

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Malcolm Duffy

ZEPHYR

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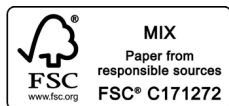
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I'm 45 per cent scared, 45 per cent excited. The other 10 per cent is confusion.

I wouldn't feel any of these things if he was just passing through. But he isn't. He's staying. Thanks to them. And their situation. Which is now our situation. Why did they have to go and do something so permanent? They didn't even bother asking me what I thought. Just went ahead and did it. My opinion, as usual, is worth less than an empty milk carton.

'Get a shuffle on,' shouts Dad.

I stand, staring into me open wardrobe. Not something I do very often. I normally decide on clothes in milliseconds. Sometimes even faster. But today I decide to choose carefully. Let him know what I'm like. Who he's dealing with. After much rummaging, I find the perfect thing.

'Ryan,' hollers Dad.

Once he gets above a certain level, I know it's time to move. A loud voice is usually as bad as it gets. Maybe a glare. Sometimes a stomp.

'What in God's name have you been doing up there?' he says, as I make me way downstairs.

'Gerrin' ready.'

He lets fly a huff.

She's waiting by the front door, looking anxious, fiddling with her cuff.

'We can't be late, Ryan,' she says, exasperated. 'Not today.'

Can't see how a few more minutes is gonna make much difference. Certainly not to him.

She sets the alarm, locks up and we climb into Dad's car. He starts the engine, and she puts a hand on his. Together they find first gear. They look at each other and smile, trying to reassure each other everything will be all right. Which it probably won't.

We move off.

Dad's car normally smells of damp socks and heat rub. Today it smells as though we've crashed into a cosmetics department. She's made an extra-large effort for the new arrival. Never seen her go to church, but if she did, imagine this is how she'd look: tweed jacket, long skirt, smart shoes, earrings, pearls, hair neat and tidy. Considering where we're going, it seems a total waste of time.

She is Dad's girlfriend. He's way too old to have one of those. The term should cease to apply after fifty. She's not a girl and is far more than a friend. The people who write dictionaries should work on that.

'Y'okay, sweet?' asks Dad.

That's new. Never heard him call Mam that. Called

her a few other words. The type that would get you in trouble. But that was mainly at the end.

'I'm fine, Mark,' she says, smiling at him.

Think he wants to smile back, but there's a busy junction coming up, and he's driving way faster than usual.

Can feel me insides being squeezed like a damp towel. Not sure what the knot's doing there. I'm not the one who's done anything wrong.

'Okay, Ryan?'

She asks me that a lot.

Always give her the same answer.

'Aye.'

Which is a lie so large it's borderline obese. I *was* okay, before this happened. Stare out of the window at the houses. Bet the people in them don't have a life like mine, where things have turned upside down. All they've got to worry about is what to have for dinner.

She glances nervously at her watch.

I've definitely made them late.

Feel a bit bad.

We're gettin' closer.

Can tell by the way her fidgeting has gone up a level.

Must be weird for her. But it's weird for me too.

I can see it up ahead.

The squat, brown building.

A shiver finds me spine.

Dad flicks his indicator. The car turns.

There in front of us.

HM Young Offenders Institution. Feltham.

Reelaesd

'See you soon, pal,' says the guy at the gate.

Not in the mood for jokes.

I grab my bag and walk outside.

I'm out. It's over. Finally, over.

I look around. Mum said she'd be here. Ten o' clock on the dot. Definitely said it. But I can't see her. Wouldn't blame her if she'd changed her mind, making me walk home instead. Not that she'd ever do that. Not my mum.

I walk up and down. Pacing's been my number-one hobby these last six months. A car drives fast into the car park, stops, brakes squealing, like they're here for a prison break. Doors open and slam shut. Three people get out. I spot her, hurrying towards me. Mum's not a runner, but she's trying her best. I sprint between the cars. As we get closer can see she's dressed smart. Don't know why she's made such an effort. It's only me.

The gap between us narrows. Her face becomes clearer. She's smiling. She's happy. So happy. Drop my bag and grab her. She seems smaller. Or have I got bigger?

'Tommy,' she sighs, holding me as close as she can. Mum's not the clingy type but then it's not every day your son comes out of prison. 'Sorry we're late. Traffic was bad.'

'No worries. You're here, Mum. That's all that matters.'

'My, there's some strength in those arms of yours,' she says, wiping her eyes, and stepping back to get a look at me.

'HM gyms. Best you can get. No queues. No membership fee.'

'Ya daft nutter.'

Mum punches me on the arm. Deserve to be punched in the face.

'You look good, Tommy.'

'Same as I did last month.'

She's been seeing me every week since I got put away.

'You look super nice too, Mum.'

She gazes up at me, as if I'm perfect.

'Mark and Ryan are here,' she says.

I glance over the cars and see Mark and his kid standing, looking awkward.

'Better not keep 'em waiting, eh?'

