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opening extract from

Luke and Jon

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Robert Williams

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Luke and Jon

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For Kate

On a Hill

I have green eyes. Probably not the green you are thinking of now. They are bright green. They are startling. This is not a boast. I am just trying to be accurate. Precise and clear. If I told you my eyes were green and left it at that you may picture them as a shade of hazel, or olive. They are vivid green. I will be honest from the start.

When people meet me for the first time, there is often a moment of shock, a pause, and then they scramble to recover. We continue as normal. Later, the shy or polite ones will risk a quick sideways glance. The confident or rude ones will stare. They are both just checking that they aren't mistaken, it isn't a trick of the light and those really are my eyes.

I live in a house on top of Bowland Fell. The house looks down on a small town called Duerdale. I moved here with my dad some time ago. My old life finished somewhere else and my new one was supposed to start here. We ended up in Duerdale for different reasons, the practical reason being we could afford the house. We could afford the house because it's falling down. There are holes in the roof, cracks in the walls, and the window frames are rotten. 'Cosmetic problems,' my dad muttered, 'we'll take it.' He shook hands with the estate agent and walked away. The estate agent laughed and then smiled. He thought my dad was daft. My dad

isn't daft. We needed somewhere to live and this is what we could afford.

He makes children's toys, my dad. Out of wood. Children don't want wooden toys. They want better phones, clothes and cash. Thankfully, some parents are stupid or old-fashioned enough to buy my dad's toys. That's why we can afford any kind of home at all. The kid gets a wooden toy and has a sulk; I get a house that's falling down.

Just to be clear. His toys are brilliant. He has won awards from the . . . wait for it . . . The Traditional Toy Makers Association. He is a bit of a hero to them. And a bit of an outlaw. He hasn't paid his subscription for eleven years but they still keep him on their books. He's that good.

I don't make things out of wood but I do paint. People say I'm very good. Sometimes they ask me how I do it, and I don't know what to say. It's easy. A lot of things that come easily to most people, I can't do at all. I can't catch, I can't sing, maths, I'm rubbish at computer games. Paint, though, makes sense to me. I know how to control it. It does what I expect it to do; it behaves for me. A teacher at my old school joked that it was a combination of having my dad's hands and magic eyes. He laughed, but it made sense to me.

There are a few standard toys my dad makes and sells at market stalls around the county – cars, boats, planes, trains, he knocks these out in his sleep. They are his stock in trade and he just bangs them out. His real joy though is a commission, the chance to make a one-off. Something special. He guarantees he will never

make another toy like it again. He talks about 'mass production' and 'globalisation'. He says it controls our lives and ruins our town centres: 'Everywhere looks the same from Inverness to Ipswich.' He says people should want difference; they should want something unique, something special. And sometimes they do; sometimes the phone rings.

He will listen intently, make notes, nod a lot, and gently guide the customer in the right direction with a few suggestions. 'Beech is nice, yes, but have you thought of rosewood? Rosewood would be perfect.' He will go to his workroom and become obsessed with the piece. He will spend hours over tiny details. He will make sure joints open and close smoothly and silently. He will check and double check that everything is completely and exactly in proportion. He will sand, paint and varnish so it all looks as perfect as it could possibly look. He will then charge about half of what he should ask for. Another reason, I suppose, why we live in a house that's falling down.

This is us then. The toy maker and the boy with bright green eyes. The two weirdos on the hill.

April 11th, 4.27 p.m.

We came to Duerdale after Mum was killed. She was killed on a bright April afternoon when her small red car and a lorry smashed into each other. April the 11th, 4.27 p.m. 'It was immediate, she wouldn't have felt a thing,' they told my dad. A cliché, but it was important. She just went. In a second. Her last words to me were,

'I'll pick you up' and she blew me a kiss. I was glad for that. One boy in our class, Michael, his dad had died. They were supposed to be going to watch a football match but his dad rang from work and said he couldn't go; he wasn't feeling well. Michael didn't believe him because he'd been working so hard lately. He thought it was an excuse and they had an argument. Michael shouted at him and slammed the phone down. That was the last time they spoke. His dad had a stroke and died that night.

