

Coral's Age

by

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ISBN: 9798417187070

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About the Author

Encounter

Monday morning, late for work, raining cats and whatever, and still no milkman. Not exactly favourable conditions for my bi-weekly sparring session with 'Lightning Electronics' 24/7 repair service. But I gave it my best shot. And needless to say, the delectable Melissa, their go-to super receptionist, was just as feisty as ever. 'What Hoover belt? Order number's no match': that kind of thing. The irresistible urge to lapse into telephone theatrics at the sound of her voice yielded the inevitable result: two falls and a submission to Melissa and a psychological kick in the balls for me. Bugger... Now, though, it's time to make tracks...

Since the deluge is showing no signs of easing, I abandon all hope of my early-morning caffeine jolt and venture outside, slamming the front door behind me; but as I embark on my standard OCD security check, repeatedly turning keys and tugging on handles, an acute sense of apprehension prompts me to freeze.

Odd. The last time such a sensation made itself so forcibly felt was just before the news that my poor, sweet Lynda had been so viciously taken from me... Caught off-guard, I'm powerless to prevent myriad bittersweet memories from rushing in. It's been quite some time since I've been so completely overcome. Two years since her death and my GP persists in saying I'm well on the road to recovery. Roads, however, come in many different lengths. This I've tried to explain to him; but it's clear that he's never experienced the depth of grief, the heartache that fills the void, when a beloved soul-mate is lost. His best advice? Cash in my membership to the legion of the walking wounded. Not in this lifetime!

Flashes of the scene where Lynda's precious life was so mercilessly battered from her barely have time to focus when a familiar voice coils me back to the reality of grey morning light and biting cold rain.

'Hey, Corran, what's up? Two calls but no dice. Lost the batteries for the hearing aid then?'

There is no mistaking the lilting tone of Roderick McClelland's anglicised Ayrshire accent. Since Lynda's tragic passing, this wiry Scotsman has been my only true, if sometimes over-zealous, friend. We've known each other from our early days in QC working at Squire's Foods; and, following its very messy collapse, Rick, as he prefers to be known, convinced me to pool our resources and go it alone with a small analytical consulting business. Lynda always insisted that Rick and I were like twins separated at birth due to a mix up at the hospital. And it's true, we do bear a passing resemblance to a couple of six-foot kippers: dark-brown hair a little on the long side, eye colouring to match, and a gaunt Celtic look that Rick thinks irresistible to women. If you ask 'my man' though, he'll swear that any similarities go no further than the fact that we each have a head, two arms and two legs.

I break my petrified stance and turn to Rick's enquiring face.

'What're ya litterin' up the doorway for?' he asks.

'Sorry,' I reply feebly, 'just a transient attack of the seniles.'

Rick raises an eyebrow.

'Bad news,' he says, clearly deciding it's best not to pursue the real reason for my behaviour, 'the bloody exhaust's blown on the Audi. Got to get it fixed this morning cos I'm

due in Sheffield by four. You remember – the guys from the Ministry... See you tomorrow in the pub.'

He turns abruptly and begins lolloping along, furiously waving at a mini cab screeching past at the top of the road. In traditional fashion I'm left to decipher the nature of the 'bad news' based on the disjointed details provided. No lift to work.

Perfect, I breathe, while hastily reviewing my options.

Take the bus, if it turns up. Unlikely.

Reclaim my right to my very own company car, which I recently waived to support the business. Attractive, but not practical.

Call a taxi. Not with the luck I'm having.

Walk. Get soaked, but arrival within 30 minutes guaranteed...

With freezing cold rain trickling down the back of my neck, my legs decide to pre-empt matters by committing to option four.

The back streets of Salford are rarely a delight, but on a stark November morning with rain ricocheting off cracked paving even Mr Smiley could be forgiven a momentary frown. To add insult to injury the fallen autumn foliage, repeatedly sodden and crushed underfoot, is like an oil slick in places and equally as treacherous. The light is still poor as I turn into an adjacent street, to all intents and purposes identical to the last. I glance at my watch – already seven o'clock.

