

The Shoes with No Soul

“Another thing about you is,” says Mike. “*You* only ever get in touch when you want something.” We’re sitting in the café surrounded by platefuls of egg and chips. He’s eating and I’m pushing mine about. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Does that mean that you won’t come with me?” I say, prodding a chip.

“I’d have to take the day off work.” He stares at his knife, suddenly perplexed by the yellow coloured, gluey stuff smeared around the tip. Nothing makes sense to Mike, least of all food.

“Who else can I ask? You’re my only real friend,” I say, and it occurs to me that this might be true.

“Am I?” he says moodily and abandons the knife. “Don’t you think she’ll find it a bit odd?”

“No, not really,” I say, because I know what’s coming.

“But I’ve never even met your mother, so if I go to her funeral...”

“If you like,” I say, crashing my plate into his so that he’ll look at me. “We could turn it into a bit of a holiday? It’s by the sea. Well, near enough. We could go to the beach.”

He gazes at me, appalled. It makes him appear older somehow.

“It’s a *funeral!*” He says, through clenched teeth.

I sit back, resigned. “Well,” I say bitterly. “We can’t all be close to our mothers, can we?”

He takes this to mean the opposite; an admission of grief disguised as acrimony and places the palm of my hand on his forearm. We sit like this for a while, until I feel uncomfortable, worried that someone I know will see us. That his misunderstanding will be misunderstood.

“Never mind,” I say getting up. “It’s probably better if I go on my own anyway.”

“Wait a minute! It’s too far to travel in one day, isn’t it? We’d have to stay over - wouldn’t we?” he adds, hopefully.

No-one knows about Mike. He’s my secret. We meet at the train station where the fumes and the fog congeal and make it hard for us to speak. I buy bags of crisps and cans of Coke for the journey and then we wait, in a forlorn kind of silence, on the platform. It’s only when we’re sitting opposite each other and the carriage has begun to sway that we talk.

“I’ve bought a suit with me for tomorrow,” says Mike. “It’s the one I wore for my dad.”

“A funeral suit. That’s nice,” I smile at him.

“I don’t want to let you down,” he says, like it could ever be that simple.

“You’ll be fine,” I say confidently.

We’re quiet for a bit and then Mike gets worried. He thinks being quiet is unhelpful for me under the current circumstances.

“It’s hard to believe that both Coke *and* crisps are bad for you, isn’t it?” he says.

By the time we're rattling through Somerset I've remembered almost everything. I glance across at Mike, wondering where to begin with him. He is staring out of the window, mesmerised by the trees rushing past the window and the vibrating carriage with its own deafening rhythm. My family often went on train journeys like this. I was the baby, eleven years younger than my sister, so I sat in the corner with crayons and a colour-by-numbers book. The journeys were long and at the end of it, relatives waited on the draughty platforms, snatching our cases from us before we'd even stepped off the train. Back then the holidays were full of tinned cling peaches and skipping ropes and, as a family, we took everything in our stride. If the sun was shining we put our shorts on, the rest of the time we just got on with it. When life became less simple, the holidays vanished and the train journeys went the same way.

Really, what I want to say to Mike is 'Let's get off at the next stop and go and make something of ourselves' but then he speaks first and it's too late.

"What does your father think of me?"

"He doesn't know about you," I say. "But believe me, he'll just be delighted that you're not a woman."

Mike laughs. He thinks it's a joke. "He sounds great!" he says, and offers me a sip of his Coke.

I feel the sugary burn in my nose as I drink it too quickly. Perhaps it's me, perhaps it's my fault we all got to a place where we couldn't think straight anymore.

The house has a smashed look about it, as if someone has run around with a giant hammer and tried to obliterate everything.

“Tracy?”

It’s my father’s voice I hear echoing faintly down the stairs, but my sister who steps silently into the hallway.

