No Way to Say Goodbye

Rod Madocks

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Extract

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No Way to Say Goodbye
by Rod Madocks

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Prologue

You went up the five steps of the hospital gatehouse lodge. Up the five steps then goodbye to the world boyos.

There were two nurses waiting for me there who took me from the prison officers after signing for me. They had blue uniforms and peaked caps in those days and they brought me down a corridor to a big, bare room where there was a tank of water like a paddling pool. There was a strong smell of chlorine and disinfectant. I'll never forget that smell.

There was a man in a white coat sitting at a desk. A doctor. He sat for a long time reading my notes in silence as we waited. Then he went through my things which I had brought: papers, letters photographs. He ripped these up in front of me and threw them into a bin and said, "You won't be needing these here."

He was a doctor for God's sake. I was told to strip and they tossed my clothes away saying, "You won't need these either," and I was handed a blue boiler suit to wear. I began to protest but got a slam in the mouth and lost my front teeth. They then pushed me into the pool, to disinfect me, they said.

And that was my start in the hospital. I was there eighteen years. They took everything away.

The things I could tell you. If the staff didn't like a fellow…

Patient R. Recounted to the author 1997.

PART ONE

1986

Chapter One
A Night in September

She came home for the last time as day was closing. I know that much. It was a Thursday evening in September, and it had rained after a long summer drought. There were puddles in the uneven asphalt of her street; car doors were slamming and homeward footsteps sounded in the darkening gullies of the city. I know also that she changed out of her work clothes and she put on washed-out jeans, slightly long in the leg, with frayed edges on the hems and she slid into some old Dolcis flats with no socks so that you could see her mauve-painted toenails. Then she went out again, taking a small, folding umbrella. It was ten past eight in the evening. The air was warm and moist, and snails had come out on the paths in the lamplight by the front gardens bordering her street. She took the four-minute walk to the Paradise General Stores on the boulevard where the last of the homeward traffic was splashing out of the city. The shop had a sign advertising a drinks brand which cast a violet shadow onto the wet pavement and the glass door rang a bell when it opened. Rachel must have grasped that worn, brass door handle when she left the place and it is the last thing I know that she touched.

In those days surveillance technology was limited, but the store had been raided some months before, so the owner, Mr Dhaliwal, had mounted a camera on the wall above the till taking shots at five-second intervals on grainy black-and-white Betamax tape. Rachel appeared in three of the blurred images. In the first, staring up at a shelf of goods, fingers touching her

lips in a familiar gesture of uncertainty; in the second, at the counter, looking down at her purse where the angle of her cheek could be seen against the dark mass of thick, spiky hair. In the last one you could just make out her shoulder and the shadow of a moving arm as she headed for the door.

As far as we can tell she bought a packet of rice and a roll of cooking foil, put these into a plastic bag and then stepped out beyond our sight. This grey picture was our last glimpse of her. The owner's daughter, Manjit, vaguely remembered serving her and recalled no significant conversation. You could also see Manjit in two of the pictures, standing with her back to the camera. You wanted her to run after Rachel and pull her back from the doorway, but she remained unmoving, barely altering her pose in the blurry video images.

Rachel's return journey should have brought her along sixty yards of lit boulevard, down a darkened passageway through a municipal shrubbery and then another right turn and a short walk below high, shadowed buildings back to her front door. I walked there five days later, retracing her steps and that journey she should have made. I came back there many times thereafter, especially on September nights, standing under the big plane trees where the leaves reached down to the lamplight, looking out at the arched doorways in the old buildings along the boulevard with their dark entrances. I would pace out Rachel's route again and again under the glow of the street lights, with one lamp seeming always to flicker, throwing my shadow over the silent shop fronts, the hoardings with their adverts for student club nights and the battered metal bus-stop shelter with its green hooded roof.

What else was happening in the world on that day and on that Thursday night? I know now that a great fire burned in Yellowstone Park, consuming 1,000-year-old trees; that the Shroud of Turin was declared a medieval artefact; that uranium radioactive dust, blown out by the destroyed Ukrainian nuclear reactor in the spring, continued to fall over the world

and on this city, drifting its dust into the pavement cracks, lodging in plants and mosses and in our hair and bones. I know from my work diary for that day I was seeing patients, so that Rachel was likely not in my thoughts except when I drove by her street, as I did every working day as I went down the boulevard and past the Paradise Stores.

