

Joe's Gran

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a pale winter shiver

by

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It's very quiet. The snow is muffling everything outside and even the light is quiet. The sky is dark and full and a bank of peachy clouds are creeping in from the sea. The roads are fluffy and under the fluff is ice. A few cars are abandoned - slewed sideways and some a bit crumpled.

I like the snow. A lot of times I'm reading about how snow makes everything look beautiful and pretend.

But I think snow makes us see things the way they really are. It makes us all behave the way we really are, by making everything feel just that little bit further away.

And the beauty and the stupid crashes and the children playing and the old folks starving are all part of that.

But I can't go out in it.

I'm not sure how much is sensible caution, and how much is sheer cowardice. Since I fell over in October I've been feeling increasingly unsure of myself. There seems to be a shudder hanging around my everyday movements. I cannot trust my legs to put my feet down in the right place.

Up until now I have been making a point of going out.

I have been walking into town,
and walking to the beach. And to
the headland, where I can sit on
the bench at the end looking out
at the sea. Someone has tied a
bunch of plastic flowers to the
seat to remember someone. There
was a card, but it has long since
gone to mush.

I sit next to the flowers,
whoever they belong to. No-one
will tie flowers to this bench to
remember me. No-one knows it is
my favourite bench.

I only come here alone. Most of my
favourite places I only go to
alone.

I turn on Joe's computer.

The family gave it to me after
Joe - my daughter's youngest -
died. He had been trying to teach
me how to do emails and look at
interesting things on the
internet. It was really nice.

He'd come round and sit on the sofa - a bit awkward in those heavy trousers with bits of chain all over them that kept getting caught on the cushions.#

And one afternoon, he brought his computer with him - a laptop he'd paid for with his own money from work. He was really proud of it.

He'd just brought it round to show me at first - he was showing it off to everyone.

And I think he was surprised because I was actually interested.

And we got talking. Proper talking, not just the dutiful mumbling and unwrapping of sweets. He showed me how it worked and told me how he'd chosen it, and I showed him an old word processor I'd used at work and taken home with me when I retired.

He was fascinated, and couldn't figure out how to use it at all. So I showed him and said he could take it home with him on the condition that he'd teach me how to use the computer. He didn't want the word processor, but he agreed to the lessons.

Six months later he was dead and the family gave me the laptop.

There was no mystery around his death, it was just ugly and sad.

He got squashed against a high kerb by a car whose brakes had broken. It was a bad way to go, and not a quick one either.

The funeral was horrible. Very formal and not like Joe at all. My daughter hadn't really had any experience of death before and didn't really know how to do it all properly but wouldn't hear of anyone helping. So it was a bit embarrassing really, but I felt for her.

Some of Joe's friends from school and his bright, gothy girlfriend Abigail sat bunched together in one of the pews, but nobody talked to them.

I tried to smile at them, but I was crying a bit so it must have just looked like a nasty old-woman face because not one of them smiled back. Some of them cried, but I don't think Abigail did - it's hard to tell with that make-up.

There was no wake.

I know about death because I have lived a long time. Me and death regard each-other sometimes when I am sitting on the bench out at the headland.

I'm looking out to sea and sometimes it is though I can see the other shore but it is not France or America or anywhere like that.

And recently it is starting to feel more like glancing across a river than staring out over a wide sea.

Joe's computer takes a long time to start up because he has a lot of things on it. That's what his friends told me. Joe had a lot of friends, although you wouldn't have known that from the funeral. I only found out myself when I turned on the computer for the first time.

There were a lot of people trying to talk to me, who thought I was Joe.

I didn't understand it at first so I ignored them. But they kept on trying to talk (well, they type in little boxes) and asking if I was alright.

They seemed really nice so I spoke to them and told them I was Joe's gran and explained what had happened.

They lived all over the world,
and they were very sad.

Some of them had a little
ceremony of sorts, on the
internet, which they invited me
to. They put up pictures of
flowers and things and talked
about Joe. It was very sweet.

