

Ten Thousand

by Melissa Jones

‘She’s gone to London. On the train,’ Dad said.

‘To London? On her own?’

‘Yes.’ Slight sigh.

‘What for? Is she up to that?’

‘You tell me.’

Hang on, I *live* in London. If she’s coming here, all on her own on the Virgin Cross Country, most likely out of her head on steroids, how come I didn’t know about it? This is odd. This is so not like her.

‘What’s she come to London *for*, though?’

‘She wouldn’t say, except – get this – would I mind if she spent £10,000?’

My spine straightens. ‘£10,000?! On *what?!*’ Amusement, or maybe it’s hysteria, is now creeping into my voice. It’s been too much, these last four years.

It’s like one of those books of drawings that move when you flip the pages fast. The four of us, on the motorway coming back from the bow-tied surgeon (‘Your odds are not good, but you have me batting on your side’). A letter from the local hospice landing on the mat. Such an unhappy coincidence – just fundraising, as it turned out. Dad carrying it in, wincing, as if it were a bomb. A look full of shock and fear across her face and a bitter flash of rage. ‘I suppose it says, “Come and have a day with us. Paint some bloody pictures”.’ (Don’t cry. Don’t cry. It won’t help her.)

And now she’d gone off on some day trip so secret that she hadn’t even told me she was coming. And this from the woman whose usual level of secrecy was like this: having solemnly sworn not to tell her friends you were pregnant again for at least another four weeks (‘Oh god, as if I would. Oh I know, anything could happen yet. No, I promise.’), told them the very instant they walked in ten minutes later, in irresistible and tearful pride.

A watch, we thought. Maybe she was going to buy him a watch. (Unspoken: something 'to keep'.)

'I told her, I don't need a watch. I mean, it's *nice* of her, whatever she's thinking, but I really don't want her doing that. I can't say this to her... Oh, it's really difficult. The thing is it just might not be good, for me, later, I mean. I might need that money.'

A friend wondered if it was actually quite selfish. A last-ditch show of control in the face of a fate out of her hands and all that. Yes, I thought, let's go with that. It's very selfish. Never mind about Dad and what he might want or need in this unbidden future that's opening up in front of him. You just spend all the money, yours and his, on whatever it is *you* think *he* needs.

It seems strange now, but nothing else really got said about it after that. But there was no big withdrawal from the bank account, Dad said. You'd think we'd have badgered her more, poked away until she gave us a clue, but things moved on.

Christmas: Do the children want to go to the panto? Oh, let her wear her party dress! Top your prosecco up, slow coach! (It's not the last, it's not.)

Easter: I'm making simnel cakes this year. I'll do you one, shall I? Do you want a mascara instead of an egg again, like your sister?

And then, quite suddenly, two painful weeks in bed.

Then sitting mute on the garden bench just staring at her beautiful coral azalea. Blanket round her in the scorching sunshine and cheekbones so visible that I had to make my lip bleed to bite back the shock. (Again: don't cry, don't cry, it won't help.)

The only thing she said to me about it was this: 'Where will you keep me?'

'In my heart.' It felt feeble and trite, but it was no less true for that.

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Just before the funeral he – Salmaan Aziz – rang Dad. Could he come? Would it be appropriate? In the end he didn't. I guess long-lost ex-boyfriend is a funny role to play at a funeral, even if you were only of the sixth form kind. And perhaps it was for the best,

because although Dad had said yes, of course, please do come, he had bristled. And that was before Salmaan had said, with his exotic inflection, that he was so shocked when he heard. He had known she was ill, but she'd looked so well when he met her at the gallery in London, in September.

We didn't really talk about it. But it was there, buzzing in the background around us when we stopped for a moment, like a fly does after you turn out the bedroom light. Why would she see him? Why would she go to see him and not tell us? Not tell Dad.

Two months later, a parcel arrived. Huge, but surprisingly light. Postmarked London. As the paper fell away, there we were. Mum, Dad, Bella and me, reunited, suntanned and smiling out of feathered brush strokes in oil paint. A gold evening light danced on the sea behind us and tiny figures were jumping off the high rocks.

It was signed at the bottom: Aziz. It came with a note, too, handwritten in thin black slanting ink on tobacco-coloured paper, somehow as exotic as his voice.

She had seen him last September to ask that he get the work to us this month, and that he not tell us in advance. She was, he wrote, quite insistent that she knew how successful he had become and that a commission now commanded a high fee, which she would pay. Nonsense, he had told her. This was a gift, to her and to us, in fondest memory.

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'Where will you keep me?'

We hung the picture above the fireplace, heart of the home, and scattered her ashes in that happy sunny place a year later. The losing her was done.

The living without her? That's another story.