The rain promptly ramps it up a notch, and the wisdom of postponing the purchase of a new umbrella to replace the one I recently lost clearly merits a rethink. Perhaps the idea of hiking to the office isn't such a brilliant one after all. I turn, resolving to return home, dry off, have my sorely missed mug of coffee and take a chance on calling a cab. What the hell! Better late than never.

No sooner have I kicked off on the return journey than the same sense of apprehension I felt earlier returns and I feel compelled to glance back over my shoulder.

In the near distance, perhaps 200 metres away, stands the old Victorian railway arches: no longer in use of course, and nowadays strictly off limits to the public due to some structural fault or other. At first I can see very little, my view obscured by the driving rain, but on a second scan I can just about make out two figures slowly climbing the access stairs to one side of the bridge. Probably kids messing about... But no, one is definitely a woman – yes, a youngish woman with a small child.

Without consciously registering the fact, I begin to walk towards the arches, instinctively scanning the area to see if anyone is about. No, no one. Maybe not so unusual this early in the morning, but what does strike me as odd is the complete absence of parked cars. Normally the streets would be lined with them – but not a single vehicle in sight.

The figures reach the top of the bridge and slowly walk towards its centre: the child – a girl – in front followed a short distance behind by the woman; and I'm close enough now to see them more clearly. The woman is relatively tall – slim with short dark hair; and since the original brick wall skirting the parapet was replaced some years back by metal railings, I can see she's wearing a long black coat. As far as I can tell, the girl's features are very similar. She is, of course, much smaller, but curiously, given the weather, wears only a flimsy cagoule and lightweight skirt.

What on earth are they up to?

I'm rapidly developing a bad feeling about this. Casting aside my easily uprooted non-interference policy, I cry out, 'Hey, you! What d'you think you're doing? The bridge isn't safe.'

No response.

I look about me again, anxiety reaching flash point. Still no one. When I look back, my pounding heart jams on the breaks. The pair have stopped above the central arch and the girl is climbing onto the railings.

Oh shit! This can't be happening!

In an instant she's positioned herself on the outside of the railings. The woman is doing nothing!

I'm already running – God knows why.

'Come on, come on,' I rasp, as my legs refuse to move at the speed I so desperately want.

Slipping on wet leaves, I stumble, recover then race on. Almost at the bridge, I look up. For an instant I catch sight of the girl's expression. So full of sadness it all but stops me dead in my tracks. Then she lets go... No moment of hovering. No slow-motion descent as in the movies. She falls; I dive.

'Can you hear me? Can you hear me, sir?'

As if captured in the wake of an exploding geyser, I feel my consciousness returning: racing to a distant point of light, guided by the persistence of a woman's voice calling. With a violent jerk I surface, crying out unintelligibly as my senses spark back into life in a chaotic flurry.

'Is the girl okay? Is she—' I stammer.

Gripped by a terrible fear of what I might find, I struggle to look around me, conjuring up all manner of horrors in a frantic attempt to prepare for the worst.

Firm hands grasp my shoulders, and for the first time I become aware of a woman kneeling beside me, her penetrating stare boring through to the back of my head.

'Everything's fine,' she is saying calmly. 'My daughter's unharmed, thanks to you.'

Thanks to me? My God! The memory of the girl falling and my desperate dive clicks into place. Somehow we must have collided in a way that broke her fall. True, the railway arches are not so high, but how she avoided serious injury – hell, that's definitely in the realms of fantasy.

Convinced that the girl must at least be injured, I haul my aching body into a sitting position; but before I can speak the delicate touch of a small hand brushes my cheek.

I turn to meet the expressionless face of a girl probably no more than six years old, her silvery-green eyes captivating me instantly; and all sensations of anxiety and pain drain away as if she possesses the power of healing in her glance.

I've no idea how long I remain transfixed, but by degrees the spell fades, and my power of speech and perception of pain returns.

'You really aren't hurt?' I whisper. Then in an uncontrollable reaction to my relief, 'What the bloody hell were you doing?' I fire the same question at the woman, but neither reply.

'Do you think you can stand?' the woman asks, exchanging glances with the girl.

