

THE LITTLE GREY CHAIR

A short story

By

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The child arrived three years ago. I attended the birth, but was not of much use. The event reminded me of my insignificance – it was an act of creation I could not compete with, a blank page that required no rewrites or editing. The mother and I separated within three months. Not that we had ever lived together. No. We merely had a final row, our newborn child screaming in the background, and declared the relationship dead – for his sake, for our sake.

I was alone, father of a baby boy.

I continued to see him every fortnight. Driving up and down the motorway between his mother's city and mine. Baby asleep, the to and fro an extension of the womb, the engine's roar an echo of circulating fluids. He rarely woke, though always cried when lifted out at the end of the return journey. To begin with, he sat in a rear facing baby chair on the front seat. So I could see him and he could see me. Later, at six months, he was banished to the back. No longer an equal, but a new boy at the start of school – no longer a master of the universe newly arrived from outer space

Humans regress after birth. They lose their old person's wisdom, the connection with that timeless place from which they have come and to which they will return. The surprised, inquiring look – asking why and by whom they have been summoned – gives way to the twinkle and trust of nappy adverts. This, they decide, is more appropriate for adults, a more effective way of obtaining food, changes and cuddles; a way of switching off that inbuilt glimpse of eternity until it is required again at the end of act three.

Once, early on, when the omniscient stare was still in place and we were almost killed by a Hungarian truck on the outskirts of my son's native town, I glimpsed relief in his eyes. 'Phew!' they seemed to say, 'only a short visit to this strange world of physical needs and disconcerting loneliness after all. Now back to eternal peace and the soothing absence of competition.' But just in time the dead-tired Magyar recalled he was amongst left-driving Anglo-Saxons and, swerving to avoid death, preserved us for life. Perhaps it was then that my child decided to opt for blind trust in me. Certainly, it was the next day that I bought him a rear-seat chair – grey and high-backed, capable of holding him safe and sound even if dad expired.

I looked at it now in my rear view mirror – the little grey chair with its three-way clip for securing straps around the waist and through the legs. It was empty and I missed the smiling face. I was in a queue on the dock at Hull. Waiting to enter the jaws of a ferry that would carry me from an island of left drivers to a mainland that Napoleon had decreed would always keep right.

I missed the smiling face, but was glad to be alone. I preferred watching the waves of other people's lives at a distance. With a child you were sucked into the sea, swimming to keep your head above water with no time to climb out, dry off and sit in the dunes. After time with my son, I slept well – the healthy tiredness of parenthood that is quite different to the world-weariness of a watcher. But I wasn't a swimmer – the odd dip, yes, but not a long-distance crawl through the turbulence of life. I was a landlubber, born to sleep badly and ask questions – a beachcomber ranting in the wind, irrelevant to swimmers, except for the odd word of wisdom in bad weather.

"Rotterdam, sir?"

A man was tapping on my window. The cars in front had disappeared. I sped across the dock and entered the bowels of the boat – it hadn't been the jaws after all. Inside, a man in an orange jacket performed a ballet of beckons, enchanting me closer to the car in front. Then, when I'd all but hit it, the flat of his gloved hand and a repositioning pirouette to the car behind.

I turned off the ignition. Teenage girls from the Audi that I had almost hit leant on my car as their father extracted cases. I didn't mind. They could park their buttocks on my bonnet if they wished. It was filthy and would take revenge on their pristine shorts. I grabbed my shoulder bag, climbed out of the car and squeezed past the mother, who was checking make-up in a wing mirror. '*Entschuldigung*' she said. I smiled, slipped through door number three and up to the safety of my single-occupancy cabin on blue deck.

After arrival in Rotterdam, I headed for Germany. This was my first holiday alone since the birth and I had no fixed plan – Dad's road movie of recovery, a chance to savour solitude. I spent one night between crisp sheets above the Rhine, a second in a motel near Freiburg and then decided to push on to the sun of Tuscany. But after crossing into Switzerland, something made me turn off. Maybe it was mid-morning tiredness, maybe the thought of that long tunnel through the Alps, but whatever it was, I found myself drawing up in front of a small hotel in a village south of Basle and booking in for the night.

That afternoon, I struck out up the nearest hill. The sun shone and the cowbells tinkled. After an hour's walk, I came to a signpost: in one direction lay the summit complete with 'historic tower' – in the other, *Deutschland*. I settled for the summit. I wanted to look down on the world. I wanted to recapture the way I had felt before my child was born. I walked quickly, pushing myself, feeling the muscles of my legs strain with each step upwards.

Reaching a clearing in the trees, I stopped and glanced down at the village. The tiny houses vibrated in the haze. My legs shook, my heart palpitated. I felt frightened.

Don't panic.

Alone on a Swiss hillside...

Calm down.

Even if I shouted, no one would hear...

