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Herring Girl

Written by Debbie Taylor

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Herring Girl

Debbie Taylor



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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In memory of my father,
Roy Picton Taylor (1926–2012)

PROLOGUE

1898

I'm on the high bank, staring out to the Tyne's mouth, where the slow brown river meets the hickety sea – for it's canny breezy today, with white spume blowing off the tops of the waves. And from every direction, here come the luggers racing home, red sails bellying with the gold of the sun and their holds brimming with silver fish. And that's just how I feel: full of gold and silver and racingness.

For he's out there somewhere, on his way home. And when they've moored up and cranned out, and he's lain down for his bit sleep in the afternoon, that's where I'm going straight after work's finished. Never mind my tea, never mind folk talking, today all I'm doing is throwing off my oilies and running to my lad.

I mean to kiss him awake and I don't care who sees me opening his door. For aren't we promised now, and can't a promised lass kiss her lad awake from his bit sleep? And later – oh, later! – we'll go wandering out to where the wyn's thick and tight-knit, and the sun's warmed the long grass, and find a hollow to lay out my shawl. There's a fluttering in my innards just to think of it.

And all the while I'm checking the sails as they swoop in, for the *Osprey*'s dark mizzen. Oh, and there she is! Tacking out along the far shore, swift as a bird, for if there's a breeze Da likes to ride it in, and save on tug fees, and scoff at the crews being towed home, tame as lapdogs on a lead. She's too far off for me to make out the lads on deck or what they're about, but if she's the *Osprey* – and she is, she is! – then my lad's aboard somewhere, feeling this same sun on his face, this same breeze that's whipping my skirt round my ankles.

So now I'm walking along the top bank, to Nater's Stairs, with my eyes fixed on that dark mizzen, watching her sails fold like a butterfly's wings as she comes about, then belly out again till she's aiming straight as a red arrow for

the quay. And I'm thinking, if I run I can meet her, and watch her tie up, and who cares if I'm late to the farlane for once? For this is the first day of my life as his promised lass, and I want to taste every last bit of it.

I'm running now, and my shawl's coming adrift, and my scarf loosening so my hair's fairly whipping round my face. And here's Nater's Stairs thronging with folk, so I must dodge round them, and grab at my scarf to stop it falling, and unhook my shawl where it's snagged on a cran, here, and again here, and say sorry, sorry, as I gallop past, taking one step, two steps at a time, and trying not to look down, for I'll lose my balance if I do, and stumble, and be delayed and I mustn't be delayed for I've a boat to meet…

CHAPTER ONE

2007

Ben stares at his face in the mirror, just stares, trying to see who's in there. He feels like his body's a coat that belongs to someone else. He's put it on by mistake and now he can't get it off. It feels like at school when you write down the wrong answer in pencil, then rub it out and write over it, but the dent of the old writing's still there underneath – and it was *right all along.*

He's been awake for hours waiting for Dad to leave, listening to him moving around the big open-plan flat: boiling the kettle, slamming the fridge, the dishwasher, the tumble dryer. Then finally, finally, the clomp of his boots down the hall to Ben's room, and the slap of his hand on the door: 'Hey, lazybones! That's me off now. I've left a couple of twenties on the table. Remember and call Nana if you need anything.'

The front door bangs shut and Ben waits a minute before unlocking his door. Still in pyjamas, he pads around the flat in bare feet to check Dad's really gone – which is daft, because of course he has. Plus Dad couldn't lurk quietly if he tried. Still, Ben checks every room just to make sure, then puts the chain on the front door in case he pops back for something or the cleaners turn up on the wrong day.

Dad's away on the boat all this week, which means Ben's got loads of time to do what he's decided. Nana's supposed to drop in later with his tea, but that still leaves the whole day.

He goes back into his room and locks the door again. It's second nature now: push it shut, lean on it a moment with his eyes closed, turn the key, then drape his dressing-gown over the keyhole. Not that Dad would ever crouch down to peer through, plus the key's in the way, but it makes Ben feel safer.

After burrowing to the back of his wardrobe, he tugs out the old sports bag he had in Year 5. He keeps it hidden under a load of other stuff: his new sports bag, all his trainers and flip-flops, odd bits of diving gear. He heaves it onto the bed and unzips it. There's a couple of old Newcastle shirts on top, in case Dad breaks in to his room – he never would, but still. Underneath the shirts are all his private things, in separate washbags: his make-up and nail varnishes, his jewellery, all his hair stuff. Poor old Lily the Pink's squashed in there too, during the day. Dad stuffed her in a bin liner for Oxfam four years ago, but Ben swapped her for a cushion at the last minute.

