

# Burial

A short story by Lezanne Clannachan

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After the storm, I walk the empty, winter beaches of Skagen in search of amber, with Torsten, a distracted step behind. As I kick over seaweed clumps, my husband creates hideous monsters which he will wrestle and tame with paper and pen once we get home. These days, since he no longer writes for publication, I like his trolls better. Created solely for our grandchildren, they have become gentler beasts, less wanton in their bloodlust.

We are about to return home, when I nudge one last tangle of mermaid-hair and there it is; a lump of golden resin like a secret heart inside the kelp.

‘There’s something trapped inside it,’ I tell Torsten, holding the amber to the white sky. ‘What do you think it is?’

Torsten squints at it. ‘It’s a piece of leaf.’

But I think it looks finer, like wisps of hair from a baby’s head.

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At home, I fix us lunch whilst he writes. Curried herring on rye bread toasted to the unbending crispness we both favour. As we eat, I keep one hand in my pocket, twirling the amber over and over. Torsten reaches for a glass of water, his cold-tipped fingers feeling their way into a steady grip before he lifts it to his lips. He swallows badly, as he often does, choking and spluttering, his fist clenching the table cloth.

‘Another bone in your water, my love?’ The careless humour is necessary to stop his panic. ‘That’s it. Cough it out.’

His father died like that, drowned on a gulp of water. I think he remembers it every time he reaches for a drink. As for me, I don’t worry. We all die; sometimes the only poetry we leave behind is in the detail.

As Torsten wipes his eyes on his napkin, I sneak the amber to my lips, savouring its plastic warmth – and remember a kiss. It comes back to me as clearly as if it had been preserved in resin all these years, waiting to be chanced upon.

I forget to put the coffee on and stare out of the sitting room window, prodding and poking at the memory to raise a little life in it. A man whose name I have forgotten but not the salt taste of his lips. We’d been swimming, somewhere still and tropical rather than the unforgiving Atlantic that batters the Danish coast like a brat in a tantrum. He smelt sweet and warm, like raisins in the sun. I study the flailing waves through the pine trees remembering the man’s shoulders breaching the surface of that distant sea, his skin glazed with water. Jerome was his name. The amber pebble in my cardigan pocket is silk between my age-roughened fingers. A taunt of lost youth.

‘Pernille,’ Torsten is saying from the hearth where he is lighting the fire. ‘What about the coffee?’

The fact that he uses my full name lets me know he is upset, his low voice giving nothing away. He has always been a man of neutral tone and expression, an indication I believe, of the enormous effort it takes to keep his monsters in line. In fifty-four years of marriage, he has only once raised his voice. But neither of us were ourselves at that time. In any case, he has never needed to shout. His size does that for him. Even now, despite crooked age, he has to bow his head to enter a room, so that once he has unfolded his full height everyone experiences a small start of surprise.

‘It’s coming, my love. You old fellows are so impatient.’

‘How can it be coming when you’ve been gazing out the window?’

I understand his displeasure. Coffee always follows lunch; these are the stepping stones we rely on to guide us through a Monday afternoon. Without routine, we tumble too quickly down the steepening slope of time.

We drink our coffee whilst the fire crackles like an untuned radio and a sea-wind cuffs the side of the house. This is the aural setting of my every winter's day. I shouldn't notice it, any more than I should feel the hairs on my arms growing; only now that I have, I can't sit still. I wander the room, coming to rest behind Torsten's armchair. At the base of his skull, where there was once a mess of blond hair, the skin has puckered into three plump folds. I press my fingers into the shallow ridges. He lifts a hand over his shoulder and we rest in that pose, our old fingers entwined. It reminds me of last summer with Hans and Lorna giggling as they buried our feet in the sand. You're too old to hold hands, Lorna had shrieked and Hans had dumped a bucketful of sand in my lap in a show of brotherly support.

Shrouded in daily noise, it comes as a surprise to both of us when I say, 'I kissed a man once, you know.'

'Do you mean Jesper or Thomas, the crazy fisherman's boy?'

In our first year of marriage we confessed all previous romantic encounters in the same way that you must sweep out the grate before lighting a new fire. Still, I'm surprised he remembers their names.

'Neither. It was when I was visiting my sister once,' I say, pleased at having unearthed another fragmentary bone of memory. 'He kissed me in the Adriatic sea.'

Torsten's hand stays in mine. 'But your sister moved to Croatia two years after we got married.'

