A PAINFUL POST MORTEM is a tragic, but tender, story of contemporary issues: love stretched to its limits by divorce, drugs and bereavement. Faced with their daughter's death, Claire and Mark are forced to confront their own dark past.

A Painful Post Mortem

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THE STORY SO FAR IN BRIEF: Following **Katya's** death, in suspicious circumstances, her estranged parents, **Mark** and **Claire**, realise that decisions will have to be made regarding custody of her baby daughter, **Zara**. Concerned that Social Services may, otherwise, intervene, they have been to speak with the baby's father, **Mick**.

Rosie, **Katya's** sister and, therefore, **Zara's** aunt, has her own ideas, however. With twin boys and a baby daughter of her own, she would like to adopt her niece.

Mark, inhibited by an arrested emotional maturity, is quite unable to process his feelings about his daughter's death. The only means known to him, is to escape via a proverbial drowning of his sorrows in alcohol. Given that he has been brought face to face with Katya's devastating opinion of him, is it any wonder that he is drinking more and more?

Claire, meantime, is struggling to cope with other people's difficulty in speaking about death, the taboo subject of the 20th Century. It is not death but the guilt that accompanies it, however, that threatens her composure when her closest friend, Helen, calls. Admitting to her feelings of inadequacy and her failings as a parent, she is astonished to find that Helen views such emotions as universal. Not only that, Helen has an answer which is breathtakingly simple, but which is guaranteed to bring peace of mind.

Chapter Seven

THE DAY FOLLOWING Mark and Claire's visit to see Mick about Zara was Open Day at Molvelly Abbey primary school. Thomas and Edward were due to start at the beginning of the next academic year in September when they would be rising-five, and this preliminary visit was designed to prepare them. Rosie dressed the boys casually, in T-shirts and shorts, as advised in the letter she had received from the Head, and made arrangements to leave Erin with Claire so that she could give the twins her undivided attention.

'I'm sure Tom will breeze it,' she confided to Claire. 'But I'm a bit worried about how Eddie's going to survive.'

The school was a low-rise building up a lane off the main Molvelly – Compass Quay route, and was tucked, neatly, between the pub, post-office, church and open farmland. As Dad would say, Rosie joked with Claire, it was conveniently placed for all the necessities of life: instruction, ingestion, dissemination, hatching, matching and despatching. Arriving at the school gates, she found her expectations about the boys confounded; in fact she thought their respective responses astonishing.

Eddie was the younger of the two by one minute. Intent on doing things naturally, Rosie's plan had been thwarted by the distress that six hours of pushing had caused the twins. Of necessity, they had been delivered by Caesarean Section. Eddie was last out.

As a tiny baby he had seemed, to Rosie, to be the more vulnerable of the two. Tom, she always said, had come into the world with a grin on his face; Eddie was imbued with solemnity. Tom was the first to walk, the first to speak, and he ordered his world to suit himself. Eddie's world was frequently chaotic, a pain-filled experience of cutting teeth, fitful sleep, and tears. In every respect, he appeared to lag behind his older brother.

Secretly, when they were little, Rosie began to wonder if Eddie was as intelligent as Tom. She found herself compensating for his late development, making excuses for his apparent lack of social skills. At the same time, Tom was so entertaining, so engaging, it became all too easy to overlook Eddie.

When she did, a stab of guilt and a rush of protectiveness made her heart quicken, until the space behind her rib cage felt fit to burst.

This awareness of what she saw as her deficiency in maternal behaviour had the effect of making her ever ready to over-compensate. But this, in itself, alerted her to the need for impartiality; the necessity of reining in on these impulses for excess. Sometimes, she thought, the complexities of parenting were enough to drive you to the edge of insanity! Then again, when you were least expecting it, all your well-formed theories would be thrown into disarray, and something would happen to make you re-evaluate. As it did, that morning at school.

'It was incredible,' she said to Claire when she and the boys returned home. 'Tom, my little entertainer who always seems so full of self-confidence, clung to me as we went into the classroom.'

