

Blackbird

4910 words

Everyone kept asking why Rosie wasn't there. Rosie was the first person they looked for when they reached the chapel; and they'd probably expected her to make a speech about her dad, or even play him out – maybe one of the Beatles numbers he taught her to love as a child. To tell the truth, I was watching out for her too. I dreaded her showing up, because I'd rehearsed every minute in my head while he was dying – a confrontation, like the showdowns in *EastEnders* – an accusation of murder – a slap in the face and a turn of the heels.

At first I told the full story – as much as I knew – watching the listeners' eyes widen with shock. Eventually I got tired of explaining, and I just said: 'You'll have to ask Rosie.' In her absence she dominated what should have been Mick's day. Everyone was whispering. They couldn't believe it. Such a lovely girl! How could she treat her father that way? How could anyone be so cold-hearted?

I had no heart, not any more. When Mick started being ill, it felt open and raw, and I cried easily – I wept at the schmaltzy tunes wafting through shopping centres, and I struggled to compose myself teaching a class on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Later, I stopped crying, because I just had to face what was coming, and what Mick would need me to do. But also because the grief was now consumed by rage, rage against Rosie for what she had done.

When was the falling out? Was it to do with the boyfriend? I only saw him once, that Sunday when they came to pick up the cat. I warned Mick, they wouldn't want to stay for lunch – Rosie told me when she rang, *We'll just swing by* – but Mick

being Mick, he wasn't listening. I saw the dismay cross her face when she smelt the lamb roasting.

'That guy's a user,' Mick said to me in the kitchen. 'Watch his eyes.'

'He's tired,' I said. 'It's been a long drive, and they want to get home.'

The boyfriend, Quinn, was closer to my age than Rosie's. I realised afterwards, snooping round on Facebook, that we had half a dozen mutual friends from the old days. He was part of that Madchester crowd, still had a cult following, and now Rosie sang with him sometimes at gigs. He hardly said a word during the meal, didn't answer any of the questions Mick threw his way, just let Rosie do the talking. She was bright and chipper, bubbling over with enthusiasm about their week at the festival, and going on stage with Quinn's band. No one would know that she was seething inside – not unless you knew her as I had come to know her since moving in with Mick.

I'd been meaning to have a quick word with Rosie – not to worry her, but she needed to be told. The moment nearly came when Mick was upstairs, looking for the cat – but then it was put off again, and I was not to know that this was the last time I'd ever lay eyes on Rosie. Days went by, then weeks. I rang, but she didn't answer. That wasn't out of the ordinary. Rosie never answered the phone. She'd get back to you, late at night, apologising. She'd been tied up... things at work were crazy... Except this time she never rang back.

Mick had been losing weight. She might not have been able to tell but other people had noticed. The neighbours were coming up to me when I was putting the bins out, asking me, was he okay? He was a shadow of the big strong man he'd once been; and his trousers, held up by braces, hung off him like a clown's. I kept

nagging him to go to the doctor's, but he paid no heed. The only person he ever listened to was Rosie.

A week or so afterwards, I made up my mind. I got Mick a doctor's appointment and I said, I'd had enough, worrying about him was making me ill, and if he wanted to cancel it, fine... There was some truth in what I was saying, but it was also strategic. He made his way to the surgery, meek as a lamb – that was how much Mick had changed – taking his first step on that long winding road of letters and blood tests, phone calls and scans and procedures. Still Mick kept losing weight; and Rosie vanished.

She didn't ring, she didn't come to see us, and of course there was no chance of her answering the phone. If I mentioned it to Mick he'd just say she'd be in touch. 'In due course.' Yet they'd been so close. I'd come downstairs sometimes to hear his voice on the phone, low and crooning, and I'd know who it was right away. He'd hold up a finger for me to shush, and I'd leave him to it; or else he'd say brightly, 'Sarah's just come in, do you want a word with her?' and I'd hang round uselessly, because it wasn't me she wanted to confide in.

They'd been through so much together. I hadn't been seeing Mick for very long when Rosie started having trouble with her eyes; and I'll never forget him saying to me, he'd give up his own sight to help her, he'd give up his life if he could – 'Wouldn't any parent?' I don't know, I never had kids, it just didn't happen. Maybe if I'd met Mick a year or two sooner. Who knows?

I decided to call round at the weekend, though I knew Rosie hated people turning up out of the blue; Mick had been reprimanded many times until he finally stopped dropping by as he pleased. She had a ground-floor flat in one of the big

houses near the centre of Chorlton. The rents had gone up massively, but Rosie was lucky, her landlady liked her. Everyone loved Rosie. She was so full of life, and so talented and so brave. That was what they all said.

