

Humber
BOY
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She currently lives in Luxembourg and volunteers at a local prison.

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*To Amber & Eden
With Love*

Deep inside
In that silent place
Where a child's fears crouch

Lillian Smith

1

The Day Of

Down the grassy bank, under the shadow of the Humber Bridge, a teenager walks on her hands in the shallows, blonde hair hanging into the water so the tips are soaked dark. Flipping back up, she sees black specs of grit on her palms from the waterbed and tries to wipe them off along her upper thighs, newly fleshed out. Her swimsuit digs in at the top of her legs; it's too small now but she hasn't got any other and it's a warm day and she longs to be in the water. Too warm, there must be a storm coming.

Yards away, her father is cocooned in his canvas chair, one hand rested lightly on the shaft of his fishing rod, beside him in a shuddering black bucket a grey fish gasps in its death throes. Her father's face sags, his downturned mouth makes him look as though he's bored, but she sees him wipe first one eye, then the other. His posture is his prison but also a shield, the best way he knows to keep the feelings inside. She knows why he's upset, but she blames him too, so she offers no comfort.

The girl punches her arms up towards the mottled sky, where grey patches mar the perfect blue. She wades to a deeper place and twists backwards, her spine arched as her palms land and she freezes in a wobbly crab pose, her legs shaking with the effort. She has been going to gymnastics since she could walk, but just recently the positions have become harder for her to achieve. Her body is finding

new ways to move, and no longer wants to be twisted into unnatural shapes, made to split or bend, but she's forcing it now, demanding it to stay still.

"Dad! Watch me."

The girl lifts one hand, touches her thigh, and quickly returns it to the sand for support. She used to be able to hold this pose for minutes, he used to time her, but the water is lapping at her shaking wrists and he barely glances her way. She releases herself down into the water.

Roger Palmer sees his daughter for just a moment and then turns his attention back to the brown murky waters of the Humber, the bucket by his side now still. He thinks again of the conversation that has been replaying in his head since it happened, keeping him in a fitful state of wakefulness through the night, so now he is so tired his very bones ache. When he thinks of yesterday's argument he can recall Jessica's sad but determined face as clearly as if she were with him now. He should have said he loved her, that they could work it out, forced her to change her mind. But he hadn't seen the end coming. He hadn't been prepared to fight for it.

"You never watch me," Cheryl complains. "I might as well be invisible."

She slaps the water in irritation and turns her back. Gravel and mud are stuck to her shoulders in the shape of angel wings. A surprising gust of fresh air makes her shiver and look up to where a dark cloud hangs, so close to the bridge it looks as though it is tethered there, as if the weather belongs to this part of Hull alone.

"I want to go home, this is boring. And it's going to rain."

The father rummages in his rucksack for their raincoats, tosses Cheryl hers and pulls on his own, a black kagool that goes over his head like a plastic jumper. He huddles into it, his shoulders closing into his chest as he gazes at the end of his rod.

“A summer shower won’t kill us. Why not read your school books? Surely you have some homework to do.”

Cheryl scowls, why should she do homework on a day off? No-one else would be, he’s only suggesting it because he’s a teacher. She tosses the raincoat aside – it’s too small for her now anyway – throws herself on the bank and gazes up at the beautifully monstrous Humber Bridge as she feels the first spit of rain.

A scream, an animal in pain or a human in terror, sounds from high above.

The noise makes them both start, the father is immediately alert, knocks his rod from its stand as he gets up. It is the worst sound of all: a child in distress. To his horror, Roger Palmer sees, high above, near the gathering thunder clouds, a small body hanging from the bridge.

“Oh God, no...”

“Dad!” Cheryl points, her eyes are sharper than his. “It’s the gang from earlier, the boys who took your fish.”

She doesn’t say that she gave one to them, or anything of what followed. She washes her hands in the water but there are no remaining signs of what took place, just the evidence of the boy, on the wrong side of the safety barrier.

Roger panics, looks about him desperately, his brain grabbing then discarding ideas. *Run around and up, get onto the bridge. Is there time? There are two other boys on the bridge, so much closer to the hanging child than him. There must be other people on the bridge too. Why hasn’t a car stopped, why is no-one doing anything?*

One of the boys, too small to be strong enough, leans far over the bridge towards the child. Roger squints to see what’s happening. A blur in the sky, a brick – no, a trainer, red – falls to the water, lands with a sorrowful splash. There seems to be a scuffle, quick movement from the boy reaching down, a hand grabbing at the dangling child. Then, with the awfulness of inevitability, the hanging child drops, gravity takes him.

His body is like a starfish as it falls, limbs curling in then stretching wide. Roger recognises him and the thought cramps him in two. It is Jessica's son, Noah. How is this possible? The boy whom they argued about just last night, is now falling from the sky.

Noah drops under the cold, grey water leaving a ripple like a halo.

Roger doesn't wait to remove his sturdy shoes or kagool, he jumps into the water, despite his daughter's screams. He dives, comes up for air, dives again, in and out of the circle in the centre of the tidal river though soon the only ripples are caused by his own movement.

Noah and his red trainer are long gone, the sun is hiding. Rain is absolute.

