

Hydra

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I heard them at lunchtime, over the sound of the radio.

They followed me here.

After everything that's happened, they followed me...

I don't know what they want.



So, anyway, hi, hello, this is me. As you can see, I'm recording this in my room. Look, there's the window; it's sunny out today. If I zoom in – hang on ... There; it's blurry cos of the window, but look, you can see how the sun falls on the fields, on those hills up in the distance, like a slice of yellow. Beautiful isn't it? I wonder if you stood up there and looked back here, would you see this place, in the shade? I wonder what it would look like from up there.



You told me I had to record myself as soon as I saw one – or heard one – it's hard to remember which it is sometimes, everything's all ... fuzzy ... like I'm walking through treacle. I get distracted by smells: the smell of the floors in the corridor first thing – lemony. I breathe it in, take great gulps; I can almost taste it. That's what I imagine when I see the sun on the fields, that yellow, lemony smell.

Sorry, yeah, so I heard one just before, at lunch. I'm recording this after lunch.

I listen to the radio when I'm having my lunch: Radio 1, the lunchtime show. It's funny and I like the music – hum along while I'm eating. Imagine

telling fifteen-year-old me that I'd be humming along to the radio. Fifteen-year-old me would've snorted and called bullshit. Fifteen-year-old me would have flashed the band names scrawled in Tipp-Ex on her schoolbag and called present-day me a fat, brainwashed sellout.

Food, though. You can smell cooking everywhere here; it's like the whole place is breathing the smell of food. It's not that nasty, canteen smell either, like old, brown fat. You can smell potatoes roasting; you can smell meat cooking, pastry baking. It drives me crazy, makes my tummy rumble constantly. When I was a kid, my mam used to make soda bread. I used to help her, stirring it all together in a bowl – buttermilk and flour. Mam used to let me do the salt. I'll never forget the taste when it first came out of the oven. And the texture: hard and crispy on top, fluffy in the middle, like biting into a storm cloud.

At lunch we were having toad-in-the-hole, and I just sat staring down into it. They do it in a circle; it looks like a moon. Each portion's a circle of Yorkshire pudding with the two ends of the sausage sticking out like a sea monster. A sea monster in a muddy gravy puddle. My mouth was watering, like, so much, I was having to swallow it back or else it would have gone all over the table, joining that puddle of gravy. That would have been embarrassing. But luckily there wasn't anyone else here. I have my lunch in my room.

Sometimes we have cake for pudding. Fridays, usually. They're the best days. We have fish and chips in batter, the flesh so soft and fluffy it glides into sections on your tongue before you've even bitten down; the batter crispy, melt-in-the-mouth. Vinegar. I always ask for vinegar, loads of it, so my chips are soaking.

Denise always shakes her head but she doesn't really mind. 'What are Fridays for?' she always says, and that makes me smile. She levers the fish onto my plate, on top of the chips, and you can see the vinegar pooling around the pile of mushy peas.

Fish and chips; cake and custard for afters.

I need to stop talking about food. Really.

I used to have a thirty-inch waist, you know? You wouldn't believe it, would you? Look at that. Ugh. That's called *flab*. I reckon I'm forty inches now, at least.

Oh well...

But yeah, anyway. I'm going to talk about what I'm supposed to be talking about. Rather than food.

I heard it above the noise of all that – the knives and forks and eating, and the smells, and Radio 1.

I'd been doing so well, too.

It were crying. That's what the sound were: crying.

It were coming from outside. Through the window at first, like it were far away. Not as far as the fields. Just ... away...

I didn't mind it at first, not until it started sounding like it were *in* the room. Right beside me, then behind me, then in front – you know how sounds do if you think about them for too long?

Crying.

Just this awful crying.

Mams and dads, they're programmed to react to stuff like that. Like, if they hear it, they can't help doing something about it. I think it's instinct.

Well, it must be like that for me too. Some instinct was pulling at me to react. I wonder what that instinct was? That's what you'll ask me in our next session.

Every part of me – every cell, every molecule of that cell – was telling me to go out there, to just push back my chair, climb over the table, smash the window and get out. I can't remember if the urge was to go *towards* the crying or get away from it. I can't remember.

