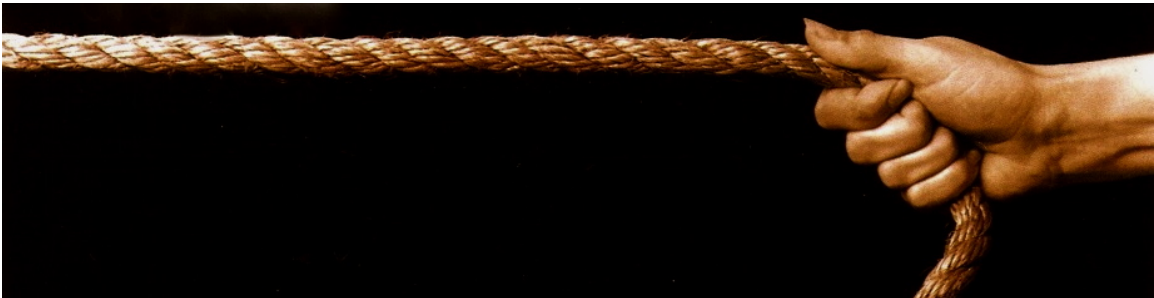


CRACKED

By Skye Loneragan



HOW DO YOU GRIEVE SOMEONE WHO'S STILL ALIVE?

Edinburgh Fringe First Winner, 2001.

Toured to Hong Kong, CityArt Festival and The Tron Theatre, Glasgow, 2002.

Premiered at The Darlington Theatre, 2004.

Adapted into a 45-min radio drama with ABC Radio National, 2006.

Hope is on the porch. Looking out.

I don't see her coming. Dad does.

Leaves the scrabble, slowly, and sticks to the flyscreen. We're in the middle of a game, and he's giving his instructions to dusk, that's what I think, but I hear it too. A car. Way too shiny to see who's in it. Tempted just to squat here like a mushroom, till they back out.

Must be lost. No one makes it here on purpose.

I can just make out a woman in a... well, like a man's wedding suit, like in the couple photos, only pinched...but I don't recognize the face. It's this window that rolls down like a magic trick, it's the mud-coloured glasses on her head, it's not a drop of sweat on her - it's not immediately apparent-

"Can I help you?"

- apparently she doesn't need a way out, and she's going on -button popping speed - Dazzie something, see I don't click it right away, she's sure I'm a firecracker I've shot up so much! Voice like a peanut. How does she know my name, says it over and over like I'm not listening and she's not certainly not slowing down, she's getting out. Out of the car. The car door almost knocks my middle, and she's got her hand out to shake, which I take, but I grab, 'cause I'm off balance, and she comes plopping out. I would say sorry but-

FRIG.

Who she is. It hits me.

and her twig heel on my bloody bare toe.

FRIG.

I just want to push her back in, hell I still have her hand, and make her back out, but she's got me. We're both playing sorry tennis, 'Sorry! No, I'm sorry', but all I can think of is how to get her out of here before she sees Dad. She pushes her way past me through our bloody pumpkin patch right up to the door! Where is he?

"Watch out for the spider web!"

That stops her.

Its almost 4.30. I don't see Dad.

She wants to know where he is, how do I tell her where he is?

Talk about stuck between a rock and a raging ocean, I try to make do,

Can I get you a glass of water?

I've gotta go get him or someone's a fried egg, and this twig walker can just make do with a glass of water, and wait , and I'll think of something, but go to get a lemon to stick in it off the tree- and what do you know?

Her car's gone! She's waiting for her piece of lemon-

There's no car! There was a car. There is no car now-

It's too quiet, I can hear myself think –

Reaching for that lemon I'm trying to work out why there is no car anymore, and I have a sort of sick feeling which I can't get to the bottom of.

Suddenly the lemon seems silly.

I think I can guess about the car.

Must be 4.30 by now. I've gotta go get Dad.

But I can hear her voice from here,

"Ooh! Ooooh! Ooh that's strange"

I know she means the car,

"did you park it round the back Hope?"

I am calm. So calm.... cutting the lemon- “Oh, did you leave the keys in?” which she did, which makes me sure about where it is, which sets her off about how its not a carpark , which makes me cut the lemon jagged, squirts up-
I can just see the clock through the lemon juice-
4.34!!! No time left.

She tries to follow me but I tell her to stay here and I’ll find it.

And I think, Back Off Point. Sure as sweat, there’s her car at the bottom of the cliff, right on top of it. A crushed tinnie. Oh Frig. I’m on the clifftop, again, last time it was the Mazda, I thought he was still in it –

“ there is only one way out Hope”, he’d say, “and its not by car.....”
-he’d pushed it off!