I had no idea children could be
so kind. I don't think we were
that kind when we were young.

They said if I needed any help
with the computer, I could
always ask them. And sometimes,
when I am sitting here with the
thing on, they crop up in their
little boxes and say hello.

They talk to me more than my
family.

I am beginning to see the
computer more as a place than as
an object.

Especially since I found the games.

Of course, I'd known Joe liked to play games on the computer. He'd been playing games of one kind or another since he was very small. Little beeping picture boxes and hulking great things that plugged into the television. I never really understood them, though. Lots of things moving really quickly, and lots of *work*.

I had a look at his games on the laptop. Tried to play a few. Most of them were annoying. Partly because I wasn't very good at them, but mostly because they just didn't interest me. A lot of running and jumping and collecting things, and doing what you're told. Too much like life.

The only ones I had any patience for at all were the shooting ones you play with other people through the internet.

They didn't take much initial thought and it was quite exciting to be stalking around ruined cities with a gun. And nicely unpredictable to be playing against real people.

Dave - my husband - had been in the army towards the very end of the last war. He had it very easy, and made the whole thing sound like a tremendous adventure. I couldn't get enough of his stories, and he couldn't get enough of telling them.

He always made me feel as though I was right there, fighting alongside him and the men. There was a lot of adventure. To be honest, I think he made most of them up, but it was exciting and sexy and that's all that mattered really.

We had a lovely marriage. He died reasonably young, and still very attractive.

So it felt sort of nostalgic to be playing out those stories again.

I liked choosing the costumes for
the little men I got to run
around pretending to be.

Choosing what I looked like, what
type of gun I would carry. And I
liked playing the games.

I liked the sense of danger, I
liked the noise, and I didn't mind
the violence.

It beat Emmerdale for a laugh.

But then I found the Garden.

That is where I am going today,
because I cannot go out in the
snow and ice. Or maybe I just
don't want to any more.

It's not really a garden. That's
just what it is to me. Really, it's
one of the same kind of games as
the others, and it's got the same
sort of name. You get an intro
with a lot of explosions and
shouting and a bit of story. You
get to choose from a fair variety
of uniforms and weapons.

Then you appear on the outskirts
of a ruined city.

The difference between this game
and the others is that nobody
plays it any more.

Nobody.

I don't understand why it is
still here. Surely someone should
have taken it away by now;
realised it was useless, empty.

It must be taking up space
somewhere. Using up power.
Getting in somebody's way.

And I don't understand why Joe
has it on his computer.

Everything else he had was very
up to date. This feels older - you
can see the little squares in
everything. But it's still here.

It is quite beautiful and
romantic. The city is all crumbly
and beige, nestled among painted-
on scenery. It's always sunset.

There is the sound of battle,
from far away. Dull crunching
explosions and faint gunfire.
But it's just a soundtrack. Nobody
is fighting here.

It sounds like the memory of a
battle, and it is the same every
time.

I don't go into the city any more.
I have explored it thoroughly,
and spent a while in a big
building with the front blown
off like a dolls house.

But now I am wandering in the
surrounding countryside. It is
lovely. Lots of different kinds
of green. Luxurious trees, thick
undergrowth, sparkling little
streams and bare, pale-topped
hills, all made of tiny little
squares. There are no animals or
birds. Everything is still.

I wonder if it is modelled on a
real place? It is very detailed.
It amazes me that people have
bothered to make all this up.

And that it has taken so much work just to allow this one pretend place to exist.

So many people making up so many things out of so many tiny pieces of information. And all the things that came before, to allow them to happen. And all the things that allow me to have this machine with which I can explore this made-up place.

Alone.

In spite of what people say, computer games give you a real sense of history. They get old fast. You get your history real quick.

There's a hill here up ahead where you can see for miles. It's where I've been coming the last few days. I can see out to the ocean -which is probably painted on beyond the edge of the map, but I haven't been down to find out.

