

*By the time he is himself again dusk has fallen and it is snowing. The temperature has plummeted and his legs are almost too numb to get up. Reeling about the little clearing, he punches himself in the arms and torso, forcing the blood that has rushed to enfold his shattered heart to flow back into his muscles. He has a job to do.*

*His nails tear away as he thrusts through the first layers of frost-hardened soil, but the deeper earth yields more easily, retaining even now some of the warmth of autumn. He pauses to stare at the blood welling in the nail beds, like crimson varnish. For a moment he can almost smell it, the intoxicating, secret scent of it. Her fingers draped over his wrist as he strokes the brush along her nails. And then the burning chemical smell of the stripper: the fleeting moment of forbidden glamour over.*

*In the distance, church bells are calling people for midnight Mass.*

*This will be his Christmas gift to her.*

*He glances over to where she lies, unable to extinguish the childish hope that she might yet stir. But the first flakes of snow have settled on a cheek no longer warm enough to melt them, and*

*frost has crept over her amber eyes. Their opaque gaze is focused on something far away, too far for him to reach.*

*He talks to her as he digs, bestowing upon her the grave goods of their memories. But they run out too soon – there should have been so many more – and then he toils in silence.*

*Sometime later he climbs out of the sunken bed he has made for her. The full moon has covered it with a silver sheet.*

*As he lifts her into his arms she seems to sigh into his chest and for a moment he stands there, breathing, as the snow drifts like confetti down through the bare branches of the trees.*

*On shaking legs he carries her across to the slot in the dark Welsh earth, grunting as he lays her down. She is a weight now. He smiles to think of how he will tease her. Afterwards, when they are together again. When he has done what he needs to do.*

*It's so cold and she's wearing nothing but a T-shirt and jeans. The T-shirt is baggy, to swamp the body she made for herself: the jeans are tight, leaving cruel marks on her soft flesh. There are other marks too, ugly black stains on the parts of her that lay on the hard ground. The blood is no longer flowing into the atriums of her heart or out of the ventricles. They learned that together, breath mingling, heads touching over the textbook. He smiles at the memory and his frozen skin crackles like wax.*

*He wants to wrap her up in his jacket, keep her warm in that frigid earth, but then when they find her they will know. And he doesn't want them to know. Not straight away. Because there are things he must do first.*

*For a long time he sits on the edge of her bed. She is asleep. That's all. A slumbering seed, waiting for spring.*

*Finally he takes up a fistful of soil. His bloody hand is numb so he doesn't feel the grains slipping between his fingers to dust her cheek. He takes another, and another, watching her features soften and disappear. A handful of earth disturbs the neck of her T-shirt and something catches in the moonlight. Her necklace. He reaches forward. On it is her ring and the key. He unfastens the chain, slips both off into his palm, then refastens it.*

*When he is done there is a slight rise in the land that might betray her resting place to anyone venturing off the dog walkers' path. He cannot bring himself to stamp it down so he lies on his stomach and lets the earth subside beneath him. With his ear pressed to the soil, he thinks he can hear her whispering. He answers her, making promises.*

*He's surprised to see the shadow of his profile on the dead leaves. It's morning. Getting to his feet, he vomits until his stomach is empty, even of bile, until he can't breathe, until the blood vessels burst in his eyes and the rising sun becomes a disc of blood, until he thinks, thank you, God, that he will die too.*

*But he doesn't die.*

*As he staggers back through the woods to where his mother's car is parked, he can hear the church bells ringing out for Christmas Day.*