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Lucas

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Extract

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It was my dad's idea to write about Lucas and Angel and everything else that happened last summer. 'It won't make you feel any better,' he told me, 'it might even make things worse for a while. But you mustn't let the sadness die inside you. You have to give it some life. You have to ...'

'Let it all out?'

He smiled. 'Something like that.'

'I don't know, Dad,' I sighed. 'I'm not sure I can write a story.'

'Ah, now, that's nonsense. Anyone can write a story. It's the easiest thing in the world. How else do you think I make a living out of it? All you have to do is tell the truth, tell it like it was.'

'But I don't know *how it was, I don't know all the details, the facts—'*

'Stories aren't facts, *Cait, they're not* details. *Stories are* feelings. *You've got your feelings, haven't you?'*

'Too many,' I said.

'Well, that's all you need.' He put his hand on mine. 'Cry yourself a story, love. It works. Believe me.'

So that's what I did, I cried myself a story.

And this is it.

Caitlin McCann

one

I first saw Lucas on a fine afternoon at the end of July last summer. Of course, I didn't know who he was then ... in fact, come to think of it, I didn't even know *what* he was. All I could see from the back seat of the car was a green-clad creature padding along the Stand in a shimmering haze of heat; a slight and ragged figure with a mop of straw-blond hair and a way of walking – I smile when I think of it – a way of walking that whispered secrets to the air.

We were on our way back from the mainland.

My brother, Dominic, had been staying with friends in Norfolk since finishing his first year at university the month before, and he'd called that morning to let us know he was on his way home. His train was due in at five and he'd asked for a lift back from the station. Now, Dad normally hates being disturbed when he's writing (which is just about all the time), and he also hates having to go *any*where, but despite the usual sighs and moans – why can't the boy get a taxi? ... what's wrong with the damn bus? – I could tell by the sparkle in his eyes that he was really looking forward to seeing Dominic again.

It wasn't that Dad was unhappy spending all of his time with me, but with Dom away at university I think he felt there was something missing from his life. I'm sixteen (I was fifteen then), and Dad's forty-something. They're difficult ages – for both of us. Growing up, having to *be*

grown up, girl things, man things, having to deal with emotions that neither of us understand ... it's not easy. We can't always give each other what we need, no matter how hard we try, and sometimes it helps to have someone in the middle, someone to turn to when things get too much. If nothing else, Dominic had always been good at being someone in the middle.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason why Dad was looking forward to seeing him again – he was his son, after all. His boy. He was proud of him. He was worried about him. He loved him.

And so did I.

But for some reason I wasn't quite so excited about seeing him as Dad was. I don't know why. It wasn't that I didn't *want* to see him, because I did. It was just ... I don't know.

Something didn't feel right.

'Are you ready, Cait?' Dad had asked, when it was time to go.

'Why don't you go on your own?' I'd suggested. 'You can have a "father and son" chat on the way back.'

'Ah, go on, he'll want to see his little sister.'

'Just a minute, then. I'll get Deefer.'

Dad's been terrified of driving on his own ever since Mum was killed in a car crash ten years ago. I try to encourage him, but I haven't the heart to push it too hard.

So, anyway, we'd driven to the mainland and picked up Dominic from the station, and there we all were – the entire McCann family stuffed inside our decrepit old Fiesta, heading back to the island. Dad and Dominic in the front; me and Deefer in the back. (Deefer, by the way, is our dog. A big, black, foul-smelling thing, with a white

streak over one eye and a head the size of an anvil. According to Dad, he's a cross between a skunk and a donkey.)

Dominic had been talking non-stop from the moment he'd slung his rucksack in the boot and got in the car. University this, university that, writers, books, magazines, parties, people, money, clubs, gigs ... the only time he paused was to light a cigarette, which he did about every ten minutes. And when I say talking, I don't mean talking as in having a conversation, I mean talking as in jabbering like a mad thing. '... I tell you, Dad, you wouldn't bloody believe it ... they've actually got us studying *EastEnders*, for Christ's sake ... something to do with *popular culture*, whatever the hell *that's* supposed to be ... and another thing, the very first lecture, right? I'm just sitting there listening to this twatty old lecturer rambling on about sodding *Marxism* or something, minding my own business, when suddenly he stops and looks at me and says "why aren't you taking any notes?" I couldn't *believe* it. *Why aren't you taking notes?* Shit! I thought university was supposed to be about choice, you know? The discipline of self-education, freedom to learn at your own pace ...'

And on and on and on ...

I didn't like it.