The blinds were drawn, as ever; the cat, Smoke, was basking on the windowsill, a cloud of white and charcoal. No answer when I buzzed. I tried again, thought I heard a guitar – no, I was sure. A few notes, then silence. There was a car outside, a dusty black Volvo estate with a ‘Manc and Proud’ decal. Quinn, I thought.

‘Rosie,’ I called, tapping gently on the glass, ‘Rosie, it’s me, Sarah.’

The cat’s head twitched, and he batted his paw in a half-hearted sort of way.

On her Facebook page everything looked normal – better than normal – pictures of Rosie duetting with Quinn – sharing appeals to sponsor a guide dog – on a girls’ night out. But none of that proved anything.

Mick was getting weaker by the day, the hour, the minute. He lost his appetite completely. We were getting desperate, and still there were no answers. The doctor sent us to hospital, to something called the Hot Clinic, where you were put through a whole battery of tests. *Do you smoke? Do you drink? Have you ever taken drugs?* ‘Why are you asking?’ he protested, his voice faint and reedy. ‘I’ve told you already.’ He could hardly stand, but there was nowhere to lie down. ‘Can’t you help me?’ he said. ‘Just tell me what it is.’ Not his heart. Not his brain. Had he been abroad? Had unprotected sex?

I thought he was going to die there and then. That was the day when I learnt that time’s different in the land of the sick. ‘Soon’ means hours later, and ‘tomorrow’ means next week, and a few weeks can sometimes turn into never.

Finally we were sent home. I was so sure they'd keep him in I'd brought his toothbrush and his shaving kit, though he hardly had the strength to use either very often. The house in darkness seemed drained of our presence, as if we'd returned to a place we used to live in, a long time ago. I didn't even notice a letter on the doormat till long after I'd got Mick to bed. He felt clammy, with a cold, odourless sweat, like ectoplasm.

A typed letter signed in Rosie's straggly handwriting.

Dear Sarah

I don't want Dad around me anymore. He poisoned my childhood and he's still trying to bring me down. I'm feeling really strong right now and I want to stay that way. I hope we can be friends one day when you split up. You will leave him. It's just a matter of time. You can show this letter to Dad if you like. I really don't care. But please don't try to contact me again.

A big spidery kiss at the end. I poured myself a drink. I was shivering; the house was freezing cold that night, the brandy bottle icy in my grasp. The worst-ever thoughts came swimming through my head. For a few minutes, or longer – I'm not sure – I imagined the worst things a father could do to a child. That was not Mick. I heard him saying, *I'd give my life...* Though it was late, I emptied the ash from the stove and relit it, watching the kindling blaze and die, waiting for the coals to glow like little red hearts.

There was a lot I didn't know about the past; Mick never liked to dwell on such things, and I had my own secrets to keep. I knew Rosie's mother ran off with another

man when she was quite small – she lived with him still in New Zealand – and Mick had married again very quickly – a woman who already had a couple of kids – but that broke up too – Rosie was still quite close to the boys – I’d met them a few times. Rosie often talked about being from ‘a broken home’, and Mick would tell her to come off it, it wasn’t all that bad. And it wasn’t, it really wasn’t. I’d seen the photographs in the boxes of old prints that Mick had catalogued by year – timeless moments on a beach or blowing out the birthday candles, an impish glance towards him, caught in black and white. Mick always preferred monochrome to colour, film over digital.

They were so much alike. Both stubborn, both strong-minded, and that made them combustible. She’s so bright, Mick said. She could read by the time she was three. She taught herself the piano. He told the story, often, about sitting next to her, picking out the first notes of ‘Blackbird’. ‘And there was me thinking I could teach her and she played the whole thing, straight off...’ I didn’t quite believe that story. But it was true that she had a certificate signed by the poet laureate, a silver medal for poetry, in a national prize for schoolkids. She was good at maths too. She’d have got a place at Cambridge, no problem. But Rosie wasn’t interested. She went to art school instead. She was running a printmakers’ collective when she first had trouble with her eyes, not just turning out her own work, but putting on classes, applying for grants, setting up projects in hospitals and children’s homes. Everything she turned her mind to had to be a success, and nothing could get in her way. When she couldn’t see well enough to carry on with her printmaking, she could’ve chosen sculpture or ceramics, or concentrated on her music, or even gone back to poetry, but she chose to experiment with photography, claiming her visual sensibility was

actually enhanced by the physical deterioration. Mick gave her an old Leica, and helped get the pictures developed, and they'd argue which shots were the best.

