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Opening Extract from...

Persons Unknown

Written by Susie Steiner

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PERSONS UNKNOWN

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Jon-Oliver

Down. Dizzy. Pitching left. He is draining away like dirty water, round and round. Stumbling not walking, the ground threatening to come up and meet him. And yet he presses on. Something's not right.

He is swampy, heavy-footed. His shin is throbbing. A scuffle – like being spun in blind man's buff – so quick that when it was over he thought he'd been mugged, but he patted himself down and his wallet and phone were there all right.

His muscles are soupy, unresponsive. His legs wade, the landscape too broad for him to make headway. The air is close like a wet web. He can barely draw breath.

He stumbles to the right, into a muddy wooded area in a direction he hadn't intended to take and it's as if the ground is reaching for him. Is it quicksand, not mud?

He's really scared now; nervously places a hand to his chest. His shirt is wet through but it's not raining. He looks at his hand. It is glistening dark; the colour unclear because of the dark and the orangey street lighting.

He starts to panic, cannot fill his lungs. What is happening to him?

He falls into the mud, feels some arms take him up and cradle him, looks up to see blonde hair. The alien scent of perfume.

Saskia?

'Sass?' he whispers, confused. Is she the cause of this, after all her stupidity? She went too far and he couldn't stop her.

'Sass?'

His sight dims, he is too tired.

The world dips.

Manon

Crisp in one hand, sandwich in the other; the tickle and press of light internal kneading around her pelvis, like butterflies in a sack. Seems typical that pregnancy has brought zero in the way of nausea but has instead turbo-charged Manon's appetite.

She becomes aware of Harriet and Davy talking, urgent and low, on the other side of the open-plan office. Something's up. They're quickening. Manon elongates her neck, craning to hear, but her colleagues are too far away.

As they pass her desk she says, 'Anything up?'

'Job's come in,' Harriet says, but it's clear she can't be bothered to fill Manon in.

'Ooh, who is it?' Manon says, full mouth.

They ignore her.

She looks at Davy, full of himself these days; Detective Sergeant Davy Walker, promoted by the super, Gary Stanton. He might as well call Stanton 'Daddy'. Well, he's welcome to it. Manon is in hot pursuit of the work–life balance: desk job, regular hours, house full of children. She wants to focus on whether to sign up for an organic veg box or whether this

would be taking her personal reinvention too far. You can lead a horse to uncooked beetroot . . .

And yet she is straining out of her seat to overhear the conversation between Harriet and Davy.

'I could be special advisor at the scene, brackets, teas,' she offers.

When she'd first begged Harriet for a job back in the Major Crime Unit, determined to leave behind the misery of the Met (awful boss, crushing workload) and the cost of London living, she said she'd do anything, didn't care how boring. Cold cases.

'You don't want to do cold cases,' Harriet said. 'There is no greater career cul-de-sac than cold cases.'

'I do, seriously. Boring dead-end redundancy's where I'm at.'

And cold cases is where she's ended up, while her belly enlarges (now at the five-month mark), spending quite a few of her days following her satnav inexpertly around the Fens – *turn around where possible* – to interview people who couldn't remember much about last week, never mind a decade ago. Telling herself this is fine. This is what's called Having It All (though most of the time, it feels like having small slivers of the duller bits) – home by five, pick up some Persil non-bio. *You have reached your destination on your right.*

Christ, really?

Harriet has marched off in a hurry.

'Davy; oi, Davy,' Manon hisses at him as he thumbs his mobile phone and Davy – who used to work for *her*, who used to do *her* bidding while *she* shushed *him* – shushes her with his finger. Now he's the DS running the job while she . . . Well, she is quite tired to be fair.

'Just tell me what's up,' she says when he's off the phone.

'Stabbing, male, in Hinchingbrooke Park.'

'Nice of him to kark it so local.'

'Actually, he might not even be dead yet,' says Davy, eyes darting with all the thoughts he's having, checklist and scene log and SOCO, no doubt. 'Right by the forensics lab as well. We can all walk it from here. Really couldn't be more convenient.'

And he is back on his mobile, heading for MCU's double doors.

Her Nineties house, squat in its tray of mown turf, the very image of a child's drawing complete with pitched roof and windows like eyes. Not too bright: a stoic face, happy with its lot. Around the lawn is a frill of box hedging, so low you could step over it – and what's the point in that, she wonders, remembering the burglary prevention advice she used to dole out when she was in uniform. Plant prickly bushes under windows. *Halt! This is a shrubbery!*

Her key in the plastic door with its fake leaded lights, letting herself in and noticing that the reality is a step removed from what she'd hoped for, moving back to Huntingdon. She thought it would be all spacious living and glorious rural(ish) childhoods for Fly and Solly.

