



# SMART

Colin  
X

KIM  
SLATER

MACMILLAN  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

①

## DEAD IN THE WATER

It just looked like a pile of rags, floating on the water.

Jean sat on the bench with the brass plaque on. It said: *In Memory of Norman Reeves, who spent many happy hours here.*

The plaque means Norman Reeves is dead, but it doesn't actually say that.

Jean held her head in her hands and her body was all jerky, like when you are laughing or crying. I guessed she was crying and I was right.

'He was my friend,' she sobbed.

I looked around but Jean was alone. People around here say Jean is 'cuckoo'. That means mental. She used to be a nurse that delivered babies. She still knows loads of stuff she learned from medical books but no one believes her.

'Who?' I asked.

Jean pointed to the rags.

I went to the edge of the embankment to look. There was a stripy bag half in the water. I saw a face with a bushy beard in the middle of the rags, under the ripples. One eye was open, one was closed.

I freaked out. The sea sound started in my head and I ran right past the bridge and back again but there was

nobody to help. I'm not supposed to run like mad because it can start my asthma off.

'When the sea noise comes in your head,' Miss Crane says, 'it is important to stay calm and breathe.'

I stopped running. I tried to stay calm and breathe. I used my inhaler.

Jean was still crying when I got back.

'He was my friend,' she said again. I picked up a long stick and took it over to the riverbank. I poked at the face but not near the eyes.

'What are you doing?' Jean shouted from the bench.

'I'm doing a test to see if it's a balloon,' I yelled back. It felt puffy and hard at the same time, so I knew it was Jean's friend's head.

'Is it a balloon?' shouted Jean.

A woman with a dog was coming.

When she got near I said, 'Jean's friend is in the river.'

She gave me a funny look, like she might ignore me and carry on walking. Then she came a bit nearer and looked at the river. She started screaming.

I went for a walk up the embankment to stay calm and breathe. Some Canada geese flew down and skidded into the water. They didn't care about the rags and the puffy face. They just got on with it.

When I got back, a policeman and a policewoman were talking to the lady with the dog. Jean was still sitting on the bench but nobody was talking to her.

'That's him,' the woman said, and pointed at me.

'What's your name, son?' The policeman asked.

'I'm not your son,' I said. 'My dad is dead from a disease that made him drink cider, even in the morning.'

The policeman and the policewoman looked at each other.

'Can you tell us what happened, love?' The policewoman had a kind face, like Mum when she wasn't rushing to go to work. She nodded her head towards the river. 'Is that how you found him?'

'It looked like rags,' I said.

'He was my friend,' Jean shouted from the bench.

The policewoman wrote down my name and address.

'Was he just like this, when you got here?' asked the policeman.

'The head was a bit more turned towards the bridge,' I said. 'Before I poked it with the stick.'

'Stick?'

'I had to see if it was a balloon or a real head,' I said.

The woman with the dog shrieked. She even made the policewoman jump.

'It's definitely a real head,' I said.

'Did you see anyone else around here but the tramp lady?' asked the policeman.

'Jean was a nurse,' I said. 'She's not mental.'

A white van pulled up. It had the words *Police Diving Unit* on the side and a blue flashing light. Even when it

stood still, the light kept flashing.

'Kieran,' said the policeman. 'Did you see anyone else hanging around here?'

'No,' I said. 'How many divers will go in?'

The side of the van slid back and two police divers got out. They had flippers on and everything.

'They'll need breathing apparatus on if they're going to search the water for clues,' I said.

'No need for that,' the policewoman said in a low voice, like she didn't want me to hear. 'Poor old bogger probably fell in after one too many.'

A man got out of the front of the police van and took some photographs of Jean's friend in the water. Then the divers put up some screens while they pulled the body out of the river.

'Why are they hiding it?' I said. 'I've already seen it.'

'And poked it,' said the policeman as they moved away. 'Don't go touching dead bodies in future.'

There were some people gathering on the far bank. One man had binoculars.

The police emptied the dead man's stripy bag and spread the things out on the concrete. There was a blanket, some socks and an empty packet of cheese straws.

Two older boys from my school walked up and stood watching.

'What you been up to, Downs? You topped somebody?' asked one of them.