The way he spoke, his constant swearing, the way he smoked his cigarette and waved his hands around like a phoney intellectual ... it was embarrassing. It made me feel uncomfortable – that *wincing* kind of discomfort you feel when someone you like, someone close to you, suddenly starts acting like a complete idiot. And I didn't like the way he was ignoring me, either. For all the attention I was getting I might as well not have been there. I felt like a stranger in my own car. It wasn't until we'd almost reached

the island that Dominic paused for breath, turned round, ruffled Deefer's head ('Hey, Deef') and finally spoke to me.

'All right, kid? How's it going?'

'Hello, Dominic.'

'What's the matter? You look different. Christ, what've you done with your hair?'

'I was going to ask you the same.'

He grinned and ran his fingers through his dyed-blond crop. 'Like it?'

'Very nice. Very beach bum. Is that how they all look in Liverpool?'

'Well, they don't look like *that*,' he said, flicking at my hair. 'Nice style. What's it called – the Hedgehog?'

'Hedgehogs have spikes,' I told him, readjusting a ribbon. 'These are plumes.'

'*Plumes?* Yeah, right.' He puffed on his cigarette. 'What do you think, Dad?'

'I think it's very becoming,' Dad said. 'And, anyhow, I'd rather have a hedgehog in the family than a neo-Nazi surf boy.'

Dominic smiled, still looking at my hair. '*Und was denkt deiner Liebling davon?*'

'What?'

'Simon,' he said. 'What does Simon think of it?'

'I've no idea.'

'You two haven't split up, have you?'

'Oh, don't be so childish, Dominic. Simon's just a friend—'

'That's what he *wants* you to think.'

I sighed. 'I thought you were supposed to grow up when you went to university?'

'Not me,' he said, pulling a face. 'I'm regressing.'

All the bad old memories of Dominic were beginning to

creep back. The needling, the snide comments, the constant mickey-taking, the way he treated me like a stupid little girl ... I suppose that was one of the reasons I'd been a bit wary of him coming back – I didn't *want* to be treated like a stupid little girl any more, especially by someone who couldn't act his *own* age. And the fact that I'd had a year *without* being treated like a moron only made it worse. I wasn't used to it any more. And when you're not used to something, it's harder to put up with it. Which is why I was getting annoyed.

But then, just as the irritation was beginning to set in, Dominic reached across and gently touched my cheek.

'It's good to see you, Cait,' he said softly.

For a brief moment he was the Dominic I used to know before he grew up, the *real* Dominic, the one who looked after me when I needed looking after – my big brother. But almost immediately he turned away with a shrug of his shoulders, as if he'd embarrassed himself, and good old big-voiced Dom was back.

'Hey, Dad,' he boomed. 'When the hell are you going to get a new car?'

'And why should I be wanting a new car?'

'Because this one's a shit-heap.'

Charming.

The island sky has its own unmistakable light, an iridescent sheen that moves with the moods of the sea. It's never the same, but it's always the same, and whenever I see it I know I'm nearly home.

Home is a small island called Hale. It's about four kilometres long and two kilometres wide at its broadest point, and it's joined to the mainland by a short causeway known as the Stand, a narrow road that bridges the estuary. Most

of the time you wouldn't know it's a causeway, and you wouldn't know it's an island either, because most of the time the estuary is just a vast stretch of reeds and brown ooze. But when there's a high tide and the estuary rises a half a metre or so above the road and nothing can pass until the tide goes out again, then you know it's an island.

On that Friday afternoon, though, as we approached the island, the tide was low and the Stand stretched out before us, clear and dry, hazing in the heat – a raised strip of pale grey concrete bounded by white railings and a low footpath on either side, with rough cobbled banks leading down to the waterside. Beyond the railings, the estuary was glinting with that wonderful silver light that comes on in the late afternoon and lazes through to the early evening.

We were about halfway across when I saw Lucas.

I remember the moment quite clearly: Dominic was laughing uproariously about something he'd just said while patting his pockets in search of another cigarette; Dad was doing his best to look amused, tugging somewhat wearily at his beard; Deefer, as usual, was sitting bolt upright in his very-serious-dog-in-a-car pose, blinking only occasionally; and I was leaning to one side to get a better view of the sky. No ... I can do better than that. I remember my *exact* position. I was sitting just to the right of the middle of the seat, cross-legged, leaning slightly to the left, looking out through the front windscreen over Dominic's shoulder. My left arm was stretched out around Deefer's back and my hand was resting in the dust and dog hairs of the blanket on the back seat. I was anchoring myself in this position by gripping onto the surround of the open window with my right hand ... I remember it precisely. The feel of the hot metal in my hand, the rubber

trim, the cooling wind on my fingers ...

