

Just a Boy

Richard McCann

chapter one

the morning after

Leeds, October 1975

I didn't want to wake up, but my sister Sonia was shaking me urgently.

'Mum's still not home,' she whispered, trying not to disturb the others.

I slept in one bed with Sonia and our younger sister Donna. Angela, the baby, was in a cot next to us, and had cried all night. She always seemed to be crying. Mostly I liked sharing with the girls because it helped us to keep warm. There was no heating of any kind in the house, and when we went to sleep we huddled under two or three blankets and any coats we could find. The only drawback to sharing was that when one of us wet the bed - which happened quite frequently - we all got soaked.

The previous evening Mum had sent us upstairs early. A few minutes after seven we heard her taking a bath then going downstairs. Sonia sneaked down after her. Mum, she told me, was in her white trousers and green jacket, and doing her make-up in a piece of broken mirror, salvaged from one of her many fights with her boyfriend and propped up above the square pot sink in the kitchen.

'Are you going out, Mum?' Sonia had asked.

'No, I'm not. You get back to bed. Go on.'

But Sonia knew she was on her way out and had asked for a kiss.

'Come on then, before I put my lipstick on.'

As she kissed her on the lips, Sonia noticed how nice and clean she smelled, a mixture of soap and perfume.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, when no one came to answer Angela's screams, Sonia ventured downstairs again. The house was silent and empty.

Sonia had taken charge of the situation as she always did. She had turned the bedroom light on and read to Angela to calm her down. I had drifted off to the sound of her voice.

There was never any predicting what time our mother would roll in, or what state she would be in when she got there, but we normally had a babysitter, and Mum was always there by the time we woke up in the morning, even if she could barely drag herself out of bed.

'What time is it?' I asked Sonia now.

'Twenty-five past five.'

'What shall we do?'

'Get up. We'll go and look for her.'

I always did what Sonia said - she was seven and a year older than me - so I pulled myself out of the warm bed. There was ice on the inside of the little bedroom window that looked out over the back garden and the bare floorboards were freezing. We crept downstairs, leaving Donna and Angela asleep upstairs. I put my brown duffel coat on over my green checked pyjamas and pulled my shoes on without socks, which felt strange. Sonia was wearing a coat over her full-length purple nightdress. She was taller than me, with long brown hair and fine features.

The kitchen was still strewn with the remnants of the supper Mum had made before her night out. She always cooked an evening meal for us, no matter how short of money she was. We let ourselves out through the back door, pulling it to behind us. Mum preferred us to go out this way, rather than through the front door, with everyone watching.

My heart was thumping in my chest. It was still dark outside and the normally familiar garden was silent and filled with threatening shadows. I remember the grass was wet on my bare ankles. Usually, if we were out the back we would have been able to hear raised voices from the neighbouring houses, radios and televisions playing through open windows and shouts from the Prince Philip playing fields behind the house. But everyone else was still asleep. We pushed our way through the hole in the hedge that we always used.

The Scott Hall council estate, which had always been my home, was about two miles north of the centre of Leeds, a sprawling mass of streets lined with redbrick houses and connected by a network of ginnels or alleys. It had been built just before the war and every house was pretty much identical. We lived at 65 Scott Hall Avenue, which was the end house in a block of four.

We walked along the path at the back of the house, close to the hedge like Mum had taught us, so that none of the neighbours could see us and gossip about what we were up to. But there wasn't anyone around at that hour anyway. There was a mist covering the ground and in the darkness we couldn't see more than a few feet in front of ourselves.

I kept asking Sonia questions, desperate for her to put my mind at rest. I wanted her to tell me where we were going, where Mum was.

'She's probably just gone to the shops for cigs or milk,' she said, but it seemed a funny time of the day to be shopping, even for Mum.

We soon reached a gateway that led back to our street. We hurried across the street and into the ginnel that ran past the houses opposite and out to the main dual carriageway. I kept expecting to see Mum coming in the other direction. Usually the traffic would be streaming past, but this morning there was only the odd car, headlights reflecting off the wet surface of the road, as people set off early for work, or came back from night shifts. A milk float jangled past.

