

It's autumn

by James Knight

Mum and Dad are dead, though I'm the only person who has noticed. They're sipping their tea in the kitchen. Dad keeps coughing up maggots. Mum's face looks like a cracked mirror: I see myself in it, broken, dark. My brothers carry on as normal. They huddle by the TV, whispering about the girls they don't dare ask out, or play in the garden. Their favourite game is called Stink Dog, which requires running, exaggerated laughter and knives. The rules seem complicated or perhaps non-existent. I've long suspected they make it up as they go along.

Sometimes, Mum sews her hands together and sings. Her song would pierce your heart.

It's autumn now, I think. Autumn is nothing. Summer burns us, winter freeze-dries us. Autumn is just a brown transition. Nothing happens. We get older, we die more deeply. Maybe that is something. Slowing down is still moving. But I can't tell the time. The hands on the clock move too slowly.

Man and wife are one flesh. Their tangled sinews wrestle through the night. If you press your ear to the wall, you'll hear the awful rasping of conjoined lungs. A brain in two halves declares: This is life! And you read the instructions tattooed on your arms, before munching on some toast and going to work. Outside, the birds are in charge. They direct traffic and the wandering days.

Mum and Dad could never afford to buy their own house, so they rented the Palace of Skulls. It was quite cosy, once upon a time. Stray stories crept in through the fissures, curled up at my feet. A man called Mr Vogel called round once a month, to collect the rent. The neighbours were boring but pleasant, and murders were rare. I remember little about those days. I was only five, perhaps fifteen.

Memories don't start forming properly until you're in your sixties. Maybe that's my problem. I'm too old for excitement, too young for reminiscence. Stuck between a life lived and a life remembered, in a time when the clock's hands move imperceptibly and my brothers dice with death.

Dad keeps trying to tell me something. His jaws move convulsively. Whenever I suggest he write it down, he waves me away with a rotting hand. What am I supposed to do?

The hospital is a Hell of corridors. There are no wards, no patients. Just mannequins dressed as doctors, breezing through a polished antiseptic maze. I try to visit whenever I can. I still hope that one day I'll find a real doctor who can look at the holes in my legs and tell me how to treat them. Maybe I'm over-complicating everything. Maybe my legs are made of cheese and the holes are nothing to worry about. Maybe my legs are made of volcanic rock. Maybe my legs are made of fallacious arguments. Whatever. As far as the hospital is concerned, it doesn't matter. The registrar murders noise. Her phantom pregnancy is more real than me.

Mum and Dad are dead. Did I mention that? It needs to be pointed out. Mum thinks she's a chair. She rocks in a corner, keeping time with the memory of her heartbeat. Dad distracts himself with Elvis Presley. My brothers gnaw on the mice collecting in my eyes. At times, this feels like happiness. At Christmas, our house is a symphony of belches and farts. We drink to each other, health, the Palace of Skulls. Santa Claus masturbates miserably in a back room. We feel as if we're together. We're not. But we feel as if we are or tell each other we feel as if we are, and that's enough for us. Carol singers collect on our doorstep like dead leaves. Sometimes I find myself thinking about the hospital and wanting to go there, even though I know it's probably pointless. Then I have another bottle of vodka and forget about it.

It's autumn now. One day it will be winter. Man and wife are one flesh.

