

The Jewelled Jaguar

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1

CRASH

When a hole in the earth opened up and swallowed my mum, everything changed.

It started on such an ordinary day. It was Sunday and sunny for the first time in weeks. We were weeding the flesh-eaters.

‘You do the cobra lilies, Griff. I’ll sort the monkey cups,’ Mum said. ‘Then we’ll work on the Venus flytraps.’

I tapped at the soft soil with my trowel. It was too hot to put in much effort. And I didn’t like those plants. They ate live creatures. Mum loved them because Mum hated flies. In our house there

was a can of insect spray in every corner of every room. Her hungry flesh-eaters were just the first line of defence in her war against all the flies on the planet. If a fly survived them and flew into the house, it got zapped.

That night, after my shower, my skin buzzed from the day in the sun. I was tired and fell asleep quickly and deeply.

#

The crash, like thunder, jolted me awake. I was thrown from one side of the bed to the other. The house shook. With a crack like gunfire, the window shattered and glass exploded inwards.

‘Mu-u-um!’

My bed tilted and I clung to the headboard to stop myself rolling off. It must be an earthquake.

My wardrobe rocked, juddered forward and toppled with another crash.

‘Mu-u-um!’ I yelled again.

In the dawn light, I could see my door swing open and twist on its hinges. The whole room sloped to one side. I watched my duvet curl and slither off the bed as if it was alive.

‘MU-U-UM!’

Finally everything stopped, except the screaming car alarm. Its headlights flashed on and off on my bedroom wall in rhythm with my heartbeat.



2

HOLE

I don't know for how long I clung to the headboard. When I got the courage to move, my legs shook so much I couldn't stand. Dust swirled in through the door like smoke. I coughed and rubbed my eyes.

The floor sloped downwards so I had to crawl on my hands and knees to reach the door. There was another deep boom and my bedside table slid towards me, thumping into my side. With a groan, I pushed it away.

The dust was thicker in the hallway, and there was a stench like dirty water, like drains. It filled my

nose and throat, and I heaved. Mum wasn't in her bedroom. Sobbing with fright, I lurched through the chaos, shouting for her. Stuff had fallen out of cupboards and off shelves. Cans rolled across the kitchen floor. Boxes of cereal had spilled on to the counter tops. The kitchen table was on its side, cups and plates smashed beneath it.

What was happening?

Nothing made sense.

Mum wasn't in the kitchen, lounge or bathroom. Another boom and shudder: pictures and photographs dropped from the walls with a crash of breaking glass. I curled up in a ball with my arms around my head until the tremors stopped.

A cold draft blew up the hallway towards me. The front door swung on its hinges, creaking like old timbers. I crawled towards it, yanked it open and stared into ... nothing.

The garden was gone.

The garage was gone; the lawn was gone; the trees were gone. Even the flesh-eating plants were gone.

Inches from the doorstep, where the garden should have been was a massive hole.

A tree twisted with a loud crack. It bowed, thrashed its leaves, and was sucked down into the seething mass of earth and rubble. The ground rippled, and more earth twisted in on itself like a dark whirlpool. Land was sliding slowly into the pit. Everything was being sucked down. The back end of Mum's car stuck out of the hole, lights flashing and its alarm screaming.

And then I knew: my mum was down there, too.

I leapt into the swirling mass.

The soil dragged at my body, trying to suck me under. I scrabbled desperately at the earth and rubble, screaming, 'Mu-u-um!'

My mouth filled with dirt. I gagged and spat. Something above me snapped and fell, smashing into the side of my head. I didn't feel the pain. I kept on clawing at the earth – digging, digging, digging.

Then I saw the flash of purple. Mum's dressing gown.

I reached for her, just as arms grabbed me from above and hauled me out.

I tried to fight them off, swinging my fists, wild with terror and rage.

‘My mum’s down there! My mum’s down there!’

But they were too strong for me. I was dragged away still screaming, ‘Mu-u-um!’

#

I was in an ambulance, and all around were noise and people and flashing lights. I shook so hard my teeth rattled. A paramedic put his arm around my shoulder and said something. He dabbed at my head. The white cloth came away bright red with blood. I couldn’t work out what he was saying. I watched his mouth move, but he didn’t make any sense.

Nothing felt real. Through the doors of the ambulance, I saw everything in snapshots. A police officer waved people away, another cordoned off our home with a reel of tape. Neighbours hovered in silent groups just behind the hedge. They peered into the ambulance at me, their eyes wide with shock. If I turned towards them, they looked away again.

Another officer stuck his head round the door. 'Griffin? We're doing our best to get your mother out. We're not exactly sure what happened here, it's a bit of a mystery. Hang on in there, son. Okay?'

I nodded. When I lifted my arm to pull the blanket around me, a pain like a bolt of electricity shot from my neck down through my back.

The police officer patted my shoulder. He raised his voice, 'Is there any way we can shut off that bloody car alarm?'

A man climbed in and sat beside me. He wore dirty jeans and a ragged t-shirt covered in dust, and he smelt of oil. I thought he was one of the rescuers.

He swept the thick blond curls from his eyes. 'Griffin, isn't it? I'm a doctor. Dr Blyth Merrick. I've sent someone to tell Rhodri, your uncle, what's happened. He can meet us at the hospital.'

I wasn't sure if my uncle would want to meet us – or if I wanted him there. Mum had fallen out with her brother – they hadn't spoken in years. I didn't really know him. Before I could say anything, the doctor took my hands in his and I saw, with surprise, that mine were covered in thick, black mud – and blood.

‘Looks like the paramedics have taken good care of you, but we need to get you to the hospital to make sure there are no bones broken. There’s that cut on your head, too. They’re still trying to get to your mum.’

We avoided each other’s eyes and sat in silence.

There was a triumphant shout. ‘We’ve got her!’ The doctor shot out of the ambulance. I tried to follow. But as my feet hit the ground I felt the world spin in on me and everything went black.

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