Washing salad stuff, finding cold meat in the fridge and laying the table, she made a drama of the story, acting out Tom's reluctance, her urging.

'Eddie, on the other hand,' she continued, 'was entirely unfazed by the sea of unknown faces and surroundings. He stood at the door, took stock of everything, saw what he wanted and went straight for it.'

Claire laughed. 'Let me guess. It wouldn't, by any chance, be a train set?'

Rosie plonked a full wooden salad bowl on the table. 'Got it in one! He was as happy as Larry, lying on his tummy, pushing this wooden engine thing along the floor.'

'And did he relate to the other children?'

'To begin with communication between him and the other kids looked pretty well non-existent. But amazingly, little by little, they all began to gravitate towards him, and join in. And then after a while, you were suddenly aware that they were all looking to Eddie to lead their play. It was quite extraordinary.'

'And Tom? Did he find his feet in the end?'

Claire filled a jug with water and put it on the table. 'It took a while! But eventually, he was just Tom. Being a clown. Entertaining everyone.'

'Well there you are, then. All the worrying and analysing gets you nowhere. In a loving environment children usually end up finding their own level.'

'That's just what I thought!' Rosie assembled oil, vinegar, Dijon mustard and herbs to make French dressing. 'You always said it was about *letting go, and letting God*.'

'I didn't mean abdicating parental responsibility!' Claire said, quickly. 'Just about trusting.'

Rosie nodded. 'Exactly!'

She thought of the last thirty-six hours, during which she'd been projecting herself into the future as Zara's adoptive mother. She had, she realised, felt incredibly hurt and disappointed that the plan to adopt her had been thwarted by Mick's desire to bring up the child himself. Since she'd heard, the previous day, she had not *let go* in the least.

But Steve had a far more philosophical take on the whole idea. If it wasn't to be, it wasn't to be, he had said, prior to the decision. And afterwards – now that they knew of Mick's plans to move in with his mother – with typical calm and acceptance, Steve had seized upon the merits. It would be to Zara's benefit, he pointed out, to be raised by her biological father; and to Erin, the boys and themselves in not having an adopted addition to the family.

There were parallels to be drawn, Rosie understood, between Eddie's carefree complacency when faced with a room full of strangers, and Steve's with a complexity of decisions and responses to be made. Each displayed a comfortable acceptance of the status quo. It was an attitude, moreover, that appeared to achieve far more than might be expected: a quiet authority, she thought, that they neither looked for, nor took for granted.

Had she got it wrong all these years, she wondered? Was Eddie, actually, the more confident of the twins? And Tom's clowning around for an audience not, in fact, a show of self-assurance but a deep-seated need for attention? If so, how did that translate in terms of Katya's propensity to show off? Had she, too, been attention seeking as a result of unrecognised insecurities?

Rosie went to the back door to call the boys in for lunch. When she returned, she took up a pair of wooden salad servers and, deep in thought, began to lift and turn the contents of the salad bowl to coat them in the vinaigrette she'd made.

MARK TURNED AT the entrance of The Ship in the Old Town area of Compass Quay, and looked back through the twilight, down the steep, narrow, cobbled lane he'd just climbed. Clad only in jeans and a T-shirt, he'd walked from The Anchor, where he was staying, down the high street to the inner harbour and had enjoyed, in a perverse manner, the spectacle of the teeny bopper tourists who had impeded his progress. Spilling out of numerous pubs and bars onto the pavements, their merriment was evident in the chaotic sprawl of scantily clothed young bodies, raised voices and raucous laughter.

He drew a breath. The sight was so reminiscent of his own carefree youth that he fancied he could taste, on the salt air, the bitter, malty, flavour of his very first pint. The memory was both pleasurable and yet like a sharp stab in his side. He turned from the revelry and stepped over the threshold.

The Ship had been Katya's place of work and the venue for the ruddy barbecue she had attended on the night she died. He hoped, despite the enforced notoriety thrust upon him by the newspaper article, that amongst the throng of locals and tourists he would be able to remain incognito.