But still he continues to search for the boy, heavy with wet clothes meant for a day fishing at the water's edge, his feet awkwardly encased in walking shoes, water becoming heavier as he refuses, again and again, to be too late. It is Roger Palmer who is hauled from the water by Humber Rescue, he who sits on the banks swaddled in a red blanket.

"I wasn't fit enough, I couldn't dive again. I have to live with that."

Roger Palmer says this many times, first to the rescue team, then to paramedics and finally to the police. Also, in a quiet moment just before Noah's funeral, to Jessica. She touched his hand for a fleeting second then pulled it from him, nursing it to her chest like she was wounded. He watched her husband, whom he knew she didn't love, lead her back to her pew. He knew in that moment that their lives were changed forever, and so was his.

And always, always, that reproach: *I should never have stopped trying. I will never forgive myself.*

Two brothers watch from the railing of the bridge. They

know the diving man, he's a teacher at the primary school. His daughter is in high school, one of the popular girls in year ten. The older boy's lips are still sore from her rough kisses. He grabs his brother by a shivering arm and urges him to move.

Together they run from the bridge as if the Devil himself is at their heels.

2 Now

FACEBOOK: FIND HUMBER BOY B

Please help me find my son's killer.

Noah's mum: It's been eight years but it could have happened yesterday, I'm so raw. It's hard to think that time moves on, even without my boy. For other people, that is. Time stopped for me.

The parole board sent a letter, that's all I got, just a single sheet of paper. He's out. Just eight years after he murdered my son and he's free to do it again. The parole board say he's served his sentence, but I'll be living this hell forever.

Humber Boy B should be locked up. It's a sin that's he's been set free.

So I'm starting this page because I need help. He's out there, somewhere. Will you help me find him?

3 Cate

Cate Austin finished reading Roger Palmer's witness statement, the first in the Crown Prosecution dossier, and closed her eyes. For a moment she was there, in the Humber, feeling the water lap above her head, the numbing exhaustion of diving again and again for the boy whose bloated body resurfaced days later, six miles further down the river. The poor man didn't get out of the frigid water until the emergency services arrived, and by then he was suffering from shock and exhaustion, his teenage daughter Cheryl hysterical by the river bank.

When she was finally able to string a sentence together, Cheryl said that she knew the boys, she recognised them from school and she'd spoken with them earlier. The older one was in her year, he was wearing a Hull Rovers football strip and this helped narrow down the search, along with CCTV footage. Just two hours later Humber Boys A and B were in police custody.

At age ten, Humber Boy B was surely too young to understand the finality of death. After fifteen months on remand, a six-week trial under the media spotlight and eight years in prison, he did now. And it was Cate's job to make sure.

"I can't believe this weather," Cate said, "September never used to be hot. Must be global warming."

“I know, I thought I’d put these sandals away for the year.” Penny Rickman rubbed her heel as she spoke, adding, “Which would be a relief to the world with my bunions.”

Cate looked at Penny’s feet, noticing not bunions but glittery painted toenails, then at her own, hidden in sensible flats. She half-shrugged off her jacket and then gazed over Penny’s shoulder into the conference room where three men were taking their seats, pouring glasses of water and leafing through paperwork. She pulled her jacket back on.

“There’s coffee if you want it?” Penny pointed to the machine in the hallway.

“I’m alright with water, thanks. Day like today.”

“I’d still drink coffee in the desert,” Penny said, going to the machine and swiping her card, pressing buttons so the machine gurgled into action. “Especially considering what we’re about to discuss.”

Cate checked her watch. “He’ll be leaving the prison now. He’s expected at the probation office at one.”

“Then we’d best get a move on.” Penny opened the door to the conference room and the three men, all seated around the head of the table, looked up.

“Gentlemen, I’m Penny Rickman, victim liaison and witness protection. And this is Cate Austin from probation, Humber Boy B’s supervising officer.”

“Hi, Cate.” Stephen Flynn, now Detective Inspector, welcomed Cate with an expression she interpreted as, ‘you always get the strange ones’, and offered her his hand, which she took, glad of the warm welcome.

“Good to see you, Steve. How’s life?”

“Weird and wonderful, just how we like it.”

It was a standing joke between them since they’d first worked together on the case of Rose Wilks.

Cate’s attention was seized by the man to his right, whom she could immediately tell wasn’t a police officer; his face was too refined, his clothes well cut. He was neatly handsome in a way that you would associate with public relations or shaving

foam adverts, not catching criminals. When she offered her hand in greeting, his was soft and moisturised.

“Cate Austin. Probation.”

“Olivier Massard.” His voice was accented, his watch sparkled at the wrist.

Steve paused for a moment, until Cate had retrieved her hand, then explained, “Detective Massard is on secondment to Suffolk constabulary for six months. European exchange, part of the EU’s desire to have us all working like robots,” Steve looked down at his paperwork to hide his expression but she could tell from his voice that he was pissed off by the idea. “Isn’t that right, Ollie?”

Cate saw the detective wince at the nickname.

