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The Loney

Written by Andrew Michael Hurley

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The Loney

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JOHN MURRAY

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While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.' But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.'

Matthew 9:32–34

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'

I

It had certainly been a wild end to the autumn. On the Heath a gale stripped the glorious blaze of colour from Kenwood to Parliament Hill in a matter of hours, leaving several old oaks and beeches dead. Mist and silence followed and then, after a few days, there was only the smell of rotting and bonfires.

I spent so long there with my notebook one afternoon noting down all that had fallen that I missed my session with Doctor Baxter. He told me not to worry. About the appointment or the trees. Both he and Nature would recover. Things were never as bad as they seemed.

I suppose he was right in a way. We'd been let off lightly. In the north, train lines had been submerged and whole villages swamped by brown river water. There had been pictures of folk bailing out their living rooms, dead cattle floating down an A road. Then, latterly, the news about the sudden landslide on Coldbarrow, and the baby they'd found tumbled down with the old house at the foot of the cliffs.

Coldbarrow. There was a name I hadn't heard for a long time. Not for thirty years. No one I knew mentioned it any more and I'd tried very hard to forget it myself. But I suppose I always knew that what happened there

wouldn't stay hidden forever, no matter how much I wanted it to.

I lay down on my bed and thought about calling Hanny, wondering if he too had seen the news and whether it meant anything to him. I'd never really asked him what he remembered about the place. But what I would say, where I would begin, I didn't know. And in any case he was a difficult man to get hold of. The church kept him so busy that he was always out ministering to the old and infirm or fulfilling his duties to one committee or another. I could hardly leave a message, not about this.

His book was on the shelf with the old paperbacks I'd been meaning to donate to the charity shop for years. I took it down and ran my finger over the embossed lettering of the title and then looked at the back cover. Hanny and Caroline in matching white shirts and the two boys, Michael and Peter, grinning and freckled, enclosed in their parents' arms. The happy family of Pastor Andrew Smith.

The book had been published almost a decade ago now and the boys had grown up – Michael was starting in the upper sixth at Cardinal Hume and Peter was in his final year at Corpus Christi – but Hanny and Caroline looked much the same then as they did now. Youthful, settled, in love.

I went to put the book back on the shelf and noticed that there were some newspaper cuttings inside the dust jacket. Hanny visiting a hospice in Guildford. A review of his book in the *Evening Standard*. The *Guardian* interview that had really thrust him into the limelight. And the clipping from an American evangelical magazine when he'd gone over to do the Southern university circuit.

The success of *My Second Life with God* had taken

everyone by surprise, not least Hanny himself. It was one of those books that – how did they put it in the paper? – captured the imagination, summed up the zeitgeist. That kind of thing. I suppose there must have been something in it that people liked. It had bounced around the top twenty of the bestsellers list for months and made his publisher a small fortune.

Everyone had heard of Pastor Smith even if they hadn't read his book. And now, with the news from Coldbarrow, it seemed likely that they would be hearing of him again unless I got everything down on paper and struck the first blow, so to speak.

2

If it had another name, I never knew, but the locals called it the Loney – that strange nowhere between the Wyre and the Lune where Hanny and I went every Easter time with Mummer, Farther, Mr and Mrs Belderboss and Father Wilfred, the parish priest. It was our week of penitence and prayer in which we would make our confessions, visit Saint Anne's shrine, and look for God in the emerging springtime, that, when it came, was hardly a spring at all; nothing so vibrant and effusive. It was more the soggy afterbirth of winter.

Dull and featureless it may have looked, but the Loney was a dangerous place. A wild and useless length of English coastline. A dead mouth of a bay that filled and emptied twice a day and made Coldbarrow – a desolate spit of land a mile off the coast – into an island. The tides could come in quicker than a horse could run and every year a few people drowned. Unlucky fishermen were blown off course and ran aground. Opportunist cocklepickers, ignorant of what they were dealing with, drove their trucks onto the sands at low tide and washed up weeks later with green faces and skin like lint.

Sometimes these tragedies made the news, but there was such an inevitability about the Loney's cruelty that

more often than not these souls went unremembered to join the countless others that had perished there over the centuries in trying to tame the place. The evidence of old industry was everywhere: breakwaters had been mashed to gravel by storms, jetties abandoned in the sludge and all that remained of the old causeway to Coldbarrow was a line of rotten black posts that gradually disappeared under the mud. And there were other, more mysterious structures – remnants of jerry-built shacks where they had once gutted mackerel for the markets inland, beacons with rusting fire-braces, the stump of a wooden lighthouse on the headland that had guided sailors and shepherds through the fickle shift of the sands.

