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Opening extract from

A Very Good Chance

Written by

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Ned Buckley and Martin Cassidy joined our class in the middle of the winter term, and to start with, you never saw one of them without the other. They had the same walk and the same silent way and the same brooding expressions on their faces. Otherwise they weren't in the slightest bit alike. Martin's eyes were pale and small. He had a round face and red hair and when he closed his fists, his fingers turned purple.

Ned's hands were tanned and so was his face. His eyes were large and so dark that he could have been wearing mascara. Though knowing Ned Buckley that would be unlikely. I remember how from the very start Laura had kept nudging me to tell me to quit staring. But I couldn't stop looking at him.

Serena Serralunga, our history teacher, said we should make an effort to get to know them, but it's not that easy to get to know people who never speak and who don't look at anyone when they come into class and who disappear at random times of the day for no obvious reason.

Martin Cassidy stayed for eighteen days and then disappeared for good. Soon, I couldn't recall that much about him except for the redness of his hair and the purpleness of his fists. We hadn't made much of an effort, but to be fair, he hadn't given us much of a chance.

Serena Serralunga said that there are times when the only thing a person needs is someone to hold out a friendly hand or show them where the vending machine is or say a single word of kindness – and those small things can convince someone to stay in school when they're thinking of maybe leaving.

I don't remember anyone even trying to talk to Martin or Ned in the early days – because why would we when everyone in my class would much prefer to talk about people behind their backs? That's Ballyross Secondary for you. And Brendan Kirby is our king.



The news went round that Martin Cassidy had had an accident. Serena Serralunga said he'd fallen off a horse, and Brendan Kirby snorted with laughter in this special way he had when he was being entertained by someone else's bad luck.

Maybe he wouldn't have laughed so hard if something like that had happened to Dougie or Laura or even me, but then again maybe he would have. Other people's misfortune is the kind of thing Brendan has always found hilarious – and he had a particular thing about

Martin Cassidy and Ned Buckley.

If I'm honest, everyone had a thing about them. The reasons for that are complicated and difficult to explain.



I remember the first day I ever heard Ned Buckley's voice. Brendan was sitting in the back row, with his usual crew organised in a circle around him.

'He rides with a bunch of wild boys across the river,' he said. 'And he's broken his coccyx. Anyone know what that is?' To Brendan's delight, nobody did. 'It's his tailbone! Ha. And now he and his broken bum are moving. His family never stays anywhere for long, you see.'

Everyone nodded their heads as if Brendan was the birthplace of all knowledge.

Nobody'd noticed that Ned Buckley was sitting at his desk in the far corner. He got up slowly and walked over to where Brendan was sitting.

Ned had been so permanently silent and unreadable for such a long time that if he'd grown wings and flown up above our heads, we couldn't have been more surprised.

'You shouldn't talk about things you don't understand,' was what he said, and he stared at us for a while, and his voice was deliberate and strong, and we just kept looking back at him with our mouths open.

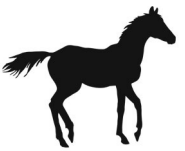
After he'd said that, Ned did what he always did at the end of school, which was to walk out of the door without looking back.



I still think about how his words affected us – how he'd broken his silence, and how the reason he'd done it was to stop Brendan's maliciousness on the subject of Martin Cassidy from spreading – which, to be honest, Brendan's maliciousness on the subject of anything often did.

After that, a few things began to change in our class. They weren't very dramatic, but they were noticeable all the same. For example, from then on, Brendan always looked around the room before sitting down with his group to talk about anyone.

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There is a tunnel made of trees at the beginning of Nettlebog Lane. It's a twisty narrow road that leads down to the river and there's a scraggly strip of grass growing along the middle of it.

Once you've walked through, you're near the part of the bank where the water's at its widest and it looks like it goes on forever. It feels like being in the middle of a secret – as if you're skirting the edges of something risky and wrong. There's this big curvy bend in the river – it's called the Giant's Elbow and right in the crook of it is a lush circle of trees. Even in the winter, when Nettlebog seems like the craggiest, most windswept place in the world, that particular bunch of trees stays green and dark and thick and tall.

Whenever you're down there, you get a mad, free kind of feeling that makes you want to shout.



Most grown-ups are normally very keen on anything that gets you out in the fresh air, but to the parents of Ballyross, Nettlebog is out of bounds. There are loads of reasons why nobody is supposed to go there.

They say it is on account of the river's strong current and because there are no lights on either side of the water's edge.

Parents seem to think that things will happen to you if you go down to Nettlebog. There's a theory that anyone who does will instantly slip into the water and drown.

It was Laura who told me that someone *had* drowned there, but Laura's a bit of a drama queen, so you can't always be sure about a lot of the stuff she says. If you Google 'drowning, Nettlebog' or 'Nettlebog drowning' or even 'death Nettlebog Lane' or any other combination, there's no mention of it, so I reckon it's one of those urban myths that frightens everyone into staying away.

But if you look at the water more closely and how deep it is and how dark, and how it licks the rocky bank and suddenly swells and rises unexpectedly – then the possibility of drowning doesn't seem too crazy.

You can drown in a puddle. Nettlebog river is much deeper than that.



When I was younger I used to like it when Mum and Dad said, 'Arminta, you are not to go to Nettlebog.'

Those were the days when I did what I was told, and

when I didn't mind being called Arminta. Doing what I was told used to make me feel safe.

But lots of things have changed. First of all, people call me Minty now. And secondly there was a new feeling inside me – a feeling that it's a pain in the neck to have parents who are constantly telling me what to do. And OK, I get it, parents don't like you to gather at a place where somebody has possibly drowned. It goes against their instincts. But I'd begun to realise that parents can't decide everything. There were things I needed to make up my own mind about.

And on top of that there is this thing about Nettlebog that had a way of pulling me towards it. The way music sometimes does, or colour. Plus, there was a tangled magic smell that's like no other: herb and nut and wood and bog. I liked breathing those smells in and I liked the way they filled my head and made me feel confident and calm, but sort of excited too, the way mystifying places do.

I was the one who went to Nettlebog first. Or should I say, I thought I was.

It turns out that practically everyone who goes there thinks they're the first. It turns out I'm not the only one who felt those feelings. Dougie told me he used to think *he* was the only person who knew about it.

'Same,' said Laura when we told her. We made this promise to each other that from then on, we'd never go unless we went together. It was kind of a pact that we had, I'm not sure why.

That was when there were still lots of things about it

we didn't know. For example, we didn't know that hidden behind the thick circle of trees, there was a caravan, and we didn't know that inside that caravan, two people lived, and we didn't know that one of those people was Ned Buckley.