
Opening Extract from...

The Pull of the Moon

Written by Diane Janes

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THE PULL OF THE MOON

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Gravity is the attraction of one body to another . . .

. . . As the moon orbits the earth it moves not only the oceans but the ground beneath our feet . . .

ONE

Marjorie swims at the leisure pool every morning – a steady breast stroke which keeps her face clear of the water and her hair dry. We've both been going there for quite some time, so Marjorie assumes we know all about each other. We chat, you see, while we get changed or pause for a breather between lengths: for I too have become the sort of woman who swims without getting her hair wet.

Marjorie is a widow, who passes her non-WI evenings in front of a television set. She asks me if I've seen programmes, then discourses on them irrespective of my reply.

'It was very ingenious,' she says, 'the way they hid the body inside the snowman. A very ingenious murder.' She pauses for my reply.

There's a lot of things I could say. Like murder isn't ingenious. It's sandpaper in the mouth – an ice cube down your spine. It's fear you can taste and feel. Thunder flashes going off in your head.

I don't say any of this. Instead I say: 'I never watch murder mysteries.'

Marjorie gives me a knowing smile. A series of wavelets plinks against us, the aftermath of a fellow swimmer's tumble turn. Marjorie raises her eyes heavenward. What's the hurry? her expression asks. I wonder if Marjorie has ever splashed or raced, or skinny-dipped.

'Sometimes I have to turn them off,' she says. 'It's no use watching something, then lying awake half the night, hearing every little noise.'

I realize she is still talking about television programmes. She thinks I'm too windy to watch alone at night. I let her think it.

'Another couple of lengths,' I say. 'Then I'm getting out.'

We set off together, but I soon outpace her, even doing the stately breast stroke which never threatens to engulf my coloured hair in chlorinated water. My hairdresser has warned me about this. Chlorine strips out what he calls my 'semi-permanent', thus exposing the grey faster. Thirty-five years ago I never thought to be careful of my semi-permanent. Didn't have to watch my weight, or consider hiding my creased neck under a scarf. Everything changes.

Just as the size of my waist has expanded, so the gaps between the thunder flashes have lengthened. Their velocity has decreased, their deadly brightness grown dim. I thought the Cat Stevens lyric would be prophetic – *Wherever I am, I'm always walking with you* . . . It is no longer so. Every day turned into every other day, every other day into occasionally. Occasionally doesn't come around so often any more.

I drove past the house a couple of years ago and it looked quite different. New windows, fancy wrought-iron gates; it had even sprouted a conservatory on one side. The wood at Bettis has become a nature trail. It has a car park with picnic tables. How we would have scorned that. I didn't stop, but I could imagine it. Waymarked walks and community arts projects. Little notices forbidding the leaving of litter, ghost hunting, or fornication on the forest floor. Well, okay, I made that last bit up.

The house where Danny lived has gone completely.

There's a neat quartet of semis there now. Semi-detached and entirely permanent. Everything changes. Even Cat Stevens isn't Cat Stevens any more.

Marjorie catches up with me in the changing room. We keep our eyes discreetly focused away from one another, our shared taste in Marks & Spencer's knickers not remarked upon. Instead Marjorie discourses about her youngest's husband. He has just paid for a new car *and* a fitted kitchen. 'He would do anything for our Lyn,' she says.

Anything for love. That's what the song lyrics tell us. Everyone from Meatloaf to Lionel Bart's Oliver professing their intention to do anything – anything at all – for the object of their affections. 'Would you risk the drop?' asks Nancy. 'Anything,' coos the besotted young orphan. Not the drop of course. Not quite that. They'd stopped hanging people by 1972.

I half listen to Marjorie's eulogizing with appropriate nods and smiles. Marjorie accepts this as a kind of victory. I have no children, so I cannot compete. She turns away to fold her towel. She is fully dressed now: tartan slacks and a pastel polo shirt, courtesy of the Edinburgh Woollen Mill. The fact that I already choose the same underwear as this woman may be a frightening portent of things to come. I'm already doing the sensible shoes. My God, I'll be morphing into pleats and a shortie mac before I know it.

