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Opening extract from

The Dying Photo

Written by

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The Dying Photo

By Alan Gibbons
Based on the winning blurb by James Pybis
As written for The Book Factor competition

Barrington Stoke 9-12 Fiction

Chapter One – Gone

That was the day Jimmy lost his parents.
The day the photographer took them.
The first time Jimmy saw the photographer, he was in Liverpool One. He was walking through the shopping centre pointing his camera at people. He didn't take any pictures at first. He didn't go up to anybody. He didn't say a word. He just watched the Christmas shoppers through his lens.
There was something odd about him.
Creepy.
He was wearing a long, black coat that stretched down to his shoes. He had a scarf round his face and he was wearing reflector sunglasses. Finally, he had a hat pulled over his eyes. Jimmy stared. What was it? Fancy dress? He was still watching when the photographer turned … and looked right at him.
Jimmy saw himself in those mirror sunglasses. He saw himself the way the photographer saw him. It made him feel very small and easy to hurt. His skin crawled.
"Come on, Jimmy," Dad said. "Let's get something to eat."
"Yes, stop daydreaming," Mum added. "What are you looking at?"
Jimmy was about to point out the photographer. But he was gone. Jimmy looked left. He looked right. There was no sign of him. All the time they were eating, Jimmy kept looking out of the window. Somehow he knew he would see the photographer again.
It didn't happen right away. They finished shopping and went to the Pier Head for a walk. The River Mersey sparkled in the winter sunlight. Seagulls hung in the clear, blue sky. It was just a couple of weeks until Christmas and flakes of snow were blowing. Jimmy soon forgot about the photographer. He had better things to think about. Like presents, and time off school.

“What did you get me?” he asked.

Mum and Dad laughed. “You know we’re not going to tell you that,” they said.

So Jimmy looked up at the Liver Buildings. He saw the huge, bronze Liver Birds and wondered how far they could see. He thought it would be great if they could come to life and fly away across the river.

That was when he heard a man’s voice. It was the photographer.

“Would you like me to take your photo?” he asked.

He was heading straight for them. His feet seemed to glide over the ground. That thing he was wearing, it wasn’t a coat. It was a cloak. It fluttered like wings.

“Tell him to go away!” Jimmy said.

“Why don’t you want him to take our picture?” Dad asked. “It can be our Christmas family photo.”

Jimmy remembered the way he had looked in the mirror sunglasses. So small. So easy to hurt. “Don’t let him take us!” he cried.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Mum told him.

The photographer pointed the camera at them. “Look at the birdy,” he said.

Just then Jimmy noticed somebody waving urgently. He turned and stared. It was a girl his age. He frowned. What did she want? He was still looking at her when the camera flashed.

After that the world went crazy. Jimmy was alone. The photographer had gone.

So had the girl.

So had his parents.

“Mum?” he said. “Dad?”

But they were nowhere to be seen. He ran to the main road. Where had they gone? They had been right there, next to him. Now they were gone. His heart pounded.

“Where are you?” he cried.

Tears were stinging his eyes. He ran back to where they had been standing. Then he saw something on the ground. He bent down and picked it up. In his hand he had a black and white photo, one of those old negatives. The moment he looked at it, his skin went cold. It showed his mum and dad.

Their eyes were wide.

Their mouths were open.

They were screaming.