

The Present

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Rows of pebbledash houses the colour of dirty spit, to match the sky and the scunnered brown hills that are not yet visible in the strained light of morning. The December wind pummels Fitzy's ears and numbs his cheeks. He wipes the stream from his nose on the sleeve of his anorak. He would rather be indoors, in front of the electric fire that rattles with the effort of keeping the frost on the outside of the window panes. But Fitzy knows he has to get away early, before Da wakes, or not at all.

Da isn't going down the mines today. He's not going tomorrow either, and he didn't go yesterday. On strike days, Da sits in the front room with his pals, smoking until they cannae see the curtains. Yesterday Maw called Da a lazy gyet and threw him out. Fitzy saw him traipsing down The Drum, which through the day kept the unemployed off the streets. Then it was off to the betting shop, where the crabbie bookie in Scotland was kept behind glass, to keep her from slapping weans who dared ask for change.

When Fitzy'd come home yesterday, Da was drunk and skint. Maw had rolled her eyes in rare allegiance with the boy, which made him feel grown up until his Da caught the glance and clouted her on the side of her head, and then Fitzy with more force, so that his teeth caught his lip. "Give over," his Maw had said, and then she left them to watch the telly in the dark. Fitzy tasted salt as he ran his tongue over his teeth. But it didn't hurt, no more than usual.

So this morning, while Da's still snorin' oot yesterday's whiskey, Fitzy sneaks out the back door and ducks beneath the washing line, under the fence, following his own footprints through the trees. He almost runs, but remembers there's no need to hurry. Not today.

The puppy was supposed to have been a birthday present for his wee brother, who never got anything because it was so close to Christmas. Only this year Fitzy knew there would be no Christmas presents either, so he'd nicked it from one of the posh houses in the next village. It'd been freezing in a kennel oot the back, greetin' so loud Fitzy'd heard it fae the street.

It was a scrubby wee thing; all wiry hair and pointy ears, its jaggy claws digging into his lap as it jumped up to lick his face with its warm tongue. It wants to come with me, Fitzy had thought, and imagined his wee brother's face when he saw it. He'd put it under his coat, feeling its wriggly heat against his ribs, and let it chew on his finger to stop it yelping on the bus on the way home.

He'd tied it to a tree in the woods at the back of his house, with a bowl of water and a can of dog food that he'd lifted from the Spar. Only for a couple of days, he'd told it, until his wee brother's birthday, and then it could live in the house. But now there are signs all over the village, laminated to withstand the sleet, tied to lampposts, taped in phone boxes, pinned to the notice board in the post office. Posters with photos and the slogan: "Missing Puppy – £50 Reward." His Da would beat him black and blue.

It yelps when it sees him and strains at the rope, its whole body waggling in time with its tail. Fitzy feels pleased, though he knows he shouldn't. Not for a dug.

"Aye shoosh wee thing," he says, "I hear ye."

Dry leaves crackle beneath him as he sits. Its nose is freezing and wet and shivery. He lets it lick his face for a minute and then pulls it inside his coat and zips it all up, like a wee kangaroo, he thinks. His pocket is full of wrappers and crumbs and a plastic bag.

“You cannae stay wi’ us after all.”

He puts the bag over its head and his hands form a seal around its neck. Its legs scurry furiously as the bag bloats and shrinks, bloats and shrinks, in and out, in and out, until there’s no more in and the plastic moulds to its muzzle.

Once it’s still, he opens his coat but keeps it close to its chest, cradled in the nook of his elbow. It weighs no more than the rabbits his Da brings home from the shooting. Its belly is freckled, barrel-round and still hot under his hand. Its jaw has gone slack and the points of its teeth stick out from black gums, like tiny shards of ivory.

His Da holds the rabbits upside down by their back legs so that they stretch towards the ground like shirts on the washing line, but the puppy is different. Rabbits run away when you get near them, and if you catch them you get to swing them by the ankles to show who’s the boss. It wasn’t like that with the puppy. It hadn’t tried to run away.

The ground is hard. He sweeps away sticks and leaves and pounds at the earth with the heel of his boot until he’s broken the surface and then starts to burrow at it with his hands, uncovering worms and beetles that hadn’t planned to wake until spring. When the hole is big enough, he throws in the body and covers it with earth.

Fitzy looks down at his hands. A rash of mud, like rot on a tree, turns the lines on his knuckles and palms black; as black as Da’s hands when he comes up from the pits. Fitzy heads for home. Home to the rows of pebbledash houses the colour of dirty spit, to match the sky and the scunnered brown hills that are only just visible in the strained light of morning.