

The End of the Road

Alexandra pressed on through the driving rain as a grim January wind swept sodden leaves across her path. Her hair hung lank down her face, though she tried vainly to peel it back over her ears. The warmth of home seemed a long way off as she passed under the bridge and trod cautiously through the muddy puddles beneath it. The rain pattered against the bag she held close to her chest. It did little to shield her from the cold. Her parents would be horrified if they knew she was out in that weather in just jeans and a t-shirt, though when Alexandra had left the house and walked into town it had been bright and sunny. Like so many things in Auburn, the winter climate had a nasty habit of turning on you. She hurried over the footbridge towards the amusements. The river had turned a drab caramel colour and as it coursed beneath her feet into the basin, she imagined what might happen if the bridge suddenly gave way and she fell into that murky monster. The amusements were deserted. The whole underbelly of the town looked windswept and horribly bleak. The gutters were gradually swelling and flooding the pavements while the last of the dwindling shoppers hid in doorways until the rain stopped. Down there near the river, Alexandra was all alone. There would be nobody to fish

her out. She grabbed the cold railing and didn't let go until she was back on solid concrete.

There was no doubt about it, her father would be mad. If there was one thing he didn't like...actually, she thought, there were a million things. He didn't like cheese on toast with Worcester sauce, he wasn't overly keen on holidays abroad, and her twelfth birthday party two weeks earlier had revealed a particularly strong disliking for what he had called 'party clothes'. Her father's definition of party clothes was broad and encompassed anything without sleeves and a well-defined collar. Generally speaking he hated everything she wore and he had a frown for every occasion. Her mother was slightly more sympathetic to the plight of pre-teen girls living under the rule of fathers who still believed corsets were adequate casual wear. Alexandra was doubtful her mother would be sympathetic enough to condone the strappy top that the carrier bag was doing a poor job of protecting from the weather. But she had a feeling it would be all right. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had to sneak contraband into her room, after all. There were three other tops in her wardrobe that had entered the Carter household stuffed inside a trouser pocket or, on one occasion, secreted in the lining of her school bag. It was putting them on and sneaking them back out that was the real challenge.

The rain seemed to ease up for a while. She continued trudging through the mud, passing a boat she presumed had been

abandoned: moored up and left to rot. The paint was crumbling away and the wood looked weak and brittle. From what she could gather, it had once been sky blue and, she supposed, someone's pride and joy. It bore the decay of a passion that had long ago petered out. What was left behind was barely surviving the epilogue of that harsh winter, and would almost certainly not hold out to see another. She struggled on. It was much colder now. The air was crisp and fresh after the rain, but under it lay a dank stench like rotting vegetation. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. There was another route to the estate – one which took her directly through the basins. The idea struck fear into her. It was getting darker, and her mother had lectured her more than once on the importance of not straying near the locks past dusk. She said it was a bad place, especially for girls, and especially for girls her age. Alexandra didn't really understand why. Her father had wanted to tell her some horror story about the basins, but he had been challenged by a barrage of objections from her mother. It had been one of many conversations Alexandra had listened to from the top of the stairs. She was rather fond of scary stories and had hoped her father might give something away...had someone fallen in, or been pushed? He didn't say. She tried not to think too hard about it.

Consideration of what might or might not have happened by the basins began to unnerve her. Her fear was only heightened by the bleak weather and lack of company. She glanced back along the

path to satisfy herself that she wasn't being followed. There was nothing. Not even a street light or a car headlight to reassure her someone was around. She wondered if the pub might be open. While it was mildly comforting to think that it wasn't yet dark enough for street lights, it was getting gloomier by the second. She knew if she didn't get to her estate soon she would be relying on sheer luck navigating the muddy path. She felt the rain coming down with renewed ferocity. It clattered around her, big round raindrops that soaked you through in no time at all. Like most of the town, the Angel pub was empty. The picnic tables outside were stained a dark brown by the onslaught they'd been subjected to since the storm broke around four o'clock. As she approached the sign that cheerfully welcomed passers by to the Auburn Basins, icy fingers crept up the base of her spine and made her shiver with fright. She was reminded again of the story her father had tried to tell. Suddenly she didn't feel so bold, and her liking for scary stories was quickly lost.

