

# Fathers Who Mourn

## The Neighbour's Chicken Coop

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### An extract

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## The Neighbour's Chicken Coup

One day, my daughter turned up at my door. It was just after her twentieth birthday and she no longer wanted to live with her mother. That same day, Kim Jong-un and the South Korean President Moon Jae-in signed a historic peace treaty on their peninsula.

When she moved in, Felicity sweetly asked whether we could swap rooms. She wasn't feeling well. Sleeping in a double bed would do her good.

'It's only for two days, Daddy,' she said in a nasal voice. 'I need to recover.'

Naturally, I didn't object.

After five nights in her old bedroom, where even in a foetal position my long basketballer's legs hung over the edge of the bed, I sensed I was going to have to get used to it. The next morning, the academic year began. On the kitchen table I found a box of books and ornaments that she didn't think suitable for the bedroom, on the tiled floor, my antique Sabena suitcases filled with shirts and trousers. With this, the exchange was sealed.

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The same thing happened with the bathroom. When my daughter needed a long, hot bath one October morning, I brushed my teeth in the outside toilet in the small courtyard, the gentle morning sun on my face.

She'd handed me a towel and asked, 'Are you sure you're OK with this, Dad?'

I smiled generously. 'Of course. Anything for the apple of my eye.'

In the bathroom, she shoved aside my shaver, lens cleaner and pillboxes, which had been standing in a permanent arrangement next to the mirror for years, to make space for her fancy hairdryer. The sink subsequently became covered with dark-brown curly hairs. A few days later, my stuff moved to a shelf I had to squat down on my rather shaky knees to get to. The next time Felicity took a bath, my toiletry bag was already waiting for me at the sink in the outside toilet. At the time I considered this an efficient, considerate gesture.

The next day I noticed she had taken the key to the bathroom door with her to class. I shrugged. It was a warm Indian summer, there was a rainwater shower in the courtyard and I was a fifty-two-year-old in good shape, I didn't need many luxuries.

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That Sunday, we went to vote together, and then, as the election results came trickling in, gradually got more and more wound up in front of the TV. Felicity had an excellent understanding of the political system. When it became clear that the party she had flyered for was losing, she cried on my shoulder. I stroked her hair and tilted her chin up to dry her tears with my handkerchief. As she sniffed and I continued to dab affectionately, I realised how little I knew her and how many such father-daughter moments we had missed out on over the years.

She flinched.

'Isn't that the snot rag you've been carrying around for days?'

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At the end of October, the first frost hit my lungs. Felicity went ballistic when I tried to take a shower inside the house. Hadn't we agreed the bathroom would be her domain from now on? She was fed up with me constantly going back on my word. In fact, I was no different from the hypocritical politicians that Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion had to contend with. She thought it totally unreasonable of me to want to wash so often, and not good for the environment either.

'Do you have so little control over your whims?' she snorted in disbelief.

'You were in the army, right?'

She looked at me disdainfully.

'Oh my God,' she said, her nostrils flaring. 'My dad's a wimp.'

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At seven on the dot, dinner was ready and steaming on the table. Felicity had a complicated diet: an intolerance to gluten, maize, sulphites and soya. On top of this, she didn't like garlic, anchovies, chicory, peanuts, turmeric and leafy greens. When, in absent-mindedness, I added a dash of red wine to the tomato sauce, to give it a fuller flavour, she scolded me.

'It was an accident,' I objected.

'You know how hard it is for me with my diet,' she complained. 'There's so little I can eat as it is, you'd like to think a father would take that into account.'

From then on she kept a close eye on me whenever I cooked.

She snorted at the slightest thing.

I found myself retreating more and more to the room she'd had as a child. I felt like I was constantly getting in my daughter's way, that she would rather see the back of me. When I heard the front door slam, I hurriedly made coffee. Weak filter coffee, so she wouldn't notice I was using Felicity's Celeste d'Oro. She had thrown my coffee away.

