

Extract from *Cold Light* by Jenn Ashworth

Beginning of this January, the council got together with the school and Chloe's parents and set up a memorial fund. There was a consultation and a vote at a meeting in the Empire Services Club. The crowd was so big it overflowed the bar and spilled onto the bowling green. Someone came round with a tray of tea in those beige plastic cups with the plastic frame holders you get to stop you squeezing too hard and covering yourself in boiling liquid. We voted, all together, for a memory. A memorial. A house. The upshot of it is the city has decided to build a summerhouse overlooking the banks of her pond.

It's not a pond and it's not hers. It's a concrete bottomed pool, man-made and deeper than it looks. The yeast in the bread thrown to the ducks has polluted the water so there are no fish and no reeds – it's a dead, black disc surrounded by a tangle of grey and leafless trees and hawthorn: their branches are decorated with torn carrier bags and faded crisp packets.

It's not a place where anyone, least of all Chloe's parents, would want to *sit and rest a while*, as it will say on the bench. But the city has decided. The council is putting up the money; Terry did the publicity and the telethon appeal for donations, and because the wood was the place where Chloe and Carl used to go – for their *privacy* – the summerhouse, decorated with stone doves and plaster cupids, surrounded by trellis and its own decking tracing a walkway down to the dirty banks of the pond – was what they planned.

They've built a model which the camera in the studio zooms in on so that on the television it looks like the real thing. This summerhouse (a concrete folly) is half a monument to young love gone wrong and half a nice piece of publicity for their urban renewal programme: deprived areas, community cohesion – something for the teenagers to smoke their glue in. Its morbid and sentimental, it ticks all the right boxes for community enterprise funding and now it's on *The City Today*.

This February has been wet and mild so the soil is easy to turn. The location camera shows the Mayor attacking the cleared patch with a spade decked out like a maypole in pink and white ribbon. Chloe's parents, because of their guilt, had wanted the memorial to be a celebration of love and life and St Valentine and as a concession to this the City had provided the ribbons for the spade and the pink and white balloons – *gratis*. He isn't paying attention when he sinks the blade into the soil, but smiling at the pop of a few flashing cameras.

When the earth opens there's nothing to see but some plastic – thicker than ordinary bin-bags, but nothing like tarpaulin. The blade of the spade tears open the plastic and a corner of it catches underneath. Even then, it's nothing spectacular. Nothing, that is, we watching at home can *see*. No spectacle apart from a dirty fold of fabric that comes up with the soil as the Mayor leans back and jiggles the spade so that the blade turns up the first clod. It could be anything – the cover from a pram, an old shower curtain, the material from an umbrella.

In fact, it's a blue North Face jacket – waterproof and indestructible.

Terry peers into the hole, smiles, and then leans into the camera. The black bulb of the microphone is at his mouth. He says something, but I'm watching the weather girl who is standing next to him. She's holding a white candle in one hand and a pink balloon in the other. They must have used helium – the string is straight up like a plumb-line and the balloon floats over her head like an idea. Her smile freezes, then fades. Terry is still talking but the people behind him are screwing up their faces and coughing.

It's the smell.

When the mayor heaves the spade backwards again, the row of buttons that bisect his belly straining, there's an audible groan of disgust from the crowd and the weather girl lets go of her balloon, leans to the side and vomits a clear string of bile onto the ground. I watch the balloon float upwards, out of camera shot.

There's chaos. The doves are flapping at the wire of the boxes they are stacked in. I don't know if it's because they can smell something too, or because the people around them are suddenly moving, jostling each other away from the little hole, talking too loudly. The camera doesn't wobble, but pans away from the crowd, focuses on the still black water of the pond.

That's what you get if you want to do these things live. Unforeseen events. Things are falling apart. Things have been falling apart long before the mayor cracked open the ground and unleashed a smell that had Terry's weather girl vomiting into the bushes.

Terry apologises for the interruption and promises they're getting a van out to the scene *post haste* but for the time being he's going to have to hand back to the studio.

'We will be back and when we are, we'll tell you exactly what's going on here,' he says. He rakes a hand through his dishevelled hair, twitches his tie and hands back to Fiona, who is waiting on her couch, legs neatly crossed at the ankle and pressed together at the knee. She's wearing an expensive camel coloured two piece suit with patent black shoes. Fiona wants Terry's job. Beautiful.

'That's our Terry. Calm in a crisis, a consummate professional,' she says, and the man practically bows. Fiona simpers. 'First at the scene again. I think we'll be in for a long one tonight, won't we Terry?' The link is cut before he can reply and Fiona is left nodding at thin air and the programme's logo on the screen behind her sofa.

'We'll be back,' she says, 'after this,' and the adverts are as harried, jangling and garish as they usually are.

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