‘NOT FAIR!’, to no one in particular, the wind’s whipping the words right out of my mouth anyway, but an Seagull hears me, lands a big poop on my arm. That settles it. No point shouting into thin air. Not when Dad’s out there somewhere on the ocean aiming for the horizon.

I get the boat.

In the nick of time, I am, today, cause he’s really far out. Real glad to spot the pot belly. Floating on his back. Staring the sky down. Looks so peaceful I could kill him. Wants to stay , I splash him a bit, drag him up a bit, I have to say real firm:

‘you can’t sleep here, now get in!’.

Says I’m always getting in the way. Says that everyday but at least I’ve got him in the boat.

I ask him about the car. Not a word, he doesn’t say a word, not a worry in the world.

“Dad, her brand new car! Must be brand new!”. Not a word.

Not a word.

We get back. She’s on the porch. Pacing. Can’t think of one good reason , not one. Not even a lie.

Dad’s shaking her hand, he’s wet but he’s making sense, says hes glad to see her again-
I wish he didn’t go swimming in his boots-

but she just wants to know about the car, first up.

Anyone want a fizzy drink? No takers.

Dad says his eyes are sore from following her round the room and wants her to sit.
Good good, he's taking her mind of it, she's crinkled up like alfoil over that one. See- he
has a sense of humour see-, and she's got one too. See.
Sees the boots. He's taking them off. He makes another joke!
“ that's the meaning of choice, Dazzie Laten, one on one off”

One on! One off! She's still smiling.

And he offers a coffee We have none.

“What about offering Dazzie some Fanta?Dad?”

There's no coffee, Dad! He doesn't get it.

The tin is so empty I try to think of something brown we can use cause she definitely
wants a coffee and definitely wants her car, hah ha, yes, Dad turns to the sink. Its up to
me.

“Did you find it? Hope?”

Well look at that! Here's coffee!

Dad's picked a crusty cup, that one's been sitting in the backyard under a gnome for
months, she's asking me straight-

“Hope? Where is my car?”

Think of something! Joyriders, I think, it could be stolen, but then it's the police, she'd
call the police,

Dad wonders why she isn't drinking the coffee,

“do you want any sugar?” I wonder what the hell he's put in it. She takes a sip.

“oh.. iced coffee”

“Oh yes the heat... we always drink our coffee cold, it’s the heat, actually I hardly ever have to use the kettle-”

“Hope? My car?”

if its stolen the police’d ask Dad- he’s not going to be able to keep his mouth shut

I spot the crusty mark from the last coffee..

“Sorry, I’ll get you another one”

Oh no she doesn’t want another one-

Dad is saying usually I’m an Angel, Dazzie’s about to ask again but he says

“Not today- today she was an insect, Dazzie, a frowning insect”

I smile and try to look a bit like an insect to make it all right , but he says

“it’s the car she was frowning about-“

I have to stop him.

“Dad! Show Dazzie your prize watermelon! Its wonderful”.

And he will, he’s going , to get the watermelon, but she just about screams out

‘My Caaaaaar !’-

I think I should just throw in the towel , and lie down right here, right now till all of this blows over. How can I tell her their prize winning author has pushed her car off the cliff?

The Great Roger Brimming! She is sorry for screaming, but the suspense is absolutely killing her, and Dad takes a breath, so I laugh really loud , and say

“-the suspense!Yes!”

to get him off track . Distract. But he’s going on, I know what he will say next so I keep laughing over him, Dazzie’s trying to ignore me , I try louder , she squints , he’s saying something about how she doesn’t need her car anymore , he will say it all soon, I just know he will, and that’ll be it, he’ll be sacked-

So I keel over.

It’s the only thing I can think of.

Down on the floor I’m trying to look like I might die, and he does stop. He does.

I'm holding my breathe. No one says anything for a bit. Both are over me now, and Dad asks "What am I doing?" and she's "Are you alright?"

And just as he's staring at me vacant and I think I've tired him out, he turns to her and puts his arm around her real gentle :

"Do you know it took the full weight of my knowledge and both hands on the numberplate to push it off?"

Uh oh.

"What?"

"Oh yes--"

Oh no.

"and driving was bizarre, I haven't driven since I was a man,- difficult with the road rebelling in curves like that. And the clouds moving so fast."

That's it. There goes the contact, the permission, all our money , and she's beetroot.

Waiting for the punchline-

"WHAT?" It's all she can get out. "What? What?"

- would what again but its beginning to dawn on her. Looks to me for help but then I am on the floor rabbit in headlights so she decides not to bother.

"My JAAAAG?Off a cliff?"

I just stare at the ceiling

He tells her its all part of the prophecy .

Not much I can do now.