Pick up my bag and we walk towards them. Mum takes my hand. Can't remember when she last did that. Though she must have done once. When I was little. And innocent.

There are two new people in my life. First there's Mark, Mum's boyfriend. Met him a few times when he came with Mum to visit. He wasn't around before all this happened.

One day she came to visit and said she'd got a new man in her life. And then she dropped the bomb.

'Moving in with us. You sure, Mum?'

'Never been surer about anything, Tommy.'

The news shell-shocked me. Mum's the cautious type when it comes to guys. Been out with a few but no one's ever stayed. But when Mark arrived, she dived right in. After what I'd done, knew I couldn't argue. And he seems to make her happy. And it's her house.

Release Mum's hand.

'Hi, Mark.'

'Alreet, Tommy,' he says, in his deep Geordie voice. Gives me a firm handshake, the type you get from banging weights. He then gives me a full-on man-hug. What's that all about? I'm only his girlfriend's son.

Finally lets go.

Mark's a tall, slim, muscly guy. Could see why Mum fancied him. About the same height as me, hair cropped short, with a splash of grey above each ear. The big smile on his face says he's almost as happy as Mum to see me.

Housemate number two is standing further back, grinning at his shoes.

Ryan.

Bombshell number two was when Mum said Mark was bringing his son to live with us. Not like he's a pet rabbit or something. He's another human. Apart from my big mistake, nothing much ever happened to us. Then, all of a sudden, we've doubled the population of our house.

'He's a nice lad.'

'Sure he is. But he's not coming for tea. He's moving in.'

'We've got the room. It'll be fine.'

Not sure Ryan's gonna make the first move. So I do.

Approach the shoe-inspector. 'Tommy,' I say.

'Ryan,' says Ryan, lifting his head and smiling at me. I shake a hand that's as soft as uncooked liver. Ryan shakes mine. For a bit too long.

Prison's made me good at sizing people up. Ryan's a bookworm. No doubt. He's shorter than me, pale-faced, with glasses. Probably doesn't get out much. I can't imagine him making any school team. Apart from chess. Got long fingers too. Bet he plays the piano. Has a small scar on his forehead. Almost certainly not gang related.

'Ryan is a very bright, talented, hard-working young man,' says Mum, as if I'm none of those things. Apart from the young man bit.

Ryan nods as if he hears stuff like this every day.

'Aye.'

All four of us stand around, wondering what to say next.

'Thought we'd go for a pub lunch,' says Mum.

'Sound.'

We climb into Mark's car, a Lexus SUV. Better than Mum's old motor. I sit next to Ryan in the back. Mark starts the engine, and off we go. Take a final look over my shoulder at my old digs. Give them the finger.

'Seatbelt, Tommy,' says Mum, peering at me.

Hate being told what to do. Had way too much of that recently. But seeing as it's Mum doing the telling, I click my belt in place. I am so glad to be out. Press the button on my window and give my face a wind wash.

'Tommy, do you mind closing the window?' says Mark.
'It's making me ears go funny.'

I don't answer to him. I move the window up a fraction, stick my nose out, the way dogs do, and breathe in that sweet air.

'Please, Tommy,' sighs Mum.

I bring my nose in and the glass glides up.

Silence. Way too much silence. Made worse by the electric car. Guess it's hard to know what to say to someone like me. Not like I've come back from a month's holiday in Greece or a gap year in Asia. No photos of parties or me messing about on a beach. Just bad memories. The type you want to keep buried.

'What's up with your knee?'

Piano man.

'Nothing,' I say, clamping a hand on top to try to stop it dancing, which it likes to do at times like this.

'Was there tons of fighting in prison?'

'Ryan,' barks Mark.

'Only making conversation.'

'Well, make normal conversation.'

'It is normal. I saw a film once where these guys attacked each other with chair legs, and...'

'Ryan,' growls his dad. 'Sorry, Tommy. He's not normally like this.'

Wonder what normal Ryan's like.

'Do you play piano?' I ask.

Ryan nods.

One-nil to Tommy.

'Ryan's grade four.'

Wonder how Mum knows about grades. We haven't even got a piano.

'In fact, he's a good all-rounder,' says Mum.

Good for Ryan.

'Unlike me, eh? Even failed at crime.'

Ryan laughs.

'That's so not true, Tommy. You're brilliant at... art... drama... sport.'

Mum twists around to me and Ryan.

'All I want is for you two to get on.'

Yeah. Whatever.

Teh Inuch

I'm sitting dead close to a criminal.

Tommy's not what I imagined. Thought he'd be tougher, angrier, crazier. But he seems almost normal. I suppose even serial killers seem normal, until they start serially killing everyone.

We reach a pub, The Magpies.

Used to love gannin' to lunch with Mam and Dad. The three of us. This feels all wrong, like at school dinner when you find yourself on a table with kids from a different year. Kids who don't even want to be in the same postcode as you.