He tugs Lily out and sits her on his pillow. Then he takes a deep breath and starts pulling out the clothes he's going to wear.

'Nothing too feminine for your first outing,' it said on the website. 'You want to blend in, not draw attention to yourself.' So he's got a pair of denim cut-offs and one of those pink peaked caps that show your hair, like a baseball cap with the top missing; and a short-sleeved stripy pink T-shirt. He was going to wear one of the little strappy tops he's bought, but he was worried people would be able to tell, somehow, just by looking at his shoulders, that he was a boy.

He's been buying clothes for months now, from that big all-night supermarket on the Coast Road: just one or two things at a time, making sure he always goes to a different checkout girl. And he always buys a girl's birthday card too, so it looks like he's getting pressies, plus normal boy's socks or something, and crisps and that, so the checkout girls never batted an eyelid.

He thought for ages about shoes, because trainers always make his feet look enormous, even though they're still only a five. In the end he got some of those open-toed sandals with Velcro fastenings, that could be for a boy or a girl. He was going to get the pink, but then he remembered what the website said and got the blue instead.

When everything's ready he goes into his en-suite and has a shower to wash away being a boy – at least that's what it feels like. He uses one of the fruit shampoos he keeps hidden in the sports bag, with the matching conditioner and shower gel; then blow-dries his hair with styling mousse, so it's a bit feathery in the front where he put in some blonde streaks last week.

Dad's always trying to get Ben's hair clipped short like his, but Ben can't stand the macho Bruce Willis look he goes in for. What he really wants is hair long enough to do in different styles, but Dad would never go for that. Plus he'd get serious grief at school if he started turning up with long hair. So in the

end they compromised. Dad says he can have it long as he likes at the front, provided there's what he calls 'a proper barber job' at the back.

Ben's practised this feathery style loads of times – it's the one that makes him look most like a girl – but he's always had to brush it out before anyone sees it. And wipe off his mascara and his careful layer of glittery eyeshadow. But this time he leaves it all on, then goes back into the bedroom where his outfit is laid out neatly on the bed.

He unfolds some new cotton knickers and pulls them on. He's been planning this for months, but now he's actually doing it, he feels sick and a bit shivery. The knickers are covered with tiny pink hearts. Standing sideways, he checks out his reflection in the mirror. Do they hold him flat enough? He's not sure. Maybe. But what if someone looks closely? Shivering properly now, and feeling like he might actually throw up, he grabs his old grey hoodie and trackie bottoms off the floor. He'll wait till he feels better, he decides. Have some breakfast first, maybe; see what's on TV. Be a normal boy for a bit longer.

Except he's not a normal boy, is he? Not inside, not deep down. And he can't put it off any longer. Dropping the hoodie back on the floor, he reaches for the stripy pink T-shirt.

When he's ready, he opens the front door a crack, and listens for the chuntering of the lift, or footsteps tramping up the stairwell. The flat's on the top floor, and the last thing he wants is to bump into one of the neighbours. He's decided to go down by the stairs so he can nip back up and hide if he has to, because with the lift there's always a risk of the door sliding open and coming face to face with someone he knows.

He goes down one flight at a time, peering nervously along each landing. By the time he reaches the bottom his heart's thudding so hard he feels sick again. Tilting the cap down a bit more over his face, he pushes out through the big security door then walks quickly along the street – not looking left or right, hardly daring to breathe – until he rounds the corner, when he starts to relax a bit. Away from the flat it's less likely that someone will connect the little blonde girl in the stripy T-shirt with 'Big Paul's lad from Collingwood Mansions'. But now there's another problem. What do girls do with their hands? It feels awkward to leave them just hanging by his side. And his feet seem all wrong walking along, too big and clumsy – do girls take smaller steps? – so he's sure anyone looking properly will realize straight away.

The website said for your first time out you should go where nobody knows you, so he's off to this mega shopping centre on the other side of the river, which people flock to from all over and there's loads of Norwegian-looking couples and crowds of women with Scots accents trailing round with bulging carrier bags. He goes the back way to the station, where it's mostly boarded-up pubs and charity shops and he's less likely to meet someone from school – though all his friends are off on holiday now, which is why he decided on this week in the first place.

