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Smart

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1

DEAD IN THE WATER

It just looked like a pile of rags, floating on the water.

Jean sat on the bench with the brass plaque on. It said: *In Memory of Norman Reeves, who spent many happy hours here.*

The plaque means Norman Reeves is dead, but it doesn't actually say that.

Jean held her head in her hands and her body was all jerky, like when you are laughing or crying. I guessed she was crying and I was right.

'He was my friend,' she sobbed.

I looked around but Jean was alone. People around here say Jean is 'cuckoo'. That means mental. She used to be a nurse that delivered babies. She still knows loads of stuff she learned from medical books but no one believes her.

'Who?' I asked.

Jean pointed to the rags.

I went to the edge of the embankment to look. There was a stripy bag half in the water. I saw a face with a bushy beard in the middle of the rags, under the ripples. One eye was open, one was closed.

I freaked out. The sea sound started in my head and I ran right past the bridge and back again but there was

nobody to help. I'm not supposed to run like mad because it can start my asthma off.

'When the sea noise comes in your head,' Miss Crane says, 'it is important to stay calm and breathe.'

I stopped running. I tried to stay calm and breathe. I used my inhaler.

Jean was still crying when I got back.

'He was my friend,' she said again. I picked up a long stick and took it over to the riverbank. I poked at the face but not near the eyes.

'What are you doing?' Jean shouted from the bench.

'I'm doing a test to see if it's a balloon,' I yelled back. It felt puffy and hard at the same time, so I knew it was Jean's friend's head.

'Is it a balloon?' shouted Jean.

A woman with a dog was coming.

When she got near I said, 'Jean's friend is in the river.'

She gave me a funny look, like she might ignore me and carry on walking. Then she came a bit nearer and looked at the river. She started screaming.

I went for a walk up the embankment to stay calm and breathe. Some Canada geese flew down and skidded into the water. They didn't care about the rags and the puffy face. They just got on with it.

When I got back, a policeman and a policewoman were talking to the lady with the dog. Jean was still sitting on the bench but nobody was talking to her.

'That's him,' the woman said, and pointed at me.

'What's your name, son?' The policeman asked.

'I'm not your son,' I said. 'My dad is dead from a disease that made him drink cider, even in the morning.'

The policeman and the policewoman looked at each other.

'Can you tell us what happened, love?' The policewoman had a kind face, like Mum when she wasn't rushing to go to work. She nodded her head towards the river. 'Is that how you found him?'

'It looked like rags,' I said.

'He was my friend,' Jean shouted from the bench.

The policewoman wrote down my name and address.

'Was he just like this, when you got here?' asked the policeman.

'The head was a bit more turned towards the bridge,' I said. 'Before I poked it with the stick.'

'Stick?'

'I had to see if it was a balloon or a real head,' I said.

The woman with the dog shrieked. She even made the policewoman jump.

'It's definitely a real head,' I said.

'Did you see anyone else around here but the tramp lady?' asked the policeman.

'Jean was a nurse,' I said. 'She's not mental.'

A white van pulled up. It had the words *Police Diving Unit* on the side and a blue flashing light. Even when it

stood still, the light kept flashing.

'Kieran,' said the policeman. 'Did you see anyone else hanging around here?'

'No,' I said. 'How many divers will go in?'

The side of the van slid back and two police divers got out. They had flippers on and everything.

'They'll need breathing apparatus on if they're going to search the water for clues,' I said.

'No need for that,' the policewoman said in a low voice, like she didn't want me to hear. 'Poor old bogger probably fell in after one too many.'

A man got out of the front of the police van and took some photographs of Jean's friend in the water. Then the divers put up some screens while they pulled the body out of the river.

'Why are they hiding it?' I said. 'I've already seen it.'

'And poked it,' said the policeman as they moved away. 'Don't go touching dead bodies in future.'

There were some people gathering on the far bank. One man had binoculars.

The police emptied the dead man's stripy bag and spread the things out on the concrete. There was a blanket, some socks and an empty packet of cheese straws.

Two older boys from my school walked up and stood watching.

'What you been up to, Downs? You topped somebody?' asked one of them.

'I haven't got Down's,' I said. 'There's nothing wrong with my chromosomes.'

'Are you sure about that, Downs?' asked the other boy.

They fell about laughing.

2
THE LETTER

One day I'm going to be a reporter for the *Evening Post*. That's why I started walking straight home, so I could write stuff down.

I don't write in my notebook all the time. I used to only write in it when bad things happened, like when Grandma stopped coming round.

But now I write down all the interesting things that happen too, so the Editor of the *Post* will want me to work for him when I leave school. I can show him my notebook as evidence of my reporting skills.

The bad thing at the river was definitely interesting.

I can do the tiniest writing in the world; even I can't read it sometimes. Nobody can tell other people what I've said, which is the best thing. You can't trust people but you can trust your notebook.

I ripped out all the pages of my old *Beano* annual and I hide my notebook in there. Then I put the annual in the middle of a pile of other annuals under the bed. Nobody will ever find it.

See, this is why I like writing in my notebook. I can talk about anything that's ever been invented and no one can tell me off.

I. Am. In. Charge.

You can write sentences with only one word in them, like that. It's your choice.

I live in Nottingham. Not right in the middle, where the castle is, just at the edge of the middle.

'Just outside the city centre,' Miss Crane says.

