Opening extract from

Infinite Sky

Written by

C. J. Flood

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Prologue

You can't tell that the coffin holds the body of a boy.

He wasn't even sixteen, but his coffin's the same size as a man's would be.

It's not just that he was young, but because it was so sudden. No one should die the way he did: that's what the faces here say.

I think about him, in there, with all that space, and I want to stop them. I want to open the box and climb in with him. To wrap him up in a duvet. I can't bear the thought of him being cold.

And all the time the same question flails around my head, like a hawkmoth round a light-bulb: Is it possible to keep loving somebody when they kill someone you love?

One

It was three months after Mum left that the gypsies moved in. They set up camp in the paddock one Sunday night while we were asleep. My brother Sam was excited when he saw them.

'Gypos!' he shouted.

Sam used to have a gypsy in his class: Grace Fitzpatrick. She'd been famous at school because she could do as many things with her feet as with her hands. She could even write her name with them, which was funny because she couldn't read. Sam, who'd sat next to her in assembly, said she smelt like cat piss and fire smoke.

'They live off barbecues,' he told me as we watched from Dad's bedroom window.

I thought it sounded brilliant.

There was a caravan and a clapped-out car and, a few metres away, a fire with a pot hanging over it.

‘Be bloody hundreds of ’em by the end of the day,’ Dad said, emptying sawdust from his overall pockets onto the floor.

‘They’ll probably tarmac the field while we’re asleep,’ Sam said. ‘Try and make you pay for it.’

Dad made a growling noise. ‘Be a nightmare getting rid of them, that’s for bloody sure.’

He left us leaning on the windowsill.

Sam made dents in the wood with his fingers while I wondered what Dad was going to do. This was exactly the sort of thing Mum would have sorted. She’d have been best friends with the gypsies by breakfast, had them falling over themselves to make her happy, even if that left them without a home.

‘Look at all those dogs,’ Sam said. ‘Bet they fight them. Tie blades to their paws.’

I shook my head.

‘Seen it on the telly,’ he said.

‘What, on kids’ telly?’

He dug his elbow into me until I squirmed.

Two greyhounds bounded round the paddock and I tried to imagine them snarling at each other, blades flying, but it was ridiculous, and then the caravan door swung open, and a tiny black dog scurried out.

A woman appeared in the doorway. Tall and thin, with red hair falling over one shoulder, she looked beautiful. She lifted her arms above her head and

stretched, revealing a stripe of tanned belly beneath her green vest. Behind her the white caravan seemed to sparkle.

'Prozzie,' Sam said.

The woman spun round suddenly, and a teenage boy in rolled-up jeans leaped from the caravan, laughing. He'd obviously startled her. The three dogs ran over to him, the tiny black one lagging behind, and he bent down to tussle with them. They licked at his bare chest.

Sam didn't have anything to say for a second. The boy looked about the same age as him. He was clearly the woman's son, tall and thin like her, but with lighter, ginger-blond hair that flicked out above his ears and curled on the back of his neck.

'Bet *he* don't go to school,' Sam said.

'Come on, Iris,' Dad called up the stairs. 'You're going to be late.'

'Aw, shame,' Sam said, because he was on study leave.

Still, I couldn't help staying a minute longer, watching as the red-haired woman filled a bucket with water from the pot above the fire and began scrubbing her steps.

Dad left the house at the same time as I did. With fists clenched, he headed towards the paddock.

* * *

I couldn't wait till the summer holidays. Everyone at school was getting on my nerves. *Especially* Matty. At registration, when I told her about the gypsies, she told me this story about her second cousin's boyfriend's brother: he was on his way to the newsagent's to buy a magazine when a gypsy girl burst out and cracked him over the head with a golf ball in a sock. For no reason. I told her we didn't have any girls, only a boy, and described the way his hair flicked out, but she curled her nostrils at me.

'Pikeys are gross, Iris,' she said. 'You'd get gonorrhoea.'

