Ferns of Ice

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For our Michael – all the things I never got round to telling you. Love, Mam.

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Ferns of ice on the inside of the glass

Ferns of ice on the inside of the glass

It's the smell that comes back to me first, more than owt else. Coal dust and wet washing, hung up over the fire because it never dried outside, not really, not in Ollerton. And me dad's hands – always black round the nails, however hard he scrubbed.

I must've been ever so small. Can't tell you the year, duck, but I know I were sat on the rug, and it were cold enough that the window had them ferns of ice on the inside of the glass. Our David were there, an' all – he'd have been about four, so under me mam's feet as

usual. Me mam, Nora, were stood over by the range, not sat down. She never really sat down in them days.

And me dad were on the rug with me. That were the unusual bit, now I think on it. He weren't one for sitting about. His coat still had his snap tin in the pocket, so he mustn't have long been in from a shift. Didn't say much, me dad. Just sat there and let me lean on him while I watched them ferns.

That's the sort of thing you don't think means owt at the time.

I don't know as it says owt, not really – he were just tired, weren't he, and I were there. That's all it were, most like. But since you're asking, I suppose it says he could be soft when nobody were watching to see it. He weren't a man who told you what you meant to him. Never once heard him say it, not to me, not to me mam, not to our David. You had to catch it sideways – him keeping the last bit of his snap for you without making a thing of it, or sitting still when he'd every reason to be worn out. That were his way of saying it.

I didn't understand that when I were little. Took me years, if I'm honest. Took me having me own bairns, probably, before I twigged that quiet weren't the same as not caring. It were just his way.

Two up, two down

It were one of the colliery houses, so nowt fancy – but it were ours, and that mattered. The front room were only used Sundays, or if the vicar called. Everywhere else were where the living actually happened.

The kitchen were the heart of it. That big black range me mam cooked on and did her piecework by, always warm, even when the rest of the house had a chill on it, which it did, most of the year, being Nottinghamshire and being a colliery house both. The stairs went up steep and narrow, right next to the front door, and you learned quick which ones creaked if you were trying to get past your mam of an evening.

Me and our David shared a room, with a curtain rail across the middle for a bit of privacy that never really worked. I can still hear that house, if I shut me eyes. The range ticking as it cooled at night. Our David's breathing through the curtain. Proper ordinary, but it were home.

Up past the Co-op

He were a quiet sort, me dad, like I say. Face like a man who'd seen plenty and weren't going to make a fuss about any of it. Hands like leather – coal gets right into the cracks of your skin down there, you know, however hard you scrub, it never quite comes out. Forty year down Ollerton pit, started at fourteen, and he never once complained in front of us, not that I heard.

He kept an allotment, up past the Co-op. That were his place, really – more than the house, if I'm honest. He'd go up of an evening even when he'd nowt that needed doing, just to stand in it. Grew beans mostly, and them big dahlias me mam liked in the front room.

I went up with him all the time, when I were little enough that Mam didn't need me for owt else. Five, six, summat like that. He'd not really talk to me up there, not proper talking – he'd just say things like 'hold that,' or 'mind them canes,' and I'd trot about after him doing as I were told. I liked the smell of it best, if I'm honest. Turned earth, and them tomato plants he grew under glass, and his pipe, which he weren't meant to have – me mam didn't like it in the house, so up the allotment were where he'd have it.

There were an old chair up there, just a kitchen chair gone a bit rotten at the legs, and I'd sit on that while he worked. Didn't need entertaining. That were the thing about being up there with me dad – nobody expected you to be owt other than quiet. Which were a novelty, mind, in our house, what with our David always making a racket and me mam wanting help with summat or other.

I think that's maybe why I've always liked a bit of peace and quiet since. Learned it up that allotment, before I ever had a word for it.

He were strict, in his way. You knew not to answer back. But he never once raised a hand to any of us, and there were plenty round here that did. Just a look off him were enough. That's what I remember most, I think. A very quiet sort of steadiness. You always knew where you were with me dad, even though he hardly said owt to tell you.

Me mam's hands

She were a different sort altogether to me dad, put it that way. Never still, never sat. She'd be at the hosiery in the day and then piecework of an evening, sat at the table with bits of stocking under that little lamp, going at it till her eyes must've ached. So when I picture her from back then, it's her hands I remember more than her face, if that

makes sense. Always moving. Sewing, or scrubbing, or seeing to our David, or telling me to get out from under her feet.

She weren't unkind. I don't want you thinking that. It's just – she hadn't the time to be soft, the way me dad could be up his allotment doing nowt in particular. Everything with her had a purpose. Even a cuddle, if you got one, you got it quick, on the way to summat else.

I used to think she didn't have it in her, the soft bit. Took me a long while to understand it were more that she'd had it knocked out of her early, one way or another, and she were making sure it got knocked out of us an' all – for our own good, she'd have said. Whether she were right about that, I still don't rightly know, even now.

I've only ever had bits of it, mind, never the whole picture. She weren't one for telling you her own troubles. But from what I gathered over the years, off me nan and off things she let slip when she didn't mean to: her own mam died young, and Nora were the eldest girl, so she were raised up doing for the little ones near enough from when she were a child herself. No time for softness when you're doing that. You just get on. And then the war, an' all – she'd have been a girl through some of that, rationing and men not coming home and all sorts.

