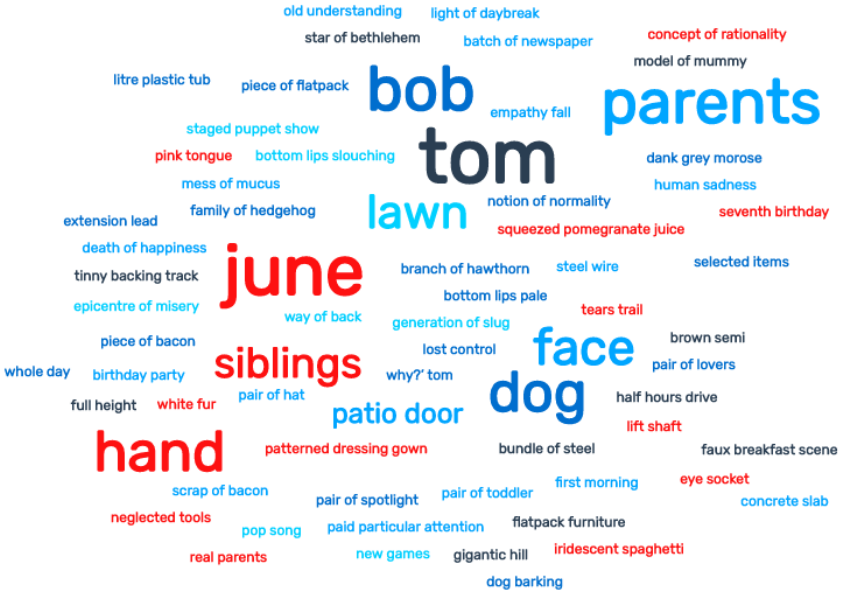

Bob

Reece Griffith

At first the children thought their parents' silence was a joke. Then they realised that everything in the garden was quiet, and watched as a robin, perched on a branch of hawthorn, had a heart attack and was swallowed by the lawn. They grabbed each other's hands. All around them the garden began to wilt as it procured the qualities of human sadness. The petunias bowed their heads and the poppies discarded their petals like useless limbs. A family of hedgehogs and badgers came to pay their respects to the death of happiness and, in its honour, killed each other on the grass. Within an hour their corpses were gone. Over the course of those seven days the house that sat on that gigantic hill, a half hour drive away from any neighbour, became the epicentre of misery. Gradually everything took on a dank grey morose look, as though the world itself was becoming a personification of the children's minds.

The siblings themselves couldn't remember what it was they had done, only that their parents had not reacted well to it. Upon being caught, June, panicked, had fallen off the back of their swing and cracked her forehead on the corner of a concrete slab, leaving her with a wound that looked like the Star of Bethlehem which refused to cease slowly leaking and would never, in her lifetime, heal. It ran into the well of her eye socket, filling it with a brown semi-liquid that came away like goo when she touched it. And then there was Tom, who, in the confusion, ended up losing the tip of his pinky finger to the curiosity of their border collie, Bob, who smelt the secretion of his sister on his hands. All this would culminate in the children's institutionalisation and the parents' arrest. But for now, Tom

lay in his bed every night staring up into the damp pulsing blackness that had accumulated on the ceiling of their room. He watched it like a film, envisioning a carousel in the garden spinning, surrounded by thousands of sweating black dogs.

The siblings woke the morning after the incident and consoled each other, holding hands meekly as they descended the stairs. In the kitchen, where the parents were cooking breakfast, they appeared in the doorway to apologise for what they had done.

'Mummy, Daddy,' they said in unison. 'We're really sorry, we're really really sorry.'

Their father turned without looking at them and kneeled to feed Bob a piece of bacon from the pan. June stretched her lips and revealed her teeth to the back of his head.

After an hour, their father had left for work. Their mother, still not speaking, drifted like a waif through the house in her purple-heart-patterned dressing gown, assaulting randomly selected items with a can of polish and a cloth.

Tom, dumbfounded, said, 'What do we do June?'

June had crept to a corner, crouched with her arms around her knees. Her face was the colour of freshly-squeezed pomegranate juice, her bottom lip pale as pip where her teeth were biting. At his questioning, she leapt up clumsily and sprinted towards her mother, who was standing at the washing machine, and started hitting her legs.

'We're sorry!' And she crumpled into the shape of a puddle, weakly vomiting a stringy mess of mucus, which her mother cleaned before leaving the room.

Tom slumped cross-legged next to her and stared into space. 'Sorry,' he said.

'What for?'

He looked at her, his bottom lip slouching, and shrugged, 'I don't know.'

‘Tom.’

‘What?’

‘He’s talking to me again.’

Tom looked at the dog laying in its bed, its ears perked up, its head tilted slightly to the side, dribbling with intrigue at the toast June was buttering on the counter.

‘He’s just hungry.’

The dog smacked its lips, its pink tongue appearing and retreating like a guillotine.

Tom couldn’t remember exactly which morning it was he woke to find the bed opposite his empty, and his sister kneeling with Bob on the landing, whispering into his ear, as he patiently mopped the perpetual drip of her weeping head. She turned to Tom as he was yawning.

‘He’s talking to me Tom, can’t you hear him?’

Tom, thinking this was some sort of new game she in her dreams had invented, giggled childishly, and imitated a TV show’s simulacrum of a dog barking. She glared at him and, seeing June was serious, a cold weight beyond the years of his understanding settled in the depths of his stomach. Later, in the bedroom, she would go on to explain how Bob had telepathically communicated with her in her dreams and how she had woken to find him sitting outside the door, desperate to transmit a message.