It takes eighty-four steps from the car to the pub.

'Table for Cavendish,' says Tommy's mam to a young waitress with multi-coloured hair.

Don't know why she bothered booking. There's no one here.

The rainbow-haired girl shows us to our table. I sit next to Tommy and grab a menu the size of a small door. They seem to have every consumable animal, vegetable

and mineral on the planet. Tommy barely gives the menu a glance, before he throws it down on the table.

'Cheeseburger for me,' he says.

'You've got the specials, can you read them out?' says his mam, eyeing the piece of paper in front of him.

Tommy ignores the request but hands the paper to her. I watch Tommy out of the corner of me eye, fiddling with his cutlery. Probably the first time in months he's held metal knives and forks.

'So how are you feeling?' asks Dad, smiling at Tommy. Funny, but he seems nervous too, playing with the corner of his menu.

'Happy,' says Tommy.

'I bet,' says Dad, laughing, despite the lack of a joke.

'We're just so glad to have you home,' says his mam, looking teary-eyed, and grabbing Dad's fingers to stop them fiddling.

Everyone's looking awkward. Apart from me. Not sure why. Tommy gets to live with his mam again. Dad gets to live with his lass. I get to live with two people I hardly know, one of whom's been in prison. But I've moaned enough about it to Dad. The moaning got me nowhere. Just got to get on with it, he said.

So here am I, Ryan Dyer, having an odd lunch, getting on with it.

'What was the scan like... inside?' I ask, turning to Tommy.

'He means food,' says Dad.

'Crap. We mainly had takeaways.'

I blurt out a laugh.

Tommy recoils as his mam gives him a kick under the table.

'Was there much bullying among the young offenders?'

'I was classified as a juvenile offender,' corrects Tommy, 'as in juvenile delinquent. I was in Feltham A. It's like a creche for criminals.'

'Oh.'

'And yeah, there was bullying, and no, I wasn't bullied,' he says, emphatically, as if he's had enough of me questions. And probably me.

'Can we talk about something other than prison, please?' says his mam, shuffling in her seat.

It's the only thing I want to talk about. Need to find out what the real Tommy Cavendish is like. His mam says how great he is. If he's that belter how come he got banged up? Feel scared. And excited. The confusion isn't far behind.

'What's that on your front?' asks Tommy, squinting at me T-shirt.

I stretch the material so the letters don't get scrunched.

'*Skolstrejk För Klimatet*. It's Swedish for school strike for the climate.'

Want Tommy to think I can be a rebel too.

'Oh, yeah,' he says, 'saw that on TV. All those little kids moaning about the weather.'

Should have worn a plain T-shirt.

'Ryan's really into the environment,' says Tommy's mam, smiling at me, then him.

'Yeah, always checking to see things are in the right bins,' says Dad. 'And we don't eat too much meat.'

'And we don't leave many lights on.'

Please stop.

'Someone came to Feltham and gave a talk about sustainability.'

'That's nice,' she says.

'Not really. Some of the guys got bored out of their brains and a fight broke out.'

I laugh, although from Dad's expression should have kept it to myself.

The young waitress reappears, with an iPad.

'Would you like to order some drinks?'

'Orange juice for me, please,' says Tommy's mam.

'Tap water for me,' says Dad.

'And me,' I add.

'Pint of Becks, please.'

'Tommy.'

'What?'

'You're not eighteen yet.'

'Can't help that. Can't help feeling thirsty either.'

His mam looks exasperated. Feel sorry for her. She's had seventeen years of this to put up with.

Make that sixteen and a half.

'Okay, let's split the difference,' says Tommy. 'Bottle of Becks, thanks.'

'Can I have a Becks too?'

'No, Ryan, you cannot,' snaps Dad.

'Why not?'

'It's against the law.'

'Why is it against the law for me, and not for Tommy?'

'The answer is no.'

Dad can be annoying when he wants to be.

The waitress gets bored with the argument and lopes away to get three legal drinks, and one illegal. Tommy's mam looks down at the tablecloth and shakes her head. She was probably glad he was inside. Finally got some peace and quiet. Dad gives her a smile and places his hand back on hers.

Wonder what *my* mam's doing now. Could be in a restaurant somewhere with a new boyfriend, gazing into his eyes, holding hands, kissing, ordering champagne. But she's most likely sitting in front of the telly, plate of cheese and crackers on the armrest. Seething.

The waitress returns with the drinks and puts them on the table. Can't believe they let him have lager, while I'm stuck on tap water. Don't want to feel angry but can't stop meself. Things have got worse and worse since the divorce. Mightn't have been so bad if they'd stopped at that. But Dad went and got a job down in London. No one asked me what I wanted. I end up moving all the way down south, starting a new school where I don't know anyone, living with two strangers in a house I hate.

'Cheers,' says Tommy, raising his beer.

I clink his glass, but me cheer stays buried.