She never sat me down and explained herself. You just watched, and you drew your own conclusions, and mine's always been: she weren't hard because she wanted to be. She were hard because somewhere along the line, hard was what kept a person standing.

Under the table with me colouring

An ordinary day in that house were noisy – not shouting noisy, just business noisy. The wireless on for the news, her machine going, our David crying about summat or other, and you'd to just find your own little space in amongst it all. I used to sit under the table sometimes, with me colouring, just to have a bit that were mine.

Truth is, as a little one, it mostly just felt normal. You don't know owt else, do you, so you don't think 'this house is like this' – it's just the house. It were only looking back, years later, that I could see how tightly wound she were, all the time. At the time it just felt like: you kept out the way when she were doing piecework, and you were glad when she looked up and smiled at you, because it didn't happen that often, so it meant summat when it did.

I don't think I felt unloved, exactly. I think I felt like love were there, but you had to catch it in a gap, same as with me dad – only the gaps with her were narrower.

Nelson

Goose Fair, that'd be the happy one. October time, and me dad took me on me own one year, just the two of us. Rare, that were, him having anyone to himself, what with three of us. He let me have candy floss, which me mam would've had summat to say about before tea, so it were our little secret. And he won us a goldfish on the rifle range – dreadful shot, me dad, missed nearly everything, but the fella running it took pity and let him have one any road.

That fish lived an unreasonably long time, considering. We called it Nelson.

He bought me a toffee apple an' all, on top of the candy floss, which looking back must've cost him summat, on a miner's wage with three bairns. I didn't think on that then, obviously. You don't, when you're little. You just think, this is the best day there's ever been.

I remember feeling grown up, almost, walking round holding his hand and not having to share him with anyone. No our David tugging at him, no me mam calling him for summat. Just me. And what made it special weren't really the fair itself, if I'm honest with you – it were having him to meself. He were a good dad to all three

of us, don't get me wrong, but there weren't ever much room for one-to-one, not in a house like ours.

So that day stuck. Even now, if I smell candy floss at a fair somewhere, it takes me right back – walking back to the bus in the dark, full of candy floss, carrying that fish in a bag of water like it were the finest thing I'd ever owned, and me dad not saying much, same as ever, but holding me other hand the whole way. Didn't need explaining, even then.

The office

Our David were a proper handful. Always into summat. Not naughty, exactly, just loud. Filled a room. Where I were the quiet one, sat under the table with me colouring, he'd be the one you could hear from the yard, always up to some game or other, always wanting to be first at everything.

He looked out for me, mind, in his way – same as our dad, though he'd never have said it soft like that. He'd have thumped anyone who said owt nasty to me at school and called it nothing. That were David all over. Rough at the edges, kind underneath, and he'd never in a hundred years have told you that himself.



He were the one who taught me to whistle, sat on the back step, going at it for what felt like weeks till I got it. Patient with that, if nothing else. He hasn't the patience for much, our David, but he had it for that.

We'd a den an' all – more of an idea than an actual den, if I'm honest, just a gap behind the coalhouse where we reckoned nobody could see us, though I'm sure me mam knew fine well where we were. We called it 'the office.' Don't ask me why. We must've heard it somewhere and thought it sounded important.

We'd sit in there and he'd tell me made-up stories about the coal – that there were a whole world down the pit, under the ground, that the men went to work in every day, full of odd creatures that lived by the seams. There were one he told over and over, about summat he called the Tommyknockers. Little fellas, no bigger than your hand, lived right down by the seams, and they'd knock on the coal face before it were going to fall, to warn the men – but only the good men, mind, the ones who'd been decent to their families. If you'd been a wrong 'un, they'd say nowt, and let it come down on you.

I've since heard tell there's an old miners' story like that from somewhere else entirely, so I don't think our David invented it whole cloth – more like he'd heard a whisper of it off someone at school

or off me dad, and built it up bigger in his own way, the way lads do. But at the time I thought it were entirely his, and I believed every word. Frightened me half to death some nights, and then I couldn't sleep, and he'd get into bother for it.

He'd another one an' all, about a creature made of coal dust that lived in the cut. A sort of black shape you'd see out the corner of your eye and it'd be gone soon as you looked proper. He used that one shameless, purely to stop me going down the cut on me own. Worked an' all. Terrified me for years.

It came out eventually, mind – years later, not as a lad. I must've been twelve or thirteen, moaning to him about summat, and he just laughed and said, 'You never did work out there weren't nowt down that cut, did you.' Bold as brass. No shame in him whatsoever.

I were furious with him for about a day. Properly wound up, thinking of all them years I wouldn't go near the place on me own. And then – I don't know, it turned into summat I were almost proud of him for, if that makes sense. Devious, our David, but devious with a purpose. He weren't trying to be cruel, he were trying to keep his little sister safe, and he'd found a way to do it he thought were funny.

That's David all over. Daft as owt on the surface, but there were always a reason under it, if you looked. I think of that a lot, actually,

now he's getting on himself. He's still like that. Say summat that sounds like nonsense, and there's usually a decent reason buried in it somewhere.

We'd a word for being told off, an' all – 'copped it.' 'You'll cop it if Mam sees that.' Still say it now, if I'm honest, forty year on. Some things just stick, don't they.