GRANTA

The Dig

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‘In the car lights he could see just beyond the runs the bodies of cars like some disassembled ghost train littering the field.’

The boy had not slept. He was gawky and awkward and had not grown into himself yet.

When his father came to rouse him he found the boy awake with expectation.

Warm, remember, said his father.

The boy nodded loosely in the way he had. The way was to have a minute hesitation before doing things. This came from trying to be eager and cautious at the same time around his father.

He was long and thin and he could have looked languid without this nervousness but instead he looked underdeveloped. When he got out of bed in his T-shirt and shorts it emphasized the awkward gangliness of him. He had the strange selection of muscles teenage boys’ bodies either grow or don’t but the skin on his face was a child’s.

He got dressed and went downstairs. In the kitchen he sat at the table with the kind of extra-awakeness not sleeping can give you and started automatically to spread paste onto the sliced bread. He had a low-level excitement running through him. A day off school. He felt the same illicit closeness to his father as he did when they went lamping and in these times he was capable of forgetting that his father did other things.

His father put the tea on the table and filled the big flask and then they sat and blew on the tea and drank it. Then they went out.

They took the dogs from the run and got them in the car and drove off the estate. The boy found the smell of the sawdust and dog shit in the run hard to bear in the early morning. The smell of it was a strange note against the deodorant he enveloped himself with.

He had not been digging before and was trying to imagine it. He imagined it frenzied and was excited by this. He did not know it would be steady, unexciting procedural work and that it would not be like ratting at all.

He had broken his own dog to rats himself and this gave him pride. When they picked on him in school he kept his pride in this. He hung on to it.

The boy's father parked up the car and they sat seeing the dog runs and the broken machinery and the boy was momentarily stupefied by the darkness and emptiness about the place. In the car lights he could see just beyond the runs the bodies of cars like some disassembled ghost train littering the field.

The big man heard them pull up outside and saw the car lights catch and reflect on the mesh of the run and came out to them. The boy had a brief inarticulate awareness that his father shied a little when he saw the big man come from the house. He hadn't seen that in his father before. The boy thought the man looked like some big gypsy.

The man leaned into the window and the dogs in the back came alive at this new presence and set off a yapping, which set off a yapping in the dog sheds beyond. The car was full of a deodoranty smell that got into your mouth.

They yelpers? asked the big gypsy.

They're good dogs, said the boy's father.

It stinks, said the man. It's a girl's bedroom.

The big gypsy looked accusingly at the boy and the boy felt himself redden. He felt the nervous flush go up in his throat.

They're good dogs, said the boy's father.

We can't have them hard-mouthed, said the man.

No. They're good dogs, the father said.

We can't work with hard-mouthed dogs, the big gypsy said. The big gypsy was looking at the terriers, taking them in. The boy could feel there was a grown-man tension.

Then his father said: They're not hard-mouthed, mun. They're good dogs.

There were three terriers in the back. One was the big Patterdale, Jip, thirteen inches at the shoulder and a solid fourteen pounds. He was about as big as you'd want for a badger dig

without being too tall in the shoulder to suit the holes. It was why the man had called the boy's father, thinking of the big boar.

What's the pup? said the big gypsy. He nodded at the boy's dog and the boy felt the redness on his throat again.

He's just along, said the boy's father. The big gypsy looked at the pup.

He's not going down, said the big gypsy. He had to take the badger and there was too much risk the young dog would not be able to hold him. The boy felt this shame and the crushed feeling from school came up in him.

He's just along, the boy's father said.

They parked up in the machine yard of the big farm and got the dogs out and coupled them dog to bitch with the iron couplings. This was one of the bigger, richer farms locally and had years ago been one of the manor farms that worked under the big house. You could tell the historical management of it by the wider fields and the way the big oaks were spread out in them.

In the east a powder of light was just coming and in the barn the tractors looked immense and military. At the edges of the fields the trees were still a solid deep black.

