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Letting Go

A True Story of Murder, Loss and Survival

Written by Alex Hanscombe

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LETTING GO

*A true story of
murder, loss and survival*

BY RACHEL NICKELL'S SON
ALEX HANSCOMBE

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For those who seek the truth.

PROLOGUE

‘Alex, what was in the bag?’

I was the most famous child in the British Isles.

My third birthday had come and gone just days before and already I was on another scheduled visit to the child psychologist. As usual, the two detectives who had been assigned to us were both present.

Immediately after our last visit the psychologist’s house had been fitted with hidden microphones and concealed cameras. The police didn’t want to miss a word. While the purpose of these sessions was supposedly therapeutic, in reality their main objective was to obtain information. The killer had left nothing behind, and despite the hundreds of people on the Common that morning I had been the only witness. Only a footprint had been found during a forensic examination of the scene, along with a fleck of red paint in my hair.

Weeks had passed, the killer was still on the loose, free to strike again at any time. The police knew nothing about what took place in the minutes either before or after the attack. They

LETTING GO

were desperate for new leads and I was now the only person who could help them solve the puzzle they faced.

‘I know how much you must remember your worst ever day,’ the child psychologist began. ‘The police are here to catch the bad man who killed your lovely mummy and to put him in prison where he won’t be able to harm anyone else again.’

I was asked many questions that morning, questions I had already been asked many times and which were to be repeated over and again during the weeks to come. Usually I would spend the sessions playing with toys, and only address these strangers directly, if I addressed them at all, from time to time. But it was always clear to those present when the child psychologist intentionally took me back to relive the day in question that I was once again living in the moment the attack took place. My mind was totally focused and they couldn’t help but imagine the film running in explicit detail inside my head.

‘Alex, was the bad man carrying anything?’ one of the detectives asked.

‘A bag,’ I replied.

‘Alex, do you remember what colour the bag was?’

‘Black.’

‘Alex, what was in the bag?’

I played on for several seconds as the adults in the room looked at one another.

‘Alex,’ the detective repeated. ‘Do you remember what was in the bag?’

Suddenly, I stabbed a crayon into the piece of paper on the table and gazed deeply into the detective’s eyes, forcing him to lean forward to hear.

‘A knife.’

CHAPTER 1

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

The Southern Wind

Doth play the trumpet to his purposes,
And by his hollow whistling in the leaves
Foretells a tempest and a blustering day.

Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1, Act V, Scene 1*

Memories can be deceptive, seemingly playing tricks on us and reshaping our past perceptions in new ways. Some recollections fade over time, while others remain vividly etched into our memories. But in the depths of my mind there are still absolutes: the shelter and warmth of my mother's embrace, the knowledge that I was safe and that I was loved.

Of this I am convinced; when a seismic event changes the course of our lives, its impressions are marked on us forever, and the day I watched my mother's soul leave her body, on the morning of Wednesday, 15 July 1992, is one I will never forget. Twenty-

LETTING GO

four years have passed, but through the fog of time I can still see the film running inside my mind as if it were only yesterday.

For me, that morning began just like any other. I was less than a month away from my third birthday and I awoke in my small bed on one side of my parents' room, stretched out on the furry sheepskin on which I had slept since I was born.

I opened my eyes to see my mother gazing down at me from above. 'Good morning, Alex,' she exclaimed, lifting me up into her arms for a hug. I felt, as I had every day of my short life until then, a warm, happy feeling that began inside my chest and spread throughout my entire body; a feeling of lightness and peace.

While my mother went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, my father picked me up and threw me onto their bed. I loved a good play fight with him. The two of us rolled on the covers together, wrestling and tussling until, after a couple of minutes, he got up, laughing, and said, 'OK, tough guy – time's up!'

Like most three-year-olds, I was full of energy and curiosity. I couldn't wait to start the day, and I was thrilled when our dog Molly – a sleek, seal-like bundle of shiny black fur with a furiously wagging tail – bounded into the room to say hello. A mixture of Labrador and greyhound, less than a year old and full of life and playfulness, she was my constant companion and like a younger sister. Not for the first time I wish she could have slept on my bed. She'd been allowed to do so the previous Easter, on holiday in the Isle of Wight. We were both delighted about it, but back at home there were strict rules to follow and Molly had to go back to sleeping on her bed in the kitchen.

