

# **Clearing The Dead**

## **Wood**

So here I am, sitting in a skip, reading a book, when he finally comes round the corner. I give him a quick sideways glance and he looks just the same, striding along, swinging his laptop bag, staring at the pavement, deep in his own thoughts. He'll get a surprise in a minute.

"What are you doing?" That's what he's supposed to say, and I'll reply in a rather sniffy manner, "Just having a bit of a clear out," and then I'll go back to my book, *Mad Cows*, as it happens, but really it could have been anything, any of the old books I'd thrown in the skip.

What he *actually* says is: "Locked yourself out again?" Doesn't even bother waiting for a reply, just carries on down the garden path to our front door. As he unlocks it, he turns back to me: "You coming in then?"

Not even a: "Need a hand?" Not even a wondering why there's a skip outside the house in the first place, or why it's mostly full of our old furniture, and me. There's no way I'm going in yet.

I knew the old furniture had to go. It began driving me mad. All this tatty, old, dark depressing stuff. Other people's furniture, given to me, to remind me of them or because they thought we needed it when we first got married. A long time ago. Time for it all to go. Even Dad's old armchair. A big

chair for a big man. That's where I'm sitting right now, a bit lop-sided and feeling lost against in its high sides, sunk down in its deep blue cushions from which I can feel feathers poking through onto my goose-pimpled legs. I'm wearing shorts, because it was hot earlier, but now I'm beginning to feel cold.

Blue Moon ... a melancholy tune, which I hear sometimes on the passing traffic, as if played by my Dad, on a mouth organ, late at night, sitting in this chair, glass of whisky balanced on one of the arms. I don't want to hear that tune anymore. I just want all this old stuff out of the house and out of my life. That's why I'd ordered the skip, but then once I'd got everything in, I felt I might as well get in too.

If he'd only said what I wanted him to say. If he'd only got it right, then I'd stay, but he didn't, so I won't. The lorry can come and take it all away, me included.

"House is looking a bit bare..." He's just stepped outside the front door, chewing on a piece of toast, without shoes, just socks, moving his feet slightly on the doormat, like he's on hot coals, I guess because the mat prickles.

"You're really getting rid of all that stuff?"

"Yep." I shout back and return to my book.

"To the dump?"

"Yep. It's all dead wood."

"What's that mean? It's not junk. It must be worth something."

I shrug, carry on pretending to read. He goes back inside, but leaves the door a little ajar, I note.

It must be worth something? Is that all he can say? I'm furious. I mean, he may be right. Mum's dressing table for instance: Art Deco, but all the

drawers stick, the knobs are loose, and the mirror is mottled. When I sat there each day on its button-cushioned velvet seat to look in the mirror, I began to see my mother's face staring back: embittered, ripple-ringed skin around faded-denim eyes. Maybe I deserve that face, my punishment for always taking dad's side. Years later, when she became ill herself, I wanted to make up, much too late of course. I don't want reminding of that every time I look in the—

“Who helped you?” He's outside again, but a bit further down the path this time, now wearing slippers and slurping on a mug of tea.

“What?” I call back, even though I heard. No mug of tea offered for me, I note.

“Someone must have helped you lug all that stuff into the skip.”

“No, not really,” I say, irritated. “Well, the postman helped me lift the dressing table... the paper boy this chair... and the rest...’ I shrug.

What is he on about anyway? All this is totally irrelevant. He is completely missing the point as usual. He can't see the wood for the trees. Never could.

He holds up his mug. “I expect you could do with a cuppa, after all that hard work.” he says, moving even closer, now up to the garden gate. “Are you coming in? Or shall I bring it out here?”

“Don't bother. I don't want one,” I lie.

I think he almost smiles, then quickly puts the brakes on it, as if he realises just how angry I'll be if I even suspect he thinks this is funny. Then again, perhaps it was because he's noticed the dismantled cot, wedged in the far end of the skip

“Looks like it might rain,” he says turning away and goes back in, this time closing the door firmly behind him. Should I have called after him? Why should I?

It’s dusk now and I’m really beginning to feel cold. I notice a nasty graze on my knee I hadn’t realised I had. I must have caught it on the drawer knob of Mum’s dressing table and in fact I can just make out a tiny rag of skin, my DNA, left behind there. From my chair, I can just reach out to open one of the drawers, still with some of her old clothes inside; synthetics in loud colours, not my style. I’m not so much like her after all, I think. However, there’s a mohair bed jacket, with a peach satin ribbon at the neck, and so I put it round my shoulders. I notice one of the neighbours peers through net curtains. Whatever must they think? Whatever they like.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes, eh love?” A rather scruffy looking man passing by has stopped. “Waiting for a bus are we?”