He nudged his way forward. The smoke-filled, flag-floored taproom was, he thought, as far removed from the genteel, carpeted comfort of the saloon bar at The Anchor as an alley cat from a Siamese. He contemplated the theme, pleased with his metaphor. He liked cats: had a soft spot for their ruthless independence; their exploitation of the affection they engendered in their carers; their sleek superiority as predators of the weak. A thought entered his head. Was Katya's given name an unconscious nod in the direction of his admiration of all things feline? It had, after all, been his ruddy choice, not Claire's. If so, it was a misnomer: Kat's neediness, her emotional outbursts, her failings, were as big a disappointment to him as were his own.

He threaded his way through the drinkers to the bar, ordered a pint and looked about him. For all his privileged upbringing and public school background, for all the international business clout and outward appearance of wealth, this was his sort of pub. A place where serious drinking was undertaken; where pretension was despised; where the past was history, the future unpredictable, and only the here-and-now was of any significance. And that only at the bottom of a tankard!

He drank deeply, the warm, bitter, tang of the locally blended brew suffusing his taste buds, expunging the sour memories of the previous day's barbs.

It had wounded him, deeply, when Mick had delivered his coup. He'd glanced at Claire to see if she had picked up on how hurtful it was to be brought face to face with the realisation of Katya's devastating opinion of him. What an impoverished view Mick had painted, and how few brushstrokes it had taken for him to get the picture! His soul felt seared to the bone. Even now. Twenty four hours later!

He raised the dimpled glass tankard to his lips and drank again. Memories of sunshine, sea and sand rushed, in a tidal wave, to his defence. There *had* been good times. There had! Times when he and Claire had packed up a ruddy picnic and, with the children and as many other boat-owning families as he could muster, had headed off for the day. Bound for some

obscure beach or cove, he had captained not only his Dory, but his flotilla. Riding the waves, feeling the rush of air singing in his ears, the roar of a powerful engine beneath him, the wheel in his hand, he had known a deep peace and satisfaction. A sense of purpose and direction.

He felt a great surge of affection, too, at such times. For Claire, her long peaty-brown hair streaming behind her, her skimpy sun-top flattened by the wind to reveal nipples, hard and round, protruding beneath the thin cloth; for his children, tanned and colt-limbed, exuding a glowing good health that filled him with pride; for a way of life that shouted aloud of affluence and abundance. True, once at the beach, he was not a sand-castle-building, swimming-and-diving, games-playing sort of a Dad. But neither was he the formal, school-masterly, distant father-figure whom he had been obliged to address as Sir.

He jerked his pint to his mouth, slopped some down his chin, wiped it off with the back of his hand, and attempted to order another. He felt his tongue fill his mouth, a useless lump of flesh and muscle, which refused to do his bidding.

'Mr StJohn? Mark?' A hand grasped his, and he turned to see one of the coppers – barely recognisable in civvies – whom he'd met, previously, when Kat had died.

'Ted. P.C. Cunningham,' the man reminded Mark. 'Thought it was you, sir. Just on my way back from the John, when I said to myself, Ted, that's Mr StJohn, or I'll be damned. Will you have a pint, sir?'

'Don't mind if I do,' Mark replied, without hesitation or impediment. And he allowed himself to be led towards the Snug where, through the archway off the main bar, two or three other coppers were evident.

It was only when he turned the corner at the end of the counter, that he noticed the Appeal. Large and vulgar, it comprised a garishly hand-penned request to GIVE GENEROUSLY, beneath a photograph of a mother and baby.

It was only a snapshot: black and white, a pretty enough girl with laughing eyes, wide upturned mouth, petite and childishly formed limbs, a round-faced baby on her hip, and it had been enlarged to such an extent that it had become indistinct in its graininess. Nevertheless, there was a poignancy and beauty in the un-posed, spontaneous stance, as if the lens of the camera were looking into the heart and soul of the mother and revealing a depth of love and commitment for the child, that was unfathomable, inscrutable, unending.