Our apartment in Balham, South London, a two-bedroom flat on the third floor of a mansion block, was for now our sanc-

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

tuary, a home where the three of us were shielded from the busy city beyond its walls. It was here where I was born and here I had spent all but a few nights of my young life.

I normally had breakfast in the front room, but that morning for some reason everything felt slightly different. Upon her return, my mother sat down on the bed beside me, handing me my bowl of cereal.

‘If you’re still hungry afterwards, you can have some toast and Marmite.’

She smiled at me as I dug into my cereal.

At the other end of the room, my father was pulling on the leather trousers he wore for work. He had usually left by the time I ate my breakfast, but that morning he was still at home and in a hurry. The evening before he’d been playing in a tennis tournament and he’d got back late.

Until recently he’d been travelling the globe playing tennis, but shortly before my birth he’d begun working as a motorbike dispatch rider. He was now working long hours, winding his way through endless city traffic, delivering parcels and packages. He worked hard to support the three of us, but my parents dreamed of making a new start. One day soon, they said, the three of us would travel together to the South of France and settle down in a small cottage in the depths of the countryside. Somewhere the sun shone every day; somewhere I could run wild with my hoped-for brothers and sisters; where the daily turmoil of city life would just be a thing of the past. But their plans were on hold until we could sell the flat.

As I finished my cereal my father bent down to kiss me and ruffle my hair. ‘See you later, Alex. Have fun!’ he said, before hugging my mother and kissing her goodbye.

LETTING GO

‘Bye, Daddy.’ I smiled up at him as he opened the front door. I often had a bittersweet feeling watching him leave for work. By the time he got home I’d usually be asleep. But if I was still awake he would look at the drawings I’d done that day, listen to stories of our adventures with Molly and tuck me into bed, singing me a soft, soulful ballad until I drifted off into sleep. I loved these moments and felt sad knowing that I wouldn’t be with him that day. But at the same time the long hours my mother and I spent together, just the two of us, were special.

Years later my father told me that although he very rarely missed work, that morning he felt a strong urge to stay at home.

After a disturbed night, during which I awoke several times, my mother had said to him, ‘I’m so tired. I just want to sleep forever.’ After all, she was always the one who got up and settled me back to sleep. Sometimes I would fall asleep again within seconds as she stroked my hair; while other times she would lift me up into her arms and cradle me tenderly, breast-feeding me until I drifted off once again.

Perhaps it was because she had been unusually subdued since her handbag was stolen from our car. It had been two days before when we went for our usual morning walk while my father was at work, and she’d left it in the glove box and forgotten to turn on the car alarm. When we returned to the car the window was broken, and the incident left her badly shaken.

As my father headed out the door, Molly began to bounce around the house, playing with her ball and getting under our feet. ‘Come on, Alex,’ my mother said, shaking off her low spirits. ‘It’s a lovely day. Let’s get out for our walk.’

My mother and I spent every day together. At 23 she was truly beautiful – tall and athletic with long, golden hair and a

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

smile that lit up her face. When I remember my mother, though, it's not in details like these, but the feeling of being loved and of loving in return.

While my father battled with the London traffic, our days always began with a walk. My parents liked to joke between them that I was like a puppy myself; both Molly and I needed long walks, so rain or shine my mother would take us to open spaces in an attempt to wear us out.

As I pulled on my shoes I looked hopefully at my yellow tricycle, parked in the hall. It had a long handle at the back that my mother could hold, to stop me pedalling headlong into the nearest road, and I loved it. I hoped that after our walk she might take me out on it.

Money was tight for my parents but my mother always filled our days with adventure. Every week she took me to the local library to choose books and at home we would make collages with patterns of pasta stuck on paper, put puzzles together on the floor and build castles and towers with building bricks piled up one on top of the other. Other times we played imaginary games together: I was always Babar, King of the Elephants, and she was always Celeste, my queen – the characters in one of the stories we liked to read best.

Minutes later, with our shoes firmly laced, we headed down the stairs to the street, holding each other's hand and grabbing on to Molly's lead with the other.

When we stepped out of the building my father was still there, wheeling his large, black motorcycle from the forecourt onto the street. As he pressed the starter and the engine roared into life, my mother and I stood together on the step waving goodbye to him. I was always excited by the loud roar of his

LETTING GO

bike, and loved watching him fire it up. He revved the engine fiercely one more time and I gave him a big smile before the sound of the exhaust pipes faded as he rode off into the distance. I did not know then that the next time I saw him our lives would be irrevocably changed.

