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Witness

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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CATH STAINCLIFFE



Witness

A senseless crime,
a community in fear,
would you speak out?

WITNESS

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For Annie, Maggie and Mairin

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PART ONE

Oh Danny Boy

CHAPTER ONE

Fiona

The blood didn't disturb her. Fiona was no stranger to blood: as a midwife, it came with the territory.

The boy lay on his back, one leg buckled to the side, his arms outflung. Large hands. A boy on the cusp. Like her own son. Different features, this boy was Afro-Caribbean, but the same sort of age. Even as she had these thoughts she was kneeling, assessing him; ignoring the wild beating of her heart, channelling the roar of adrenalin to fire up memory and intellect and practical responses.

Checking his airways and finding breath there, stuttering but there all the same. Warm, moist breath, the faint tang of spearmint. And his eyes on her. Brown eyes, tawny, reflecting her silhouette and the blue sky beyond her. A rim of gold edged each iris. His eyes locked on hers as she tore off her cardigan, folded it and pressed it to his chest. There were dressings in her bag, over in the house, but there was no time to fetch it. The green T-shirt he wore was now black with blood. The same blood pooled in a slick beneath his shoulders, soaking into the grass, into the hard earth among the daisies and dandelions, the clover and the plantain. His eyes fixed on hers as she murmured words of comfort and prayed for the ambulance to hurry. His gaze was a kaleidoscope of emotion: surprise, then the skitter of

fear and finally the bloom of love. Bringing tears burning in her own eyes.

‘It’s all right, love, the ambulance is on its way, you’re all right.’

His eyelids fluttered and a spasm shook his frame. She saw his eyes roll back and his mouth slacken. Felt the thready pulse at his neck race then falter and stop.

She bent over to give him mouth-to-mouth and glimpsed his young person’s travel pass. His photo and name: Danny Macateer. A kick of memory. Macateer. The first twins she’d seen born by vaginal delivery. Danny and a girl, a name with similar letters: Dana? Anya? Nadia? Nadine! Must still be living in the area.

Fiona held his nose; his skin was clammy now from shock. She placed her mouth over his and breathed out, soft, steady. She had never had to do this before. Not in twenty years of midwifery. His chest moved, she allowed it to settle then breathed again. She could smell the soap on his skin, see the fine down on his cheek, the shine in his close-cut, springy, black hair.

Sitting back on her heels she felt for his breastbone, placed the heel of her left hand on it, covered that with her right hand and laced her fingers together. The wound was somewhere on the left of his chest, close to his heart and his lung. Pumping his heart might increase the blood loss but without it there would be no chance for blood to reach his brain. She began to push, using her weight, counting the rhythm. Aware of the ground trembling, people running, approaching, a Babel of words: *shot . . . I saw the car . . . has anyone rung the ambulance . . . broad daylight.*

‘Come on, Danny. Stay with me. Come on.’ Fiona gave him two more breaths. Resumed pushing. The

muscles in her upper arms ached with the strain, she was sweaty with exertion, her hands now smeared red, the smell of copper in her throat.

She was still trying when she heard the howl of the ambulance getting louder and louder, then abruptly ceasing. The paramedic put his hand on her shoulder, told her to move away, that they could take it from here. And she nodded, unable to speak. Placed her hand against Danny's cheek and saw his eyes unfocused, still. She bent to kiss him on the forehead. A mother's kiss.

Fiona tried to stand but her legs were numb, useless. She struggled to her feet and felt the world tilt. Dizzy. She closed her eyes.

Across the grass came a crowd, to add to the clutch of onlookers. Perhaps two dozen people, mostly black. In hats and frocks, finery and natty suits. Fiona thought of a wedding party. Then she remembered it was Sunday. Churchgoers. And in the centre of the crowd, three women. Three generations. The youngest, the boy's age. Exactly. Calling out, crying, praying aloud. Anguished. Fiona moved back, moved away and watched as the women – the mother and grandmother, the sister Nadine – fell beside him, demanding hope from the paramedics, deliverance from their God.

Fiona stood reeling under the high, blue sky, voices swooping and diving around her, while the boy was injected, defibrillated and put on oxygen. They loaded him into the ambulance.