For the first time since coming round, I'm able to marshal my wits into some semblance of order and initiate a survey of my physical condition. Apart from a thumping headache and an overwhelming feeling of having just survived a rugby scrum, I seem okay. My clothes are saturated and filthy with mud; I'm frozen stiff; but these are minor inconveniences compared to what could have been.

I nod. 'Yes, I'll survive.'

As if wishing to verify my claim, the woman and child stand back, allowing me to scramble to my feet unaided. The woman inspects me from head to toe.

'You do *seem* unhurt,' she murmurs. Then in an animated tone, 'Look, I'm really sorry this happened. We'll always be grateful for what you did, but we have to go.'

‘Go?’ I splutter. ‘What do you mean, go? You take a young girl onto a derelict bridge then stand back while she jumps! You must be seriously disturbed or criminally insane! No, no, no, you’re not going anywhere. I’m calling the cops to deal with you and an ambulance for the kid.’ I fumble in my jacket pocket and finally yank out my mobile. ‘Sodding thing,’ I curse, as my chilled fingers fail to manipulate the controls.

Before I can complete a second try, the woman grasps my arm.

‘Please don’t. It won’t help. My daughter is truly unharmed, and the situation is not as you think.’

Ignoring her plea, I shrug off her grasp and again focus on the phone. She seems to capitulate then suddenly beckons to the girl.

‘Come, Coral, it’s time. Quickly now.’

‘No!’ I exclaim. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’

I open my mouth about to deliver a further set of demands when I feel the same small hand slide into mine and grip my index finger. My mouth automatically closes. I look at the girl then at her mother, and, as if caught in a photograph, we all stand in silence: motionless; the rain still falling, the street still deserted.

The woman finally breaks the spell by kneeling in front of her daughter.

‘Are you absolutely sure?’ she asks softly. ‘You really want to try again, even though there can be little hope?’

The girl gazes up at my face then slowly turns to her mother, nodding, causing the woman’s features to soften and her mouth to form into a smile... Which promptly dissolves as I grimace.

‘Should we take you to hospital?’ she offers.

Eight out of ten for effort, but there’s no mistaking her real concern – that I might actually say yes.

‘No, I’ll be fine... After a few herbal baths and a couple of day’s R and R,’ I reply. ‘Besides, my only visit to A & E took over three hours to have a gashed hand looked at. By the time they examined me the cut had partially healed and I’d unknowingly contracted a particularly lousy dose of flu courtesy of an Asian lady I’d been sitting next to.’

‘In that case, can we at least see you home safely?’ she persists. ‘Will your wife be there to look after you?’

‘My wife... No, she’s... No, I live alone.’ I can’t conceal my discomfort at her question, yet for some reason I smile. ‘Thanks... I’d appreciate that. There’s definitely something strange going on, and I’m not letting you two out of my sight until I’ve an at least half-plausible explanation.’

With my comment hanging in the air, my female escorts each take an arm and we set off for home; but as we slowly head back it occurs to me that something has changed: as if a cloud has passed in front of the sun, temporarily blocking its rays before moving on, allowing the scene to return to its original state. The rain has all but stopped, and cars... Cars are parked along both sides of the street. An old VW Beetle trundles by, and I notice a couple emerging from one of the houses. It’s all very confusing. Have I really just witnessed someone fall from the railway arches and by some miracle saved them? Was it all imagined: a kind of daydream? Maybe I’ve been hit by a car and these two kind souls came to my aid... No, that surely can’t be right. The images are so vivid. And then there are the woman’s comments. Not even a warped imagination like mine could dredge up anything as bizarre, whatever the circumstances...