But it was impossible to truly know the Loney. It changed with each influx and retreat of water and the neap tides would reveal the skeletons of those who thought they had read the place well enough to escape its insidious currents. There were animals, people sometimes, the remains of both once – a drover and his sheep cut off and drowned on the old crossing from Cumbria. And now, since their death, for a century or more, the Loney had been pushing their bones back inland, as if it were proving a point.

No one with any knowledge of the place ever went near the water. No one apart from us and Billy Tapper that is.

ꕥ

Billy was a local drunk. Everyone knew him. His fall from grace to failure was fixed like the weather into the mythology of the place, and he was nothing short of a

gift to people like Mummer and Father Wilfred who used him as shorthand for what drink could do to a man. Billy Tapper wasn't a person, but a punishment.

Legend had it that he had been a music teacher at a boys' grammar school, or the head of a girls' school in Scotland, or down south, or in Hull, somewhere, anywhere. His history varied from person to person, but that the drink had sent him mad was universally accepted and there were any number of stories about his eccentricities. He lived in a cave. He had killed someone in Whitehaven with a hammer. He had a daughter somewhere. He thought that collecting certain combinations of stones and shells made him invisible and would often stagger into the Bell and Anchor in Little Hagby, his pockets chinking with shingle, and try to drink from other people's glasses, thinking that they couldn't see him. Hence the dented nose.

I wasn't sure how much of it was true, but it didn't matter. Once you'd seen Billy Tapper, anything they said about him seemed possible.

We first met him in the pebble-dashed concrete bus stop on the one road that skirted the coastline from Morecambe down to Knott End. It would have been 1973, when I was twelve and Hanny sixteen. Farther wasn't with us. He had gone out early with Father Wilfred and Mr and Mrs Belderboss to look at the stained glass in a village church twenty miles away where there was apparently a magnificent Gothic Revival window of Jesus calming the waters. And so Mummer had decided to take Hanny and me to Lancaster to stock up on food and visit an exhibition of old Psalters at the library – for Mummer never missed an opportunity to instruct us on the history of our

faith. It looked like Billy was going the same way from the piece of cardboard strung around his neck – one of the several dozen that made it easy for the bus drivers to know where he was supposed to be going.

The other places he'd either been to or might need to visit revealed themselves as he stirred in his sleep. Kendal. Preston. Manchester. Hull. The last being where his sister lived, according to the square of bright red card that was attached to a separate shoestring necklace and contained information that might prove invaluable in an emergency, with his name, his sister's telephone number and a note in block capitals that he was allergic to penicillin.

This particular fact intrigued me as a child, and I wondered what would happen if he *was* given penicillin, whether it could possibly damage him any more than he had damaged himself already. I'd never seen a man be so unkind to his own body. His fingers and his palms were shattered with filth. Every crease and line was brown. Either side of his broken nose his eyes were twisted deep down into his skull. His hair crawled past his ears and down his neck which had turned sea-coloured with dozens of tattoos. There was something faintly heroic about his refusal to wash, I thought, when Hanny and I were so regularly scrubbed and towelled by Mummer.

He slumped on the bench, with an empty bottle of something evil lying on its side on the floor and a small, mouldy-looking potato in his lap that comforted me in a strange way. It seemed right that he should only have a raw potato. It was the kind of thing I assumed down-and-outs ate, nibbling at it bit by bit over weeks as they roamed the highways and byways looking for the next. Hitching lifts. Stealing what they could. Stowing away on trains. As

I say, vagrancy wasn't entirely without its romance to me at that age.

He talked to himself in his sleep, scrunching his pockets – which, like everyone said, sounded as if they were full of stones – complaining bitterly about someone called O'Leary who owed him money and had never given it back to him, even though he owned a horse. When he woke up and noticed we were there he tried his best to be courteous and sober, offering a grin of three or four twisted black teeth and doffing his beret at Mummer, who smiled briefly but, as she managed to do with all strangers, got the measure of him instantly, and sat in a half-revolted, half-fearful silence, willing the bus to come by staring down the empty road.

Like most drunks, Billy bypassed the small talk and slapped his bleeding, broken heart into my palm like a lump of raw beef.

'Don't get taken in by the demon drink, lads. I've lost everything 'cause of this stuff,' he said as he held up the bottle and swilled the dregs. 'See that scar?'

He raised his hand and shook his sleeve down. A red seam ran from his wrist to his elbow, threading its way through tattoos of daggers and melon-chested girls.

'D'you know how I got that?'

I shook my head. Hanny stared.

'Fell off a roof. Bone ripped right through it,' he said and used his finger to demonstrate the angle at which his ulna had protruded.

'Have you got a spare fag?'

I shook my head again and he sighed.

'Bollocks. I knew I should have stayed at Catterick,' came another non-sequitur.

