

TRUNKS

Prologue: Christmas sparkle

Jake said that I should have just sold the house and be done with it, and he would be right, on all counts. Who in their right mind leaves a whole house to some random person? Well, I say random, but I do recall uncle Tom from a brief visit one christmas to drop off a present when I was a kid. He was at first looks, if I remember rightly - drunk as a skunk, and from the cross looks on the faces of the rest of the family, it was not the first time. My mother, due to the waft of alcohol fumes emanating from my uncle, ushered him to the kitchen where I could hear a series of muffled cross words.

The mood in the house had quickly changed from the usual gay Christmas levity, to murky black clouds of general woeful gloom. Fine lines between joy and depression was always difficult in our house never knowing which way it would turn from day to day.

The door was just open enough for me to see the worry lines on Tom's forehead deepen as he desperately glances back through the house as if searching for something. He still had his heavy coat and customary oversized chunky red knitted woollen scarf on. Tom hated the cold and any other guest these would have been hung up on the coat stand by now and a hot cup of tea thrust into their hand, even if they did not want one! For his age Tom was not that bad looking and I had often thought about what had happened to his side of the family for relations to be so strained.

Looking back, I now understood the world of a 10 year old certainly was one of innocence, shielded from the outwardly negative connotations of anger, worry, sadness and anxious gesturing exchanged between adults.

From my vantage point on the stairs, I snuck through to the dining room in the hope I can hear more clearly what was going trying not to disturb the wreath stuck to the gloss white serving hatch.

No one would say what it was about of course, no one ever did in our family, and mother probably would have exploded from rage if I asked right now. Hastily I rethought the situation slinking away to busy myself with rearranging the shiny decorations dotted around the living room. Looking about I knew that even if I swapped the paper heads for each character in the christmas nativity scene no one would bat an eyelid. This targeted frivolity usually got at least one laugh, however no one was paying me the slightest attention as I fingered the shepherd boy and chuckled at Mary who now sported a sheep's face.

John the oldest brother sat slouched down in the best chair for the T.V, feet up on the cream coloured satin poof. He was scouring the pages of the chanel listings hoping for inspiration that did not involve those annoying things like joy, love and hope. My older sister Catherine had retired to her room, and was drowning out the earlier raised voices with a dose of heavy rock music, probably not to be seen for some time yet. Claire the baby of the family was sprawled out claiming the sofa for her own, trying not to engage with anyone. She was engrossed in a thickly bound beige book that looked very boring and entirely uninspiring.

Guessing things may have calmed down by now I carefully climbed up behind the dinner table and peeked through the narrow gap in the serving hatch doors. Tom's previously upset features had since turned to resignation that he was not going to get to join the rest of the family for the Christmas meal. Letting out an audible sign Tom turned around and left quietly through the back door, closing it gently behind him.

Mum had her back to me arms crossed with a frustrated scowl obviously trying to process the days unsettling events. Poking a wooden ladle into a pot of potatoes on the cooker she looked sad and to a point somewhat lonely. To my right on the melamine kitchen table I spotted a small wooden box. Intricately carved decorative stars, comets and fantastical looking animals adorned the top with a beautiful deep red lacquer around the edges of the lid. As I pressed my eye to the gap and squinted, I noticed a brown paper tag attached with string with my name on it! My hopes for an exciting holiday that did not revolve around crappy repeats of sci-fi and war films filled my young ten year old mind, but unfortunately that was the last I would see of the wooden box, until today.

Of course I did ask many times over the holiday and kept checking under the tree, but to no avail. I distinctly remember the overwhelming disappointment as I sat down later that evening, to watch men dressed in tacky white plastic and an overgrown wailing bear almost get crushed in a rubbish compactor, again, and just like uncle Tom, I let out a long sigh.

Chapter One: Tom's house

"I bet it is filled with newspapers and rubbish purchased of the internet, like, you know those hoarders off the TV". Jake's smile beamed at me with anticipation as we stood outside the door of 307 Lower Richmond Road. I had known Jake from primary school and always had an innate capacity to make even the mundane situation sound fun and interesting, even when it was not. I did not dislike his demeanour, but it did erk me to some degree depending on the drabness of the day's events. It had taken us all day to find the property as the street name had been removed by the council leaving a faded paint mark where it had been. The traditional houses were steadily being replaced by bland and boring glass concoctions that, in my mind, only marred the existing surroundings. But, as the mayor of London said on the TV news that morning "That's progress" or some such twaddle. As the incessant rain dribbled down my face, I reach up and turn the key in the lock, praying that the electric was still on so that we could at least have a shower and get out of our drenched clothes. Pushing open the heavy black door my foot slipped on the marble step sending me unceremoniously forward with a wet slap onto the red tiled floor in the hallway.

"Shit, fuck, bollox, bloody rain" I moaned through gritted teeth checking for scrapes and bruises on my arms. Finding no visible ailment I hold my leg for dramatic effect trying to secure a smidgen of empathy from my travelling companion.

Jake however had no regard for my wellbeing and not wanting to miss an opportunity to get the first look, clambered over my already hurting body and flicked on the light.

“Oh, I stand corrected, it is not the dump I thought it would be. In fact it is very clean and spacious. No piles of newspapers and bin bags filled with rubbish to be seen. At least uncle Tom was not a hoarder!” and with that he disappeared into what looked like it might be the kitchen to the right.

Retrieving our belongings off the path below I raise my voice dragging them up the steps “Do not worry, I will get the bags you left on the street, shall I”? As I throw the them in an unceremonial heap in the middle of the hall Jake pokes his head around the door frame.

“Humm, what did you say? Anyway enough of that. LOOK!” and he thrust up a big long sausage in front of my face almost touching my nose, his eyes darting back and forth from me to the sausage.

