

The Plot

By Adair Broughton

The man took a deep breath and a drink of his warm tea saturated with satisfaction. He stretched his back, one hand on his hip, the other bringing the plastic cup to his lips, enjoying the tannin and sugar that was a reward for the hard work of turning the soil. He lent on his spade, his friend of years and for just that moment his existence was perfect, the sense of achievement fulfilling, knowing that this was the beginning of a new year and another cycle. He looked down, watched the flask by his foot fall over as an invisible swirl of wind knocked it off balance, knowing the moment had gone.

As the fresh breeze filtered early spring into his lungs the man stood against the backdrop of recently dug brown and wet earth, taking a long look at the scene before him, knowing that in a few months, the green of life would dominate and this image would seem a world away.

He looked at the clouds that covered the sky in a blanket of grey that reminded him of his dad's cataracts. The sun was there but hidden, still without the energy to penetrate, hidden behind the filtering foggy water that seemed stationary above, wrapping the sky in bleakness, protecting the earth from the universe.

Beginnings were endings or were endings beginnings; nothing separated them apart from the distinction of looking forwards or looking backwards. But this year was different and the warm tea had not warmed the cold place left by the absence of his son. Usually, at this time, he would find a sweet hidden in his pocket that he would give to his boy on completion of the work. His son would always come and help him on the last day.

That last day was now a year ago and he knew it was probably lost forever.

Something as simple as the nascent of a smile became exigent because of what it signified, as the wrapper made its familiar noise of opening in his mind. Now he had silence. Normally, he would have his tea while his son sucked gently on the sweet. He would watch his son carefully, knowing the conflict of the young mind, not wanting the sweet to disappear too quickly but equally eager to absorb the delightful feeling of that rare sugary taste.

They lived away from the main village, money even for sweets was scarce but he always thought he was doing the right thing, letting the children eat healthfully, making the most of the small income. This was why the plot was so important to him.

The occasional slurp of lips from his son, however simple that thought, had left a void in the day. He felt like the soil, barren but without the seeds of change for development and growth. He wanted above all else to understand why this one day was so important for his son. He was sad but he did not want to feel disappointed in his son, despondent just because of change. That specific day had become the most important in his year, when his son looked at him with admiration and a pride that could not be described and at other times so rarely felt.

For years he had placed his arm around the shoulder of his son, equal partners, a bonding that could not be expressed in word or thought. In one day everything had changed. Could you place your arms around a memory?

Much of their relationship was unspoken; a satisfaction of being together that was neither forced nor contrived but the man delighted in questions raised by his son, felt happy when he saw him eat the fresh produce and saw the world as a much better place when his son asked to help dig at the plot. It was the first year of his son's absence, the memory of that same morning flooding his mind like a wave that would not retreat for long.

"I promised I'd go fishing with Jake dad. Maybe next year ok?"

He had only looked blankly at his son for a second but it had felt like an eternity. He raised his lips slightly, and engaged in his best smile.

"Of course it's ok. You can take my fishing rod if you like."

"Thanks dad" said the son, bouncing away to the shed, where his father's special fishing rod was kept.

He had stood in the same spot for minutes until his wife snapped him out of the thoughts that penetrated into his soul.

"Are you ok", she said

"What? Yeah, sure, yeah" and then he had picked up flask and walked out of the front door. He did not want to tell his wife that their son would not be going with him. A little piece of him felt ashamed, as if he had failed something, but more than that he had an overbearing sense of loss and just wanted to be alone.

His wife watched him leave the house, concerned for a few seconds but then dismissing any thoughts with a subtle shake of her head. Once the man had disappeared she returned to the kitchen, to make some sandwiches and let her thoughts meander and daydream as they did most days.

It was a few weeks later and the first seeds were planted, the small green shoots like regimental emeralds too young and small to be proud but still standing to attention. He was sad to leave the allotment this day, the sun had finally broken the clouds and cast a subtle warm glow over him all day, as if the sky was giving him a present, a little promise of heaven. Tomorrow was work and he felt it difficult to go there, but he could not leave the factory, the small wage overriding any sense of self worth. There was a house to pay for, a family to support.

He was unsure why they bullied him or why he let them. The plot was his escape, his affinity with life and nature because people could not provide that, not those outside of family. Now his son had decided not to come anymore, it felt like the only safe haven in the world but one that had an inherent sadness because he was the only one who felt the wonder of being here.

He had a family so why did he seek this loneliness or was there something deeper, that he could not relate to people or he felt too much, felt each word, and could not understand why people were cruel. Many of them seemed angry, without contentment and put so much energy into increasing their own self worth by attempting to lower that of others. The world seemed harsh, people especially. He would stand by his machine, cutting himself off from the world, wishing it was him fishing with his son, longing for the life as a child when he had friendships and life was light and insouciant, an endless stream of vivacity.