Up ahead she could just make out the wharf where boats sometimes moored on their way through the town's canal network. It wasn't used very often. During the summertime some of the children from the estate would hang around it. Occasionally someone would be plucky enough to jump off it into the river, though those children were quickly hauled out by parents and rarely seen outdoors again until after the holidays. Scarcely a

hundred yards away stood the disused factory from which every child in Auburn was customarily forbidden. Some of the children believed it had once been part of the nearby toy factory, and that inside its crumbling walls were hundreds of crates of toys that were never sold. Some years earlier a boy of about her age had ventured inside – and had never returned. The boy’s name had been Peter Freeman. Alexandra had only been a toddler when it happened, but she remembered her parents telling her about it as if it were only yesterday. She tried to shut the memory out. It was grey and cold out there on the long walk along the river, and she knew her mind was just trying to scare her. But the thought returned. Nobody could understand what possessed him to head into that crumbling old death trap. Peter Freeman was an intelligent lad. But, inexplicably, he made his way inside and was never seen again after that day. Naturally enough the legend lived on in the playground, and the varying versions of what happened were each disparate and horrific. One account held that the boy’s head had been dredged up in the canal, but that the rest of him was never uncovered. Another version said that two other boys had ventured inside looking for him, and that when they emerged their hair was as white as flour, and that from that day not a single word ever passed their lips. Alexandra thought each story equally vile and she outright refused to believe either. She would never know it, but the hearsay that endured for years in the town’s playgrounds in fact didn’t stray far

from the truth; that the boy's body had been recovered by police, but that it had been so badly mutilated that his family asked that the press be told that it was never found. In a strange way they believed the lie themselves. It made it easier.

No one was ever charged. It was a detail Alexandra's parents had shared with her in an effort to make her fearful of being out alone. Whoever killed the boy might still be out there somewhere. Everyone had their suspicions, of course, but most parents on the estate made their minds up the day Greybeard disappeared. Greybeard was a tramp who took up semi-permanent residence in Auburn after wandering into town during the carnival in September '85. Nobody knew his real name, or where exactly he had come from. He had a long, thick beard which covered most of his face, and it quickly became his trademark in the absence of any other distinguishable feature. Few people had ever approached him, and fewer still had engaged in conversation with him because he unfalteringly kept himself to himself. Over the years he became a regular fixture, like the graffiti and the litter and the malefic things most people didn't care to talk about. He was seldom seen without his grubby ankle-length windcheater, and that gave him a continuity that some residents found almost comforting. Even a flyblown vagrant like Greybeard could bring a little constancy to a town that seemed otherwise to have none. With no particular home of his own, he often slept in the public toilets, where he was

rumoured to offer high school pupils blow jobs for a pound a go. But like most rumours in small towns, it was forgotten at one end before it reached the other, and of course it was never substantiated. Greybeard never caused any kind of trouble, and the residents and the authorities were content to let him live out his days there for as long as that was the case. It might have been coincidence that Greybeard vanished on the day Peter Freeman died. A silent minority were unconvinced.

Alexandra did her best to put Peter Freeman's death to the back of her mind, where the basins and the idea she was being followed were stacked in a corner, hoping for some preoccupation to clear them from her thoughts altogether. A distraction came in the form of a man, sitting on the bench a little way up the path. There was hardly any distance between them now and she could make out that he was an old gentleman. He wasn't moving, and from the way his clothes glistened in the paling daylight, she could tell he had been out in the rain for a good while. For a moment she thought he was dead. The rain was falling harder than it had all afternoon. It pattered on the old man's anorak. She approached him from the sanctuary of the path. He didn't look up even when she stood inches away from the bench. Alexandra watched beads of water swell all along the rim of his sodden hat before dripping away. Quickly growing concerned, she cleared her throat softly. He didn't respond.

“Um...excuse me,” Alexandra whispered. She wiped the rain water from her eyes and leaned a little closer. Though she tried her hardest to ignore it, he smelt of urine. “Excuse me?”

The man lifted his head suddenly and made her jump. “Yes?”

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Only...”

“I’m fine, my dear,” he croaked. He shifted a little to his left and freed one of his hands from where he’d been sitting on it to keep it warm. He held it out to her. She looked at it incredulously.

“My name’s Tom,” he told her. His voice was deep and gravely, dried by years of smoking and boozing. “Aren’t you going to tell me yours?”

