

“Tabula Rasa”

This was the second time I had seen my brothers since our father’s death. Before the funeral, three weeks ago, we hadn’t been together in almost a year. I was standing now outside the house, categorising involuntary memories into those I would examine and those I would avoid. My brothers approached me, together and silent. Luke was looking around at the old street, and Paul was looking down at his feet. I realised as I watched them how familiar they were, despite their absence from my life. I recognised Luke’s casually aggressive way of strolling with his head up high. Paul still had the appearance of someone absorbed in his inner world, oblivious to others in a way that less confident people cannot be. A man walking a dog stood aside to let them pass, and Paul didn’t notice him. They stopped beside me and looked at the house. Luke spoke first.

“Was it always this small?”

“It seemed bigger, didn’t it?” I said. “It’s more imposing in my memory.”

The house seemed empty. Not because its occupant was deceased – it seemed empty of significance, as if I could have walked by, wondered about it, then forgot it again as soon as I moved on. Its yellowing walls and shabby lawn were signs of lacking love, which set it apart from the other houses on the respectable street. But it didn’t stand out at all, despite its neglect. Somehow, it drew into itself defensively like a rodent backing into a corner. The house was playing dead. The fact that it had just one floor stood out to me now. When I thought back to the house as I’d known it, I was overpowered by the sensation of eyes watching above me, glaring down at me. I think that gave me the impression of another floor above.

“Anyway – how are you, Adrian?” Luke moved toward me as if for a hug, and I instinctively withdrew. I pretended to be turning to Paul to bring him into the conversation.

“I’m well, thanks. How are you both?”

Paul shrugged. “Same as always, really. Was supposed to be fishing. Still, I can take the boat out tomorrow.”

Luke said, “I’d be up for that, if you’ve got a spare rod?”

“Yeah, no problem. Room for you too, Adrian.”

“Yes, you should join us!”

“Well ...” I couldn’t think of an excuse, any prior plan that would prevent me joining them, and then I told myself I didn’t need excuses. “Maybe another time.”

“Come on, Adrian. We never see you. I’m hoping all of *this* will bring us closer together. We miss you. Don’t we, Paul?”

Paul nodded and shoved his hands into his pockets. He was staring suspiciously at my head. “Have you dyed your hair or something?”

“Well ... Yes, actually.”

“Why?”

I’d first had the idea some months ago when I discovered grey hairs on my crown (at twenty-seven – a sign of things to come, sooner than I’d thought). I remembered that my father had gone grey early in his life. I’d had the fleeting, ridiculous thought to colour it, to hide from it. At the funeral, the physical similarities between my brothers struck me. They stood side by side with chests stuck out, their black hair matching their dark features. I knew I shared these looks, and the idea of dying my hair returned to me. However slight, it was a change I could make to distance myself from our genetic link. Besides, my girlfriend liked lighter hair and told me, once my hair was dyed, that she much preferred the new sandy brown colour.

“Shall we get on with this?” I said, changing the subject.

“This shouldn’t take long.” Luke clapped his hands together, and the sound rang out across the lawn. His large hands and the sound they’d made reminded me of something and made me think of clouds overhead. I brushed these thoughts aside. He said, “Now, we’re not supposed to actually take anything yet. We’re just here to do a broad inventory and discuss how we’d like to divide up the estate.”

Paul scoffed, “The estate? What the hell is that, the house? You’re welcome to it.”

“The estate is everything. The house, the stuff inside, any money he had.”

I said, “As Paul has mentioned it, I might as well let you know now that I’m not interested in the house either.”

“Well, that’s one thing sorted,” Luke said. “I’ll begin the process of selling up, and we’ll divide any profit. I’ll sort the details, don’t worry about that.”

I wasn’t worried about that. I wanted to get in, get out and return to my life away from all of this. Luke was still talking, saying something about being the administrator.

“I’ll also need to look for all of his financial documents, bills and such. I won’t bore you with the details, it’s my concern.”