They coupled the boy's pup to the older dog and coupled the gypsy's older bitch to the big Patterdale. They had to couple the right dogs. Dogs that could work together at rat could fight at a badger dig, as if they sensed the individuality of the process.

They got the tools and divided them up to carry; then they took the big five-litre tubs of water from the van and the bag with the tin drinking bowls and the food and gave them to the boy. They weighed on him immediately. It was crisply cold and with their thin handles the weight of the water bottles burned on his fingers.

They went through the gate and down the lane, letting the dogs run in front of them, passively aware of which dog took the lead of the other as they rooted in and out of the hedgeside at the dying scents laid down in the night.

Mud had gathered in the track and the overnight rain left it wet and the boy, alert and cold and over-awake, took in the sucked sounds underfoot and the clinking of the coupling chains and the body sounds of the dogs as they pushed through the undergrowth of the bank. He was using the gulping sounds of the water sloshing in the tubs as a kind of rhythm to walk by.

The thin light was beginning to increase and the few bean-shaped flowers on the gorse stood out with unnatural luminosity. The men's feet went down hard and solidly in the lane, but the boy constantly tripped on the loose stones the winter's rain had brought down, as if he didn't have enough weight to himself.

They went off the track and whistled the dogs in as they went over a field, the lambs prone and folded next to their mothers. Some of the smaller lambs wore blue polythene jackets against the rain and they looked odd in that first light and overprotected.

The boy could hear the ewes crunching and one or two faced the dogs and banged a foreleg on the wet ground, giving a thump that sounded like kicking a ball. He wished he could play, really play, but he was clumsy against the other boys. He loved the idea of himself playing and his inability was just another little cruelty. Even now, he looked out across the lightening field and saw himself catch a high kick, the crowd of trees a fringe of spectators coming to their feet as he took the ball. But then – the school field, the ball smashing off his fingers to the laughter of the other kids, the teacher's shouted scorn. That was the reality of him and it brought up a wad of sick and anger.

They worked their way down through the topped reeds that stubbled the slope at the base of the field and stopped by the brook and the boy set the water down. They put the dogs to lead. His pup was shaking a little with excitement.

He's got rats somewhere, he said. The sentence came out on the swell of pride and he realized it was the first time he had talked in front of the man.

The man lifted up a tub of water and unlidded it and took a rough swig.

Keep them in, he said. The bank's snared.

The mink had made their way up from the fur farms by now. They were not indigenous and so it was righteous to kill them. They took out the fish and the waterside birds, even kingfishers from their nests in the burrows, and had annihilated the watercourses as they came up.

It was as well to be able to produce something they could legitimately hunt if by chance they were stopped. It would explain the dogs. In reality, though, they should shoot the mink to make it look like they'd run it into a gun.

The boy was made thirsty by the river and wanted to drink but he did not like the idea of drinking the water after the big man had drunk from the tub.

In the relative openness of the lane and across the field the dawn light had been enough, but here things closed in and they checked the snares with the torchlight.

Bar the one, the snares were empty. The boy heard the dogs whine with the scent of something and the man signalled them to hold back and the boy put the water tubs down and stretched his fingers. Then the boy heard the dull crack of the mink's skull and for a while did not register what the sound was. The man had hit it with a foldaway spade.

They went on. The water had become convincingly heavy to the boy now. The scrub began to encroach the bank until it was thickened and difficult to pass and after a while they cut away from the stream. It was heavy going but somehow the big man had mobility in it and seemed to fit into the countryside in a way the other two did not.

The dogs sniffed in and out of the torch beams ahead of them and the men pushed through the sprawling holly as they drove into the wood. Every now and then they disturbed something, and there was a clatter in the branches or the tearing of undergrowth as something fled. The wood thickened. Everywhere there were branches down and in the strange beams of light some looked animal and prehistoric.

