Canvey Island

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Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2006

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square
London W1D 3QY

www.bloomsbury.com

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

ISBN 0 7475 8187 8
ISBN-13 9780747581871

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ONE

31st January 1953

Len

I know the fear of death is always with us but sometimes it can disappear for days. You don't think about it when your wife is coming to bed and she takes off her nightgown and you're excited by her nakedness even if you have been married for a long time. You don't think about it when your child gives you a smile that you know is meant only for you or when the sea is dead calm and you're out fishing with no one to trouble you. You don't think about death, of course you don't, it never crosses your mind, but then back it comes, far too soon, telling you not to be so cocky, don't think this is going to last, mate, this is all the happiness you're going to get and you should be grateful I didn't come before.

I should have known. I'm a fisherman. All my life I could read the sky.

I'd already decided that it would have been nasty to fish on, what with the tide rising on the full moon and a long fetch expected; but it was hard to imagine what followed. In any case everyone was in a state because of the dance. Lily was anxious and wanted to look after our boy; her sister was fossicking through her clothes wondering which dress to wear; and I was convinced we were going to be late for the bus. By the time the storm reached us we didn't have a prayer.

Violet

I don't see why I should feel guilty. My sister told me that it was all right to go to the dance without her. It wasn't as if there was going to be any hanky-panky with Len and she was never much of a party girl anyway. The little boy provided a perfect excuse to stay at home. She always said she didn't like leaving Martin alone on a Saturday night.

'Come on, girl,' I said, making a bit of an effort, 'have a drink and a dance.'

'It's all right, Vi. I've got my knitting and the wireless.'

'You need a bit of a treat, you do.'

Len came into the room, took one look at his wife and decided that there was no point trying to persuade her. 'Have you seen my cuff-links?' he said.

He liked to put them in when his shirt was laid out flat so that he didn't have to fiddle about with one hand later. But even then he kept getting them the wrong way round. He could be all thumbs, that man; which was strange given how well he could dance.

'You sure you don't mind?' I asked.

'You know what I'm like,' said Lily. 'I'd rather stay at home. Is George ready?'

'He's happy enough,' I said. 'And I've made sure he's got a blanket.'

I liked to see to my husband first so that I was free to concentrate on myself afterwards. I couldn't abide his fussing.

It was a relief when I found out that it was going to be just Len and me doing the dancing. Now Lily wasn't coming I wouldn't

have to worry about getting another partner. George could sit and watch. It calmed him down, I think. It was about the only thing that did in his condition.

Afterwards people did ask if we had ever thought of staying back with Lily and the boy, but how were we to know? I'd always liked dancing and Len and I were natural partners. We waltzed with an easy sway, always moving, always light. When he led, I never had to look at my feet or worry about the steps because he gave me such confidence.

Going to the ballroom was our one chance of a bit of glamour, an escape from the cold of winter and all our anxieties about money and whether George would ever get better. I let Len take me in his arms and we floated away from everything that troubled us. Dancing can make you forget anything you like if you let it get to work. You're moving faster than the world and nothing can touch you: not war, not storm, not even death. Nothing can harm you if you keep dancing.

At least that's what I thought.

Martin

I should have said. I saw the leak in the ceiling but I knew Mum would worry if I told her. She was washing up the tea things and humming along to the wireless in the kitchen and I didn't want anything to ruin bedtime.

It was the best part of the day, the time I had my mother all to myself, when she read me a story and smiled and laughed and sang me a song. And so when I knelt at the foot of the bed, I prayed she would not notice the ceiling. I even thought that if I looked away for long enough the leak would disappear.

'What shall it be?' Mum asked when she came into the room, picking me up for a swing in her arms. 'Oh, what shall it be?' She had taken off her apron and was wearing a red cardigan, as if she had dressed up especially for me.

I tried to imagine which would be the longest song to keep her. I wanted to be snug and warm with the rain outside and my mother beside me. I wanted to fall asleep to the sound of her voice.