But she swears: "Oh my GOD!"

- no, no!- I crunch out a caution about the swearing- too late- Dad is big and stiff and gets right into her ear, she almost falls off her twigs, and he tells her about blamspheming,

I say its okay, she doesn't know: but she is dribbling:

"Jesus! Oh – Christ, sorry I mean- oh Lord, oh no I mean" –

"you can only use bloody well, shit, and and and Frig"

Now she looks at me like she hasn't got the right change or something.

Dad is gobsmacked. Shuts right up . Takes a slow chair.

No one says anything.

The fly screen flaps shut .

I can't look at her.

But she's staring at me like I've hurt myself:

Tells me she had no idea. Well, now we're in the shit.

Dads bugged. He gets up and she's like this , but he just touches her shoulder on the way out and says its alright cause how could she have known? He's still got the one wet boot on.

I still can't look at this Dazzie, I don't know how we can get her a new car, I don't even have bangers and mash for next week

“ Does he? I mean is he? He thinks he's-?”

“Yes. Well-yes- but he pushed our Mazda off the cliff too”

wants to know when he stopped writing, but he still does, all the time..... the second edition of the Bible. But I don't say that.

“Not long after mum died”, I say.

“I see.” she says. We just sort of look at each other for a bit . We both need some fresh air.

“So- you live... out here.... alone with him ?”

“Yep”

“So this is whats become of Roger Brimming”

Pause

She asks all these questions, all these *questions*. I tell her three times about the boat, picking Dad up. She's a bit slow. Her face is all crumpled so I have to really spell it:

“it doesn't hit on him to swim backwards when he's doing freestyle”

still no light –

“ when he’s in a forwards direction.”

Still stuck.

“ He only swims one way”.

Bingo. Truth is, it’s the rip tide past the rocks ...if I don’t take the boat out to get him - he’d come back in a body bag.

And she tells me she absolutely has to know more. But that’s pretty much it. I’ve been doing it every day for years now. Every day. 4.30. If its really stormy, he doesn’t go. And when he’s sick he stays in bed. But every other day he tries to get to the horizon. She is lit up like I’ve made her day. She says , “write that down! Write it!” Says she will check out the insurance, to get us off the hook for the car, if I give her a whole lot of info on Dad. Says his name like its gold.

“What would you do with the info?”

“There’s a lot of people who would like to know about Roger- your.....Dad” she says. I let her know I’m too worried about the next few months to even think about notes- It would mean money she says- she wasn’t going to put a price on it- but can you believe it? I can buy the next tank of petrol for the boat! And dishwashing liquid! Or at least when we a payment through..

A month later. Dazzie hasn’t called

During the next speech she is setting up the table and chair for the kitchen..

In the boat bringing Dad back I see this aeroplane , it draws this line across the sky. I point it out to Dad – its already disappearing- and he tells me about this “silly bugger” pilot once that writes ‘Run for Cover’ up there to warn people they are in for a bombing, but they all stand there to look at what he’s writing, and he takes ages, so they are all out in clear view and not underground when the raid comes.

The silly bugger can’t do it. Save them. That’s obvious.

Dad's laughing but it makes me sad the way the line just wafts away.
Sticks in my mind for some reason.

Six weeks later. Still no call from Dazzie.

I burnt the sausages. All fiveCharcoal. One minute they were brand spanking pink, and the next thing I see its allthey're all ...every one of them....hard stuck solid ..black. I put them in when the potatoes were nearly soft through, and I fork holed them all, both sides I fork holed them, way after I put the spuds on to bubble

All the while I am humming to myself and in my true head I guess I'm not thinking much, but I did check them, I did, I fork holed them early on....I check them all to make sure they are near to brown or stuck at pink, but they are only half ways ready so I mash the potatoes. Must have just been squashing too long cause spooning it out I smell- and Dad smells it too, comes in all high rising, he thinks it's a crisis fire, he's telling me to stand aside, I'm trying to say its okay, I grab the foil tray out real quick and- poof! In his face all this smoke. He doesn't see the sausages at first, shoves me down, If there was a fire I'd be safe, you know- he's got the teatowel up like this ready to swipe something, and I giggle, cause usually he is the first to see the smile in a mudslide.

"Dad, Dad, look its just the sausages, look"

. . I can see he's still stuck in the bushfire, so I go for the teatowel real gentle , slow... to let him know ...its not a problem- and he turns to rock. I can't get it from his grip.

Rock still.

He wants to hit me. He wants to hit me so bad- its in his eyes - I should duck or move or - but I can't. I don't believe he will. Not really.

"You burnt them" he says.

Happens so quick. The teatowel round my neck like this- this is real. Yanking it. It hurts.