They won't let you go in for the operation unless you've been 'passing' as a girl for up to two years, which means he's got to start now, before puberty sets in. Well, he should have started ages ago, really, because he's finished Year 7 and some of the lads in Year 9 have already got spots and smudges of dark hair round their mouths. But he's read there are some hormones you can get that stop puberty from happening – which is something else he's got to worry about, because how is he ever going to get hold of those without Dad finding out? Plus they stunt your growth, and probably have all other kinds of side effects, but that has to be better than a hairy chest and Adam's apple.

On the train he grabs a corner seat. His palms are sweating; he wishes he had a magazine or sunglasses to hide behind. He'd forgotten how everyone always stares at you on the train, because there's nothing else to do. He's the only young girl on her own, which makes it worse somehow. There's a gang of noisy girls down the carriage a bit, who keep glancing over at him; and an old bloke opposite grinning over the top of his newspaper. What are they looking at?

Ben gets out his phone, for something to do, and switches it on. It beeps straight away. There's a message from Nana asking if he's fine with a fish supper for his tea, which is weird because she never usually bothers what he wants; and another one from Dad just saying hi, which means he's probably been on to Nana.

Seeing the girls giggling together gives Ben a real yearning to be in a gang like that, and go for sleepovers and nail parties, and try out all the milkshakes and fancy lattes in different coffee shops. And he starts wondering where he could meet some girls to hang out with who don't already know him from school. But everywhere he thinks of – like a girls' footie team, or dance lessons, or swimming – means going in changing rooms. Which means sharing cubicles and stripping off, which he'll never get away with. Which brings him

back to the operation. Everything he thinks of always brings him back to the operation.

He's been to this shopping centre loads of times with Nana, so he knows where all the different shops are – she's always dragging him around, buying him puffa jackets he never wears and boring jumpers and navy slippers.

He goes to an accessories boutique first to try on the sunglasses, and chooses some big ones with pinky-brown glass and gold frames, and a little gold heart on a chain. There are loads of girls his age wandering around, rotating the stands of earrings and hair stuff. Nobody stares at him, which is a relief, and the assistant's really friendly and pops a free watch ring in his bag when he goes to pay.

On his way out, he catches sight of this young blonde girl coming out of the shop opposite: petite and pretty in denim cut-offs and a pink visor just like his. When he realizes he's looking at his own reflection, a fantastic buzzy feeling zips straight through him, from his toes to his throat, that makes him want to laugh out loud. He's doing it! He's really doing it!

The buzzy feeling takes him into Markie's, past the men's and the children's bits, and up the escalator to the lingerie department. He's seen it in the distance, when Nana's been getting her pop socks: a massive maze of underwear stands, with flesh-coloured models in coloured tights or matching bra-and-panty sets on stands towering above the displays. Now he's going to see it close up. He wants to buy a bra to stuff with cotton wool: one of those little skimpy ones he's glimpsed through the tops of the girls at school.

At the teen bras bit it's mostly mams flicking through the bras, and their daughters lurking behind them looking embarrassed. Ben starts to feel sort of yearning again, because this is another girlie thing he's never done: going shopping with your mam for your first bra. He leafs through the little packets, trying to make sense of the labels. What does 30AA mean? Is it bigger or smaller than 32A? He takes a 30AA out of its packet and opens it out like he's seen one of the mams doing. Would it fit him? He has no idea.

There's another girl, about his age, looking at the bras on a neighbouring stand. She's scowling like she hates the sight of them, and she's on her own so Ben thinks maybe her mam's forced her go and buy a bra by herself, or maybe her mam's dead, or divorced, so she's got no option. Which makes him feel sorry for her, like they're both in the same boat, so when she looks up he forgets about not drawing attention and smiles at her.

She sighs. 'God, I hate this. How are you supposed to choose?'

'Do you understand the sizes?' Ben asks, then worries that he sounds stupid – *then* worries that his voice sounds like a boy's.

'The numbers are for your chest and the letters are the cup size.' She glances at Ben's front. 'You'll be an AA like me,' she says. 'I was going to leave it, but everyone else in my class has started, so—'

Ben can hardly believe it: he's talking to a girl who thinks he's a girl! 'I don't know if I'm a 32 or a 30,' he says. Most of the bras seem to be 30 or 32, so he feels on pretty safe ground.

