

'How far?'

'A mile, mile and a half.'

He shut the boot of the Audi and swung a rucksack on his back, looking away from her too white trainers and the flared jeans that dragged along the ground.

'I told you,' he said.

'I thought there'd be a path.'

'Just this once, please. It'll be worth it.'

She dragged a tissue out of the pocket of her fleece and blew her nose. The last year had created a web of fine lines around her mouth and her eyes.

The field of heavy soil was furrowed and dotted with pools of brackish water. There was a view onto low hills, more green and brown, the odd bare tree. He tried to rest his arm on her shoulder, not protesting when she shrugged it off.

They set off together, his feet strapped into well used walking boots, legs in moleskin trousers, his shins gaitered. He resisted the temptation to stride ahead and kept pace with her tentative foot placement and the zig zagging route across the wet earth. A pheasant hurtled into the air, an ungainly round thing with frantic, beating wings, quickly losing its velocity. His wife's fear of birds was dictated by their size and the suddenness of their appearance. She crouched, shaking, taking his hand to ease herself upright again.

The archaeological site was a small mound of green in the brown, secured by an elderly fence, poles coming adrift. He'd used the word 'Monument'. She looked

disappointed at the low hump of grass. Had she expected an obelisk, perhaps, or a pillared mausoleum?

'This is going to be good,' he said, 'seriously good.' He smiled, his teeth an advert for the skills of his profession.

He held her hand as she clambered over the fence, ensuring her jeans didn't catch on the wire.

The makeshift, much repaired doorway was set low in the ground, an entrance to a low, dark tunnel. She didn't ask why he already had the key to the padlock, why they hadn't collected it elsewhere.

'No reception', she said, holding her phone to the fading sun like an offering. 'People must live around here and there's no mobile reception?'

'You can manage without for an hour or so.'

She thrust it in her pocket and turned away, searching for evidence of habitation, a chimney, a rooftop or a passing car.

The sky had darkened. He felt a spit of rain on his cheek as he opened the padlock.

The agreement to share experiences was part of the counselling process. It was a means of rediscovering a life together, a way to fill the space left. Today was his turn. Next week he would have to accede to her wishes. It would, he knew, involve shopping. She allowed him to hold her hand as she lowered herself into the souterrain.

The narrow underground passageway fell steeply away. Less than five feet high, it was lined with stone, a sharply curved corridor leading to complete darkness. He

landed with a soft thud behind her and she did nothing to steady him. Putting his hands to the walls, he demonstrated the narrowness of the space, touching the stone, just a sliver of light around him,

'Two thousand years old,' he whispered, 'amazing!'

'And not a burial mound, no bodies?' He heard the hesitation in her voice, the fear of small corpses.

'It's a place of safety, an escape from rape and pillage. I told you.'

The light of his head torch made her shut her eyes and turn away.

'You're sure it's safe?'

'I am. I always check things are safe. You know that.' His words were measured, but carried a potency she understood, that criticism he could not bury, the thing she had done he couldn't forgive.

'How are you sure?'

'That's what it is. The villagers would have used it when the Vikings attacked. It's been here for two thousand years. It's hardly going to give out on us now.'

Stone lintels in the corridor marked where earlier doorways had been. Even stooping, their heads brushed against the ceiling. She swiped at something that clung to her face then shone her torch, a slim, pencil shaped thing, upwards.

'You could have told me,' she said, looking at the spider webs swagged across the ceiling. Her eyes were moist and she held her fist against her mouth, the knucklebones clear and sharp under her pale, fine skin.

'You'll cope.' He saw her mouth furrow, expensive moisturisers no cure for grief. The narrow beam of light traced the shape of the sloping walls, the ceiling made from slab after slab of stone.

'See?'

His torch steadied on a stone lintel pocked with crescents. It looked, as if tiny hooves had galloped across its surface when it was at the cusp of turning from lava to stone. 'Crescent and cup marks, Neolithic, much older than the structure. And only used in important places, junctions, niches for lights, for offerings,' He knew he sounded pleased with himself, as if he had been in some way responsible for the Celts' choice of building materials. He knew it would irritate her but he didn't care.

It was less cold here than outside but there was also dampness deeper rooted than anything he'd ever experienced before, damper and mustier than, for example, a small, rectangular grave.

'I don't like this,' she said as she walked with her hand in front of her face, protecting herself from the legions of waiting arachnids.

'We'll be ten minutes. Bear with me. Please.'

