

The Echo of Michael

As a kid, I was fascinated by bin men, the way they raced from backyard to backyard in noisy, bare armed loops, never quite catching up with the insatiable clanking monster as it lurched down the narrow street. Later on, the act of disposal became an obsession. Jobs, memories, lovers, a wife – I got rid of them all eventually. Perhaps I lacked a sense of value. All I know is that what began as an aversion to clutter gradually became a way of life. To retain is to retard: that was my philosophy.

‘You’ll throw yourself away one day,’ my mother used to say. And she was right - almost.

Ten years ago, I scrambled up the side of an old quarry near my house. It seemed like an appropriate ending. Rubbish to rubbish. And that’s when I heard her voice for the first time.

‘Do you always go birding at the top of landfill sites?’

It was the kind of question a local radio reporter would ask to take the piss out of some quirky ornithologist.

‘Only when I want to jump on them,’ I said, staring wildly at an imaginary microphone.

‘Shame to make a mess,’ she said, as though about to hand me a napkin.

I laughed at the perverse logic.

‘Forgive the interruption, but...’

‘Who are you?’ I said, turning angrily to face her.

A tall, slim woman with short, boyish hair was looking up at me from a winding path that led down to the site entrance.

‘I tried to kill myself once,’ she said.

‘Better luck next time.’

‘The plastic bag over my head was too large. That was the mistake.’

‘Sounds like bad planning to me. Did you throw the bag away?’

‘No’, she said. ‘I keep it as a reminder.’

‘A reminder of what ... abject failure?’

‘Just a reminder,’ she said, moving quickly up the path towards me.

It was mid-Summer and the stench was overpowering. I pictured myself nestling face down in the putrescent expanse and wondered how the gulls would react: stylish indifference or eager pecking? The woman was within touching distance. I shifted my position so that we could both balance precariously on a crumbling sandy ledge.

‘Do you know what it’s like when the most important person in your life is suddenly taken away?’ she said, sliding closer. The idea of a crippling loss made me uneasy.

‘No’, I said. ‘I don’t think I do.’

A steady stream of wagons meandered along the dust-choked track to present their detritus. Two giant bulldozers bobbed wearily between the ever-changing contours. The quarry’s crude periphery loomed like empty terracing in an old football stadium. I couldn’t decide whether we were the first spectators to arrive or the last to leave.

‘My son was murdered in this place. He used to play here with his school friends before it was a landfill site. One afternoon he was late home, so I went looking for him. It was getting dark and my torchlight started to dim. I stumbled down the track, shouting his name. I can still hear the echo of Michael.’

‘I remember reading about it in the press,’ I said. ‘You found him, didn’t you?’

She shielded her eyes from the glare and my feeble mask of empathy. One of the bulldozers nearly toppled over on a mound of concrete pillars. I followed the line of her pointing finger to an oasis of rock on the far side of the quarry.

‘The manager promised to fence it off and let me have regular access. I don’t trust him though. That’s why I come every day to check. You’re the third person I’ve met up here this week. Would you like one of these?’

She held out a round tin of what appeared at first glance to be sweets, but which were actually glass marbles.

‘They were Michael’s favourite possession. He loved the shape, colours and sound they make. I always offer one to people who are struggling.’

I trapped a flickering orb between thumb and forefinger and raised it up to eye level between us.

‘So, you think something this simple can solve all my problems?’

She reached across to tilt my hand, until the sun-caught marble refracted an orange and green light onto her hair.

‘No, of course not ... but I think we can all learn a lot from children.’

I slipped the marble into my pocket and sat down on the gull shit splattered ledge.

‘Tell me more about Michael.’

The woman waited for a plane to bank towards Heathrow before responding.

‘What can I say? He was just a sweet kid. We had eleven years of love and happiness together after his father jumped ship. Football and Art were his two passions. The school labelled him as gifted and talented, but that was only part of the story. He also had a natural ability to sense how others around him were feeling - kids, adults and animals as well. It was an amazing thing to watch.’

I tried to construct a supportive comment about her description of Michael. What I eventually said was more like a knife thrust into an open wound.

‘Yes, I’m sure he had special qualities, though it must have made his final minutes all the more frightening.’

I watched the blood drain from her face.

‘That thought has kept me awake more nights than I care to remember.’

The woman made some salutary remarks and edged past me, returning to her familiar journey around the giant bowl of waste.

Two oversized gulls swooped down to scavenge for rotting fish. A sudden dizziness forced me back down to the exit.

I keep the marble on a shelf above my desk with a few poetry books and family photographs. Sometimes I like to feel its reassuring smoothness. The impulse to jettison difficult parts of my life is not as strong as before. Simple things mean more to me now.

I often think about Michael.