I can stand up here in my green
and brown fatigues and clumpy
boots and rucksack and hat and
big muscles and gun, and look out
to sea.

Sometimes I think about Joe, and
sometimes I think about Dave. But
mostly I think about myself. I
want to see the ocean, even if it
is just painted in little bits of
light. It is peaceful and
enormous and it has another
shore.

But today I see somebody walking
on this one.

Here in my living room I take a
sudden in-breath and I notice
that it is cold and I see that
the sun has set and I have not
lit the gasfire. I look back at
the screen.

There is another figure in the
Garden. Far, far down from the
hill, down towards the water.

A figure moving slowly from the sea towards where I am standing.

I make my soldier lie low to the ground, then I bring around my gun and look through the telescopic sight.

I don't know if it has seen me. It is so far away it is hard to see, even through the magnifier. This game just doesn't make things clear at such a distance.

The figure is just a clump of little dots, really, but it is moving with purpose.

I feel lucky I had been standing so still, and not jumping around for the sake of it, as I have done so often up here on my own. I keep the sight of my gun trained on the figure's head as it moves through my world.

I wonder whose side it is on.

I can't even remember what the sides are supposed to be in this game.

I decide to shoot. If it is a friend, I probably won't be able to kill them anyway.

I fire.

The distant figure drops and is still.

Without thinking, I find myself standing up and running, running down the hill to the seashore, to the figure that has fallen. I reach it.

It is crumpled just where the little green pixels of grass mingle with yellow pixels of the sand. I do not want to look at it.

I want to look at the ocean.

DISPOSE OF CORPSE [Y]/[N] ?

I click [Y] and immediately
regret it. The body vanishes as
if it was never there.

I exit the game.

I make a cup of tea.

I light the gasfire.

I turn off the laptop.

I turn it on again and restart
the game.

It's my Garden. Mine.

I shoulder my gun, and walk from
the ruins to the top of the hill.

The land stretches out all
around me, and is quiet and
still. But I have my gun ready,
and I do not make any extraneous
movement.

I point my gunsight to the spot
where I first saw the figure and
wait.

Nothing happens for a long time.

I relax a little and move out of the telescopic view.

And then I see movement again, a little way along the shore. Must have come from a different direction. Surprised, I fire, missing by a lot. The figure stops, spins around, looking.

Before it can draw its weapon I fire again and hit. The figure seems to stumble. I fire again, a cleaner shot and it is down.

This time I walk towards the body and look at it properly.

DISPOSE OF CORPSE [Y]/[N]?

[N].

The fallen figure is a young man in a grey uniform, not that that tells me anything. He is as pixellated as I am, and is carrying a simple rifle and standard ammunition. I take his bullets.

I am standing now on the edge of
the ocean. I can hear it - even
though the picture does not move,
the sound is of waves rolling in
and dragging away back along
the sand.

I walk forward, towards the blue,
until the whole screen is just
full of blue. I keep walking for
a long time, until I wonder how
far I have travelled.

I turn for one last look back to
shore, and see that I am still
standing exactly where I was.

The sea is the edge of the map.

I leave the body where it is and
make my way back up the hill. I
take my position again and wait
in case he comes back.

He does.

He stops at the body where he fell before and bends down, probably checking for ammo. Then he stands up and begins moving again towards the hill.

I quite suddenly do not like the slow, floaty animation they use in this game when things are far away. I fire, and now there are two corpses on the shore.

He comes back. Three.

Then four.

His start point must be somewhere along the shoreline but I never see him arrive.

I just catch a movement at the corner of my vision, and he's there, walking (gliding, really, at that distance) slowly from the sea towards my hill.

It is night-time now, and I can feel sleep making its demands of me.

To leave the Garden and go to my warm, white bed. To read the paper and drink cocoa and milk, and maybe have a biscuit.

And to know that if I do that, I can never, never go back to the Garden again.

Because I don't like to admit it, but this grey intruder frightens me.