That was the moment I first saw him – a lone figure at the far end of the Stand, on the left-hand side, with his back to us, walking towards the island.

Apart from wishing that Dominic would shut up braying, my first thought was how odd it was to see someone walking on the Stand. You don't often see people walking around here. The closest town is Moulton (where we'd just come from), about fifteen kilometres away on the mainland, and between Hale and Moulton there's nothing but small cottages, farms, heathland, the ranges, and the odd pub or two. So islanders don't walk, because there's nowhere nearby to walk *to*. And if they're going to Moulton they either drive or take the bus. So the only pedestrians you're likely to see around here are ramblers, bird-watchers, poachers, or, very occasionally, people (like me) who just like to walk. But even from a distance I could tell that the figure up ahead didn't fit into any of these categories. I wasn't sure how I knew, I just did. Deefer knew, too. His ears had pricked up and he was squinting curiously through the windscreen.

As we drew closer, the figure became clearer. It was a young man, or a boy, dressed loosely in a drab green T-shirt and baggy green trousers. He had a green army jacket tied around his waist and a green canvas bag slung over his shoulder. The only non-green thing about him was the pair of scruffy black walking boots on his feet. Although he was on the small side, he wasn't as slight as I'd first thought. He wasn't exactly *muscular*, but he wasn't weedy-looking either. It's hard to explain. There was an air of hidden strength about him, a graceful strength that showed in his balance, the way he held himself, the way he walked ...

As I've already said, the memory of Lucas's walk brings a smile to my face. It's an incredibly vivid memory, and if I close my eyes I can see it now. An easygoing lope. Nice and steady. Not too fast and not too slow. Fast enough to get somewhere, but not too fast to miss anything. Bouncy, alert, resolute, without concern and without vanity. A walk that both belonged to and was remote from everything around it.

You can tell a lot about people from the way they walk.

As the car got closer I realised that Dad and Dominic had stopped talking, and I was suddenly aware of a strange, almost ghostly, silence to the air – not just in the car, but outside as well. Birds had stopped calling, the wind had dropped, and in the distance the sky had brightened to the most intense blue I'd ever seen. It was like something out of a film, one of those slow-motion episodes played out in absolute silence when your skin starts tingling and you just *know* that something stunning is about to happen.

Dad was driving quite steadily, as he always does, but it seemed as if we were barely moving. I could hear the tyres humming on the dry road and the air rushing past the window, and I could see the railings at the side of the road flickering past in a blur of white, so I knew we *were* moving, but the distance between us and the boy didn't appear to be changing.

It was weird. Almost like a dream.

Then, all at once, time and distance seemed to lurch forward and we drew level with the boy. As we did so, he turned his head and looked at us. No, that's wrong – he turned his head and looked at *me*. Directly at me. (When I talked to Dad about this a little while ago, he told me he'd had the very same feeling – that Lucas was looking directly

at *him*, as if *he* was the only person in the whole world.)

It was a face I'll never forget. Not simply because of its beauty – although Lucas was undeniably beautiful – but more for its wondrous sense of being *beyond* things. Beyond the pale blue eyes and the tousled hair and the sad smile ... beyond all this there was something else.

Something ...

I still don't know what it was.

Dominic broke the spell by peering through the window and grunting, 'What the hell is *that*?'

And then the boy was gone, whizzing past into the background as we left the Stand and veered off towards the east of the island.

I wanted to look back. I was desperate to look back. But I couldn't. I was afraid he might not be there.

The rest of the journey was something of a blur. I remember Dad making a curious sniffing sound, glancing at me in the mirror, then clearing his throat and asking me if I was all right.

And me saying, 'Uh huh.'

And then Dominic saying, 'Do you know him, Cait?'

'Who?'

'The droolee, the urchin ... that thing you were gawping at.'

'Shut up, Dominic.'

He laughed, mocking me – '*Shut up, Dominic* ...' – and then started on about something else.

I remember Dad changing gear and gunning the car up Black Hill with a rare burst of confidence, and I vaguely remember passing the sign that says *Beware Tractors*, only the *T* and the *R* are hidden behind a hedge, so it says *Beware actors*, and whenever we pass it one of us always

makes a point of saying, Look out, there's John Wayne, or Hugh Grant, or Brad Pitt ... but I don't remember who it was that afternoon.

I was somewhere else for a while.

I don't know where.

