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The Returners

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

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I like it here. It's probably one of my favourite places. Don't know why. Or maybe I do. There's something about the river at dusk. In the spring, I mean. When the sky goes all red and pink and there's no one around – and even if there is, they don't stay for long, rushing away to whatever it is they've got to do. What's so important anyway? I bet if people thought about it for a moment they'd realise that all the rushing is a complete waste of time. Chill out, I say. Forget about it. Like the ducks.

Ducks are cool. Whatever happens, whatever gets thrown at them, they just carry on, their little legs paddling. Unfazed. They always look like they're smiling.

I found her here, when she died. Mum, I mean. I can remember bits about that day, but then I think maybe I'm just remembering the stories I've been told,

because I remember different things at different times, things that don't really add up, like a series of photographs but the continuity is all wrong.

I didn't talk about it at all, apparently. Didn't even go for help – I guess I knew it was too late for that – I just sat there watching, watching over her. She was floating, face up, her long hair splayed out over the water like a painting. She was peaceful. Not like in real life, not in the months before. She'd be happy one minute and crying the next, and I could never see why. I was eight when she did it. Threw herself into the river to escape it all, to escape from her life, from me. They said I shouldn't take it personally; they said it was nothing to do with me. But I knew even then they were wrong. Mums generally don't throw themselves in rivers. Not when things are going OK.

I knew immediately it was my fault. Afterwards I remember my heart clenching slightly every time Dad left the house, in case he was going to go off too.

He didn't, though. He's still around.

She was nice, my mum. When she wasn't laughing and playing, or locking herself in the bathroom in tears, she used to sew things, knit things. I had a million jumpers, all in weird colours and sometimes a mad mix of clashing hues because she'd found some wool on sale, because they'd caught her imagination. She had a lot of imagination, my mum. She used to tell me stories about witches and wizards and ghosts and ghouls, but never really scary ones. She talked like the witches and ghosts were on our side; it was

the humans you had to watch out for, the humans who'd betray you and let you down.

The only other humans in our house were me and Dad. I guess we let her down quite a lot really. We didn't mean to. He works hard, my dad. He doesn't always have time. And I could have worked harder, could have helped more.

Could have. What a pointless couple of words.

They used to tease me at school about the jumpers. But the funny thing – funny in retrospect, I mean – was I always defended them. Vociferously, like my life depended on it, like those jumpers were more important than anything else in the whole wide world. Maybe they were. Maybe I knew deep down how easily they'd unravel if you just picked at one for a bit. Like Mum. I don't even know why I was down by the river. I mean, I'm eight, and I find her? Like, I'm on my own? The river's a good ten minutes' walk from our house.

So it doesn't make sense. She wouldn't have taken me with her. You don't kill yourself in front of your eight-year-old son.

Then again, she was sick, wasn't she? I mean, that's what they told me.

I'd ask Dad but . . . Actually, I wouldn't ask Dad, not even if you paid me. We don't mention Mum in our house. Well, he does from time to time but only when he's really irritated about something, usually me, and then it's just to blame her. You're just like her, he'll say. God, you inherited your brain from

your mother. You know you'll end up like her if you carry on like that, don't you?

That used to make me angry, really angry, like a white fire that started in my belly and shot out to my head, my hands, my legs, all of which would lash out uncontrollably. That's what Mum was scared of. The white anger. Dad has it too – you know when you've gone too far, when you've said something to make him really angry, because his eyes change. They go kind of flat and dull and you know you're in for it then. We're the same in that way. I don't let it take hold any more, though. I control it, bury it, push it somewhere, anywhere. You can't go succumbing to anger, or any other emotion for that matter. You just have to get on with it. If someone upsets you, just pretend they don't exist. That's what I do anyway. Life's much easier that way.

Her hair was long. Really long. No one else's mum had hair like hers. I used to tell her sometimes that it was too long, but she wouldn't get defensive or angry like Dad would if I told him something about the other dads at school, about their cars or their jobs or their appearance at sports day. She'd just smile serenely and say that one day she'd grow it right down to the ground, and I'd tell her that was impossible and she'd wink and say nothing was impossible. That's what she was like on good days – bubbly, funny, magic. And on bad days, it wasn't her fault,

she was just taken over by something. Depression, Dad called it. I figured it was a bit like the white rage that Dad and I shared, but worse because it lingered, sucking every bit of happiness out of her, leaving her listless, unaware of anything or anyone around her. She used to just sit there and rock back and forward and even if I threw myself at her she didn't bat an eyelid, just kept right on going.

