Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Two O'Clock Boy

Written by Mark Hill

Published by Sphere

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

TWO O'CLOCK BOY

MARK HILL

sphere

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in ebook in 2016 by Sphere

This edition published in 2017 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Mark Hill 2017

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

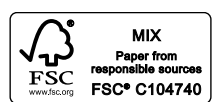
All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-6323-8

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London
EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Fiona & Archie

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides;
Who cover faults, at last shame them derides.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1

The English Channel, 1986

The boy loved his parents more than anything on this Earth. And so he had to kill them.

Perched on the edge of the bunk, he listened to them now. To the squeak of their soles on the deck above as they threw recriminations back and forth in voices as vicious as the screeching seagulls wheeling in the sky. He heard the crack of the sail in the wind, the smack of the water against the hull inches from his head, a soothing, hypnotic rhythm.

Slap . . . slap . . . slap . . .

Before everything went wrong, before the boy went away as one person and came back as someone different, they had been full of gentle caresses and soft words for each other. But they argued all the time now, his parents – too stridently, loud enough for him to hear – and the quarrel was always about the same thing: what could be done about their unhappy son?

He understood that they wanted him to know how remorseful they were about what had happened. But their misery only made him feel worse. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to speak to them, to utter a single word, and the longer he stayed silent the more his parents fought. The boy plugged his fingers into his ears,

closed his eyes, and listened to the dull roar within him.

His love for them was untethering, drifting away on a fierce tide.

Slap . . . slap . . . slap . . .

A muffled voice. 'Darling.'

The boy's hands were pulled gently from his face. His mother crouched before him. Her eyes were rimmed red, and her hair was plastered to her face by sea spray, but she was still startlingly beautiful.

'Why don't you come up top?'

Her cold fingers tucked a loose strand of his hair behind his ear. For a brief moment he felt a familiar tenderness, wanted to clasp her to him and ignore the bitter thoughts that churned in his head. But he didn't, he couldn't. It had been weeks since he'd been able to speak.

A shadow fell across the hatch. His father's voice boomed, 'Is he coming up?'

'Please, let me handle this,' his mother barked over her shoulder, and after a moment of hesitation, the shadow disappeared.

'We're doing the best we can.' She waited for her son to speak. 'But you must tell us how you feel, so that we can help you.'

The boy managed a small nod, and hope flickered in his mother's gaze.

'Your father and I . . . we love you more than anything. If we argue it's because we can never forgive ourselves for what happened to you. You know that, don't you?'

Her eyes filled with tears, and he would do anything to stop her from crying. In a cracked voice, barely more than a whisper, he heard himself say, 'I love you.'

His mother's hand flew to her mouth. She stood, hunched in the cabin.

'We're about to eat sandwiches.' Moving to the steps, she spoke brightly, but her voice trembled. 'Why don't you come up when you're ready?'

He nodded. With a last, eager smile, his mother climbed to the hatch and her body was consumed by sunlight.

The boy's heel thudded against the clasp of the toolbox beneath his berth. He pulled out the metal box and tipped open the lid to reveal his father's tools. Rasps, pliers, a spirit level. Tacks and nails, a chisel slick with grease. Lifting the top tray, the heavier tools were revealed: a saw, a screwdriver, a peen hammer. The varnish on the handle of the hammer was worn away. The wood was rough, its mottled head pounded to a dull grey. He lifted it, felt its weight in his palm.

Clenching the hammer in his fist, he stooped beneath the bulkhead – in the last couple of years he'd grown so much taller – to listen to the clink of plastic plates, his parents' animated voices on the deck.

'Sandwiches are ready!' called his mother.

Every night he had the same dream, like a terrible premonition: his parents passed him on the street without a glance, as if they were total strangers. Sooner or later, he knew, this nightmare would become a reality. The resentment they felt that their child had gone for ever, replaced by somebody else, someone ugly inside, would chip away at their love for him. Until there was nothing left.

And he was afraid that his own fierce love for them was slowly rotting, corroded by blame and bitterness. One day, when it was gone completely, other emotions would fill the

desolate space inside him. Fury, rage. A cold, implacable hatred. Already he felt anger swelling like a storm where his love had been. He couldn't bear to hate them, yearned to keep his love for his parents – and his memories of a happy time before he went to that place – uncorrupted, and to carry it with him into an uncertain future.

And so he had to act.

Gripping the hammer, the boy moved towards the hatch. His view filled with the blinding grey of the sky and the blur of the wheeling gulls, which screamed a warning to him that this world would always snatch from him the things he cherished, that life would always be this way.

He stepped onto the windblown deck in the middle of a sea that went on for ever.

Slap . . . slap . . . slap . . .

2

Present day

Everybody wanted a piece of Detective Inspector Ray Drake.

He circled the room, accepting handshakes and backslaps until there was no one left to congratulate him. Soon, he hoped, they'd all get too drunk to remember he was there and he'd be able to slip away.

He was being selfish, he knew that, but large social gatherings like this made him uncomfortable, particularly when he was in the spotlight. If she were here, Laura would tell him to leave right away, not to worry about what anybody else thought.

Detective Constable Eddie Upson was already well on the way to getting pissed. Waving his pint around, he cornered Drake to moan about missing out on promotion.

'It's not like I haven't delivered.' Lager slopped belligerently over the lip of his pint. 'You know what I can do.'

'Excuse me a moment, Eddie.'

At the back of the room, clinging to the wall beneath a curled poster of Jimmy Greaves, was Flick Crowley, the only person who looked like she wanted to be in this pub less than he did, and Drake pushed towards her. On his way, he elbowed Frank Wanderly.

