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BETHAN ROBERTS

My Policeman

VINTAGE

Peacehaven, October 1999

I considered starting with these words: *I no longer want to kill you* – because I really don't – but then decided you would think this far too melodramatic. You've always hated melodrama, and I don't want to upset you now, not in the state you're in, not at what may be the end of your life.

What I mean to do is this: write it all down, so I can get it right. This is a confession of sorts, and it's worth getting the details correct. When I am finished, I plan to read this account to you, Patrick, because you can't answer back any more. And I have been instructed to keep talking to you. Talking, the doctors say, is vital if you are to recover.

Your speech is almost destroyed, and even though you are here in my house, we communicate on paper. When I say on paper, I mean pointing at flashcards. You can't articulate the words but you can gesture towards your desires: *drink, lavatory, sandwich*. I know you want these things before your finger reaches the picture, but I let you point anyway, because it is better for you to be independent.

It's odd, isn't it, that I'm the one with pen and paper now, writing this – what shall we call it? It's hardly a journal, not of the type you once kept. Whatever it is, I'm the one writing, while you lie in your bed, watching my every move.

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LEPIS
You've never liked this stretch of coast, calling it suburbia-on-sea, the place the old go to gaze at sunsets and wait for death. Wasn't this area – exposed, lonely, windswept, like all the best British seaside settlements – known as Siberia in that terrible winter of '63? It's not quite that bleak here now, although it's still as uniform; there's even some comfort, I find, in its predictability. Here in Peacehaven, the streets are the same, over and over: modest bungalow, functional garden, oblique sea view.

I was very resistant to Tom's plans to move here. Why would I, a lifelong Brighton resident, want to live on one floor, even if our bungalow was called a Swiss chalet by the estate agent? Why would I settle for the narrow aisles of the local Co-op, the old-fat stench of Joe's Pizza and Kebab House, the four funeral parlours, a pet shop called Animal Magic and a dry-cleaner's where the staff are, apparently, 'London trained'? Why would I settle for such things after Brighton, where the cafés are always full, the shops sell more than you could possibly imagine, let alone need, and the pier is always bright, always open and often slightly menacing?

No. I thought it an awful idea, just as you would have done. But Tom was determined to retire to a quieter, smaller, supposedly safer place. I think, in part, he'd had more than enough of being reminded of his old beats, his old busyness. One thing a bungalow in Peacehaven does not do is remind you of the world's busyness. So here we are, where no one is out on the street before nine thirty in the morning or after nine thirty at night, save a handful of teenagers who smoke outside the pizza place. Here we are in a two-bedroom bungalow (it is not a Swiss chalet, it is *not*), within easy reach of the bus stop and the Co-op, with a long lawn to look out on and a whirligig washing line and three outdoor buildings

(shed, garage, greenhouse). The saving grace is the sea view, which is indeed oblique – it's visible from the side bedroom window. I've given this bedroom to you, and have arranged your bed so you may see the glimpse of the sea as much as you like. I've given all this to you, Patrick, despite the fact that Tom and I never before had our own view. From your Chichester Terrace flat, complete with Regency finishings, you enjoyed the sea every day. I remember the view from your flat very well, even though I rarely visited you: the Volk's railway, the Duke's Mound gardens, the breakwater with its crest of white on windy days, and of course the sea, always different, always the same. Up in our terraced house on Islingword Street, all Tom and I saw were our own reflections in the neighbours' windows. But still. I wasn't keen to leave that place.

So I suspect that when you arrived here from the hospital a week ago, when Tom lifted you from the car and into your chair, you saw exactly what I did: the brown regularity of the pebble-dash, the impossibly smooth plastic of the double-glazed door, the neat conifer hedge around the place, and all of it would have struck terror into your heart, just as it had in mine. And the name of the place: *The Pines*. So inappropriate, so unimaginative. A cool sweat probably oozed from your neck and your shirt suddenly felt uncomfortable. Tom wheeled you along the front path. You would have noticed that each slab was a perfectly even piece of pinkish-grey concrete. As I put the key in the lock and said, 'Welcome,' you wrung your wilted hands together and pulled your face into something like a smile.