She considered his question carefully.

“Come now,” he said softly, observing her unease and withdrawing his hand. “When two strangers meet for the first time it’s customary to share names.”

“Alexandra,” she said uncomfortably. “My friends call me Alex.” She didn’t know why she told him that. She supposed because she told everyone. It was a reflex. Her grandmother had once asked her why she didn’t just say Alex, if that was how she wanted to be known. Alexandra hadn’t been able to think of an answer, and after that day her grandmother made a point of addressing her as Alexandra regardless of how much she protested.

“That’s a pretty name,” he said kindly. “I don’t believe I’ve met a girl with that name before,” he told her after a moment’s

contemplation. “I don’t suppose you’d be kind enough to help an old man to his feet, would you Alex?” he asked.

“Um...”

He grinned at her. What few teeth he had were yellow and rotten. She felt mildly ashamed for being repulsed by it. Her father had told her to always respect her elders, although he allowed her some leeway in the case of his own mother. She wasn’t sure she liked being called Alex by this man. To her sudden surprise he grabbed her arm and squeezed her with a cold, calloused hand. She struggled under his weight as he clambered to his feet. His grip tightened as he steadied himself. When he did finally release her, she touched her arm gingerly and examined the white marks he’d left behind.

“Thank you, dear...it’s not easy getting around at my age, you know.”

She smiled forcedly.

“How old do you think I am?” he asked her, resting a hand on her shoulder. He didn’t put any of his considerable weight on her, but still she felt troubled by how familiar he was being with her.

“I don’t know,” she said uncertainly.

“Well have a guess,” he implored her, bringing his face close enough to hers that she could see the white stubble on his chin.

“Go on...”

She looked into his eyes once more, and found nothing there but kindness. She couldn't account for her feelings of anxiety. He was just an old man. "A hundred?" she asked.

He laughed. His stale breath flooded her nostrils. "Ha, a hundred indeed!"

She smiled uncomfortably.

"And how old might you be, if you don't mind me asking?" He raised his bushy grey eyebrows at her. It wrinkled his forehead. "Or should I guess?"

She shrugged. "You can guess."

He stepped back and squinted at her. The rain still pitter-pattered down his anorak, but it seemed to be fading again. The old man looked her up and down slowly, then nodded as if reaching some brilliant deduction. "I think you look about thirteen to me," he told her. "Am I right?"

She shook her head. "I'm twelve," she corrected, secretly rather thrilled to have looked older. Between her height and her slow progression into puberty she didn't think there was much to distinguish her from her younger brother, much less an older girl.

"Close," he said with an air of pride that, given the circumstances, she didn't consider misplaced. "Do you live near here, sweetheart?" he asked, looking down at her with his old, dark eyes. "Only with all the mud this rain's made it'll a devilish task getting anywhere in a hurry."

“I live on the estate,” she answered. “It’s not far.”

He nodded. “I wonder then if I might ask you to help me home...it’s just the other side of the field there and I’d certainly appreciate it.”

Alexandra quickly checked her watch. It was nearing five. Her parents would be home soon and she still had to get herself dried and make it seem as though she’d been home all afternoon. “I’m not sure I should.”

He stepped back and rested on the arm of the bench. His dirty boots made sucking noises in the mud. “I understand...it’s late, and you’re very sensible not to go off with just anyone. Very sensible indeed.”

“It’s not that,” she explained, “it’s just –”

He smiled warmly.

“Okay...but can I ring my mum and dad to let them know where I am?”

“Of course you can, I wouldn’t dream of keeping you away a minute longer than I need to.”

He held his hand out to her and she took it. He felt warmer now, more alive. As they returned to the path, he started whistling. She didn’t know the tune. Her grandmother always played terribly old music when they went to visit her, songs from what her mum called yesteryear and what her father called the middle ages. He was usually met with disapproving glares from her grandmother. The

path continued past the point where Alexandra normally turned left to cut across the field. To the best of her recollection they were walking towards a part of the town she'd never been before. As far as she knew the town ended back by the bench.

They walked in silence for a while. The rain had finally stopped and it felt a little warmer. She was still dripping wet, but Alexandra felt more comfortable now the wind had lifted. The chill had gone, and the air felt fresh and clean.

