

Deliverance

When Rachel was growing up computers were the things of science fiction; they filled warehouses with reels big as millstones, churned numbers into codes that nobody understood. She recalled seeing one on television and thinking, *that'll never catch on*. Now look at us, she thought, all pecking away at keyboards like chickens over corn.

She took a quick glance around the office. Almost every screen bore an image from the news site: crumbling towers, smoke and tumbling bodies; the same shocking scenes that had been emerging all week. That was where technology got you. There were websites that told you how to make a bomb, start a plague.

She angled her screen away, checked over her shoulder and logged on to Friends Forever. It had become a furtive sort of addiction. Not that it brought her pleasure. Since joining in a weak moment, women she could barely remember now claimed her as one of their dearest long-lost friends. *I've thought about you so often!* they lied. *Remember the fun we had!* Rachel didn't. Everything about her schooldays had been far from fun. Some were more personal in tone. *Did you marry Missionary Malcolm? We all had money on it!*

All the postings had one thing in common. *Didn't I do well!* was the unvarying subtext. Her inbox was flooded with a deluge of smug photographs. Family holidays, lovely houses. Photogenic children in graduation gowns, high-achieving husbands -*here's Gerald receiving his MBE*. Some had recently become grandmothers: three generations of gloating potential. Sickening.

As she stared at the screen a pulsing envelope appeared and her heart did a back-flip. Daniel Grady.

Her cursor hovered over it. The sensible thing to do would be to delete it. Instead she logged off, switched off, pleaded a migraine and went home by way of the off-licence.

Rachel and Daniel first met in the Lion's Den, a scout-hut turned youth club. In the liberal spirit of the times the elders of the club (not one of them more than twenty years old themselves) had let 'the kids' choose the name and paint it over the door in violent psychedelic lettering. The name was approved by Malcolm Moon, the youth leader. He hoped it was a place where deliverance would be found.

In Margate that year, Christianity was making a stab at being groovy. Some of the youth leaders even had beards. They drank Seven-Up straight from the bottle and quoted from a book called 'Jesus is for real, man'. The Lord, they said, was the first and original hippy and they made quite a convincing beard-and-sandals argument for their thesis, leaving aside free love. Free love had no place in their kingdom.

To begin with most youngsters went for the orange squash and ping-pong but little by little their secularism was chipped away. By the beginning of that summer, more and more teenagers found salvation in the Lion's Den. On sweaty June evenings they stood up to 'testify' telling the story of sin-stained lives, their journey to redemption. The things they'd done, (or more often only thought of doing) were nobody's business. In voices choked with tears they gave their testament and were born again.

Members of the Lion's Den even had a secret salute, a rather timid version of a clenched fist, raised over the heart whilst declaring 'PTL', a streetwise sort of shorthand for 'Praise the Lord'. Rachel hadn't testified. She didn't know how to and wondered whether the others were making it up, pretending to see visions, hear the call. She screwed her eyes shut, but all she found was blurry darkness and her own blood hissing, like the sound inside a sea-shell. She remained on the outside of the group, sucking on a paper straw, beset by doubt.

She and Malcolm were indulging in a jaunty game of ping-pong when a wild-haired boy came breezing through the Den doors, like a gunman in a saloon. He was greeted by a chorus of 'PTL'.

'PTL?' drawled the boy in slummy Dublin brogue. 'What the feck is PTL?'

Malcolm Moon shuddered, before reminding himself of JC's position on sinners and rejoicing. He composed his face into a pious smile. The boy, who introduced himself as Daniel, wore a crucifix. What a challenge, bringing a Catholic to the church of Jesus the original hippy.

'Praise The Lord, Daniel – and welcome to the Lions' Den!' Malcolm allowed himself an ironic chuckle.

But Daniel was already distracted, shaking his head at Rachel. 'You're gorgeous, so you are' he said 'What the feck did you do to get sent here?'

Malcolm breathed deeply. God was testing him with this one. Because it was common knowledge that Rachel was Malcolm's future girlfriend. Future, because at not-quite-sixteen she was too young for the chaste sort of hand-holding-cheek-pecking courtship the elders indulged in. It was understood by all that Rachel had Malcolm's name on her. But already Daniel was advancing towards Rachel, hand extended. He held her hand in both of his, for far too long. Seconds later, they were gone.

Rachel stood her glass of Chardonnay on the mantelpiece and fired up her PC. The monitor flickered and hummed for agonising seconds. She logged on and let the cursor waver above the unopened envelope. *Pandora's box*, she whispered, clicking it open. Daniel said that seeing her name on Friends Forever '*Fair turned my heart over, so it did. Remember me?*'

Did he think she could ever forget?

He sent a picture of Donegal hills, another of the simple white cottage where he now lived, all he had left after paying off 'the last wife'. *What about you?* he asked. *Tell me everything.*

Everything? Rachel wanted to lay her head on the desk and weep. Instead she turned to the news website, to remind herself what bad luck really was.

