**Crow**

Looking back, that doll’s house was probably the only thing our dad ever for made us. Well, for Sandra I should say. Pine and ply, match box beds, bit of cord squirreled from the back of the telly, wall-to-wall Anaglypta; a fine job of it he did.

Not long after that, Mam left.

Another man. Flited to the coast - Bridlington or some such. I was only young, don’t remember. Don’t remember her at all really. But Sandra did. It bothered her lots. She cried for ages. Dad never said anything about Mam from that day on, and I never asked.

No photos, no letters. No nothing.

Plenty of women in the village took us under their wing. Mrs Yaxley, next door but one, she always had a jam tart or two for us; a say-it-as-ya-see-it woman, her wrestlers’ forearms and flowery pinny were oddly comforting. Mr Yaxley worked on the same team as dad and was always offering to take me rabbiting (or whatever else he could line up in his sights) but I never fancied it.

I never fancied killing things.

Then there was Eileen next door. Egg and chips teas and a constant stream of orange pop during that ’76 scorcher. Sandra took over being official mother; walloping me one minute, hugging me the next. Life just carried on.

That’s what you do.

Dad wasn’t into budgies or pigeons or fishing, or even the gee-gees and shooting like Mr Yaxley, a couple of pints at the welfare after a shift and that was his lot. He didn’t do anything else, so other than play in the village we didn’t do much else either.

By far his favourite shift was nights - the golden shift. Decent money, but more important, nights meant he didn’t have to come out of the black into the black.

He hated the dark, our Dad.

Winter days after a shift, he’d circuit the rec (the Recreation Ground) then watch the News in his string vest and old wedding-suit trousers. The rest was ‘garbage’, which to be fair, it probably was. Some days he didn’t even put the telly on; he’d just stare at the blank screen.

I always picture him like that; subdued, inert, lost almost, staring at that telly.

He wasn’t a talker which used to annoy Sandra to death but it was fine by me ‘cause I didn’t talk much either. If he was pleased he’d say, ‘champion’ and if he wasn’t he’d say ‘bastard’. What else do you need to say. Mostly, he’d just nod and mutter ‘ya’right?’ Two syllables were about as far as Dad went. Summers, he’d perch on the stool in the yard with a ciggy, hands on his knees like a linesman at Wimbledon watching the crows swoop and swirl over the oaks by the rec.

Strange creatures are crows, brutal, and clever. Look after each other mostly but they can whip a spuggies head off with a single swipe and needle it to bits in an instant. Watched them for hours he did; chasing and diving in the wind, then settling down to roost, cawing away like they owned the world.

Apart from the stool, the washing-line post and the ash pan hung on the wall there was nothing in our yard.

Down our way, yards were mostly little Edens worked over by men desperate for a flash of colour, or rubbish tips. Ours was neither. It was simply flagged and bare. Then one day, the shed appeared.

‘What’s that fo? ‘ I says.

He tapped the side of his nose and with a fleeting smile said, ‘mind this’.

A week later, he rocks up on a Triumph Hurricane.

I was playing kerby in the street when this big fat beast of a bike chugs down the street like an old pit bus. Shock of my life when I saw it was my Dad on the back of it. He was wearing a Barry Sheen helmet and Biggles goggles and he looked bloody fantastic! Course, I didn’t know who Biggles was at the time, didn’t do reading much then, but if I had to tell you what the goggles looked like, that was them. All the kids went mad asking for a ride, but he never give them a ride. Never give me a ride. I was to ‘keep off’. That bike was his pride and joy, and he’d away on it for hours.

By the time I was leaving school the strike was going proper.

I was fixed on not going down anyway. I understood miners, understood the strike; men desperate to retain their jobs, their traditions, their communities, but I’d also knew the hardships; poor pay, rattling lungs, arthritis, industrial deafness - every man jack of them had an injury of one sort or another. Some, like Eileen’s old fella, had even lost their lives.

But more than that, times were changing.

You could feel it.

The world outside our village was romping along, all property booms and privatisation - we’d know about it sooner or later for sure. My mind was made up; whatever I was going to do would be on God’s earth, not smothered inside it. When I told dad I wanted to be a photographer he looked at me not with surprise, but with a glimmer of amusement. ‘Fine son’, he said. And that was it. Thinking the strike wouldn’t last long I took a supermarket job before college started.

Life-saver it was.

Kept us going throughout, and neighbours and friends; a couple of loaves for Mr and Mrs Yaxley here, a bag of spuds for Eileen there. Longest year of my life it was. The violence made me retch, but the little things upset me the most.

Like the bloke standing outside the supermarket with his collie that day.