The written part of the appeal was partially hidden behind a group of drinkers leaning on the bar. Mark took a step nearer. A clear glass demi-john, already half-filled with coins and notes, came into view. Above it, printed in broad black marker pen, and given three-dimensional perspective in red, the name: KAT STJOHN screamed at his jangling sense of propriety.

PEOPLE, I AM discovering, do not want to talk to me about Katya. In fact, food shopping in town with Rosie one day, I think I would go so far as to say that many are avoiding me altogether! Even those whom I knew well in the days when Mark and I lived in the vicinity, now appear to cross the road when I come into sight, or to have urgent business elsewhere if they have the *misfortune* to bump into me.

Those to whom I have mentioned this phenomenon have been quite condemning of those who avoid me. I've found myself agreeing that *they don't understand* but, paradoxically, I've also found my compassion evoked. In all honesty can I say that I haven't, prior to this experience, fabricated excuses at times to avoid talking to the newly bereaved? Death, it appears, is the ultimate taboo.

I know, from Mark, that the local papers have carried reports of Katya's death, not all of which are entirely sympathetic, and I suppose that this has played a part. But for someone whose prime topic of thought, these days, centres on my deceased daughter, I have to admit that I find it exceedingly trying.

One morning, to my great joy, my enforced silence is ended. Rosie is upstairs putting Erin down for her morning nap, and the boys are at Nursery School. I have been clearing the kitchen; I open the back door to put the empty milk bottles out, and find my oldest and closest friend, Helen, about to enter.

Face to face, we're both transfixed by the moment. Neither of us speaks a word. In the instant before Helen holds out her arms and takes me into her embrace, milk bottles and all, I glimpse the crumpled features of my friend's face and the tears that well in her eyes. For some moments, the two of us stand on the doorstep and weep, quietly, on each other's shoulders. When we draw apart, a smile touches our lips. No explanation, no verbal expression of sympathy, support or encouragement is necessary. It is enough to have shared, to have felt one in our pain. I know that my grief is Helen's, too.

'I've just heard!' says Helen, taking the bottles and depositing them on the doorstep, before stepping inside. 'We've been completely out of touch, on

a camping holiday in Cornwall. I rang home late last night and they told me the news.'

Helen's sun-bleached hair, softly tanned skin, shorts and T-shirt are evidence of the sort of relaxation I once enjoyed – in another life, pre-Katya. Harry is not with her.

'He had to call on one of our old parishioners – newly widowed – in Compass Quay,' Helen continues, 'so I asked him to drop me off here. We're due back in Eastbourne tonight, but I just had to see you.'

Helen and Harry relocated to Eastbourne soon after my marriage to Richard took me to London. Busy lives mean that we rarely see one another. I draw Helen into the kitchen and, with my arm about her waist, say:

'You have no idea how much I've missed you!'

HALF AN HOUR later, when Rosie comes down, greets Helen, makes coffee for the two of us and leaves us alone in the lounge, I begin to open up about some of my deepest feelings.

'I find myself going over and over everything in the small hours of the morning,' I tell Helen. 'All the old chestnuts. Like *where did I go wrong with Katya?* And *were her problems down to nurture or nature?'*

Seated in Rosie's cheery burgundy and buff furnished lounge, I feel warmed by the mutual affection of my friendship with Helen. She looks exactly as she always has; exactly as I recall from that first dinner party at the Vicarage after Harry's visit, following Rosie's meningitis.

Harry, I thought at the time, was like no other Vicar I had known: young, vibrant and up-to-the-minute. He appeared, also, to have a depth of insight that was staggering. There were times when I felt convinced that he could read my mind. Listening to a sermon on a Sunday morning, I found that, frequently, it was *my* innermost sentiments that were under discussion; *my* problems for which solutions were offered. Since then, I've discovered that this level of discernment is not exclusive to Harry.

