

# THE BOY WHO LOVED RAIN



THE  
BOY WHO  
LOVED  
RAIN

*They say that what you  
don't know can't hurt you.  
They're wrong.*

GERARD KELLY



LION FICTION

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Keeping a secret is the first step  
in becoming an individual.  
Telling it is the second step.  
Paul Tournier, *Secrets*



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LONDON





# PROLOGUE

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*When I was thirteen I lost myself. It was as if night fell and I didn't know where I was. People ask me: How can you not find yourself? How can you not know who you are? It must seem so dumb to them, not even to know who you are. But if they can't see it, I can't explain it. I just know that once you lose yourself, there's no easy way back. Kids sometimes pinch themselves to know if they're awake or dreaming. That should work for sure if you've lost yourself. You should be able to roll up your sleeve and slap your arm, squeeze the fat pink flesh of it and find out who you are. People who've never been lost imagine that would work – they think that something physical and real and maybe even painful should be enough to wake you. The point of a compass or a thumbtack, scratched across a knuckle until it bleeds and then goes deep; a tiny chasm opening up into the flesh. You're supposed to recoil in horror from the first pain, or if not, then at least from the blood and exposure of flesh. But what if you don't? What if you are watching the whole operation, fascinated by the effect of metal on flesh, following the lines of the canyons that have opened up in your skin, not even caring about the pain? At school I used blades from a pencil-sharpener. They made highways on my arms; ploughed fields; landing patterns for aeroplanes and passing spaceships. The problem with cutting yourself to find out if you're lost is that you do: you find out that you're even more lost than you thought. The lostness has depths you haven't even begun to explore. Your points and blades are just scratching the surface. It's like switching on a torch in the dark, thinking you will find your way by it, only to discover by its beam how lost you truly are.*



# CHAPTER ONE

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*Rain is liquid water in the form of droplets that have condensed from atmospheric water vapour and then precipitated – that is, become heavy enough to fall under gravity.*

“Rain”, Wikipedia

Colom woke with a start, the dream slipping away like water from a bath. Only the question, the puzzle, remained strong. Once again he was at sea, trying to push himself towards a muddy shoreline, where he might just find a grip and pull free. There was nothing to push against. Every time he felt he was moving closer, the drift took him further away. If he couldn't get to the land he would surely drown when his tired limbs surrendered at last to exhaustion. He knew that the ocean wanted him, had claimed him. He knew that in the end he would not have the power to resist. Nor would his sister, thrashing just as he was in half-darkness at the edge of his peripheral vision. He couldn't get to her, couldn't propel his body in her direction. And even if he did, what use would he be? They could drown together, or they could drown apart; either way they were both going to drown.

He woke up trying to solve the riddle, as if the question had been set for today's exams: “My sister is drowning, and I can't reach her. But I don't have a sister. How can I save my sister from drowning when I don't have a sister?”

The room was dark, the house silent but for the noises he already knew – his father's soft snoring seeping through the wall. The central heating boiler, housed directly below his room,

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clocking on for its pre-dawn duty. Was this what had woken him again? The creeping cold of his legs told him it wasn't. He swung them from the bed and shuffled barefoot to the drawers to find some fresh pyjamas.

Even with the broken night, he was up early, dressed and showered by the time his mother had put breakfast on the table. Neither spoke as he ate, the undulating rhythms of the *Today* programme filling the space they created. His father was already gone.

Fiona had dropped him at school, cleared away breakfast and folded a basket of dry linen by the time she found and washed the wet sheets from his room. The act of piling bedding yet again into the washing machine brought to light an unease that had been shadowing her for weeks. Her son's evident anxieties plagued her throughout the day. By the time she stood facing a heavily mascaraed and less than enthusiastic sales assistant across a counter cluttered with china, she could sense a shortness in her temper as sharp as hunger.

"Mrs Dryden. D – R – Y – D – E – N. They phoned and told me it would be ready today."

She followed the girl's eyes as she read slowly through the list on her clipboard. Even upside down Fiona saw her name two-thirds of the way down. She resisted the urge to point, checking her watch for the fourth time to slingshot a visual hint of her impatience.

"Here it is," she said at last, as if there had been some doubt. "Six side plates and one gravy boat in Blueberry Mist. I'll get them from the stock room."

Fiona shifted her feet to reinforce the urgency of the task, but the girl had already opened a half-hidden door behind the till and twirled herself into a backstage area. 2:45 p.m. If she made it back to the car by 3:00, there was still hope of being on time for Colom. She hated picking him up late in his first weeks back after such a long break. She regretted trying to collect the china this afternoon, but she came to town so rarely these days, and she

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had hoped it would be a quick task. In truth, the indulgence of ordering china filled her with horror. The pretentiousness of the shop grated against her. The smug superiority of the staff. Even in this cathedral-like glass shopping centre, the store retained its old-world snobbery. David, for his part, never tired of reminding her such things were now within their reach. Was there justice in such spending after so many years of privation?