Entering the beige-papered hallway, you would have smelled the bleach I'd used in preparation for your stay with us, and registered the scent of Walter, our collie-cross, lurking beneath

it. You nodded slightly at the framed photograph of our wedding, Tom in that wonderful suit from Cobley's – paid for by you – and me in that stiff veil. We sat in the living room, Tom and I on the new brown velvet suite, bought with money from Tom's retirement package, and listened to the ticking music of the central heating. Walter panted at Tom's feet. Then Tom said, 'Marion will see you settled.' And I noticed the wince you gave at Tom's determination to leave, the way you continued to stare at the net curtains as he strode towards the door saying, 'Something I've got to see to.'

The dog followed him. You and I sat listening to Tom's footsteps along the hallway, the rustle as he reached for his coat from the peg, the jangle as he checked in his pocket for his keys; we heard him gently command Walter to wait, and then there was only the sound of the suction of air as he pulled the double-glazed front door open and left the bungalow. When I finally looked at you, your hands, limp on your bony knees, were shaking. Did you think, then, that being in Tom's home at last might not be all you'd hoped?



Forty-eight years. That's how far I have to go back, to when I first met Tom. And even that may not be far enough.

He was so contained back then. *Tom*. Even the name is solid, unpretentious, but not without the possibility of sensitivity. He wasn't a Bill, a Reg, a Les or a Tony. Did you ever call him Thomas? I know I wanted to. Sometimes there were moments when I wanted to rename him. *Tommy*. Perhaps that's what you called him, the beautiful young man with the big arms and the dark blond curls.

I knew his sister from grammar school. During our second year there, she approached me in the corridor and said, 'I was thinking – you look all right – will you be my friend?' Up until that point, we'd each spent our time alone, baffled by the strange rituals of the school, the echoing spaces of the classrooms and the clipped voices of the other girls. I let Sylvie copy my homework, and she played me her records: Nat King Cole, Patti Page, Perry Como. Together, under our breath, we sang *Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger* as we stood at the back of the queue for the vaulting horse, letting all the other girls go before us. Neither of us liked games. I enjoyed going to Sylvie's because Sylvie had *things*, and her mother let her wear her brittle blonde hair in a style too old for her years; I think she even helped her set the fringe in a kiss-curl. At the time, my hair, which was as red as it ever was, still

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hung in a thick plait down my back. If I lost my temper at home – I remember once shutting my brother Fred's head in the door with some force – my father would look at my mother and say, 'It's the red in her,' because the ginger strain was on my mother's side. I think you once called me *the Red Peril*, didn't you, Patrick? By that time, I'd come to like the colour, but I always felt it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, having red hair: people expected me to have a temper, and so, if I felt anger flaring up, I let it go. Not often, of course. But occasionally I slammed doors, threw crockery. Once I rammed the Hoover so hard into the skirting board that it cracked.

When I was first invited to Sylvie's house in Patcham, she had a peach silk neckerchief and as soon as I saw it I wanted one too. Sylvie's parents had a tall drinks cabinet in their living room, with glass doors painted with black stars. 'It's all on the never-never,' Sylvie said, pushing her tongue into her cheek and showing me upstairs. She let me wear the neckerchief and she showed me her bottles of nail varnish. When she opened one, I smelled pear-drops. Sitting on her neat bed, I chose the dark purple polish to brush over Sylvie's wide, bitten-down nails, and when I'd finished, I brought her hand up to my face and blew, gently. Then I brought her thumbnail to my mouth and ran my top lip over the smooth finish, to check it was dry.

'What are you doing?' She gave a spiky laugh.

I let her hand fall back into her lap. Her cat, Midnight, came in and brushed up against my legs.