I didn't though. I didn't. Not this time.

Well done me.

It started just as I sat down. My table faces the window and that's why I kept my head down. It were horrible. I very nearly looked up. That would have been bad. I could have called for someone; that would have been worse.

There were a load of options, a load of possibilities laid out in front of me, and I had the choice of what to do.

What I did was keep staring into that plate of toad-in-the-hole, proper staring at it like it was the most interesting thing I'd ever seen. After a little while the toad-in-the-hole became a face, the two ends of the sausage became the eyes, a crease in the batter became a mouth.

The crying kept on, louder and louder. It was like someone was tightening a screw in the side of my head, its tip pressing onto my brain, then

bursting the side and going right in. Over and over, I could feel it in my veins, my nerves, my organs. Crying, crying.

I put my fork down gently, really gently, no slamming or crashing, and reached up for the little ticket thing you use to pull the blind down.

There was a moment then – a moment when I could have looked; I could have looked out. I know that view by heart: the lawn is stripy like a football pitch, the polytunnel like a big white caterpillar, the borders and two little circles of soil like eyes. We planted up the borders with bulbs last year, watched them sprout shoots – little green spears like there was an army of elves under the ground. Beyond that are the trees, which clump into a brown fuzz if I've not got my glasses on, and just disappear into the horizon with the hills all rising up ... misty mountains.

They say if you see fairyland, if you look upon it, you'll never be able to go home. I've always known that. A part of me – an old, struggling part that hides under the meds – was pulling at me, biting at my heart, begging me to look.

The crying was coming from the lawn.

I could have seen what my mind was telling me was there.

When the crying began, they'd tried to make it sound like a cat. They did it to fool me, so I would look.

I'm not stupid though.

But they tried to make me look. They got louder with every cry, and I could hear breathing; rattling breath, lungs pulling in for another wail. I still held strong. The cries didn't have words – they said everything they needed to say. You know that saying, 'tugging on your heartstrings'? Well these were bell-ringers heaving up and down, relentless and desperate.

They were telling me to do what I shouldn't be doing; they were telling me to spoil everything, to break the window, feel the explosion of summer air over my face. It would smell like leaves and flowers and cut grass; underneath would be that sour tang of silage, manure, hot animal.

I would feel the grass under my feet, that rush in my chest as I ran. With all this extra weight I'd get a stitch. I wouldn't get far.

The thing is, though, I knew the crying had nothing to do with me leaving and running away across the fields; it was all about them.

About them coming in.

Then the crying turned into their voices. I've heard those voices before. They never cry, they just speak – on and on and on, the same questions. 'Why, why, why?' they ask, their questions curling round me, penetrating through everything like mist or fog. Over and over, their voices begging. But I don't answer.

Today, though ... today they told me what I need to do.

How to stop them crying.

How to make them go away.

Episode 1: Black-Eyed Boy

—That knock. *Rat-a-tat-tat*. I could almost hear the ... the *smallness* of the finger. Not a knuckle but the joint, the index finger folded into a point. *Rat-a-tat-tat*. Against the wood.

I remember it sent this jolt of fear through me. Most knocks on the door do. Well, they did back then. I always thought that it was going to be someone coming to get me, to take me away. Yeah, I remember that anxiety from when I were young. It were always mixed with a little tug of ... what? Excitement? If someone were coming to take me away, where would we go?

Imagine thinking like that when you're a kid?

But hearing that knock then, that night, it were more than that; it were real. It were so real, it went through me. I felt that folded finger tapping against my bones. There were like a voice inside me, shouting at me, screaming at me – to stay put, not to answer the door.

If only I'd listened...

If only I'd listened.

The voice you've just heard – and please excuse the interference on the phone line – is that of Arla Macleod. Yes, that Arla Macleod. You've seen her face. Black-toothed, grinning like a ghoul on the front of T-shirts; staring from memes on the darker corners of the internet. Her name resonates through a whole generation.