“Hello Tracy,” she says and moves towards me, pushing my head into her shoulder. I stay there for a while, trapped in the alcove of her collarbone, until my face becomes wet and she releases me.

“I’m Mike,” says Mike.

“Hello,” says Ruth.

Ruth is my sister. What else can I say? We look alike, even though that’s not possible. Even today, even dressed in her solicitor’s uniform and me looking the way I do, there’s a resemblance. Ruth has a husband as well as a job. But before she started down that path, before Alan hapless *and* hopeless walked into her life, she was full of – dreams or desire maybe – something like that.

“This is my sister, Ruth,” I say to Mike.

“I can tell!” Mike says enthusiastically. Then he changes gear, clears his throat and says how sorry he is. He says he knows how we’re feeling and I swear I see a tear in the corner of his eye as he struggles to think of another word for ‘died’. In the end he says ‘passed’ as if he’s an American.

Plans have been made. Tonight we’re eating Chinese food at my mother’s favourite restaurant. She loved Lemon chicken and egg fried rice, with a portion of seaweed on the side. We all order it, except for Mike who is bewildered by all the different pages, the set menus, the vegetarian options. “What is *beancurd*?” he asks more than once. In the end he settles for beef in black bean sauce, even though he’s

faintly panicked by what a black bean might be. He compensates by pretending he can cope with chopsticks. We've always been a knife and fork sort of family, no fingers and definitely no wooden sticks, but even without that we're already in two camps. Me, my sister Ruth and my recently widowed father. And then Mike. I realise that this is why I invited him, so that I wouldn't be the one on the outside for once. So that we could unite against someone.

"How bitter and heartless we all were," I think I say, but no-one's listening. They're eating noisily, no longer sure where their mouths are or which direction the fork is going and caring less. Even Mike, who's using one chopstick to lever his beef onto his fork, looks tear stained. In the past, eating here was always an excuse to have a rant and we'd each take our turn; now we're speechless.

"So," says Mike, eventually, glancing between Ruth and me like we're a tennis match. "Why the big gap between you two?"

"I was an afterthought," I say, quickly.

"And nothing wrong with that!" says Ruth, and taps my father's glass with hers.

When he doesn't respond, she taps it again, harder. He looks at her and knows that he is lost. This wasn't a good idea. He's ripped into a million different pieces and we're expecting him to eat Lemon Chicken. As if he can swallow.

When we were children, Ruth and I, she pretended I was her baby. For years I thought *this* was the family secret, the one we tiptoed around. I thought they would tell me when I had a child of my own and we'd all cry with the relief of me knowing the truth

at last. What actually happened was that my mother found Anita in bed with me one morning and, in the shock and heat of the moment, said that I wasn't hers. I find myself telling Mike this as we drink whisky in the early hours of the morning. Mike, being Mike, is more concerned with the nuts and bolts of the situation. Like why was Anita hiding at the bottom of my bed?

"She wasn't hiding," I say, patiently. "*That* was the problem. She'd been invited."

"Well," he says, bursting with something. "Well!"

In the morning there is nothing else to do but lie here and listen. The house reverberates with getting up noises; running water, the radio low and serious-sounding, the creak of the third stair from the bottom and the steady crash, bang, wallop of the kitchen – noises so familiar they make my chest tighten.

We decide to eat boiled eggs for breakfast. We convince ourselves that the eggs will line our stomachs and somehow make the day easier to get through.

"There's *nothing* worse than your stomach rumbling..." declares Ruth and then catches my father's eye and shuts up.

Mike is making a crazy-paving type mess of his shell with no intention of actually eating anything. He feels sick. We all feel sick. It doesn't help when he starts to pick bits from the skin of the egg with fingers too clumsy to cope. I leap out of my chair and start clearing the table.

"What are we having then? Ham? Cheese? Ham *and* cheese? Salmon?" I sound like Ruth. I sound like the sandwich-maker from hell.

“I’ll do them,” says Ruth, tidying her end of the table. “You know what you’re like.”