I am glad to escape from Marjorie. Normally she is at worst no more than mildly irritating, but today she has trampled into dangerous new territory, prising open the door on to an 'occasionally' – one of those increasingly rare moments of stark reality, which can be provoked by any unexpected reminder – some innocent unconnected prompt – a phrase from a song, a headline in the paper. A few weeks ago it happened in a busy street. I saw a tall young man walking ahead

of me, with wavy dark hair and a leather jacket which was well worn and creased at the elbows. I opened my mouth to call out. Closed it again. Danny would not be a young man now. *I look but you're not there . . .*

The walk from the leisure centre to my flat takes twelve and a half minutes. I find that the postman has already deposited his daily handful of litter through my door. The top item is a gaudy flyer for a furniture store – the sort of thing you come across dropped on the pavement. This morning I have won a guaranteed cash prize, been selected to attend a special holiday promotion and deemed worthy to apply for both a credit card *and* a loan. Machine Mart and the Hawkshead Clothing Company have both favoured me with their latest catalogue, while a charity I have never heard of solicits my support via a depressing picture of underfed Africans.

At the very bottom of the pile is a plain white envelope, addressed by hand. When picking up everything else, I somehow leave this envelope lying on the hall carpet where it sits reproachfully, for all the world as if I've neglected it on purpose. I have to bend specially to pick it up, transferring the other mail into the hand holding my swimming bag, so that this letter is carried into the kitchen separately from the rest, already acquiring a status my other post does not possess.

Propped unopened against the silent radio it tries to catch my eye, this letter, with its second-class stamp and smudged postmark. The writing is old-fashioned, with elongated loops on the y and f of Mayfield. All the letters slant to the right, uniform as sequence dancers, but there is an unsteadiness about them, as if some have spent too long in the bar.

Reluctant to concede to the self-important air this missive has assumed, I pour my juice, sort and discard

my other post, put bread into the toaster, reach down the jam.

I know the writing. Recognized it immediately. We still exchange Christmas cards every year. A weird ritual – and my own fault it has continued. I could have stopped it years ago – inadvertently failed to supply a new address. Why didn't I? Guilt? Fear? The ultimate gesture toward non-existent normality? For several years now, I have written her card wondering whether I will get one in return. She must be well over eighty. One year soon there will be no card. Then I can stop sending.

In my head Cat Stevens sings some more: *I'm always thinking of you, always thinking of you . . .*

Every year I expect the cards to cease, but they keep on coming. Season's Greetings. Christmas Wishes. Every December. Never in springtime. Not in April. Nor is this a card – the envelope is the sort supplied in stationery sets: plain white with matching paper. Very sensible, nothing fancy. Why would she write to me? We have never exchanged letters – only cards; just a card at Christmas, the way you do with people. They get on to your list and you carry on sending cards to one another, year after year, knowing full well you'll probably never set eyes on each other again.

I make the envelope wait until I've finished breakfast and rinsed my swimsuit. It sits implacable, sneering almost. I can't put it off indefinitely.

There are two sheets inside, unlined paper, each written on one side only and folded in half. Even as I extract them and smooth them flat, I still cannot imagine her reason for communicating like this. All that we had in common is long gone.

The address in the top right is the one she's lived at for the past decade.

Dear Katy – a blast from the past to start us off. No

one calls me Katy now. Kate, that's me. Brief, brisk, brusque even.

Dear Katy,

I would like you to come and see me. Perhaps you could write suggesting a suitable date, as I have difficulty hearing on the telephone. I would be happy to pay any expenses you incur for the journey, including a taxi to and from the railway station.

At this point the long sloping letters run out of space. As I turn the page, I wonder why she thinks I would be travelling by train. Probably never realized I had passed my test. I catch myself dwelling on the mechanics of the journey because this is a far safer area of speculation than considering the reason she wants me to make it.

I feel sure you will understand what I want to discuss with you and why. Please come as soon as you are able, as I must find out what happened to my son.

Yours sincerely,
E. J. Ivanisovic

The letters go fuzzy in my hand, so I put them down on the table where they dance around like a formation team, arriving back at the phrase *what happened to my son*, whenever I glance back at them. Pyrotechnics fizz and flash in my mind.

It's like the rule of three in a fairy story. In stories everything happens in threes. Three little pigs, three bears, two ugly sisters plus Cinderella makes three. Two idle prompts from Marjorie, then this letter. Marjorie thinks murder is ingenious. She thinks actions in the name of love are always for good.

What does Mrs Ivanisovic think? What does she know? Why does she ask now – after so very, very long?