From working with the hunts the big man knew most of the land roundabouts. The hunts called in the terriermen to bolt their foxes, or sometimes to dig them out if they had gone to earth, and in the country covered with the dogs he'd had more than a chance to scout the land and get to places most people would never go. He had noted the vast majority of the local setts, and the information was a paying commodity for him, and he checked the setts regularly in the way a herdsman might his flock.

Some of the setts he knew of had been there for generations, and in other districts he had heard of those, particularly in the more impregnable places, in the harder chalk soils and rocky hillsides, that went back centuries.

Each clan of badgers had a group of setts, swapping between them periodically, sometimes with the seasons, and he needed always to know which of these was occupied. He tried not to take badgers from the same clan too regularly, to allow the family groups to recover and breed, and in this it was like he farmed the animals to ensure there were always badgers to be had.

They staked the dogs some way from the sett and poured them water and took a drink themselves. The boy had a queer feeling about the man's mouth being on the water and still did not want to drink it.

The trees had opened up a little and you could see the light finally coming through. There was a moment of greater coldness, like a draught through a door, and the boy felt an unnerving, as if something had acknowledged them arriving there. They had made a lot of noise moving through the wood and when they stopped they heard the birdsong and the early loud vibrancy of the place.

First dig? said the man.

The boy nodded, with that hesitancy. They could hear the dogs lapping and drinking at the water bowls.

The big man had been up to the sett the afternoon before and seen the heap of freshly scuffed soil and the drawn-out bedding outside the entrance. The sett was on a slope and looked to head deep in and there was much undergrowth and thin sycamore on the cover.

He'd gone out a little from the entrance and found the dung pit that in the colder weather was often close to the sett this time of year. The fresh spores looked soft and muddy from the badgers' predominant diet of earthworms. In the mud around were scrapings and footprints and from their impress he knew it was a big full-grown boar. A sow would put up a better fight if she had cubs to defend, but there was something more competitive to the size of a big forty-pound boar. They wanted a spectacle.

On the nearby trees were the unhealed scars where the badgers had cleaned their claws and rubbed off the dirt from their coats.

The main hole's up there, said the gypsy. He gestured up the slope. We'll put in the dog, he said. He meant Jip, the big Patterdale.

His own bitch was by his feet, with her distant, composed look against the other dogs.

I want to put her in next. He indicated. Better be a dog goes in first. He was thinking of the big tracks and the possibility of the big boar. A bigger dog would have more chance up front. They knew if you put a bitch down after a bitch, or a dog down after a dog, there were problems most times; but if you changed the sex the other usually came out with no trouble.

The boy's father nodded agreement. He was checking the locator, checking the box with the handset.

The boy was thirsty and looking at the water, not wanting to open the other tub in front of the man.

Take him round and block up the other holes. I'll do the other side.

The gypsy brought out the map he'd drawn of the holes and went over it with the boy's father. The gypsy asked the boy if he understood and the redness came to his throat under the zipped-up coat collar; but he was feeling the rich beginning of adrenalin now. He was dry and thirsty and had a big sick hole of adolescent hunger but he could feel his nerves warming at the new thing and began to feel a comradeship of usefulness to the man.

They unwound the sheets of thick plastic and went off and systematically blocked the holes with stones and sheets of plastic and laid blocks across the obvious runs with heavy timber and then went back to the dogs. Then they went up the slope with the two first dogs and gathered around the main entrance and stood the tools up in the ground.

There was old bedding around the hole, the strange skeletal bracken starting to articulate its colour in the grey light. Jip started to bounce on the lead and strain for the hole as if he could sense the badgers. The strewn bracken might have meant the badgers had gone overnight, but from the way the dog was behaving there was a fresh, present scent.

The boy looked at the dog straining on the lead and could feel the same feeling in his guts. He felt the feeling he did before the first rats raced out and the dogs went into them.

The boy's father knelt with the excited dog and checked the box and collar over again and Jip let his enthusiasm solidify into a determined, pointed thing and stood stockily facing the hole, a determined tremble going through him.