After the sandwiches come the cakes. Slices of Battenberg and Victoria Sponge. Date and Walnut, which Ruth insists on cutting into fingers and buttering, and a jaundiced looking Maderia cake.

“Mum’s favourite,” Ruth insists.

I didn’t know that.

In the end, the dining table is crammed with plates of this and that, all there for a reason. Cheese and pineapple on sticks for those that have eaten and wedges of pork pie for those who haven’t

“Looks nice. Very nice,” says my father, and helps himself to a crisp while Ruth straightens his tie.

Afterwards, at the tail end of the never-ending day, Ruth tells me that she’s getting a divorce. Alan, her husband, is even more useless than he was before and now he gambles as well. Because she’s given me that piece of information she thinks I owe her one.

“It was good of you... not to bring Anita?” she says, as if I don’t know that it’s a question not a thank you.

It’s gone well. Today, of all days, we have behaved. We’ve hugged complete strangers and then wept all over their smart black clothes. We’ve laughed hysterically with neighbours we haven’t seen for years and exchanged addresses with relatives we will never see again. We’ve handed around plates of most of the things you can hold between your finger and thumb and poured three cases of wine down people’s throats.

We've behaved like daughters, even if the sister-thing is still a bit beyond us. And now Ruth wants to unpick all of it. She wants us back where we were all those years ago, one hand murderously around my throat and a fist swinging across my face.

"Who *was* Anita?" says Mike.

If she was here now she would see me sitting up, not drunk enough to drink properly yet. Or to lie down. But here, in the place where we tried so hard to belong. What a joke.

"Good question!" Ruth shrieks, the day, the divorce and the death of our mother finally getting the better of her. "Who the bloody hell was *she*?" she shouts, loud enough for the neighbours who are safely back in their houses to hear. Loud enough for Mike to begin to make sense of everything.

In the morning, with everything left unsaid from the night before, we tread softly around each other. If all else fails, I used to think, there's always the way we were. We can fall back on that.

When we're about to leave the house, my father calls me up to their room. His room. I sit on the edge of the bed and wait while he pokes around in a drawer. I know what he's doing. He's getting ready to give me a brooch. Brooches are good, you can keep them in a box and look at them occasionally. And if you forget how painful it all once was, there's always the pin to remind you. Only, when he turns around, it's not a brooch in his hand, it's a large manila envelope.

"We always said this is when we would do this, so," he sits down beside me and lays the envelope down between us. "There it is then."

We're quiet for a while and I think about when I lived here. When I lived in this house I didn't need a certificate to remind myself of who I was. I didn't need the contents of a brown envelope to work out whose nose I've inherited or which hereditary illnesses might be lying in wait for me.

"I'm not with Anita anymore," I say, instead of all the things I meant to say. "She left me."

"*Well done!*" he says, beaming, as if I've confessed to a first class honours degree from somewhere.

"Thanks," I say, staring at the envelope.

When we say goodbye, I feel the soft leather of his cheek against mine.

Ruth looks awful, but it doesn't stop her driving us to the station.

"Don't be a stranger," she says, as if I am a stranger.

She knows all about the manila envelope. She's always known about it. When I arrived; the story goes that she was given the job of naming me. Out of spite, she called me Tracy.

"Do you need anything? Money?" she calls, waving a gloved hand as the train pulls away.

I shake my head and slam the window shut.

"Bit like the Queen, your sister, isn't she?" says Mike as I sit down. "The gloves and everything," he adds, when I look doubtful.

"More like Princess Margaret."

"That's it!" he says excitedly, as if I meant it.

And then it's over. We sit there, silent and sad, while the weight of yesterday collapses on top of us. I fold my arms across the table and put my head down. With my eyes closed I can see myself, looking like a stranger but wearing my mother's smile.

Excerpt from Other Useful Numbers, to be published by Parthian in February 2008.

© Sarah Broughton