car park. Neighbours opened their gates.

Inside, big strips of paper had been taped to the backs of the first four rows of seats on which another sign said, 'Reserved for 3R' because only the people in his class were allowed to sit there.

Everyone looked dazed. It was the Day of Prayer for Oscar Dunleavy, who was missing, presumed dead – and no one ever gets used to something like that.

Father Frank was at the absolute centre of everything. He said that Oscar's classmates were going to need space and protection and respect on account of the 'unnatural, wretched, disbelieving things' you feel when a person in your class looks like they are never going to be seen again.

We were also going to need blankets because the heating in the church had broken down just when the February weather had taken another turn for the worse.

I heard Father Frank talking to the parents about how we were 'in for a very difficult time' – facing Oscar's empty desk, and passing his still-padlocked, graffitied locker that nobody had had the heart to wrench open. Father Frank was in his element, focusing on something more important than his usual duties, which normally involved going round the school telling people to pick up their rubbish or to spit out their chewing gum.

Now he was soothing people who were sad and traumatised, and talking a language of grief and comfort that it turns out he is fluent in.

He explained that even when it looked as if everyone was fine, we were going to encounter bewildering moments when the loss of Oscar would be like an assault on our impressionable young minds, not only during these empty sad weeks, but for many years to come.

Everybody filed in. Pale faces. Blotchy red noses. The whole class melded into one single silent smudge, a blue blur of uniforms shimmering like a giant ghost.

Every time I looked at the crowd, I saw something I didn't want to see: a grown man's face quivering, a woman rustling in her bag for a tissue, tears dropping off the end of someone's chin. There were low murmured hellos and unnatural-sounding coughs.

And then there was Oscar's dad, pushing Stevie's wheelchair, the two of them looking like the broken links of a chain. For a second, the squeal of someone's baby drifted above us – an accidental happy little noise ringing out, clear and pure in the middle of the despair. There were flowers, tons and tons of flowers, all blue and yellow.

'Cornflower. Buttercup,' said Father Frank somewhere in the middle of his endless speech.

'Cornflower for the blue of his blue eyes. Buttercup for his bright soul.' Seriously, that's actually what he said.

There was something in the air that smelled of herbs and musk. Dust seemed to rise from corners of the church like an unearthly kind of mist. And for the duration of this unwanted ceremony, everyone in my class seemed to be trying their best not to look into each other's eyes.



I was on the verge of assuming that Father Frank's speech really was going to go on for ever, but then his voice got deeper and slower and more solemn, signalling the end of something and the beginning of something else.

'Ahem,' he said, 'now we're going to ask Oscar's best friend to come forward, please, for her reading. She was the person closest to Oscar. She is going to say a few words in memory of her friend – on behalf of all of us who knew him and loved him so well.'

I could feel myself heating up with that embarrassment

you get when you're not prepared for something important. Nobody had said anything to me about a reading. I wasn't in the mood to stand up in front of anyone or say anything. But I took a couple of deep breaths and I told myself that I had to keep it together for Oscar. I felt sure that the words I was supposed to read would be up there on the stand beside Father Frank, waiting for me. Someone was meant to have cleared this with me in advance, and there must have been a mix-up because nobody had, but I guessed that was probably understandable under the distressing circumstances.

Nobody was hovering nearby, waiting to give me instructions and all I could see was the tops of everyone's heads. I got to my feet as the silence bulged inside the church and people shifted around on the benches. The crowd seemed to quiver in front of me.

And then she stood up. Golden-haired and glittery, rising like an angel from her seat and walking so gracefully to the top of the church that it looked as if she was floating. At the sight of her, I was thick-footed – stuck to the floor. The angel girl proceeded to the microphone.

'Who is that?' I asked my mum, who did not know.

'Who,' I leaned over to Andy Fewer who was sitting in the row in front of me, 'is that?' And as the girl began to speak I realised that I'd seen the outline of her before and I did know who she was.

'*Death is nothing at all . . .* '

Her voice was like melted chocolate and it drifted among

us, as if music had begun to play.

' . . . *one brief moment and everything will be as it was before.*'

Andy turned to me with a mystified look.

'That's Paloma,' he said as if I'd asked him what planet we were on. 'Paloma Killealy.'

'Of course,' I thought. 'Of course it's her.'

