Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

Skeletons

by Ano Tura

A loose stone caught in the trolley wheel, dragging it along the concrete. It happened a lot. The old man bent down and easily dislodged it with his finger. The secret, he discovered, was to deal with the matter straight away, or it would press too deeply and be a bugger to fix. It was a lesson well-learned he thought, smiling within each time, given how much of a procrastinator he remembered being. But every time he bent over, the thick shirt that he had tucked into his trousers, to keep out the cold, pulled itself out. He tucked himself back in each time and continued pushing the trolley. He didn't like belts. There were some things he would just never learn.

'Blah, blah, don't you fucking dare do this, don't do that.'

The old man took the same route, alongside the river, every day. Thick weeds pushed out from gaps between the slabs, and teasles lining the edges, were a magnet for the goldfinches. He had retrieved the empty trolley from amongst the buddleia, which had taken over the space between the railway sidings and the abandoned, rusting industrial sheds. It was safe there with him overnight, hidden from the guy in a yellow coat over the road at Tesco. There was often a rogue trolley hanging around which had strayed from the flock, and he always rescued it.

'Just fuck off! Leave me alone, you bastard.'

After traversing the last of the slabs he squeezed the trolley through a furled tear in the wire fence.

'Hold on Mr. Pickles. I'm coming. Piss off!'

He pushed the trolley to the edge of the river.

'Get out of my life! Come on boy.'

With an almighty effort, from stick-thin arms poking out of grubby oversized coat sleeves, he lifted the trolley over the parapet and let it drop into the river below. Plop!

‘Mr. Pickles? Mr. Pickles?’

He moved back from the edge after the last ripple gave up the ghost. The low sunlight, peeking through the bare trees, glistened a tear running down the old man’s ruddy cheek. He turned around and walked away.

David and Rachel were watching from a bench.

‘What a fucking loony.’

‘David! He’s probably got mental health issues.’

‘His missus probably kicked him out, more like!’

They walked across the road and into the reception of a grey building. Stark lighting from overhead fluorescent tubes highlighted the depressing interior.

‘Hi, it’s Rachel Jones, this is David. We’re here to pick up our dad’s ashes.’

The reality suddenly shook David as they were handed a cardboard box containing all of what was left of a lifetime of regret. He could feel tears of his own begin to form, and when they arrived he was able to see through them with a lucid clarity.

‘Now I’m a single dad myself, I think I understand him a bit better. Maybe it wasn’t his choice to leave us. Maybe mum wanted him to go. Relationships are really hard, you know. Being a dad is hard! And there are some things you just don’t tell your kids.’

His sister gave him a hug, ‘You’ll see little Poppy soon. She can’t keep her from you forever.’

The receptionist went to the window, ‘Before you came in I saw you watching Terry.’

‘Terry?’

‘Yeah, Trolley Terry. We often see him, wheeling a trolley into the river.’

‘How do you know him?’

‘His adult children came in here a few years ago to collect their mum’s ashes. They said that Terry had left them when they were kids and taken the family dog with him. They were distraught. Then one day the poor thing fell into the river. Terry threw in a trolley in a desperate attempt to give it something to climb onto. But it went under and never came back up. They said they could never forgive him and he eventually lost his mind. At low tide you can see hundreds of trolleys half-buried in the mudflats; skeletons of lost lives, you could say.’

David looked down at the box in his hands. His father’s name was printed on a small white label. Beneath it, in biro, someone had written: COLLECTED.

He thought of the old man at the river, calling for a dog that had been gone for years. Then he thought of Poppy, waiting somewhere for him—or perhaps no longer waiting at all.

'We should go,' Rachel said softly.

David nodded, but didn't move. Outside, beyond the window, the river kept carrying things away.