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Opening Extract from...

The Lost Girl

Written by Adam Nevill

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ADAM NEVILL

Lost Girl

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For Gill, Bernard and Liz.
And in memory of Graham Joyce and Michel Parry.

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither

William Shakespeare,
King Lear

ONE

The last time he had seen his daughter, she'd been in the front garden. Two years ago.

In his mind the father had replayed the scenes of that hot afternoon more times than it was possible to remember. One thousand times, in the first six months following the abduction, might not have been an exaggeration. The father suspected that his wife, Miranda, had relived that afternoon even more than he had, with each replay incrementally confirming her absence from the world. To this day, he believed much of his wife was still standing in the front garden, outside their old house, bloodless with shock.

He'd rescreened his memory's shaky footage – at first sun-blinded, then too dark, all recorded during the worst kind of day that anyone could dream up – for clues, then reshot it to imagine different outcomes, then repeated it on loops to punish himself. But in his clutching at the brighter sections of his recall of that day, and in his clawing at the vaguer opaque patches of those crucial, booming minutes, he'd always recognize, almost immediately, that he'd begun adding details. The more he forced his mind to remember, the greater the temptation to insert himself acting quickly and decisively; in ways that he had not done at the time.

But the original script had remained a final draft, and could not be rewritten no matter how hard he tried.

The front garden was tiered. The first time he saw the place, when he and his wife were house-hunting, he'd been reminded of a jungle step-pyramid, or a hillside divided into layers by ancient farmers. And during the two years they had lived there, with him often working away from home, his wife had steadily and neatly cultivated the slope, level by level. Corn and potatoes, courgettes, pumpkins, marrows and kale had grown upon their street-facing garden. Behind the house, on the long, level garden, tepees of bamboo poles had created a thicket for beans, and glittering polythene cloches, flashing like pools of water seen from the air, had stretched to the rear fence. The back garden had yielded all the fruit they could possibly want.

The father had moved his family from Birmingham to the coast when the Thames flooded one too many times, the new tidal barrier still unfinished. This meant that tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and finally millions, had left London for the second city, a landlocked place of Jurassic limestone, not prone to floods and high enough to poke above the waves that might one day rise ninety feet, or more, the world over. And with some terrible irony, the exodus from the south-east headed to the place that had started the Industrial Revolution, with its heavy reliance on coal-burning. Accompanying the masses were the banks and businesses, and most of central government, and all of its affiliates, forlorn but adapting: a steady stream of colonizers retreating from the rising waters and street strife too plentiful to police. The evacuation had pushed up the house prices along the length of the retreat,

but as London had most of the country's money, it was forced to give some of it back.

During the great migration, the father's house in the south of Birmingham, close to its last good school, had sold for more than he and his wife had known was possible when they'd first bought the property. They were one of the few early winners as the world's food markets collapsed and food exports slowed to a trickle, before finally running dry for all but the devious and those of means. Once all the arable land between the cities had been consumed by the growing of genetically modified, drought-resistant crops, few new homes were built. Every field where sheep and cattle had grazed, every city park, football field, grass verge, motorway embankment – every inch of green space – was given over to the new crops, as meat and fish vanished from the shelves of stores.

The father, his wife and their baby had moved to the coast, but not to a place that was going under the waves. They found a place where hardly any had wanted to live for a long time because there were so few jobs, and there was some time remaining before the latter surges of refugees would arrive. The father had moved his family into a house on one of the hills of Torquay. It had a view and a big garden to grow food. Everyone had been growing food in Devon and going vegetarian by necessity for a decade.

The house on the hill had felt like a safe place to be in times changing from bad to worse, with no relief in sight: a house protected by trees, but airy and light, swept by sea breezes, and so far removed from the lines of angry, glittering traffic and the mean instability of the city they'd left behind, they had thought this the best place to raise their

only child and to cherish that solitary soul with all of themselves.

On *that day*, their daughter had been in the front garden of their house on the big hill.