I like saying 'edge of the middle' better. It feels more like a place.

Robin Hood came from Nottingham. He lived in Sherwood Forest and formed a merry band of men, including Little John, who was massive. Yorkshire tried to steal Robin Hood. They said he came from there but it's been proven by scientists that he was from Nottingham.

I stopped walking for a minute and looked back at the embankment and the flashing blue lights of the police van.

Sometimes, when I look at the river I imagine it is a long, thin piece of sea. If you followed it for nearly a year, you could reach Australia. It's been here as long as Robin Hood. He might have stood in some of the exact same places as I do, looking at the river. I said that once, to my older brother.

'Course he did,' he replied. 'You daft prat.'

Ryan is my older brother but not a proper one. I've got a different mum and dad to him.

My dad died. I only know him because of the

photographs that Mum kept to show me. I was just a baby then. Miss Crane says our brains store away everything that's happened to us, but you can't remember everything because some memories get locked up in a bit of your brain you don't use, called the 'subconscious'.

In my subconscious, there are pictures and films of my dad playing with me and tucking me into bed. Nobody can take them away and burn them. I wish I could get them out of my locked bit of brain to look at again.

When I got home I stopped at the living-room door on my way upstairs, but nobody turned round. Mum wasn't back from work yet, so I couldn't tell her about what had happened. Sometimes she leaves for work before I wake up and doesn't come back till after I'm in bed, even on the weekends.

Tony was lying on the settee, smoking, with his eyes nearly closed, and Ryan was playing Call of Duty. The gunfire was very loud. Louder than Mum liked it.

Mum says I have to call Tony 'Dad', but secretly, in my head, I always say 'Tony' straight after, so it cancels it out.

Ryan was supposed to go to college to do Media Studies at the beginning of September. After two days he said he didn't like it, so Tony said he could stop going. After that, he played soldier games all day long and nearly all night. When he went up each wave, he went barmy,

like he was a real soldier in Afghanistan.

'Yes! Who's the daddy?' he kept saying and punching my arm.

When you say that, it means you think you're the best of anyone in the whole world at something. Ryan thought he was the best at Call of Duty.

'Dean Shelton in my class is on the last wave,' I told him.

'Shut your mouth,' he yelled. 'Before I bleeping smack you one.'

Writing 'bleep' takes all the power out of swear words.

A long, long time ago, someone decided what word to use for every single thing there is. For a wooden thing you sit on, they decided that word would be CHAIR. But what if they had decided it would be called a B*****D? Then you would sit on a B*****D and call someone a CHAIR if you hated them.

'That's true,' Miss Crane had said when I'd asked her about it at school. 'It's the meaning we attach to a word that's important.'

When I've worked at the *Evening Post* for a bit, I want to go and work for Sky.

Sky is 'First for Breaking News'. All the politicians want to talk to Sky first, even before the BBC.

I like Jeremy Thompson but I don't want to present the news like him. I want to do a job like Martin Brunt.

He's my favourite on the Sky News team.

Martin Brunt is the Crime Correspondent. He comes on when very bad stuff happens, like murders. If he lived around here, he would be down at the river now, reporting back to viewers about Jean's friend, who was dead in the water.

The Sky News cameraman would zoom in on the rags and they'd bring criminal experts into the studio to say what kind of person might have killed the man. The experts are called 'criminologists'. They even know what car the murderer drives and whether he still lives with his mum and dad.

In my room, I wrote down all the evidence I'd seen so far in my notebook. I did it in very small writing so I could fit it all in. 'Evidence' means every single thing that has happened. Sometimes on *CSI*, they don't even realize something is evidence until later on. Then they look at their notes to check it out.

I wrote down all the people I'd seen that morning, even Jean. At this stage, everyone was a suspect. Really, I knew Jean hadn't done anything because she used to be a nurse, but sometimes witnesses on Sky News said, 'I can't believe it – she was just an ordinary woman who lived next door.'

Jean doesn't live anywhere. People don't like the homeless; they say they stink and should get a job.

'I'd like to see half of them get a job if they were

starving hungry and freezing cold,' Jean had said, when I'd told her.

Jean used to have a big house in Wollaton with her husband and her son Tim, who wanted to be a pilot. When Tim was killed in a motorbike accident, Jean started to drink so it wouldn't hurt as much. Her husband left her and Jean lost her job.

'I had a mental breakdown,' she said, when we were sitting together on the embankment one day. 'When I got better, I had no husband, no job and no house.'

That's how Jean ended up homeless. It doesn't mean she killed her friend.

The next day, I told Miss Crane all about the homeless man's murder.

'He might have just fallen into the water,' Miss Crane said. 'You mustn't jump to conclusions.'

Falling into the water sounded boring. I felt sure Martin Brunt could find the killer.

I wrote him a letter in class.

Dear Martin Brunt,
There has been a ~~deathh~~ murder
of a homeless person in our river.
The man was Jean's friend. Can you
come with your cameraman and
bring the Criminology experts?

After I've worked at the Evening Post for a bit, I want to work with you at Sky News.

Yours sincerely,
Kieran Woods
Class 9
c/o Meadows Comprehensive School,
Nottingham

Miss Crane was pleased I'd remembered that it's 'Yours sincerely' when you know someone's name and 'Yours faithfully' when you don't. Before I put the letter in an envelope, I crossed out 'death' and wrote 'murder'.

Miss Crane didn't see me do it.