For ages I wondered if I'd done something to upset her. I don't wonder about it any more. I mean, you can't spend your life looking for answers to questions you're never going to get, can you? OK, maybe you can, but then you end up like Mum, rocking back and forth like a loon.

I didn't mean that. She wasn't a loon. She was nothing like a loon. If someone else had said that, I'd have them on the floor now, kicking them in the head and making them take it back.

No, I wouldn't. But I'd be mad as hell.

I must have told someone at some point. Or maybe someone saw me and thought it was a bit weird that an eight-year-old kid was standing by the side of the river, staring into it. I think sometimes I remember Dad being there, remember him talking to me, holding me really tight then walking away. But that doesn't make any sense, not really. What I'm sure I do remember is the people. Lots of them all crowding around me, asking me questions, touching me, trying to move me. Someone shouting that she'd been killed by 'one of them', that there would be vengeance for

her death; a policeman telling him, 'It was suicide, mate.' Suicide. Did I know what the word meant? Of course I did. Even if no one had ever told me, I knew. I remember trying to ignore them, wishing that they'd go away, putting my hands over my ears like if I couldn't hear them then they weren't really there.

And I remember the other ones too. The ones who didn't say anything, the ones I'd felt around me before but never acknowledged. The freaks. I knew even then they were different. They were with the others in the crowd but separate somehow. They looked at me mournfully, like they knew, like they knew everything. But how could they? How could anyone know? I still don't know now, still haven't got a clue.

I asked Dad once about the freaks I saw there. He just raised an eyebrow, like it was a really dumb question. 'You think someone throwing themselves into the river doesn't attract attention? You don't think there were policemen and ambulancemen and nosy passers-by? Of course there were bloody people there. Think, will you, Will, before you ask unnecessary questions.'

Dad doesn't like unnecessary anything. He's a lawyer who works for the government, prosecuting criminals and making sure justice is done. Which means he's always sifting through papers and evidence to compile his cases. Outside work he likes things concise and to the point, nothing extraneous, nothing that isn't absolutely essential.

Mum dying was hard on Dad too. He got shorter.

His hair went grey really quickly. We never talked about it, but I heard him sob himself to sleep, heard him shouting at the television in a rage. Claire said he was the one who needed to talk to someone, not me. But no one was going to tell him that to his face – especially not me.

Claire's my neighbour. Not my next door one, but my bottom of the garden one. We used to be good friends. I used to hang out at her house a lot. You can see her window from mine – her garden backs on to ours – and I used to climb over the fence sometimes, late at night when Dad thought I was asleep, and shin up to her window. We'd sit in her room talking, playing video games, watching films. She had a television in her room. I don't know if she does now. We don't really see each other any more. Only in school and I don't like to spend any more time than is absolutely necessary *there*.

Her parents were funny. Are funny. Not in a ha-ha way, more in a weird way. I used to really like them. Now I don't know. They're probably all right. Dad says they're dangerous liberals. It's probably because they let Claire watch television whenever she wants to. He always thought Mum spent too much time with them. I asked him why, once, but he looked like he was going to hit me so I didn't wait around for an answer.

They don't watch television themselves, Claire's mum and dad, which is pretty weird when you think about it. They sit around talking and reading stuff to

each other, like articles from the *Guardian*. They play board games. And they're always asking questions. You can never just sit there zoning out – it's always so, Will, how's school going? Are you enjoying Maths this year because you were finding it a bit difficult last year, weren't you? Is that a new bicycle, Will? Are you still playing tennis, Will? How's your Dad getting on, Will? Does he have any interesting cases on at the moment? It's relentless.

Was relentless. Like I said, I haven't been there in a while.

Dad, on the other hand, doesn't go in for questions. We don't talk about our stuff; we just get on with it and say what has to be said. Pass the tomato ketchup. We need some milk. The school called again – if I find out you've missed one more class I'm going to give you a hiding you'll remember till Christmas . . .

He used to talk more. When Mum was alive. He used to tell us about his cases. Tell us about the clever arguments he employed, about the ways he tripped up witnesses. I used to think he was so great, protecting the innocent, making things OK after bad things happened.

Turns out no one can do that. Turns out bad things happen and there's nothing you can do about it.