When the police came they took her to sit in a car at the edge of the grass. She told them everything she could but the order kept getting mixed up and she left things out and had to correct herself and retell it until she had stitched together the sequence. All about doing the home visit and hearing the shot,

seeing through the window the boy fall, and racing out of the house. The car that almost ran her over, as she hurtled across the road, the glimpse of the driver, a white man, at the wheel. Reaching Danny.

The area had been cordoned off. They asked for her shoes. Something about forensics. Her shoes were full of blood.

She had left everything at the new mother's house when she heard the gunshot, saw Danny fall. Her medical kit, her bag. The police gave her some protective shoe covers in place of her shoes. Similar to the paper slippers patients wear for theatre. They hid the blood on her feet but were useless at protecting her soles from the gravel and glass scattered on the pavement on the walk back to the house. The police had offered to call someone, or find her a taxi home, but she needed to get her own car back, so she declined.

She knocked on the door for the second time that day. She found it hard to recall how much of the visit she'd covered: checking and weighing baby, examining the contents of its nappy and the cord. Examining mum (temp, BP, glucose in the urine) and checking how feeding was going. Leaving some time for any worries and problems to be raised. She couldn't do anything now, in the state she was in. Hygiene was one of the most important routines to establish with parents. When the new mum opened the door Fiona apologized several times.

'It's all right,' the other woman said. Her eyes kept creeping back to Fiona's uniform, to her hands, where the blood had dried like rust in the creases of her skin. Carmel shook her head. 'It's terrible. Just a kid.'

Fiona nodded fiercely. She didn't trust herself to speak. She held up her hands, looked a question, the

woman nodded and Fiona went through to the kitchen. She washed her hands with cold water, then handwash, until the blood had gone and they were blotchy red and white. She collected her things together and asked Carmel if she would like another midwife to call as the visit had been cut short.

‘I’m fine.’

‘There will be someone here tomorrow,’ Fiona told her.

Fiona sat in her car. She felt immensely tired, her back ached, her stomach was hollow. She was desperately thirsty. Around the green space police tape shivered in the light breeze, glinting in the sun. The sound of her phone jolted her. She took it from her bag. Home. Owen wondering where she was. She was on a half-day, four-hour shift. Should have been back two hours ago. She couldn’t face talking to him now. There were two earlier missed calls. She groaned. Go home, she told herself.

She drove carefully, the pedals biting into her feet, fearful that she would drift off and lose concentration. Everything looked so ordinary, so normal. She had an irrational desire to wind down her window and shout to people: a boy’s been shot! See their faces change. Make them pause. Stupid, she muttered to herself.

She pulled into the drive and parked the car. Gathered up her bags and jacket and went in the side gate expecting the french windows would be open. The garden was empty.

Owen was in the living room, playing his games. Chisel-faced men in uniforms, men with guns, sweeping through abandoned houses. ‘You could have rung,’ he complained without turning round. ‘I needed that money.’

Rage reared in her. Owen turned, saw her face,

took in her uniform, the blood, the overshoes. ‘Oh, God.’ His voice had softened.

‘They shot a boy,’ she began, sorrow replacing anger. Her fingers stiff, splayed bouncing on her lips. ‘Your age.’

He swallowed, uncertain how to respond.

‘In Hulme, on the field by the dual carriageway, near the bridge. I couldn’t save him.’ Tears spilt down her cheeks, blurring everything. ‘Sorry.’ She wiped at her eyes.

Owen was blushing, his face and his neck red. ‘You could give us a hug,’ she chided him. He looked at her uniform.

‘It’s dry,’ she said.

He lumbered to his feet, came closer. She wrapped her arms around him. Still a child really, though he was taller than her now, broad like his father. She was careful not to weep all over him. They were on their own together and she always tried to remember she was the grown-up, not to expect him to meet her emotional needs. She withdrew. ‘I need to shower. I didn’t get any cash. It’ll have to be tomorrow.’

He grunted. Went back to his game.

She undressed. Her tights were stuck to her knees with discs of blood. She peeled them off, put them in the bin. She soaped and scrubbed her hands and feet, then washed her hair in the shower. She sat down under the water, knees bent up, resting her head on them. She let the water drum upon her upper back, where her spine felt rigid, fused hard as stones. She tried to clear her mind but each time she closed her eyes, Danny swung into view: his eyes on her, that steady warmth, looking joyous almost, just before she lost him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered over and over. Sitting there until her back was numb from the jets and the room was dense with steam.