Matty was always name-checking STDs. She thought it made her look sophisticated.

At dinner time, we watched the boys play football.

'Your socks are odd,' Matty told me. 'Don't you care?'

'Not really.'

'Maybe you should.'

I took my shoes off and folded my socks down so their oddness was less obvious.

'That's your problem, Iris,' she sighed. 'You think that makes a difference.'

Before maths, next lesson, I nipped into the toilets and took them off.

Matty had moved to Derby from Guildford four years ago with frizzy black hair and too-big glasses which left red dents on her nose, but every new term she got

prettier. Today her black frizz was tamed into long waves that she twisted round her little finger. Her glasses had shrivelled to contacts, and to make matters worse, her boobs had gone from a size nothing to a 32B in the last six months. As far as Matty was concerned, she was a fully mature woman.

'Remember, Iris,' she'd taken to saying to me, '*my* birthday's in September. *Really*, I'm in the year above you. *Really*, I'm a Year Ten.'

Every day, after school, I watched the gypsies. They hadn't listened when Dad told them they weren't welcome, and much to his annoyance were getting on with their lives. As well as the teenage boy, the dogs and the red-haired woman, there was a man, a baby and four little girls.

The boy spent a lot of time with his mum. He got in her way while she was cleaning, and made her laugh. Sometimes she grabbed him and ruffled his hair. They reminded me of how Mum and Sam used to be.

The gypsy boy was good to *his* sisters. They were all loads younger than him, but he still played hide and seek with them, and picked them up when they cried. I couldn't imagine him getting mad at them for something as silly as borrowing his socks.

In the evenings, they all sat around the fire, or on the grass nearby, until it was time to eat whatever their

mum cooked in the pot, or their dad brought home in the car. Later on, when the mum had put the little ones to bed, the gypsy boy went to lie underneath the caravan by himself, and I felt as though I understood him completely.

Dad shouted if he caught me watching from his bedroom window.

'It's not a game, Iris,' he said, and so I kept my spying to when he was out.

One night, I left my curtains open so the sun could wake me. I wanted to see what the gypsies did first thing. It was well before six when I crept upstairs, past Dad sleeping with his head half under the pillow, to my usual perch on his armchair by the window. He didn't notice. Mum was the light sleeper – the snorer too. She used to make herself jump in the night.

Underneath the early white sky, the paddock was dotted with poppies, and fat wood pigeons in the tall poplars surrounding the yard called to each other. The boy got up first. He jumped down the caravan steps and did a lap of the field with the dogs. Occasionally, he stooped to pick up sticks, or tugged dead branches from the hedgerows.

By the entrance to the paddock was a huge pile of logs that Dad and Austin, his apprentice, had cut down over the months – a year's supply at least. Reaching it, the boy

stopped. He glanced towards our house, and I ducked behind Mum's rose pincushion cactus. I peered round its spiky dome, which was flowering purple, and watched as he added a couple of long, slim branches to his pile.

Back at the camp, he knelt to build a fire. By the time the door to the caravan next opened, he was fanning the flames with a sheet of cardboard. His mum emerged carrying a stack of bowls, the baby wrapped to her back, and the boy changed position to direct the smoke away from them.

'Eye?' Dad lifted his head. 'That you?'

Dad called me Eye, as in ball. Sam had started it. Mum used to tell Dad off for joining in, back when they still talked to each other. 'She's named after the flower,' she'd say, but she didn't mind really. It was just something they did.

'What you doing?' Dad said now.

'Need some socks,' I said, pretending to rummage in the unsorted pile I'd been sitting on.

The plastic of Dad's alarm clock creaked as he looked at it. 'S'not even seven,' he groaned. 'Go back to bed.'

I watched the boy put on a rucksack, pat the baby's head, and walk to the far end of the field where the paddock dropped into the brook. He reappeared on the other side of the water, and then disappeared into the cornfields, and I wondered where he could be going.

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