'Worthless rubbish,' she had sneered.

I warmed up my oatmeal porridge with soya milk, which I had pre-soaked in a pan under my bed, on the highest heat. My right leg wouldn't stop trembling due to a nasty twitch. I was late for work again.

As soon as my cup was empty, I washed it and put it back in the cupboard.

I became a burglar in my own home. Especially on Saturdays, when there was no predicting how long she'd be gone for.

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As my insecurity grew, I became less and less capable of flavouring my dishes, even though in principle I was a good cook. I wanted to season my food with love, but I had run out of supplies. My famous spirelli - with lentil-based pasta especially for her - tasted of fear.

Felicity noticed immediately, of course. Her mouth twitched.

'Disgusting! Jesus! Did you really go to evening classes? Didn't you seduce my mother with your cooking skills? Your food is *dégueulasse*! No wonder she dumped you.'

I focussed on the ornate floral pattern on the edge of my Villeroy & Boch Vieux plate, a wedding present. I hadn't started using the dinner service until after the divorce because Felicity's mother found the china so hideous. It didn't stop the trembling in my right calf from climbing upwards, higher with each bite, to the extent that became difficult to raise my fork to my mouth. Felicity spoke louder and louder, like a blaring alarm increasing in volume.

'Do you hate me so much? Do you think me so awful you can't even make me a simple pasta dish? Or did you pour red wine in it again? Is that it? Are you trying to poison me?'

I wished I could defend myself. But there was some fundamental truth in her words, causing my trembling to gradually turn to violent jerking.

'I'm sorry,' my voice quivered. 'I'm so sorry, Felicity.'

'What's happened to you anyway?' my daughter ranted. 'You're my father and you're trembling like I'm sending you to the slaughterhouse! Take responsibility for your shortcomings! You drive me crazy with all that shifty sneaking about the house! And that victim look of yours, like I'm the source of all your unhappiness! Stand up for yourself!'

She threw her plate of spirelli in my direction. I ducked just in time for it to explode over the sink.

'—and for me! Where were you all these years? Under the ground? I needed you!'

The glasses and the water jug flew over my head.

'You're not a father at all! You're the most useless scab I know!'

With every piece of cutlery that bounced off me, I dived down further, shielding my head.

She paused.

'I hate you so much,' she said in a quiet voice that verged on vulnerability.

She towered over me holding the pasta pan aloft, like in the slapstick cartoons she found hilarious as a toddler. I pressed my fingers to my mouth to muffle the shrill sound that wanted to come out, the shrill sound that wailed so unbearably inside my head that the spirelli and sauce she threw over me were a welcome distraction. It transported me from a smoky study back to the kitchen, to the shard of china lying next to the table leg. I turned the shard over. The blue Villeroy & Boch Vieux floral decoration was still intact.

'Aaaaaaarrrrrgggghh!!!!' my frustrated daughter yelled as she bolted from the room.

I knew she longed for me to say, 'Now that's enough. You are behaving unreasonably. You have a choice: either you give me the key to the bathroom and move back into your old room or leave the house and go back to your mother. Or anywhere else. I won't tolerate this.'

I longed to say it myself.

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I couldn't do it.

The antique cuckoo clock above the door ticked on inexorably. Instead of standing up and shaking off my helplessness along with the food gunk, I pressed my forehead to the cold tile floor in recognition of the fact that this was my place. This was my place. I pressed the sharpest point of the shard into the tenderest part of my palm until the pain was no longer mere pain but also relief. She

was not unreasonable: she was right. I was a scab. At work, I was the one who went to get coffee for the whole department to compensate for my lack of contribution in meetings, the one who did all the tasks that my colleagues thought were too below them but for which they nevertheless took credit. I was a weak father. I didn't set a good example for my daughter at all. She ran this household, while I hid deeper and deeper behind the shaky pillars of my incapacity.

