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Exmoor dripped with dirty bracken, rough, colourless grass, prickly gorse and last year's heather, so black it looked as if wet fire had swept across the landscape, taking the trees with it and leaving the moor cold and exposed to face the winter unprotected. Drizzle dissolved the close horizons and blurred heaven and earth into a grey cocoon around the only visible landmark – a twelve-year-old boy in slick black waterproof trousers but no hat, alone with a spade.

It had rained for three days, but the roots of grass and heather and gorse twisting through the soil still resisted the spade's intrusion. Steven's expression did not change; he dug the blade in again, feeling a satisfying little impact all the way up to his armpits. This time he made a mark – a thin human

mark in the great swathe of nature around him.

Before Steven could make the next mark, the first narrow stripe had filled with water and disappeared.

Three boys slouched through the Shipcott rain, their hands deep in their pockets, their hoodies over their faces, their shoulders hunched as if they couldn't wait to get out of the rain. But they had nowhere to hurry to, so they meandered and bumped along and laughed and swore too loudly at nothing at all, just to let the world know they were there and still had expectations.

The street was narrow and winding and, in summer, passing tourists smiled at the seaside-painted terraces with their doors opening right on to the pavement and their quaint shutters. But the rain made the yellow and pink and sky-blue houses a faded reminder of sunshine, and a refuge only for those too young, too old or too poor to leave.

Steven's nan looked out of the window with a steady gaze.

She had started life as Gloria Manners. Then she became Ron Peters's wife. After that, she was Lettie's mum, then Lettie and Billy's mum. Then for a long time she was Poor Mrs Peters. Now she was Steven's nan. But underneath she would always be Poor Mrs Peters; nothing could change that, not even her grandsons.

Above the half-nets, the front window was

spotted with rain. The people over the road already had their lights on. The roofs were as different as the walls. Some still wore their old pottery tiles, rough with moss. Others, flat grey slate that reflected the watery sky. Above the roofs, the top of the moor was just visible through the mist – a gentle, rounded thing from this distance. From the warmth of a front room with central heating and the kettle starting to whistle in the kitchen, it even looked innocent.

The shortest of the boys struck the window with the flat of his palm and Steven's nan recoiled in fright.

The boys laughed and ran although no one was chasing them and they knew no one was likely to. 'Nosey old bag!' one of them shouted back, although it was hard to see which, with their hoods so low on their faces.

Lettie hurried in, breathless and alarmed. 'What was that?'

But Steven's nan was back in the window. She didn't look round at her daughter. 'Is tea ready?' she said.

Steven walked off the moor with his anorak slung over one shoulder and his T-shirt soaked and steaming with recent effort. The track carved through the heather by generations of walkers was thick with mud. He stopped – his rusty spade slung over his

other shoulder like a rifle – and looked down at the village. The street lamps were already on and Steven felt like an angel or an alien, observing the darkening dwellings from on high, detached from the tiny lives being lived below. He ducked instinctively as he saw the three hoodies run down the wet road.

He hid the spade behind a rock near the slippery stile. It was rusty but, still, someone might take it, and he couldn't carry it home with him; that might lead to questions he could not – or dared not – answer.

He walked down the narrow passage beside the house. He was cooling now, and shivered as he took off his trainers to run them under the garden tap. They'd been white once, with blue flashes. His mum would go mad if she saw them like this. He rubbed them with his thumbs and squeezed the mud out of them until they were only dirty, then shook them hard. Muddy water sprayed up the side of the house, but rain washed it quickly away. His grey school socks were heavy and sodden; he peeled them off, his feet a shocking cold white.

'You're soaking.' His mother peered from the back door, her face pinched and her dark blue eyes as dull as a northern sea. Rain spattered the straw hair that was dragged back into a small, functional ponytail. She jerked her head back inside to keep it dry.

'I got caught in it.'

'Where were you?'

'With Lewis.'

This was not strictly a lie. He had been with Lewis immediately after school.

'What were you doing?'

'Nothing. Just. You know.'

From the kitchen he heard his nan say, 'He should come straight home from school!'

Steven's mother glared at his wetness. 'Those trainers were only new at Christmas.'

'Sorry, Mum.' He looked crestfallen; it often worked.

She sighed. 'Tea's ready.'

Steven ate as fast as he dared and as much as he could. Lettie stood at the sink and smoked and dropped her ash down the plughole. At the old house – before they came to live with Nan – his mum used to sit at the table with him and Davey. She used to eat. She used to talk to him. Now her mouth was always shut tight, even when it held a cigarette.

Davey sucked the ketchup off his chips then carefully pushed each one to the side of his plate.

Nan cut little pieces off her breaded fish, inspecting each with a suspicious look before eating it.

'Something wrong with it, Mum?' Lettie flicked her ash with undue vigour. Steven looked at her nervously.

'Bones.'

'It's a fillet. Says so on the box. Plaice fillet.'

'They always miss some. You can't be too careful.'

There was a long silence in which Steven listened to the sound of his own food inside his head.

'Eat your chips, Davey.'

Davey screwed up his face. 'They're all wet.'

'Should've thought of that before you sucked them, shouldn't you? Shouldn't you?'

At the repeated question, Steven stopped chewing, but Nan's fork scraped the plate.

Lettie moved swiftly to Davey's side and picked up a soggy chip. 'Eat it!'

Davey shook his head and his lower lip started to wobble.