I didn’t want to sort through the mess of bureaucracy accompanying the death, so in that sense I was grateful to Luke for taking on the task. But I resented the undertone of martyrdom in his way of doing it. It had often been expected of me, as we grew up, to act as *de facto* leader to my siblings because I happened to be the oldest. The fact that Luke was the youngest added to the admiration he now received for accepting those responsibilities in my place. I never expected him to do these things, but I wouldn’t be expected to do them either. No one knew what I had done for them growing up. I didn’t seek praise for taking my father’s place because he was a failure as a parent. But I did it all, except discipline – that was the one area in which our father excelled. And then we grew up and escaped, and I left them to fend for themselves.

I interrupted Luke to say, “Shall we go in then?”

We each turned to the house and waited for one of the others to go first. No one moved.

Paul said, “I feel stupid, like I expect to see him in there. Or his ghost.”

“He never went anywhere else when he was alive,” Luke joked. “Where would he go now he’s dead?”

“I can take a guess,” I said, nodding down. We all looked at the ground and imagined him looking back up with accusing eyes. “For God’s sake, let’s just do this already.”

I went up the path, which was a mess of soggy leaves and flickering memories, and my brothers followed. I acutely disliked the idea of leading them anywhere, but if we were ever going to finish this, we would have to start. We reached the porch, and I let Luke go by to open the door with the key he had. It made a coarse grinding sound as he pushed it into the lock. He twisted his wrist, but the key didn’t turn. He jerked it more forcefully. He swore violently and hammered a useless fist on the door.

“This is Dad’s final ‘fuck you’,” Luke said. “The key doesn’t work.”

Paul pushed past Luke and me and took over at the key. He muttered to himself as he tried the lock, leaning on the handle and pushing against the door. Luke told him to go easy. I suggested a gentler approach. Paul growled and pushed harder. He bumped his hip against the door, then again, harder. He yelled and threw his shoulder into the door, the lock snapped, wood splintered, and Paul fell into the house with the key in his hand. He looked up at us dazed. There were flecks of wood dusting him. I couldn’t help but join in with Luke’s laughter, which Paul then contributed to with his own bellowing laugh.

“You,” Luke said through gasps, “are such an idiot!”

I took control of myself and stopped laughing. I left them to it while I gathered my impressions of the hallway, this place I hadn't been in for ten years. I heard the clock tick-tocking in the other room. I thought I smelled the acrid fumes of beer on breath. I couldn't stop glancing back to the bedroom door at the end of the hall, thinking I'd seen it start to open, thinking he was about to walk through it. Ten years hadn't been long enough to erase certain memories. The other two appeared more comfortable here, unaware of my unease. They had both been back here in the last decade, out of a desire to prove to their father that they had got away. Their "checking in" with him was not kindness or even loyalty or duty, it was a war waged between a father and his sons. They were ignorant of the irony, not understanding that their need to return meant, by definition, that they still had not escaped, not fully. The old man was winning whenever they came here.

Less often than they visited, I had phone calls with our father. Unlike my brothers, this contact was entirely out of social obligation. He had never touched us inappropriately or beaten us with belts, so a part of me sometimes felt that entirely disowning him might not be justified. Emotional abuse was easier, for some reason, to justify than physical harm. My girlfriend understood that I must have had good reasons for not having more to do with my family, but she still encouraged phone calls at Christmas and his birthday and other arbitrary dates.

The last time I saw my father in person (a very rare event since I left home), we met up at a pub. Meeting outside of the house was my request, meeting at a bar was his. We sat in a corner of this dark pub with low ceilings and stained carpets. A football game was being replayed on a television over the bar. I drank water that day, just to make a point, and he drank whiskey. His skin had loosened on his face, folded around his tired eyes. His hand had a tremor that I noticed when he lifted his drink to his mouth. As he rolled his whiskey around the glass and stared into the honey-coloured liquid, he said, "This is how I want to die – with a drink in my hand." Actually, he might have said, "This is how I'm going to die." I'm not sure if there's much difference. It seems like there is, but I don't know what it is.

