

## DEATH ON THE ROCKS

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'Follow me,' Hal said.

And, of course, I did. I'd have done anything for him - crawled through burning coals or broken glass if he'd asked.

Secret lovers making for our secret place, we slithered over the rocks. Always before, knowing how treacherous they were, he'd held my hand, but not that day. Then my foot caught in a tangle of seaweed and I stumbled.

'Oh, for God's sake!' Scowling, he hauled me upright.

Close to tears, I brushed dirt off my jeans and scurried after him, to stand in his shadow where a sea smooth as glass splintered on the shoreline.

The mossy tidemark around Penmon lighthouse was almost submerged. The lantern strobed hypnotically. The bell buoy pinged and bobbed, marking the maelstrom where tides collided in the narrow strait between us and Puffin Island. Sometimes, we heard the staccato bark of seals echoing off the cliffs.

The light was failing, as ever when we came together. Because Hal said we must, we went about our loving furtively, in the twilight that turned all cats grey and people into wraiths.

'People mustn't see us,' he'd warn. 'Not yet.' Then he'd kiss me slowly, longingly, and whisper words to quell the fiercest doubts.

I touched his arm. Did he flinch? Surely not. 'It's getting dark,' I said. 'Shall we drive along the coast, find somewhere to eat?'

'No,' he snapped. 'Your clothes are filthy.'

The tears fell then, burning my cheeks. 'What's wrong?' I cried, reaching for him.

And in one swift, eye-bewildering movement, he stooped, grabbed a rock and, as if I were a fly, swatted me down.

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We're not just where the ghost stories have us, you know. We're abroad twenty four seven, as your saying goes; waiting wherever you go, keeping you company at home, at work, on holiday, in the streets, as you sleep. We watch you watching TV,

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ogling internet porn, beating your kids, shop-lifting, cheating on your lover, breaking every law known to God and man.

We're beside you in that empty seat in the cinema, on trains and buses and, if only you glanced over your shoulder, in the back of your car. When you take the stairs, we're going up or coming down. We jostle you; we even walk through you. Or do you walk through us? Whatever, don't believe that nonsense about the land of the living. All the places you think you own are ours, too.

And we come in hordes. Some may lie quiet in rotting caskets and rusting urns beneath headstones and thorny rose bushes, but the restless are legion. Yet why? Like leaves on the wind, we drift randomly, pointlessly, perpetually through time and space, without power or purpose. We can't shame the guilty, punish the wrongdoer, rewrite history. This world holds no justice, either.

When my mother was struggling to get me out on time to school, to college, to my first day in my first job, she'd start fizzing with exasperation. 'You're such a dawdler,' she'd say. 'You'll be late for your own funeral!'

I was. I must have been roaming the nowhere space between your world and mine. When I first found my grave, it was already tricked out for eternity, with purplish grey gravel between the copings, vibrant daffodils tall in their vase and a smart granite headstone that said who now resided there, and why.

'Stacey Webster

1969-1993

Beloved daughter and sister

Taken by the sea'

Reading that, you'd think Davy Jones dragged me down to his locker. He didn't. Hal pushed me in there, but so cleverly no one realised. But that's him all over; the arch beguiler.

Did he go to my funeral, I wonder? Shed crocodile tears over the deep, dark hole dug for my coffin? Hold Janet, his wife, while she wept real tears? She was my best friend, you know. So maybe, I only got what I deserved.

And maybe, echoing our other secret trysts, he steals into the cemetery in the summer gloaming or winter dusk. I don't know. While the grave's my only home now, I don't stay in on the off chance. I owe him nothing. He's the one with dues to pay.

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Regular as clockwork, my father, mother and brothers replace the flowers and, every so often, Dad forks out the weeds from the gravel. My flesh nourishes them; has he ever thought of that when he's holding them in his bare hands?

Poor man, he looks worn out; he's bound to, grieving year after year. How can I tell? I track the passing of your time by marking new memorials - checking on the neighbours, you might say. Mum still looks as if someone hacked out her heart. Not surprising, really. I was part of her and I'm dead.

I want to comfort them. I want to weep whenever I read the inscription that declares I was so beloved. When folk stand by a particular grave and say: 'You mark my words. There's a story there', I want to tell them that there's always a story, whether a body's fresh to earth, skull and bones, or dust and ashes.

My brothers know part of my tale, part of my secret. Some nasty gossipmonger whispered in their ear, I suppose, and it led to one of those low-voiced, bitter exchanges.

Ever the prig, Seth said: 'She was a slut, going with a married man. Mum and Dad have a right to know.'

'You'll tell them over my dead body!' Jack snarled.

How ironic was that? Standing over my dead body, he was. I wanted to laugh but couldn't. I'm powerless, helpless; I don't exist. Like Narcissus, I lean over a pool of water yet no reflection disturbs its depth. I hover before mirrors, where you're primping your hair, admiring last night's love bites, despairing over each new wrinkle or grey hair, yet you see nothing and nor do I.