'Sorry,' I said.

Midnight stretched and pressed herself along my ankles with greater urgency. I reached down to scratch her behind the ears, and whilst I was doubled over the cat, Sylvie's bedroom door opened.

'Get out,' Sylvie said in a bored voice. I quickly straightened up, worried that she was speaking to me, but she was glaring over my shoulder towards the doorway. I twisted round and saw him standing there, and my hand came up to the silk at my neck.

'Get out, Tom,' Sylvie repeated, in a tone that suggested she was resigned to the roles they had to play out in this little drama.

He was leaning in the doorway with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to the elbows, and I noticed the fine lines of muscle in his forearms. He couldn't have been more than fifteen – barely a year older than me; but his shoulders were already wide and there was a dark hollow at the base of his neck. His chin had a scar on one side – just a small dent, like a fingerprint in plasticine – and he was wearing a sneer, which even then I knew he was doing deliberately, because he thought he should, because it made him look like a Ted; but the whole effect of this boy leaning on the door frame and looking at me with his blue eyes – small eyes, set deep – made me blush so hard that I reached down and plunged my fingers back into the dusty fur around Midnight's ears and focused my eyes on the floor.

'Tom! Get out!' Sylvie's voice was louder now, and the door slammed shut.

You can imagine, Patrick, that it was a few minutes before I could trust myself to remove my hand from the cat's ears and look at Sylvie again.

After that, I did my best to remain firm friends with Sylvie. Sometimes I would take the bus out to Patcham and walk past her semi-detached house, looking up at her bright windows, telling myself I was hoping she would come out, when in fact my whole body was strung tight in anticipation

of Tom's appearance. Once, I sat on the wall around the corner from her house until it got dark and I could no longer feel my fingers or toes. I listened to the blackbirds singing for all they were worth, and smelled the dampness growing in the hedges around me, and then I caught the bus home.

My mother looked out of windows a lot. Whenever she was cooking, she'd lean on the stove and gaze out of the tiny line of glass in our back door. She was always, it seemed to me, making gravy and staring out of the window. She'd stir the gravy for the longest time, scraping the bits of meat and gristly residue around the pan. It tasted of iron and was slightly lumpy, but Dad and my brothers covered their plates with it. There was so much gravy that they got it on their fingers and in their nails, and they would lick it off while Mum smoked, waiting for the washing-up.

They were always kissing, Mum and Dad. In the scullery, him with his hand gripped tight on the back of her neck, her with her arm around his middle, pulling him closer. It was difficult, at the time, to work out how they fitted together, they were so tightly locked. It was ordinary to me, though, seeing them like that and I'd just sit at the kitchen table, put my *Picturegoer* annual on the ribbed tablecloth, prop my chin in my hand and wait for them to finish. The strange thing is, although there was all that kissing, there never seemed to be much conversation. They'd talk through us: *You'll have to ask your father about that.* Or: *What does your mother say?* At the table it would be Fred, Harry and me, and Dad reading the *Gazette* and Mum standing by the window, smoking. I don't think she ever sat at the table to eat with us, except on Sundays when Dad's father, Grandpa Taylor, would come too. He called Dad 'boy' and would feed his yellowing Westie,

crouched beneath his chair, most of his dinner. So it was never long before Mum was standing and smoking again, clearing away the plates and crashing the crocks in the scullery. She'd station me at the drainer to dry, fastening a pinny round my waist, one of hers that was too long for me and had to be rolled over at the top, and I'd try to lean on the sink like her. Sometimes when she wasn't there I'd gaze through the window and try to imagine what my mother thought about as she looked out on our shed with the slanting roof, Dad's patch of straggly Brussels sprouts, and the small square of sky above the neighbours' houses.