Over the years, however, Helen and I have shared more than a mutual admiration of Harry's prowess. Back then, we were both home-makers, with a love of all things old: from an academic interest in antique furniture (we couldn't afford for it to be anything else) which made us ardent night-school students and visitors of stately homes, to a collecting of bric-a-brac at house sales and street markets. During that time, little of our secret inner world of thoughts and emotions was left unspoken, and I know, without it being voiced, that nothing either of us could reveal about ourselves could ever be

detrimental to our friendship. It is this certainty that brings a lump to my throat. I sip my coffee to clear it.

'My mind is like a battlefield,' I continue, 'teeming with arguments and counter-arguments; memories real and false; bent perspectives and wonky ideology. I know from what I've heard and read that the hours of night are when you're most vulnerable, psychologically. And I know up here –' I tap the side of my head '– that it's the Powers of Darkness who want to pull me down; who condemn me as a failure; who try to drown out the voice of Truth. But down here –' pointing to my heart '– there's such a confusion of guilt and remorse. It tells me I've made mistakes; that Katya suffered because of them; and that in one sense, it's too late, now, to redeem them.'

Helen scrutinises me over the rim of her coffee mug, her soft tawny eyes full of understanding. When she sets the empty beaker down on the polished, oval coffee table in front of the sofa, she does so with an economy of movement, and returns to an upright position with her hands clasped loosely in her lap. It is one of the things I love about her, this sense of peace that emanates from her.

'When I think of Katya,' Helen says, slowly, 'I think of a mischievous little imp. Do you remember when she was an angel in the Nursery School nativity play? She could only have been about two or three. She looked as angelic as they come, with her little round face and dark, shining eyes.'

'I've got a photograph of her,' I exclaim, recognising the description. 'She looked so funny. Her tinsel halo was hanging over one eye.'

I fall silent, the joy of recognition replaced with a pang of nostalgia; the symbolism of the fallen halo almost too poignant to bear.

'But do you remember what happened next?' Helen asks, gently. 'The children had all sung *Away in a manger*, and the teacher asked if they'd like to sing it again. Your Rosie and my Debra both nodded their heads, obediently. But Katya? Oh, no! Quick as a flash, she looked at the teacher and said, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, *No thank you*. Then she led all the angels off the stage. I think even Mary and Joseph would have followed if they hadn't been stopped.'

The embarrassment, revisited, is still an uncomfortable experience. I avert my eyes.

'So what are you saying?' I ask, stiffly. 'That Katya was what you'd call a *difficult* child?'

Helen shakes her head. 'Claire! You know me better than that. I'm convinced that, in those days – before events intervened – Katya took everything at face value. She had a simple, uncomplicated, understanding of

life. She'd been asked to express a preference: *would she like to sing again*? She answered! Literally. And politely.

'Of *course*, she entranced the audience. They loved her! But I don't think, at that point, that that was her intention. If it affected her at all, it would have been through learned behaviour. Later in life. I'm inclined to believe, though, that she carried that – I want to say naivety, but I'm not sure it's the right word – into childhood and beyond, into adulthood.'

Tipping my head forward, I take the weight of it on my arched fingertips. A heavy sigh escapes my lips.

'What I'm trying to say,' Helen continues, quietly, 'is that in one sense Katya had a simplicity about her that defied the understanding of those of us used to weighing the complexities of life. But in another sense, she was a deeply complicated character, herself.

'All the other parents saw was this little *funiosity*. So they laughed. They didn't know the toddler whose best friend was the dog because he was the one constant in her life; the little girl who was always in the wars because of problems with her eyesight; the primary school child who was later bullied because she had to wear a patch over one eye.'

In the easy chair at right angles to the sofa and the broad limestone hearth, I begin to cry. Helen moves swiftly to my side, kneels on the floor at my feet, and takes my hand in her own.

'That was the Katya you knew,' she says softly. 'The one I knew. And the one God knew. The vulnerable little girl, who felt things deeply; who was open and honest about her feelings, but who was also prey to her emotions.'

I look down at my lap. I have twisted my hanky until it represents a tourniquet. Or a hangman's noose. I straighten it out and scrub at my eyes.