Tom, he was a piper's son,
He learned to play when he was young,
But all the tunes that he could play
Was 'Over the hills and far away'
Over the hills and a great way off,
The wind shall blow my top-knot off.

She sat down on the bed and stroked my hair. 'Close your eyes,' she said to me, 'close your eyes, my darling. Sweet dreams are coming.'

Then she kissed me on the forehead. I kept my eyes shut and felt the weight of the bed change as she rose away from me. I could hear the sound of her heels, two steps softly on the rug by the bed, and then four louder ones on the linoleum to the door. I half-opened my eyes so I could see her turn for a last look before she switched out the light. Then she gave me a little wave. I think it was her secret to keep me safe.

Perhaps if I hadn't looked then the storm wouldn't have come and we would still have been a family. Perhaps it was my fault for peeping.

Mum left the door ajar so there was still some light from the hall. She even turned the wireless down but I could hear her humming. Then I was glad I hadn't told her about the water in the ceiling. Everything changed when she was afraid.

I listened to the rain on the roof as the wind began to pick up.

When I woke up the light in the hall had gone out. Mum never turned it off because I was afraid of the dark and so I knew something must be wrong.

I tried to find my torch and put my hand down into water. At first I thought the hot-water bottle had burst or that I had wet the bed but it was too cold and there was too much of it. The floor was shining and the sea was coming in from the hall. I could hear waves outside, close against the walls and window.

I reached for my dressing gown and stood on the bed to get dressed. I had to do it one-handed because I didn't want to let go of the torch. The light made patterns on the walls, moving all the time as I tried to put on the dressing gown. Then I got down into the water and felt for my slippers. Dad never liked me coming through without them and I didn't want to make him angry.

I pointed the torch at the bedroom door and saw that it was open, blown back on its hinges. I began to wade, picking my feet up but trying to keep my slippers on. The water was almost up to my knees. I knew I had to find my parents and not be scared. Perhaps they had already left and forgotten about me. I couldn't think where I'd go, perhaps Uncle George and Auntie Vi's, but they lived miles away and we always went there by car so I didn't know how I could walk.

Then I saw Mum, dressed in her nighty, standing in the middle of the living room and staring at the water.

I shone the torch into her face. 'Mum,' I said. 'Wake up.'

She didn't seem to know who I was.

'Where's Dad?' I said.

She began to take out her curlers and let them fall into the water.

'Dancing,' she said.

I could hear the storm against the front door. 'We have to go, Mummy. We have to get out.'

She looked up at the ceiling. 'Should we go up there?'

'No, Mummy . . . the window at the back. In the kitchen.'

'I can't.'

'You must,' I said, tugging at her arm. 'We have to get out.'

I pulled her towards the window and tried to push it up but it was stuck.

'Len always meant to do something about that.'

'What are we going to do?' I said.

Mum struck at the window with the side of her arm but hit the wooden frame. 'Oh, heck . . . don't shine the torch at me, Martin . . . I need it here.'

She hit the glass with her forehead. It cracked and fell away from the centre. Then she used her elbow to push away at the edges, pulling out the bits that stuck with her fingers.

She stepped back and hit the central frame with her shoulder. The wood cracked. Mum pushed the crosspiece away so that there was enough room for us to get out. She put out her leg first, bent down and lowered herself into the water below.

'O Mary, Mother of God,' she said.

Outside everything was louder. There was wind and flood and rain; bells ringing, gates banging, police whistles, people screaming.

Mum held out her arm. 'Come on.' Blood from her forehead was trickling down into her eyes.

She had always promised that nothing bad would ever happen. 'Make it go away,' I said.

'It's all right, Martin. Shine the torch down here into the water. Get your foot out.'

'I'm frightened,' I said.

'It's only the darkness. It'll be all right.'

'I don't want to do this.'

'You must, son.' She held out her hand and helped me out of the window. 'Hold on and don't let go. The water's cold but it's not deep.'

