We all went in together – not everyone made it out

DARK PEAK



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Sample

Sometimes I see people staring at the scar on the side of my head. I know what they're thinking. They want to ask how I got it. But they don't – they just stare. I try to keep the scar hidden by having my hair long. But there's no hiding the white line that comes over my left ear and down to my cheekbone. And people look but they don't ask.

Other times, they might remember something – if they hear my name, and if they're the right age. My name is … unusual, after all, and hearing it will start them remembering.

"Porter Fox?" they say. "*The* Porter Fox?"

And I try to smile and say, "No", but I can see they don't believe me. I can see that they are trying to remember the details and so I leave them to whisper behind my back. For I was famous once, for five minutes, at the end of a certain summer.

Sample

Over the years I have heard all sorts of versions of what happened. None of them are right, so now I'm going to set it all down. But before you read it, remember this: I only ever tell one lie, and this isn't it. Everything I am about to tell you is exactly what happened. It is the truth.

Sample

1

Seven times we looked for them. That first day, the Saturday. We searched that dark place, up and down, back and forth, seven times.

The first time, it seemed like a game. Hunting for them. Like hide and seek. None of us were really taking it seriously – none of us kids, I mean. But a strange look had appeared on the faces of Mr Lindsay and Miss Weston, and it was the same look they both had.

It wasn't the normal way your teacher looks cross, to get you to do something. It was something else. Maybe a lot of things: things like worry, and fear, and confusion.

I think, to start with, confusion was the main thing. There was a question in their minds: how do thirty-four people walk into one end of a tunnel but only thirty-two walk out of the other end?

Because that is what happened.

Sample

And if lots of us weren't taking it seriously, our teachers were.

I suppose we thought that the missing two kids were just mucking about: hiding on purpose or up to something. Except, that didn't make sense. Not with the two who were missing. Stephanie. And Stephen. If it had been a couple of the proper "lads" in the class, maybe, but not those two. And the more we searched, the more it became clear to everyone that there wasn't really anywhere to hide in that place.

Lud's Church.

I didn't like it, right from the start. Something about the place made me feel uneasy, but I can't tell you why. I didn't even notice it to start with – I was too busy just being there and trying to avoid Adam Caxton and his mates. And putting up with my friend Sam's endless attempts to be funny. And wondering why Miss Weston from the English department had brought her eight-year-old daughter along with her on our Geography field trip.

But if I had stopped to think for even one second, I would have noticed that the place was

Sample

unsettling. It was as if there was a low humming sound, the sort of sound that's so low you can't even be sure you're really hearing it, or just feeling it beating at your body. A sound gnawing away at you, one you only notice when it stops. This place was like that.

When we got there, we didn't even know we had. Not at first. It was all so confusing. For one thing, you have to remember how hot it was. That summer, that famous summer. So hot. No rain all year, almost none the previous year.

The sun beat down, day after day. Even before the holidays began, it was super-hot. Now we were back at school, the summer was nearly over, and still it didn't rain. The temperature was in the high twenties every day, then into the low thirties. Rivers dried up and they put in a hosepipe ban, and then they even had to put these little water trucks out in some places. There was one at the end of our street, and me and my little sister would take it in turns to go and line up for drinking water.

By the end of that summer, the ground looked crazy. I'd seen pictures on the TV once of the droughts in Africa, and now our parks and fields

Sample

looked like that – the grass all dead and the mud dried out and cracked. Cracked in wild patterns.

And there we were, thirty-four of us packed into a bus on a stinking hot day for our Geography trip, and on a Saturday too. I can't remember why it had to be a Saturday but somehow it did. We were only a week or so back into term and we had to give up half our weekend. That was another thing that no one liked.

Across the moors went the bus, and you know there was no such thing as aircon back then. The bus was ancient, and it just had these tiny slits for windows. Half of them wouldn't open at all, so by the time we even arrived at the car park, everyone was in a mean mood.