'I don't want to bring up a black boy in London,' she said to her sister Ellie at the start of her campaign for them to move back to Cambridgeshire. This had followed Manon being summoned to the headmaster's office at Fly's vast, terrifying comprehensive school and an encroaching fear that he was getting in with the wrong crowd, or possibly that he *was* the wrong crowd.

'That's exactly where you should bring up a black boy,' Ellie said.

'And watch him get stopped and searched every five minutes

of his life? Arrested for stuff he didn't do? Looked at by old ladies who think he's going to mug them? I watch them, you know, giving him a double take, and it breaks my fucking heart.'

'So what, you'd rather take him out to the UKIP heartlands, would you, where he'll be the only black boy for miles around?' Ellie said. 'You should see the old ladies out there.'

'We can't afford to stay here. The rent's crippling me. It's crippling you as well. Come on, we could get a big house, the four of us. Fly would never agree to leave Sol, you know that.'

Ellie looked uncertain. 'It *is* astronomical,' she admitted. 'But God, I hate being uprooted. Having to start again somewhere new, making new friends. Makes me feel exhausted just thinking about it. I've got a group of mums I feel comfortably ambivalent about, right here.'

'We could get a mansion in Huntingdon or Ely or Peterborough,' Manon pleaded. 'You could—'

'Start a course of antidepressants?'

'Go back to work.'

Their charmless four-bedroom house opposite police HQ in Hinchingbrooke is costing a fraction of what they were spending on two flats in the capital, and is more than double the size. They each – her, Ellie, 12-year-old Fly (whose trainers alone, like cruise ships adrift, have their own housing needs) and Ellie's nearly-3-year-old Solomon – have a capacious bedroom, hers and Ellie's both with en suites. The house has one of those bolt-on hexagonal conservatories made from uPVC and, beyond, a 150-foot lawn dotted with menacing conifers. The Bradshaws can even boast a utility room (and what says you have arrived more than a utility room?) with grey marble-effect laminate worktops.

Manon calls 'Hello?' into the volume of the house, clattering

her keys onto a glass-topped console in the hallway (an irritant none of them could be bothered to remove – whatever domestic improvements are hatched in the utopias of the night are laid to waste in the harum-scarum day). She smells cooking – whatever Solly has just had for tea.

She stands in the doorway to the lounge, already disappointed by the scene in front of her: an oatmeal vista, its candelabra lights descending stiffly from the low ceiling (a persecution of a ceiling – she feels at times as if it is lowering in real time and will one day crush her). The three-piece suite, extra wide and squat, is the most engulfing Manon has ever sat in, so much so that she often feels she is being consumed by it. Everything beige, so that the whole atmosphere is one of porridgy comfort. They've lived here for five minutes, and she's already nostalgic for the high ceilings of Victorian London.

'Oh Fly, don't play *Temple Run* with him,' she says, removing her coat. 'His brain's not even formed yet.'

'He loves it,' Fly answers without looking up from the iPad he is hunched over, Solly nestled in his lap. Manon walks back out to hang her coat on the banister and to drop her bag at the foot of the stairs. *Where is Ellie? At work?* Her shifts run from 7.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. or 1.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m., and this is considered part time. The entire shift usually on her feet, sometimes with no chance for a break. When she's on nights, she'll often have Solly all day the next day because she's trying to save money on the childminder (Ellie's sense of impoverishment is their microclimate). She'll doze on the sofa while he plays in front of rolling episodes of *Peppa Pig*. There has never been a worse time to work for the NHS, Ellie says. The management obsessed with targets and budgets, every shift short-staffed. No love, only constraint and a communal sense of harassment. Yet her sister has also been a master of evasion

lately, time thick yet hollow. The stresses and strains mingled with absences unexplained. 'Shift ran over, sorry.' Or, 'Training. Kept me late.'

Manon frowns at the children: 'He'd also love to bury his face in Haribo; doesn't mean he can, does it?' She strides over and lifts the iPad out of Fly's hands and Solly – predictably – howls, launching himself, starfish-shaped, to the floor. The passion erupting from him, their three-foot Vesuvius. Solomon Bradshaw is either happy or angry. There appears to be nothing in between.

'See what you did?' says Fly.

Home three seconds, and already she's the object of hatred.

'Where's Ellie?' Manon asks, keeping hold of the iPad and wondering where she can hide it this time. *Out in the shed? In the freezer?* This is the wonder of parenting: behind every new low is a lower low, to which you thought you'd never stoop.

'Gone out.'