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On Wednesday, Liselotte – my third and most independent child – calls to say she is coming for the weekend. She likes to escape the city with its endless carousel of cars and people. Here she is allowed to be solitary, she says. To temporarily unyoke the requisitions of friendship; all that collective eating, dancing, fun-making. It sounds like bliss, I always tell her and she laughs and complains it's tiring. In those moments, I see how truly young she is; careless with her perceived abundance of time.

After the phone-call, I find myself staring into the back bedroom and the lifetime of discarded furniture blocking light from the window. For a moment, the weight of that unwanted collection sits on my chest and I struggle to breathe. That's when the idea comes to me.

'I want Liselotte to stay in the back room,' I tell Torsten and watch his face closely. 'Everything in there must be thrown out and the walls re-painted.'

Torsten looks at his watch.

'The bus to Vesterby leaves in ten minutes,' he says. 'I'll need some paint.'

Of course he doesn't ask why we must use that particular room; he is made of that old, patriarchal stock, trusting his personal interpretation of the world above the deflecting notions of others. Then he adds, 'You're pacing, 'Nilla.'

I stop marching about the kitchen and put my coat on.

On the bus I worry about which colour I will choose. It has to be powerful enough to bring life to a room that has never been used before; a room that has been weighing down our home like a dead limb.

Torsten has only just started moving the furniture by the time I return. In the hallway lies a roll of carpet and six upturned chairs, legs in the air like dead cartoon sheep. He remains on the far side and we have to talk across the junk.

‘You haven’t made much headway, have you, my old man?’

‘I’ve been busy enough.’

I prise the lid off a tin of paint, tipping it gently forward, to show him the colour. ‘This is cheerful, isn’t it?’

‘It’s an honest blue,’ he says, nodding. ‘Like the colour of a baby’s eyes.’

And for a moment I panic, glaring at the paint and worrying that yet again I have chosen the wrong colour.

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When we first moved in, still wearing our nuptial gleam like a winning medal, my mother wanted to know why I needed a house with four bedrooms.

To fill with babies, I told her.

Then she questioned my choice of room for the nursery.

Why this small, dark one at the back of the house?

That was my mother; always trying to tweeze out the sinister motive behind everyone’s actions.

I told her my daughter must feel safe. In those days, before scans and such, we relied on sixth sense, the body’s voice – I knew I was carrying a girl. I told my mother the baby wouldn’t be used to space and light after nine months in my belly. I must ease her gently into this world. The room was going to be quiet, womb-like and I would paint it a dusky pink for warmth and softness.

As soon as the paint had dried, I realised I’d made an awful mistake. The pink had a faded and dusted-ridden quality, like something existing only in memory. Early one morning, whilst Torsten swam in the sea, my baby girl slithered from the broken cup of my belly onto the nursery floor and lay motionless in a drowsy puddle of blood. An other-worldly being, curled in on herself like a translucent snail. Her head rested in my palm, so thin and malleable, I was afraid it would take on the shape of my cradled fingers.

That day Torsten raised his voice at me.

How could you lose our baby? He’d screamed. How could you be so careless?

As though I’d misplaced her, set her down like a bag in a coffee shop and walked away, humming.

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After lunch, when I go to stack the kindling in the hearth, I notice there is something wrong with the firewood. It has the planed surfaces and paintwork of something that belongs indoors and like a puzzle I try to piece it back together. The colour keeps poking me in the eye until I realise it is the same marmalade orange as the bed we inherited from my grandfather; a present on our wedding day. I leave Torsten to struggle down onto his knees with the matches, only to find an empty hearth.

At the end of the corridor, I stare through the doorway. Our room has become huge, dizzying with the unimpeded flow of air. I grab hold of the doorframe to stop myself being sucked into its empty tornado. All that remains of our bed is a dark rectangle on the floor where the sun’s scuffing light had, until now, been unable to reach.

‘You’ve chopped our bed up,’ I shout over my shoulder. ‘What will Liselotte think when she comes on Friday?’

‘She will assume we are two old people going a little crazy.’ That’s what he says.

I join him back in the sitting room and watch as he makes a fire out of our bed's splintered remains. I conjure up that kiss, let me tell you. A kiss such as I'd never before or since experienced; a lesson in perfect contradiction, violating and seducing both. I understand now it was little to do with the man in the surf and everything to do with my wish to inflict damage.

'I'm not making coffee today.'

'Then I shall make some.' Torsten rises from the hearth, drawing up his full height with much dignity despite the audible bone-snaps.

'You don't know how.'

'I didn't know how to chop up a bed this morning. But I managed.'

He returns with coffee, precariously balanced on the board I use to cut raw meat. He has failed to find the tray and apparently we shall drink our coffee from water tumblers this afternoon.

'Why did you hack our bed to pieces?' The glass of coffee scalds me with gathered heat.