We crawled off the bus, just hanging out. Then I saw Adam Caxton making faces at me, mouthing things, like how he was going to hurt me next, and I tried to pretend I hadn't seen. But we both knew I had, and there was no avoiding his presence, his bulky strength.

I turned away and heard Mr Lindsay making some arrangements with the bus driver, an old man called Ted who always did stuff for the school. He was ancient too, like his bus. I mean, I suppose

Sample

he seemed that way to me then, but I liked him. Ted was OK.

"OK, Jim, see you at five," Ted said to Mr Lindsay, and drove off. We were left standing by the ruins of some old mill by the river, while Adam sniggered with his friends because they'd just found out Mr Lindsay was called Jim. What was he supposed to be called? *Idiots*, I remember thinking.

From there, it wasn't really that far to the forest. We just made a meal of it. Dragging along. Thirty-one hot and stupid teenagers. Miss Weston and her daughter were up front. Mr Lindsay came along behind, telling us things about the rocks and the river and the Dark Peak itself.

We walked alongside the River Dane, but there was almost no water in it. With the drought it was no more than a brown trickle between the stones.

Sam and I were near the front, to get away from certain people. We were still near the front when we walked up out of the small valley and into the sloping forest that covered the hillside to our left.

A few minutes later and we were deep into the trees. And then there we were, at the bottom end of Lud's Church. Even then you couldn't see it. Mr Lindsay had to call ahead to Miss Weston because

Sample

she'd just walked right past it. You could be right at its mouth – the entrance to this place, I mean – but you couldn't see it, not until you took a few more steps and then you were inside.

Mr Lindsay, who must have been there before, made us stand around him in a circle while he gave us a lecture. He told us how it was formed, from the land slipping, from the whole hillside slipping a tiny bit, and opening this crack in the land.

And Mr Lindsay told us when it had happened. It was long ago, but not as long ago as I'd been expecting him to say, though I don't know why I thought that. And then Miss Weston told us one of the stories about the place, which was why she'd come, I guess. She said there was this really old poem, written in English so old you would barely know it was English, and it was about one of King Arthur's knights. She told us that it happened here.

"For real, Miss? King Arthur?" Sam said, and people rolled their eyes. Meanwhile Miss Weston explained that the end of the story was set there. And she made Sam feel better by glaring at everyone else and explaining that, while no one knew for sure, there was every chance that King Arthur had been a real king of Britain, once upon

Sample

a time and long ago, when it wasn't even called Britain yet. She called the country by another name: Logres. She told us that Arthur was maybe even what we would think of as Welsh, and she told us that the Welsh for England is *Lloegr*, to make her point.

"So why's it called Lud's Church, Miss?" Sam said.

"No one really knows," she replied. "Some people think it was named after a man who was arrested here for his religious beliefs. Other people say that 'Lud' is an old word for 'back' and the forest you are now standing in is called Back Forest. But no one really knows."

"You have twenty minutes to make your way through," said Mr Lindsay, staring at his watch. "Make some notes of the rock structures. You remember from our lesson that this is a Carboniferous sandstone. Yes? Yes."

No one seemed to remember anything of the sort, but we all clutched pencils and notepads anyway, as if we were detectives ready to record something important. I think it's fair to say we were bored. Most of us. If only we had known what was to come.

Sample

Mr Lindsay was still giving us instructions. "We will all meet at the top end of the so-called Church, by the edge of the forest, at half past two. Sharp!"

Mr Lindsay was always tough about people being on time. It was his thing.

So we went in.

It's hard to describe. I remember thinking, as I walked inside, it was like one of those cracks in the sun-dried ground of that summer. Imagine you were an insect crawling into such a crack. Imagine you made it ten thousand times bigger, and placed it sloping up a hillside, and then covered it all with a forest of scrubby trees and ferns. That was how I saw it then.

