

Confidence

Ben Richards

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Extract

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PART ONE

Terrapins

The early-morning sun is warming the water on the lake as a blue-shirted jogger clutching an iPod in one hand outpaces the red buses crawling up the road parallel to the London park, running past a middle-aged man from one of the expensive terraces overlooking the park who is walking his dog.

The dog is called Rab and his owner – a lecturer in social history – is composing a paper in his head about the nature of selection and class bias in the contemporary British education system. He turns and whistles back to the dog, which comes running with such enthusiasm that it is almost laughing as it is running and it looks as if its front legs might actually rise higher than its head, such is its determination to arrive at its goal. The man turns away from the dog and continues walking, but Rab does not arrive at his heels, and so he turns back to see that the dog has suddenly stopped to sniff the feet of a red-headed girl sitting on one of the benches. She is quite tall and dressed simply in a long skirt made from a light and frothy material with silver thread running through it and a plain black vest. Sometimes she glances at her shoulder as if checking to see that her vulnerable skin is not being burned by the morning sun. One of her long legs is crossed, and he can see the bright red of her nail varnish as she jigs a black flip-flop on the end of her foot. The lecturer sighs slightly and for an instant he wonders what an attractive girl like that – perhaps a little younger than his daughter Lucy – is doing sitting alone by the lake at this early hour. Then he feels slightly impatient with himself for thinking it. Why shouldn't she sit here just staring at the water?

Why should he be thinking about her in that way? Perhaps she has a good reason, people have all kinds of worries and sorrows, perhaps she just wanted a little time to think, nothing wrong with that. Still, she should be careful. There are people . . . he feels the flash of irritation with himself again, something a little like shame . . . all right, but she should be careful, that's all. At this time of the morning there are all kinds of strange people in the park, especially in these quieter bits by the lake with the bushes just behind them. He whistles his dog a second time and it bounds towards him again – a little cylinder of energy, all packed muscle on its little legs, and the girl turns to watch it, smiling at its singular exuberance. The lecturer walks on and doesn't look back at the red-haired girl or wonder any longer about her well-being or the nature of the internal drama that has impelled her to come and sit by the lake. He has just seen his neighbour walking her boxer and he thinks he really might say something about the satellite dish that she has just had installed in what he considers far too prominent a position on the front of her property.

Kerenza Penhaligon watches Mr Dressed-Exclusively-By-Marks-and-Spencer disappearing with his funny little dog, smiles again and turns back to the lake. Right in front of her bench is the log where sometimes terrapins sit and sun themselves, but they are not there today, although a squadron of ducklings are pattering about. They are so tiny and helpless, she imagines some sharp-toothed predator gliding towards or, worse, underneath them; a pike perhaps attracted by the morse code of those fragile legs disturbing the water. Dot Dot Dot Dash Dash Dash – snap me up for breakfast.

She's been sitting here for about half an hour because she woke up at about half-past four in the morning worrying about credit card bills and direct debits (four due in the next couple of days, no funds with which to pay them, four charges for unpaid direct debits) and the rent which is due to her housemate, Anna. For a while, she lay watching the digital clock change and the tail of her cat Smut – high on top of the suitcase – twitching as

she dreamed. In the end she had got so pissed off with lying awake letting the same information kaleidoscope in her mind that she had got up and walked down Green Lanes to buy a paper. The early-morning sun had been shining so brightly – and unexpectedly – that she had stepped into the park and walked to the lake to try and brush out her fatigue and worry.

‘It’s just money,’ she thinks as she sees a young girl pushing a pram with a kid she has seen in the park before. The kid has cerebral palsy, flaps his arms chaotically. But this thought doesn’t console her much. She doesn’t have cerebral palsy, it’s true, but that enables her to worry about other things. The girl pushing the pram stops at the spot where the terrapins normally are, then turns and shrugs at Kerenza.

‘They’re not here?’ She is very young, her accent sounds Eastern European, unlikely to be the child’s mother, some hired help. Kerenza shakes her head but points out the ducklings. The girl kneels down to the pram and shows the ducklings to the boy, who lolls his head and flaps his arms. Kerenza gets up and heads for the park exit, walks back down Green Lanes – past the Ockabasis and Turkish coffee shops – towards her own house. On her way back she sees the man with the dog again, but he is on the other side of the road and does not notice her.