I've never seen him so mad and I don't know the way out of this one. His hands are huge. Mine aren't strong enough. I get him in the knee with my foot, harder than I mean to. Just for a flicker his eyes close. I can breathe.

Its almost like he wants to take it back. But he's too angry.

“ You burnt them.” He says. Like I meant to.

I said sorry to the lino but he mustn't have heard cause he grabs the mash and crash! All over the floor with it. I'd put the fresh coriander in it this time. Its all stuck to his boot, he is at war with it , steps on every clump. That's the last of the potatoes, there's nothing I can do.... I want to let him know its okay, that we'll think of something else, I'll figure something out, but I'm not so sure-

I can't even de-charcoal dinner.

“Jack. 02 99356 2020. Long distance

Who? I don't hear over the beeps.I'm gunning for Dazzie, but it's a Jack .Jack Mullinar. Wants to come down here.

“Come down here, why?”

He's interested in putting me on television, but I don't want my face on the box. We don't have one anyway- its busted.

“No thanks.”

But he says my face doesn't have to be on it, Roger Brimming's face on it is enough, if they can come with me in the boat to pick him up one day-

This Dazzie's got a big mouth

Jack, I say, Jack- I don't think it's a good idea. No way.

He absolutely understands, its like chocolate his voice, like he's right next door, and he understands but all they need is a few words from him, for their documentary piece, its about famous people and the lives they lead- and he just needs just a little shot of Dad, and maybe some of the notes I've made for Dazzie- must've told the whole city- that's all he says, he says, just one day, that's all AND IT'D BE WORTH IT.

I see Dad bending over the vege patch out there. His bum's peeking out, loose elastic.

Jack leaves a big gap.

Dad picks the last zucchini off.

I tell him I think I'd better go.

"Before you do Ms Brimming"-

Ms Brimming!

"We're talking at least 8,000" – I get him to spell it, write it down, make sure- yep, 8,000!

he's sorry its not as much as Dad's royalty-

Dad's coming up the step-

but they only need a few words-

...he's at the flyscreen. I just can't.

He says call. "Call me!" .Just as I hang up.

Dad's got the biggest zucchini he's ever seen, its hilarious the way he holds it.

I almost wish I didn't write the number down.

But it's the last zucchini.

Stacks up more newspapers on the pile, perhaps now it is so tall she can kick it down during the next scene

The insurance papers turn up.

GOD! God god god god- He wouldn't sign them. I talked him through it, the money and the car and the way to get over it, and I handed him the pen , pointed to the line ,

" all we need is your signature and it all blows over."

Wouldn't do it.

His memory has faded on him.

"the car, Dad, do you remember the car?" he thinks a long while, tells me he had a car once, as a man, but has no need of such things now.

I know. I know.

“Listen Dad can I tell you the story of Dazzie?”

“Yes, my word, a story!”

“She came here by car, - a messenger for your manuscript- and she left on foot. Cause her car went off the cliff. And these papers are to say that we don’t have to pay for her car going off the cliff”

that’s pretty clear I think.

I give him time. I put some water on the stove . When its noisy in the pan he asks me what I want?

.Says he knows what I am trying to do, whoever I think I am.

Okay. So I leave him for a bit, and leave the papers there incase he has a change of heart, a jump start. He has before. Like when he wouldn’t let me listen to the old records.

I polish the sink instead. It didn’t need it, but he likes the twinkling, and the sound of water running.

When I turn around he’s staring at me. Blank.

I should be gentle but want to shake him. Hard. I give him the hot choccy a bit forceful.

I show him the papers, real slow, and the line, the place for him to sign, and hold out the pen .Oh, hurry up.

Its like he reads my thoughts, grabs my hands, looks at the pen, the mug, and me. Right into me. Through this little bit of steam between us. He’s still clutching my hands, and turns the pen around to face me. I don’t understand. Says nothing. I have to let my breathe go , blows the steam in his face. Suddenly he’s so loud I jerk back a bit :

“Who the hell are you?”.

We’ll do it tomorrow. Nevermind. But he’s still got my hand. I try to stop the pen shaking.

“Its me Dad”

“ Never seen you before”

I’m not sure but I think its my voice that tells him its *me*.

“Me Who?”

A tighter grip.

All I get out is a tiny “*Hope*”.

The pen drops . Says he doesn’t know a Hope.

“Dad, I’m your daughter”

“I don’t *have* a daughter”

So I come out here. For some space. Behind me I can hear him ‘Yes!go home’, ‘leave me alone’, ‘go home to your father’. I hear him slide the bolt, turn the deadlock.

So I guess I’m sleeping out here

Quite a few nights out here, actually.

- no insect spray.

END EXCERPT