



The Bottom of the Well

By Ken Barlow

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I've been losing track of time recently – one day melts into another, one week slides into the next – but I woke up this morning and somehow I knew. The rock on my chest a little heavier than normal, the quiet in the flat transcending the usual silence and screaming your absence. I checked the calendar and there it was – a year exactly. It seems longer, shorter, I don't know. A car grinds its engine outside and I remember. How we stood on the kerb, your hand clenched in mine, the red man stubbornly refusing to give way to the green, my impatience mounting as the seconds slipped by. 'C'mon,' I snapped, 'it's all clear, let's go.' 'Why are you always in such a hurry?' you said. 'We've got all the time in the world.'

I go to the window and press my face against the glass. Outside is the city. I can hear it, feel it, swollen with life, the future cascading through its streets. A black guy wearing oversized headphones swaggers past, his dreadlocks bobbing in time to a melody I wish I could hear. On the other side of the road, a stooped, decrepit couple shuffle along arm in arm, so slow it's agonising to watch. But you'd have liked that, told me it was the sweetest thing. I used to watch you sitting where I'm sitting now, peering out, waving me over if you caught sight of anything exciting. 'Come quick,' you'd squeal, flapping your hand, 'there's a man chasing a fox down the road.' 'People spotting,' you called it. 'Poking your beak in,' I called it.

I turn away from the window and wander from room to room. Even now, a year on, everything is defined by your absence. The paintings on the wall appear lifeless without you beside me to gaze at them. The books on the shelves are only so much waste paper without you to tell me what you loved about one, what you hated about another. The bed is a wilderness without you to snuggle up next to me. I remember how much you loved this flat. Remember the first time you called it 'The Kingdom of Us' and smiled. That's the thing – you were a homebody at heart, content to potter

about the place, willing to sacrifice your morning for a doze on the settee. Whereas I was always insistent we rise and shine at eight on the dot and squeeze every last minute we could from the day. The latest blockbuster exhibition followed by dinner at a 'hidden gem of a restaurant' a friend had raved about followed by a movie classic showing for one night only at a cinema on the other side of town – there was always something new to be consumed, and no weekend could pass without a checklist of experiences ticked off. It was the same with holidays abroad – I'd begin the planning months in advance, drawing up schedules and trawling websites. You'd ask me if this time we could 'slow down', 'take things as they come', maybe 'chill out for a while'. I would be too busy scribbling notes in the guidebook to give you anything more than an insincere nod.

It's strange – when I turned and saw you lying in the road, as if settled down for a nap, my first thought was one of irritation. You'd dawdled, like you always dawdled, and now you'd gone and ruined a beautiful day.

I'm sorry.

Believe me, I'm sorry.

There's a spider spinning a cobweb in a corner of the bedroom ceiling. I sit beneath it and watch the spider work – back and forth, back and forth, as if it could keep going forever. A knock at the front door. I unlock it and sprint to the bathroom. I hear my sister come in and set down her bags. 'How are you?' she says. I lean tensed against the bathroom door. 'I'll get started then,' she sighs. The vacuum cleaner commences its familiar howl. Every Sunday she comes to clean the flat and re-stock the fridge. Occasionally, she'll turn up on other days as well and ask to be let in, but once a week is the limit of what I can manage at the moment. It used to be that I would sit on the settee and let her tidy up around me, but she kept bursting into tears, asking when I was going back to see the counsellor. Now I alternate between hiding in the bedroom and the bathroom, so both get cleaned.

When we were young, she would always make a show of playing the big sister – fussing, clucking, bossing me around – and I hated it. Today I hear my sister shuffling

around only yards from me and more than anything I want to fling open the door and fall into her arms. Sometimes she whispers through the keyhole: 'Talk to me. Just come out and talk to me.' A voice in my head whispers back, tells her how much I appreciate her coming round and giving up her time. But always my jaw remains locked, and I know that even a simple spoken 'thank you' is liable to set off a landslide that will leave me buried. It's months since we last spoke. Months since I last spoke.