The father had been in his room upstairs, the home office, writing messages to a woman that weren't work-related and should never have come from a married man. Through his open windows came the swish of distant traffic: mostly local, with the frequent grind of freight lorries carrying grain from the breadbasket of East Devon and vast, cultivated Dartmoor.

The sounds of his daughter rose and fell from below the window, as she gave her mother a commentary on her activities, something that always made him smile. He briefly watched her as she hefted a small plastic bucket filled with new potatoes from place to place, moving swiftly and with purpose. Then he sat down again at his desk.

In the front garden, his daughter had been on the third tier of four, her mother on the fourth, closer to the house. His daughter had been halfway between the house and the street.

The father had heard his wife walk into the house below. She had entered through the patio windows that opened onto the front garden from the living room. They ate most of their meals on the patio outside from late spring to the beginning of autumn, and the paved area had become an outside dining room.

As his wife had come into the house, she had called up to the father: 'She's down in root crop. Taking potatoes in a spaceship to Nanny's.' The father had laughed, but could not deny that although slightly touched by the description,

his mind had been on other things that afternoon, and the potential of another woman's body at a food management conference the following month. He'd known his wife was instructing him to keep an eye on their daughter from his window. And he'd intended to do so once he'd completed the business he was engaged in; once he'd finished the message in just the right way, in a tantalizing but non-committal fashion.

His wife had carried two buckets filled with shallots and cucumbers in through the living room, along the hall, and into the kitchen. She had placed the buckets on the floor before the sink unit. Then she had emptied the cucumbers into a colander and slipped it into the sink. The father thought he remembered hearing the water come on hard before the flow weakened. There was a water shortage, as usual, that summer. Much of what had been held in reservoirs from the floods the previous winter was now needed to irrigate crops, though most of the water was required to cool the new power stations, and always would be.

As the tap ran, the father had heard his daughter say, 'Mummy'. There was no alarm in her voice.

The father had been close to the end of the final sentence he was typing and began to rush the message so he could look out and see what his daughter wanted. His daughter had repeated her call from the front garden, in a slightly higher voice. Downstairs, the kitchen tap was still running. His wife had not heard their daughter.

Outside, his daughter had spoken again. The father had heard her say, 'What's that?' He had thought she was addressing her toys. She didn't speak again. But the father

had heard the rattle of plastic. That was his daughter's bucket dropping onto the dry topsoil.

A few more moments had passed.

His wife had turned off the tap in the kitchen. In the near distance, the father had heard the clinking sound of the metal gate at the end of their property. The gate stood at the end of the cement path that ran along the side of the house and down the slope to the road.

At the sound of the clink the father had hurriedly pushed his chair back from his desk, abandoning the email exchange, stood up, and gone to the window.

Though he'd always been paranoid about the traffic so far below, his daughter had never once ventured to the end of the front garden unaccompanied. Even if she had explored that far, she would not have been able to unlock the gate latch.

He'd thought the metallic clink had signified an attempt to open the gate by a visitor to the house, probably a hawker or an evangelist. But he had not heard the telltale scrape of the heavy, lopsided metal frame across the first paving slab of the front path. Only those familiar with the gate knew to lift it first, then push or pull it open or closed.

The father had looked out of the window at the front garden. He could not see his daughter on the third tier, or the fourth tier closer to the house, or the second tier further down on what had once been a lawn. The first tier was crowded with trees they'd left in place for privacy so that the front of the property was screened from the street.

His wife had come into sight and walked across the patio, nonchalant and relaxed. She had been wearing green

rubber gloves, denim shorts, one of his t-shirts and running shoes. The father could see the top of her head and was about to say, *I can't see her*, but didn't.

His wife had looked about quickly, then behind herself and into the house. Her voice steady, she'd called out their daughter's name, and calmly went back inside.

