

# A SMALL ACT OF VANDALISM

By Andrew Biss

Malcolm, a gentle, middle-aged soul with a troubled mind, keeps his mother's remains sealed in a small porcelain box. What he keeps hidden among his memories, however, isn't so easily contained.

## CHARACTER

MALCOLM: A gentle soul with a troubled mind. 30s-50s.

## SETTING & TIME

SETTING: Unspecified.

TIME: The present.

A Small Act of Vandalism received its premiere production in London at the Off-West End Brockley Jack Studio Theatre in 2014, directed by Brigid Lohrey.

An abridged version of the play received a staged reading at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2015.

*At Rise: The lights come up to reveal MALCOLM sitting in front of a small table. Atop the table is a small, oval porcelain box. He stares affectionately at the box for a few moments before speaking.*

MALCOLM: That's Mother, that is.

*(Beat.)*

Well...not her in the strict sense, I suppose...just the bits and pieces of her left over from the cremation, you know. Sort of a dried and granulated version of her, if you will. A bit like instant coffee, you might say, only without the flavour. Not that I've ... you know ... I mean ... good heavens.

*(Beat.)*

That's Wedgwood, that is. Very expensive. Very expensive indeed. But worth it - worth every penny – 'cause Mother was worth it. Weren't you, Mother? She was.

Worth every penny.

*(Beat.)*

It's glued shut, actually. The lid, that is. I glued it myself with superglue - I had to. Seems criminal, really, doing something like that to a beautiful piece of genuine Wedgwood bone china. I'm sure if the Wedgwood's knew what I'd done they'd be all up in arms and fit to be tied. But it had to be done. Even so, I was riddled with guilt. As I squeezed the glue around the rim, I felt just like a vandal...like one of those yobs on the corner of Wentworth Street, with their saggy trousers and their big hoods with their nasty little eyes peering out ... I felt just like one of them. But I had no choice. Not after the, um ... well ... the incident.

*(Beat.)*

The thing is, I loved Mother, you see. I loved her ever so much. And when she passed on ... well, I ... it was, um ... it was very hard. I missed her something terrible. Some days I'd ... well, I won't get into that now.

*(Pause.)*

Anyway ... some days ... evenings ... when I missed her most, I'd sit down and have a chat with her. Just me and her and a bottle of pale ale ... having a chitchat. Well, I did most of the chatting. All of it, actually. But whatever I said, whatever I told her, I knew what she'd say in response, so it all made sense, you see. Anyway, I'd sit her down on the coffee table, take the lid off, open up a pale ale, light up a cigarette, and tell her all that was on my mind - just like before ... before she ... took her leave.

*(Beat.)*

In retrospect, I'm not entirely sure why I took the lid off to begin with. I think I thought she could probably hear me better, if that makes sense. Which I don't think it does. Perhaps it just made me feel a little closer to her. In any event, that's what I would do.

*(Beat.)*

But then, one evening ... oh, about two or three months ago now, I suppose ... I had ... let's just say, one of my "off days." It had all become a little bit too much, you see. The images had returned. The final ones. You don't forget those. I try very hard, you see, to ... to banish them. But sometimes they come back. And that day ... they'd come back.

*(Beat.)*

At first I tried to hide it from her. I just chatted about this and that - general things, you know - like how I'd shrunk yet another cardigan in the wash, and that Mrs. Tottle at number twenty-three apparently had a new fancy man in her life, from what I could tell. But I knew. I knew that she knew. And I didn't want to talk about it. . . think about it. So I'd keep talking, and pour another pale ale, and have another cigarette...and another pale ale, and another cigarette ... and another, and another ... and I suppose it all started to get a bit carried away, and all these feelings started bubbling up out of nowhere, and just as I was telling her how angry I was with her, I saw myself flick the ash from my cigarette into her little Wedgwood resting place instead of the ashtray!

*(Beat.)*

I froze.

*(Beat.)*

Even though the room was sort of spinning around me, I froze. I was horrified. Mortified. How could I have done such a thing? To my own Mother? It was the ultimate slap in the face. And what could I do? I couldn't fish it out - it all looked the same. I could've scooped out the top part, I suppose ... but some of that was Mother. I felt sick - sick to my stomach. But what could I do? What would you have done? I wanted to throw up. And then I went to the toilet and I did throw up. And I was glad I did, because afterwards I felt a bit better ... a bit more. sensible. And I walked back into the living room, apologized to Mother very sincerely and without a scene, and vowed

that the next morning I would seal the lid of her little Wedgwood tomb permanently and for all eternity - just like the ancient Pharaohs and Cleopatra, etcetera.

*(Beat.)*

So yes, even though in most respects this is my Mother, I suppose that, strictly speaking, I would have to say that this is 99.8% my Mother ... and a tiny little bit of Marlboro Light.

*(Beat.)*

I did, for a moment, have this horrible thought that perhaps in introducing her to cigarettes, I might have inadvertently turned her into some pack-a-day fiend in the afterlife. But then reason soon returned. I mean, it wouldn't matter, would it? It's not as if everyone in heaven's jogging around in parks and taking vitamin supplements in the hope of squeezing out a few more years of it. You're just there.

*(Pause.)*

I often think I should scatter her somewhere. Somewhere nice and quiet and pretty, with birds singing. Just her alone with nature ... and Philip Morris, I suppose.

*(Beat.)*

But then, where would I be? I'd be alone. With just my thoughts. And the memories. And the memories are good. Very good. Wonderful. Just not the last ones. I can't be left with those. Not on my own.