At weekends, the three of us drove out on expeditions. Rosie would feel the texture of rough plaster, or sniff the seaweed on a beach, and she'd home in on some small detail intuitively, visualising the image she'd make. Sometimes it was just the two of them – 'You don't *have* to come,' he always said – and there was an on-and-off romance with an old boyfriend who'd take her out instead. Mick was ready any time. She only had to call.

Once he came back early, a dark look on his face. I knew not to say anything; I knew it would come out sooner or later.

'The tyranny of the weak,' he said, 'where did I hear that?'

'Sounds a bit fascist.'

'So it's wrong, obviously,' he said sarcastically.

I waited...

'She has to be contradicted sometimes. Someone has to set her straight. You can't have a blind photographer. That's not what she is. She can't frame a shot. She can't compose a picture. Clearly. So how can she go around calling herself a photographer?'

'So what is all this work she's doing – just therapy?'

'Why does she think I spend all this time with her?'

'It must be hard,' I said, 'not feeling in control.'

'She's always been controlling. I'm not blind to her faults.'

Not blind to her faults. They had these squabbles, and they always made up. But not this time. I threw Rosie's letter into the fire, poking it deep into the embers so

that not a scrap could survive. I didn't want Mick to see that, ever. I'd tell him when he was stronger. Not yet. I'd already asked him, had he said something to her? And he said, probably. 'She'll come round eventually, she always does.'

But what was it all about? I went over that Sunday, again and again. Was it Quinn? Or did she already know she was going to cut him off, once we'd done her that last favour with the cat? Smoke was a house cat, a Ragamuffin, always a point of contention for Mick. *Let him out, he's a cat for Christ's sake.* That day she'd said something about maybe getting a guide dog, and in that case would we think about keeping Smoke for good?

I said yes straight away, but Mick didn't want to commit himself. He said something about it being a bind, and what if we wanted to go away? It was a responsibility, having a pet.

'Never big on responsibility, were you Dad?' said Rosie.

'We'll talk about it,' I said, in an encouraging way. 'Quinn, you look like you could do with a coffee.'

I knew they wanted to get going.

While I was making the coffee, I heard Mick say something – something about, was Rosie allowed a guide dog, weren't they for people who were completely blind? And I heard Rosie's voice rise with studied patience, as if she was explaining simple facts to an obdurate child:

'I have retinitis pigmentosa. The cells in my eyes are dying. I can see some things, not much. Not all visually impaired people suffer total sight loss. I might, eventually, who knows? Just count yourself lucky you didn't inherit this condition. Because you know it's genetic.'

‘She blames me for everything,’ Mick said to Quinn.

I’d heard that speech of Rosie’s so many times – as often as I’d told Mick to stop needling her that way. She likes it, he said. She likes to have her mettle tested.

But maybe he’d gone too far, maybe because this time it was in front of Quinn who said nothing. Whose face was inscrutable throughout the whole exchange.

You can live in the same city and never run into each other. Everywhere I went I was looking for Rosie. Every day my bus went past the Whitworth Art Gallery; Rosie had a job there, working on public engagement, and we used to meet there for coffee now and then. Sometimes I’d see a woman just like her – a blonde flag of hair and dark glasses. But it was never Rosie. And soon I stopped making regular trips into town. I had less teaching after Christmas, and the university was fine about granting me a few weeks of compassionate leave. Before long my world had shrunk to the daily circuit along the hospital corridors and up the stairs to whichever ward Mick had been moved to in the struggle to keep him alive.

After the Hot Clinic there were tests, appointments with specialists, and further tests, and finally they discovered what was wrong with Mick, and would operate – soon, they said, once he was strong enough. He was a drowning man. If only I could do something, if I could haul him back to the land of the living. But there was nothing I could do, except to sit holding his hand. ‘What time is it?’ he’d whisper through the husks that remained of his voice. ‘Don’t miss your bus.’ As if he couldn’t wait for visiting time to be over. And then I’d look back on my way out, taking him in,

capturing the little that remained, his body scarcely making a crease in the bedclothes. Once he said, 'I should have married you. Why didn't we get married?' in a puzzled sort of way. I asked him, was that a proposal, but he was already fretting about something else. Christmas cards. He was still expecting to hear back from Rosie.