With quiet spite, Nan murmured: 'Leaving food. Kids nowadays don't know they're born.'

Lettie bent down and slapped Davey sharply on the bare thigh below his shorts. Steven watched the white handprint on his brother's skin quickly turn red. He loved Davey, but seeing someone other than himself get into trouble always gave Steven a small thrill, and now – watching her hustling his brother out of the kitchen and up the stairs, bawling his head off – he felt as if he had somehow been accorded an honour: the honour of being spared the pent-up irritation of his mother. God knows, she'd taken her feelings for Nan out on him often enough. But this was further proof of what Steven had been hoping for some time – that Davey was finally old

enough, at five, to suffer his share of the discipline pool. It wasn't a deep pool, or a dangerous one, but what the hell; his mother had a short fuse and a punishment shared was a punishment halved in Steven's eyes. Maybe even a punishment escaped altogether.

His nan had not stopped eating throughout, although each mouthful was apparently a minefield.

Even though Davey's sobs were now muffled, Steven sought eye contact with Nan and finally she glanced at him, giving him a chance to roll his eyes, as if the burden of the naughty child was shared and the sharing made them closer.

'You're no better,' she said, and went back to her fish.

Steven reddened. He knew he was better! If only he could prove it to Nan, everything would be different – he just knew it.

Of course, it was all Billy's fault – as usual.

Steven held his breath. He could hear his mother washing up – the underwater clunking of china – and his nan drying – the higher musical scraping of plates leaving the rack. Then he slowly opened the door of Billy's room. It smelled old and sweet, like an orange left under the bed. Steven felt the door click gently behind him.

The curtains were drawn – always drawn. They matched the bedspread in pale and dark blue

squares that clashed with the swirly brown carpet. A half-built Lego space station was on the floor and since Steven's last visit a small spider had spun a web on what looked like a crude docking station. Now it sat there, waiting to capture satellite flies from the outer space of the dingy bedroom.

There was a drooping scarf pinned to the wall over the bed – sky-blue and white, Manchester City – and Steven felt the familiar pang of pity and anger at Billy: still a loser even in death.

Steven crept in here sometimes, as if Billy might reach across the years and whisper secrets and solutions into the ear of this nephew who had already lived to see one more birthday than he himself had managed.

Steven had long ago given up the hope of finding real-life clues. At first he liked to imagine that Uncle Billy might have left some evidence of a precognition of his own death. A *Famous Five* book dog-eared at a key page; the initials 'AA' scratched into the wooden top of the bedside table; Lego scattered to show the points of the compass and X marks the spot. Something which – after the event – an observant boy might discover and decipher.

But there was nothing. Just this smell of history and bitter sadness, and a school photo of a thin, fair child with pink cheeks and crooked teeth and dark blue eyes almost squeezed shut by the size of his smile. It had been a long time before Steven had

realized that this photo must have been placed here later – that no boy worth his salt has a photo of himself on his bedside table unless it shows him holding a fish or a trophy.

Nineteen years ago this eleven-year-old boy – probably much like himself – had tired of his fantasy space game and gone outside to play on a warm summer evening, apparently – infuriatingly – unaware that he would never return to put his toys away or to wave his Man City scarf at the TV on a Sunday afternoon, or even to make his bed, which his mother – Steven's nan – had done much later.

Some time after 7.15pm, when Mr Jacoby from the newsagent sold him a bag of Maltesers, Uncle Billy had moved out of the realm of childhood make-believe and into the realm of living nightmare. In the 200 yards between the newsagent's and this very house – a 200 yards Steven walked every morning and every night to and from school – Uncle Billy had simply disappeared.

Steven's nan had waited until 8.30 before sending Lettie out to look for her brother, and until 9.30, when darkness was falling, to go outside herself. In the light summer evenings children played long past their winter bedtimes. But it was not until Ted Randall next door said perhaps they should call the police that Steven's nan changed for ever from Billy's Mum into Poor Mrs Peters.

Poor Mrs Peters – whose husband had been stupidly killed wobbling off his bicycle into the path of the Barnstaple bus six years before – had waited for Billy to come home.

At first she waited at the door. She stood there all day, every day for a month, barely noticing fourteen-year-old Lettie brushing past her to go to school, and returning promptly at 3.50 to save her mother worrying even more – if such a thing were possible.

When the weather broke, Poor Mrs Peters waited in the window from where she could see up and down the road. She grew the look of a dog in a thunderstorm – alert, wide-eyed and nervous. Any movement in the street made her heart leap so hard in her chest that she flinched. Then would come the slump, as Mr Jacoby or Sally Blunkett or the Tithecott twins grew so distinct that no desperate stretch of her imagination could keep them looking like a ruddy-cheeked eleven-year-old boy with a blond crew-cut, new Nike trainers and a half-eaten bag of Maltesers in his hand.

Lettie learned to cook and to clean and to stay in her room so she didn't have to watch her mother flinching at the road. She had always suspected that Billy was the favourite and now, in his absence, her mother no longer had the strength to hide this fact.

So Lettie worked on a shell of anger and rebellion to protect the soft centre of herself, which was fourteen and scared and missed her brother and her

mother in equal measure, as if both had been snatched from her on that warm July evening.

How could Uncle Billy not know? Once more Steven felt that flicker of anger as he looked about the clueless, lifeless room. How could anyone not know that something like that was about to happen to them?