I jumped down and the flood was up to my knees. I felt bits of wood bang into my leg. Mum took my right hand in her left and used the other to clasp to the side of the house, pushing against it for support. I could hear the creak of the outside staircase beginning to fall away.

'Into the street,' Mum shouted. 'Keep hold of the torch. The water's faster than a bus.'

I looked down and saw her hand bleeding from the broken window glass. The blood was dark, almost black, and her hands were inky blue in the torchlight.

She pulled at my arm. The water was almost up to my waist. It rushed against us, knocking us down. We were half-walking, half-swimming.

'It's no good,' Mum said, 'we must go with the tide.' We turned south towards the high street. 'O Jesus,' she said. 'O Jesus, get us out of this.'

I couldn't tell what was going to hit us next; it could be water, wood or brick. Everything was so dark.

'Get out! Get out! The flood comes,' a man was shouting. He sounded foreign.

There were green electrical flashes in the night sky. I thought I could see two dead horses. Their heads were lolling flat amidst the foam, bodies twisted away, the hair of their manes separating off in strands. I didn't know the difference between air and water but I could tell, in the sparks of light, that a bungalow across the street had been lifted from its foundations and torn away.

Then Mum's ankle gave way and she stumbled, holding on to me to save herself from going under.

'What's wrong?'

'It's all right, son, stay with me.'

She tried to move her leg but couldn't.

'Damn.'

She was stooping, as if she was an old woman. Then she tried to lift and turn, freeing herself from whatever lay below, but she couldn't make herself upright.

'Are you stuck?' I said.

'I don't know.'

Mum looked ahead, out into the night. 'Shine your torch into the water. Can you see anything?'

'It's too dark.'

'It must be a cattle fence.'

I put my hand down to my mother's leg. There was barbed wire. I felt it cut into my hand.

'Careful,' she said, losing her footing again. 'You'll have us over.'

Again, she tried to shake herself free. 'It's no good. We'll have to wait for help.'

'I can do it, Mum.'

I pulled at her nightgown but she overbalanced, falling sideways towards me, pushing me down so that I felt us both go under. The water bubbled up into my face.

I thought I was drowning. I knew I had to surface as quickly as I could but the current was taking me away. As I came back up I heard my mother calling, but she was no longer close. I realised I had dropped the torch.

'Get help, Martin, get help.'

I had to keep my head and body high, I had to try to let the water support me, and I swam towards the lights in the distance. Everything was noise. There were children shouting and distant sirens, but I couldn't tell where any of the sounds came from. I was going in circles through the darkness, calling my mother's name, alone in the rising flood.

I thought I heard her voice – 'Martin, where are you?' – but I couldn't trust anything I felt or heard. All I wanted was light and dryness and for everything to stop and right itself and for the world to be still again.

A piece of driftwood bumped against my shoulder. If I could half-stride, half-swim then I could survive, but I found myself underwater and out of my depth.

A group of coffins floated towards me and I wondered if I was dreaming my own funeral. I prayed in my head, *O Jesus, save me*,

and heard the prayer echo back in my mother's voice. Then I heard something else, not my mother, a man shouting through the darkness, urging me to take hold, telling me to use the wood as a float that would carry me to the end of the floodwater. I found an edge and a lid, and held a coffin sideways to my chest.

The wind cut into my lips. I could feel them cracking. I thought perhaps I could rest for a while against the wood. I stopped trying to swim and held on, not knowing whether I was heading out to sea or back towards the marshes and the railway line. The nearest objects were hidden by spray, and everything was covered in the smoke of fog, foam and water. I closed my eyes and thought of fields, horses and daylight.

I tried to imagine summer: on Dad's shoulders, Mum taking our photograph.

I pushed the coffin forwards, fending off everything around me: glass and doors from porches and garden sheds, old tyres, bits of wood and metal. I thought I could see an 'Old Bill' carnival head bouncing on the water by a stone rum jar. Nearby, a pig was shrieking, caught in a mass of debris. I let go of the coffin and turned on to my back, kicking hard, away from the danger, following the current. There were no lights in the buildings and the flood took me on, further inland.