“Seems that your uncle not only liked bears but fancied a bit of pork” Biting off the end Jake proceed to drag me into the kitchen where he pointed to an array wild animals were mounted on the walls above the cupboards. “Do not worry though I found receipts for some scandinavian shop behind the cutlery, does not look like he stuffed them himself” and closing the draw went back to stuffing his face with food.

Taking off the embarrassing ‘Uke’ T-shirt Jake got me last Christmas, I checked out the kitchen which was massive, dwarfing my own flat many times over. It was odd how very clean it all was, with sparkling worktops, expensive looking light fittings and no dust in sight at all. How many months had Uncle Tom been dead now? A cold shiver went down my spine and my nose twitched as fatigue seeped into my weary body. Knowing I would not get to my handkerchief in time I resigned to sneeze into my hand instead.

“Eww, I think I am going to take a shower or bath before I defile any more rooms with my smelly, wet presence” and I wipe the gooey mess on my trouser leg.

Jake interrupts his quest for food and climbs out of the fridge dumping the spoils on the middle table and pats me on the shoulders. “Yes, Yes of course we can not have you dying on us before we have fully explored the house. Let me get you out of those soggy pants and you can have a nice long shower” and tugging at the belt around my waist he sends me to the floor again.

It was at this point that both of us has failed to notice the stern looking visitor standing at the front door as Jake pulled down my trousers laughing like Grotbags on drugs.

A distinctly Scottish “Augh-humm” echoes down the hallway portraying a authoritarian inflection that judders the soal and makes animals howl.

Hopping on one foot I wrestle the wet jeans up to provide partial modesty and held out my hand “Ahh yes, and you would be?”

“The name is Greer, and it’s rude don’t you know, not to introduce yourself to begin with. Lucky for you, uncle Tom told me what to expect and do not think I won’t have you papped!”. The short statement seemed to define her all encompassing demeanour as she produces a business card from her tartan tweed handbag thrusting it into my outstretched hand. As I looked closely at the jet black card I traced the solid red border with my finger feelling raised raven embossed in the middle. The words ‘Corbie’ were in a fancy gold italic script and glancing up I realise she has already light footed it into the front room.

A swish of the curtain rings along a metal pole ring out as the newly self appointed home help attempts to get more light into the house. Slightly confused I look up to see her attention has moved on to jabbing the wooden logs on the iron dog in the hearth. Greer holds the hot poker like a magician waves their wand and pushing me back out of the room, she asserts her authority without compromise “Now go and have a shower young man and I will get a good fire burning. You can warm your toes once you are back down and I will have ready your evening meal and a newspaper to read. It is up the stairs last room on your right.” The door closes firmly behind me as if to expedite my progress like a naughty schoolboy late for first class of the day.

Gingerly moving up the steps I guessed Jake had already ventured towards the top of the building from the pools of water dotted about. Gazing upwards grey clouds had started to break in the sky allowing shards of coloured light to shine down from a central dome on the roof. As the warmth of the sun returned it fell on the ornately decorative staircase the rich rose coloured mahogany bannister revealing the artisans creative flourish and technical expertise in the decoration.

The further I walked, the more my eyes became widely transfixed by the beautiful scene set before me everywhere I looked. Exotic wild animals looked back at me from regular intervals on the deep cobalt blue walls. Wondering just how the artist made them look so detailed and realistic I stopped to study one such image of a tigers face. So brilliant and vibrant the subject matter I fully expected the surface to feel sharp on the encompassing leaf edges or the soft fur of the back of this magnificent beast who's posture seemed to almost move with the scenery.

Turning the handle on the next door I find, anticipation of what laid beyond raised my blood, my heart beating faster. The stunning red hue of the paint radiated warmth into the steps and floor below beckoning those of an inquisitive nature to enter and explore beyond the boundary however to my dismay find it locked.

Looking further up the stairwell there were another five similarly painted doors, each with a magnificently coloured rainbow hue.

Unfortunately the dulcet tones of another type of feral animal turned my ear and subsequently my gaze towards the top landing where steam billowed out from the bathroom. "Ahhhhh... this is heaven Violet, they even have one of those tiled stone recliners that heat up. Come in and try it out. Feels like your bones are being warmed up from inside"! Jake calls out a notably sublime tone to his voice that gave away how the days fatigue was finally falling away.

I never fully understood why my parents called me Violet. I never had any problems with the name sounding feminine to western ears. No one ever dared to make fun of me when I was younger, lest they caught the rath of the dorm master, who closely kept an eye on the other boys conduct. Standing out was more of a benefit than hindrance. It tended to get me into more circles and places than others, maybe from a realisation that I was at a disadvantage from the perspective of the adults. No one admitted that however it was a useful tool and never failed to work in the upper echelons of academic circles.

Thinking twice, I decided the prospect of seeing Jakes dirty undies was not wise and postponed his invitation. "I think I will wait for you to finish first, if you do not mind" I half heartedly call back, but my mind was screaming "hell no".

A shiver went down my spine as I felt the damp soggy fabric on my clothes and deciding it was time to find something to change into, headed off towards what looked like a spiral staircase almost hidden at the back of the the landing.

As I got to the top I pushed open a heavy wooden door. Immediately it struck me how it felt like I had walked through a portal to another world. Directly across the room in front of a dormer window stood a large four poster bed with earthy green fabrics draped over the top. Darkly painted floorboards and walls gave the space an intimate, close feel even though the room stretched around the skylight in a circle. The dusky setting invited me to examine the contents of the room such as they were dotted around like they had only just been left by the previous occupant. A selection of books were scattered all about and a tall pile sat next to an old reclining chair the coffee rings revealing whoever lived here was an avid reader to say the least.

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