When she'd finished the reading, she said there was this song that was Oscar's favourite, like, ever, and how whenever she heard it, she'd always think of him.

'This is for you, Osc,' she said, and she started to sing some song that I did not recognise.

Osc? Since when was that his name? Nobody ever called him that.



When something bad happens to someone young, and when people get together in a church to say prayers for that person, there is a weird vibration, sort of like a buzz or a whistle. Everything shudders, like I reckon it would at the beginning of an earthquake, as if even the ground is shocked and horrified by the wrongness of it all.

'*There should have been so much time ahead of him,*' was the kind of obvious, useless thing that everyone kept repeating, not that anything anyone said was going to make a single bit of difference – at least not now. It was too late, they said. Because Oscar had made his decision, and we were going to have to suffer for the rest of our lives because of it. He was

gone. And by now, everyone more or less took it for granted that he wasn't coming back.



February had been Oscar's favourite time of the year.

I'd told him he must be the only person in the universe with a pet month, but he was quite stubborn about it. He explained that when you stop being a kid, Christmas is nothing but a terrible disappointment. And January has never been anything but a dark and boring month full of homework and dull dinners. But then, right at that moment when the world seems to be at its bleakest, February creeps up on you like a best friend you haven't seen in a while, tapping you on the shoulder.

Plus, this particular February had been holding up a new sign, allowing us to make plans to do things that none of us had ever done before – exciting stuff – different stuff – teenage stuff. We weren't little kids any more and this February had been full of a hundred different kinds of new chances.

Now, any of the chances Oscar might ever have had, had dropped radically. To nil.



Outside, on the steps of the church it was formal and hushed, but there was a low murmur that felt as if it was growing, like some distant, gigantic monster was moving closer by the second.

A group of parents clustered round Father Frank, and the sun shone like a cruel joke, making everything seem more beautiful than it deserved to be. Andy was there, and so was Greg, and Father Frank was asking, 'Deary deary me, boys, why? Why would someone with so much going for him have . . . have . . . ended it all in the way he appears to have done?'

'Oh Father, you see, it could be for any number of reasons,' Andy said, serious and fluent, as if he was an expert on the subject. 'Personally, I think that it's pretty much a miracle that any of us survives.'

'What do you mean?' said the priest.

'I mean,' continued Andy, 'there's this one moment as you're growing up when the world suddenly feels more or less pointless – when the terribleness of reality lands on you, like something falling from the sky.'

'Something falling? Like what?' asked Father Frank, trying his best.

'Something big, like a piano, say, or a fridge. And when that happens, there's no going back to the time when it hadn't landed on you.'

'But what about the pleasure and the joy and the purpose, like sport, music, girls and the like?' Father Frank was nearly pleading now.

'Fiction,' sighed Andy. 'Mirages in the desert of life, to make people feel like it might be worth it.'

'Oh,' said Father Frank. 'Oh I see, and do all you youngsters get this feeling?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Andy, not even asking anyone else for their opinion, 'but most of us learn to live with it.'

'Well that's a relief, I suppose.'



It took me ages to find Stevie, who was sitting close to the church entrance in his wheelchair. His dad was nearby, fully occupied with the sober, repetitive job of shaking hundreds of hands.

'Oh Stevie,' I said and I leaned over to hug him and I closed my eyes and the tears that I'd been trying to keep inside came tumbling out.

'It's OK, Meg,' he whispered, even though obviously it wasn't. But I felt something a little like relief when I got a chance to look at his face properly. 'When did you get back?' he asked, and I told him we'd been back since the night before. That we'd come as quickly as we could, as soon as we'd heard the news. It occurred to me that part of the reason everything felt so wobbly was because I must still be jet-lagged. I couldn't see straight.

But surrounded by this fog of grief mumbles, there was a gladness in Stevie, a light in his eyes that lifted my heart slightly, and made me feel that maybe there was some reason to be cheerful, or hopeful, or even faintly optimistic.

'What happened, Stevie? What on earth happened? And why is everyone acting like this? This mass? A *mass*? I mean, you're not supposed to do that unless it's completely clear

that the person you're having it for is definitely dead. Not unless there's proof. I mean, there's no reason for us to believe he's *dead*. Is there?'

Stevie looked up at me and swivelled a little closer.