Luke led the way into the front room. The curtains were closed and there was a musty smell of old water from somewhere. While Luke opened the curtains and allowed in sunlight that came filtered through kicked up dust, I went to the kitchen. Dishes were stacked in the sink, sitting in stale water and soggy food bits. I let out the plug and watched it all wash away down the hole. I realised nobody had come by to tidy or inspect the house. I returned to the front room and saw Paul standing in front of a wall, looking up at the clock. It was still ticking, but the time was wrong, it was twenty minutes slow.

"Remember this clock?" Paul said to no one in particular.

Luke sneered at it. "How could I forget it? It's burned into the backs of my eyes."

I sat down in the armchair next to Paul, beneath the clock. He was glaring at its face as if staring it down, as if his stare could stop it ticking, could stop time. I'd rather erase time entirely, to start again. The clock kept ticking, and Paul kept watching.

"I was late home from school," Paul said, "last time I remember looking at this thing. He made me watch it for twenty minutes."

That was often the punishment: stand still and watch the second hand tick around the clock for twenty minutes. Our father would watch us watching the clock. He would sit there and not take his eyes off whoever was being punished, to be sure they didn't look away. He lost out too, of course, by doing this, he lost twenty minutes, but he didn't care. He always looked satisfied after it was done, knowing that he'd won, we'd been beaten, and his authority was still in place.

"He'd just sit in that chair," Paul said, pointing at the chair I was sitting in. "Sit and fucking watch me. I hated it. I hated him."

I stood when Paul reminded me that this chair had been the chair from where the tyrant controlled us. Paul reached up to the clock and unhooked it from the wall, and then he hurled it across the room and smiled as it shattered. Shards of its face rained over that corner of the room, then a picture in a grey frame slipped off the wall, disturbed by the impact of the clock just beneath it. The glass in the frame shattered too. It was two or three seconds of chaos, of noise and anger, then the room was silent again. Paul shrugged off my stunned expression. He said, "That felt good."

Luke went to the Welsh dresser where the alcohol was kept. He opened the lower cupboard and explored the extensive collection within. He pulled from it three bottles of beer and handed one to Paul. He extended another bottle towards me, but I declined. I had a look through the drinks in the cupboard and found an unopened bottle of Ballantine's. I took a tumbler from the top shelf and poured myself a little of the scotch.

Luke watched me and said, "Whiskey? You don't want a beer?"

If I wanted a beer, I'd have taken a beer, you idiot, I almost responded. Instead, I shrugged. "I prefer spirits."

He watched me for a moment, that full-of-concern look remaining on his face. He was worried about my drinking because of our father's drinking. He was ignorant to the fact that, of the three of us, I was the least like that man. He and Paul were in danger of becoming him. Their aggression and bursts of fury and so many other traits, some more obvious and others subtle, all came from him. I was not and would not be him. This was why I had cut myself off from my brothers and our history.

Even their repetition of history was inherited from their father, who had likewise become his father without realising it. During that last meeting at the pub, after he'd begun drinking his fourth glass of whiskey, he sneered at me, "You all think I was a tyrant. You should've met your grandfather – *he* was a real bastard. You guys had it good compared to me. And I don't know how I did it – I tried not to – but I raised ungrateful kids. You know the last thing my dad said to me? He was in hospital, the day he died, and he told me, 'You'll have kids one day, then you'll see how ungrateful they are.' He was right."

As the three of us stood with our drinks and our thoughts, Luke said, "I always thought it would be the drink that finished him. He was doing everything he could to make it end that way."

"Either of you know what's happening with the guy who hit him?" Paul asked.

Luke said, "He's looking at some time, I think. I'll let you both know what happens when I find out more."

"He was drunk? The driver, I mean."

"Yes, the police said he was well over the limit, and it wasn't his first offence either. Dad was just crossing the wrong road at the wrong time. Although there is a kind of poetry in how he died – the drink killed him after all."