'I never understood Katya like I did Rosie,' I whisper. 'You could reason with Rosie. Even when she was tiny. It was such a shock to the system when Katya arrived. I hadn't a clue –'

Helen gets to her feet, makes a charade of cramped muscles, aging joints. She seats herself at the end of the sofa nearest to where I'm sitting.

'Of course you made mistakes,' she says. 'We all do! You wouldn't be human if you didn't. But don't think they were unique to Katya! I expect you made them with Rosie, too. Just as I did with Debra, Esther and Phil. All we can hope for is to do our best.'

Helen falls silent for a moment. In the corner of the room, the grandfather clock gathers itself together and strikes the hour. Midday. I feel – nothing. Not oblivion. Nor numbness. Just a – a lack of anything. A black hole. Helen has made some interesting observations. But I remain

unconvinced. There's nothing new then, under the sun? Nothing Helen can say that will unlock this – this chasm? Nothing I don't already know; no rationale I haven't been over a thousand times in my head; no solution to my misery?

Helen leans towards me, her hands hanging loosely between her knees.

'Harry explains things better than me,' she begins. 'I remember when he had his first church. It was a country parish in Yorkshire. Everyone was very kind. But they all had this idea of what a Vicar's wife should be like. And I didn't fit the bill!

'I found it incredibly difficult. I knew I had to be true to myself. To be Me. Not some fantasy dreamed up by Harry's parishioners. It got so bad I was on the point of leaving Harry. I was convinced that I wasn't cut out to be a Vicar's wife.'

I raise my head. A sense of astonishment washes over me. It's a diversion rather than a rescue, but I clutch at it as if it is a life-raft.

'I can't believe it,' I declare. 'You're the perfect Vicar's wife.'

'No! I'm me.' Gently, Helen corrects me. 'What Harry said to me all those years ago, helped me to understand. He said that a life is like a lump of clay on a potter's wheel. The master potter has one intention: to turn out a pot that's both perfectly functional – ideally suited to its particular purpose – *and* sublimely beautiful.

'But inevitably, in the making, things go wrong. Circumstances play a part – bits of grit blow in through the door and spoil the clay, or the oven is overheated and cracks it on the first firing.

'Sometimes it's human intervention, rather than inanimate conditions, that threatens to ruin the end result. Other people want to have a go – people like Harry's parishioners. They may think they know better, or can do a better job than the master potter; or they may genuinely want to help him achieve his goal but fail to realise their limitations.

'Other times, wilfulness is the problem: the clay has a mind of its own –'

I laugh, unsteadily, through my tears.

'Yes it does!' Helen retorts, her eyes open wide, her mouth smiling to show white, even teeth. 'Have you ever worked with clay? It picks up on the humidity in the air and turns into slop; so that what you thought was going to be a Ming vase, turns out to be nothing more than a mess like mushy peas.'

'Like Katya's life, then?'

'Like anyone's life!' says Helen. 'Except that it isn't. Because despite everything – the circumstances, the interference from others, the contrariness of the clay – the potter is committed to achieving his aim. He has promised to

complete the work he has begun in us. Neither death, nor life, nor anything in it will stop him. Except we, ourselves. He won't force us.'

I pick at the frayed arm of the chair in which I'm seated. Then I look straight at Helen.

'So what you're saying is –'

'What I'm saying is that he knew exactly what he was doing when he made you. And when he made Katya. He made you for each other. You to be a mother to Kat; she to be a daughter to you.

'I can't explain how, blow by blow. But he uses each of us – as parents, teachers, friends – in the lives of others. Just as a potter uses a tool. As yet – this side of heaven – we're far from perfect. But we have to be prepared to be moulded and shaped by him. We have to listen and be obedient. And to do that, we have to refuse to listen to those other voices. The ones that tell us we're worthless. And useless.'

I remain silent, contemplating what Helen has said. Is that what I've been failing to do? Have I been so busy looking at the flaws in my parenting skills, that I've obscured what the potter has been doing in my life; my children's lives? As if in answer, Rosie pops her head around the door. She has a big beam on her face.

'Just like to spend some time with two of my favourite people,' she says. 'Is this a good moment?'

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