Don't panic. Calm down. You're all right. If your child were here, you wouldn't panic. You wouldn't say I'm feeling faint and fall off the side of a hill. You'd hold the child to stop the child falling off.

Relax! It's all right!

I grabbed the branch of an oak tree and sat down. The attack was passing. I'd merely forgotten that I hated heights. I turned and looked at the rock behind me – at the trees growing above and below – and reasserted my own rootedness, my own position in reality. My vision steadied and, standing up, I climbed on towards the summit, proud of my victory over fear.

The tower was an overgrown ruin from the sixteenth century. Seldom visited, judging by the undergrowth and absence of litter. Not a tourist attraction, but somewhere historians or lovers from the village might seek out. I walked inside. A plan explained that it had once been part of a fortress guarding the pass from Basel. I climbed to the top and found a magnificent view of the Rhine. Defenders of the canton would have had ample warning. I sat down, back to stonewalling, feet lodged in crumbling ramparts. I had been shaken by the panic attack and, as I stared out at distant hills and a ribbon of motorway below, was only saved from further giddiness by the flatness of the plateau surrounding the ruin.

Is this what I want? I wondered. Detachment? A sense of being above it all? A splendid but defensive view of the world that warns me of impending disruption, but keeps me apart from life. Is that what I want? To be invisible? Out of reach? Pretending not to exist? And the attack? What if I *had* fainted? I'd have needed other people then.

I laughed out loud. Why worry? I hadn't fainted and now felt better. The attack could have happened to anyone after two days driving and little sleep. Stop worrying. I hadn't come on holiday to analyse myself. I'd come to enjoy my own company and revel in the contemplation of nature both human and otherwise – to be a footloose and fancy free observer of this and that, no longer the fog-brained father of the last three years. I stood up and yelled 'Yippee!' at the top of my voice. The sound echoed from hilltop to hilltop, until, near the border, it stopped and floated off down the Rhine to find England and a similar cry of joy from my childhood.

That evening, staring at the map, I decided to stay on. I was not going to be dissuaded from further exploration by one attack of vertigo, and rushing on to Italy seemed greedy. I had not yet savoured and digested this corner of Europe and hurtling through the Alps to Tuscan olive groves seemed philistine

and excessive. I would stay and wander: discover what was in these valleys as they dipped and climbed to the mountains behind; gradually uncover secrets, instead of ripping them apart on a motorway.

I went to sleep with the duck down duvet wrapped around me like the hills, my body touched by the softness of life, my questioning mind settled and soothed by sleep – the peace of solitude not the anguish of loneliness.

Before leaving the village, I bought fruit from a supermarket and maps from a bookshop. The owner, a dark-haired *Schwitser* with sharp eyes and thickset limbs, said footpaths were well marked, but warned me not to be taken in by the apparent smallness of the hills. They were higher than they seemed and distances deceptive. He tried to sell me a compass, but I said my sense of direction was good. A whistle? I smiled, thinking of yesterday's exultant cry. Had anyone heard that? But I bought it. I didn't want to offend.

Fifteen miles east of my village, I parked the car down a track, leaving only the grey child seat in view. No one would steal that. I blew it a kiss and wished my child well. He was in Spain with his mother, no doubt unaware of his father a thousand miles to the East – he only missed me for a few hours after I'd gone. I felt a pang of regret that he was not here now, but it passed and without turning I strode away from car and chair.

After an hour's walk up a wooded slope, I emerged on to a cultivated plateau. I followed a track past farmhouses and plots of maize and wheat, until I reached a road that led to a village visible at the bottom of the valley. Buzzards soared, floating on pockets of air and swooping on field mice that had strayed too far from family and friends. The only car I met was an old Buick. I waved, but the driver remained impassive, presuming I was mad, a tourist, or both. Occasionally dogs barked and ran to gates, daring me to come in, but unlike in parts of England they were not free to ambush walkers, and their bared teeth failed to unsettle my mood of tranquil observation.

In the village, I stopped at a restaurant and drank mineral water. A car with Dutch number plates had parked outside, but there was no sign of its occupants. I ate a cheese roll and plate of salad and consulted my map. The walk so far had been pleasant but tame. I felt safer with civilisation in sight, but today wanted to be more adventurous. After all, there was no child to limit what I could do and I was feeling at one with the world. I plotted a circular route back to the car. Up and across one of the larger hills with – according to contour lines on the map – a steep drop on the far side and a zigzagging footpath down to the track where my car was parked. It was longer than any walk I'd done in the last three years, but I was fit and could always stop and rest.

I paid the sad-eyed girl behind the bar and set off again.