She had also hoped lunch with Susie would not turn into an interrogation worthy of the Stasi, though she feared it would. Her troubles were travelling the church's rumour circuit like a dancing cat on YouTube. In the end, she left her friend with questions still hanging in the air. Susie wanted to gently let Fiona know that concern for the family was fast becoming a concern for her skills as wife and mother. Her sainted husband was above reproach and beyond criticism. It would be a sin to gossip about him, but Fiona enjoyed no such immunity. Those convinced she was no match for such a man were enjoying her struggles a little too much.

"So what will you do?" Susie's bluntness matched her dyed, cropped hair and grey executive suit. She was impeccably made up, her narrow designer glasses telegraphing the seriousness with which she expected to be treated. Fiona had made her own best stab at honesty, though neither her hair, three weeks past a missed appointment, nor her outfit, more randomly selected than strategically planned, cried out "managerial directness".

"I just don't know. We've discussed a few ideas – programmes we could follow; places we could send Colom – but I have no faith in any of them, to be honest. It takes all my energy most days just to keep David from blowing a gasket."

Susie's millefeuille pastry had been surgically sliced into eight well-ordered pieces, of which six now remained. They had both made the healthy choice of wholemeal open sandwiches, only Susie had partnered hers with an indulgent cake for dessert. Fiona wondered which poor soul would be on the receiving end of the calorie-burn when their boss got back to her office.

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“Colom is back at school this week for the first time since before Christmas,” she said. “I focus on getting us through each day. I’ve tried to think what might bring a longer-term change, but I really have no idea. I trust. I try to pray – though I’ve not had much success in that department lately. I press on: persuading; cajoling; caring for them both as best I can.”

“What about the doctors?” Four pieces eaten, four left – a perfect square.

This was the question Susie had come to ask. By doctors she meant professionals outside the church: people who would struggle to understand their style of parenting. People you needed to explain yourself to. Avoiding such people – only ever having problems that could be resolved in-house – was one of the learned habits of their tribe. They weren’t fundamentalists or cranks but they were a self-defined community with clear beliefs. It was so much easier to deal with people who understood this. And accepted it.

“We haven’t seen anyone yet. David so wants to solve this our own way. I don’t know if we can hold out much longer. We do need help with this.”

At which point the waitress swept in to take away their plates, the conversation left spinning on the table like car wheels at an accident scene.

Fiona had taken the opportunity to pick up her coat.

“I mustn’t be late for Colom,” she said, “and I still have shopping to do.” She caught from Susie a look that told her the interrogation would be resumed at the next available opportunity.

Susie had got through her defences and rattled her. She made a point of smiling when the girl returned with the china, hoping she had not been unduly impatient. She thanked her as she paid and quickly headed for the lift to the car park. The words she had never spoken out loud before were echoing in her mind. We do need help with this. Saying it didn’t solve it, but by saying it to Susie she had said it to herself. Every step she took towards the car confirmed it. By the time she pulled out into the Hammersmith

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traffic she knew it to be an immovable truth, one that she would have to broach on the homefront before long. They needed help, and they needed it soon.

She clicked her mobile into the hands-free holder and pressed the first speed dial. All week they had played voicemail tag. Twice when he returned her calls she missed his. Their schedules were such that they could go for weeks without talking in depth. They were either in different places or in the same place with so many people around them that privacy was impossible. Or they were alone and so tired that sleep was an infinitely stronger attraction than communication of any sort.

His precise, clipped tones invited her again to leave a message or, if she needed urgent help, to call the Pastoral Helpline. “Me again,” she said after the tone. “I really do need to talk to you this evening. Even if I’m asleep when you get in, will you wake me? Thanks.” She rang off satisfied that she had forced herself into a corner. She didn’t know what to do. They had made choices. They had commitments. She could see no way of breaking into his routines without breaking up his life’s work. In the meantime she had Colom to think of. His flourishing meant more to her than even her marriage. Certainly more than the church.

She turned the last corner, leaving the shops and traffic of the Fulham Road behind her, and knew at once that something was wrong. There was a space beside the bus stop where Colom’s shape was meant to be, his trousers sagging where they were too long for him; his dark curls full of movement and rhythm as if they made his head too heavy to keep still. No matter what the weather or the condition of Colom’s health his hair bounced and caught the wind. She felt she could spot him across the O2 Arena. Today he was nowhere to be seen. Despite her efforts the traffic had made her late and the black-jacketed crowd, wheeling and diving like crows, was thinning. Colom’s absence was unavoidable. Ignoring the hundred and one perfectly rational explanations for his non-appearance, Fiona felt panic rising in her chest.

