

Alex Hopkins

## Last Visit

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He went alone, arriving at 10pm. His mother had always lit the porch when he visited; it was now dark.

He parked the car and entered the house, walking to the lounge, reaching for the light switches. Crystal beads bathed the room in gold.

His mother had died in her armchair. A neighbour had found her body.

5 He stood in the space between her now empty chair and the one that had been his father's and lingered for a moment, the silence falling on him. Then he went into the kitchen, which was cluttered with filthy pans and plates. It was the room he most associated with his mother – her refuge from his father – and it appalled him to see it like this.

10 The drinks cabinet looked untouched since his father's death. His mother had hardly drunk since that awful night of truths and recriminations. Most of the bottles of liquor were unopened and the Scotch was waiting; he poured himself a large glass, gulping at it.

15 He went upstairs, walking past his childhood bedroom; he couldn't bear to go in. Instead, he headed towards his mother's bedroom, but couldn't face that either, so he continued down the dark corridor to the guest bedroom where he stood looking out at the black lawn. Then he redressed, lay down, and prayed for sleep.

He rose at 6am, dizzy with tiredness and, for the first time in years, craved a cigarette.

20 He made a strong coffee before moving into the lounge. And it was then, seeing her chair in the shards of morning light, that it hit him: she was gone. He swayed, as if his feet had been kicked from beneath him and reached for the side of her chair. As the tears came, he closed his eyes, holding his hands out in front of him, reaching for the joy this room had once promised, but then moved them back to his sides, clenched his fists and took a deep breath. He couldn't break. There was too much to do.

25 Clearing the garage was the easiest task to start. He rummaged through boxes of memories, finding objects long forgotten, reminders of his first five years – the years spent with his parents before he was sent to boarding school. He remembered the day his father had delivered the news in a cold, flat voice, not even looking at him. He knew it was his decision to send him away, his cruelty once more crushing his mother.

30 He had lost count of the times he had wished his father dead. Every time the other boarders ripped apart the tuck box<sup>1</sup> his mother had lovingly packed for him, every time they trampled on the currant cake she had baked, every time he had been jeered at on the rugby pitch, every time he had been called fag and pansy and queer and shit stabber, every time he had been spat at, every time he had cried himself to sleep, every time he had been woken at midnight and dragged into the bathroom and kicked and punched in the face, every time he had been ambushed in the cricket pavilion, every time he had been held down and burnt with cigarettes; each and every time, he had wished his father dead.

35 But what he now found reminded him that it hadn't always been that way. He discovered things that he could hardly believe had once belonged to him, touching them carefully as if searching for their stories: *Dinky* diecast metal cars<sup>2</sup>, toy soldiers and tatty photograph albums. There he was holding his mother's hand beside the greenhouse, his father in the background, picking runner beans; a moment he couldn't remember, but a snapshot from days he had never wanted to end, that had left him hungry ever since.

40 At 8am, he summoned the courage to go into his mother's bedroom, tossing skirts and blouses into piles, dumping everything in bin liners, carrying them downstairs, discarding them on the kitchen steps, before swinging around, striding back through the house, up the stairs again, for another load, and another after that, his heart pounding, sweat pouring down his face.

He carried a bottle of paraffin to the bottom of the lawn, making a fire by the pond, in the same place

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<sup>1</sup> a box used for storing food

<sup>2</sup> *Dinky diecast metal cars*: toy cars

45 as he remembered lighting the fire that long-ago summer, during those few days he had spent with Simon. For the next hour, as the pink morning light fell through the trees, he moved feverishly between the fire, the garage and her bedroom, heaving bags, cardboard boxes and wooden crates through the house, across the lawn and to the fire. He burnt everything.

50 Finally, he entered his old bedroom once more. Her gowns were in the big oak wardrobe and mothballed<sup>3</sup>, covered in plastic: marbled velvet, Paris chiffon, Duchess satin<sup>4</sup> and silks with flashes of gold and silver. It astonished him that his mother had held on to them. He wondered if she had ever come in here, opened the wardrobe and remembered. He hoped so.

55 He remembered when he had first found the gowns, forty years ago; he had been eleven. He had brushed them against his arms, imagining how it must feel to be wrapped in something so beautiful, so delicate. When Simon visited, they had both been fourteen. He recalled the trepidation in his voice when he'd asked his mother if Simon could stay, and how she hadn't hesitated. Of course, my darling, she'd said, smiling, he'd be very welcome. His father would be in London; it would be safe, he'd thought.

60 He sat on his bed, isolating the spot where it had happened. It had been night time, and he had opened the wardrobe, revealing the gowns to Simon; he had only wanted to show him how his mother used to dress, prove that she had once been beautiful but, before he could stop him, Simon was parting the clothes, reaching for the emerald silk dress dotted with silver butterflies. Simon, no, he'd said, no, don't, please, but it was useless; there was no telling Simon, which was one of the reasons he'd loved him, and suddenly Simon was climbing out of his clothes and into the dress and they were both laughing, Simon pointing to a black satin gown with a golden brocade like broken half-moons around the waist, and snatching it from the hanger, throwing it at him. Come on, Simon had said, your turn, his smile lighting the whole room. He had looked at Simon and hesitated for a moment but before he knew it, he too was removing his clothes and slipping into the dress as if he were trying on another life. Let's dance, Simon had said, dance with me, and so, moments later, he was walking cautiously towards him, unable to believe that this was happening. Simon was pulling him into his arms, and they were moving around the room, swaying and giggling, and at that moment he felt that this was everything; this was all he would ever want. He didn't hear his mother's footsteps, but suddenly there she was, staring at them draped in her precious dresses at precisely the moment that Simon pulled him to him, harder, this time kissing him softly between the eyes. Oh, she'd said, just the one word, but then she'd smiled her usual smile, goodnight boys, sweet dreams, she'd said, quickly walking away.