‘Hey, Ren.’ Anna is pushing down the plunger on the cafetière as she pads into the kitchen followed by Smut. ‘Sleep well?’ Kerenza sits down at the kitchen table, lets the cat jump onto her lap, reaches for a piece of cold toast, takes a bite, throws it back onto the table. Smut stands with front paws on table and back paws on lap, sniffs the toast and looks outraged from toast to owner and back again.

‘I’ll take that as a no, then.’

Kerenza studies her friend, who is scratching the back of her leg with one foot. She has known Anna since their first day at school together, when Anna had come up to her and said simply, you’re going to be my best friend, and Kerenza had said, oh all right, and Anna had nodded, and they have managed to

stay best friends even when Anna went off to university and Kerenza was at drama school. Now Anna has a job lecturing on international law and human rights, a funny Croatian husband she married so that he could get a passport and a purse that contains money and credit cards which aren't maxed out even though she doesn't earn so much. She is one of those people who just seems to manage her affairs well, who chooses her best friend decisively at eleven years old, has her paperwork in box-files and fills in forms on time. She doesn't have an iPod or a Palm or a Blackberry, her mobile is so old it's fashionable, although she does not know or care about that. She also owns their house, which was left to her by an aunt. It is an old and comfortable house; a great willow in the garden overhangs a bench where Anna often reads her books on human rights abuses and violations of international law, and Kerenza sometimes watches her from her own bedroom window, envying the quiet certainties of her life. Anna charges Kerenza a ridiculously low rent for the spare room, and Kerenza sometimes thinks that, without the house and without her best friend, life would be a complete disaster.

'I can't pay the rent this month.'

'OK.'

'You can evict me if you like.'

'Don't be stupid. When do you think you can pay?'

'I don't know.'

'Whenever.'

Anna sits down, cradling her cup of coffee.

Kerenza says, 'You going in to your department today?'

Anna shakes her head.

'Got some stuff to do here. You want to go and see a film this week? We can go to the Rio: it's further than you think.'

Kerenza laughs at the name they use for the cinema in Dalston. They always set off for it on foot and always end up grumbling about the distance.

'I haven't . . .'

'I'll get the tickets. I just don't want to go on my own.'

Kerenza nods and peers out of the window to the road. There is no traffic and a yellow-jacketed policeman is making exaggerated circling gestures to oncoming cars, urging them to turn around.

‘What’s going on out there?’

Kerenza shrugs. ‘Shooting? Accident?’

‘Go and have a look. Go on.’

Kerenza goes obediently to the front door, opens it, stands on the step, with the grey wind brushing around her bare ankles. She makes a mental note to do her toenails that morning. A little further down the road a police Land Rover stands enclosed by blue and white tape in the road. A maroon van is parked at an odd angle and policemen are making notes.

‘What happened?’ she asks the Turkish café owner who is standing nearby with his arms folded, also watching. Everyone watching has their arms folded.

‘Woman was trying to cross the road. She saw a car coming and stepped back but that van was coming on the inside lane. Split her head right open. Dead.’

Kerenza turns her gaze on the instrument of death. A maroon van with a sticker in the window. The sticker says McGeery Motors. There is something both forlorn and sinister about the stationary vehicle. Behind the scene, a pair of greenfinches are skeering between the branches of the trees. A couple of kids holding chocolate bars pause and stare at the scene outside the newsagent’s. The boards for the local paper outside the shop say ‘Rapist forced scissors down my throat’. The police take notes. Smut sticks her head around her ankles and Kerenza shoos her back inside, although Smut doesn’t like it outside and only ever leaves the house crawling nervously on her belly and staring at the sky as if it might come crashing down on her. Bit of a scaredy-cat when she’s not on top of the wardrobe. The postman arrives, staring also at the scene, shaking his head. He hands Kerenza their letters and she turns back into the house.

‘Accident,’ she tells Anna when she returns. ‘Woman was hit outside the dry cleaners.’