Grandma Annie, Dad's mum, had arthritis eating her up from inside out, crooking her back and making crab's claws of her hands. 'What wouldn't I give,' she'd wish fervently, 'to be free of this damned body of mine!'

Long before I died, her wish came true. I'll bet she wishes it hadn't. I'll bet she could kick herself for not heeding the warning about being careful for what you wish. She's come to nothing, like me, and it's terrible - absolutely, unspeakably so. Against all reason, we're aware, you see. We remember.

She should've been waiting for me, shouldn't she? On the 'other side' - this side, as it is for we who have 'passed over'. After all we're led to believe about dying, I had every right to expect to find her there, hand outstretched, cooing: 'Come on, sweetheart, there's nothing to be scared of. Granny's here to look after you.'

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But she wasn't. No one came to welcome me, to staunch the terror that ran like the blood from the gaping hole that Hal put in my skull. We're no community of lost souls, clinging together for warmth and reassurance, and there's no reunion with loved ones; not even the pets we once cherished. Utterly forsaken, men, women, children, babies, wearing whatever we wore in life, whenever that was – uniforms, high fashion, pyjamas, rags, rompers - pass by each other and through each other, just as we do with you. Loneliness is no word for what we feel; it's an aching, eternal desolation.

And this is why we haunt you. When chance makes our time collide with yours, like a tangent striking a circle, and you sense our wretchedness, glimpse our shape, it's only because we long for company. There's nothing to fear, unless you're Hal.

I was Janet's matron of honour when she married him. She came to church in a horse-drawn carriage. Proud as Punch, her father helped her alight then led the bridal procession through an archway garlanded with flowers. I'll never forget how her pale silk dress whispered along the floor of the nave.

Everyone joked, of course, about love-and-marriage going together like that horse-and-carriage - perfectly. If only they'd known. Before the party was over, Hal slipped his traces, ambushed me in a shadowy corner and, forever and a day, yoked me to him.

He'd given the bridesmaids pretty amethyst earrings. My memento of that momentous event was a heart-shaped garnet pendant on a golden chain. In the wedding photos, the jewel burned bright as the love I thought it betokened. Does it still, I wonder, or did the flame die with me?

Dead people turn to ghosts in photos. Did you know that? My cousin Jonathan did, after he fell under the wheels of a builder's lorry. We had his portrait in the family album - eleven years old, very solemn, dressed up in his new school uniform – and whenever we looked at it, usually at Christmas when the relatives were maudlin with drink, he was even less flesh and blood.

I haven't seen him, either. Maybe I wouldn't recognise him anyway, for who knows how we look now? Or perhaps he's been and gone, for we do. Ghosts giving up the ghost, we fade away, like our photos or some ancient who's already crumpled to nothing when death rattles in their throat. Do we have a death span, too? Does something even we can't see move among us, culling this one for heaven, that one

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for hell, offering another one more go at life? I don't know and can't find out. There's no one to ask. But maybe anything's better than this.

Don't ever make light of purgatory. It's not pounding the pavements in brand new heels or a bikini wax or waiting for that call from your new boyfriend. Tempt fate that way and you might join me. Over and again, I find myself where slimy weed drapes the rocks, the bell buoy pings, the lighthouse strobes, seals bark; drowning in a roaring maelstrom of memories as I never drowned in the sea.

Sometimes, the sun burns down on parents, children, birdwatchers, lovebirds, dogs tearing frenziedly along the water's edge, their shadows trailing behind them like their future. Other times, cold white fog curls smokily over the strait, obscuring the island and stifling the yelp of the seals. I've seen lightning slash the sky far out to sea, watched storms ride in on the back of the wind and downpours flatten the dune grass - sword-sharp, that grass is; Hal once pushed me in and while I bled, he laughed. But whether it's spring, summer, autumn, winter, morning, noon or night, always for me it ends the same way. That's purgatory.

I'm here now. Clouds droop in the sky, whitecaps tear across the water, the bell buoy gyrates crazily and drizzle mists the island. A black and tan mongrel noses about the shoreline, black and grey gulls wheel overhead, two figures meander through the rocks.

The woman is quite petite, clad in jeans and a padded jacket. A wind I can't feel ruffles her fair hair and, when she laughs, lifting her face to the man at her side, it's girlish laughter.

Much taller, he too wears a padded jacket. He turns to her, showing me his profile, but he's already betrayed by the set of his shoulders and cast of his back. God knows, I caressed them often enough.

'Hal!' I scream. 'Hal!'

He doesn't hear me. How could he? The dog does, though. Stopped in its tracks as if turned to stone, it looks at me, not through me, and cowers, teeth bared, hairs on end. Then, with a banshee howl, it hurtles away towards Hal and his latest love.

They aren't quick enough. Just as I didn't, they don't see what's coming. The dog cannons into Hal, sends him crashing onto the rocks and, even before the woman starts her own howling, I see the blood gushing from the hole in his skull.