'I haven't got Down's,' I said. 'There's nothing wrong with my chromosomes.'

'Are you sure about that, Downs?' asked the other boy.

They fell about laughing.

2

## THE LETTER

One day I'm going to be a reporter for the *Evening Post*. That's why I started walking straight home, so I could write stuff down.

I don't write in my notebook all the time. I used to only write in it when bad things happened, like when Grandma stopped coming round.

But now I write down all the interesting things that happen too, so the Editor of the *Post* will want me to work for him when I leave school. I can show him my notebook as evidence of my reporting skills.

The bad thing at the river was definitely interesting.

I can do the tiniest writing in the world; even I can't read it sometimes. Nobody can tell other people what I've said, which is the best thing. You can't trust people but you can trust your notebook.

I ripped out all the pages of my old *Beano* annual and I hide my notebook in there. Then I put the annual in the middle of a pile of other annuals under the bed. Nobody will ever find it.

See, this is why I like writing in my notebook. I can talk about anything that's ever been invented and no one can tell me off.

I. Am. In. Charge.

You can write sentences with only one word in them, like that. It's your choice.

I live in Nottingham. Not right in the middle, where the castle is, just at the edge of the middle.

'Just outside the city centre,' Miss Crane says.

I like saying 'edge of the middle' better. It feels more like a place.

Robin Hood came from Nottingham. He lived in Sherwood Forest and formed a merry band of men, including Little John, who was massive. Yorkshire tried to steal Robin Hood. They said he came from there but it's been proven by scientists that he was from Nottingham.

I stopped walking for a minute and looked back at the embankment and the flashing blue lights of the police van.

Sometimes, when I look at the river I imagine it is a long, thin piece of sea. If you followed it for nearly a year, you could reach Australia. It's been here as long as Robin Hood. He might have stood in some of the exact same places as I do, looking at the river. I said that once, to my older brother.

'Course he did,' he replied. 'You daft prat.'

Ryan is my older brother but not a proper one. I've got a different mum and dad to him.

My dad died. I only know him because of the



photographs that Mum kept to show me. I was just a baby then. Miss Crane says our brains store away everything that's happened to us, but you can't remember everything because some memories get locked up in a bit of your brain you don't use, called the 'subconscious'.

In my subconscious, there are pictures and films of my dad playing with me and tucking me into bed. Nobody can take them away and burn them. I wish I could get them out of my locked bit of brain to look at again.

When I got home I stopped at the living-room door on my way upstairs, but nobody turned round. Mum wasn't back from work yet, so I couldn't tell her about what had happened. Sometimes she leaves for work before I wake up and doesn't come back till after I'm in bed, even on the weekends.

Tony was lying on the settee, smoking, with his eyes nearly closed, and Ryan was playing Call of Duty. The gunfire was very loud. Louder than Mum liked it.

Mum says I have to call Tony 'Dad', but secretly, in my head, I always say 'Tony' straight after, so it cancels it out.

Ryan was supposed to go to college to do Media Studies at the beginning of September. After two days he said he didn't like it, so Tony said he could stop going. After that, he played soldier games all day long and nearly all night. When he went up each wave, he went barmy,

like he was a real soldier in Afghanistan.

‘Yes! Who’s the daddy?’ he kept saying and punching my arm.

When you say that, it means you think you’re the best of anyone in the whole world at something. Ryan thought he was the best at Call of Duty.

‘Dean Shelton in my class is on the last wave,’ I told him.

‘Shut your mouth,’ he yelled. ‘Before I bleeping smack you one.’

Writing ‘bleep’ takes all the power out of swear words.

A long, long time ago, someone decided what word to use for every single thing there is. For a wooden thing you sit on, they decided that word would be CHAIR. But what if they had decided it would be called a B\*\*\*\*\*D? Then you would sit on a B\*\*\*\*\*D and call someone a CHAIR if you hated them.

‘That’s true,’ Miss Crane had said when I’d asked her about it at school. ‘It’s the meaning we attach to a word that’s important.’

When I’ve worked at the *Evening Post* for a bit, I want to go and work for Sky.

Sky is ‘First for Breaking News’. All the politicians want to talk to Sky first, even before the BBC.

