

THE REMAINS

The day after my father's remains were found in a shallow bush grave, the oddball from two doors down went missing. The following morning the police found him, dead of an overdose, propped up against a rock face only metres away from my father's grave.

In spite of all the ill-informed gossip, there's nothing to say the two deaths might be linked. After all, it's been nearly forty years since my father walked out the front door, yelling back to my mother that he was popping down to the shops for a packet of cigarettes. He didn't bother to say goodbye, no need, because he was only going to be gone a short while. We never saw him again.

I was ten at the time and the thing that bothered me most was how ordinary that last moment was. His life with us came to an end because he'd run out of cigarettes. Something so trivial in exchange for something so momentous.

When the oddball disappeared two nights ago the circumstances were just as ordinary. He took the dog for a walk and two hours later the dog came back on its own, trailing the empty lead behind him. Just like my mother, forty years before, his wife had no idea where he might have gone, why he didn't come home.

Though, unlike my father, the oddball's body was found pretty quickly. He'd taken his own life right in the middle of a spot already under investigation, a patch of dense scrub surrounded by blue-striped police tape and dotted with little white numbered tags marking all the significant points of my father's puzzling death. A couple of investigating detectives found the man slumped against the rock face when they went out for a routine survey of the

graveyard. They came to my door to let me know firsthand. I was grateful for that. When these things happen, far too much is said and believed by people who don't have the foggiest. I've learned not to listen.

When they told me about the oddball's death, I could picture it all too clearly. After my father's body was found, before the fact was made public, the police took me out to see his shabby grave. His remains had already been moved off to some forensic laboratory. Not that I was keen to see them. The police had already described what they'd found in far more detail than I was prepared to hear. My father's skull was caved in on one side, suggesting he'd been bashed repeatedly by something large and heavy. As well, his jaw and several teeth were broken.

Even more puzzling, the remaining shreds of his clothes were not on his body. They'd been tossed separately into the grave before it was covered with soil and branches. That's something I definitely didn't need to hear. I don't remember what my father was wearing when he left the house, it's not the sort of thing you notice when you're ten, but it's disturbing to know he was not wearing those clothes when he was killed. Once you've heard something like that, there's an unnerving curiosity that works away inside. I can't say I was close to my father but even so it's not how I want to remember him.

I suppose the police offered to show me his last resting place out of courtesy. It's what they do for the families of missing people, however long they've been gone. And out of courtesy I thanked the officers as they drove me back home, even though I wasn't sure I was grateful. Seeing his grave didn't mean anything more than just another tangle in an old story. A story I'd relegated to the shadowy confusions of childhood. All this time, I'd believed he simply left us and was living another life somewhere else. For a while, I even thought he

might have had another family. My mother scoffed at that idea. Right up until she died a few years back, she maintained there was no point speculating. Things happen, move on, she said.

It's been years since I gave my father's disappearance any consideration but it was still a shock to find out his life ended so soon after I'd last seen him. Not to mention the terrible circumstances. On top of that, the oddball choosing to end his own life right beside my father's newly-uncovered grave makes it all so much worse. In the eyes of others, especially.

As anyone will tell you, he wasn't known as the oddball for nothing. He's lived in this street for longer than anyone else and for all that time you could never really talk to him. If you tried, he'd back off, rambling his way around any number of excuses why he couldn't stop to chat. His wife has never been exactly friendly either. Always keeping to herself, just like he did.

Mostly, he was ignored and I think that probably suited him. Though some things were a little harder to ignore. There have been incidents at night when he's been sprung poking around other people's gardens with his little torch. He'd claim he was looking for frogs, some sort of hobby I guess. Most people didn't buy it, accused him of snooping on the private lives of others.

I've always been inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. I was happy to take the oddball's intense interest in frogs at face value because my own father had his oddities. Not frogs, obviously, just strange behaviour. Quite often he'd go out late and come home hours after midnight. He'd creep back in the house, closing the front door with only the slightest click, then tiptoe up the stairs, his shoes in one hand.