I have sometimes thought I could remember my journey home that day in the rain, quite late in the afternoon, passing that secure world containing Rachel for the last time, although in truth it could have been one of a hundred journeys like that. I lived not three miles away from her in the suburbs of this Midlands city; my life continuing its course, not sensing anything unusual, nor having any inkling of that taking place which was to change everything.

Rachel had invited a teaching colleague to dinner at her home. She was a new member of staff, needy and garrulous and going through a difficult divorce. Rachel attracted people like that. Her guest came at nine and pressed the bell but received no answer. Rachel had a ground-floor flat, and the visitor could see the lights behind the curtains. She rapped on the window and called out her name but could not raise a response. Eventually she went away assuming she had been forgotten. On the following day Rachel had not turned up to work at her secondary school in a dormitory suburb. She usually travelled by bus to cross the great sandstone bridge over the river loop that separated this part of the city.

Although by nature Rachel was a little absent-minded she was a steady, reliable member of staff and usually came in early to prepare lessons. She rarely took sick leave. Assembly came and went and lessons began, and still Rachel had not fetched up, nor had there been any call. Her planned guest of the previous night told the others in the staffroom about her failed dinner appointment, and the first ripple of apprehension spread. There was no reply when her telephone was rung save her recorded voice saying "Leave a message."

Rachel's personnel file was eventually opened, and other calls were made. Her next-of-kin was contacted. This was her younger sister, Catherine, who lived fifty miles away. She had not heard from Rachel for some weeks. Mid morning two of her friends from the school staff paid a visit to her building. Still the everyday world continued to run, postmen completed their rounds and retired people walked their dogs down her quiet street with its old high-gabled houses. The two teachers, initially self-conscious and hesitant about disturbing Rachel, became more concerned when they saw her mail still hanging in the slot and her windows curtained. They rang the doorbell insistently until a sleepy Iranian postgraduate student let them in to the building. They asked him if he had seen Rachel and rapped loudly on her door. The only sound from within was the steady monotone signal of an inert TV station. The student had noticed nothing untoward and scarcely knew of Rachel's existence. Later in the afternoon, after Catherine had arrived, another neighbour in the shared block was found who sometimes watered Rachel's plants when she was away and retained a spare key. Rachel's two friends from school and her sister persuaded this neighbour to give up the key; they unlocked her flat and entered it, thus signalling Rachel's first displacement from everyday life.

Within, her household objects lay scattered about just as they were when she left the evening before. Her work clothes lay jumbled across her bed, onions waited on a chopping board in the kitchen and a light on her telephone answering-machine signalled that it had messages.

Rachel's colleagues and her sister disagreed about her clothing, her eye colour, her height and her weight when hesitantly describing her to the desk sergeant at the local station as he filled in a missing-person form with painful slowness. No one at that time knew what she had been wearing on the previous night or when exactly she had returned

home from work. The police usually liked to wait twenty-four hours before listing someone as missing, but something in the frantic tone of her sister's concern made them take this one more seriously, and checks had already been made to see if Rachel had been admitted to any local hospital. The police asked for a photograph which the three of them had not thought to bring, so they had to hurry back to her flat where they found and opened a pack of holiday photographs taking one away with them. It was of Rachel sitting at a café table in Barcelona, in the summer sunshine of that year, one hand holding a cocktail glass, smiling at the camera.

The photos also featured a snub-featured man with tinted glasses, smiling in that lost world of all holiday snaps, pictured arm in arm with Rachel and singly in front of an ornate building where flags were flying. Rachel rarely spoke of him, but he was the steady man in her life. He was a technical translator, and they had been together for years. His name was Layton; he accompanied Rachel to some of the school social events. Catherine had met him occasionally when visiting her sister. He travelled a good deal and came to her flat for a few days at a time to stay with her before moving on to another job. They also went on holidays abroad together. Staring at the holiday pictures, it occurred to the three of them that this was the explanation: Layton had visited unexpectedly. He had swept Rachel away on a mystery date, a surprise weekend, and this had all been an embarrassing mistake, a sudden, sinister forking in the path; but now everything could be set back on its accustomed track.