I know there'll be a few of you who are already writing this podcast off as unethical and even callous, unkind. You'll say I'm taking advantage. A few of you are wondering why I've broken my usual protocol, stepped outside my comfort zone and investigated what seems to be a case that's at the other end of the spectrum from the cold graves I usually rake over.

Please, though, stick with me, hear me out. If only for a short while. Just hear why I'm prodding this sleeping bear.

You must forgive me for attempting to set up an interview with Arla Macleod. Practically every single journalist the world over has done the same, but I'm the only one that has succeeded. I didn't think she would even respond to my request and, to be perfectly honest, I had no idea what I wanted to ask her – I had no ideas prepared for this series, no story arc. But you can't pass these opportunities up.

You could even say that Arla chose me. Perhaps Arla is a fan of Six Stories. Certainly, Six Stories will entice an influx of new listeners, as Arla has her own fans. For whatever reason, she agreed to speak to me. So I had no choice but to go ahead with the interview, did I?

I should also say, before you press the 'stop' button, the unsubscribe button or make that nasty comment on iTunes, that this interview was conducted with Arla's full cooperation. She was allowed to terminate it at any time and everything you hear in this opening episode has been approved by Arla herself.

So rather than questioning the ethics of what we're about to do, or why Arla has become the unlikely poster child of a defiant generation, I'd say what you should be concerning yourself with instead is the question at the centre of Arla's case.

I've thought long and hard about this, I'm aware of the impact this series could potentially have and I've come to the conclusion that the crux of this can be found in what you're about to hear: in our first story; Arla's story. And the question at its centre is not about guilt or innocence. It's about whether what Arla is telling us is true.

—I thought, *they've found me*. After all these years, they'd finally tracked me down.

Maybe it was a relief? I think there was a small part of me that almost welcomed them, like I could stop running at last.

Welcome to Six Stories. I'm Scott King.

In the next six weeks, we will be looking back at what happened to

the Macleod family in 2014 – the incident more commonly known as ‘the Macleod Massacre’. We’ll be looking back from six different perspectives, seeing the events that unfolded through six pairs of eyes.

Then, my dear listeners, it’ll be up to you. As you know by now, I’m not here to make judgements, draw conclusions, or speculate. I’m here to allow you to do that.

For newer listeners, I should make it clear that, as frustrating as it may be, this isn’t an investigation that will reveal any new evidence – I am not a policeman, a forensic scientist or an FBI profiler. My podcast is more like a book group – a discussion about an old crime scene. We discuss things with the help of others, those who have agreed to look back on a tragedy.

We rake over old graves.

In this opening episode, we’ll refresh ourselves with what we know – the so-called ‘facts’ about what happened to the Macleod family. We’ll also allow Arla to have her say. And then we’ll see where we go from there.

That OK? Good.

Welcome to episode one.



—They asked me in court; they asked why I didn’t close the door, why I didn’t raise the alarm ... why I said nowt to no one about them. And, it’s like, for me that’s just the most stupid question I’ve ever heard.

Arla’s talking to me on the phone, a landline. The phone is the way we’ll conduct our discussion. Unfortunately, Elmtree Manor will not allow me face-to-face access to its most notorious patient. They tell me about their reluctance in no uncertain terms: they fear a media fire-storm, a feeding frenzy, like sharks around a school of sardines. I agree. That’s why we’ve managed to keep this interview a secret until now.

Elmtree are aware of the questions they’ll face when this series airs; they are aware of the spotlight that will shine on their facility. It won’t

help their patients, it won't help me and it certainly won't help Arla Macleod.

However, patients at Elmtree are entitled to make and receive phone calls, sometimes via video link. Where patients such as Arla are concerned, these are often monitored. Elmtree prefers that we do this rather than meeting personally – that we talk on the phone or via video.

I'm happy to respect that. As you know, I'm not interested in sharing my identity either. Who I am has no bearing on this, or indeed on any of my cases. What I do know is that my phone calls with Arla are conference calls and that, at any time, the medical professional who sits patiently beside her may advise whether our conversation can continue. Despite what she's done, Arla's welfare is paramount here. Wrong or right, that's the way it is.

But I digress. For now, let's lay out our intentions. Let's explain everything.