I couldn't help huffing at this nonsense, but Luke didn't notice. I saw no meaning in any of it. It was just a mistake that ended a life full of mistakes in a world full of mistakes. If the driver hadn't killed him, something else would have, one day.

"When you think about it," Luke was now saying, "it's incredible any of us managed to escape. He did his best to keep us locked up here."

"Couldn't wait to move out," Paul said.

"Me neither. Adrian, you really paved the way for us, moving out when you did. It gave me and Paul the courage to get out soon after, I think."

I smiled as if I accepted the compliment, but Luke was wrong. He, in fact, had made it possible for me to leave. We'd never discussed it, of course, and I would never tell him that it was an act of defiance by him that had freed me. I had been eighteen, Luke had just turned sixteen, and our father was bellowing at him for something. I don't remember what it was

now. Luke suddenly yelled back, louder. After a stunned intermission in the argument – the old man stuttered and looked confused – both sides began yelling over the other. It was as if Luke, emancipated at last, was now freeing every grievance he'd held inside himself. Eventually, Luke was ordered to go his room. Luke refused and turned to walk away. I looked to Paul, who looked as shocked as I felt. Our father reached out and grabbed Luke's arm, a squeeze on the trigger, Luke whirled round and threw his fist out. I remember hearing the slap of knuckles on flesh like a sharp clap of thunder.

Luke was moving toward the door, but turned back twice to check on the damage he had inflicted. The pathetic old man winced and touched his cheek, he stayed sitting against the wall and ignored Luke, who finally walked out the door. After an hour, Paul and I became worried. We wanted to go find Luke, and I suggested to our wounded father that we might. He was sitting in his chair and said nothing, so we left the house and searched for our brother. We found him not far away, sitting at the edge of the local park. The three of us stayed there while the sun went down, and we talked and laughed, and I didn't feel any concern about the fact that we'd stayed out. I didn't worry anymore what my family might say or do. Within a year, we had all moved out. Paul and Luke shared a flat, while I lived out of a rented room and earned a degree through a distance course.

That punch, although it inspired them to stand up to our tormentor and escape, demonstrated how much like our father Luke had become. His aggression had passed on to Luke and, I could see later, to Paul. I wanted a clean slate, to erase any influence from my father and my past, to be a fully independent person. But my brothers were angry and aggressive, and they lacked the self-awareness to even diagnose – let alone treat – the problem. My father, before he died, had seen this too. Before he and I had parted ways after that last meeting at the pub, he had raised his glass at me and said, "You and I get it, don't we? We don't need to keep up any pretence, don't need to see each other every few months. Your brothers have never been as shrewd as you. They seem to feel it necessary to visit and pretend at happy families. I just let them. It's funny."

Luke finished his beer and set the empty bottle on a shelf next to his head. "Let's get started then. We'll go through the bedrooms first, then the cupboards and then the kitchen and front room. We'll do the garage last."

"You two carry on," I said, gesturing to my drink, which I hadn't finished. "Give me a minute to finish this, and then I'll join you."

Paul and Luke set off into the other rooms, and I was left alone. I wanted to stay this way for a moment. I'd only spent twenty minutes with my brothers, and I already wanted to get away. So I sipped my drink and licked the sticky residue it left on my lips, then I took the headphones connected to my iPod out of my pocket and pushed them into my ears. The earphones pleasantly softened Paul and Luke's voices. I pressed play on the track I wanted to hear right now. A long, string note pierced the silence and then fell into silence again, like a single human life. The first movement began, the violins took up their part and began to build their theme. I vanished from the room, or the room vanished from around me, and I enjoyed the oblivion of being absorbed into this piece of music.

My eyes must have closed, because I suddenly felt a jab against my shoulder and had to open my eyes to find Paul standing in front of me. He backed off and wandered around the room, moving his mouth, obviously talking, but I couldn't hear a word. I watched him and wondered if he would ever notice that I wasn't listening, hoped I would not have to turn off my music. But he looked up at me and said something that I was clearly meant to respond to, so I removed my headphones and said, "What?"