'Sorry, Frank.'

'That's quite all right.' The duty sergeant clasped his hands together. Tall and gaunt, and with not a single hair on his head, everybody at the nick fondly called him Nosferatu. 'And congratulations once again, DI Drake, it's well deserved.'

A few hours earlier, Drake and his Murder Investigation Team had received a Commendation for outstanding service, commitment and teamwork, after the successful completion of a series of homicide investigations in Haringey. Cops and civilian staff had come from Tottenham Police Station to celebrate beneath a blizzard of Spurs memorabilia – shirts, scarves and photos – on the walls.

Drake smiled his thanks, and kept moving.

'You're looking smart tonight, guv,' Flick said.

Drake was wearing the same clothes he always did, a dark off-the-peg suit, white shirt and a frayed brown tie – which Laura had bought him many years ago and lately he'd taken to wearing again – so he guessed she was being mischievous. He was a restless, wiry man who found it impossible to stop moving for long, and no oil painting either. Drake's craggy face was all unexpected drops and sharp angles, as if carelessly hacked from stone.

'I spoke to Harris earlier.' He placed his glass of orange juice on the ledge against the wall, glad to be shot of it. 'Told him how glad I was that you got the promotion.'

Flick frowned. 'As if you had nothing to do with it.'

Detective Chief Inspector Harris had been adamant that they should bring an experienced pair of hands into the Murder Investigation Team, but Ray Drake had gone to war on Flick's behalf, and she'd been promoted from Detective Constable to Detective Sergeant. He had worked to build her confidence, to make her believe in herself a bit

more. She was prone to hide behind procedures and systems, but fundamentally she was a fine copper. In time, when she'd learned more readily to trust her instincts, she'd be a very good detective indeed.

'If anyone deserves the chance, it's you.'

Flick glanced over at Upson, his arms draped over the shoulders of the two young PCs he'd clearly singled out to be his drinking comrades for the evening, regardless of their feelings on the matter. 'Eddie doesn't seem to think so.'

'He'll come round. I want you to lead the next investigation, whenever it comes in.'

'Really?' she asked, surprised.

'I think you're ready, DS Crowley.'

She took a gulp of wine, not knowing what to say. 'I meant to ask, how's April?'

'Good.' Drake stiffened at the mention of his daughter's name. Things hadn't been good between them, not since the funeral, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to make things better. 'She's good.'

'The offer still stands. If you'd like me to talk to her . . .'

'Thank you.' He nodded at Harris. 'The DCI has brought along a couple of suits from Scotland Yard.'

'I didn't mean to—'

'Come on,' he said quickly, 'I'll introduce you.'

'You know what? I think I'll give it a miss.' She drained her glass of red. 'Besides, it looks like Vix has got that area locked down.'

Detective Constable Vix Moore was working the guys from the Yard, nodding gravely, the tips of her long blonde bob bouncing, as they explained the latest Met reorganisation proposals.

'Besides,' said Flick, 'I'm shattered, and I want to get home.'

'Stay a while longer. We're celebrating your good news, as well.'

'To be honest, it's been a crazy couple of months – work's been non-stop – and I fancy an early night.' Drake wondered if there was something else on her mind. Flick's watchful almond eyes gave little away beneath a thick fringe of brown hair. A tall woman, a shade below six foot, she had a tendency to hunch, as if the weight of the world was bearing down on her shoulders. She had been a keen swimmer once upon a time, and a good one, she had told Drake. The top of her arms tapered into a strong, lean body, but her broad shoulders rolled forward apologetically. 'Sorry, guv, but I don't think I could bear it if someone *says a few words*.'

'Fair enough.' Having heard more than one of Harris's interminable speeches, he couldn't blame her. 'But just for the record, I'm proud of you.'

'Thank you.' A hesitant smile played across her face. 'I really appreciate everything you've done.'

Her last words were clipped by the sound of a pen ringing loudly against a glass.

'Attention, everybody!' DCI Harris's stomach strained against a tight Lycra top, and his shins were pale beneath lurid black and yellow cycling shorts.

'Too late,' Drake whispered as conversation died and a respectful space opened around him and Flick.

'I know everyone's having fun, however I really wanted to say a few words about the very deserved commendation given to DI Drake and his team,' said Harris. 'But first, we've a new detective sergeant in our midst, so I want you all to put your hands together for Flick Crowley.'

‘Smile for the ladies and gentlemen, DS Crowley,’ murmured Drake, behind the grin bolted to his face.

Hanging onto her empty glass, Flick shot him a look that suggested, on balance, she’d rather face a firing squad.

3

Kenny hated going straight. Loathed it.

He'd been a good boy for three years now – three years, eight months and fourteen days, to be exact – and every single minute of every single hour had been excruciating. A few years back, if you'd told him that he'd be strapped onto the dreary treadmill of so-called everyday life, he'd have laughed in your face. Now the joke was on him, having to work nights in a supermarket, stacking shelves and lugging pallets beneath pallid yellow lights that exaggerated every pimple and line on your face.

The night bus groaned away down Tottenham High Road, carrying off the motley collection of night owls who sat obscured like phantoms behind glass thick with condensation, and within minutes Kenny was striding down Scales Road, past the foxes nosing around the bins, to let himself into his little terraced house.

Tonight he'd had another row with his supervisor, a spotty kid with a business degree. He picked fights with Kenny every chance he got just to show who was in charge, stomping up and down the aisles, clip-on tie swinging like a limp dick. Stack those boxes, tidy that display!

On top of that, Kenny had lost his mobile. God knows where. He knew he'd had it when he left home, but when he'd gone to put it in his locker it had disappeared.