'Out? Where? Working?'

'Dunno.'

'Well, how long did she leave you alone with Solly?'

If she's on a shift, she should have cleared it, made sure Manon could cover her. Or is she having some fun – *heaven forfend!* – leaving Manon sore, bicep straining as she holds aloft her measuring jug of what is owed and what's been taken. A life with children has brought out in Manon her meanest spirit – never a moment when she isn't keeping a tally.

Fly has got up, lifting Solly's stiff body off the floor. 'Not long,' he says. 'Anyway, I don't mind. Come on dude, time for the bath.'

Manon watches them walk out towards the stairs, Solly's puce face, his breathing juddering with outrage, his little splayed fat hands on Fly's close-cut hair.

Flumping into an armchair, Manon feels her tiredness mingle with affection for her adopted son; so much older than his years. She's often washed over with it – pride in his reading, in his gentleness, his soft manners, his decency, his care of Solly.

Solly's mission statement, bellowed while trying to climb the cupboard shelves towards the biscuit tin, is MY DO DAT! He can turn purple at the prospect of being denied complete autonomy – for example, not being allowed to start the car or push his buggy blindly into oncoming traffic; eat a snail or run off with the back-door key. Hot cheeks, angry square face torn up with his despair; trousers descending below the nappy-line, impossibly short legs. His unreasonableness smiled at (most of the time), especially when, tears spurting, he rubs furiously at his eyes and shouts 'MY NOT TIRED!' as if the mere suggestion is a gross slur on his toddler honour.

She could sleep right now.

She could sleep walking up the stairs.

She could sleep stirring a pan at the stove.

The baby squirms, bag of eels.

Yes, it's laughable that she should consider herself the author of Fly's best qualities. She's been his mother for such a short time she can no more claim credit for his good qualities than his bad. His goodness is courtesy of his alcoholic mother, Maureen Dent, slumped with her bottle of Magners in front of *Cash in the Attic* (no cash in their attic, in fact no attic), and down to his brother Taylor, who loved him, who took care of him, probably in much the same way Fly cares for Solly now she thinks about it – you love in the way you have been loved, after all. Taylor turned tricks on Hampstead Heath and was murdered because of it – the homicide that brought Manon and Fly together. Perhaps his goodness is down to the genes

of a Nigerian father Fly has never met. The more Manon lives with children, the more she believes in the determination of genes.

Neither a child nor a teenager, though if she has to pick, Manon would place Fly closer to the adolescent camp. People who meet him think him nearer 15 than 12. She has come to realise adolescence is not switched on at once – it seeps, gradually, during late childhood. There are glimpses from age 10. Some say earlier, though she doesn't know about that. It's more like a litmus paper turning blue, as the hormones leach.

Fly can read a room before she can. If there is an accident in his vicinity, he acknowledges vicarious feelings of guilt; can trace the root of awkwardness in a conversation. He once said of a rather sadistic PE teacher, 'She's mean to us because she had an injury and now she can't be an athlete.' He can identify envy without judging a person for it. All this he does quietly, and though she has always thought of empathy as imbued or developed, with him it seems innate. Its flip side is heightened sensitivity – an aversion to high collars and the congestion of cuffs under his coat, which means he wears only a fraction of his wardrobe: one beloved pair of tracksuit bottoms and one hoodie – with the hood *down*, Manon is forever insisting, though he takes less and less notice of her. Tall black youth with his hood up? He might as well wear a sign saying 'Arrest me now.'

Stork-like, he is all limbs. Silent much of the time and unknowable. Fly is unhappy – she knows that much, knows too that she is the cause, and this she can hardly bear. She has uprooted him, unfurled his sensitivities like wounds open to the air. He is not himself. She hopes he'll settle in.

Even so, he has his playful moments – has begun taking pleasure in irony: putting his arm around her shoulder,

towering lankily above her, and saying, 'I'm just off out,' and her saying, 'No you're not,' and him saying, 'That's right, I'm not, I don't know where that came from.' Both of them smiling at each other. They can begin to enjoy a new kind of conversation, with meanings other than what is said.

'You are *so* down with the kids,' he'll say to her when she puts some kind of easy-listening mum-pop on the iPod.

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy. What is that? Lines from *Twelfth Night* embedded in her brain. Funny that she'd resented all the drumming and drilling at school, the tittering and yawning in uniforms as lines were delivered by lacklustre boys and girls leaning back in their chairs. The essays on *Coriolanus* or *Much Ado*. She hadn't realised those lines would be the ones to comfort her most in the second half of her life. Perhaps the teachers knew; had thought to themselves, 'You'll thank me one day.'