I was probably about eight years old when I surprised my father one night, standing at the top of the stairs in my nightie, pretending I was going to the toilet. He was more than halfway up when he noticed and the fright of seeing me staring down at him made him drop

his shoes. They tumbled down the stairs, bumping loudly off every step until they came to a halt only two steps from the bottom. I have to admit I'd intended to give my father a bit of a start but it was far more awkward than I'd anticipated and, rather than meet his eyes, I watched those toppling shoes all the way down. He used my distraction to slip past me, retreating to his bedroom and closing the door softly behind him.

The shoes were gone in the morning and I never said a word about it. Neither did he. If no one said anything then nothing had happened. That was the comfortable way of it in our family.

If my father was going to disappear, you'd think it would have been one of those nights. But on the day he left, it was only late afternoon and he had a reasonable excuse for going out. At first my mother was reluctant to take his disappearance seriously. She was certain he'd turn up in a day or so. I couldn't put down the worry of it all but she was not so much worried as angry with him for going off like that. When she finally reported him missing, two days later, the police seemed a bit concerned she hadn't come to them earlier.

Of course, they searched for my father. It was pursued vigorously by the police, with friends and neighbours adding their own little efforts to keep an eye out for him around the local area. Some even wrote to relatives further afield to ask them to notify the police if they happened to see a man that matched his description.

At school, other kids pestered me about it. Some teachers even made open-ended comments, probably hoping I'd drop something of interest no one else had heard. My mother told me to say nothing. That was easy, seeing as I knew nothing.

So I can imagine a little of what the oddball's wife is going through right now. They never had children so she's left to deal with it on her own. Much like my mother, now I think about it, because I'm sure I wasn't much help, being so young. I don't think she had that

much support, though I remember people bringing meals to our house. That's what people seem to do when they don't know how to respond and it occurs to me I should do the same for the oddball's wife. For a brief moment, I have second thoughts. It might appear nosy. After all, I barely know her.

More than that, if I pay her a visit it might imply I believe in some sort of link between the discovery of my father's remains and her husband's suicide. Already the morning newspaper has made that assumption and I'm certain the street gossips are having a field day with their tidbit of local drama. But coincidences happen all the time and there's no point trying to join the dots. You just have to live with strange things happening for no obvious reason, however uncomfortable or inconvenient that might be. Or ordinary, for that matter.

Though, by late afternoon, I've pushed my misgivings aside and I'm heading out with a lasagne in a small aluminium tray, wrapped in a tea towel to keep in the heat. It's only two doors away but I swear the whole street is watching my every step. And now I have another bout of second thought about the wisdom of my little mission. If I was hoping to quell the rumours, this is hardly helping. There she goes, they'll be saying, the daughter off to see the oddball's wife. Suspicious little minds with not enough excitement in their own lives. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them rings the newspaper and reports on this latest development. Trivial as it is. But it's too late to head back inside now, so I pick up the pace.

To make it worse, when I knock on the door, the oddball's wife takes ages to answer. Though when the door finally opens she grips me by the wrist and pulls me inside before slamming the door behind me. I'm amazed at the strength of it. She's such a tiny little thing, her greying hair unbrushed and matted, her eyes red and raw. From lack of sleep and crying, I assume.

I open my mouth to let her know why I've come but she jumps in ahead of me.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she says, “we need to talk.”

My first thought is: do we? But instead of saying it aloud I hold out the lasagne and announce with stiff formality, “Mrs Baldwin, I thought you might like ...” I can’t think of anything beyond that, so I just stand there like a fool.

She takes the little offering and grabs my wrist again, towing me into the kitchen, sitting me in a chair at the table. This is further than I intended. I would have been happier stopping on the doorstep, handing over the lasagne with a couple of well-intentioned words and heading back home as quickly as possible. But before I can make any kind of excuse, she sits opposite and, in a wobbly voice on the verge of tears, she comes straight out with something unexpected.

“Of course, he never got over your father’s disappearance. He grieved terribly for years. Though I thought he’d long ago come to some sort of ... well, acceptance. But when he heard they’d found a grave ... when they identified ...”

This is another step too far. Just like everyone else, she’s making some sort of link. I give a little shake of my head and rise to my feet. But before I’ve taken a single step towards the door, she almost shouts.

“He loved him, you know.”

Her fierce words thump me right in the stomach, throwing me back down onto the chair. I shake my head even more vigorously, raise my hands to tell her to stop. But she reaches out and grips my hand, squeezing until I cry out with the pain of it. Pulling back in surprise, she speaks more cautiously.