'We'll wait at the bus stop,' Sonia told me, 'and meet her off the bus. She's bound to be back soon.'

I did as she instructed, sitting down beside her on the seat of the shelter, my feet swinging. It was cold around the bottoms of my legs. A double-decker bus appeared at the far end of the road after a few moments and, as we watched it approach with its brightly-lit interior, my heart lifted. I was sure she would be on it. She would probably scold us for coming out of the house on our own, but it would be worth it to be able to walk back home with her and climb into a warm bed. The bus driver indicated that he was drawing in at the stop and the doors hissed open. No one got off.

'You getting on then?' he called out to us.

'No,' Sonia shook her head. 'We're waiting for our mum.'

The man muttered something under his breath, the doors slapped shut again and the bus drew away.

'She'll probably be on the next one,' Sonia reassured me. 'Don't worry.'

As the sky became lighter, the frequency of the buses drawing up at the stop increased, but Mum still didn't get off any of them. After we'd been there an hour and seen ten buses come and go, Sonia began to fret that Donna and Angela would have woken up at home and would be wondering where we were.

We decided to make our way back. The houses that had been dark when we set out were now full of light as people woke and got ready for the day. I hoped nobody would look out and see us because I knew Mum would be angry with us for coming downstairs and leaving the house without her. She was quite strict about that sort of thing.

I wondered if Mum might be waiting inside for us, her arms folded, demanding to know what we were playing at. It would have been a relief to see her, because we were beginning to feel really scared, but at the same time I didn't want to get into trouble.

'Go upstairs and see if she's in the bedroom or the bathroom,' Sonia instructed when we got in. She checked the rest of the house.

It didn't take long for us to exhaust the possibilities in our small home.

'What should we do?' I asked, frightened but sure Sonia would know the answers.

'I'll go and get Angela and Donna up,' she said, trying to sound certain.

I got dressed and went down to the kitchen to prepare us all some cereal. I put out the bowls and mixed up some powdered milk. We often didn't have the money to buy fresh milk, although there always seemed to be hundreds of empty bottles all round the kitchen, their dregs turning to cream and giving off a sour smell.

'Should we go to school?' I asked when Sonia came in with the little ones. Some mornings, after her nights out, Mum wouldn't be able to wake up and we'd have to walk ourselves to school. It was too far for such small children really, but Sonia and I thought we were grown up enough to do it.

'I don't know,' Sonia admitted, settling Angela in her high chair. 'Let's just get ready.'

All four of us sat down to breakfast at the table as if nothing unusual was happening. When we finished eating, Sonia obviously wasn't sure what we should do next. She and I should be going to school, but we could hardly leave Donna and Angela on their own. It looked as if we might have to go in late.

'Go to the front gate, Richard, and see if she's coming up the street,' Sonia said.

I did as I was told. It was light now and I could see that there was some sort of commotion going on at the end of Scott Hall Avenue. A couple of police cars were parked there, and their flashing blue lights were attracting a crowd of onlookers, just a few yards from the route Sonia and I had walked earlier. It was unusual to see police cars around at that time in the morning; they usually came out at night to answer complaints or break up domestic quarrels. I went back in and told Sonia that something was happening in the street.

'Stay here and play with Angela for a moment,' she told Donna as she put the baby down on the sofa. 'Richard and I will see what's going on outside.'

Some instinct told me that the scene we were walking towards had something to do with us. I felt nervous without knowing why. As we got nearer, I recognised two neighbours who were talking to policemen. One officer spotted us and came over.

'And who might you two be?' he asked.

'Sonia and Richard McCann,' Sonia told him.

'And where are you off to?'

'Our mum hasn't come home,' I said. 'We're looking for her.'

Very suddenly, the policeman looked concerned. 'Where do you live?' he asked, and we told him.