And also I know that if I leave it now, the thought of him will follow me out of the game and into my bedroom and will wake me in the middle of the night, afraid and alone.

So I remain, and I shoot him again, and again, and again.

And then I realise that not once has he drawn his gun. I am overwhelmed by a sudden terrible sense of the purposefulness of his actions.

He arrives, and he moves towards
the hill. I kill him, and he
arrives again. At some point I
know that I will tire. I am old.
This does not feel like a game.

I think perhaps the Garden never
has.

He arrives, and this time I do
not shoot him. There's no point. I
stand and wait as he approaches.

I can feel my hands shaking on
the keyboard and making the
letters rattle.

The figure climbs the hill.

Closer and closer until
eventually he is standing right
in front of me.

I do not move.

He does not move.

Then, he vanishes.

[PLAYER.DEATHSHEAD3729 HAS LEFT
THE GAME].

Everything is as it was. The
landscape is empty. The ocean is
far away and the ruins rumble
quietly with the story of a war.

I do not know what to do so I
turn off the laptop.

I sit for a minute with my hands
covering my mouth.

I look out of the window at the
snow falling in the dark.

It looks grey and ugly under the
sodium orange of the streetlight,
and I know that it will melt and
refreeze tomorrow into slush
then ice, and be dangerous and
boring.

And I will still have nowhere to
go, and nobody will visit me.

I look back at the computer and
turn it back on.

I make a cup of strong coffee and
start the game again.

He might have gone forever.

He hasn't.

He's come back, and I can see him at the top of the hill - a fuzzy grey outline looking down towards the ruins, towards my start point. His gun is drawn and aimed at me, but he does not fire. He does not move towards me. He is waiting at the top of the hill.

I know that I will go to him, but to do what, I do not yet know.

My heart feels light and fluttery in my chest and I am sure that coffee at this time of night is no longer a good idea for me.

I think about Dave in the war and wonder for the first time what he really must have felt when faced with the enemy - his enemy - if he ever saw them at all.

I think about Joe, stuck and
squashed by that car, bent over
and trying to breathe with his
lungs all full of bits of bone. I
wonder if he saw the face of the
man who was driving.

I think of all my friends who
have died in so many ways
throughout my long life. I think
of my family.

I feel cold, even though the
gasfire is on high, and I feel my
age creeping over me like moss.

With the sound of battle behind
me, I draw my weapon also, and
walk towards the hill.

I climb the hill and it feels
difficult, heavy, like I am
really climbing. I do not want to
reach the top.

I do not want to know who or
what it is that has come for me
from across the ocean.

But I climb steadily and keep my
gun pointed at the figure in
grey. And he keeps his pointed at
me until we are once again
standing opposite each-other,
unmoving.

Then words appear in the corner
of the screen.

PLAYER DEATHSHEAD3729 SAYS:

[JOE?]

I stare at the words. My mind
blinks. My eyes do not. My soldier
is frozen on the screen, and I am
frozen in my chair.

The words flash up again.

PLAYER DEATHSHEAD3729 SAYS:

[JOE?]

I blink. I breathe out slowly.

Then..

PLAYER DEATHSHEAD3729 SAYS:

[JOE? IT'S ABIGAIL.]

I breathe in again. Oh, Abigail. I am so sorry. What have you been doing? What have you been thinking as you've been walking and walking and being shot down?

PLAYER DEATHSHEAD3729 SAYS: [I MISS YOU JOE.]

The little soldier in grey is still holding up its gun and not firing.

I type quickly. [ABIGAIL, IT'S JOE'S GRAN.]

Then there are no more words on the screen. The grey soldier lowers its gun, but clumsily, the way they will if a player takes their hands away from the controls.

I take my hands away from the controls too. This empty, forgotten game is not my garden. Not my secret place to wander through, alone.

It was theirs.

I look at the soldiers standing
together on the hill at sunset.

Two little puppets of light and
thought.

And I turn off the computer as
the snow falls quietly outside,
making this world a ghost of
itself.