“What have you got in your bag?” he asked her finally. “You seem to be very protective of it!”

She looked down and saw she was still clutching the bag to herself. She drew it away, quietly amused to discover that she had an oblong-shaped dry spot on her chest. He was looking at it too, and he smiled at her when she looked up at him.

“Just clothes,” she said.

He nodded. “Ah. Girl stuff, hmm?”

She shrugged. “Kind of.”

“Something,” he said thoughtfully, “that your mum and dad wouldn't want you wearing.”

Alexandra's eyebrows arched quizzically. “Yeah...how did you know that?”

He winked. “I'm as wise as I am old,” he said mysteriously.

She smiled. “Is it much further?” she asked.

“It’s just here,” he said, pointing out towards a small house some twenty yards ahead.

Alexandra was secretly rather relieved. He wasn’t leaning on her, but she could see how easily he might have slipped and fallen in the mud. And who would find him, so far from the estate? She didn’t suppose this particular part of town attracted many visitors, be they residents of the town or otherwise. Nevertheless, it was getting late and she wanted to get home.

As they reached the front door, he fished in his trouser pocket. The house looked terribly neglected. She realised at his age he was past painting and decorating, but it still surprised her how he could live in a house that looked for all the world like it was going to fall down at a moment’s notice. He had to give the door two strong shoves before it scraped open. It didn’t seem to fit the doorway very well. She could see scratches on the wooden floor where it had dragged against it over the years. He stood looking at her. She didn’t see what he did with the key.

“Will you come in for a little while?” he asked.

“I should go home,” she said earnestly.

“You’re soaked through,” he said. “At least let me get you a warm drink before you go. It’s the very least I can do to repay your kindness.”

She looked at her watch again. “Um...if it’s just for a minute,” she said unhappily.

“Would you like to ring your mum, let her know you’re safe?”

Alexandra nodded. “Yes, please.”

He made no effort to wipe his shoes before tramping inside. Alexandra followed him into the shadows. The front room smelt musty, like her grandfather’s shed had done whenever the damp set in. He was rummaging around by the far wall, swearing to himself under his breath. Alexandra was taken aback by his language. It didn’t seem appropriate a man of his years using language for which her generation had practically claimed exclusive rights. He had seemed so mild-mannered when she first met him.

“There,” he said finally, as a dim orange glow suddenly filled the room. He drew away from the antique-looking lamp and stood looking at her.

The room was cramped, with a low-slung ceiling that appeared to dip towards the middle. The notion that sitting outside in the rain had been preferable to sitting indoors no longer seemed so absurd. There was a fireplace, but the grate was full of ash and tatters of newspaper that hadn’t quite burnt. She saw there was no carpet, and what little furniture the old man had was cheap and run-down. A shabby old sofa had been pushed up against the wall, and beside it was a foldaway table covered in magazines and empty food cartons. Two pictures hung on the walls, both set in dull wooden frames that looked set to splinter and collapse at the merest

provocation. Alexandra couldn't make out what they were pictures of, so caked in dust and grime had they become over the years.

"I'm afraid it's a bit higgledy-piggledy," he said apologetically.

Alexandra smiled at how strange that expression sounded coming from his aged lips. "That's okay," she said.

"Let me get you a towel, maybe you can dry yourself a little before you go."

She went to decline but he had already headed into an adjoining room to fetch it. There was a small section of newspaper poking out of the ash in the hearth. She crouched to inspect it but found it yellowed and sooty and impossible to read. As Alexandra straightened up she spied something else in the grate. It was fabric. She took hold of it gingerly and gently tried to pull it free. It grew longer as she dragged it from the cinders, and she realised it was a sleeve.

"What are you doing in there?" the old man demanded.

She sprang to her feet and looked at him fearfully, her heart pounding in her chest. "Nothing," she lied, searching for any excuse that might wipe the look of fury from his face.

He seemed satisfied, for he smiled at her and held out the towel he had fetched. "Here," he said.

Alexandra crept over to him and took it. "Thank you."

He watched her examine it unhappily, not turning away until she lifted it up and hesitantly dabbed at her hair with it. The

instant he was gone again she snatched it away from herself and turned it over in her hands. It was crusty and old, with dark stains and holes and an unpleasant odour. Sure he would lose his temper again, she grasped it by the edges and dried herself with a tiny area that looked clean.