Over the weeks Rachel unfolded her story to Daniel in a series of well-chosen photographs. Rites of passage, high-days and holidays, family weddings, a holiday home in Provence. A group of tow-haired children on a beach, two athletic teenagers clutching surf-boards. She wrote little, letting the images speak for themselves. A blurred crowd of faces raising glasses around a barbecue, under a 'Happy Birthday' banner.

Finally she wrote *But now it's just me and Malcolm*. The painful, unvarnished truth.

She imagined that was it. Story over. No more to be said. But Daniel emailed every day, even though she didn't reply. *I know you're there. Nothing has ever felt so vivid, so bright to me as those days with you.* Rachel remembered, the past that glowed behind them both like a perfect sunset.

Daniel's zest for life had been infectious. Whatever he was reading was always the new best thing – the Tibetan book of the dead, Kerouac, Ginsberg, philosophy, poetry. He was a lapsed Catholic, an atheist, a Buddhist, a pagan, a humanist. He read John Stuart Mill, Timothy Leary, Bertrand Russell. He was a communist, an anarchist, a libertarian. Father

unknown and mother departed, he had been passed around his mother's family 'like a parcel of dirty laundry' from one side of Ireland to another, before being sent to Margate.

He was often short of money, then inexplicably flush with cash. In wealthy periods, Players would be replaced by Dunhills, toast and ketchup gave way to steak and chips. He gave her presents, a brass ring-holder, an amethyst brooch, a first edition of *Under Milk Wood*. Walking along the front on a wet day they stopped in a seafront shelter and Daniel taught her how to roll a joint. As she took her first lungful she felt the thrill of transgression. Drugs! Nobody in the Lion's Den had ever admitted to that. It brought on a savage attack of asthma and she had to decline it as a future pastime - but at least she had tried. She tried a lot of other things with Daniel, things she suspected not even the elders knew about.

Remember Papa Nico? Daniel wrote, seemingly not discouraged by Rachel's silence. Of course she did. The Colosseum, a.k.a. Papa Nico had been their favourite meeting place. But one day in November, Daniel had not been waiting there. Mr Stephanopolous brought her a second coffee, waved away all payment. 'He not coming, Duchess', he advised. He became more forthcoming in his opinion, telling Rachel to 'look for a decent boy now, Greek boy, not no-good Irish rubbish'. But Rachel's throat was aching unbearably. A week later, her father unrolled the evening paper and made a noise somewhere between a gasp and a roar. Daniel stared out from the front page under the headline '*Margate's Baby-faced Pusher*'. Pot in Margate! So that was where all the money had come from.

When Rachel walked back through the door of the Lion's Den, Malcolm smiled benevolently. Rachel's father leant out of the window of the Ford Anglia, making sure she didn't do a runner. With a nod to him, Malcolm put an arm around Rachel.

'There is more rejoicing over one sinner...' He began.

'Shut the feck up, Malcolm.' said Rachel.

Malcolm sighed happily. God had sent him another challenge.

Daniel's email unrolled down the screen. Rachel read on, transported back to Nico's on a long-ago summer afternoon. July sunshine poured through dirty windows, layered with cigarette smoke; she heard the hiss and roar of the coffee machine. She tasted the dry and dusty flavour of Greek pastries baking under their plastic domes. She heard again his musical

Irish voice, saw his intense expression as he quoted TS Eliot. She remembered their passion, their discussions about life, art, politics – everything. It was as if he'd opened a door into a room inside her head; when he disappeared into three years of youth custody that door had clanged shut forever.

Margate itself was a distant memory. Her parents moved to Coventry the following January and Rachel with them, the ache of loss as familiar as her own lifeless face in the mirror. The gunmetal sea, the concrete prom, the seaside shelters and the wide blue skies vanished forever. And what could she tell Daniel about Coventry? Rachel shut down her PC and opened a bottle of Merlot, tears sliding down her face.

That night she dreamed she was back in the Lion's Den. Malcolm stood over her, young, bearded, a bottle of Seven-Up in his hand.

'Thou shalt not steal!' he commanded.

'It wasn't stealing!' her dream-self was shouting as she awoke.

She hadn't stolen anything, she told herself as her heart-rate slowed. Only borrowed, from those who could afford it. Details, places, photographs, magpie fragments of other, luckier lives. A passive sort of revenge on all those smug, self-congratulating bastards who thrust their success at you. *Did you marry Missionary Malcolm?* as though her life had never held any other possibility.

Rachel crept out of bed, careful not to disturb Malcolm. In her study she opened a drawer, drew out the envelope containing the Polaroid that had lain inside for almost thirty years: the only photograph that had ever mattered, the one she owed Daniel.

Photographs had been against the home's policy. The girls were allowed no reminders. But a sympathetic nurse had taken the Polaroid in the locked nursery, slipped it into Rachel's hand on her last day. Now she looked again at the dark quiff of hair, the little face framed by the white cellular blanket.

Rachel lifted the lid of the scanner, placed the photograph face-down. She turned, aware that Malcolm was in the doorway, staring at her in that supercilious way he had.

'Malcolm' she said. 'I'm going to tell Daniel everything. It's for the best, isn't it?'

But Malcolm's mind was on breakfast. He crossed the room, entwined himself briefly around her legs and walked towards the kitchen, tail held high.

Louise Green

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