My memories of that morning fast forward and I find myself walking beside my mother beneath the open blue skies of Wimbledon Common, the midsummer sun warm on our skin while Molly runs in circles around us, intoxicated by the sounds and smells of the park. I know of course that we had driven the twenty minutes across South London in our old grey Volvo, but details of the journey have long since faded away.

Until only a few weeks before we had regularly visited a local park near our home, but one morning a stranger exposed himself to my mother and we had not returned since. Wimbledon Common was in a wealthier area and both my parents felt it was a safer place for us to walk. My father had spent a great deal of his free time there as a child, running wild with his friends, and knew every inch of it by heart.

To me, the Common was a wilderness that stretched on forever; an untamed forest with endless leafy tunnels to explore and wide open spaces where Molly and the many other dogs that were brought there could run freely alongside picnicking families that sat together basking in the warm summer sun. Even in winter there were always people walking on the Common, and when temperatures dropped there was a large pond where parents, children and teenagers came to skate happily together.

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

As my mother and I walked hand in hand along a familiar path, we passed a spot I remembered well. It was here, in a quiet corner just off the path, that we had laid Birdie's body to rest only a few weeks before.

Birdie had entered our lives as my parents and I made our way back home from one of our weekend walks. Just outside the front door to our block of flats we spotted a beautiful bird lying on the pavement. Molly sniffed curiously while my parents crouched over it in concern and I watched, intrigued. The bird's wing was broken and none of us wanted to leave it there, so we decided to mount a rescue and my father quickly disappeared upstairs to find a cardboard box.

When he came back he lifted the bird gently into the box and carried it upstairs as my mother and I followed closely behind. In the living room he placed it on the floor and I peered into it, fascinated by the beady eyes which stared back at me. It wasn't long before we came up with the not so original name of 'Birdie', and for the next hour my father and I scratched around in the earth in the communal back garden, digging up worms, insects and other treats for Birdie, which we carried carefully back upstairs and attempted to feed to him with a pair of tweezers.

The next morning I woke to a loud burst of birdsong. Fascinated, I went running to look inside the box. Our devotion to Birdie was paying off – he was full of life and showing definite signs of recovery.

For a couple of days he continued to thrive. But when we came back from our walk one afternoon, Birdie was lying stiff and silent at the bottom of his box.

'What's happened to Birdie?' I asked.

LETTING GO

‘He doesn’t need his body any more,’ my mother explained gently. ‘The part that’s really him has gone somewhere else now.’

I listened thoughtfully as I studied his lifeless body.

A few days later we went to Wimbledon Common and chose a special place where we dug a shallow hole in the soil and gently laid Birdie’s body to rest.

Soon afterwards my mother took me to our local library to pick out several children’s books dealing with the subject. Over the next few days we read the books together and she explained to me that, even though I would perhaps be sad that Birdie had gone, he was now free and his broken wing was not hurting him any longer. He had gone to a beautiful place, where he could be happy.

‘We are not our bodies,’ she explained. ‘The body is only like clothes that cover us for a little while.’

Less than a week before, we had been to a video shop and picked out a dinosaur cartoon for me to watch. It was called *The Land before Time*. When we got home I sat at my little red table, eating a sandwich and totally absorbed while my parents sat on the sofa behind me. In the film, a baby dinosaur, Little-foot, was separated from his mother by a devastating earthquake. When he finally found her again she was lying weak and frail, collapsed on the ground, dying. The baby dinosaur nuzzled her as he pleaded desperately, ‘Please get up! Get up!’ But as much as his mother tried, she simply couldn’t. She told him to carry on to the Great Valley and promised that she would be with him always, even if he couldn’t see her.

I was glued to the screen as I watched the scene unfold. But to my father the thought of me – so devoted to my mother –

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

ever losing her in some kind of accident was too much for him even to contemplate.

‘Switch it off,’ he exclaimed, only half-joking. ‘I can’t take it!’

As the film played on I continued to watch wordlessly, keeping any thoughts I might have had to myself.

That warm July morning, as my mother and I walked past the place where Birdie was buried, we didn’t stop. There was no reason. My mother had already explained to me that Birdie wasn’t really there. He was now in a place of greater beauty and freedom – and what was once his body would now blend into the earth in order to create new life and repeat an infinite cycle.

Hand in hand we made our way down to the pond and headed back up the hill again, Molly trotting close by all the while. Soon we reached a large tunnel of trees, where sunlight appeared only dimly through the canopy above.