Stood there he was with a Walkers Crisps box at his feet, Rice Crispies and a couple of cans of soup inside and the words ‘Support The Miners’ scraped into the end. The bloke looked windswept and tired. The dog looked pissed off. I didn’t expect it you see, well, you wouldn’t would you - a man, a tough working miner, begging outside Sainsburys. I didn’t know him from Adam, but when his eyes caught mine…

by the time I’d gathered myself, decided to go back, decided to give him a quid, the police were moving him on.

I stood and watched.

Dad got a fantastic suntan; I’d never seen him with one before. By November we were burning every spare stick we had. Sandra’s dolls house was the first to go. ‘Bastard’ was all Dad could say as he chucked the ply into the flames.

He said bastard a lot during the strike.

After everyone went back we all thought the world was going to end, and for a while it did. But eventually Dad got a job at the garden centre. It suited him. There was spring in his step and he’d come home with all sorts of ‘throw outs’. The concrete flags disappeared and our back yard blossomed. His ‘yarden’ Dad called it; wisteria, clematis, peonies, geraniums. Percy Thrower would have been green.

After I’d finished my photography course I joined Reg at Reg Finch Photography; the occasional portrait work but mainly weddings. The money was lousy, in fact, post pit closure it was crap. But I loved photography, I loved catching the moment and Reg was a decent bloke. When Sandra married Paul, Reg did the album cheap. She cried and cried that day. I think she was happy, maybe the crying was because Mam wasn’t there. I didn’t give a fig whether Mam was there or not.

I’m not sure what Dad thought.

When I married Louise, Reg did our album even cheaper, and Sandra cried and cried again. Louise and I scraped enough together for mortgage on a terrace in Askern. I liked that little terrace, Louise and me, we had some good times there: lots of friends over, lots of laughs, then Katy and Emily came along and Louise wanted somewhere bigger, somewhere better. Things got difficult. The rows we had.

When I turned up back at Dad’s he never said a dicky-bird.

I’d treat the girls at McDonalds, did the after-school dancing, paid-out for whatever. I missed them like mad, but I didn’t miss the agro with Louise. After that, I took up with a few lasses but I never went the distance, kept them at arm’s length, kept things sweet.

Then one day Sandra turns up all agitated. ‘I want to find Mam’, she says, ‘are you in?’

After I’d said no Sandra cried and cried. Fortunately, Dad was out. I wouldn’t tell him. I wouldn’t tell him that Sandra was hell bent on finding Mam. I sat on the stool in the yarden, lit a roll up, watched the birds. Blue tits were in the bird box again.

‘Jumpers’, he’d said.

That was the trick to get them back the next year, a scrap of old woollen jumper before the start of the season. I remembered Dad sitting there, hands on his knees gazing at them, at the crows above the oaks, gazing at the yard walls, the floor. And suddenly I had a thought. An awful thought.

A black thought about Mam and her leaving and the concrete flags in our back yard.

I squeezed my eyes hard trying to think of something else. Dad telling me about blue tits. How they sometimes had two broods but hardly ever in this country - probably due to the shit weather - and I got to thinking about how two lots of chicks must be exhausting for a little bird like that.

Dad’s bike throbbed down the ginnel. I sat up straight.

He chugged into the yard, parked it up then popped his red helmet off like a Cava cork. The Biggles goggles looked dafter than ever patched up with electrician’s tape but the pit boots spoke volumes about who he really was.

‘Them’s mine’, he’d said when he’d walked out of the pit gates that last day. He wore them constantly; on the bike, at the garden centre, down the welfare with the few blokes that went now, and scuffed and steelie-weighted as they were, I knew he’d wear them till they dropped off his feet.

The black thought pinged. I tried to push it to the back of my mind. And then another thought. Why did Dad take off here and there for hours on end? Where did he sail off to on that big fat Triumph?

I was feeling brave.

‘Where ya bin?’

‘Arght.’ Dad lifted his goggles off and folded them.

‘Yeh, but where?’

He stopped and looked at me. A hardness swept over his eyes. He sleeked back his thinning hair and tap-tapped the side of his beak-like nose.

‘Mind this,’ he said. No smile.

I nipped my ciggy out, stood up, went inside.

Even though I’d said I wasn’t interested Sandra kept calling round when she’d some news to tell me, or rather, when she didn’t have some news to tell me. She’d tried to trace Mam through her married name, her maiden name, through her mother’s maiden name. Nothing. She went through library archives, census records; she contacted every living relative she could think of and the registrar’s office as well but to no avail. The less she found the more she got the bit between her teeth.

Meanwhile, I could tell Dad was annoyed at me. He’d stare at the cord carpet when I came into the room and evenings he began to disappear even more, but now without a word. I’d sit and watch the crows above the oaks while I tried to tie dates together: how long had the concrete flags been down, when did Mam disappear, what did she look like?

I couldn’t even remember the colour of her hair.