“I’m sorry, I should have realised. This must be so difficult for you, after all this time.”

I'm still shaking my head, trying to get all my jumbled thoughts to settle into something that makes sense. I came here with lasagne, just a little token, and now I'm scrambling around for a bit of solid ground, desperate to find something coherent to say.

Then a muddle of words spill out of their own accord. "He knew my father? I mean, of course he knew my father. This is a small street. You've lived here as long ... But they were ... friends?"

She raises her eyebrows and nods with slow deliberation as if suddenly understanding my confusion.

"Your mother never spoke to you about this?"

About what? My mouth is open but I'm not going to say the words. She's joining dots so fast, dots I've never even contemplated. I can't keep up.

I'm leaning back in my chair, staring at her, when she stands and takes my wrist again, this time pulling me towards the back door and out into the garden. She tows me all the way down the path to a shaded little corner where a spill of flowering May bush almost hides a rocky pond fringed with lush ferns and mosses.

"Stay still and listen," she says, still gripping my wrist.

At first I can only hear my breathing, hard and fast. My head is still spinning with thoughts of how I might excuse myself, take my leave. But as I stare at the water, blink at the little glints of sunlight flickering across its dark surface, I hear something else. A high-pitched croak, followed by another almost identical from the other side of the pond. Then a different one, deeper, longer. I hold my breath and all of a sudden there's a whole staccato chorus of them. Different in pitch, different in tone. Bouncing back and forth around the pond. It's delightful and I can't help an odd little laugh.

She drops my wrist and laughs back at me.

“Gordon built this for Peter.”

For a moment, I can't think who she's talking about. Then it clicks. That was my father's name, Gordon.

“My father made this pond?”

“Yes.” She smiles, this time without any trace of tears. “Perhaps you don't remember, but your father was a wonderful gardener. He built this for my husband Peter. For his frogs.”

I shake my head, still trying to make some sense of it all.

“I know,” she admits. “It's a funny sort of hobby. And I know there are people who didn't like him rummaging around in their gardens, looking for the slimy little things. But he loved his frogs, did my Peter.”

Then, with a rush of unexpected courage, I ask. “And my father?”

With a small smile, she says, “Yes, Peter loved your father. And your father loved him.” She hesitates a moment, swallows, takes a deep breath. “We had a good marriage, we were happy. There are plenty who won't understand that.” She takes another long breath and becomes more serious. “And the police will work it out, I have no doubt. It will be in the newspapers. The whole street will talk. It will be unpleasant, just like before.”

“Yes, I remember my mother struggling with it all.”

“Your mother put on a brave face. She was very strong. I did admire her for that. You know, we spoke about it only once. Must have been about a year after Gordon disappeared. Though when I say disappeared, we both knew he was dead. As did Peter.”

“Knew he was dead? My mother never said he was dead. Even the police didn't necessarily believe he was dead. How did she know?”

“Because Gordon would never have gone off like that, not of his own accord. And there had been threats. Made against them both.”

“Threats? Did the police know about these threats?”

She presses her lips firmly before choosing her words carefully.

“No. Back then, the police were not as ... how can I put it? Sympathetic. A man like your father or like my Peter ... they were not considered acceptable. Things were different back then. We all agreed it was better not to say anything to the police. Or to anyone else.” Then she adds in a whisper, “But I thought your mother might have talked to you.”

I shake my head and stand silent for a couple of long minutes, listening to the frogs chirruping away and trying to picture my father digging this pond, settling the rocks into place, edging it with ferns. Then as my father watches on, there’s Peter placing his frogs, setting them free to swim and sing to their heart’s content.

My father and Peter Baldwin. My mother knew and she never said a word to me. Mrs Baldwin knew and stayed with her husband all this time. I can’t call him the oddball anymore. It was cruel to think of him that way, callous to pretend he never had a name.

Then I think of the poor man taking all those pills, sitting up against the rock face beside my father’s newly-discovered grave, all the painful grief opened up once more. Sometimes, when you join the dots, the picture is anything but comfortable, anything but consoling.

Reaching across, I take her hand. I’ll stay as long as she needs. As long as I need. Both of us beside the frog pond, all that remains of my father, her husband and the terrible sadness of it all.