Feeling raw and slightly giddy, Fiona sat down to eat with Owen. It was a fine June evening and they ate on the patio. The air was full of drifting seeds, woolly clumps from the stand of poplars that ran along the edge of the meadows near the river. She and her ex, Jeff, had chosen the house because of its location. They were still close to the city, fifteen minutes in the car to town outside rush hour, but had the advantages of being on the edge of the housing development with uninterrupted views across the meadows to the Mersey. A small back garden and a rather characterless semi were a small price to pay for the pleasure of being close to the open land.

Fiona doled out lasagne and handed Owen his plate, took some salad. Her son was avoiding her eyes, skulking behind his long, black fringe. Eyes studiously downcast. She felt a flare of resentment; what was he so scared of? That she might weep again or shake or show some other embarrassing emotion? Precisely that, she thought. With all the intense selfishness of a teenager, Owen hated adult displays of feeling though his own moods were mercurial and dramatic.

She cut into the pasta, scooped a small forkful up. It smelt good, her mouth watered. Then she felt a rush of nausea. She set her fork back down. ‘He was one of my babies,’ she told him.

Owen gawped. ‘He was a teenager.’

‘Now he is,’ she told him. ‘A twin.’ She frowned, her eyes stung. Owen hastily looked away.

He cleared his throat. ‘It was on the news,’ he said. ‘He died.’

She’d known. He’d died there, in her shadow. The sky trapped in his eyes. Everything that came after:

the breath she shared, the medical efforts, the oxygen and drugs, the mercy dash – irrelevant, surplus to requirements.

She felt her nose redden and the prickle of tears. Bit down hard on her inside cheek and watched as the swifts wove arcs in the sky.

Owen shovelled his food down, eating only with his fork, gulping his orange juice in between.

She cut a piece of cucumber in half. Ate that, a sliver of red onion, some lettuce. Took a sip of the Sauvignon, so cold it made her teeth ache. The meat in tomato sauce was congealing on her plate. Ask me about it, she demanded in her head. Ask me now. Just show a glimmer of interest. She wanted to talk about it, all the details, go over it. Tell him everything, not just the facts that the police wanted, but all the rest. How she felt. Ask me how I am. Ask me.

Owen pushed back his chair, the metal legs scraping, screeching on the flagstones. ‘Going out,’ he said.

Panic exploded in her chest. Stay, she wanted to say. Don’t go. Be careful! This – the soft air, the food, home, it’s a mirage. Gone in an instant. It’s not safe out there.

‘Back by ten,’ she told him, ‘school tomorrow.’

‘Kay.’

She turned to watch him go: a clumsy bear of a boy. An impression strengthened by the ridiculous baggy black denims, the huge black T-shirt. At fifteen it was as if the light in him had gone out. Just a phase, everyone told her, and she hoped that was the case, and that it would not be long-lived.

She took more wine. Drank deep. Felt her edges smudge. Stayed there for a while watching the birds. Then forced herself up to go and walk Ziggy.

The dog ran ahead of her hoovering up smells, tail waving. Ziggy was a mongrel they'd rescued from the dogs' home. Owen's dog. Arranged when he was six in the wake of his dad leaving them. The dog was average, unremarkable. Tan-coloured, pointy ears and muzzle. An every-dog. The sort that could illustrate the alphabet letter D or a brand of dog food. Impossible to mistake for any pedigree breed. He was good-natured, biddable.

Owen was meant to walk him once a day, Fiona the other time. But in recent months Owen's personality transplant meant he'd given up on the walking. It ranked alongside brushing his hair and clearing up his room. Boring, beneath him.

Fiona felt a stab of guilt. Then a wash of shame. Her son was alive. She should have clung to him despite his protestations. Rejoiced. He was a lovely boy beyond the practised disenchantment, the grunts and the sneers. He was caring and honest. As a younger child he'd been avidly interested in the world and its workings, genial, prone to giggles. Easy company. He would be again, surely.

She wondered about Danny and his mother. Had they squabbled and fallen out? Was he surly and sullen at home? What had his parting words been? Something mundane: *I don't want tea*. Or edgy: *I heard you, I'll do it later!* Or poignant: *Love you, Mum*. Fiona had a sudden urge to text Owen – *Luv u*. He'd not thank her for it, would probably not even acknowledge it. His phone was always off when she tried it, or out of credit when she asked why he'd not responded to her messages. Mysterious how he still seemed able to communicate with his mates on it.