He pictured the colours and pastels of nature, so deep and vibrant. He enjoyed the smells that dominated after rain, he liked the earth on his fingers and the minutes he spent sipping tea with his mind pure with nature and this secret green life. When he saw ladybirds or butterflies he tried to imagine his own existence that free and gentle. He enjoyed the merging of the seasons and the nurturing of vegetables and fruits from earth to plate.

He would place the food in the kitchen but no words of satisfaction came from his wife. It was expected; sometimes he felt that he wasn't respected for doing this. Why couldn't he buy vegetables like everyone else? He had found out his wage was lower than other people doing the same job but who could he complain too. His manager spoke to him with arrogance and as if he was stupid. He sometimes wished he could talk more, could smile and joke with these people, but they mostly pushed him as he passed or talked about him thinking he didn't understand what they were talking about.

Nothing could prepare him for seeing his son look at him as three of the workers were prodding him, shouting at him about a mistake he had made on the machine. No tears came but inside he felt that he was shrinking, that he was becoming nothing, and that everything was meaningless. It was not the people that upset him, it was seeing his son's blank stare, an understanding caught in the glimpse that showed he was ashamed of his dad, that every idea he had about his dad was now worthless. He was worthless, destroyed of pride. When you lose the respect of your son, well, nothing had prepared him for that.

“Will you go give your father these sandwiches?”

“But I've never been to dad's work”

“If you leave now you can get there before school”

“Ok” and with that he shuffled off.

He had walked into the factory and nobody had challenged him as to why he was there. He had realised he had never spoken or asked his dad about his work.

What he saw made his heart stop. He could see his dad surrounded by three men shouting at him, the words drowned out by the machinery that rumbled like incessant thunder. He could feel the floor shaking slightly, wondering how the whole building had not collapsed after years of vibration.

His father stood there, a vacant look in his eye as if it was normal, as if he was devoid of an essence of life. Their eyes had not yet met and he wanted to run at these men, push them over, protect his dad but he was glued to the spot, staring, as if he was made of stone and every emotion he could feel solidified in his heart and lungs. He dropped the sandwiches and ran. School that day was a blur. He felt there was something he hadn't done but he couldn't quite place it, or know through the surreal events what it was he was trying to analyse or comprehend.

When he saw his son run away the man did something he had never thought he was capable of. He walked directly to one of the men and stared him in the eyes. There were no words said, but he did this to each man. It unnerved them and they too lost the use of their angry voices. He walked out of the factory, looking at the exit doors all the time apart from one brief glimpse at the sandwiches lying like a dying symbol of regret on the floor.

He did not walk home. Instead, he cut through the forest and headed towards the lake, the same lake his son went fishing too those few weeks ago. He sat on the log that outstretched itself over the water, a platform that became a prime fishing spot. He knew the lake was deep, knew all the stories of its dangers from his own childhood. He thought of his son playing with his friend, giving him an enjoyment he never could. He sat for a long time, knew where his thoughts were heading, and he wanted to drown in the melancholy they could provide.

She was worried by late evening, when the sun had finished its deliverance for the day and it was the time for shadows to welcome the night.

“Did you see your father today?”

“Yes, but I left the sandwiches for him. He seemed...busy by the machine.”

He did not want to tell his mum of what he really saw. It upset him, and he did not want her to feel like he did, that his father was weak. He wanted to protect the image of his father, give her some comfort. He knew his father would not come home; there was something in his eyes. He had to be strong for his mum.

She could not sleep. She stared out the window thinking of her day. She watched the moon on its silent journey in the sky, wondering why it always faced the same way. She found out so many animals wondered around the lawn sniffing mysteries and insects. She longed to see his shadow walk up the drive, to come home, there were things she had never said, had needed to say. She had walked to his factory to make sure he had not been in an accident and they only said he had left early. She had walked to his plot of land, hidden away behind fields and trees. He was not there.

She had told her son not to worry, dismissed the look in his eyes that fragmented her own insecurity. Her daughter just mumbled and went back to her room.

The sun was still hidden but the sky had the slightest hint of blue and grey rising above the outline of trees. She heard the first birds, welcoming the day with song. Then she heard the front door and saw her son walk out the house with a watering can and a spade. He was going to the plot. She wanted to knock on the window, ask him

what he was doing but knew he needed that connection with his father, knew that he had his own feelings to dig up.

She just watched him as he entered the path at the end of the front garden, to disappear from sight, hoping that at least he would return home that day.

The day was flourished with light by the time she gave up her position at the window.

There would be no daydreams to pass the time today.