I found out later that they closed the bypass for eight hours while they measured tyre marks and took photographs of what was left of the car. There were tailbacks for miles across the county. They said at the inquiry that neither vehicle had any defects and both were in a roadworthy condition. The lorry had been serviced and checked the week before. It passed. They said it was nobody's fault. It was 'a tragic accident that led to loss of life'. Of course, the lorry and the driver escaped pretty much unscathed. With the size of the thing I reckon he could have driven into the moon and the moon would have come off worse. It was just my mum's car that was squashed and twisted and left looking like a piece of modern art. I saw a photograph of the lorry driver, Brian Stuart, in the local paper. It was taken at the inquiry, after he had been told he was blameless. He was dead-eyed. He looked like a ghost.

My mum was coming to pick me up from the after-school art club when it happened. When she didn't turn up I set off walking. It was the kind of spring day that tricks you into thinking that it would be summer the

next day and it was almost warm; car windows were wound down and shirtsleeves rolled up. I walked past traffic jams and frustrated people in cars calling home to say they would be late; there had been an accident. By the time I got home I think I was the last person in town to know. The police had been and gone. There was just my dad, sat in his chair, slack-faced.

The next morning I didn't know what to do so I did what I always did, I went to school. I walked into the classroom for registration and Mrs Calvert's eyes filled with tears. She dragged me out of the room, shoved me in her car and drove me home. She told me to only come back when I felt better. It seemed unlikely that I would ever feel better so I went back the next day. My friends and teachers all treated me differently for a few weeks. Concerned looks and gentle voices. Quiet chats in empty classrooms. They asked how I was coping, 'How's your dad?' I shrugged and muttered. After a few weeks they stopped asking. They didn't forget, but I learnt that life doesn't stop for everybody just because yours does.

My dad didn't do anything for weeks. He sat in his chair. He didn't sleep, he didn't shave, he lost weight. I would hear him at strange hours of the night going downstairs to drink. And sob. Eventually red bills started arriving and the phone started ringing. He didn't read the bills and he didn't answer the phone. My dad was never good with the day-to-day stuff at the best of times. He wasn't going to start now.

I painted more. I painted because it made my mind blank. It was like falling asleep. Falling asleep without

having to dream about my mum. I painted for hours. When I painted I was empty. It helped.

A big grin

They met at sixth-form college. Mum said she loved him because he was the most unconventional man she had ever known. At first she thought he had an act. She thought he'd noticed the way all the boys tried to attract girls, and his plan was to stand out by doing the opposite. She laughed at her young self: 'I kept waiting for him to start shouting, running, pushing and flirting, but he never did. He would just let the school day pass him by, the chaos and noise, the fights and the tears. He would always be working on a sculpture or something or other. He was on a different planet. I would leave at the end of the day and he would be there waiting for me at the gates with his latest piece of art and a big grin.'

They got married the day after their A-level results came out. Some people thought it was a mistake; they should travel and see the world, see what opportunities were out there for them. They went to Loch Ness for their honeymoon, a week in a cottage on the shore. When the holiday was over they went to live back with their parents. At the end of the summer my dad enrolled on an advanced City and Guilds course in Design and Craft and my mum got a job with a solicitor in the town. They started renting a little terraced house near the middle of town and a year later I was born.

They were stupidly happy. Even as a kid I could see

that. Sometimes though, she wanted to kill him. She would go to work in the morning and ask him to make sure he posted the cheque for the phone bill or the gas, whatever. Just one thing. She would kiss him goodbye in his workroom and he would already have forgotten. When she came in eight hours later and tired, he would still be at his desk, chiselling and sanding – the cheque on the kitchen table where she left it. It drove her mad. She would shout and he would slam his workroom door and we wouldn't see him all night. The next day though, he would do the shopping, get the tea ready and there would be flowers on the table. Everything would be back to normal. It worked well when I was a bit older. I could post things on the way to school or go to the shop and buy bread and milk. He could just concentrate on his work and making me and mum laugh. We were a good team.

Melanin

My parents took me to the doctor's when I was twelve months old. They thought there might be something wrong with my eyes because they had become so bright. They thought I might have some kind of infection or sight problem. The doctor agreed and he sent me to a specialist. Apparently the specialist thought my eyes were brilliant. My mum told me, 'He kept shining his torch, peering and laughing. He did the eye tests they had for babies and said your sight was fine. He said you were very lucky to have such beautiful eyes.'

My parents were told that it was the amount of a

pigment called melanin, which determines eye colour. When a baby is born there is virtually no melanin present but this gradually develops over the first twelve months. Varying amounts of melanin or pigmentation can create different shades of colours. They were told that it was possible that as I got older my eye colour may change, the tone may calm down, but it never did.