As I passed the Dutch car, I noticed stickers from Scotland and the English Lake District stuck on a rear window. Why do people want others to know where they've been, I wondered? In the back of the car was an orange child seat. I walked on, but, before leaving the village, stopped in the middle of the road and stared back at the car. A feeling of emptiness welled up in my chest. I missed him. I missed my boy. Enormously. Frighteningly. I wanted him here, his hand in mine, impatiently pulling and squeezing, 'Come on Dad!' I felt tears prick my eyes and was glad when the returning Buick screeched to a halt and hooted. I waved at the man again. I *was* a tourist and I *was* mad. I was standing in the middle of the road.

I must have been walking for a couple of hours, when the path came to a sudden end.

The last signpost, twenty minutes earlier, had indicated this way to the summit, and I had been ascending steadily, but the tree cover was dense and I had no idea whether I was near the top or not. I wondered what to do. I could retrace my steps to the last crossroads and take the valley route to my car or presume that the footpath I was on – clearly marked on the map – had become overgrown and would re-emerge in due course.

I glanced at my watch. 2.30 p.m. According to the map, the summit route was shorter than the valley route and, as I had opted for something less tame and more adventurous on this leg of my walk, I pressed on.

The sense of not knowing exactly where I was, proved exhilarating. The lack of a clear path appealed to the pioneer in me. I ascended with long strides, crushing dead leaves and fallen twigs underfoot, suntanned arms brushing aside ferns and branches. I would soon find a clue to my whereabouts, and my good sense of direction would keep me moving towards the summit. It was not cold, there was no mist and I had a bottle of Evian in my rucksack – a risk-free adventure that I would enjoy recounting to my son. Maybe we could come here again, when he was older, and walk the same route. He was a fearless boy and enjoyed exploring new ground.

Half an hour later, my mood changed. My legs were tiring from the continuous climb and the backs of my hands were scratched and bleeding. I was out of breath and the steepness of the incline meant that my feet slipped and I had to use my hands to steady myself. I could not see through the wall of trees around me and there was no sign of a path.

Then, just as I was wondering whether to cut back down to the valley, the ground flattened out, the trees thinned and, as with the hill yesterday, I emerged on to a plateau. No tower, no sign of civilization, but definitely the summit.

I stopped to get my bearings. Where was the sun? I looked up through the trees, but could see only a high covering of cloud between swaying beech leaves. I became aware of the pulsing of my heart. Had I climbed too quickly? I scrutinised the clearing for a gap between the trees that might indicate a path. But the undergrowth was thick and pristine, untouched since the start of summer.

There was a scuffling noise behind a Scotch pine. I tensed. A thrashing of leaves and then a thud, as something warm, wet and bloody landed at my feet. I jumped and turned just as a whirl of wings hit my face and a screeching call broke the silence of the hilltop.

I screamed.

I was three.

The dark hen house. Eggs for father's tea.

The broody hen. Into my face. Wings flapping.

Get away! Get away!

I collapsed on the ground breathing heavily, face buried in damp moss.

After a moment, I rolled over and stared up at the receding wings. My hand touched the still-warm body of a field mouse. I shuddered. A buzzard had dropped its prey and was desperate to escape, terrified like me.

"It's only a bird, dad," my son would have said.

But he wasn't there.

I lay still, heart thumping. I must get back to the car. I needed something that was mine around me, an intimate space that reflected my identity. I felt too insignificant here. Like a child, but with all the awareness of an adult. Alone on a mountain top. Lost. No one knowing I am here. No parent to come looking for me. No duck down duvet.

I stood up and leant against a tree for security. I took several deep breaths and then, picking what felt like the right direction, set off into the undergrowth.

I began to calm down. As long as I was walking, I felt all right. As long as I believed that each step was bringing me nearer to the car and my son's grey chair, my legs kept moving. I was starting to descend now, calf muscles jarring as they put on the brakes. The trees were thick, but the undergrowth thinner. I made a list of things to think of to stop me thinking of my predicament: work, my son, my holiday, my son, Italy, my son.

My son. My son. My son.

Gradually the image of his face and body dominated. I could hear him pattering along beside me, running on ahead to check the path, yelling back news of important discoveries, chiding me for my slowness.

Then he was gone.

Without warning the trees cleared and the ground disappeared. A wave of nausea swept up from my stomach. My chest constricted. I couldn't breathe. I stood on the edge of a sheer drop – straight ahead another hill, but between it and me a chasm, a pitted sheer rock face plunging down to the valley floor. Empty space dropping like a roller coaster and sweeping up the hill beyond only to slip back down, tear across the valley floor and rise up again – to hit me.

It took my breath away. I couldn't breathe.

I tried inhaling, but my chest was too tight. I stared at the hill opposite, but my eyes were drawn to the chasm. I tried to find my car, but it was too far away, and the thought of how far away it was, how high I had climbed, made me feel worse.

It was too much.

Too much space, nothing to hold on to, nothing to compare myself with – nothing to put the enormity of the drop in perspective.