The boy's father studied the locator once more and checked the signal, then they sent the dog in.

The boy was not expecting the delay of listening for the dog. He could feel his stomach roll though. He could feel a slow soupy excitement. This was a new thing. Then deep in the earth the dog yelped. Then again; and his father was instantly by the hole, prone, calling to the dog, calling with strange excitement into the tunnel.

Stay at him, boy. Good Jip. Good Jippo.

The boy glanced at the man as his father called this out, as if it had revealed what he was thinking about the way the man looked. But the big gypsy seemed to be rapt, a pasty violence setting in his eyes as he listened and watched Messie, his bitch, solidify, focus. Finally, the dog let out a low whimper of desire.

You could hear the barks moving through the ground now and they came alternately sharp and muffled until they seemed to regulate and come with a faraway percussive sound.

The big man moved across the slope. He seemed to swirl in some eddy, then came to a halt, as if caught up on something.

The big man moved again, listening, and the boy's father tracked across with the locator until the two men stood in the same place, confirming the big man's judgement.

Here, he said. They brought up the tools and they started to dig.

It was very early spring and the bluebells were not out but made a thick carpet that looked newly washed and slick after the rain. They cut through this carpet and cleared the mess of thin sycamore from the place and the big gypsy cut a switch and bent it into a sack mouth and laid the sack down by where they would dig.

The ground was sodden with rain and sticky and they worked with the sharp foldaway spades, cutting through the thread roots. The smell of rotted leaves and dug-up soil strengthened. When they came to a thicker root, they let the boy in with the saw. Then they started to dig for real.

The big man swung the pick and the father and boy shovelled. Within minutes the boy was parched with thirst and hunger and
could not shout properly when they called constantly to the dog below. He was dizzy with effort. He was afraid of not being able to keep up with the men. As the hole deepened they shored up the sides of the hole with the plastic sheeting and the work steadied to a persistent rhythm.

The badger was going nowhere and it was not about speed but persistence now.

After two hours they stopped for a drink and ate some of the paste sandwiches. The big man ate nothing. The dry soil on the boy's hands was tide-marked with water from the blisters that had torn and were flaps of skin now and there was a type of dull shock in his back. He had been expecting more action, not this relentless work, and he didn't understand it.

The dog had been down for two hours and had continually been barking and yelping and keeping just out of the badger's reach for that time.

Every so often, the boar rushed the dog and the dog retreated and the badger turned and fled; and Jip went after him through the tunnels and junctions until they reached the stop end.

Then the badger turned and ran at the dog again. It was nearly two and a half times the weight of the terrier and armed with fearsome claws and a bite that would crack the dog if he landed it properly. But the dog was quick and in his own way very dangerous. Jip kept barking. Yelping. The badger faced him down and every now and then turned to try and dig himself into the stop end. But then Jip moved in and bit his hindquarters, and the big boar swung round again in defence.

In the confined tunnel of the sett, the constant yelps were deafening and confusing like bright lights in the brain of the badger and it was unsure what it could do. It was then a stand-off. A matter of time.

They sent the bitch in and Jip came up. He looked like he was grinning. His mouth was open and flecked with spit. The dog was exhausted and thirsty but gleamed with the event somehow and when they took off the box and collar, steam came into the morning air off his body. The boy was confused that they ignored the thick obvious blood that came out of the Patterdale and spread down its throat.

The boy kept looking nervously at the exhausted bleeding stubborn dog. The fresh blood seemed a synthetic colour against the dun-green slope.

Messie's good, said the big man. She'll hold him for the rest.

The boy sat and held his blistered hands against the cold metal of the foldaway spade. He had gloves but he did not feel he could wear them. Steam rolled off from the plastic-flask cup of tea and it came off the body of the injured dog. Steam came too off the lifted soil, but no birds came as they might to a garden, as if they knew some dark purpose was at work.