Too late now to return the letter unopened, marked not known at this address. Why, why had I maintained the contact? I could have dropped it years ago. Seasons Greetings. Merry Bloody Christmas. Was it because, at the back of my mind, I was always afraid she guessed too much? Yet how could she?

'Your son is dead,' I said, addressing thin air above the letter. At least you have a grave to mourn at. Not like Trudie's parents. Trudie who saw it all. Trudie whose coincidental disappearance you scarcely remarked upon. Was she so easily forgotten? Or does some octogenarian widow still vainly await her return? Another grieving mother who has no address to write to: someone without the means to reach into the past, demanding answers.

Every night and day I pray, in hope that I may find you.

But Trudie is not to be found. I saw the earth fall on to her, clod by clod, under the yellow light of the torch. Murder is not ingenious. Murder is cruel, dirty, fetid. Murder is sliding on piled earth in the dark. Sights you never want to see, a dead white face in a flickering beam, not flinching when the soil hits it.

TWO

Trudie's arrival cast a shadow over our little group from the very beginning. Literally. She appeared one afternoon while we were sitting on the beach and stood between us and the sun.

The first thing I ever noticed about her was her feet. Bare brown feet – sunburnt rather than dirty – which protruded from beneath the broderie anglais trim around the hem of her maxi. Each of her toenails had been varnished in a different colour: scarlet, black, fuchsia pink. One nail had pale blue glitter polish – glam rock making its mark on the beaches of mid-Wales.

'I thought for a minute it was Cat Stevens,' she said. She rolled her r's in a soft blur of an accent which I couldn't quite place. It reminded me of summer-scented roses and cream teas.

Danny stopped strumming and we all looked up. When I remember it now, it's as though Trudie towered over us, a huge dark figure against the cloudless blue. I can see the sun's rays shooting out from around her head – thunder flashes again. Of course that wasn't really the way of it at all. I couldn't see her properly because I'd forgotten my sunglasses. It was no doubt this foolish omission which rendered everything impossibly bright that day. For everyone else it was just a glorious day beside the sea.

Naturally Danny loved the Cat Stevens thing. He

really did look a little bit like him – and although he always denied it, he'd played up to the likeness by growing a little goatee. He had the same dark hair and thoughtful eyes as the singer. A lot of people remarked on it. He and Trudie immediately struck up a conversation, but I was disadvantaged by the glare: forced to avoid looking directly at the newcomer, while conscious of a vague uneasy jealousy as she invaded our group. It was not just that until then I had been the only female. Confident people always put me on the back foot. I could no more have walked up to a trio of strangers than sprouted wings and flown across the dunes: but Trudie – Trudie was something else. Within a matter of minutes she had flopped down beside us on the sand and was dueting with Danny. A love song, as if you couldn't have guessed. Some Anne Murray number about a child conceived in love.

I wanted to drop her a signal – some casual sign of possession, just to let her know that Danny was spoken for – but there's not a lot you can do when the object of your affections is cross-legged on a beach, cradling an acoustic guitar. The wretched instrument sticks out in both directions, precluding all but the most overt gestures of affection. Anyway, I didn't want to appear completely freaked out and uncool about her presence, so I bided my time, acting the appreciative audience while I sized her up.

She was taller than me and her hair was much darker, though worn like mine in the regulation style of the moment – a long uncut mane, parted down the centre and falling halfway down her back, where it finished in a cascade of split ends. She was wearing an embroidered cheesecloth smock over her full-length cotton skirt, and carrying two bags which she had dumped beside her when she sat down: one a tasselled Greek bag in blues and browns; the other a small

tapestry holdall – which seemed a funny thing to have on a beach.

I realized Simon was studying her too. In the normal scheme of things, I thought, Simon ought to pair up with Trudie for the rest of the day. That would transform us into a neat two boy, two girl foursome. It would be better if Simon had a girlfriend. There was no obvious reason why he never quite clicked with girls, because he was not at all bad-looking. He had the sort of straight blond hair which was very much admired at the time, blue eyes and a ready smile. He was thoughtful and polite in a way which had all but gone out of fashion, and he gave out an impression of gentleness, because he was softly spoken and had an unusual delivery – with every word enunciated carefully, as if specially chosen from a vast lexicon in his head. He was also rather quiet until you got to know him, which inevitably meant that Danny was the one people noticed.