'Do you need some help there?' An old lady in a Markie's uniform comes up behind them. 'We've got a free measuring service if you want.' She beams down at them.

'No, I'm all right,' Ben mutters, backing away.

'Go on,' urges the girl. 'Mam says they're brilliant. They find out what size you need, then bring you loads of different styles to try on.'

'I was only looking,' says Ben.

'Why don't you both come with me?' suggests the old lady. 'I'll see if there's a fitter free.'

Ben looks at the girl. She's smiling and turning, expecting him to follow her. And he can see it all suddenly, how it could be. The two of them in the same cubicle, snaking their arms through the lacy straps and adjusting them. Trying all the different styles and comparing them. Then maybe going for a milkshake at McDonald's.

The Markie's lady puts her hand on his shoulder to steer him towards the changing rooms, which is the one place he can't ever go – *ever* – and it hits him like a punch to the stomach, how fucking impossible this is, trying to 'pass as a girl', when he can't even manage it for two hours, let alone two years.

'Sorry,' he says. 'I can't—I mean, it's not—' And he turns away, his eyes stinging with tears, and rushes off, then breaks into a run, and doesn't stop running till he's out of the shop.

CHAPTER TWO

2007

Mary is smoking a Gitanes – a pungent French 'gypsy lady' – her chosen brand of cigarettes for over two decades, though she suspects she'd smoke grass-cuttings if nothing else was available. She often jokes that she took up psychotherapy because the analytic hour only lasts fifty minutes, which is the exact limit of her nicotine withdrawal period.

She smokes outside – she's punctilious about that – so the ashtray is a large flower pot of sand beside the garden bench. When it rains she shelters in the porch, blowing fragrant smoke out through the open door. But she feels foolish and undignified doing this, like some callow clerk shivering in the lee of his office block, urgently sucking in and flicking ash in his tea break. (Do people still have tea breaks? She has no idea. Is 'clerk' still a viable job description?) So as soon as the rain ceases, she returns to the wet bench, on a blue towel she keeps precisely for this purpose.

She fears she may smell of smoke – how can she not? – but she hopes that this airing to which she subjects herself forty times a day ameliorates the worst of it. It helps that the house is situated in a bracing position overlooking the mouth of the Tyne, where on a rough day you can literally taste the salt spray on the wind. Which brings its own set of problems, of course – because Mary is deeply afraid of the sea. So every time she opens her front door to light up, and spies the enormous grey expanse of the North Sea in the distance, she comes face to face with her phobia. The karmic irony of the situation is not lost on her.

It's her own fault, of course: for choosing a house with a sea view. But she was unaccountably drawn to the building despite her better judgement as soon as she saw it – and she's learnt in her fifty years not to argue with unaccountable impulses.

She stubs out her cigarette and returns indoors to her consulting room. She was due to see Mrs Hargreaves at eleven and Mr Barnard at two, but she's just cancelled them both, claiming a sudden migraine: which is a blatant lie, and something she heartily disapproves of. But how can she concentrate on clients with this occupying her mind? 'This' being the two envelopes that came in the post this morning: one a much-recycled brown Jiffy bag addressed in shaky biro capitals; the other slim and white, professionally typed.

She extracts a single folded sheet from the white envelope and rereads it, though she already knows every word by heart. It's from the editors of the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* rejecting a paper she's submitted for publication.

> We have now received the peer reviews of your manuscript, 'Past Life Experience as an Heuristic Principle in Psychopathology', and we are sorry to tell you that, on balance, they are not favourable. We therefore have no choice but to decline publication.

The fact that it's a pro forma letter makes it more humiliating, somehow. But it's the contents of the jiffy bag that have really destabilized her: three closely typed pages – plus a copy of her own manuscript, liberally underlined and annotated in bold spiky writing. The package has been sent to her by Karleen Bryce – Mary's old supervisor and one of her staunchest academic supporters – who was on the committee that rejected the paper.

'Mary dear, I'm so sorry about this,' wrote Karleen in her covering note. 'I argued till I was blue in the face, but the others wouldn't be swayed. Anyway, I'm enclosing a copy of Hester's report. Totally against the rules, of course, but I thought you ought to see what you're up against. I'm here, as ever, if you want a chat. *A lutta continua!* K.'

