

Passing Premonition

A short story

By T.J. Beach

Jack sipped on the can of Watney's Pale Ale that Pete had given him. He wished he could honestly say he liked the taste. In the beanbag on the far side of the dimly lit lounge room, Pete had both hands under Alison's shirt. Lucky bugger.

Kathy changed the LP to some Bay City Rollers shang-a-lang crap. Pete lifted his head and rolled his eyes.

Jack shrugged. Kathy's party. Kathy's music. No way he'd argue with an ex-girlfriend.

Couldn't be bothered anyway.

Debbie stared at him from the corner by the record player. Jack pretended deep interest in the contents of his can. Couldn't be bothered there, either. Weird that, but he hadn't felt like partying all night. When he got off the bus after playing rugby for the school then visiting his dad in hospital he almost decided to walk right past Kathy's and keep going all the way home. But there'd be no one there. Hi sister, Christine, stayed out late with her boyfriend every Saturday night. Wouldn't see her until morning.

Half the girls at Kathy's had been in Jack's class all through primary. He'd known the lads for years from pick-up football in the park even before the grammar school girls started the weekly snogging parties. Yet he couldn't shake a sense of being alone, distanced, and as the can grew warm from his touch while the tartan twerps murdered Bye-Bye Baby, a chill drop of dread formed under his ribs and began to grow. It ran down his chest. He rubbed his side but it spread, anxious, throbbing until it filled his head and strained his stomach. Sadness. Grief welled up in his throat so he couldn't breathe. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

He stood up.

Everyone stopped what they were doing, even Pete and Alison. Looked at him. Shadows of surprise in the glow of the lava lamp and smouldering incense sticks.

"I need to go," he said.

"You okay, Jack?" Kathy's pretty blue eyes clouded with concern.

"Don't feel well."

He blundered across the room, stumbled over outstretched legs, searched for his anorak in the pile by the front door. Kathy followed him out. He tried to find a smile for her while his arms and legs shivered.

Ten minutes' walk home. Mist clouding the streetlights. Heels echoing off the pavement. The muddy smell of English winter gardens. Key in the front door and straight to the sitting room. He flicked the light on, and the two-bar electric heater then sat on the floor with his back to the settee. Feet pointed at the warmth, hands in his anorak pockets. He checked the clock. Just after half ten. Match Of The Day would be on. No urge to move. He couldn't shake the image of his dad propped in

bed as though the pillows were all that held him up. Getting smaller and smaller every time they visited. His face had sagged. His arms were like matchsticks and every breath shook his shoulders in his baggy pyjamas. The other patients coughed and wheezed. The whole place smelled of old polish and boiled cabbage.

Dad had grabbed Jack's forearm. Surprised him. It felt like a claw.

"Thanks for coming, Jacky," he'd said. "I look forward so much to seeing you both. Makes my day."

Jack couldn't think of anything to say, embarrassed because Christine hadn't come. She'd gone early to meet Kevin. First night either of them had missed visiting time.

Another key in the front door made Jack jump. "Chrissie?"

"Yeah, just me."

"What are you doing here? Is Kev with you?"

"No. He walked me home but ..." She shrugged, sat in the armchair. Nose pink from the cold. Hands between her knees. Jacket hanging open to her floral smock flared purple slacks and stacked heels.

"Are you okay?" Jack asked. "You never come home early when you're out with Kev ..."

"No. I ... Jack ... what will we do if Dad ... dies?"

"Go to Australia. To Mum." It popped straight out. Jack didn't know where it came from. Didn't even realise he'd thought about it. Not consciously. The obvious solution though. They wouldn't let him and Christine live on their own permanently. A sixteen-year-old girl and a thirteen-year-old boy. But Dad wouldn't die, would he? Jack's heart thudded in his chest.

Christine turned away. Sobbed. "I should have gone to see Dad tonight. I wish I'd gone now. I suddenly started thinking about it in the middle of the movie. But if Dad dies, Jack?"

Next morning, when Jack got back from football, Uncle Ken's green Morris 1100 blocked the driveway. He had to get off and wheel his bike around.

He took his time stashing it in the garage. Pain in the ass having his uncle round. They never found anything to talk about, but the family felt obliged to check on them with Dad in the hospital and all. Hopefully, he'd leave before The Big Match came on.

Jack scratched through his jeans at the paste of dried mud that spread from his ankle to his thigh. Bath would have to wait till Uncle Ken had gone. And he still had his homework to do. Physics and geography.

He felt under the ant powder can for the kitchen key but the door burst open, a blast of warmth and the rich aroma of shepherd's pie. Sunday lunch?

Ken stood in the doorway. Auntie Janet at his elbow. Big sad eyes.

His uncle reached for him. "Jack. It's your Dad. He died last night. Sorry to tell you like that but ..."

Jack didn't hear the rest.