Sunday morning and Dad was at the garden centre. Sandra turns up early doors and she could hardly catch her breath. Exciting news, she’d been round to Mrs Yaxley’s over and over, sure that Mrs Yaxley knew something and fair enough, a result. Mrs Yaxley had finally given in but would only tell Sandra that Mam had left Dad to live, not in Bridlington… but in Edlington.

Bloody Edlington! Only a couple of miles down the road.

Mrs Yaxely wouldn’t divulge anymore. She was going to get lambasted by Dad for telling Sandra that! My stomach churned, so Mam was probably still living around here - if she was still alive.

When Dad got back I watched him for a while as he gazed at the News on the telly.

He shook his head here and there, said ‘idiots’ now and again, sighed. Long sighs they were, like he was exhaling an invisible ciggy, like he was letting all the darkness out of his life.

‘Dad’

‘Yes son’

‘I think I need to tell ya…’

He looked over.

‘ya need to know, Sandra’s been lookin’ fo Mam…’

His face darkened.

… and she thinks she might be near to findin’ her.’

He sat there, grey-faced. Still. Speechless. Then, his breathing became shallow; his features slipped at one side, his left eye flickered.

The next few hours were a blur.

I stayed with him in the stroke unit till the nurses just about booted me out. Sandra and I went to see him every day. We didn’t mention Mam, even between ourselves. On the last day, I held his hand. I’d never really held Dad’s hand before.

Huge gnarled fingers they were, skin thin as rice-paper.

At one point, he fixed his beady eyes on mine and opened his mouth to say something. But the words wouldn’t come. I put my ear to his dry lips, there was only a rasp. I looked at him again. With a huge effort he mouthed the word ‘sorry’. I didn’t even notice the tears until Sandra gave me a tissue. When the nurse insisted we leave, I knew Sandra and I would never see him again.

The last thing I did for my Dad was to make sure he had his pit boots on when they put him in that coffin; those and his old wedding suit and them flaming Biggles goggles.

Somehow after that, I felt better.

It was a sombre do, as you’d expect of a funeral, and yet, even though he wasn’t an old old man I was surprised at how many people turned up. Men I hardly knew in the village who shook my hand, said he’d made mistakes but stuck it all out. Women who kissed our cheeks like we were children, praised our Dad for doing his best, said he was a stalwart, a first-rate bloke.

And then, the breakthrough, Mrs Yaxley came up to me and Sandra and thrust a scrap of paper into my hand.

‘It’s time you both had this,’ she said.

I looked at the scrap of paper, then at Eileen.

 ‘It’s ya mam’s name she took on… and her address.’

For once, Sandra stopped crying.

The welfare thinned. Sandra and I began collecting glasses, stacking chairs. I knew Sandra would be desperate to do some talking, make some decisions.

I’m not sure what I thought.

Then from out of the corner of my eye I saw a woman approach Sandra. I didn’t know the woman, never seen her before in my life, but if I had to tell you what she looked like, I would have said she looked like our Mam. I went over.

I stared at the woman. She stared back. She had two younger women with her, probably about my age. I put my arm around Sandra. I waited.

‘You don’t know me love,’ she said.

‘Don’t we?’ I said.

‘No. But I had to come. I had to see ya, I’ve wanted to for years, and I needed to pay me respects to your dad.’

A lump blew up like a balloon in my throat.

‘And I want both on ya to know that I’m sorry…’

Sorry? Dad had said sorry.

and that ya dad was a grand fella, the best of men, and he did everythin’ he could to be a good dad to all his kids.’

All his kids?

‘All his kids?’ Sandra said.

 ‘Ya need to know… that these two ladies here, these are your sisters.’

I couldn’t believe it. My eyes began to sting.

‘Mam,’ I whispered.

My heart was hammering through my shirt.

‘No love. I’m not ya mam.’

And then it dawned on me.

When we finally found Mam she was living a couple of miles away in Edlington just like Mrs Yaxley had said. But she didn’t want to know.

Right from the start she made it clear she was the one who had been wronged and she’d washed her hands of the lot of us. When Dad had had the affair and the other woman, Barbara, she’d got in the family way; Dad had refused to just ditch her with the baby. Mam wouldn’t forgive him or live with another family in tow. She didn’t want the humiliation.

Barbara on the other hand is as different again.

It’s late summer now and I’m in the yarden catching a moment before my grand-daughters come over for the day.

I’m on the small patch of grass where the concrete flags used to be, working on some pieces of wood; pine, a bit of hardboard, ply. If I had to tell you what I’m trying to make you might not believe me, ‘cause it’s a hellish rough effort as far as dolls houses go.

I’m not sure what Dad would think – probably wouldn’t tell me anyway. But when I’ve put a bit of carpet inside and wall-to-walled it with Anaglyta, it’ll come up champion.

**2,984 words**