Compass and Torch

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The road ends at a gate. The boy waits in the car while the man gets out. Beyond the gate is the open moor, pale in the early evening with bleached end-of-summer grass, bruised here and there with heather and age-old spills of purple granite. The boy, though, is not looking that way, ahead. He is watching the man: the way he strides to the gate, bouncing slightly in his boots, his calf-muscles flexing beneath the wide knee-length shorts, the flop of hair at the front and the close-shaved neck as he bends for the catch.

The boy is intent. Watching Dad. Watching what Dad is. Drinking it in: the essence of Dadness.

The man pushes the gate with one arm, abruptly, too hard – the boy misses a breath – and sure enough, the gate swings violently, bounces off the stone wall and begins to swing back again while the man is already returning to the car. But then it slows, keels out once more, and comes to rest, wide open, against the wall: the man judged correctly after all. The boy is relieved. And, as the man drops into the driving seat something in the boy's chest gives a little hop of joy and he cries excitedly, 'Oh, I brought my torch!'

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Coming downstairs after finding his torch, he overheard his mother say what she thought of the expedition.

Mad, she was calling it, as he knew she would. 'Mad! The first time in four months he has his eight-year-old son and what does he plan to do? Take him camping up a mountain! Talk about macho avoidance activity!' Her voice was low, and light and mocking, but he heard it catch, and he could also hear Jim, his mother's boyfriend who lived with them now, shifting at the kitchen table with an unhappy kind of rustle. His mother said: 'Well, what do you *expect*?' There was a choke in her voice now, and suddenly a kind of snarl: 'You wouldn't expect him to start *now*, would you – accommodating his child into his *life*?'

When the boy stepped into the kitchen he saw her start with alarm and shame. He said, 'I found my torch.'

'Oh good!' she said quickly, wrenching a look of bright enthusiasm onto her face.

The light seeping through her fuzzy hair made the bones of his shoulders ache.

Jim asked kindly, 'Is it all in working order?'

The boy forced himself to put the torch into Jim's big out-stretched hand, to stand

still and attentive while Jim gently twisted the barrel to make the bulb come on.

'It's a good one,' said Jim, pointedly approving, handing it back.

'Yes,' said the boy, forcing himself to acknowledge Jim's kindness and affirmation.

But Jim is not his dad.

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'It's a red one,' he tells his dad now. 'It's in my rucksack.'

'Oh,' says his dad, 'good, good,' a little distractedly, driving the car quickly, efficiently through the gate. His dad parks the car neatly, gets out smartly and shuts the gate.

Some yards off on the tufted moor a scattered group of wild ponies lift their heads and sniff the air. One, dappled grey, moves with interest towards the car, man and boy.

The boy is still in the car, tugging at his rucksack, fighting with stiff straps to get at the torch. As the man comes back and puts his head into the open door, he holds it up: 'Here it is!'

'Great!' cries the man. He isn't looking at the torch.

He is looking away, seared by the glitter of anxiety in his little boy's eyes.

The horse comes up to the car. She nudges up, puts her nose over the edge of the door. The man bats her away.

It's OK, the boy decides, that his dad hasn't looked at the torch, hasn't studied or handled it like Jim. It's better: the torch is not for looking at now. It's better to have for it a proper purpose, to put it away, to carry it carelessly but with meaning, as a warrior might carry his sword. A torch is for lighting when the time comes, for lighting up the expedition of father and son.

'Come on!' says the man, all briskness now, and holds the door back for the boy to get out of the car.

Neither man nor boy takes much notice of the horse. The man steps back, and she swings her head out of the way. They go to the boot, and after a moment she slowly follows.

The boy is chattering:

'Have you brought one too, have you brought a torch?'

'Oh, yes!'

Is this a problem? the boy suddenly wonders. Does this make one of the torches redundant? For a brief moment he is uncertain, potentially dismayed, a mood which the man, for all his distraction, catches.

‘We can use both of them, can’t we, Dad?’

‘Oh, yes! Yes, of course!’

Then a swoop of delight: ‘We can light up more with both, can’t we?’

‘Oh yes, certainly!’ The man too is gratefully caught on a wave of triumph. ‘Oh, yes, two are definitely better! Back-up, for a start.’

Two torches are for lighting a bigger space in the wilderness, for lighting it together. Two torches are for father and son to back each other up.

The man has swung up the car-boot door. The horse, softly curious, is standing behind.

‘What colour is your torch, Dad?’

‘Er …’ The man is peering into the boot, preoccupied once more now, turning his attention to the bags. ‘Er ... it’s green.’

Unseen by the man and boy, clouds sweep like opening curtains above the brow of the hill and the grass lights up, bright yellow. Ancient rocks glint like heaving carcasses asleep.

Man and boy both peer intently into the boot. Behind them, the horse looks in too, through dark, deep-fringed eyes.

The man lifts up the tent in its smart holdall-style bag.

The boy still chatters. ‘Is that the tent? What colour is it? Is it that round kind? Does it have a little porch?’

The man says with robust authority: ‘It’s an all-weather mountain tent. Two-man.’

The boy is thrilled. A tent to weather all conditions. In which he and his father will be two men.