Ziggy waited at the bridge to see which route they were taking. Fiona signalled ahead: 'Go on Zig.' The dog waited and trotted over the bridge when Fiona reached the steps. The pub on the other bank, Jackson's Boat, once derelict, had been done up a couple of years ago and there were parties sitting at the picnic tables. The smell of fried food lingered in the air, children squealed in the playground. Back in the mists of time she and Jeff had occasionally treated themselves to Sunday lunch there, Owen in his pushchair.

The lane led through an avenue of trees, the canopies in full leaf, the track beneath still muddy in the shadiest places from last week's rains. Fiona hoped she wouldn't run into any of the regulars, the dog walkers who'd come to know each other through their animals. A rag-tag community, all shapes and sizes. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She tried to immerse herself in the natural world around her: the heady perfume of dog-roses, splashed pink among the hedgerows, the clamour of sparrows, a small tortoiseshell butterfly dancing in the nettles, the flash of orange and the blue edging far fancier than its name suggested. They crossed into the little wood by the nature reserve building and she saw a wren busy in the undergrowth and a ball of gnats in a roiling jig under the boughs of the trees. The path led on to the water park. The lake was the colour of blue-black ink, ruffled despite the still of the evening. The motorway ran at the other side, its roar ever-present. Pylons stood sentinel, their wires stretched high above the water. Bulrushes and Himalayan balsam, with its sweet, waxy scent, lined the banks. The lake was used for sailing and canoeing but the water was clear of craft now, the boats locked away in the yard on the far side near

the fancy motorway footbridge with its triangular frame. Now only ducks and Canada geese, gulls and a solitary heron broke the water's surface.

Ziggy ran down to the shore and barked half-heartedly at a clutch of geese. The birds ignored the dog. They were resident here all year; their marbled olive-green and white guano decorated the banks and the paths. Further along Fiona saw fishermen, hunkering down for the night, with their green tents and paraphernalia, rods already baited and propped on stays.

Fiona and Ziggy passed a man and a woman with a golden retriever. Strangers: smiles and nods exchanged. When the path left the lakeside, she took the turn up to the river. The banks had been raised for flood defences, and the broken bricks and chunks of concrete peeked through the grass here and there. A path ran along the top and another had been carved out halfway down. Fiona took the lower route, which was punctuated by heaps of debris – kindling and plastic waste – left by the storms. As they neared the bridge again, she was tiring. She stopped and stared into the river, following the ripple where some obstacle altered the current. Ziggy ran ahead then back, waited unsettled, head cocked on one side. They turned for home. The air was cooling now, the sun lost behind the tiled roofs, the swifts still in flight. She had read that they sleep in flight, roosting high above the ground, unable to fly again if they are forced to land. Ziggy waited for her at the back gate. Fiona looked up at the house. Owen was still out. She wasn't due in work till Wednesday. She must ring in the morning, tell them she hadn't finished her last visit.

She locked the gate behind them, let the dog in. She took off her trainers and cleared up the dishes

even though it was Owen's job, unable to let them sit and then face another argument about it. She poured a glass of wine.

It was almost nine. She tuned the radio into the local station. Why was she doing this? Proof? Prurience? The jingle came on then the time signal. The newscaster gave her introduction, then announced the headline: *Police in Greater Manchester have launched a murder inquiry after a sixteen-year-old boy was shot and killed in the Hulme district of Manchester earlier today. The youth has not yet been named.*

'Danny,' Fiona whispered, 'Danny Macateer.' She turned the radio off and sat in silence until she heard Owen come in at quarter past ten, his footsteps thudding up the stairs, shaking the house. She stood and went up after him. Met him on the landing.

'Hey,' she kept her voice light, 'I said ten.'

He gave a sigh.

'I love you, you know,' she said quickly. 'Don't ever forget that.' He made a noise in his throat. She squeezed his shoulder. He swung past her into the bathroom, a half-smile on his lips.

She cleared up the living room, set the alarm, put Ziggy in the kitchen. Routines. Then she went to bed, promising herself that if she couldn't doze off, she'd get up and read or something. It didn't matter; she'd no work in the morning. She felt so tired, as though she'd not enough blood in her any more, insubstantial. She closed her eyes. And slept.