"Asked what you're listening to."

"Oh, right. It's Arvo Pärt. A piece called *Tabula Rasa*."

He tutted, "You and your underground music."

“He’s hardly ‘underground’, just not in the charts.”

“Can I listen?”

“I don’t think it’s really your thing ...”

“How do you know what my thing is?”

I shrugged and handed him the headphones. He held them in place with his stumpy fingers and nodded along to what he was hearing. A few seconds later, he handed the headphones back.

“It’s all right,” he said.

Luke joined us in the front room, pocketing his phone. He said, “Daniel just called.”

He used the name so casually that I assumed I was supposed to know the person that the name was attached to. I waded through my brain for the relevant information but came out empty.

“He wants to go to a sleepover tonight,” Luke continued. “He started kicking off when I said no because he didn’t finish his homework last night.”

Right, Daniel was his son, my nephew.

“I wish he could see that I’m not just doing it to be a bastard. Look at Dad – he did it for his own amusement, or his desperate need for control. I’d have let Daniel go if he’d done his work for school. It has to be in on Monday, for God’s sake. The kid is so unfocused. Tell you what, though, maybe he should come out fishing with us tomorrow. I’ll get him to do his homework tonight and he can come out on your boat with us, Paul.”

“Fine by me,” Paul said. “Room for the four of us.”

I spoke up. “Actually, I might not be able to join you tomorrow.”

Luke sighed. “Adrian, one day out with us won’t kill you. It’s good to stay connected. That’s why I’m bringing Daniel along, I don’t want him drifting away from me. I really think this could be good for you, Paul and me. Dad’s death has brought us together, and this could be the start of a better relationship between the three of us.”

His optimism wound me up, especially as it seemed so concrete and gave me no room to have a say in this apparent “coming together” between us. He was naïve too, that irritated me. This would not be the start of a better relationship, would not be the start of anything. Everything would go on as usual, I could see that with clarity. Everything would go on as usual and lead to the inevitable. I knew how this would end:

Despite trying to be a different parent to the kind of father we’d had, Luke would grow apart from his son. His son would learn to hate him. As for Paul, it would be his inherited anger that would kill him young. It might make him sail into a storm as blindly as our father pushed himself into alcoholism. It might be more mundane, a heart condition or stress. Either way, Paul would die. Years later, Luke would die too. He would die alone, far from his last brother, the wife who will have divorced him, and the son he will have alienated. I would outlive my brothers, despite being the oldest. I would attend their funerals, which would be my responsibility to organise. And with them gone, everything we were would remain with me, I would be all that was left of everything I had spent my life trying to run from. Yes, I knew how this would end.

It would end as it began.

“All right,” I told Luke, “I’ll go fishing with you tomorrow.”

“Really?”

He was grinning stupidly at this. Even Paul slapped my shoulder, a little too hard, but in that way I recognised to be intended as friendly. I supposed that it was probably very nice that they were pleased I would be joining them, but I had other motives. Luke and Paul were becoming everything I never wanted to be, because they were so blind to it happening. I did not have to join in with this process, but by remaining aware of it could know best how to avoid it.

We spent several hours at the house together. We looked over things from our childhood, reminders of our past, remnants of our father. I noted with each memory that I allowed to surface for examination what it was I was resisting and how best to resist it. Eventually, we left the house, pulling the broken door shut, although the lock did not work now. Paul said he would get it fixed. We agreed to meet the next day at the harbour. My brothers left in the direction they'd come from, and I went the other way. In the ideal world, I wouldn't have to see them again. No, that wasn't true – in the ideal world, we could have the friendship they hadn't given up on, but without the attachment to our past that came with it. I couldn't simply stay away, but I wouldn't give in and become what I feared becoming. There was no ideal situation in reality. This was just what worked. I wondered, rhetorically, what else I could do, and the answer came back: whatever works.

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