When my trembling had abated and all the pasta had slipped from my head, I heard the heavy step of my tall daughter approaching. She lifted my head with her hands and smiled. Her long gel nails drilled into my neck.

'I'm sorry, Daddy,' she said as sweetly as an angel. 'That was rude of me. I shouldn't have shouted. And I certainly shouldn't have thrown the plates. I'm so sorry. The way to my heart is through my stomach, you know me. Let's order in. Yes! Shall we order something?'

I wanted nothing more than reconciliation. I nodded enthusiastically, too enthusiastically.

'Where's your credit card?' she asked. 'I didn't find your wallet in your coat pocket.'

I pointed to her old bedroom, groaning as I stood up. My daughter put on the Lady Gaga song she had been playing continuously since seeing the film. The cinema used to be something you saved for, got dressed up for. Nowadays, everyone sits in front of their laptops the whole time. I wanted to tell my daughter that I was proud that she went out with her friends, that she took so many initiatives, but I couldn't get a word out.

*'Longing for change,'* she warbled from the sitting room. *'And in the bad times I fear myself.'*

My knees protested with every step I took towards the courtyard.

'Where are you going?' she asked, holding my wallet in her hand.

'Just to shower and change,' I said with a glance at my stained shirt.

Before Felicity moved in, my shirts had hung by colour in my bedroom wardrobe. Each day I chose a different shade, for a little variety in life. I liked an orderly arrangement of things, which I always maintained, whatever life threw at me. I liked my fixed rituals.

Since I'd moved to my daughter's old bedroom, a few shirts hung on the coat rack behind the door, the others lay folded in my antique Sabena suitcases for lack of space. It seemed like more and more shirts were disappearing, even though I did the laundry myself. At Felicity's request, I separated our garments across different washes, she couldn't bear the thought of my sweat.

On Friday evenings, I washed her fragile garments by hand while she was out. There was a new order in the house. The bar was high. All that remained from my solitary life were the neighbour's eggs. She regularly left a crate on our doorstep. She had been doing so for years. The neighbour would shake her head and laugh if she saw me like this, covered in tomato sauce. I straightened my back.

'Or can I use the bathroom?'

'Of course, Dad,' Felicity said with a wink. 'Just this once.'

I gasped for breath. For weeks I had been standing in a boxing ring holding my fatherly heart like a shield in front of my chest. All the world champions – Smokin' Joe and Sugar Ray Robinson and Rocky Marciano – were beating me up one by one with my daughter's fists. I knew she meant no harm. I had to toughen up. I had serious bruising and internal bleeding, but I wasn't KO. On the contrary. The pasta pan to my head was the kind of blow I could handle. And this was now rewarded with a handshake from my sparring partner, an invitation to get up and throw in the towel.

I watched from the darkness of the corridor, my wet hair smelling of my daughter's organic aloe vera shampoo, as she pressed a generous tip into the Deliveroo boy's hands. I realized that there was no escalating conflict between the apple of my eye and me. I had been looking for drama in our mutual attempts to live comfortably together, a quest that everyone had to go through. After all, I had lived in seclusion for years. It was only natural that my stubborn habits and unruly behaviour should annoy my daughter.

Felicity devoured the edamame poke bowl with relish, which moved me to the depths of my soul. Tears welled.

‘I love you, my darling,’ I said, entranced.

Her look reminded me of Kim Jong-un’s when he posed for the press to shake hands with a political opponent. She would probably have looked just as unmoved if I had joked that I wanted to have her name tattooed on my arm, in gothic letters, from wrist to shoulder. *Felicity, bringer of happiness*, named after Felicity King in *Road to Avonlea*. My daughter was just as beautiful, with her generous brown curls. She pushed her poke bowl towards me so that I could eat the leftovers. This Korean peace was enough. Anything was better than her contemptuous look, which was now a thing of the past. From that day forth, we only ate meals delivered to us.

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