“Do you want to ring your parents?” he called from the next room.

“It’s okay, I should really go home now anyway.”

He returned. He was fingering his hat. Alexandra saw it was dripping onto the floor, darkening the grime that lay thickly at his feet. “Please,” he urged her.

“I don’t live far away...”

“I’d like to speak to your mother myself, to tell her what a kind-hearted daughter she has.”

Alexandra frowned, and looked over her shoulder at the door. “Um...”

The old man held his hand out. His bony fingers beckoned to her. “It will just take a moment,” he told her. “It’s through here.”

She supposed such glowing praise could only soften the blow for when she did finally get home, soaked through, to a sermon about how stupid she was to have gone out dressed like that, and how it was her own fault if she got a cold, or flu, or worse. She felt herself drifting towards him, as if her body were answering to him. She left her bag on the table, next to a cluster of empty beer bottles.

“This way,” he said.

His gaze was fixed on her. She felt his big, strong hand on her shoulder, pushing her to the doorway of the adjoining room where the cold embrace of the air within sent a chill down her spine. It smelt stuffy and stale. Tiny shards of glass lay glinting on the cold, hard floor. The wind howled through the jagged holes in the broken windows. The walls were poorly plastered, and great oval tidemarks were imprinted where the damp was slowly and calculatingly rotting it to the ground. One wall had once been papered with a print of daisies, but this now was peeling and grimy. A rickety trestle table leant near the door, and on it had been placed a thick, oversized book. Beside it was a sheet of crumpled plastic.

“Would you like to see my scrapbook?” he asked.

She looked up at him. “Where is your phone?”

“In my trouser pocket,” he replied. “A girl your age should have a mobile phone herself,” he told her. “You could get into trouble...and how would people know?”

Alexandra shrugged. “My dad won’t let me have one.”

He nodded. “Well now, would you like to see my scrapbook?”

“What’s it of?”

The old man flashed his yellow teeth at her. “Memories,” he told her. He edged back. “Go ahead, take a look.”

Alexandra went in. The floor had been covered with cardboard. It squelched under her feet as she edged over to the table. Like everything else, the old man's scrapbook was dirty and old. One corner of the book had been exposed to moisture, and the pages bulged slightly where the damp had spread though it like a cancer. The plastic bag beside the book was also grubby, though she never made the connection that the book had until recently been buried inside it. She lifted the heavy reinforced cardboard cover and read the headline of a newspaper cutting the old man had carefully glued onto the first page. *Young woman missing since Wednesday.* The man had carefully printed the date on a slip of paper underneath. Saturday July 3rd, 1965. Alexandra's heart grew heavy as she flipped the page and saw more clippings. One was headed *Police struggling with missing woman enquiry*, another read *Family offer reward for information*. On the next page was a headline that made her stomach knot: *Schoolboy finds body in river.*

"She was naked," he told her.

Alexandra looked up. The old man was peering over her shoulder.

"Face down in the water, the police said."

"That's horrible," Alexandra said grimly. "Can I –"

He reached round her and lifted her trembling hand from the page.

“You should listen to your parents more,” he said. “Haven’t they warned you a hundred times about going out alone? Especially in the dark.”

“It wasn’t dark when I went,” she said sheepishly.

“It gets dark early at this time of year,” he replied. “If you wanted to go to town when you did, you should have run there and back. You can’t hide from the dark.”

“I know,” Alexandra told him. “I couldn’t because of the mud...I might have slipped.”

“You might,” he agreed, edging back. “The really good part is near the back,” he said, tapping the page with one long, bony finger. “Take a look. I’ll be back in a moment and you can ring your mum. The best part is always near the end.”

The old man left her, whistling past the thin wall as he returned to the other room. Alexandra flipped through the book. Her eyes filled with tears as dozens of unspeakable images flashed before her. What she saw in those pages was more terrible than her worst nightmares could conceive of. What she saw poisoned her innocence and destroyed her sanity in one swift stroke. The book finally flopped open by itself when she no longer had the strength in her hands to hold it. Unseen arms caught her as the Polaroids of Peter Freeman’s bloody body made the world go grey and stole her legs from under her. The cloudy impression of the old man’s face

stretched into a delighted, maniacal grin was the last thing Alexandra saw.