'Exactly!' he whispered. 'That's what I've been trying to tell everyone! Thank goodness you're home Meg because seriously, you're the first person, the first person I've talked to – apart from myself – who doesn't believe it. I knew I'd be able to count on you and I'm *so* completely glad you've come back, because basically I felt on my own here, kinda thought I was going mad to be honest. Everyone's going round saying he committed suicide. I mean seriously, right? That doesn't make any sense – it really doesn't.'

'Stevie, you've got to tell me everything you know. Every single thing that happened before he disappeared.'

'I'll do my best, Meg,' Stevie said. 'I've been going over everything again and again in my head. There's no time to talk now though,' and Stevie frowned and looked around, and he sounded much older and wiser than a kid his age usually sounds. 'Let's meet at the pier later on. I'll see you there. Leave it till about midnight, OK?'

'How are you going to get there on your own at that time of night, Stevie?'

'No problemo,' he said, in a definitely non-grieving tone, which kept giving me hope. 'A lot has happened since you've been gone. I'm practically self-sufficient!' He grinned so widely that he started to attract some unwanted attention, so he

changed his expression to something more grave, and, speaking with the furtive confidence of a spy, he told me to mingle, to say nothing and to meet him later as instructed.

The crowd milled. Arms were put around people and there was a lot more crying. Off in the distance every so often I glimpsed the golden hair of Paloma Killealy, and everywhere within the murmuring crowd I seemed to hear her name spoken softly from person to person as if it were a poem. Paloma Killealy. Paloma Killealy. Paloma, Paloma Killealy.

THE SECOND SLICE



I didn't die. I never died. I'm not dead. OK, I feel pretty rotten about the whole situation – the way I disappeared that night without saying where I was going and how everyone assumed I really was dead, and the way I let them believe it.

Things had got on top of me. It was because of this whole sequence of events that made me want to cycle faster than I'd ever cycled before down to the shore and tumble into the black sea.



I remember how afterwards I kept telling Barney about what a complete idiot I obviously was, and how worthless I had become and how much I really did hate myself.

He kept saying that he knew how I felt, and it wasn't a pretend thing that some people say when they're trying to help you. I knew more or less for certain he was telling the truth.

The truth's a fairly important thing to hold on to when you've been pulled out of the sea after wanting to drown in it. I could've let the sea take me. I could easily be dead now, which is funny when you think about it. When I say funny, what I actually mean is weird and kind of disturbing.

When there's the loud sound of a siren screaming in your head it doesn't take too long before a feeling of not caring what happens washes over you and you become recklessly self-destructive. I used to be full of energy and happiness but I could barely remember those kinds of feelings. The cheerful, childish things I used to think had been replaced. A whole load of new realisations had begun to grow inside me like tangled weeds, and they were starting to kill me. That's why I'd made the decision that involved heading off to the pier on my bike in the middle of the night and cycling off it.

The plans I'd once had had been ruined and by the time that night came, they felt like the bent-up metal of a car crash and there was nothing left – nothing that wasn't warped and destroyed, nothing that made any sense.

I didn't manage to kill myself. And when I discovered I couldn't even do that properly, I decided to do the next best thing. I decided to stay away, and to pretend I'd died. For a while, afterwards, part of me wanted someone to come and find me.

It was a bit annoying the way nobody seemed to look that hard. Within a distressingly short space of time,

everyone seemed to be fairly happy to assume I was a goner – after a search that can only be described as half-hearted – and get back to their lives as quickly as possible. A couple of policemen did call at Barney's house, but as soon as he told them to go away and stop bothering him, that's what they did.

You shouldn't give up on people when they vanish. You shouldn't go, 'What a terrible pity but, oh well, that's that.'

In actual fact, the disappearance of someone is exactly everyone's cue to get out and search, and keep searching and not stop until there's dirt under their fingernails and wretchedness in their souls from the number of rocks they have pushed aside to see whether I'm under one of them. If you want to know my opinion, coming to terms with someone's disappearance is a bit of an offence. It's an insult to someone's memory.

I learned a lot though. As the days passed, I learned that staying lost made its own sort of sense. I learned that there's not that much difference between pretending to be dead and really being dead. As far as I can see, both seem to amount to the same thing.

I learned that if someone you know disappears you shouldn't automatically jump to conclusions. You should ask questions, and look, and search until you know for sure. Don't write them off until you've exhausted every avenue. Keep hope in your heart.