All I can remember is a strange, buzzy feeling in my head, an intensity of excitement and sadness that I'd never felt before and probably won't ever feel again.

It was as if I knew, even then, what was going to happen.

Over the last year I've often wondered what would have happened if I hadn't seen Lucas that day. If we'd crossed the Stand ten minutes earlier, or ten minutes later. If Dominic's train had been delayed. If the tide had been high. If Dad had stopped for petrol on the way back. If Lucas had left wherever he'd come from a day earlier, or a day later ...

What would have happened? Would everything be different? Would I be a different person right now? Would I be happier? Sadder? Would I dream different dreams? And what about Lucas? What would have happened to Lucas if I hadn't seen him that day? Would he still ...

And it's then I realise how utterly pointless such thinking is. What if, what might have been ...

It doesn't matter.

I did see him, and nothing can ever change that.

These things, these moments you take to be extraordinary, they have a way of melting back into reality, and the further we got from the Stand – the further we got from the moment – the less tingly I felt. By the time we turned into the narrow lane that leads down to our house, the buzzy

feeling in my head had just about gone and the world had returned to something like normal.

The car lumped and shuddered down the lane and I gazed out at the familiar view: the poplar trees, with the sunlight strobing through the branches; the green fields; the pitted driveway; then the old grey house, looking restful and welcoming in the cooling sun; and beyond it all, the beach and the sea glistening in the evening distance. Aside from a lone container ship inching across the horizon, the sea was empty and still.

Dad told me once that this part of Hale, the east side, reminded him of his childhood home in Ireland. I've never been to Ireland, so I wouldn't know. But I know that I love everything about this place – the peace, the wildness, the birds, the smell of salt and seaweed, the call of the wind, the unpredictability of the sea ... I even love this straggly old house, with its mouldy old roof and its uneven walls and its scattering of outhouses and tumbledown sheds. It might not be the prettiest house in the world, but it's mine. It's where I live. I was born here.

I belong here.

Dad parked the car in the yard and turned off the engine. I opened the door. Deefer bounded out and started barking at Rita Gray, our neighbour, who was walking her Labrador along the lane. I got out of the car and waved to her. As she waved back, a pair of Mute swans flew in low across the field, their wings throbbing in the breeze. The Labrador started after them, barking like a lunatic.

'She'll never catch them,' Dad called out.

Rita shrugged and smiled. 'It'll do her good, John, she needs the exercise – oh, hello Dominic, I didn't recognise you.'

'Yo, Mrs Gee,' Dom replied, scuttling into the house.

The Labrador was halfway down the lane now, its tongue hanging out, yapping at the empty sky.

Rita shook her head and sighed. 'Damn dog, I don't know why she – oh, Cait, before I forget, Bill said would you give her a ring about tomorrow.'

'OK.'

'She'll be in until nine.'

'All right, thanks.'

She nodded at Dad, then strode off down the lane after her dog, whistling and laughing, swinging the dog lead in the air, her red hair blowing in the breeze.

I noticed that Dad was watching her.

'What?' he said, when he saw me looking at him.

'Nothing,' I smiled.

Inside, Dominic had thrown his rucksack on the floor and was stomping up the stairs. 'Give me a shout when grub's on,' he called out. 'I'm just going to have a quick kip. I'm knackered.'

The bedroom door slammed shut.

It felt strange having someone else in the house. It unsettled me. I suppose I'd got used to being alone with Dad. Our sounds, our quietness. I'd got used to the calm and solitude.

Dad picked up Dominic's rucksack and leaned it against the stairs. He smiled reassuringly at me, reading my thoughts. 'He's just a big kid, Cait. He doesn't mean any harm.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'It'll be fine. Don't worry.'

I nodded. 'Do you want something to eat?'

'Not just now, eh? Give him an hour or two and then we'll have something together.' He leaned down and tight-

ened one of the ribbons in my hair. 'Plumes, you say?'

'Plumes,' I agreed.

He fixed the ribbon then stepped back and looked at me. 'Very becoming, indeed.'

'Thanks,' I grinned. 'You're not too bad yourself. Did you see the way Rita was looking at you?'

'She looks at everyone like that. She's worse than her daughter.'

'She's always asking after you, you know.'

'Look, Cait—'

'I'm only joking, Dad,' I said. 'Don't look so worried.'

'Who's worried?'

'You are. You worry about everything.'

We chatted away for a couple of minutes, but I could tell he was itching to get back to work. He kept looking at his watch.

'I'm going to ring Bill,' I told him. 'And then I'll take Deefer out for a walk. I'll make something to eat when I get back.'