In this series of Six Stories, we will look back on the events of November 2014. Through talking to Arla Macleod and others who knew her, we will try and formulate an opinion on a very complex and disturbing case.

So what do we know about what occurred at 41 Redstart Road, Stanwel, England in the early hours of that winter morning?

Stanwel – with one 'l'; an apt symbol for the attitude of the town: stubborn, resistant to change – was once a thriving coal-mining community on the northwest coast of the United Kingdom. The Stanwel colliery was closed by the National Coal Board in 1965 – long before the miners' strikes of the 1980s. Some say that Stanwel itself closed then too. The town never recovered. The silent towers of the Stanwel coal-fired power station still stand along the coastline; bleak, monolithic reminders of a bygone age.

Stanwel is a hard place, crouched on the Fylde Coast, north of Blackpool. Betting shops have infected the town, bright in their unashamed opportunism. Men in ill-fitting suits stand under a gazebo on Stanwel High Street between the pound shop and the library, hawking cable television to passers-by. The older people of the community remember window ledges caked with soot, handkerchiefs with black stains and the

grinding of the great wheel that brought the workers up from the coalface at the end of the day. To say Stanwel is depressing is a tired cliché about northern towns that have had their industry pulled from under their feet. But visiting the place as a diamond-bladed breeze cuts in from the Irish Sea and jangling electronic fairy music laced with the smell of old carpet wheezes from the door of yet another amusement arcade, one could be forgiven for using it.

—I don't know why anyone would want to stay there. When I was a teenager and that, me and my mates used to say that Stanwel's full of freaks and junkies. All we wanted to do were get out of there. Manchester or Liverpool, or up to Newcastle. Not too far but far enough.

Arla Macleod was not born in Stanwel. Her mother, Lucy, fled a life of poverty in Saltcoats, Ayrshire, on the west coast of Scotland when Arla was two years old and her sister Alice was a year younger. Arla's father, Conor Walsh, was a violent drunk and remained behind. Neither Arla nor Lucy was known to ever make contact with him again.

—I don't like to remember my real dad. I don't remember him, I think. I ... dissociate. There are flashes. Like, sometimes, when people shout – men especially – I get this ... this *tingling* feeling all over and I'm scared...

Lucy Walsh was accompanied south of the border by Stanley Macleod, who Lucy had befriended at her church group back in Scotland. Both of them spirited and hardworking, they persevered on their arrival in England, Stan taking a job as a refuse collector and Lucy working as a teaching assistant in a nursery. They married as soon as they could afford to. Like most in Stanwel, their life was modest. The Macleods did not stand out.

—I remember growing up down Redstart Road. It were a proper

nice childhood really. There were lots of other kids my age and the back gardens had this, like, interconnecting path at the bottom, with a great big fence where the train line was. Us kids used to play down there, for days it seemed. Out front was the road, and there was no reason for anyone who didn't live on Redstart to walk down there. Perfect really. Our mams and dads, they could just ... get on with stuff, I suppose.

The overriding thing I've noticed about Stanwel is its dignity. To look at, it's fairly run down, with its sagging high street, shops clinging on, tight rows of miners' cottages that open directly onto narrow pavements, and the largest road being the one leading out of town. But with the single 'V', the gardens fastidiously weeded and watered, the scrubbed wheelie bins, the trails of soap suds dribbling from driveways, it clearly has a stubborn pride.

Despite this, the 'grinding poverty' often affixed to descriptions of the town is clear for anyone to see. Jobs are rare – only to be found in call centres in the out-of-town industrial estates, or else accessed by long commutes to the region's larger cities. And drug addiction is a huge problem for the town – possibly its most obvious one. I'm alluding here to Arla's 'freaks and junkies' comment.

So, on the surface it appears that Stanwel has little going for it. Which begs the question, why did Stanley Macleod bring Lucy here? But Arla herself tells me how grateful her family was to get away from her real father. And, scratch beneath the surface and you find there's a lot more to this place than meets the eye. Stuff that might make it attractive for a family. Community allotments and a city farm nestle between the old slag heaps near the old colliery. The land around the abandoned power station is home to a few species of wading birds, and a small trust has been set up to protect them.