*(Pause.)*

When I was a child, whenever I thought of death which wasn't that often, don't get me wrong - I just thought you sort of fell asleep ... forever. It wasn't something scary. It wasn't something you looked forward to, either. But it all seemed to have a nice, sleepy, peaceful veneer to it. But then, when I got older, I realized what a veneer actually was - not that I used the word at the time, it was just how it seemed - and I learned it was a thin, fake covering, not something real at all. I realized it was a façade ... a word which came some time later. And then, even later in life - in more recent life - I realized that death can actually be quite horrible, even for nice people. I don't like to say it, but it's true ... and it's best just to get it over with, because unless you're very lucky, there's not a lot of dignity in it. That's just a façade.

*(Pause.)*

I was never angry with Mother. Never. Not when she was alive. How could you be? She was just so lovely. Perhaps once or twice when I was very small. I don't remember, really. But that's normal, isn't it? I mean, kids are kids, aren't they? So it was ... it was a bit of a shock to feel angry at her once she'd gone. Inappropriate, really. Not just because you're not supposed to speak ill of the dead - or think it, in my case - but ... well, she couldn't defend herself, could she? And she had a defense ... a very good one. But it doesn't stop me feeling angry.

*(Beat.)*

You see, before she died she asked something of me. Now, let me tell you in no uncertain terms that there's nothing in this world that I wouldn't do for my mother.

Nothing. I'd have given up my own life for her at the drop of a hat ... which in some ways, I think I might have done. But this...what she asked...well, it...it stretched the limits ... of my love.

*(Beat.)*

But I did it anyway. And I'm still paying the price.

*(Pause.)*

Mother was very ill, you see. Very ill indeed. She had ... well, something I neither remember nor found pronounceable to begin with. But whatever it was, was causing her system to atrophy. It was neurological, that much I can tell you. And progressive. It wasn't going to stop. First she'd lose her balance - would fall over for no reason at all. I'd pick her up, dust her off, and send her on her way again - just like a little wind-up toy. Then later on, all her coordination went to pot. Just picking up her teacup became something of a challenge. But we got through it. We found a way. For a while.

*(Beat.)*

And then ... swallowing.

*(Beat.)*

Not something you ever think about, really. I mean, it's just automatic, so you don't. But if your body starts to stop doing it ... well, then you do. And it became harder and harder for her to do it. It was all shutting down.

*(Beat.)*

And the next step ... was breathing.

*(Beat.)*

And without aid ... without artificial assistance ... her body was going to forget how to breathe. And she knew it, and I knew it. They'd told us. But ... while she still could ... while she still had the chance to make a choice ... she asked me to stop it. Stop it all.

*(Beat.)*

It was my mother. She was facing the unthinkable. And so I agreed. I loved her, you see. I'd have done anything for her. And I did.

*(Pause.)*

It was a simple plan. I was to take one of her favourite cushions - one she'd embroidered herself as a girl, when her head was full of thoughts of what lay ahead - and I was to hold it gently against her weakened face until what little life left in her was extinguished.

*(Beat.)*

And I was a good son. I did what she asked. What she needed ... so desperately. And I made her feel better. And I'm glad of that. I try to focus on that. But I'm not always very successful at it, to tell you the truth.

*(Beat.)*

Because now she's gone...and resting in peace. Hopefully. But me ... I'm still here. And however you want to look at it and no matter how you word it ... I killed my mother. I killed her. And I love her so much, and I'm so angry at her. So angry, you wouldn't believe. But it's not her fault. She's not to blame. And neither am I ... but I'm still angry. Because I hate life now. I can hardly live with myself. I'm hardly living.

*(Pause.)*

I thought for a while I'd be sent to prison. I felt for certain they'd figure out what I'd done and cart me off to prison and lock me up with some of those yobs from Wentworth Street, with their nasty little eyes. But they didn't. They never figured it out. Nature of the illness, I suppose. I got lucky.

*(Beat.)*

Yes, indeed ... what a lucky boy.

*(Looking down at the box.)*

Look at her, bless her - she has no idea. She's somewhere else now ... being lovely and kind to ... some other people. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad she's in peace ... I just wish I was. And if I had to do it all again, I would. I'd do it in a heartbeat ... because it was the right thing to do. She was owed it. Someone as lovely as she was shouldn't ever have to suffer. I just wish ... I just wish it wasn't me that had to do it. That's all.

*(Beat.)*

And I get by, you know, like you do. I have my good days and my bad ones. You make the best of it. But on the bad days...the days I get angry ... angry with Mother ... who's the last person anyone should be angry with ... that's when it's hard. I get angry with her for getting ill, you see. That doesn't make any sense, does it? But I do. I get angry and frustrated with her - as if she let me down. I start thinking of how it used to be, and how perfect it all was, and how she went and ruined it all by getting sick. Makes no sense ... but that's what I do. Because as bad as it got, she was still there ... until I made her not there.

*(Pause.)*

And I think ... I think the worst part of all ... is I can't talk to anyone about it. About how it makes me feel. It plays on your mind, you see -- having to do something like that to your own mother. And it gets very hard sometimes. Very hard. But I can't. Can't say a word. Not to no one. 'Cause I'd be in ever so much trouble. Terrible trouble. So I just have to ... you know ... keep a lid on it.

*(He forces a half-smile as the lights fade down to BLACK.)*

END OF PLAY