When I was young I never even thought about my eyes and nor did any of my friends, things like that don't bother kids. When I was bit older though and people commented and I'd learnt how to be shy, I wished they weren't so unusual. Now though, they are just my eyes. Just part of me. They don't make me any more or less of anything.

Brian Stuart

Brian Stuart drove the lorry that crushed my mum's car. Did I hate him? Yes, I did. And then the inquiry said he was blameless. And I saw that photograph of him in the local paper. He didn't look like he had got away with anything. He didn't seem relieved or pleased or vindicated. He looked like it hurt him to be here, like he was thinking about what had happened every second.

The paper said which lorry firm he worked for and one day, a week after the inquiry, I went to their depot. I wanted to see him, to watch him. I stood across the road from the depot, at the bus stop, pretending to wait for a bus. I saw him almost straight away. He was sat in a Portakabin speaking on the radio. I watched him

for a few days and saw that he would spray the lorries down when they came back at the end of a shift. He seemed very quiet. There was a lot of shouting from driver to driver but he never raised his voice. He didn't join in. I never saw him speak more than a few words to anyone and I never saw him drive. He moved slowly, like his bones hurt, like he had flu. Quite a few times when I went down after school he wouldn't be there at all. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for days in a row. Then he would come back, even thinner and slower than before.

I stopped going after he saw me. One of the drivers had pulled into the yard and walked across to him in his Portakabin and they spoke briefly. They both looked out from the dusty window across at me. The driver left and walked to the depot and Brian Stuart carried on looking out of the window. After a few minutes he walked out through the door, into the middle of the huge yard and stopped. He stood with his arms at his side and tears running down his face. We looked at each other and he shook his head. I think I nodded. I was crying too. A bus pulled up and I got on. I didn't know where I was going but I didn't know what else to do. I didn't go back after that.

When I found out he had killed himself, I cried. I was shocked but not surprised. He looked like he had to get out of his body, if that makes sense, like it hurt him too much to be here any more. He looked like my dad and that scared me senseless.

It was a bright morning when the men arrived with a van to take everything away. It felt like a good day for a fresh start. They were nice guys really; they seemed embarrassed by it all. I think they probably knew. Small towns. My dad made them a cup of tea as they loaded up. They cracked a few jokes and everyone laughed a bit too loud. They were pleased we didn't try to fight them or stop them or cry. We just watched. They said we were dream clients. They wished us luck, pulled down the shutter of the full van and drove off. They didn't touch my room though and they left my dad his chair and tools. Like I said, they were nice guys. Just doing a job.

The next morning Dad got up early, washed and shaved and cleaned his teeth. He still looked awful, but he'd tried. He came into my bedroom and sat next to me on my bed and hugged me. For ages. It was the first time since I walked past the traffic jams and saw him in the chair that I didn't feel like I was on the edge of the world about to fall off. He talked to me about our situation. He hadn't paid the mortgage and bills for months. We had been in trouble before Mum died but since then it had, he paused, 'escalated'. He said that things would be changing and he was sorry.

The bank took the house back and sold it to reclaim their money. My dad got a letter explaining it all and a small payment when everything was finalised. He looked at the cheque and laughed. He asked me if I would prefer 'coast or country'. We went to the estate

agent and Dad gave details of our situation. They talked figures. The estate agent straightened his tie and said, 'Not around here, not even with the market as it is now.' He spoke about other areas that were more affordable, up-and-coming towns that offered good properties at more realistic prices. He made some phone calls, listened and nodded, hung up and looked at us. 'Duerdale?' he said.

We would have to move away. It meant a new school, a new town, new everything. It didn't matter. I don't think either of us cared that much. Dad did have friends but he wouldn't see them. Some still persevered but they weren't rewarded with much. People looked at him and beneath the cocked head of concern I knew they were thinking, 'Time to pick up the pieces, time to move on, no more wallowing.' I think my dad felt like I did. There were no pieces to pick up. We left the next week.

Duerdale

Duerdale: It's about an hour away, to the north-west. It's tucked between hills and moors, almost hidden, like a mole tucked between rolls of skin. I had never heard of it. Nobody I knew had heard of it. When we went to sign for the house the estate agent told us, 'Make sure you have provisions. It was cut off for three days when the last snow fell. When the rain finally washed the snow away they found two old people dead in their beds in one house.' My dad looked up at him, then back at the contract, and signed.