—Even when me and Alice were only little, Mam used to sit us down after Dad – Stan I mean when I say that – after Dad had one of his ... his little 'episodes', and she used to tell us what it were

like living with my *real* dad; how he used to drag her round by the hair when she were pregnant. Alice used to get proper scared and she used to cuddle into me with her hands over her ears, like she couldn't bear to hear it. Mam said that sometimes she used to have to go out to the shop in sunglasses, grabbing onto the walls cos he'd battered her and her eyes were all swelled up. She said Stan's little episodes were nowt compared to that, and we should be grateful to him. We were.

The street Arla Macleod grew up on is a pleasant one: a row of cottages in what you might call a suburb of Stanwel. Many of the back gardens of Stanwel's houses are linked by paths like the one Arla describes, providing easy access to the neighbouring gardens. This small addition gives many of Stanwel's streets a sense of community; it's another of those hidden gems you find below the surface.

Later we'll learn more about what life was like for Arla in her younger years. For now, let's leave behind these peripheral observations and discuss what happened on that infamous night.



Extract from North West Tonight, 10th February 2015

—Welcome to the programme. The headlines this Wednesday evening:

Stanwel family massacre: a woman has been sentenced to life in an institution for the killing of her parents and young sister. [Fade out]

[Fade in] Good evening. Twenty-one-year-old Arla Macleod of Stanwel was found guilty today of the manslaughter of her mother, stepfather and younger sister back in November of 2014. The judge gave the verdict of guilty with diminished responsibility... [Fade out]

[Fade in] It is considered particularly upsetting that twenty-year-old Alice Macleod's blossoming career

as an athlete was cut short. Alice was undergoing trials to represent her country as a swimmer.

Arla Macleod, who bludgeoned her family to death with a hammer, was immediately taken to a secure hospital from Preston Crown Court, where she was convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Macleod showed no emotion as her sentence was passed amid cheers from the public gallery and will now live out her life as a resident of Elmtree Manor Hospital, north Lancashire.

—That were made a big thing of, the fact that I showed ‘no emotion’. They said it were because I were a psychopath, that I wasn’t ‘able’ to feel things. Truth is I’d been medicated up to me eyeballs before the trial; I could barely even stay awake. The world was like ... it was like I were wrapped up in cotton wool, like I were only half there, do you know what I mean? Like it weren’t even me.

—Mr King? I need to let you know that’s enough for today.

—*That’s fine, thank you. And thank you, Arla, for talking to me.*

—A pleasure.



I’m not sure what it was that stopped our interview; our agreed hour was far from up. Perhaps it was a test to see whether I would respect Elmtree Manor’s wishes. These are tentative days, though, so I let it go. We’ll hear from Arla again later.

For now, let’s get some perspective.

Elmtree Manor, where Arla resides, is one of sixty medium-secure mental-health hospitals in England and Wales that house people deemed to be a danger either to themselves or others. At Elmtree, there are around two hundred residents – or patients, as they’re known. The overwhelming majority have committed offences while mentally ill or else have been diagnosed with a mental illness while in prison. All are being held

under the terms of the Mental Health Act. There are some who would say that Elmtree's patients, especially those like Arla Macleod, belong in higher-security institutions such as Broadmoor in Berkshire or Rampton in the East Midlands. Indeed, there are those who would say Elmtree is not punitive enough, especially for someone like Arla Macleod.

Elmtree is renowned for its modern design and for spearheading new therapeutic techniques. A state-of-the-art facility, it has been described by the columnists of the tabloids as 'better than a Premier Inn' and 'luxury slap-on-the-wrist with full board'.

The decidedly modern structure, which nestles near the Forest of Bowland, was once the imposing Fell Hospital, a towering Victorian asylum that blighted the picturesque countryside, its single, bat-haunted spire rising up into the sky amid the winding single-lane roads like Tolkien's tower of Orthanc.