“Not at all,” he replied, in perfect English. “Because of the sterling police work with your Suffolk Strangler, we have become aware of this county. It is being held as a model of excellence, and I am here to observe and learn. Nothing more.”

“Seconded from France?” Cate asked.

“From Luxembourg, actually. Though I’m three-quarters French, so good guess.” He didn’t say what the other quarter was.

Mystified, Cate turned her attention to the third man, who to her relief she could more easily classify by his worn jacket and pale pudgy face as a civil servant.

“I’m Ged, we spoke on the phone. From Ipswich borough housing.”

“Oh, great, good to put a face to the voice. So, do you have an address for Ben?”

“I do.” Ged picked up his pen and started to toy with it. “Though I’d prefer it was out of my area.”

Cate wouldn’t care where it was, so long as it was an address. She’d been envisioning last minute calls to local B&Bs, which would be scandalous given the nature of Ben’s crime. If the papers ever got wind of something like that... well, it didn’t bear thinking about.

“He has to live somewhere, Ged.”

Ged sniffed. “Since there’s no death penalty in this country.”

Cate suppressed a sigh. “He was ten when he was convicted. He hasn’t had a breath of free air in eight years.”

She became aware of the French detective listening closely and felt her colour rising. When she met his eye she saw a look of amusement on his fine features, apparently he was enjoying this minor clash of values.

Ged delivered the coup de grâce: “Unlike his victim, who’ll never breathe again.”

Steve tapped the desk, “Alright, folks, so now we’re all on friendly terms shall we get to work? Sit down, Cate, you’re blocking the sun.”

The police conference room was on the top floor of the squat building so its windows showed the tops of trees and a blue Suffolk skyline. It was the view that Cate tried to paint when she had time. In another life she would have liked to have been an artist, spending her days with images rather than words, with beauty rather than the ugliness of human behaviour. But she had never made it to art school and there were bills to pay. Canvas stacked against canvas in the laundry room, all the same blues with shots of white and grey, all not quite right somehow but the activity filled weekends when Amelia was with Tim and Sally. Looking out on the blue there wasn’t a cloud in sight, the sky was bleached clean.

“Okay, so, this is us,” Steve said, rotating his pen in a circle around the table. “Buck stops here. Penny and I will be managing the police end,” he said, “making sure Ben’s registered on the Schedule 1 list and checking that only those who need to know are in the loop, and everyone who doesn’t stays in the dark. And thanks to Ged his housing is sorted.”

Cate picked up a pen to make a note, “So since the gallows weren’t an option, Ged, what’s the address?”

“We’ve allocated him a flat in the new affordable housing

section of the block overlooking the docks. The new waterfront, Ipswich's pride and joy."

Steve whistled, "Whatever would the neighbours say?"

Ged looked panicked, but Penny swiftly answered for him, giving her police superior a warning glare.

"Nothing. Because they won't know." Penny made a bridge with her hands and rested her chin. "He's got a whole new identity, he hasn't used his given name in eight years. And even though there are photos out there, he was just a kid when he got sent down, so there's no way people will recognise him."

"What photos?" Cate asked.

"Pictures of them messing around under a sprinkler in the garden, playing football in the street. Regular family snaps, taken by Jessica Watts – that's Noah's mum. She's started up a Facebook page and since the victim and Ben were friends, she's got a lot of pictures of our guy from just before the murder. All in the public domain."

Ged sniffed. "A kid who murdered a kid. And we're giving him a prime flat in the marina." He pushed a piece of paper across the desk, "Here's the address."

Cate made a note and handed it to Penny who continued to update them. "Jessica is posting on Facebook, 'please help me find Humber Boy B' et cetera, but she's just fishing, she has no idea where he is. If we can just keep this from the press and vigilantes we'll be fine. Things will die down after a few weeks. He needs to live like a hermit, one on a vow of silence."

"I'd like to think we can do more than that, and give him a chance at a normal life." Cate said, quietly but with feeling. "He was only ten when it happened. Barely formed."

"Still ten in here," said Steve, tapping his temple. "Don't go thinking you can make a silk purse from a sow's ear, Cate. Keep his identity secret and he can rot in his flat for all I care. At least he's got a view."

Beyond the conference room window the blueness of the

sky now seemed oppressive in its constancy.

“Have you met him yet, Cate?” asked Penny.

“Our first meeting is today.”

“He’s strange. Of course, he’s been locked up since he was a child. But he’s not our usual sort.”

“What’s our usual sort?” Cate was genuinely interested, having lost the notion years ago that such a person existed. Working in the prison with Rose Wilks, then supervising the Suffolk Cannibal, Alice Mariani, Cate didn’t make assumptions anymore.

“You know how it usually is, young man, just out of prison. How they blag, how pale they are and cocky, fluent in Hackney patois and bullshit. Ben’s different. Looks like a choir boy. But evil.”

An evil choir boy sounded like something from a tacky horror film.

“What he did was evil.” Cate said, thinking of Roger Palmer’s witness statement, the boy in the single red trainer hitting the water with the weight of death. “But he was just a child. There’s got to be some reason, some sort of explanation.”

“There is. He’s evil. End of story,” said Ged, now standing. “Are we done here?”