This hope evaporated within the hour. As Rachel's school colleagues were leaving the flat, resolving to tell the police about the possibility that she had gone away unexpectedly with Layton, the phone rang loudly. It was Layton calling from Hanover. He had been intending to leave a message, and at first he thought that he was speaking to Rachel, surprised that she was back from work. He sounded shocked to hear of

Rachel's disappearance, not having heard from her for several days despite trying to ring her the previous night. He agreed to fly back immediately.

The uniformed police went through the flat early on Friday evening as it became clear that she had not been admitted to any hospital, nor had she been arrested, nor shown up in any refuge or hostel in the city. Rachel's private spaces were quickly invaded in the process of her becoming a missing person. The police checked for signs of a break-in, they took her bank details, listened to her phone messages and made a list of her main contacts. I was not one of them.

Layton turned up on the early-evening flight from Germany and checked into a hotel although he had his own key to the flat, not wanting to stay there without Rachel's permission. They stuck a letter on her door explaining that everyone was concerned about her, just in case she turned up and was surprised at all the fuss. But she didn't appear; there was no call and as each hour passed she moved further and further from our world. The hospitals were checked and rechecked in case she had presented in an amnesiac or fugue state. Layton toured the casualty departments of both large hospitals in the city, talking to staff and showing her photograph to reception and nursing attendants. On police advice, the local press were contacted and the lunchtime Saturday edition of the *Evening Post* carried a front page headlined "City Woman Missing" with a studio photo of Rachel showing her in a formal pose with an unfamiliar, wavy hairstyle. That picture was to be used by the police and the press agencies as Rachel's official picture. Later, so much later, it appeared on a web site featuring people who were missing.

I noticed none of these first indications of events as I pursued my weekend, even though I had leaned over the counter of the off-licence buying cigarettes, with copies of the local paper heaped in a stack by the till with her picture on the front page. Nor did I watch the local news on TV, and I missed

seeing her sister on the Saturday evening news slot with her frightened eyes, standing outside Rachel's flat with Layton and other members of the family in front of the cameras.

★

Jayney Kirkman was a fifteen-year-old from one of the villages on the outskirts of the city which had become a commuter estate. She was blonde and slight, and her pinched, elfin face became a familiar sight for a while on hoardings and in press announcements after she disappeared on her preschool paper round one rainy autumn morning the previous year. The only trace was her little trolley, still stacked with papers with the house numbers ringed in pencil, found tipped on its side in a nearby lane, thick with seeding grasses and nettle. There was no forensic evidence, no leads and no arrests, only reports of a light-coloured van which was never traced. Jayney had not been found, although there were vague sightings and hopes were raised in the first few months before she quietly joined the lists of those missing with no clue to their fate.

The police at that time had been criticized after the Sutcliffe case in West Yorkshire because of their uncoordinated approach and their failure to understand the mind of the man doing those things. I, too, had listened to the taped voice of the hoaxer with his menacing Wearside drawl who had led them so astray and who had introducing himself with "I'm Jack." A rising number of women and girls had gone missing; some were found dead, others simply disappearing in other parts of the country. The year before Rachel had gone there was the case of Suzy Lamplugh. She was an estate agent who disappeared following an appointment in a run-down house in London's Fulham with a mysterious Mr. Kipper. Although I had little interest at the time in crime or the disappeared, I recall watching the first television interviews with

her quietly-spoken parents in their ordered sitting-room, plates gleaming on a sideboard behind them, her mother holding Suzy's wide-brimmed straw hat with its pearl scallop ornament, found on the back window-shelf of her car, a last emblem of their daughter's existence.

A new breed of offender seemed to be on the loose, showing distinctive patterns of behaviour. Police began to speak of "crime signatures" and a repeating series of crimes, although the profiler Robert Ressler's newly coined description "serial killer" had yet to make its imprint. A number of forces had begun to pool their inquiries after three little girls went missing in the North of England and the Scottish Borders. The bodies were found in the Midlands within a triangle of interconnecting roads. One girl had been found floating in the river a mile from the school where Rachel taught. A dog walker out along the flood defenses by Wilford Church, next to the wide river, had found something floating and, thinking it was a bag of clothes, had pulled it in with a stick until he saw the fair hair fanning in the brown water. Her abductor had not yet been found and would not be until the end of the decade. In view of the local disappearances and the suspicion that there were men out there systematically taking women and girls, the county force had formed Operation Beekeeper, a standing inquiry centre using the new Holmes computer system which was to be activated early on in inquiries for missing females. Once district police had screened out the drunks, the domestics, the mad and the impulsive, any missing woman was to be a Beekeeper case and went to CID at Central.