The man looks up – for the first time – at the path they will take, which runs from the gate to the brow of the hill. Then he groans: ‘I didn’t bring a compass.’

The boy’s eyes are suddenly wide with fear and dismay: not with the notion that they’ll get lost, but because of the way the man’s shoulders slumped and the tent in his hand dropped back onto the boot floor.

But then the man says quickly, almost brightly, ‘Never mind!’ and swings the tent out.

The boy breathes with relief. ‘I’ve got a compass,’ he cries, ‘and guess what, I forgot mine too!’

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He ought to have remembered it when he went upstairs for the torch. He might have thought of it if he hadn’t already heard from his room the intent murmurings in the

kitchen, and known the sort of thing his mother would be saying, and wanted badly to get back down there and make her stop.

No hope of him relating to his son on any personal, day-to-day level! No hope of him trying to RELATE to him, full stop!

The boy might have remembered it, the compass, as they were leaving. But he couldn't wait to get going, for it all to be over: the way his dad said, 'Hi there!' in that brittle, jovial way to Jim, and the way Jim dropped his eyes when he'd said Hi back, as if he understood all there was to understand about Dad, and didn't want to embarrass him by letting him know that. As if as well as despising him, Jim also – horribly – felt sorry for Dad. And the way his mother said hardly anything, and made her face blank whenever Dad spoke to her or looked her way, and kept shredding a tissue so bits leaked through her fingers to the floor. When they were ready for off she put her head in through the car window, and her eyes were bulging and wobbly with tears, and he thought he couldn't bear this: that she didn't want him to go, that this moment which he had looked forward to, longed for, as his moment of joy, was a moment of unhappiness for her. And that terrible thing she had said then to Dad: 'Now you *will* be careful? Don't go camping too near the edge.' Unforgivable – as if she and Jim didn't think that Dad could think of such a thing for himself.

And then the worst thing of all: that brief but really awful moment when the car slid out of the drive and he felt, after all, he didn't want to go. That was another reason the compass never entered his head.

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But they don't need a compass after all. They are adventurers, after all. Compasses are things that boys and dads tend to have, but which, when they are alert and strong at heart, they can leave behind. It is no accident that they both left their compasses behind.

'I keep mine by my bed,' he tells his dad. 'Where do you keep yours?'

'In my desk,' says the man.

The boy nods with satisfaction. He struggles unsuccessfully to get his arm in his rucksack strap; his arm flails.

The man notices this, and it makes his chest twist. He holds the strap wide so the boy can get his arm in. The horse nuzzles the rucksack top and the man pushes her away.

The horse sighs. She wheels around. Facing the open moor, she lifts her tail, spreads her hind legs and provides a close-up display which could easily fascinate an eight-year-old boy: opens and flexes her bright-red arse and lets out a steaming stream.

‘Is it the kind of compass where the top lifts up, like mine?’ asks the boy eagerly, with eyes only for the man.

As the stream goes on hitting the ground, the man snaps the boot shut, with satisfying clicks attaches sleeping bags and tent to his own pack, and shoulders the lot. The boy is gratified by his speed but unsettled by his subtle nervy hurry. The man checks the car locks. ‘Right?’ says the man decisively and, without looking round to check the boy is following, sets off.

Which is good, thinks the boy: no-nonsense. There’s an important adventure ahead, which means there’s no time for hanging around. ‘Right!’ he echoes, and sets off too, running to catch up.

Neither looks back at the nestled shiny car, the snaking wall, the ghost-coloured ponies in the hummocky grass.

The man strides; the boy walks fast, gladly half-runs, proud to keep up. They reach the top in no time. When they get there, they do not stop, as most walkers do, to take in the view, the purple sweep of the plain towards the blue wall of mountains beyond. They keep going, and the boy is asking, ‘Is it one of those tents where you don’t have to use pegs?’

Halfway down the next incline a thought suddenly occurs to the boy. He slows briefly, arrested. ‘Dad, hey, do you think that horse wanted something to eat?’

‘Maybe,’ says the man, cheerfully, dismissively, having to call because the boy has fallen behind.

The boy puts his concentration into keeping abreast.

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Ten minutes later, when the ponies reach the brow, heading in for the night, there is no sign on the plain of the man and the boy. Too purposeful to loiter, too focused on their goal to stop and gaze at the still black mirror of lake, man and boy have crossed the tract of land and are gone.

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They camp under the highest peak, on the far side of the plain. They have pitched their tent, they have lit their stove, and in the quick-dropping dark at the foot of the mountain they have eaten their reconstituted soup. And all the time the boy talked: about the stove, about the valve at the top of its canister of gas – gabbling, his voice growing shrill when the man failed to light it first time and the flare sputtered and died.

In the plummeting darkness, the man’s own anxiety began to mount. He could feel it gathering in the blackening chill: the aching certainty that already, only one year on from the separation, he has lost his son, his child. And the thought grew so strong that he could only half-listen to the child’s earnest desperate voice.

At last the child, tucked up in his sleeping-bag, chattered himself out.

The man gently takes away the torch.

It isn't long before the man, already expert at blanking out pain, falls asleep too.

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Neither hears the horses moving round the tent in the night.

For years to come, though, in his dreams the boy will see their wild fringed eyes and feel the deep thudding of their hooves.