You always got on well with my sister. Both chatterboxes, shooting words at each other a mile a minute. I'd sit between you, feeling restless and left out. Occasionally, you'd squeeze my arm and I'd feel a little better. But still I remember listening to you witter on about 'girl things' while in my head I totted up the minutes wasted, itching for my sister to leave and our life together to kick back into gear.

'I've left a lasagne in the fridge for this evening. Just pop it in the microwave and it'll be good to go.'

A pause.

'Say something. Anything.'

I want to reply. I think I'm about to but then a minute has drifted by and I haven't. The front door clicks shut and I listen to the silence left behind. It takes me a while before I can muster the courage to return to the living room. The scent of pine lingers in the air. I wish my sister wouldn't use aerosols – they make me feel queasy. I should tell her. I creep to the window and glimpse her figure receding down the street. Her shoulders are slung low, her head bowed. The sky has clouded over, gilded silver by the sun.

I'm sorry, I want to shout after her.

Believe me, I'm sorry.

I check the bedroom and discover the cobweb has gone. Its absence unsettles me, and I feel foolish for being so affected. I return to the living room window and press my face against the glass. A woman in a canary yellow tracksuit lumbers into view, laden

down with shopping and accompanied by two bickering children – a boy and a girl, neither of whom can be older than five. You used to love child-watching, were always pointing them out as if they were monkeys in a zoo. You'd pull tongues at them, wiggle your fingers, and it made you giggle when they responded in kind. It irritated me sometimes. I could never see the point in other people's children, never understand what they had to do with *us*.

Suddenly, without provocation, the boy shoves the girl in the back. She stumbles unsteadily for a few steps, then topples over, skinning the palms of her hands. The mother swears, sets down her shopping, and smacks the boy hard round the back of his head. He begins to wail, his face scrunched up like a fist. I want to yell at them, 'Stop it! Behave! Be good to each other! Life's too short!' But who am I to dispense such trite advice? Me, who always thought I knew best despite protesting otherwise. I back away from the window and chew my lip.

I switch on the TV and flick through the channels, settle eventually on a cookery programme. Competing celebrities flip pancakes. It's bland enough to settle me down. There's not much I can take these days – mainly just cartoons and documentaries about particle physics. Anything else – even the campest soap opera, the lamest sitcom – is liable to tip me over into despair at the first hint of emotion. I remember reality TV shows were your favourite, how you'd poke fun at the participants whilst hanging on their every word. And if I'm honest, I suppose I was drawn in too. But afterwards I would feel angry with myself, frustrated I had wasted an entire half-hour on something so trivial. The fact I'd spent that half-hour cuddled up next to you, your head rested in my lap, was by the by.

I hear the *thud-thud-thud* of a helicopter passing by overhead. I go to the window, crane my neck towards the sound, but can't see anything. It's raining now, the sky a dirty, swollen grey. You told me once that a helicopter over the city means that there's a criminal on the run. I said you were being ridiculous. Today, though, I imagine there really might be someone racing for their freedom, and whoever it is, whatever they've done, I want them to succeed. Run, keep running, and never stop.

Something...

Something must happen.

I run to the front door and take hold of the handle. But even as I begin to turn it, I feel my resolve ebb. My hand drops limply to my side and I feel depressed more by having deluded myself into thinking I could escape than the failure itself. I used to pride myself on being realistic, always corrected you when you exaggerated for effect, whereas really it should have been me and my grand ambitions kept in check.

I go to the window and press my face against the glass. Someone – it could be a man or a woman – runs down the street, hood pulled up against the onslaught of rain, carrying a violin-case plastered with stickers. I wonder where they're going, where they've come from, what the stickers signify. I wonder about all the life I'm missing out on. Time drags, but even so it leaves me behind. When you died you tore a hole in the world, and every second of every hour of every day I'm afraid of tripping up into it. Sometimes I think I'm already there, trapped at the bottom of a well, the only thing keeping me company the echo of my own thoughts.

I wish you were here. Wish I wasn't alone in this flat. I wish I could have been more like you – content just to be happy instead of aspiring to the finest happiness life could buy. You left me a year ago today, and I wish I'd made the most of you.

I'm sorry.

Believe me, I'm sorry.