In the summer holidays Sylvie and I often went to Black Rock Lido. I always wanted to save my money and sit on the beach, but Sylvie insisted that the Lido was where we should be. This was partly because the Lido was where Sylvie could flirt with boys. All through school, she was seldom without some admirer, whereas I didn't seem to attract anyone's interest. I never relished the thought of spending another afternoon watching my friend being ogled, but with its sparkling windows, glaring white concrete and striped deckchairs, the lido was too pretty to resist, and so more often than not we paid our ninepences and pushed through the turnstiles to the poolside.

I remember one afternoon with particular clarity. We were both about seventeen. Sylvie had a lime-green two-piece, and I had a red swimsuit that was too small for me. I kept having to yank up the straps and pull down the legs. By this time, Sylvie had rather impressive breasts and a neat waistline; I still seemed to be a long rectangular shape with a bit of extra padding around the sides. I'd had my hair cut into a bob by then, which I was pleased with, but I was too tall. My father

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told me not to stoop, but he also made a point of telling me to always choose flat shoes. 'No man wants to look up a woman's nose,' he'd say. 'Isn't that right, Phyllis?' And Mum would smile and say nothing. At school they kept insisting that with my height I should be good at netball, but I was dreadful. I'd just stand at the side, pretending to be waiting for a pass. The pass never came, and I'd gaze over the fence at the boys playing rugby. Their voices were so different to ours – deep and woody, and with that confidence of boys who know what the next step in life will be. Oxford. Cambridge. The bar. The school next door was private, you see, like yours was, and the boys there seemed so much more handsome than the ones I knew. They wore well-cut jackets and walked with their hands in their pockets and their long fringes falling over their faces, whereas the boys I knew (and these were few) sort of charged towards you, looking straight ahead. No mystery to them. All up-front. Not that I ever talked to any of those boys with the fringes. You went to one of those schools, but you were never like that, were you, Patrick? Like me, you never fitted in. I understood that from the start.

It was not quite hot enough for bathing outside – a freshening wind was coming from the sea – but the sun was bright. Sylvie and I lay flat on our towels. I kept my skirt on over my costume, whilst Sylvie arranged her things in a neat row next to me: comb, compact, cardigan. She sat up and squinted, taking in the crowds on the sun-drenched terrace. Sylvie's mouth always seemed to be pulled in an upside-down smile, and her front teeth followed the downward line of her top lip, as if they'd been chiselled especially into shape. I closed my eyes. Pinkish shapes moved around on the insides of my eyelids as Sylvie sighed and cleared her throat. I knew she wanted to talk to me, to point out who else was at the pool,

who was doing what with whom and which boys she knew, but all I wanted was some warmth on my face and to get that far-away feeling that comes when you lie in the afternoon sun.

Eventually I was almost there. The blood seemed to have thickened behind my eyes and all my limbs had gone to rubber. The slap of feet and the crack of boys hitting the water from the diving board did nothing to rouse me, and although I could feel the sun burning my shoulders I remained flat on the concrete, breathing in the chalky smell of the wet floor and the occasional waft of cold chlorine from a passer-by.

Then something cool and wet fell on my cheek and I opened my eyes. At first all I could see was the white glare of the sky. I blinked, and a shape revealed itself, outlined in vivid pink. I blinked again and heard Sylvie's voice, petulant but pleased – 'What are *you* doing here?' – and I knew who it was.

Sitting up, I tried to gather myself together, shading my eyes and hastily wiping sweat from my top lip.

There he was, with the sun behind him, smirking at Sylvie.

'You're dripping on us!' she said, brushing at imaginary droplets on her shoulders.

Of course, I'd seen and admired Tom at Sylvie's house many times, but this was the first time I'd seen quite so much of his body. I tried to look away, Patrick. I tried not to stare at the bead of water crawling its way from his throat to his navel, at the wet strands of hair at the nape of his neck. But you know how hard it is to look away when you see something you want. So I focused on his shins: on the glistening blond hairs that covered his skin; I adjusted the straps of my one-piece, and Sylvie asked again, with an overly dramatic sigh: 'What do you want, Tom?'