

## Beyond The Grave

By CHARLOTTE CASSON

In my dream I was running; desperately running, choking and gasping, trying to get away. Whereas he just stood there, looking at me, his mouth set in a slightly amused, faint smile. He stared at me silently as I ran away, but no matter how hard I ran I never seemed to be able to get away from him.

I woke up, sweating underneath the bedclothes. The radiator next to my bed burned, and I quickly threw off the duvet and hurried over to the window. I opened it, and leaned out to breathe in the fresh air. Eventually my heart slowed down and the sweat dried on my face. The night was freezing cold, making me shiver, but I did not want to go back to bed; sleep held that terrifying imprisonment from which it was impossible to escape. I leaned out of the window, looking down at the large, neat garden in which much of my childhood years had been spent, and remembered many occasions as a boy when I had stood, similarly, at that window in the middle of the night. Back then I found it difficult to sleep. My eyes wandered over to the shed at the bottom of the garden. It was deserted, not having been touched for months. Yet it remained tidy and bland, no weeds creeping round the door or cobwebs adorning the windows. My father's presence still reigned, even though he was dead.

Before I could stop it, an image of his dead body buried deep underground, decaying and mouldy, flashed through my mind. I shook my head. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to forget all about him and get out of his house - but we'd only had the funeral the day before. My sister, Laura, and I had promised my mother that we would stay with her. Yet every step I took in that damn house, I came face to face with him. His belongings, the way he ran the house, the things *he* liked; they were all still there. His preciseness, his orderliness – he never put a foot wrong – were deeply rooted in the house. These were things I had hated.

I had been thrown out of the house when I was eighteen. Of course, my father did not use passion or violence. He simply told me, politely, to leave. I was now old enough to make my own way, he had said. And I wasn't to ask him for anything, he made that quite

clear. If he wanted to give me anything, he would do it of his own will. Of course by that point, I was only too glad to get as far away from him as possible. My mother was little more than his maid; she had to do whatever he said. He had obviously discussed the issue of my moving out with her, but by then she knew better than to object. I think in the first couple of years of their marriage, she had stood up to him more. But he beat her down in the end. Oh, he never laid a finger on her; it was just that his will was stronger than hers.

The day I left was the last time I had set foot inside my father's house. I had moved far away, and saw my parents rarely. If I did see them, it would be at my own flat, or at a pub or restaurant. That was the way I had wanted it, and I was glad that my father did not object. If he had, then things would have been different; for from my earliest days it had been imprinted on my mind that *he* was the head of the house and got whatever he wanted. I think that was the reason that he liked me being away from his home: in the natural course of things, I, as the eldest son, would eventually take his place. That fact did not sit well with my father. In fact, I would go as far as to say that he hated it, and did everything in his power to prevent it from happening.

I never remember having any feelings for my father. My strongest emotion when I was around him was a distinct feeling of discomfort. As a young child I had been beaten into submission until I would never dare step out of line. I will say again that he never used any violence against me. His abuse was of an emotional kind.

My younger sister had a less controlled nature than myself, and as a child she was also bullied by him. He would fire cutting remarks at her across the dinner table until she cried. Then she would be called pathetic and useless. He made us behave like adults, even at very young ages. We were forced to drink wine at dinner, and eat rich food that we could not stomach. If we were sick or ill, we were not given any sympathy. If there was one thing he could not stand, it was illness; it seemed to make him mad with rage. I remember that he refused to speak to me or look at me for a month after I caught measles.

We were made to read aloud to him for an hour before bedtime. The books we had to read were of a much higher standard than we were old enough to understand; but if we struggled, we were cut down with his acid words. We soon learnt that crying was unforgivable, but my sister found the impulse much harder to conquer than myself. Much of my youth was spent trying to protect her; yet so terrified was I of him, that I failed miserably. My sister was exposed to his cold nature much more than myself because she

was often an emotional wreck – especially in her teens. He only had to look at her and she would whimper. I, on the other hand, chose to shut him out. I hardly ever looked at him. The sight of his cold, expressionless face was more than I could bear.

As my father grew older, I did not cease to feel afraid. It was not actually him that I was afraid of; my fear was of doing something that he did not like. I became obsessed with the idea of illness, and even at the smallest headache I would dose myself up to the eyeballs and hide in bed, willing my body not to get ill. I never had real conversations with him. If I spoke to him on the phone, I would always say the same things; that I was fine and work was fine and life was fine. I never told him about my personal life and he certainly never asked about it. Indeed, there wasn't much to tell: I found it immensely difficult to form relationships with anyone, and spent much of my time alone in my flat.