It was difficult to tell – and he looked nothing like the ruggedly handsome veterans that popped up in my *Commando* comics all the time – but I guessed that he must have been of an age to have fought in the war. And sure enough, when he doubled up in a coughing fit and took off his beret to wipe his mouth, it had some cockeyed metal, military insignia on the front.

I wondered if that was what had set him onto the booze, the war. It had done strange things to some people, so Farther said. Knocked their compasses out of whack, as it were.

Whatever the reason, Hanny and I couldn't take our eyes off him. We gorged ourselves on his dirtiness, on his brutal, alien smell. It was the same fearful excitement we felt when we happened to drive through what Mummer considered a *bad* part of London and found ourselves lost in a maze of terraces that sat shoulder to shoulder with industrial plants and scrapyards. We would turn in our seats and gawp out of the windows at the scruffy, staring children who had no toys but the bits of wood and metal torn off the broken furniture in their front yards where aproned women stood and screeched obscenities at the men stumbling out of corner pubs. It was a safari park of degradation. What a world without God looked like.

Billy glanced at Mummer and, keeping his eyes on her, he reached down into the plastic bag by his feet and brought out a few tatty bits of paper, which he pressed into my hand. They had been ripped out of a dirty magazine.

He winked at me and settled himself back against the wall. The bus appeared and Mummer stood up and held out her hand to stop it and I quickly stuffed the pictures away.

'What are you doing?' said Mummer.

'Nothing.'

'Well, stop messing about and get Andrew ready.'

I started trying to coax Hanny into standing so that we could get on the bus, but he wouldn't move. He was smiling and looking past me at Billy, who by this time had fallen asleep again.

'What is it, Hanny?'

He looked at me and then back at Billy. Then I understood what he was staring at: Billy wasn't holding a potato, but his penis.

The bus stopped and we got on. The driver looked past us and whistled at Billy but he didn't wake up. After another go, the driver shook his head and pressed the button which drew the door closed. We sat down and watched the front of Billy's trousers darken. Mummer tutted and peeled our faces away from the window to look at her instead.

'Be warned,' she said, as the bus pulled away. 'That man is already inside you. It won't take more than a few wrong choices to bring him out, believe me.'

She held her handbag on her lap and looked straight ahead. I clutched the dirty pictures tight in one hand and slipped the other inside my coat and pressed my stomach hard with my fingertips, trying to find the kernel of badness that only needed the right conditions of Godlessness and depravity for it to germinate and spread like a weed.

It happened so easily. Drink quickly possessed a man and made him its servant. Father Wilfred always said so.

When Mummer told him about Billy later that evening, he simply shook his head and sighed.

'What can one expect of a man like that, Mrs Smith? Someone so removed from God.'

'I said to the boys that they ought to take note,' said Mummer.

'And rightly so,' he said, taking off his glasses and looking at Hanny and me as he polished them on his sleeve. 'They should make it their business to know all the poisons that Satan peddles.'

'I feel rather sorry for him,' said Mrs Belderboss.

'So do I,' said Farther.

Father Wilfred put his glasses back on and raised a brief, condescending smile.

'Then you'll be adding to his already brimming store. Pity is the only thing a drunk has in abundance.'

'Still, he must have had an awfully hard life to have got himself into such a state,' Mrs Belderboss said.

Father Wilfred scoffed. 'I don't think he knows the meaning of a hard life. I'm sure my brother could tell you as many tales as I could about real poverty, real struggle, couldn't you, Reginald?'

Mr Belderboss nodded. 'Everyone had it tough in Whitechapel,' he said. 'No work. Kiddies starving.'

Mrs Belderboss touched her husband's arm in sympathy. Father Wilfred sat back and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

'No, a man like that is the worst kind of fool,' he said. 'He's thrown everything away. All his privileges and opportunities. He was a professional, I believe. A teacher. What a terrible waste.'



It's odd, but when I was a child there were certain things that were so clear to me and their outcomes so inevitable that I thought I had a kind of sixth sense. A gift of foresight, like

that of Elijah or Ezekiel, who had predicted drought and destruction with such unsettling accuracy.

I remember Hanny once swinging over a pond on the Heath and knowing, *knowing*, that the rope would break, which it did; like I knew that the stray cat he brought back from the park would end up minced on the tube line, and that he would drop the bowl of goldfish he'd won at the fair on the kitchen floor as soon as we got home.

In the same way, I knew after that conversation around the dinner table that Billy was going to die soon. The thought came to me as an established fact; as though it had already come to pass. No one could live like that for long. Being that filthy took so much effort that I was sure that the same merciful God who sent a whale to save Jonah and gave Noah a nod about the weather, would put him out of his misery.