Back on the landing, Tom became bewitched by his sister’s heterochromic gaze, as she knelt stroking the still guzzling Bob.

‘He’s been telling me we don’t belong here anymore. He’s been telling me we’re not wanted.’

On that first morning, unbeknownst to Tom, June had paid particular attention to her father's interactions with the dog: the affectionate pats, the voice that went up an octave to imitate that of a baby's coo, the feeding of the scraps of bacon. That whole faux breakfast scene was staged around the parent's inability to disrupt that one notion of normality: to reveal enjoyment in the action of looking after the only other being out of the three dependent on them. They made the mistake of treating Bob with just as much care as usual. Some mechanism of subconscious thought clicked into place upon the sight of this, and it was then that she began to receive the first murmurings of the dog's voice in her mind.

It transformed her. Her panic faded. She let the recollections of sibling disagreements that stood for her ten-year-old understanding of empathy fall through her like a dumbbell down a lift shaft. She spent the whole day observing, tuned out to the frantic babblings of her brother, believing but not knowing that a plan for them was somehow forming.

The plan came to them that morning on the landing when she turned and translated to Tom what Bob had said.

'We have to dance.'

'What?'

June, deadpan, the dripping of her skull rising to a trickle that ran down the point of her chin, repeated, 'We have to dance. We're going to make big models of Mummy and Daddy and dance with them in the garden. Then all the sadness will go away.'

Tom, having no concept of rationality in his tiny nine-year-old mind, shrugged, figuring that there wasn't anything he could even think of better to do and recalled the fifty

minutes he'd spent earlier, picking his nose and plastering his bogeys onto the bedroom wall. 'Ok.'

They spent the next sixteen hours transmuting gargantuan batches of newspaper and wood glue into pulp, mixing it like batter with their bare hands in forty-litre plastic tubs stolen from their father's shed. From amongst the arsenal of neglected tools and iridescent spaghetti-tracks that seven generations of slugs had left behind them, they found a pair of hat stands and six bundles of steel wire which they used as the skeleton of their parental effigies.

June, possessed by some supernatural concentration, went without sleep. Tom, whereas, passed out at intervals where he was sitting and would wake, his face sticky, suddenly unable to open his eyes. Each time, she had to fetch a bowl of soapy water and a sponge to wipe away the glue that had hardened on his face. He was incessantly sleepy. There were times she would find him looking up at the clock as though hypnotised by its hands.

Then suddenly, it was finished. Tom was awoken by a strange silhouette that stood raising its arm in the centre of the sunlight that was shining orange through his eyelids.

'Dad?'

June came out from behind the mannequin, letting its arm drop, 'You've been asleep for hours.'

They waited until both of their parents were home and moved the effigies to the lawn. From the conservatory where the adults were sitting drinking tea, the siblings, by way of back and forth trips, framed themselves in the panes of the patio doors from where they knew their parents would be able to fully see them.

June, using an extension lead, plugged in the karaoke machine she had asked for her on her seventh birthday, pressed a button and stopped and stared at the speakers. The tinny backing track of some 2000's pop song began playing quietly.

Tom, taking his cue, began skipping in circles with the reproduction of the Mummy and so June ran over and did the same with the Daddy. They danced without pause, sweating through the glue still stuck to their skin, realising halfway they had lost control of the ritual. Like a staged puppet show, as the dance went on, the clouds concentrated the daybreak into a pair of spotlights, everything else darkening, and the music of the speaker enveloped them as though the garden itself was whispering.

A force pushed the children away from the grass as the effigies continued to dance, gyrating their hips like a pair of toddlers loaded off of E-numbers at a birthday party. As they shimmied, the models began to bloat and rot as moss and lichen appeared on their faces and consumed them, their eyes opening up as the papier-mâché flesh of their cheeks drooped with the damp and fell away onto the lawn. The children sat watching, thinking this is what it looked like to age a thousand years in the space of thirty seconds, imagining it was their real parents that stood there, being eaten by mold. Then the lawn wrapped itself around their ankles, embracing what was left of their metal skeletons, and pulled them into the ground.

The light of daybreak returned, and the siblings saw Bob sitting looking regal on the other side of the patio doors. He watched June as he licked his lips. Their parents were both still sipping tea.

'It didn't work,' she said, and the fluid from her head glugged out patiently. She sat down in the gravel that bordered the lawn. 'It didn't work.'

Tom stood for a moment, perplexed, then pointed and said, 'Look.'

The parents were laughing. Bob, extended to his full height, had his paws on the knees of their father, biting at his wrists as he laughed and ruffled the dog's head with both hands. The image of the pair of them through the glass became immediately petrified in June's mind. With their heads level like that, she thought, they could have been a pair of lovers.

'He lied to us.' In an instant the fluid ceased flowing. She stood, extended her hand. 'Come with me.'

'Why?' Tom took her hand and trembled, 'What has he told you to do now?'

They trapped the dog in the pantry; pried it apart with butter-streaked cutlery as though under the spell of some instructions for the disassembly of a piece of flatpack furniture. Its limbs they duct-taped to their own. When they had finished, June, watching a tear trail its way through the blood caking Tom's face, slapped him and said, 'No.'

In her mane of black and white fur she stood, knowing it was dinner time, and padded on all fours into the dining room. Bob's tail, limp and wet, taped by its stump to the back of her calf, dragged, leaving a track behind her. The parents were sitting at the table, about to eat a meat stew, when June leapt up onto the table. She straightened her back to look into the eyes of each of them, both father and mother, then shoved her face to the plate and lapped up the food. Tom slinked in, half crouching, half crawling, sat at his mother's feet, and barked.