My mother sometimes asked me about my life, whenever he was out of earshot I presume. But I had become alienated from her as well. When I was younger and living at home, she never once stuck up for Laura or me when we were bullied by our father. The most we got from her was sympathetic smiles behind his back. But she was too weak even to protect her own children. She was a transparent sort of person really, and didn't have much personality. When I was a teenager I hated her for that, but as I grew older I just felt sorry for her. Imagine being married to a man who had to live his life, day by day, in an exact order. It got worse as we grew up. He became obsessive, starting habits like only eating hot breakfasts on dates that were divisible by four, only drinking white wine on Sundays or red wine on a week day, things like that. And we all had to live in that way. But at least Laura and I got out, however scarred it left us. My mother had to live with it all her life. In fact, I seriously wondered how she was going to cope now that he was dead. She would not know what on earth to do with herself because she was so used to being told what to do.

His illness had been brief – a couple of months. He had not spoken to anyone during that time. I had visited him, the day before he died. I crept into that bedroom, which I had only ever seen through a crack in the door, as we had been forbidden to enter it as children. I looked round with some interest. After all, I had lived in that house for eighteen years, and to see the room for the first time after all that time was somewhat confusing for me. However, it held no surprises. Everything was in absolutely perfect, neat order. The desk was bare except for a small white lamp. The walls were painted white and the floor was bare except for a neat, white rug under the bed. No belongings lay

around the room as they did in my own flat; everything was hidden away in drawers and cupboards. It looked almost clinical.

I stole up to the bed in which the thin, pale figure lay, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. I stopped by his side and for the first time ever, I looked down at him.

“Hello, Father,” I whispered.

No reply.

“I’ve come to see you.”

Nothing. I sat down slowly on the rocking chair next to the bed and stared at him. Then I began to talk.

My voice sounded high pitched and strange. The years of instinctive cowering clashed with a sudden feeling of empowerment, making my voice tremble. I told him that I hated him, that he had ruined my life. Still he said nothing. But no remorse showed in his face.

My voice trailed off. I had looked at him for too long, when I had been so used to shutting him out. I turned my head away and realised with a shock that tears had come to my eyes. I was weaker than him, even on his deathbed. He had won. I left the room.

We buried my father on a viciously cold, windy Tuesday afternoon. Laura cried hysterically, but I wasn’t sure if it was grief or relief that prompted her tears. My mother stood looking confused and disordered, as if she wasn’t quite sure what had actually happened. I looked over at her repeatedly during the service but she always looked as if her attention was somewhere else. I shed no tears as I watched the burial. I just stared at the coffin blankly. After staying in that house for the past week, I don’t think I could quite believe that he was really gone.

After the funeral, my mother went straight to bed, and Laura and I stayed up and drank wine together. We talked about our own lives, but we didn’t mention him once. I saw her shudder a couple of times when she glanced around the room, and knew that she was feeling what I felt - that we weren’t free until we left the house. When we finally went to bed it was late, and the house felt eerie and silent. I said good night to my sister outside her bedroom, and on impulse I kissed her cheek. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was that she had had to go through what she had, that I hadn’t been strong enough to shield her, but I could not find the appropriate words. I wanted to hug her, to show her that she was protected and loved, but I didn’t know how because I’d never been shown. Instead I just stood looking at her for a minute.

I said goodnight, turned away and walked towards my own room, but my feet took me past the door. I walked instead to the room at the end of the corridor – my parents' room, the forbidden room. My mother had not slept there since his death. I let myself in cautiously. It looked the same as the last time I had been in it, except that the bed was empty. I looked round for a minute, feeling apprehensive in the knowledge that I was in forbidden territory. Yet nobody came to stop me, and I decided to have a look inside the cupboards. The first I looked in was full of clothes, but the second contained all sorts of my father's belongings. Most surprisingly, buried at the back, were three photograph albums. I hadn't realised that he had enough sentiment in him to keep photos. I slowly picked one up. It was very old. I opened it, and saw black and white family photos, my father as a young boy with his parents. I was shocked. Why hadn't I ever been shown these? I had only ever seen one photograph of my grandparents, who had died before I was born, and that was blurred and faded. I watched my father's young face smile at the camera; he looked like such a happy child. I wondered what had made him so bitter. The second album was similar to the first, my father slightly older, a laughing, joking teenager. But the third; it showed my father as a young man, with groups of friends. One friend in particular stood next to my father in all the photos: a tall, blonde young man, who I didn't recognise. At the end of the album were pictures from my parents' wedding, and here I saw the man I knew; cold, unsmiling, cruel. The pictures did not correspond. I wondered why he was so different from the older photos.

As I reached the end of the album and was about to shut it, a small Polaroid picture fell out of the back sleeve, having been shoved inside it. It fell on to the floor face down, and I picked it up ready to put it back, glancing casually at the image. I don't remember how I felt or what I did, I only know that I did not put the photo back, but stared at the two people in it for a long time; my father, the younger, smiling version that I had never known; and the tall blonde man. They were kissing.