70 The next day he was terrified, but she hadn't seemed any different with him. That evening she had helped them light the fire by the pond, leaving them alone as they barbecued sausages and chicken legs. The night ended with them sitting at the foot of her chair as she knitted, smiling down at them as they played scrabble. Everything had felt possible.

75 After Simon left, he had been sitting on his bed, sitting where he was now, when she finally spoke to him about it. I'm happy that you've got a friend, my darling, she'd said, and then she cast her eyes to the floor and paused before speaking again. But your father must never know. I'm sorry, but that's how it must be.

80 He and Simon had one more year together, though Simon never visited the house again; he was never mentioned in the house again. But they ran and picnicked and made love in the fields and woods surrounding the school; they laughed and talked and cried and dreamed. They protected each other, just for a little while. Then Simon's father took him away to the other side of the world, and again there was nothing but silence and emptiness and pain.

85 He couldn't think about it anymore. Anger coursed through him; he rose from the bed, grabbed at the gowns, ripped them from their rails, hurled them into heaps, took them downstairs and left them outside. He intended to burn them along with everything else, but he found that he couldn't, not yet.

90 Exhausted, he returned to the house, to the dining room, where he sat at the table, in the same place

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<sup>3</sup> protected against moths

<sup>4</sup> *marbled velvet, Paris chiffon, Duchess satin*: types of fabric

he'd sat throughout his adulthood – opposite his parents. He thought about the meals they had eaten here, so many meals accompanied by the polite conversation that had made him want to scream until his throat tore. He thought about all the things unsaid. He thought about the day that his mother had told him, delicately yet unequivocally, that his dreams and longing must be bundled up and consigned to the house's dreadful mound of secrets. He thought about how he had never found the courage to challenge her, how he detested himself for it, and her. He remembered the hours he had sat at this table in the years ahead, answering her questions about how he was, what he was doing, without ever talking about how he really felt, without speaking of the men he loved, the men he was watching die in their dozens, their beautiful bodies and minds pulped by a disease<sup>5</sup> that neither she nor his father would mention.

95 He thought about the night that he had come to the house immediately after his father's death, and the immense relief and excruciating guilt he felt knowing that he was finally dead. Might it be different now? he dared wonder; now the man who had terrified them both was gone, could there perhaps be something after so long of nothing?

105 He remembered the first anniversary of his father's death; they had drunk too much, and it had all come out. He thought about the furious, pained words he had used. You're ashamed of me, I sicken you, don't I? My life, what I am, it repulses you, he'd said. No, no, she'd said, no, my darling, I only wanted to protect you from him. Protect me? he'd shouted. She'd started crying, sobbing as if her body were breaking apart. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's my fault, she'd said again and again. I should have let your father have his way, kept you with us; it's my fault, she'd said. But I didn't want him to hurt you. I knew you were different, special, she'd said, speaking softly now. I thought you would be safer away from him, that's all. He'd stared at her. What do you mean? he'd said. She'd flinched, her body shrank, and when she'd spoken again there was a tremor in her voice. It was me, she'd said. What do you mean? he'd repeated, his voice rising. It was me, she'd said, who decided you should go to boarding school. He'd sprung back, looking at her as if she were a stranger. Suddenly it had made sense; that was why his father hadn't been able to meet his eyes that day he'd told him about the school; he had never wanted him to go. You, he'd spat at his mother, you. Yes, she'd said in the tiniest of voices, me. She'd moved slowly towards him, placed a hand on his shoulder, but he'd swiped it away, and she'd gasped. All these years you let me believe it was him, let me hate him, he'd said, fighting to control his voice. He'd paused, trembling, looked at her steadily, brutally. You sent me away, mum, he'd said, and she'd buried her face in her hands.

115 In the few years that remained to them, he'd tried to move beyond it, he'd tried to understand, though it wasn't enough, and this time he knew it had been his fault; he'd kept his distance, visiting too infrequently, every three months or so, barely phoning her in the meantime. He had adored her and never forgiven her. He had punished her; he had let her die alone.

125 He sank his head towards the table and cried, silently, just for a little while. Then he walked outside, picked up the pile of gowns, moved down the lawn to the fire, which was crackling and spluttering in reds and purples, the smell of petrol filling the air. He began to throw the dresses into the flames, watching the past crinkle away. None of it matters now, he said to himself, it's over now, but then there were just two gowns left: the emerald silk and the black satin. He brought them to his face, breathed them in; he closed his eyes and saw himself and Simon: Simon in the silk, as green as his eyes; he in the satin, smooth like happiness on his skin. He felt Simon's kiss again. It was the first time he had been kissed, the purest of his life. Then he saw his mother in the same clothes, a lifetime ago. She had done what she'd thought was best, he now understood, but sometimes the way we choose to love perpetuates the damage we seek to diminish. He would keep these two dresses, he decided; he would cherish them, just as his mother had; they were all that was left, yet they held so much, just enough.

135 He sat on the dewy grass, pulling his legs to his chest, sitting as he had with Simon that summer night when the crickets chirped, the fire roared, the chicken sizzled, and his mother sat in the house waiting for them. Everything should have been possible.

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<sup>5</sup> (here) the AIDS epidemic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

140 When he opened his eyes, the sun was breaking through the clouds like splinters of gold; he could feel  
the promise of its heat on his face.

(2021)