But I had to breathe. I thought of running back into the woods. No. There was the fear of getting lost – and the buzzard. I peered over the edge searching for the zigzag path, but I was too far off course. I tried to draw in air, but my lungs remained clamped. I reached for the bottle of water, but the lack of air weakened my muscles and I couldn't get the rucksack off my back. I slumped to the ground. Relax and swallow. Relax and swallow. I tried to bring my son back: *him* panicking, not me, *me* calming *him* down. But it didn't work. He'd gone over the edge. Disappeared. He wasn't there.

I began to shake – violent, involuntary movements. How long had I not been breathing? It seemed like minutes. The pain in my chest spread. Down my arm, my left arm. I reached for my throat to ease the constriction.

No help.

Then I felt the whistle. I'd put it round my neck to please the man.

I grabbed it.

The valley floor swam up towards me and then dropped back again at sickening speed. If I blew once, he would hear me. The old wise man from eternity would hear me. I lifted it to my lips and blew – as hard as I could, willing my lungs to release air. A piercing note shot out across the valley to the hill beyond, and bounced back – back and forth, to and fro, forth and back.

Help me! Help me! Help me!

And then the pain was too much, the distance too great. Blackness covered my eyes and I was falling, falling in darkness. Pitch darkness sucking me inwards towards an even darker hole. Too small, too small, I screamed. But I was shrinking, receding, returning – child, baby, nothing.

I heard a sound like the fast breathing of a small animal.

I opened my eyes.

A red face was peering at me.

"*Papa dood!*" it kept saying.

I was on my back.

I could see only the face – which I now saw to be that of a child – and the sky.

"*Papa dood!*" the face repeated.

I turned my head and saw a man bent over a camping stove. Without turning, he answered the child:

"*Papa niet dood. Papa slaapt.*"

Swiss-German, I thought.

The child smiled and held out a fir cone to me – a boy, no more than eighteen months, with blonde hair and blue eyes. I smiled and reached out my left hand.

But a sharp pain made me cry out.

"*Papa wakker! Papa wakker!*" called the child, backing off towards the man.

The man picked up a mug warming on the stove and came over.

"Are you alright?" he asked in High German.

"Yes" I replied.

"Are you German? Swiss?"

"English" I said, continuing to talk in German

"We talk English then", he said. "I'm Dutch – Jan. This is my son – Sander."

"Simon" I said.

They stood side by side staring down at me. I smiled.

"Quite a fall" said Jan. "We were on the path, just below the summit. We heard a whistle. I thought it was a bird. But then a fall of rocks – followed by you. It wasn't far, but you landed hard. Here, drink this."

He held the back of my head and put the cup to my lips.

Warm milk and brandy.

"Must have tripped," I said. "I was lost".

"Like us," laughed the man.

I rolled on to my other side and saw the chasm stretched out below. But somehow, with the man and child near, I no longer felt frightened. I wasn't alone. It couldn't swallow me up. I turned and looked at the boy.

What was he doing here, I wondered, high up on a Swiss hilltop?

"He always comes," said Jan, sensing my concern. "Keeps me company. I carry him in a back pack."

"You're the Dutch hill climber, then," I said. "You go to Britain to climb."

"Yes," laughed Jan. "How did you know?"

"I saw your car, the stickers."

"Yes" Jan smiled. "Sander likes to stick them on. More?"

After emptying the cup, I managed to stand up. And, with me leaning on Jan's arm and Sander steering his father's head from behind, we managed to make our way down the zigzag path and along the valley to my car. We didn't talk much, but I felt safe and warm.

When Jan saw the grey chair, he glanced at me.

"You have a child?"

"Yes. He's in Spain with his mother."

"Separated?"

"Yes. But I see him every fortnight."

"It must be difficult."

"It is. But I like being alone."

"On mountain tops," joked Jan.

"Yes," I said.

Jan fitted Sander into the grey chair, talking to him in Dutch as he did so. I could understand the odd word, but my mind was elsewhere – with my own child.

I would stay a few more days and then drive back – stop for a stroll by the Rhine, maybe a walk along the canals in Holland. I would read books, keep my feet on the ground, not go searching for adventure in the clouds. Then, when I reached England, I'd drive to the airport and meet my son. He'd be surprised, but run and hug me.

"Can I stay with Daddy?" he'd say.

The mother would be cross that I hadn't stuck to our plan.

"Why are you back so early?" she'd ask.

But she'd be relieved to have a few extra days to herself.

And then it would be me strapping my child into the little grey chair, and bowling up the motorway as we did every fortnight.

We might even go to the sea. I might be brave and swim.

"Shall I drive?"

Jan stood by the passenger door watching me. I smiled and climbed into the driver's seat.

"No, no. I'm fine now."