Standing at full height in the end chamber, a beehive roof of overlapping stone above, she said 'I don't understand.' He thought about how one loose stone could send the rest cascading down, smothering her in rock. 'How is this a safe place? The Vikings could just let you starve, set a fire or smoke you out.'

'Fill the corridor with earth,' he could have said, 'smother you,' just as their child had been smothered with sand as his wife sunbathed.

He shook his head.

'It's vented. There's air. There would have been doors between here and the entrance, the original Iron Age fire door system. The corridor is narrow intentionally. A Viking attacks,' he thrust his hand into her stomach abruptly, making her gasp, 'the Celt stabs him back, the Viking falls and the passageway is blocked, the next one can't get through.'

He watched her draw herself back up, not wanting to acknowledge that his demonstration had hurt her.

'More cup marks,' he said. This time the light illuminated a hollow in the wall, a stone shelf with a channel carved in its lip, another pock marked lintel above. She put her fingers to it, tracing the marks, beginning to understand his enchantment. There was something caught in a fissure in the stone. She shone her torch, the beam enough to illuminate a tiny satiny bird's skull, the beak long and sharp. She wiped her hands against one another, against her coat.

'How could there be?' she whispered, 'how could there be a bird down here?'

He turned his head torch off, the fingers of his other hand grasping her torch. The bird skull was his gift, along with the desiccated corpse of a gull she might find in time. His waterproof brushed against the stone, the pencil beam enough for him to find his way out, to pull the much repaired door shut. His hand eased the hooped metal of the shackle into the padlock. A cordless drill and screws were stashed at the top of his backpack, above the supplies he always brought, the practical things she neglected, snacks, water and tissues, a first aid kit. It took him a matter of minutes to

ensure that the small bits of wood he had packed alongside the drill were braced around the hinges, above and below the hasp.

It would be a lesson. She would, finally, properly, apologise and feel guilt as well as grief. It wasn't simply a 'tragic' accident. It was her carelessness that had caused their child to die. A few hours, a night, in that loamy, musty smelling, spider ridden, damp space, the absence of light and the presence of that bird's skull would make her feel terror. He walked back to the car expecting the feeling of jubilation that had occurred during his rehearsals when he had exchanged the farmer's padlock for another, the same brand but with two keys, one of which he had kept, when he had measured the door and planned the reinforcements against the kicking she would inevitably give it. He suddenly felt exhausted, as if he had climbed a trio of Munroe's in a day or completed a triathlon, battling against younger men. But there was a point to this, a punishment to be delivered, even a kind of healing. He could just give it a few hours instead of the whole night. Bearing in mind her initial response to the bird's skull, that might be enough.

Andrew Ramsay was a modern farmer. Unlike his father, he didn't curse the presence of the low mound that intruded on ploughing and sowing. There was grant money available for maintaining access, for keeping a key in a designated place and for very simple maintenance.

During his childhood the souterrain had been both a source of curiosity and a place that inspired terror. Once, his older brother had left him locked in for what felt like days but was really only a small interval between tea and supper.

His father had comforted him and muttered something about it being a ‘rite of passage’ for Iron Age boys; he should see it as the same. His elder brother had snorted into his soup. They all knew what the souterrain looked like in plan, the testicular sack the end chamber, the curving shaft leading to the entrance, cup shaped. They all knew that Andrew’s voice was breaking. There were stiff patches on his sheets in the morning, hairs that sprouted irregularly, a voice he couldn’t depend upon.

His father had wilfully ignored the visitors that drove gingerly into the muck strewn farm yard. Andrew met them with a leaflet and a donation box.

The couple in the elderly Volvo were the second and third visitor of the year. A man had been for the key a month before, or was it two? All, his visitors had the same look, wearing worn walking gear that was sometimes adorned with a more hedonistic scarf wrapped around the neck, the occasional tattoo peeking out.

It didn’t take long to walk from one end of the souterrain to the other but once people had made the journey to the farm, gathered the keys and trudged the field they seemed to think it necessary to linger and discuss. Their conversations would be the same as his childhood ones, the danger of attack, the escape under cover of darkness, what Vikings would look like, how it would feel in that tomblike space. He knew something of the fear. He had huddled in the corner and kept his hands over his eyes so that he could pretend it was light as the ground beneath him slowly filled with water from the rain falling above. He had cursed his brother, imagining him with an axe and a helmet that covered his nose with a dull sheen of metal and had armed himself for his return with a rock with a sharp edge. It was his mother that had retrieved him. The rock was left lying by the doorway.

The couple returned sooner than he had expected.