All the same it was Simon who asked Trudie, 'Do you live round here?', following up her negative with 'Where are you from?' and getting that strange offhand reply: 'Here and there. Nowhere in particular.'

This didn't faze us at all. It was very 1972 to affect the persona of a mysterious hippy love child, who drifted from place to place, when you were in fact a schoolgirl from Bristol, with a Saturday job in Woolworth's and a respectable career in banking ahead of you, once your O-level results were out.

Naturally, when Trudie asked similar questions of us, she got equally nebulous responses. We said we had driven across from Herefordshire, where we were currently living together in a great big house in the middle of nowhere. We may even have given the impression it was some kind of squat or commune. I don't think the conditions of our tenure were specified, and

I'm sure the fact that we were holidaying students, temporarily escaping the mundanities of Geography Field Trips and Teacher Training, was never mentioned at all.

The upshot of all this was that we had known Trudie scarcely half an hour before she casually suggested 'hitching a ride' with us. An alarm bell began to ring in my head, faint but insistent. I blotted it out. There could be no harm in giving this girl a lift (although an affectionate display between Danny and me was a necessary precursor to avoiding any misunderstandings). Yet still the doubt persisted – we did not know her at all, and she did not know us. My cautious mother had drilled me never to accept, still less solicit, lifts with strangers. All the more reason to do it, said a voice in my head. You're not a kid now, are you?

Simon offered to buy us all ice creams. He ran the words together – eyescream. It's a Brummie thing. Trudie loved it. Not that Simon had the accent: he was well spoken enough to be sneered at as 'posh', but we always said 'eyescream' – it was one of our catchphrases.

Danny said he wanted mint chocolate chip as usual and I asked for tutti-frutti. In those pre-Magnum days, when ice cream had barely begun to reach out beyond strawberry and vanilla, tutti-frutti was still a bit exotic.

'Ooh – I love the way you said that,' Trudie exclaimed. 'Tutti-frutti – go on, say it again.'

The joke was clearly on me, and I wasn't amused by the way she aped my Midland accent. 'He knows what I want,' I said, attempting to make light of it with a smile.

'Go on, Katy,' Danny joined in. 'Say tutti-frutti for us.'

'Tutti-bloody-frutti,' I said, affecting my Lady Muck voice. 'Come on, Si, I'll help you carry them.'

Simon and I set off to stumble our way through the soft sand at the top of the beach. Trudie's barefoot approach was undoubtedly the most practical, and after a few steps I removed my flip-flops and made much better progress.

We joined the short queue at the ice-cream kiosk.

'Do you really think we ought to give Trudie a lift?' I asked. 'We don't know anything about her. We don't even know how old she is.'

Simon could generally be counted on to take a more sensible line than Danny. Danny had a tendency to seize the moment with the confident enthusiasm of one upon whom Dame Fortune invariably smiles. Simon considered briefly before saying: 'I don't think she's as old as she looks – but I'm guessing she's about eighteen.'

It was halfway towards being a question, so I pretended to consider this while squinting into the distance, to see what she and Danny were up to. 'Perhaps we should ask her,' I suggested.

'Mmm.' We were on the point of being served and Simon had become distracted by the operation of extracting coins from the pocket of his jeans – no easy task when they were such a tight fit.

'We might get into trouble if she's only a school kid.' I affected all the concern of someone not quite out of her own teens. 'We don't want to be accused of kidnapping her or something.'

'But she's coming of her own free will,' said Simon. 'It was her idea. A mint choc chip, a rum 'n' raisin and two tutti-fruttis, please,' adding for my benefit, 'I'll ask her, if it's bugging you.'

There was no further opportunity to discuss the matter because as soon as he was handed the first two cones, Simon set off across the beach, leaving me to trudge behind him with the other two ice creams dribbling on to my fingers.

‘Yeuch,’ I said, licking my hands. ‘Sticky.’

‘Hey, Trudie,’ said Simon, handing her ice cream across. ‘How old are you, by the way?’

Ah, that wonderful tact and guile for which the young adult male is so famous.

Trudie’s lips curved into a smile. ‘Old enough,’ she said, dropping a wink which made the others smile.

Thus the matter was settled. We would give Trudie a lift to Herefordshire. Her final destination sealed over a tutti-frutti ice cream.