I thought of my mother, still trapped, and of my father, still dancing.

My arms ached, and I wanted to sleep, but then I saw the outline of a group of houses in Point Road, and Ivy's sweet shop where Dad always bought the papers. I realised I was near Leigh Beck School. I could just make out shadowy figures moving quickly, carrying what looked like rugs, carpets and linen, even battered suitcases, as if they had a train to catch or were waiting for a ferry through the flood.

I felt my left foot scrape against the ground. The tide was on the ebb and the water had lost its force. I could make out the torches of a family in the distance: a man with a girl on his shoulders, a woman with blankets and a baby.

I lowered my arm on to the road and felt the hard wet surface. Then I tried to stand.

The man shouted, 'Come on, son. You're nearly there.'

Scattered groups of people were making their way to a shelter lit by a car headlamp. The engine had been left running to show them where to go. They slid through the mud, the men with their hats, the women holding their skirts up against their waists, following the light. By the side of the road were ridges of salt from the water and a slew of chicken carcasses. An elderly woman in a dressing gown held a dog in her arms, a white poodle with bloodshot eyes, its body smeared with mud. Her husband carried a parcel of wet blankets tied with string. I could see another dog roosting in an apple tree and a woman rowing a dinghy with a pair of crutches.

'Are you coming?' the man asked.

'My mum,' I said.

'What about her?'

'She's stuck.'

'She'll be all right. The police are out. And the fire brigade. Loads of people to help, don't you worry.'

'I have to find her.'

'You can't go back there. Come into the school.'

'Someone has to help her.'

Then the man said, 'You're Lenny Turner's boy. He can't be out in this. Where is he?'

'He went dancing.'

'And left you alone? Couldn't he tell?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'Come with us,' said the man's wife. 'We'll look after you.'

A woman was pulling a drowned pig down the street. I wondered if she was going to roast it.

The shelter didn't look anything like school. The playground was filled with washed-up furniture. Survivors were brought on inflated rubber rafts, tin baths, skiffs and prams. A coil of rope led from the edges of the flood to the doorway. I looked at the faces of the people coming in. They were old and afraid.

I thought of my mother and prayed that she was inside. I tried to imagine her smile and the sound of her voice: *There you are, Martin. Come here. It's all right. It's over now.*

Perhaps we would be together again after all and my father would return from the dance, his hair slicked and his shoes polished. He would take us back to a home that would be exactly as it was when he had left it, a home where no flood had ever come, and my mother would kiss me again and for ever.

The step into the school had been covered with newspaper to stop people slipping. One man sat in a corner looking through a damp photograph album with his son. It was a boy from school, Ade. We played football together. He looked up but neither of us knew what to say. I don't think anybody did. Everyone was doing things so they didn't have to talk. Another man was carrying a kettle and two mugs, uncertain where, even in the middle of the flooding, he could find clean water. The others stood drinking tea: half-ghosts, staring out into the darkness.

Then a woman with a kind voice came and told me to get out of my wet pyjamas. 'You'll catch your death,' she said and handed me a towel that made me feel as if I'd just come out of the swimming pool. Then she gave me an army blanket and a pair of plimsolls and told me to get warm by the fire while she tried to find clothes in my size.

I could see a woman leaning forward on a chair. 'My home, my home, everything I love. All that I have is there. Take me back. Please, someone, take me back.' The straps on her shoes were broken and they left raw marks where they had been buckled.

I went over to the fire but I couldn't see anyone I knew. There was no one apart from a thin girl sitting with her knees together and her feet apart. It was Linda from the sweet shop, Ivy's daughter, but we had never spoken and I didn't want to go up to her. She had a red dress and a white band in her hair. Someone had given her colouring crayons and she was drawing. When she looked up, she put her arm round the work as if she thought I was copying.

Then there was another woman standing at the far side of the room. The light was behind her and I couldn't see her face but I recognised the dark-red ball-gown and the gloves up to the elbows.

'Martin?' she asked.

It was Auntie Vi.