'That's awful. Is she . . . I mean . . .'

'Dead. Apparently.'

'Oh.'

'What's the post?'

Mostly white envelopes, mostly full of vague threat.

'Kerenza – boring, Kerenza – boring, Anna – college, Kerenza – irritating, Anna – Homerton Hospital . . . what are you going there for?'

'Oh, just some stupid check-up,' Anna says. 'That'll be my appointment.'

'What for?'

'Just some gynae thing.'

She starts to read the paper, licking her finger as she turns pages. It's the *Guardian*, so the headline is not about the scissor-wielding rapist but a claim by the head of MI5 concerning the inevitability of further terror attacks on the UK. None of this matters any longer to the woman who stepped backwards into her death. It was an understandable thing to do, Kerenza thinks, she can visualise herself doing the same, just hopping back out of range of the car seen, not thinking about the other traffic unseen. While Kerenza was sitting in the park looking for the terrapins the woman was still alive, maybe picking up her keys hurriedly from the kitchen table, kissing somebody goodbye.

She wonders again how old the woman was. Young? Impatient? Late for work? Was she middle-class, educated, with a nice sensitive husband at home? Was she a drunk clutching a can of super-strength lager? Would that make it less tragic? Kerenza has to admit that the answer to this question is not as straightforward as she would like to think. She turns and walks back to her bedroom.

In the garden outside her window, a brightly coloured paper windmill propelled by the morning breeze spins in a flowerbox, small and irrelevant under the London sky. The little windmill makes her feel an almost overwhelming sense of despair and then anger at her despair because she hasn't just had her skull split open by the McGeery Motors van, she's not being herded

with rifle butts onto a cattle truck, it is just that her chosen career is not going very well and that the careers of others are. Why then is she so miserable that she feels as if the air is entering her lungs and choking her?

For a magic moment, a few years ago after she played Cordelia in a fêted production of *King Lear* that propelled the director to Hollywood, it had seemed that she was about to cross the moat into the castle, but somehow she got waylaid, detained just before the drawbridge while charlatans like her drama-school contemporary Olivia Scott wave their handkerchiefs blithely from the battlements. It is vulgar and unattractive – she knows – to hate Olivia quite so vehemently, to feel like weeping when she hears of the new part she has just been offered, to experience nausea at the sight of the fawning profiles. But her hatred is now a hard cyst inside her because she knows – with equal certainty – that Olivia’s success is so out of proportion to her feeble talent. She clenches her teeth as she sees photos of Olivia with her new boyfriend from a serious and earnest pop band. She digs her nails into her hands as Olivia – who has neither a political nor a literary bone in her body – is asked what she thinks about the latest international crisis, the downgrading of cannabis, her most hilarious *faux pas*, her favourite TV programme or her summer reading suggestions.

And what did you expect? cry the mocking voices in her head. *Justice of some sort? Didn't your mad old dad have a few words on this topic, something about plating sin with gold?*

If she had had a fall from grace that was dramatic it might have been better, but now it seems that all the promise and hope and bright confidence of a few years ago has simply oozed slowly away, and she has been powerless to prevent it; nobody pays her the slightest bit of attention any longer, and she can't understand why. What has she done? What has she failed to do? What is wrong with her? She cannot even really identify a turning point, one moment her Cordelia was receiving accolades and people were predicting a glittering future, her agent was fizzing, and then expectation and waiting and then nothing,

just a gradual waning of interest, a slow, painful puncture that she can neither locate, nor fix, nor understand. And perhaps, in spite of the pettiness of her rage at the success of Olivia, this lack of an answer lies at the heart of her misery; she just doesn't know. Stories of overnight success require, if they are to have any dramatic impact, the possibility of failure. Some of those eating cold baked beans, packing shelves and fighting to find the coins for the electricity meter while they pursue their dream have to *continue* doing so otherwise there would be nothing interesting about the stories of the luckier few. But who is bothered by the dashed expectations and unrenewed contracts, who really cares about the kid packing away his football boots after being told he is no longer needed by the club that once promised him glory, the actor waiting for the phone to ring?