All traces of those days are long gone now. It seems that even the screams and wails of its inhabitants have been fumigated out from between the cedar trees, neat lawns and working organic farm. What has rankled many a tabloid columnist is that, as Elmtree is 'medium secure', Arla Macleod and her ilk are free to wander the surrounding woodland, watch birds or help out on the small farm. Perhaps the fact that Arla's parents and sister will never again smell the grass and the tilled earth, or see the roll of thunderclouds cross the horizon, is what irks so many. However, unlike most medium-secure hospitals, Elmtree focuses on the maintenance of its patients' illnesses rather than their rehabilitation. This means its patients are rarely, if ever, discharged.

Arla, who will therefore see out the rest of her living days at Elmtree, never contested her guilt; the only questions were around the degree of her responsibility – whether she was aware of what she was doing at the time. I'm in no way qualified to comment on mental illness – I won't give any pop diagnosis; it would be an insult to the psychiatric profession for me to even try. All I can say is that Arla's guilt and her diminished responsibility were eventually decided in a court of law and her sentence was passed accordingly.

—Of course, it's too simplistic to explain what exactly is 'wrong' with Arla Macleod. We understand so much more about mental illness – and specifically the psychosis that the psychiatrists in court presented – that I think I'm safe in assuming her condition is a complex combination of things.

The voice you're hearing belongs to a doctor of criminal psychology, Dr Sarah White. Dr White has appeared on many television true-crime documentaries, most recently the three-part award-winning documentary on Robert Bonnet, The Quiet Ripper. She talks to me via Skype.

—I've never spoken to Arla Macleod, so I can't say with any true conviction what it is that's 'wrong' with her. I can only make a reserved judgement from what I know.

—*You can speculate though?*

—We can all speculate, but we can't give a diagnosis. That task is for her doctors at Elmtree, and I imagine that they're not at liberty to discuss their conclusions with you, right?

—*That's right. Hence I'm talking to you.*

—I'll take that as a compliment...

—*So what are your thoughts on Arla's condition?*

—Like I say, I can only speculate based on the evidence before us. From what we know about the case, I think I can say with some confidence that Arla Macleod was, and perhaps still is, suffering from psychosis. I strongly suspect she has been for a number of years.

—*Psychosis?*

—It's an umbrella term used to describe a range of different diagnoses, including schizophrenia.

—*So is it possible that Arla Macleod was or is schizophrenic?*

—Yes, that's entirely possible. However, each person's experience of psychosis is individual. Psychosis is characterised by the following symptoms: extreme paranoia, hearing voices, and hallucinations. From what I've read of the case and the therapy I know is practised

at Elmtree Manor, I wouldn't be surprised if Arla is struggling with a degree of extreme psychosis.

—*What do you think made Arla that way? As far as I know, that sort of condition does not run in her family.*

—While we're getting closer to answering that age-old question of whether 'monsters', as they're called, are born or made, we still don't have a definitive answer. Arla's psychosis could be explained as a genetic predisposition, exacerbated by environmental factors.

—*And you? What do you think?*

—I think there's no straight answer. A person's childhood, their home life in their early years, can have a huge impact; but it can also aggravate underlying problems or conditions. It is also entirely possible that psychosis is simply chemical.

—*What do you mean?*

—People with psychosis produce too much dopamine in their brains. Dopamine is a chemical, produced naturally, that acts as a sort of filter, a buffer for the sensors. At normal levels, it helps the brain focus and choose between perceived and actual threats. So someone whose brain is producing too much dopamine struggles to decipher what is important in their immediate environment and what isn't. So, for example, the woman pushing the pram next to the busy road becomes as threatening as the busy road, as does the bird singing in the roadside tree, the music coming from inside the corner shop. Does that make sense?

—*It does – too much dopamine produces a sort of state of constant fear?*

—More or less. A constant state of hypervigilance.

—*And this, combined with hearing voices and hallucinations, could have caused Arla to do what she did?*

—Causation is a tricky one. I'm talking generally, and each sufferer of psychosis experiences things differently. As I say, I don't know enough about the case, but in short, yes, Arla Macleod's psychosis *could* have caused her to do what she did. But we don't know the full story, do we? Will we ever?