I decide it’s best to ignore him and pretend to read my book.

“Wish I’d seen it first,” he persists, sucking hard on a thin roll-up.

“Sorry?”

“All this good stuff,” he indicates into the skip, pushes a few things aside for a better look. “Wouldn’t have minded some of it myself. Pity you got here first.”

I look the other way.

“Anything you don’t want?” He persists, the fag now in the corner of his mouth, dropping ash onto old curtains, Mum’s favourites, the ones she’d thought were classy.

“No. Please go away.”

“Suit yourself. No harm in asking eh?” The man walks off, shoulders hunched in his tatty bomber jacket that has Mickey Mouse embossed on the back. He probably found that in a skip.

I glance back at our house. In the dimming light I think I see a shadow of him move across the bedroom window upstairs. Perhaps he does care a bit, maybe he did once, but he’s gone now. It’s finally starting to rain, not heavy, but each drop leaves a cold circle on my bare leg warning of a deluge to come. I shall have to go inside. I shall have to give in. This all seems so ridiculous now. What point was I trying to make? He hasn’t even noticed. He hasn’t understood. I’ll have to go in and he’ll smile. A smug smile. Now why would I think that? He’s not a smug person. It’s not his fault. It’s nobody’s fault. What will he say then? Nothing. That’s the truth. He’ll say nothing. He’ll bring me a cup of tea, we’ll watch TV in silence, and we’ll go on as before and never talk about my sadness or his or why I’m so angry that I’ll never have a chance to leave my DNA somewhere other than on old drawer handles.

It doesn’t matter now.

I start to ease myself out of the deep well of Dad’s chair. I feel stiff. I’ve used muscles I never knew I had, heaving all this junk around. As I stand on the cushion, get my balance, look for a spot on the cold metal lip of the skip to haul myself out, our front door opens again. My old bureau is thrust out of it, end on, then it is followed by him, pushing it from behind. I say my bureau, but in fact it belonged to his father, who gave it to him. We weren’t long married, and as we didn’t have a car and couldn’t afford a van, he dragged it across three streets by himself. He wanted to surprise me because I didn’t have a desk for marking the schoolwork. When he’d finally got it into our hall, he

somehow managed to climb inside the desk and pull down the roll top lid, laying there in foetal position until I got in from work. When I did and he tried to jump out, he found it wouldn't open and had to rap from inside on the roll-top, scaring me to half to death. We laughed so much, doubled up in the hall and the memory now almost makes me smile, but I don't.

"What are you doing?" I call out.

He's moved round the other side of the bureau now, dragging it backwards, it's heavy, and he's leaning at an angle pulling, like a rower in a race.

"I'm... clearing...dead wood... too," he gasps.

"But... I don't want to get rid of that."

"Why not?" He's almost at the garden gate and stops, out of breath, and leans on the bureau, looking at me, as I stand upright on Dad's chair, trying to balance myself.

"Because...." I'm floundering here. "Because... well... there's no more room in the skip."

"There will be if you get out." He leaves the bureau then and approaches the skip, holding out one hand towards me. "Come on now," he says so gently that tears start to tickle the back of my eyes.

I keep one foot on the chair and place the other on the edge of the skip and lean forward to take his hand.

"Steady," he says like I'm stepping from a moving boat. The rain has made the edge of the skip slippy and as I remove my other foot I stumble slightly, so he has to half-catch me and holds me. It feels safe, familiar, warm.

"Now what's all this about?" he mumbles.

“Oh I don’t know...”

“I know.”

“I just wanted to get rid of all this...then it felt like I might as well go on the scrap heap too.”

“Well I’d only have to come and recycle you.”

I smile whilst the tears fall.

“Help me get this desk in the skip then,” he says nodding towards it.

“No. I don’t want to lose that.”

“Then help me get it back inside.”

Together we do, and collapse in the hall, almost laughing, but not as much as the last time.

“What shall we do about all that other stuff?” he says. “It’ll all have gone by morning, if we leave it there.”

“Good. And with it all the unhappy memories.” And I touch wood. The wood of the old bureau.

He smiles and goes and puts the kettle on.

(1900words)