The father had thought of the trees at the bottom of the garden and wondered if his daughter was hiding. He played hide and seek with her most days he was home, and there were two places in the copse where she would lean against a trunk with her hands over her eyes and believe herself invisible. But the father could not see her pink shorts or red shirt amongst the darker greens of the trees, which were thick enough to hide the garage roof. As he searched the trees with his eyes, he had become aware of the faint sound of a car engine idling far below. A door had whumped shut, and had been followed by exactly the same sound.

His wife had come out of the house more quickly than she had entered it, and stood still. Her posture had transmitted an instant trill of alarm into the father that pinpricked along the bottom of his stomach. She'd started walking briskly across the patio towards the vegetable patches and onto the second tier, where she'd glanced at the bucket. Here, she had turned to the house again and noticed the father's face at the window. Momentarily, Miranda had appeared relieved; clearly she'd thought that the father had been watching their little girl the whole time she had been inside the house with the vegetables, and he knew where their daughter was.

She must have seen something in the father's eyes

though, because her face had adopted the expression it assumed at the precise moments when their daughter lost her footing beyond an arm's reach. His wife had returned her attention to the garden and called their daughter's name again. A short but awful silence had followed. She had looked up at the window of the father's room and said, 'Where is she?'

As if in a spiteful riposte, a car engine had revved and they'd both heard tyres ripple away from the kerb below their house. The father had felt as if he was standing in a lift that had suddenly dropped through space.

No, no, no, no, he'd chanted in a faux-cheery tone of voice, not out loud but inside his head, as he ran from the room and down the staircase and through the hall, the living room and onto the patio. By then his wife was amongst the trees on the first tier, repeatedly calling their daughter's name in a tense, hurried voice.

The father had run down the path, leapt down the steps to the bottom level and had seen the gate ajar. All of the air inside his chest had seemed to cling to the top of his lungs. Somehow, within less than a second, his mind had replayed every single bright yellow road safety poster he had ever seen in his life. But he'd heard no traffic, so if his daughter was in the road there was no danger from approaching cars.

He'd thought of his daughter's last words: *What's that?*

And that was the first moment he had suspected that she might have been taken by a stranger. When the idea entered his thoughts, his mind had reeled horribly, as if he'd just climbed off one of the small roundabouts in the

local play area. He had lost his balance and gripped the gate with all the strength of a dead man's hand.

Holding his breath the father had stepped into the road. His legs were quivering and he'd felt concussed. The street had suddenly seemed brighter, but the air was cooler than it had been as he raced through the garden.

His wife had called his name from the trees. Her voice on the verge of tears, she'd added three words: 'She's not here.'

At the top of the road, a long one that ran from the hospital to the main road that he used to get to the motorway for work, he could see three vehicles, about three hundred feet distant: a white car turning into their road at the top, a red car waiting at the stop line to turn left, which it did as soon as he looked up the street; and behind the red car was a black one, a full electric SUV model. Brake lights on the rear of the black vehicle had glinted, two cherries in the sunlight.

The top of the road had shimmered dusty. There were no pedestrians.

The father had begun walking towards the end of the road. He hadn't run, because part of him was desperately trying to refute the notion that she had been taken from their garden. He'd suffered a constant morbid anxiety about her safety since her birth, but what he felt right then amplified the instinctive dread to such a level that his ears had popped, and the stiffening of his gut had stifled his breath.

'She's not in the garden.' His wife had come down the steps and into the street. He hadn't been aware of her descent. Still unbelieving, the father had glanced at the

neighbouring properties, across the road and behind him, trying to make his daughter reappear with the power of his mind alone.

At the T-junction the black car was still waiting for its turn to enter the traffic. The father had found his voice and called out his daughter's name.

Behind him, above him, he had heard his wife again. She had returned to the garden. Her voice grew shriller as she'd called their daughter's name into the still, humid air.

The black car at the end of the road had not appeared to be in any hurry. From a distance of two hundred feet, the father couldn't read the number plate. His legs had felt old and insufficient, but his jog had soon become a sprint and he'd begun crying with a similar intensity to the way the child he'd just lost cried when she was frightened.

The black car had turned left, onto the main road, and had vanished from sight.