I like Jeremy Thompson but I don’t want to present the news like him. I want to do a job like Martin Brunt.

He's my favourite on the Sky News team.

Martin Brunt is the Crime Correspondent. He comes on when very bad stuff happens, like murders. If he lived around here, he would be down at the river now, reporting back to viewers about Jean's friend, who was dead in the water.

The Sky News cameraman would zoom in on the rags and they'd bring criminal experts into the studio to say what kind of person might have killed the man. The experts are called 'criminologists'. They even know what car the murderer drives and whether he still lives with his mum and dad.

In my room, I wrote down all the evidence I'd seen so far in my notebook. I did it in very small writing so I could fit it all in. 'Evidence' means every single thing that has happened. Sometimes on *CSI*, they don't even realize something is evidence until later on. Then they look at their notes to check it out.

I wrote down all the people I'd seen that morning, even Jean. At this stage, everyone was a suspect. Really, I knew Jean hadn't done anything because she used to be a nurse, but sometimes witnesses on Sky News said, 'I can't believe it – she was just an ordinary woman who lived next door.'

Jean doesn't live anywhere. People don't like the homeless; they say they stink and should get a job.

'I'd like to see half of them get a job if they were

starving hungry and freezing cold,' Jean had said, when I'd told her.

Jean used to have a big house in Wollaton with her husband and her son Tim, who wanted to be a pilot. When Tim was killed in a motorbike accident, Jean started to drink so it wouldn't hurt as much. Her husband left her and Jean lost her job.

'I had a mental breakdown,' she said, when we were sitting together on the embankment one day. 'When I got better, I had no husband, no job and no house.'

That's how Jean ended up homeless. It doesn't mean she killed her friend.

The next day, I told Miss Crane all about the homeless man's murder.

'He might have just fallen into the water,' Miss Crane said. 'You mustn't jump to conclusions.'

Falling into the water sounded boring. I felt sure Martin Brunt could find the killer.

I wrote him a letter in class.

Dear Martin Brunt,  
There has been a ~~death~~ murder  
of a homeless person in our river.  
The man was Jean's friend. Can you  
come with your cameraman and  
bring the Criminology experts?

After I've worked at the Evening Post for a bit, I want to work with you at Sky News.

Yours sincerely,

Kieran Woods

Class 9

c/o Meadows Comprehensive School,  
Nottingham

Miss Crane was pleased I'd remembered that it's 'Yours sincerely' when you know someone's name and 'Yours faithfully' when you don't. Before I put the letter in an envelope, I crossed out 'death' and wrote 'murder'.

Miss Crane didn't see me do it.

3

## EVIDENCE

When I got in from school Mum still wasn't home, so I went straight to my room and read through my notes again to make sure that I hadn't missed any important pieces of evidence. Then I got my sketchbook out.

I keep this hidden under the bed next to my notebook. It contains pictures I've drawn of stuff that some people might not want others to see.

'Sensitive information', Miss Crane calls it.

You can show sensitive information very well in pictures, if you are good at drawing. You don't need words.

I'm the best at drawing in my class and the best in the whole school. I'm not even being big-headed. I can look at something once or twice, then draw it with my pencils so it looks like a photograph.

It's easy-peasy.

I like my drawing pencils. I keep them in a special wooden box. There are twelve pencils but the matching sharpener is missing. The gold lettering on the box lid says: *Graphite Pencil Sketching Set 5B-5H*. I won them last year at school in a competition called 'Best Young Artist'.

All the schools in Nottingham were in the competition.

Only the people who were good at drawing got to send a picture in.

The writer Julia Donaldson judged it. She works with an illustrator who draws awesome pictures so she knows what good drawings look like.

I won the bit of the competition for people my age and a bit older.

‘The under-sixteens category,’ said Miss Crane.

There was a prize ceremony for the winners at the Council House. Mum said she’d try and get there but her and Tony had had a row and she didn’t want everyone to see her eye. When I went up on stage to get my certificate and pencil box, everyone clapped like they knew me. I pretended Mum was there and waved.

Afterwards, while the others were standing with their parents, Miss Crane stayed with me. We had a glass of pretend champagne and little bits of puffy pastry with this tasty filling in. It was brilliant.

