

DAD

1965

It was a four-mile drive from Joe's boarding school to his home and it always struck him as strange that he was not allowed to attend as a dayboy. It would have saved his parents money and given him a more integrated existence. As it was, he lived two separate lives in the same place. In term time, he was a member of an elite institution that barred him from contact with the locals; in the holidays, a local who was unapproachable because he went to an elite institution. When school broke up, friends scattered across England and being at home meant being alone – since his three older brothers regarded him as an unwelcome hanger-on and his sister was a girl. He developed an air of self-sufficiency and his mother never tired of telling friends how good he was at amusing himself. She did not question this isolation but was thankful that one of her children was growing up to be a self-contained adult. He did not plague her with cries of 'We're bored Mum!' as his brothers did, nor threaten her sense of social position like his sister who hobnobbed with the local children that Joe – constrained by the straitjacket of self-containment and the prejudices of private education – could only watch from a window and envy.

He sat in the car staring at the road. His housemaster, Mr Castle, a man of fifty with a puffy red face and air of offended stubbornness, drove in silence.

The news had been broken an hour ago.

"Could I see you for a moment, Joe?"

Joe was changing for rugger and had pulled on a shirt.

"Yes, sir."

Mr Castle had taken his hand, led him through to the private side – the part of the house reserved for the housemaster and his wife – and showed him into a study.

"Sit down, Joe."

Joe chose a dining chair in front of the desk. Mr Castle crossed to the window, peered out at the wintry landscape and then turned.

"Joe, your father died an hour ago. I'm sorry."

Joe had clenched his fists and tucked his feet round the legs of the chair until the wood dug into his ankles.

"I'm not good at telling people these things. But if you want to talk...?"

Joe cleared his throat. He could see Mr Castle was embarrassed.

"I'll manage, sir."

Relief had spread across the housemaster's face.

"Well done. Let me know when you're ready and I'll pop you home."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Only now sitting in the car did it strike him as odd that he had not felt sad or tearful. Was he too used to watching the world from a window? Too detached to feel grief at the loss of his father? Or had his father been too distant, too controlling of his own emotions to share them with Joe? Perhaps there was no loss to grieve, no love to miss.

The car drew up outside a Queen Anne house in a quiet village street.

"I won't come in," said Mr Castle. "Convey my condolences to your mother."

He patted Joe on the knee.

"Chin up"

"Thank you, sir."

Joe climbed out of the car and closed the door carefully behind him. The car drove off. He stood in front of the wrought iron gates resenting this disruption to his well-ordered school life. He didn't want to deal with death, didn't know how to deal with death. He mounted the steps to the door and rang the bell. His second eldest brother Michael, an officer in a cavalry regiment, appeared in a dark suit and tie.

"Joe, old boy – come on in. I'm off to the pub for a bottle of whisky."

He clapped his youngest brother on the shoulder and ran down the steps, leaving Joe alone in the hallway. His third brother, Philip, appeared from the drawing room with a glass of beer. Joe saw no trace of sadness on his face, just a blank expression. Philip had helped nurse their father in the last stages of illness and it showed in the empty eyes.

"Mum's in there," he said pointing to a door behind him. "She'd like to see you."

The drawing room door was open, a fire burning in the grate. His mother sat on the floor slumped against her dead husband's armchair; hands clutching a glass of whisky, head thrown back, mouth trembling. Her eyes, red rimmed and wide open, stared at Joe in the doorway. Stared and appealed.

Joe ran across the room, threw himself to the floor and hugged her.

He cried. She cried.

"I'm so sorry," he kept repeating.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed and Anthony, Joe's eldest brother who had been in the room all the time, came over and put a hand on Joe's shoulder.

"Come on, Joe, there's a good chap."

Joe felt the flow of tears blocked. Why shouldn't he cry? He turned back to his mother, but she too had put on a brave face.

"I'm alright, darling. Don't bother to see the body – if you're upset."

The body. His father. In the midst of his mother's grief, Joe had forgotten his father. That quiet man killed by sclerosis, his arteries clogged forever. His father. Dad. Dead.