

We Welcome Dusk

by Chani Fifield

Thud. The sound of mud shovelled on to tensile wood startled her. The thin heels of Clara's Sunday shoes were sinking into the wet ground, pushing her toes forwards and with them, her balancing point. The steep slopes of the valley made it a challenge for her to stand in this corner of the cemetery. As her foothold sunk into the waterlogged earth towards the graveside, she wondered if she were being beckoned to follow. As if in response, a gurgling croak of ravens broke out overhead. Perched in sentry on bare branches, they seemed to welcome dusk in chorus. Clara clutched hold of Aidan's arm; the coarse fabric of his suit sleeve soaked with rainfall. He glanced at her, hardly registering; the weight of his grief was like anchored stone. She looked at his face. It was solemn and pale in complexion and his lips were locked into a grimace; struggling to contain his pain and prevent it from tumbling out.

Clara's grip on Aidan's arm softened and she reached downwards towards his hand, waiting for his to meet hers. As it did, tears softly fell, mixing with the rain which had saturated their skin and drenched their clothes. People say it's not what happens in your life that matters, it's what you think happened. Aidan had idolised his father, who from what Clara could discern, was largely absent at best, morally reprehensible at worst. His father had meant the world, and for Aidan, that world stopped with him.

The priest continued his reading, blessing the departed and offering his protection to the light. Clara raised her gaze to the hillside hoping for a glimmer of this light, but her eyes were met with nothing more than the stinging downpour. The rainfall was relentless; water dripped from the pages of the priest's service book which he struggled to turn, losing his place in his incantation. The congregation shuffled awkwardly as cue points were missed and Latin stumbled over, the whole thing was becoming almost farcical. Clara could tell everyone just wanted it over with, But for Aidan, that couldn't be further from the truth. She knew he wanted to extend the memorial as long as he could — the last chance he had to be in the presence of his father. The connection was soon to be severed forever and Clara knew Aidan wasn't ready for it. How could he be?

He'd phoned her that night, repeatedly. A blow by blow account of tragedy unfolding. At 3.18am, the last call came: Aidan was standing outside in the garden, beneath the weeping willow he'd loved so much as a boy - his father had planted it for him to play under. Aidan's voice choked. A shooting star had burst out overhead, he said — he knew it was his father crossing over at that moment. Aidan crumbled, inconsolable. There were no more words. The family dog barked in the background; its master was gone.

Thud. The sound of earth upon wood was reaching its crescendo as the pallbearers battled to fill in the grave before the rain, their feet slipping on the mounds of earth at the graveside. Clara observed her own feet; the soft satin of her shoes stained with soil, the rain water seeping upwards, how it engulfed the embroidery. The priest's Latin faded from earshot as the congregation recited *Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust*. It doesn't have to make sense, Clara thought to herself. It just has to sound like it does.