When I got home after the ceremony, nobody was in. I sat at the kitchen table waiting for Mum, looking at my drawing and pencil box prize. I felt warm and calm inside. Then the back door opened and before I could hide my stuff, Ryan came in.

‘Let’s see,’ he said, and grabbed my picture. After a minute he asked, ‘Could you teach me to draw?’ His voice was small. I looked at him but he wasn’t grinning – he was serious.

The back door opened again and Tony stomped into the kitchen. He stopped dead in front of us.

Ryan looked at his feet. 'I was just—'

'Just what?'

'Just telling him to get his stupid stuff off the table,' Ryan said, and he swept my drawing and pencil box on to the floor.

I scrambled to grab my stuff before Ryan could destroy it. The pencils were rolling everywhere but I managed to get them all.

When I got upstairs, I realized that the sharpener was missing. Mum helped me look for it when she got home and she even asked Tony and Ryan if they had seen it but they both said no. It was just gone.

My drawing pencils all look the same but they all have different sorts of lead to draw with. You use the really hard pencil leads for tiny detailed drawing, like eyes. The softer ones are good for filling in, like if you're drawing the sky. The other thing that is really important when sketching is how much you push the pencil down on to your paper. Different pressures make for different shades on your drawing. It's all very complex if you don't know what you're doing.

My favourite artist is a man called Laurence Stephen Lowry. People shortened it to L. S. Lowry. He was an even better drawer than me. Grandma was going to take me to see some of his real-life pictures at a gallery in



Manchester. It was before she fell out with Mum and Tony.

People think Lowry just painted matchstick men and matchstick cats and dogs. There was even a song about it. But he didn't. He painted all sorts of things and did fantastic sketches.

When I won the Best Young Artist competition, Miss Crane bought me a massive book called *L. S. Lowry: The Art and the Artist*, by T. G. Rosenthal. T. G. Rosenthal knows even more about Lowry than I do.

When Lowry's mum died, he got very sad. He stopped painting people and dogs. He painted the sea but didn't put any boats on the water. He painted houses that nobody lived in. They were falling to bits and sinking down into the ground.

When I look at Lowry's *An Island*, it makes my tummy go all funny. In it is a big, old house that used to be grand, standing alone on a little island surrounded by water. Even though it is a house and not a person, it still looks sad and lost.

When I look at this painting, it feels like something is pressing down on my chest. I go all quiet inside, like when I'm curling up under my blanket, away from everyone.

That's what Lowry can do to you without saying a single word.

I picked out a pencil and started to draw all the scenes of evidence from down at the river, like a comic strip,

filling the page with little boxes. I drew Jean like one of Lowry's matchstick characters. She got to be in every box.

Ryan's video game was booming downstairs. I could tell if he had shot someone or detonated a bomb by the different noises. While I was drawing, I thought about Mrs Cartwright next door. She has ulcerated legs so can't get upstairs. She even sleeps in her living room, which is joined on to ours, so she can never escape Ryan's noise.

I wanted to draw some pictures of Tony and Ryan in the living room. Ryan would be playing on his game and Tony would be half asleep. Neither of them would see the pack of wild dogs sneaking in at the door. There would be Japanese Akitas, pit bulls and Dobermanns. The dogs would pounce on them both at the same time.

No one would be able to hear Tony and Ryan screaming because of the loud noise of the Xbox. Not even Mrs Cartwright.

The dogs would rip them both to shreds and eat them. Later, when the dogs were gone, I would sneak downstairs and clean up. When Mum came home, she'd be glad it was just me and her again, with no one to upset her. She wouldn't even be bothered they'd both been eaten.

I saved the pictures in my head to draw another day, and concentrated on the murder instead.

I drew from when I first got down to the river and saw Jean crying on the bench, to the divers getting the

body out of the water. It took up two full pages of my sketchpad.

When I was finished, I had very detailed notes and drawings.

I had remembered all the little bits of evidence. I packed matchstick people into the scenes, but I kept the background white like Lowry mostly did and just drew the river and close-ups of where the murder took place. This would make any clues much easier to spot.

Martin Brunt was going to be very pleased.