'Because we have to start over. Nothing is the same.'

'It was just a-.' I can barely say the word now that I'm upon it. It requires the lips to soften and part under its formation as though just saying it betrays the speaker's desires. 'Kiss.'

Torsten shakes his head, staring hard at me. 'It was an alternative future.'

That night we paint furiously side by side. We complete a single wall and it looks to me like a cresting wave ready to sweep away all those visceral-pink memories. Then we fetch roll-up mattresses and sleeping bags from the garage and make a camp at the foot of the blue wall. Torsten lets me zip the two bags together so we can hold hands before we sleep. At least our bedtime ritual has survived his axe.

Sleep steals Torsten's fingers from mine and I am left awake in a room quiet as held breath. Then he shifts and coughs deep in his throat, like he's clearing a water-bone. He is not sleeping; instead he has been mulling over something he wants to say.

'There was a girl once,' he says, his voice disturbing the room's peace like a hand tearing cobwebs. 'Her name was Nana.'

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'Nana? Nana Pedersen, the wife of your best friend?'

'Of course not.'

'Nana what's-her-name from Oveby who had that bicycle accident?'

'No.'

'Not that Nana who looked after the chickens on Nick's farm?'

'I don't know any chicken-lady.'

'Then who?'

'A student from Copenhagen. She came for the summer.'

At regular intermissions throughout the night, like the slow rotation of a lighthouse beam, another question lights up before me in the darkness. He sleeps between his answers.

‘Why would some city girl want to write a thesis on your foul, old goblins and how come I didn’t meet her?’

Torsten’s eyebrows are freckled with blue paint as he turns to look at me. ‘You were at your sister’s.’

In sweeps the blue-glass of the Croatian sea with Jerome, bellydown on his surfboard of polished wood, hands out to snatch me up like a fish. He was a friend of my sister’s husband, a Dutchman on holiday. And there I was, also alone, with an empty ache in my belly.

‘I wasn’t gone for long.’

‘But you were, ‘Nilla. The whole summer.’

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It wasn’t how he’d pictured the summer to come. The rocking chair he had painted and brought onto the verandah so his wife and newborn baby could enjoy the warm evening breeze, creaked alone. He put it away in the back room, avoiding the dark stain in the middle of the floor. Then came a knock on the door.

Nana, it seems was drawn to all things oversized. Human beings are small on the outside but huge on the inside, said this wise, little thing from Copenhagen. Her thesis explored the dark brotherhood between trolls and our own psyche. She quoted Ibsen and wore inappropriate shoes for this part of Denmark.

‘She was always tottering, on the verge of falling over,’ says Torsten as we walk off paint fumes on a frost-hardened beach. ‘Always in need of a steadying arm.’

‘A tree to snake herself about,’ I offer.

And yet, for all my husband’s corporeal sturdiness, it was his chimp-limbed, bulb-eyed, boulder-headed beasts she was most taken with.

‘But there were looks,’ he tells me. Moments that arrived in sudden silence and caught them both out. Those sweet, unexplored possibilities. The same ones I tasted in the surf on Jerome’s lips.

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Liselotte comments on how ridiculous the new Ikea bed looks in our old bedroom. Still, she’s quite happy to sleep in it for a few days. She laughs, shaking her head, when she sees our camped in the back room. She is truly Torsten’s daughter, asking no questions for fear of the unwanted intimacy they might attract. When she’s gone, we retrieve the hatcheted remains of our marital bed from the garage and continue to burn it.

‘You are right,’ I say. ‘A kiss is not just a kiss.’

Torsten nods at the fire. ‘We are all trolls on the inside.’

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When the snow thaws, I put the amber bead into my coat pocket and take Torsten on a long walk, deep into the empty flats of marshland behind our home.

‘Pernille,’ he rumbles. ‘We’re getting lost.’

But he is wrong. It has been some years now since I last took this path, but every step is sown into my feet. When we reach the cupped hand of earth, hidden from the endless horizon, he peers over its edge.

‘There’s nothing down there,’ he says, frowning at the knee-high bramble.

‘You must be brave,’ I say and unnerve him with a kiss. He steps forward to steady me as my feet catch and trip on the matted gorse, and together we descend into the earthy hollow.

‘What an eerie place,’ Torsten says, glancing around as I rip the vegetation aside. ‘A troll-hole if ever there was one.’

‘That’s where you are mistaken.’ I straighten, so he too, can see the small cross, nothing more than a pair of sticks twined together, standing guard over a knot of hardened earth.

‘You see, I didn’t lose her.’ I press the amber into the small mound under the cross. ‘I knew where she was all along.’