By the early hours of that Saturday Rachel's disappearance went to Beekeeper. CID held offices at all the sector stations, but their base was at Central in the heart of the city, a four-storey limestone 1930s' building. Its piers, pocked with wartime bomb damage, seemed a breakwater or buttress elbowing out at right-angles to the inner-city slums of

Radford. It was always hot in the building, and the open first-floor windows spilled light on to the straggling tea roses that bloomed late in the season in the raised beds by the street below. The Beekeeper room was active that night with a team of detectives and uniformed staff putting data into the Holmes computer system, sitting in front of a row of screens with Rachel's photo pinned up next to the dry wipe boards showing the division of detective tasks. Some were assigned to interview all known serious sex offenders in the area, looking for access to a vehicle and their movements on Thursday night; others coordinated searches with uniformed police and the divers wallowing in the black water of the canal behind the boulevard. Some checked with traffic division for suspicious vehicle movement; yet others interviewed neighbours and made inquiries on the street. Rachel's doctor and dentist were contacted. They discovered Rachel's early-evening visit to the Paradise General Stores and recovered the images on the security camera. They went through Rachel's rooms so thoroughly that it brought Catherine to tears to see them prying at her floorboards and probing under her bed. Lights flickered in her rooms as scenes-of-crime officers took photographs, fixing an image of her rooms as Rachel had left them.

They found a little black business diary with motivational sayings for each day and showed interest in a succession of inked crosses until Catherine pointed out that they were probably the days of her period. They also found a brown manila envelope under her jumpers in a clothes cupboard. The envelope contained my letters and cards written over the years and a few photographs of me. They matched this with a battered red-leather address book decorated with gold fleurs-de-lis. I had bought it for Rachel in Italy years ago, and in among all the other names was mine recorded in her strong, looping, generous hand under J for Jack, the addresses crossed out over time as I had moved, leaving only my work

number and just the letter J scrawled next to it. CID showed the address-book entry and the contents of the envelope to Catherine on the Monday. It took a while for her to place me, for we had met only a few times over a decade before but she eventually came up with my name. Thus our secrets were displaced by events.

*

I imagined Rachel again and again over time; seeming to come closer and closer, letting the door to the Paradise Stores clatter behind her, her flats going *slip-slap* on the pavement, her jeans making a lisping sound as they rubbed. I would see her pausing for a moment. What had distracted her? I would make out the gleaming tarmac, shadows of vehicles moving. Something was up ahead of her, something moving, straining at the leash. I would try to make it out as again she came closer, scuffling under the glare of the street lights, passing the parked cars, the hooded bus stop. The image would then jerk back. I would rerun it again like an old film: Rachel always walking towards me, yet ever receding as if on an escalator. *Slip-slap*, her footsteps kept coming. I would shift my focus, try to get ahead of her, try to make out what was there moving under the shadows of the plane trees. Then the image would readjust and I would be back at the beginning with Hedgepeth and Canter leaning near my desk, those first emissaries to my world, announcing that everything was going to be different from now on.

They came to see me where I held a training psychotherapy post in a Victorian building which had once been an annexe to the city asylum. The asylum had been built on a ridge line, so you could see the huddled city below. It was a Tuesday morning, and the September weather had flared up warmly; the cries of schoolchildren newly returned to school echoed around the car park. The police were waiting for me

in reception and a secretary handed me a message sheet with their names written on it: DCs Hedgepeth and Canter.

