

A DECAYING MATTER

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All you have to do is dig to succeed. I'm digging for victory – my toys have all run out of fuel and Dad is as off limits as Mum's dolls, not that I'd play with them anyway – I'm a boy. I'm going to dig so far into the mud that my hands are going to shine brighter than Dad's war medals. He's in a wheelchair now. He militarily wears a blank expression and only calls people by a nickname esoterically known to them. Mum and I take him everywhere now, not like before when he would drag us everywhere. I'm trying to carve out the Thames with this copper-rusted trowel. The beaten metal collides with something soft in the harsh dirt. I peer inside the parched soil crater and a vein of flesh flashes before my eyes. It looks like an earlobe. Hesitantly, I plunge the trowel into the adjacent muck. The texture hardens as I collide against a wedged surface. Frantically unearthing the dirt, two large holes peer at me, accompanied by a pitiful expression on the face of a skull. Who was this? Was this fractured pile of naked bones once a curious boy like me?

'Yes,' Dad answers me. 'Not too long ago, I should think.'

He didn't even flinch as I strained my arms against the handles of his chair to wheel him to it. My hands are red with contrition and the trowel gleams guiltily.

'Shall I ... cover it up?' I cautiously ask him.

'Why?' Dad stares through me as if I am not there. 'Do corpses frighten you?'

I don't know how to respond to him. I don't think many people do anymore.

‘I hope they do, my son, because when the dead bodies stop giving you nightmares, you become as placid as they are. They become more useful than you, spreading their hope to the soil as you restlessly toil over what happened.’

‘Dad, what happened to you in the Great War?’

‘I lost an arm. Then a knee. An ear. My skull.’

‘And they repaired everything?’

‘No, son. I was buried like everyone else.’