Andrew was gracious.

'Find the cup marks did you?'

The young man handed him back the key for the padlock and shook his head.

'It wasn't locked,' he said. He steadied himself by placing a hand on the windowsill; his fingers shockingly pale against the red stone. The young woman huddled into her Aztec scarf.

'There's something dead in there,' the young man said, 'a body.'

The crime scene tape followed the line of the rickety fencing. A van and a mobile generator occupied part of the field Andrew Ramsay really could have done with ploughing.

It was relatively straightforward to identify the body from the missing person's register. The cause of death was less immediately clear although there were some clues. There had been a lot of rain and the floor of the souterrain was a morass of mud and small stones. A senior officer was dispatched to a leafy suburb and a modern house with historical trimmings, a small turret and a solid oak front door.

The woman in receipt of the officer's information sat on her well upholstered sofa and held her manicured fingers to her face. Her eyes glistened. She shook her head abruptly, as if a fly were bothering her. 'No' she said. The female officer that had

accompanied the investigating officer made tea while he explained the process that would follow the autopsy and the coroner's report.

'I, we,' she said, 'it was difficult. We weren't talking much. I should have known where he was, where he had gone.'

'The head injury,' he said, wanting to save her this remorse, 'I know the autopsy isn't complete yet, but it was severe. Knowing where he was wouldn't have made a difference.'

She rested her hands on her stomach as if she were protecting it from harm. He had a sixth sense for pregnancies, could smell them, he told people. The woman tightened her soft, pale jumper to reveal a very definite bump.

'He didn't know. We lost our first, an accident.'

There were photographs in moulded silver frames on the fake stone mantelpiece. They showed a happy family with a tow haired child on the beach next to a bucket and spade. They would be a nightmare to dust.

'I understand it was sometime before he was reported missing that you last saw him? It was the staff in his dental practice that alerted us?'

The woman nodded and twisted her wedding ring around her finger.

'We had a row. There's a flat above the practice. It's empty at the moment. He sometimes stayed there when we ... we weren't getting on. I assumed he was there. He kept stuff there for when he stayed late.'

'No phone calls or messages?'

'It wasn't how it worked. We can,' she corrected herself, 'could' not talk to one another for days. It was one of many things we needed to work on.'

'We're trying to establish his last movements. We have the date he collected the key but he did also return it that day. At the moment we are assuming he remembered he'd left it unlocked and returned. We will check with the local transport. It has such little use he might be remembered. It's a fair walk from the nearest bus stop, five miles or more.'

'He could walk for miles. It was something he wanted us to share only, I don't know, the countryside is so ... boring, so ... dark.'

'We are considering the possibility that he might not have been alone. If there had been an argument and he'd fallen, it's possible the person with him may have panicked.'

'Who would he have been if he wasn't with me? We had some difficulties but there wasn't anyone else.' Her voice grew shrill. 'There couldn't be anybody else.'

For a brief moment, she looked much, much older.

A loud thump on the large picture windowpane made them all turn. There was a glimpse of feathers. The teacup dropped from her ringed fingers, its contents spreading on the cream carpet. The female officer collected a cloth and began scrubbing t the carpet under the widow's feet while she tapped a foot clad in a heeled sandal, slender straps revealing ivory toenails.

'The day you argued, and the day after that, we do need to establish your movements, dot the i's, cross the t's.'

'I was here. I was upset. It wasn't a ..., I was going to say a 'good' row but sometimes, you know, they were, they cleared the air and moved us on. This one didn't. And I knew then, about the baby, and I didn't tell him. Seems like neither of us had a good weekend.' A tear fell then, slowly sliding through her face powder, leaving a slug trail of paler, lightly freckled skin.

'The row?'

She shook her head.

'I'd agreed to go for a walk but I felt sick, tired. I had to pee all the time. I said no. He went out on his own. He left the car because mine was in the garage. I'll give you their number.'

The liaison officer cleared the cups while the police officer recorded the name and number of the garage in his notebook. 'Would you like my colleague to stay with you, until someone else comes?'

She shook her head.

'No need' she said. 'It's been nearly two months. I knew he wouldn't just disappear. I was expecting this.'

She escorted them to the door. A small rockery at the edge of the lawn looked recently planted. The inert shape of a dull, brown bird lay beneath the window

'Before you leave,' she said, 'there is something you could do for me.'

'And what's that Ma'am?'

She picked up a stone with a sharp edge from the rockery at the corner of the sleek, green lawn.

'Make sure that bird is dead and get rid of it.'

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