It takes only minutes to reach home – an oversized, detached mausoleum seemingly dumped as an afterthought at the end of a terraced row. It’s undeniably a bit of an eyesore, but Lynda really loved the place and always joked about it being our very own *Addams*

Family mansion. We were told that the builder of the surrounding houses had built the place for himself about a hundred years ago but had gone broke before it was finished, leaving the new owner to complete the job. Its heyday was in the forties when the holding passed to a middle-class doctor and his family. Apparently, the doctor's wife had a penchant for grand parties, which delighted the gentry living in the stockbroker belt several miles to the south, but incensed locals who were struggling to make ends meet. With the advent of the economically tragic sixties and seventies, the doctor's finances had taken a dive, and eventually the family was forced to sell up. The house then remained empty for many years, and, like much of the surrounding area, fell into disrepair. It's now just over eight years since Lynda and I took the place on as a 'fixer-upper'. As elsewhere in the region, new life is being breathed into old working-class communities. Waves of so-called professional folk, with easier access to mortgages than their parents, are buying up the terraces and converting the interiors into highly desirable town houses. Outside, however, little has changed. After all, a row of terraces is a row of terraces. The only difference these days is that the characteristically uniform appearance of the buildings is marred by grotesque aerials and other 'receiving' junk affixed to all available surfaces by their entertainment-hungry owners.

'... And I think you should perhaps lie down.'

'Huh?' I grunt, just catching the tail end of the woman's recommendation. 'Sorry, I drifted off there for a bit... No, I have to call work first then change. There's a bathroom at the end of the corridor you're welcome to use... .. You've been very quiet,' I say, focusing on the little girl. 'How d'you feel now?'

The girl almost smiles but says nothing.

Determined to elicit some form of response, I persist.

'There's no need to be shy.'

'She isn't,' the woman interjects. 'She doesn't speak.'

Before I can pursue the issue any further, mother and daughter turn in unison and disappear down the corridor in the direction of the bathroom.

Left alone, I summon sufficient enthusiasm to call the office, spinning some unconvincing story about feeling off-colour; then, with less difficulty than expected, manage to bathe and change clothes. Any minute I expect to hear the front door click shut, signalling the hasty retreat of my guests. I am, therefore, relieved and surprised, on coming downstairs, to discover the girl sitting motionless on the sofa dressed in one of Lynda's old dressing gowns while her mother pours coffee.

'I hope you'll forgive me. I took the liberty—'

I wave away any need for apology. 'It's kind of you to take the trouble... And I appreciate you not "doing a moonlight".'

I try to give my guests time to drink their coffee in peace, but after barely minutes I can contain my curiosity no longer.

'If you're ready,' I say to the woman.

She nods in understanding.

'Initially I felt no obligation to reveal our personal circumstances, but on reflection you're entitled to at least some explanation.'

'I'm listening,' I say as cordially as I can.

'To begin with, then, my name is Vanessa... Vanessa Swift, and this is my daughter, Coral. We actually live near Bristol, but are visiting friends locally.' As she finishes her introduction she looks towards the window, her pause giving me the opportunity to take in her fine features. She is, without question, a remarkably attractive woman.

Vanessa, I muse. Yes, that certainly fits perfectly. Her intensely-black hair cut in a short bob is only surpassed in beauty by the same captivating silvery-green eyes possessed by her daughter. She wears little make-up, but that present has clearly been applied with considerable skill. If anything, her skin is abnormally pale, almost doll-like, but in conjunction with her other colouring the effect is akin to many a classical portrait of the nineteenth century.

‘As I explained, Coral is unable to speak,’ she resumes. ‘A few years ago while vacationing in Switzerland my husband was killed in a freak accident. Our cable car was ripped open, and he and two others fell through the gap. He was the only one quick enough to catch hold of a mangled piece of the carriage.’

‘And Coral saw the whole thing,’ I add sympathetically.

‘Not only that, but Coral and I were the only other passengers. We tried frantically to pull him up, but he was too heavy and it was too cold to sustain a grip.’

‘It’s all right, you needn’t go on,’ I say gently, concerned how Coral might react when reminded of the tragedy.

Vanessa seems to read my mind.

‘Don’t worry, Coral has blocked out the entire episode. Somehow she manages to filter out anything she doesn’t want to recall.’

I offer Vanessa my handkerchief, but she refuses.

‘The trauma effected Coral’s ability to speak. The doctors feel it’s not permanent, but no one can predict when or how her voice will return.’