He said something into his radio and then walked us back to the front door. We let ourselves back in and he followed us. I think the house was probably a bit of a tip. Mum was never great at the housework. He started asking us lots of questions as the four of us sat huddled together on the sofa.

'Where's your dad?'

'He doesn't live with us,' Sonia explained. I was proud of the way she spoke up.

'When did you last see your mum?'

'Last night.'

'Are you all brothers and sisters?'

Sonia nodded.

'Do you have a photograph of your mum?' he asked.

'All our photographs were burned,' Sonia said. I didn't know about that, but I'd never seen any photos around the house and burning them was something that Mum's boyfriend, Keith, might very easily have done in one of his tempers.

The policeman went out into the kitchen to use his radio again. We could hear his voice and the crackle of the responses, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. Sonia was looking pale. When the man came back into the room he seemed uncomfortable and unsure what to say to us. Sonia got up and turned on the television to cover the awkwardness of the moment. We all pretended to watch it with our full attention, even the policeman, so we didn't have to talk.

After a while another policeman arrived, in plain clothes this time. He introduced himself and said he was going to look after us. He was talking very softly, like he was our uncle or something, very friendly, even though we didn't know him. He asked us all to come out to the police car that was waiting outside. We didn't often get to travel in cars. I knew that Mum must be in some sort of trouble.

All four of us climbed into the back seat and we were driven slowly away from Scott Hall Avenue. None of us had any idea where we were going. I caught Sonia's eye and I knew now that she was as frightened and disorientated as I was. We just wanted the fuss to stop and for Mum to come home.

The journey lasted about ten minutes before we turned into what looked like a long street lined with terraced houses. At the end, tucked well away from passers-by, was a narrow opening that led to a slightly wooded area. A thin gravel path wound

through the trees and the police car crunched slowly along it until it reached a large, grey-brick Victorian building. A sign announced this was Becket's Park Children's Home. It looked more like an abbey, two storeys high and as wide as four normal houses. Steps led up to imposing double doors. Although I was nervous about what was happening, all the attention was now making me feel quite special. I remember thinking that it was actually quite nice to be away from the usual shouting at home.

As we came in with the policeman, the staff seemed to be expecting us. We were given cups of hot chocolate and taken to a room with a television. After a while, once we were settled in comfortably, the policeman came back in to see us. He felt more like a friend by now. He sat down and said he had something to tell us.

'Your mum has been taken to heaven,' he said. 'You won't be seeing her any more.'

Someone had attacked our mum, without warning or explanation, the policeman said. His words seemed jumbled, unreal. I needed time to sort them out and think about them. Such a terrible thing couldn't really happen, could it? It just didn't make sense. I relied on Mum completely, how was it possible that she was no longer there for me? It wasn't possible, I decided eventually. The policeman had made a mistake and she would be coming back one way or another. I stopped listening to him. If she could be taken away to heaven so easily, I was sure she could be returned. I simply had to wish hard enough and everything would be normal again.

The next few hours crawled past us as we sat, numb and dazed, while life at Becket's Park went on around us. Everything was unfamiliar; we didn't know the routines of the home or where we would be sleeping that night. We had no idea what was going to be happening to us in an hour's time, let alone what the next days, weeks or years held in store. We moved from one moment to the next that day, from sitting in a silent row on the sofa to another room where we were given meals. We made trips to the loo and just existed, waiting to be told what to do. We didn't talk to each other and nobody explained what was going on.

Out of our sight, however, phone calls were made and discussions were held - and after being given dinner we were asked to go to the visitors' room. I hoped this meant Mum had come back down from heaven to see us. The room was full of toys and we were sat down on a sofa and each given something to hold. I think I had a train. Whatever it was I sat holding it while a photographer came in and took some pictures. Our bewildered and glum little faces would soon be all over the national papers.

I didn't like the way no one was saying anything about Mum. It was as if she'd never existed.

But no one at Becket's Park Children's Home wanted to talk about how two small children had walked just yards away from their mother's murdered body, only saved from finding her by the early morning mist.