Nearby, a small stream wound through the woodland and the sounds of other parents and children laughing and calling to one another began to fade into the distance, replaced by the gentle splash of the stream. It had rained heavily in the previous few days; the grass was still wet and the air fresh.

As Molly headed into the bushes, following yet another tantalising trail, my mother and I carried on down the path. It was dark there, but as I looked up through the leaves I could see the blue of the sky beyond.

All of a sudden, as if sensing something was wrong, we both turned our heads to the right. Out of nowhere, a man with a black bag over his shoulder came lurching towards us through

LETTING GO

the undergrowth. There was no time to respond. I was grabbed and thrown roughly to the ground and my face forced into the mud. Seconds later my mother collapsed next to me. There were no screams. Everything was silent – so silent that for years to come the memories of those moments were to play out in my mind like an old film, without sound.

I saw the stranger's blank face, the clothes he wore and the knife he took from his bag. All these images remained so vividly engraved in my mind that later I would remember every single detail about him.

I picked myself up from the ground as fast as I could. I felt unsteady and my face was hurting. As I struggled to regain my balance, I caught sight of the man a few yards away, kneeling to wash his hands in the stream. A moment later he rose suddenly and headed rapidly off through the trees and into the distance, his black bag still over his shoulder. It was almost like seeing a ghost, appearing out of nowhere and disappearing without a trace.

I looked down at my mother lying on the ground beside me. She looked peaceful, as if pretending to be asleep, like in one of our imaginary games, ready to wake up at any moment and gaze adoringly into my eyes.

I noticed a piece of paper on the ground nearby, which had fallen from her pocket, and reached down to pick it up, holding it out to her.

'Get up, Mummy!' I said to her.

She didn't respond.

'Get up, Mummy!' I said louder.

Why didn't she move or answer?

'*Get up, Mummy!*' I shouted with all my strength.

THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

In less than a split second, life seemed to have come to a standstill. She was gone. Just like Birdie, she had disappeared. I was very young, and yet, at that moment, on some deep level, I knew that she was never coming back. My heart was completely broken. She was never going to get up and play with me again. I would never look into her loving eyes and see her adoring smile again. I would never hear her soft voice again, telling me how much she loved me.

I reached down and placed the piece of paper delicately upon her forehead so it would be with her wherever she was.

Around me there was absolute silence. The woodland was peaceful. Even though my mother's body lay beside me on the ground. Even though my face was swollen and bruised and my clothes splattered with blood.

I can't say how long I was there. Two minutes? Five? Ten? I knew, however, that there was no reason for me to remain there for even a second longer. I began running out of the woods up onto the grassy slope from which we had come a short while ago. I'm not sure I knew where I was heading but I knew I was going somewhere for a reason. I was flooded with pain, but felt a guiding hand on my shoulder, ushering me gently out of the trees. Suddenly, the bright rays of the morning sun dazzled my eyes as the sounds of families and friends sharing picnics happily together on the grass around me grew louder.

As I emerged from the trees, strangers came running towards me. They must have noticed my battered face and the blood splattered across my clothes. They were kind to me and somehow I knew I could trust them. But it felt like, although I was physically present, inside I was floating somewhere far away.

LETTING GO

In my memory, I still hear the sirens wailing in the background. I hear people talking to me, as well as to one another, but the words no longer register. In the distance the first flashing blue lights of police cars appear and when the ambulance arrives I'm rushed inside, sedated by doctors and drift off into a deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes I was lying in a hospital bed; white room, white ceiling, white floor, white walls and green curtains.

The story was already all over the news. Hordes of reporters were surrounding the building and the hospital's staff had been ordered to lock down all floors in order to avoid them breaking in. There were police and security guards posted all across the building.

I was awake, but still in a dreamy state. I lay very still, trying to work out where I was. Soon a nurse appeared, offering me water to drink and biscuits to eat. I didn't ask where my mother was. Inside, part of me was still attempting to understand everything that had happened.

The nurses were warm and friendly, and even though we talked and read some books together the words no longer reach me. How much time passed I don't know. But eventually one of the nurses led me by the hand through a large, echoing hallway to where my father stood at the far end, waiting for me.

He came rushing towards us, lifted me up into his arms and gave me a crushing hug. I gazed intensely and unblinkingly into his eyes. They were red and raw and tears were running down his cheeks.

'There's been a terrible accident,' he began, his voice breaking as he struggled to find the words. 'Mummy has been killed and she's not coming back ...'