‘That’s horrendous,’ I comment, not knowing what else to say. ‘I’m *so* sorry I put you through this. I didn’t—’

‘Please don’t worry,’ Vanessa interrupts. ‘It’s healthy to talk about it now and again. Anyway, you still need to hear about the bridge.’

Good grief. I’d almost forgotten about that. I hold up my hands, gesturing her to stop.

‘There’s no hurry. You can tell me later. How about more coffee?’

‘Thank you for the offer, but “later” may not be possible,’ she counters. ‘I will, however, accept a little more to drink.’

As I refresh her cup, Vanessa continues her dramatic disclosure.

‘About six months after the accident I found Coral clinging to the outside of our sixth-floor flat window. She seemed perfectly calm and in no danger. In fact, on reflection, she was in more danger from my attempts to drag her back inside than anything else. Two days later the same thing happened. Her psychologist is convinced that her behaviour is some form of complex related to her inability to prevent her father from falling. After a series of hypnosis sessions failed to help, I decided to allow her to act out any such incidents in the hope it might lead to a natural cure.’

‘You must be out of your mind with worry. Aren’t you afraid she’ll slip or... Or jump?’

My intentional blunder isn’t missed, and I suspect Vanessa’s been wondering how long it would take me to get round to the topic. She gently strokes Coral’s shoulder.

‘Please understand, during an attack Coral enters a kind of dream-state. She’s like a bat or other creature that sleeps perfectly safely in precarious locations. If, however, she were to be abruptly awakened, then who can say what would happen.’

I sit back in my chair and regard Vanessa quizzically. I feel like an interviewer trying to interrogate a politician. It’s difficult to know how to proceed, but I have to give it a shot.

‘I’m very grateful that you’ve explained about Coral, but with the greatest respect I still don’t understand what happened at the bridge. Why were you there, and so early? What possessed you to climb up there? And what was all that, “Do you really want to try again?” stuff?’

Vanessa suddenly jerks forward on the sofa and glares at the window. She rises gingerly and strides over to one side of the curtain.

‘Is something the matter?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ she states emphatically.

Well that, at least, seems to be the first clearly honest reply so far.

I too leave my seat, intending to join her by the window, but the instant I move Coral starts to moan.

In a flash Vanessa moves back to the sofa and, in a frenzy of activity, places Coral flat on her back with cushions beneath her head and legs. Moments later Coral begins to shake then convulse in a way I’ve never seen before.

‘Oh, my God, what’s happening?’ I breathe.

‘No need for alarm.’ Vanessa’s staring eyes rivet me to the spot. ‘Quickly, hold her legs. Don’t let her kick out.’

I obediently do as I’m bid, but Coral’s limbs seem charged with superhuman strength, and although the seizure barely lasts seconds, it seems like minutes. Then, as abruptly as the attack surfaced, it subsides. Her contorted face relaxes and she opens her eyes. Her head lolls a little back and forth as Vanessa helps her into a sitting position and makes an effort to straighten her ruffled hair; then suddenly she sits still, stretches out her hand and touches my face as she did at the bridge.

‘The Josalynde,’ she whispers. ‘Please help us... Please.’

That’s about all I can take. A suicide attempt, a tragic story, a fit, and now speech, albeit gibberish, from an apparently mute girl. I scramble to my feet, waving my arms about erratically.

‘Please listen!’ Once again Vanessa’s commanding voice marshals my attention. ‘There’s no time now for further explanation. If there is a “later”, then... You are to be given the choice to help us. It is your decision. Coral has faith in you, but know that I do not. Soon a man will come. He will know of us. How you deal with him and how you answer his questions, if you elect to do so, will determine our future. That is all I can say. Now I must tend to Coral. Do you have any blankets?’

I hesitate.

Vanessa’s hard expression softens slightly.

‘Look, despite what you might think later, I’m truly sorry that you’ve become entangled in this.’

Out of concern for the girl, I make no attempt to reply or interrogate further, and instead hurry upstairs in search of blankets. It takes longer than expected to dig out something suitable, and by the time I return the front door is wide open and my guests are gone.