Rosie had unfriended me on Facebook, but I still checked from time to time. She posted on New Year's Eve, wishing peace and love the whole world over. And she cropped up sometimes in the pictures on the gallery's Twitter feed – #creatives #culture #art #family fun. I didn't tell him about the message I left on her voicemail: *Mick is very ill. It would make a real difference if you went to see him in hospital. Please get back to me. If you don't, that's okay, I won't bother you again.* If she didn't want to know, she must have a heart of stone.

A heart of stone, I thought, as I went through the house room by room. It had never been cleaner, never more tidy. I dusted picture-frames, washed cushions, polished mirrors, swept beneath the beds and behind the sofa, discovering lost earrings and penny coins and the plastic tops of biros, the fury boiling up inside me as I went. *She wants him dead.* The thought struck again and again, like the hours of a clock. The only person who could save Mick wanted him gone. Whatever crime he had committed, she had sentenced him to death.

This was Mick's house, where Rosie grew up – my office once the place where she dreamed of being an artist. A glass icicle dangled from the window frame, a single droplet from a broken chandelier, refracting rainbows on the wall when the sun came out. Something Mick found in a skip when he was working in the building trade, a little thing she left behind. The house was full of mementoes – a vase with a

crazed surface that she gave me for my birthday; a lithograph portrait of Mick, and teenage sketches he'd preserved; an old jacket of hers that I forgot to return. The piano – he kept trying to persuade her to have the piano – no good to him, he said, hadn't touched it in years.

In the evenings there were always calls to make and messages to answer, people asking could they visit, but Mick said no. He didn't want his friends to see him in that state. And how are *you*, they'd say, are you eating properly, are you looking after yourself? I was; I was keeping my strength up, because Mick had no one else to care for him.

I never mentioned Rosie in those phone calls. I let everyone assume that she was there for him. Sometimes I asked myself, could I have put a stop to it when it all began? Should I have kept ringing that doorbell until I got an answer? Should I have marched into her office at the Whitworth – *Come on Rosie, this is silly* – in a maternal kind of way. But I was not her mother. And still I couldn't find the beginning of this story, or understand how we reached the point of no return.

Spring was on its way, the cut-glass arrow at my window projecting slices of violet, orange and green. Mick was being fed through a tube, the sickly smell of the yellowish gloop lingering in his hair. 'This is Hell,' he'd say, 'you've no idea...' Or else he'd stroke my hand, whispering endearments. The ground would suddenly open up before me, as I made my way home – *Hell, this is Hell* – and the streets would be transformed into one of those back projections you see in old movies – and then I'd force myself back into the land of the living, and the rage would surge through my bones. One word from Rosie could save him. One word, a single phone call.

The operation would be next week, maybe Tuesday or Wednesday; or if not then, the following week. *Soon*. And then one morning I made my way as usual, walking past the smokers by the automatic doors, entering the labyrinth, cleansing my hands at the dispenser, only to find his bed empty, the sheets tucked in and his locker cleared. It was Tuesday, like they said; he'd been taken down to theatre.

The following day was the loveliest so far, the day that comes every year when at last you have faith in the summer ahead. I put on a dress to visit Mick. I always wore perfume and make-up for him, and plastered on my brightest smile. At Intensive Care, you couldn't just walk in like I had before; I had to wait by the intercom, and wait again outside his room while he finished using the bedpan. He looked better than I thought he would, sitting upright in a chair, amongst all the circuitry and gadgets.

He looked straight at me. 'Rosie,' he said. 'Come here, don't be scared. It's funny, I dreamt about you, and here you are! The genuine article! Come on, play something. You can do it! Play "Blackbird".'

A moment later, he knew who I was. It was just the after-effects of the anaesthetic. He didn't even know that he'd been hallucinating.

'It's so awful,' he said. 'It's hellish, you've no idea. Like a prison.'

'You'll be out soon,' I said, 'you'll be home. For the summer.'

But I couldn't forget the sight of him, upright on his vinyl throne, beaming at his daughter, hair disheveled, like King Lear. I kept hearing the plaintive pleasure in his voice as his vision came true. One word, a phone call, a simple gesture...

I brought down evil. I summoned all the strength in my body and my being, and I laid a curse on Rosie. Not on that morning, but one of those days on my way

home, the ground once more opening up beneath my feet; I pulled myself together, every ounce of energy, and sent the world spinning with rage. It vibrated deep within the pulsing of the traffic lights, the throbbing of engines, the babble on the streets. Wherever Rosie was, she would feel the tremor. The force of my fury was so extreme I didn't doubt its power to seek her, like a flood, like a tornado, like a thunderbolt. This was my curse; if Mick died, may she be haunted forever. Let her never forget she'd killed her own father. Let her head never rest easy on the pillow.