If I think about it now, I imagine the day that God finished making the Earth. I see Him with a giant knife, having shaped and scraped the ball that is our world. Before moving on to decide whether or not to create evil, God makes one final thoughtless action. He stabs the tip of the knife into the ground, here in the Dark Peak. To Him, the peaty soil covering the ground is no more than a thin film of near-black mud. His cosmic knife

Sample

jabs into the rock below, and then He pulls the knife out again, opening the stone just a fraction. Leaving behind a deep, dark chasm of a place. A tight ravine, with sheer sides, secret and hidden.

That's Lud's Church.

Within a few steps, the walls rose above us rapidly. I had the sense we were gently climbing up, but the walls climbed faster, and soon they towered above our heads, fifty feet, maybe more. It was hard to tell from inside.

The green forest and blue sky had become a thin blur of colour far above our heads as we walked in cool darkness. And the gap along which we were walking was no more than a few feet wide at most.

It took a turn this way and that, and very soon you only saw a few people at once, though there were more than thirty of us in that gap. It was cold. I mean, *really* cold. The terrible heat of that summer was gone in an instant, as if the sun never reached right into the bottom of this dank hole. And so we made our way along and up, dutifully looking at the old rocks all around us, covered in

Sample

moss, with ferns hanging in great clumps here and there.

Sam and I were somewhere in the middle of the group. Near the end of the Church, Sam stopped and turned around to wait for me. Then he shouted.

"Do you see that? Look! It's a face!"

I looked, but I didn't see it. Some others stopped around us and for one brief moment, other people actually found Sam interesting as he showed how the edges of the rock wall, to one side, looked like a face in profile. And some of us could see it and others couldn't, but those that could said it was cool, or spooky, or both. Like the face of some giant man, with a square chin and brooding eyes.

Sam and I got to the top at half past two exactly. We scrambled up some stone steps that someone had put there to make it a bit easier to climb the final steep section, and there we were. Out of the Church and standing at the top edge of the forest, just as Mr Lindsay had said. Just as he had told us.

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Sample

Except, it wasn't quite as he told us. Mr Lindsay said we would *all* meet at the top. But we didn't.

One by one, we climbed out. Mr Lindsay came last, and he was late, nearly ten minutes late. He checked his watch, as if surprised by something, and then he shook his head. He smiled at Miss Weston.

"There," he said. "Everyone here?"

I remember exactly that he said it like there was no possible way that Miss Weston would answer with anything other than "Yes. All here."

But she didn't.

"Just a couple more." That's what she said, and even then I saw that strange look creep into Mr Lindsay's eyes.

"No," he said. "That's everyone. It must be."

"Thirty-one here," Miss Weston said. "Including you and me."

"Thirty-*one*?" asked Mr Lindsay.

"Well, thirty-two. With Joan."

Joan was her daughter, the little girl.

Mr Lindsay turned sideways, away from most of us kids, and he lowered his voice as he spoke more urgently to Miss Weston. But I heard what he said.

Sample

"Which is it, Jessie? Thirty-one or thirty-two? Or thirty-*four*?"

That was how it began.

Then, for hours, we hunted for the missing two up and down that simple chasm of rock, and I saw that strange look spread from Mr Lindsay's face and start to haunt Miss Weston's face too. And as time went on, and we searched and searched again, others began to notice it.

Soon there was no more laughter, no fooling around. Even Sam went quiet, even Adam Caxton and his idiots. As we went on, again and again, we grew tired and hungry and miserable.

Then someone started snivelling. Mr Lindsay turned and snapped at them, and then everyone was totally silent and trudged on without making a sound.

By this time, we had worked out who was missing. It was Stephanie Best. And Stephen Greene. As I said, it made no sense for these two to be missing. They were not the type who go missing. They were not the type who fool around. They didn't even know each other, not in any real way. From time to time Mr Lindsay or Miss

Sample

Weston would call out “Stephanie! Stephanie?”, but the sound just bounced around the rocks and was soon swallowed. No reply.

And it was strange, but children go missing. It happens. In fact, things only really became strange when one of them was *found*. That was when things really stopped making sense. When they found Stephanie.

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