'OK,' he said. 'I suppose I'd better get a couple of hours in while I've still got the chance.'

'How's the new book going?'

'Ah, you know, same old stuff ...' For a moment he just stood there staring down at the floor, rubbing at his beard, and I thought he was going to tell me something, share some of his problems with me. But after a while he just sighed again and said, 'Well, I'd best be getting on – make sure you're back before it's dark. I'll see you later, love.' And he was gone, stooping into his study and shutting the door.

Dad writes books for teenagers, or *Young Adults*, as the bookshops like to call them. You've probably heard of

him. You may even have read some of his books – *Some Kind of God, Nothing Ever Dies, New World* ... No? Well, even if you haven't read them, you've probably read *about* them. They're the kind of books that get nominated for prizes but never win, the kind of books that get rubbished by all the papers for being immoral, for setting a bad example, for contributing to the destruction of innocence in the youth of today. Basically, they're the kind of books that don't make very much money.

Bill was eating when she answered the phone. 'Mmyeah?'

'Bill? It's Cait—'

'Just a mm – hold on ...' I could hear the television blaring in the background, Bill chewing, swallowing, burping ... 'Right,' she said. '*Urrp* – sorry 'bout that.'

'Your mum said to ring you. I saw her down the lane.'

'Yeah, I thought she was never gonna go – just a minute ...'

'Bill?'

'That's better, dying for a ciggy. You all right?'

'Fine—'

'I saw you coming back in the car, where've you been?'

'Picking up Dom.'

'Hey, now you're talking—'

'Oh, come on, Bill—'

'What?'

'You *know* what. He's nineteen, for God's sake.'

'So?'

'You're fifteen ...'

'Girls mature earlier than boys, Cait. It's a well-known fact.'

'Yeah? Well *you* certainly have.'

She laughed. 'Can I help it if my hormones are hungry?'

'Maybe you should try going on a diet?'

'Ha!'

'Anyway, Dom's got a girlfriend.'

'Who?'

'I don't know, someone at university, I think.' I quickly formed a mental image. 'A tall blonde with long legs and pots of money—'

'You're making it up.'

'No, I'm not. Her name's Helen, she lives in Norfolk somewhere—'

'There you are, then.'

'What?'

'She's in Norfolk – I'm two minutes walk up the lane. End of story.' She laughed again, then covered the mouthpiece and spoke to somebody in the background.

I twiddled the telephone cord in my fingers and wiped a cobweb from the wall. I jiggled my foot. I told myself to ignore it, forget it, don't let it bother you ... but I couldn't. This thing with Bill and Dominic was getting out of hand. It used to be funny – *Dear Trish, My best friend fancies my older brother, what should I do?* Yeah, it *used* to be funny, when Bill was ten and Dominic was fourteen. But it wasn't funny any more, because Bill wasn't joking any more. She really meant it. And that bothered me. The trouble was, if I told her what I really thought she'd just laugh it off. She'd say – oh, come on, Cait, don't be so bloody *serious* all the time, it's just a bit of fun, girl ...

So, right or wrong, I just went along with it.

'Cait?'

'Yeah, who was that?'

'What?'

'I thought you were talking to someone.'

'Nah, it's the telly. I was just turning it down. Anyway,

are you still all right for tomorrow?'

'What time?'

'I'll meet you at the bus stop at two—'

'Why don't I come round to your place? We can walk over together.'

'No, I have to go somewhere first. I'll meet you at two.'

'The bus goes at ten to.'

'All right, quarter to, then. What are you wearing?'

'Wearing? I don't know, nothing special – why?'

'No reason, I just thought it'd be fun to spice it up for a change.'

'Spice it up?'

'You know, skirt, heels, skinny top ...'

I laughed. 'We're only going to Moulton.'

'Yeah, well ... you look nice when you get dressed up. You should do it more often. You can't wear those worn-out shorts and a T-shirt *all* the time.'

'I *don't*.'

'Yes, you do. Shorts and a T-shirt in summer, jeans and a jumper in winter—'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing – all I'm saying is, you've got to make an effort now and then. Show a bit of leg, bit of belly, slap a bit of lippy on, you know ...'

'We'll see. Maybe ...'

'Oh, go on, Cait. It'll be a laugh.'

'I said maybe—'

'You never know, we might bump into someone decent ... what's Dom doing tomorrow? Bumpety bump—'

'Look, Bill—'

'Oops – gotta go. I think I heard Mum coming back and I've still got a ciggy going. I'll see you tomorrow at two—'

'Quarter to— Bill?'