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Atonement

by Daniel Judd

She lay in the dark and new everything. She knew her dad was a bastard.

The water in the bath moved in waves, some making a bid for freedom as Jan leaned over and looked at the alarm clock on the floor.

“Another ten minutes wouldn't hurt,” she said out loud, as she lollopped back into milky grey water, the letter in her hand bleeding ink.

Jan's reasoning was sound. Her Dad had left her, little Stephen and their glorious mother in the family car with a flailing business and not a bean. A large minus number of beans, in fact.

She could still feel Ste's grip as he held her hand, not wanting ever to let go of his big sis, as their mum opened the shop. Business as usual. The car sped off around the corner of Church Street, the bottled-blonds belongings piled high on the backseat, blocking the driver's view. Perhaps they'll crash and burn, Jan thought.

Eddie was driven by that compulsion that most mothers of a happy, healthy and beautiful daughter could barely understand. He'd wanted a son. Vanity thy name is Eddie!

Three miscarriages later, and her mother's looks soon lacked the luster of the jewel that had once proudly hung on his arm and his every word. The family name he wanted to

continue now a byword for evil. Her former glory locked up in a locket she would clutch for dear life. Soon that's all she had left from a marriage unexpectedly announced on her 21st birthday. It was the first she'd heard of it. A day marked every year by the receiving of a piece of jeweler. Piece by piece the annual gifts of glitter would disappear.

Then, when Jan was 9, Ste came along. An unexpected bundle of mischief and mayhem. Too little, too late. The rows and the cheating had already led to departure day. A delicious irony, or so she thought.

The letter had disturbed her world view or at least the part of it called New Beacon, a seaside town they forgot to knock down. It was in her recently, dear-departed brother's neat handwriting, not typed, for that, presumably, personal touch.

Her brother was not her brother but her half one. A halfling, to use that quaint, archaic yet ever so damning word. She had stopped and paused at that point and took a glug from the champagne flute. She suddenly realized it all made sense. While clearly her mum had chosen wisely - tall, propensity for baldness, love of all things churchy' - there was one thing she'd got wrong - the kindness.

"Uncle Dicky!" she shouted, as if she'd just worked out the identity of another murder in Midsommer.

But then the feeling of satisfaction faded, as she realised, not that her mum had cheated but the fact she had lived a lie. A big fat one. That tall, glorious and glamorous lady, forever preserved, due to an early death at just 52, had lied. Like a ship's figurehead, confidently guiding her to the safe shore, her mum had been there for her, despite not being, had lied to her.

But then she laughed - heartily.

"Eddie never had a son!"

She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

She lay in the half-light and now new everything. The water was now muddied a darker grey.

She raised the glass to the bastard.