The man's bag hung on the tree and the head of the mink protruded. The boy looked at it. The mouth was drawn and the precise teeth showed. He thought of one of his earliest memories, of

his father holding a ferret and sewing its lips together so it couldn't gash the rabbits it was sent down to chase. The mink had the same vicious preciseness as the ferrets.

Get your dog on it, the man said. The boy immediately felt the redness at being talked to by the big man.

He nodded.

She on rats?

The boy nodded again. He had a panicky lump in his throat.

Good rat dog should take mink. Start them early.

The boy felt the swell of pride come up and mix strangely with his nervousness at the man.

Nice dog, commented the man.

They'd gone through finally into the roof of the tunnel and it looked now like a broken waste pipe and it was mid-morning when they lifted the terrier out. There was still an unnerving composure to her, a kind of distant, complete look.

The boy did not understand the passivity of the badger and that it did not try to bolt or to struggle. He had to develop an idea of hatred for the badger without the help of adrenalin and without the excitement of pace and in the end it was the reluctance and non-engagement of the animal which drew up a disrespect in him. He built his dislike of the badger on this disgust. It was a bullying. It was a tension, not an excitement, and he began to feel a delicious private heartbeat coming. He believed by this point that the badger deserved it.

The big man was in the hole alone now, his shape filling it. The boy's head pumped hotly from the work and finally his nerves sped.

Have a spike ready, his father said.

Then the badger came out. It shuffled, brow down as if it didn't want to be noticed. It sensed them and looked up and the boy looked for a moment into its black eyes, its snout circling. The boy was expecting it to have come out snarling and fighting with rage, but it edged out.

It had been trapped in three or four foot of pipe for hours and it edged out until it was by the opening and the big gypsy took it.

He got it round the neck with the tongs and it struggled and grunted and then the man swung it up and into the sack with this great output of strength. Then it kicked and squealed and you could

see the true weight and strength of it and the boy didn't understand why it hadn't fought at first, at the beginning.

The badger scuffed and tried to dig and the big man punched the sack and the badger went still. At this, the boy felt a comradeship with the man again and a sense of victory, holding the iron spike there in readiness, as if he was on hand.

We'll hang him while we fill things in, said the big gypsy, stop him trying to dig.

They filled in the hole. Threw in the old roots and stones they'd dug out and finally put back down the sods of bluebells. The place was slick with mud and trodden down and the ground of the area looked like the coat of a sick dog.

The big gypsy looked at the sack hanging from the tree, at the sack-like weight of it.

It was the second time he'd dug a badger for the gang. That first time, Messie had been just a pup. He thought of the money. It was worth the risk. He made a point now and then of taking in a badger he found genuinely hit on the road to the Veterinary Investigation Centre and he carried the receipt slips in the van to produce if he was stopped. But that worked only for dead badgers, or to explain the hairs they might find. He had to move the live badger and it wouldn't matter what else was in the van if they stopped him.

The big man reached into his bag and took out the mink and threw it to the boy. Its damp weight and the limp, sumptuous ropiness of the animal surprised him as he caught it. The mouth was drawn and he could see the precise teeth.

You can keep him, the big man said. They're vermin here. It was like a payment for things.

The boy felt a glow of pride and the sudden warm teamship with the man that was alien to him and which he had difficulty with. His father looked at him with a strange grin and the redness came to him then.

He lifted the mink's lips to see the needle teeth. They were like sewing needles.

He looked at the needle teeth and felt the fur of the rope-like body. The electricity was gone out of it.

Give him a shake tonight. The big man nodded at the pup. Good rat dog be good on mink.

The boy's father was panting and looked brightened. The boy could see the sweat on his father's head through the very short hair. The adrenalin was coming in the boy now and he looked at his pup and swelled with pride. He felt a warm cruelty, standing there on the beach of soil.

I'll start her tonight, he said to himself.