"What is it about?" I asked, but the secretary could not say, shrugging and glancing at the pair of them standing in the patients' waiting area. They asked to speak to me in private, and we walked in silence down the corridor past the therapy suites. I brought them into my office which also served as a consulting-room. One of them was a square-faced blonde woman in her twenties, wearing a twin set with padded shoulders, with a Princess Diana sweep-over fringe and fading holiday tan. She had pushed up the sleeves of her dark jacket to show strong-looking forearms. She sat in an easy chair while her male colleague remained standing, and I drew up the chair behind my desk where I swivelled uncertainly facing them. I noticed for a moment the transparent hairs on her forearm outlined by the light from the window and a slim gold chain on her wrist. The male officer was a little older, jowly, with sleek black hair. He remained silent with a bored expression throughout. All I remember of him was the shuffling sound of his gleaming chestnut brogues as he roamed over my office, peered at my books and pictures and lightly tapped the buttons of the therapy-session tape recorder. They seemed in no hurry, so I asked, "How can I help you?"

The woman detective did not immediately answer. She looked up and asked, "Do you know Rachel Hauser?"

Both of them stared at me to measure my response, I suppose, and I looked back at them, unable to say anything.

The female DC drew out a shiny black-and-white photograph from her bag and added, "This is the person we are talking about."

I looked down at it. Yes, it was Rachel, my Rachel, and yet a remote image, not like her at all. I knew something dreadful had happened. I held on to the picture and looked out of my office window at the blank sky for a moment and then

back at the photo. My desk phone began to ring as if the normal world was trying to reassert itself then as suddenly it stopped.

"Yes, I know Rachel," I eventually replied.

They had more questions.

When did I last see her? What was the nature of our relationship? Did I know why she might go missing? And, lastly, "What were you doing last Thursday night?"

I found a form of words. I had last seen Rachel two months previously. We had taken lunch together. We were friends from university days. All this was true in its own way. My words blew about the room and a brief silence followed.

"And on Thursday night?" repeated Canter.

On that night, I thought, I came home, showered and slicked my hair back with gel, put on a silver Ciro Cetterio suit and waited for Louie to come in from work with her things in a bag. We stood in the kitchen under a bright light like children at a feast and sniffed amphetamine sulphate from a neat paper wrap. Louie licked all the edges of the wrap then fluffed out her golden hair with a blow-dryer and applied her makeup, squinting a little in the smoke from the cigarette burning in the ashtray by the mirror. Then we went out as we did most nights; alert and bright-eyed, enjoying the clash of sounds, running on sulphate in those whirling hours, accompanied by the stuttering tempo of New Wave in the city clubs, or reggae at the Hippo Club, or the blues dives in Radford and then tumbling home, drunk, wired and forgetful, screwing on the living-room carpet by the light of my fish tank.

No, I could not tell them that. What I said was that I stayed home alone that night, not wanting Louie to be mixed up with this. They asked me if anyone could verify that I remained at home all evening. I could not, and Canter said that they might have to make checks, speak to neighbours. They asked again if I could think why Rachel would disappear. Did she have enemies? I could not think why Rachel

would go. The thought was ridiculous. Perhaps she went because we could not love her enough, we were not fit for her, dear, sweet Rachel who could not think ill of anyone.

The police seemed satisfied by my subdued responses. Canter wrote the inquiry telephone number down on a blank sheet of session notes on my desk. They took down my date of birth so they could make checks on me. Before leaving, Canter leaned forward over my desk and tugged Rachel's picture from my hand where I had continued to grip it. I stumbled along behind them back to reception with the late September sunshine falling on to my face through the plate windows, my heart filled with panic at the thought of living in a world without Rachel.

★

I often think of her waiting for me in the night, sitting there on my empty bed. It happened in France three years after we had first met. I had wandered back through the streets of Alençon after a drinking party. It was lucky that I was on my own. My footsteps resounded on the cobbles of the narrow winding streets and the town hall clock was striking 2 a.m. I turned the corner under the Ricard sign by the bar across from my rooms and was surprised to see a light on in the windows. Rachel had arrived unannounced earlier that evening, having decided to see me one weekend on impulse, travelling all that way to see me from England for just a night. I had not seen her since Christmas. She had taken the rattling country bus from St Malo and had charmed the concierge into letting her in and had waited for me for hours, sitting on my bed in the lamplight. There was relief that I had come home alone and wonder at her naïve, loving gesture of travelling all that way. I will never forget her face in the lamplight, waiting for me like that. I could not resist taking her photo with my little Instamatic. Later in the faint, blue