Sighing, Mary sits down at her desk and leafs through her rejected manuscript again. She knew she was going out on a limb with this paper – about how certain clinical phenomena, such as phobias, false memory syndrome and schizophrenic hallucinations, might be the result of past life memories intruding. But she had been so tentative in her conclusions – *some* instances in *some* patients was all she was suggesting. And she had supported every hypothesis with reputable experimental research, along with evidence she herself had painstakingly amassed during twenty-five years of helping clients access memories of their past lives as a way of resolving their current neuroses. Her

plan had been to use the paper to spark a debate in the literature, which she would then incorporate into an introduction to the four-hundred-page book about past life regression she's been working on for the last three years. The book would then be published to resounding critical acclaim and her reputation secured. Spit, spat, spot, as Mary Poppins would have said. How could she have been so naive?

Mary leans back in her chair. It never occurred to her that others might find her latest hypotheses preposterous. Challenging, certainly, and unorthodox – but derisive? Dangerous? Why, Hester's report practically accuses her of malpractice: 'How many schizophrenics are walking around without medication because Dr Mary Charlton has convinced them that their hallucinated voices are simply emanations from a prior incarnation?' she had written. 'How many sex abusers have escaped prosecution because Dr Charlton has persuaded the victims that the molestations they remember occurred in a previous life?'

Unable to settle, Mary gets up and wanders into her tiny back kitchen where she enacts the comforting ritual of grinding fresh coffee beans and loading up the two espresso attachments of the Gaggia. The bulky chrome-and-black contraption dominates the gloomy little room. Like almost everything she owns, this machine has a previous incarnation – in this case, donated by Laura when she was renovating the café.

Setting out a cup and saucer, she thinks she really ought to eat something: boil an egg, perhaps; put some toast in the toaster. But her appetite's vanished – not that she ever had much of one. The kitchen is rather dank and unfrequented as a result. Investigating an intermittent smell here a few years back, the plumber had lifted a floorboard and discovered a puddle of water glinting far below in the foundations. On closer examination, it turned out to be a small sluggish spring that rose briefly beneath the kitchen, then seeped back underground to meander its way down to the river.

'You should have the whole place tanked,' the plumber had said. 'Your walls are wringing wet.'

But when he outlined the process – replacing the wooden floor with layers of polythene and concrete – Mary couldn't face it. It seemed like an insult to a building that had been standing unmolested for nearly three centuries. And she found she quite liked the idea of the spring being there, a relic of the site as it once was. Did someone dig a hole there once to create a small pool, she wondered, and line it with pebbles until the water welled up clear? And scoop

it up with a tin jug and set it to boil on a cooking fire? She envisaged a barefoot woman squatting down to tend the fire, feeding twigs of kindling into its hot yellow mouth.

That would have been long before her house was built, of course – at least in its current form. But old maps reveal that there has been a dwelling on this site for over five hundred years: first an unremarkable two-room cottage (beside, it would seem, a small spring); then an irregular five-storey tower made of ships' timbers and sandstone blocks pilfered from Hadrian's Wall. When Mary considers those sandstone blocks, how they were hewn and by whom – and how very *very* long ago – she feels something akin to awe at the Heath Robinson structure in which she lives.

The tower was built to house the light-keeper, who tended a candle beacon in the cupola above the fifth floor to guide vessels navigating through the sandbanks at the mouth of the Tyne. In 1808 an elegant new bespoke Georgian lighthouse was constructed further along the bank, and the light in Mary's tower was snuffed out for good. The building was then pressed into service as an almshouse for the wives and children of fishermen lost at sea. She pictures them crowded into her rooms, these family groups, with their pathetic bundles of worldly goods – the women perhaps stoical and in shock, the children whimpering or whingeing. She pictures them laying out their blankets, their one suitcase, their few tin cups and spoons.

Occasionally Mary finds herself drawn to the window of her bedroom and transfixed for one, two, hours at a time, gazing down at the river. Why she chose that particular room, of four bedrooms, she can't explain. It's up three flights, which is a damn nuisance; but there's something familiar about the view from just that height that tugs at a memory at the back of her mind. For Mary the past is a series of chambers, along a corridor lined with doors that can be opened at any time. One day, she promises herself, she will investigate that part of her past that once looked down from her bedroom window at the river viewed from exactly that height.