This was the story, so far as it went, that I told anyone who asked – except the curse. I never told anyone about that part of it, but I let them know who was to blame for Mick's death. That didn't come quite as soon as I feared. After the operation Mick came home again, and though we never did get back to normal we had one more year together. When he was well enough, I told him about Rosie's letter, wondering again if I could have done more.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'Forget about it.'

He understood now that he wouldn't hear from Rosie, though we still sent a card on her birthday, still pretended she might change her mind one day. He worried about her constantly, worried over Quinn. He was a rat, Mick said. He knew the type.

I wasn't sure Rosie was even going out with Quinn any more. That Sunday, over dinner, she'd been talking about not just singing with him – playing keyboard as well, and that was when the piano came up again – but there was no sign of Rosie in the band's Twitter feed, no mention in the online reviews or likes on the Facebook page. All I knew was she still had her job at the Whitworth. Still posted blessings to the world on New Year's Day.

After the funeral, I went away for a while. I couldn't bear to stay in Mick's house without him, so I spent the summer in the west of Ireland, working at my book on Thomas Hardy. But I'd have to go back for the start of the new term. My department had been very accommodating, giving me a timetable that meant I could take care of Mick, but now I had no other responsibilities I'd have to take on my share of the burden. Sitting in my office at home, the cut-glass prism refracting brighter colours than ever in the autumnal sunshine, I wondered if my curse had worked on Rosie, and in what manner. Had her hopes turned to ashes, had her luck run dry?

Someone said that Mick's house would be Rosie's now, unless Mick had left a will, which I knew he hadn't. When I first heard that, I doubted she'd be interested. That kind of thing was just too tacky for the Rosie I remembered. But those weeks in Ireland made me see more clearly. Why would anyone turn down a house in Manchester, still less a woman who had no one to look after her interests, a woman who had shown herself to be completely ruthless?

Let her have the house. Let it be haunted by the evil I wished on her.

But where would I go? I couldn't think. I wanted Mick so badly, it was ridiculous that he wasn't there to tell me what to do. I changed the locks and sat tight, expecting any day now to find another letter on the doormat, not from Rosie this time – from a solicitor.

I often wished we'd taken the cat when she asked us. People were nice, inviting me for a meal, taking me out to see a film. But I always came back to the empty house, no breath of life within. I should have liked a cat to welcome me back

home. But to get a cat now – middle-aged woman, living alone – no, just too much of a cliché.

I wasn't lonely, that wasn't it exactly; in fact, I'd rather be on my own than making small talk. But I appreciated the invitations, and sometimes I even caught myself looking forward to something. The opera, for instance – Mick was never keen, he thought it was snobby. I went to see *La Traviata*.

It wasn't until Violetta sung *Gioir, gioir!* towards the end of the first act that I remembered. We saw it with Rosie. Rosie, as she used to be, just before the diagnosis, Rosie and I glancing at each other with glee at the thrill of those notes flying through the theatre – Mick sitting unmoved between the two of us – then later, those terrible final moments when she so much wants to live, believes for a moment that she will, the two men at her side too late, too late...

'Load of tosh, isn't it?' he said as we left the theatre. But his eyes were glittering with tears.

It must have been around February or March; there was still black ice on the road, and I remember him telling her, watch out – she'd stumbled on the stairs going up to the Grand Tier – did we drop her in town, was she meeting someone later? As I turned the key in the front door, I thought, *I'll have to ask Mick*, and for half a second I really believed that he was inside.

That night I woke up suddenly at round about three or four. Someone was in the house. I froze; a neighbour's place had been burgled just the other week. They jemmied open the front window, in and out while the family was asleep. But this was not a break-in. I knew that, as soon as I heard the piano, the first notes picked out, sweet and clear and steady, and then the tune skipping merrily, towards the high G. I

longed for Mick to hold me and tell me I was dreaming. But this was not a dream of mine. I was inside Mick's dream, his never-ending dream that no curses could ever destroy. Rosie had killed her father. That was what I believed. And yet it was my head that would never rest easy. Always, wherever I slept, the piano would sound in the small hours, playing the tune that Rosie learnt to play when she was just a little girl, the song her father taught her to love.