The area that we live in, it's what's known as a leafy commuter-belt town. Which basically means it's over-priced, there's nothing to do and we're expected to

feel lucky all the time because there aren't gangs rampaging through our streets, or people being knifed, or drugs being sold on every street corner. All Dad's money gets swallowed up in the mortgage; it's a sacrifice he's made for me. He doesn't actually say it; I just feel it every time I ask him for money. Felt it, rather. I don't ask him for money any more. We used to have more money. He used to be a defence lawyer in a big law firm. He had a big car and wore smart suits and crisp white shirts, and Mum used to shop in Marks and Spencer.

But then the recession came and everyone started losing their jobs. Dad lost his in 2009. I remember the day – I got back from school and he was sitting on the sofa, staring at the wall, and when I asked him what the matter was, he just looked at me blankly and shrugged, not in an I-don't-know way but in an isn't-it-obvious way. Mum ushered me away, and told me that there wasn't enough work for him at his firm, that he'd been 'let go'. Which I didn't like the sound of because it sounded scary, like a balloon that's come out of your hand and is floating down the street and you just know it's going to bump against something hard and sharp and get popped. And Dad shouted out that 'There *was* enough work. They'd found work for *him*. If they think holding on to foreigners and letting Brits go is how to claw the way out of recession, then they deserve to go bankrupt', but Mum ignored him and gave me a kiss and told me it was time for tea.

For a few weeks Dad didn't get out of his dressing

gown at all, not even to go down the road to get a newspaper. I started taking a packed lunch into school. And Mum didn't go out with her friends any more with her dangly earrings and louder voice than normal when she got home.

He got another job, though, eventually, working for the Crown Prosecution Service. Now he's the one who prosecutes criminals instead of defending them. His friend Patrick helped. Mum didn't like Patrick, but Dad always told her that Patrick was one of the good ones, a patriot, that he wasn't going to let the country sink into the shit like everyone else. He started talking like Patrick too, calling the people he prosecuted 'thugs' and 'wasters', even though Mum said they hadn't been proven guilty yet.

There aren't that many thugs and wasters around here, but what we do have in this leafy commuter-belt town are off-licences where people hang outside waiting for someone's older brother or someone else they recognise who might do them a favour and buy them a bottle of something. We also have Parents' Drinks Cabinets, which they probably don't have in inner-city estates – Claire's parents, for example, have a huge cabinet dedicated entirely to the storage of booze, along with a wine cellar that is full of the stuff. Other than that, there's an arcade in the high street full of bored people playing boring video games, a shopping mall where all the girls seem to hang out, mostly giggling at nothing as far as I can tell, and a café where you can get a Coke for 50p and sneak a

fag from the woman behind the counter for another fifty.

In spite of the wide variety of alcoholic beverages on offer, I don't drink. I've got enough problems without turning into a drunken idiot like the ones you see stumbling out of the pub in the middle of the afternoon.

They sent me to a shrink a few months after Mum died. I think the school had something to do with it, or maybe the doctor, I don't know. Dad didn't want me to go, said shrinks put stupid ideas in your head, made you think about things best left alone, but they said I had to go anyway. The shrink said he thought I was paranoid. Dad told me that was another word for mad, said I needed to pull myself together, to move on, to just get on with it. He said I had to sort it out because if I didn't . . . He didn't finish that sentence but we both knew what he meant. He meant I'd end up in the river like Mum.

The shrink pretended he didn't think I was mad. He kept asking about the freaks, only I could tell from his voice that he didn't believe a word I said. Didn't believe that they follow me, that they're always there, that there are more of them all the time. He made a big deal about them turning up just after Mum died, like I invented them to keep me company or something. I mean, the man was an idiot. If I was going to invent people to keep me company, they'd be nothing like the freaks. Nothing at all, trust me.

* * *

It started with one or two. It happens, doesn't it? You're walking down the street or something and you see someone you think you recognise, and they look like they recognise you too, right? Only when you get nearer you realise you don't know them. Or at least you can't place them. And so you walk past them. It's happened to us all, right?

Well, it happens to me all the time. Sometimes I think that every other person is looking at me, staring at me, that they know me, that they know something about me. The shrink thought I was delusional, I realised. He was probably right too. You can't be completely sane if you see eyes staring at you all the time, haunted, sad-looking eyes boring into you, eyes that you recognise, that recognise you; except you don't really recognise them because you don't know them, you know you don't – you've been through every person you've ever met in your life and they are none of them . . . You don't have that unless you're loop the loop.

That's probably why Claire and I don't see each other any more. She probably thinks *I'm* a freak.

I don't blame her. Sometimes *I* think I'm a freak too.