

LOCAL POET

PAUL TREMBLING

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POET



LION FICTION

CONTENTS

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CONTENTS	5
DAY 1: RTC	7
DAY 2: ACCUSATIONS	12
DAY 3: THE WAVE	17
DAY 4: OFFICE WORK	29
DAY 5: COMPLICATIONS	38
DAY 6: HISTORY	75
DAY 7: THE BLACK GULL	84
DAY 8: THE BEGINNING	107
DAY 9: MOVING ON	154
LOCAL ARTIST	159

DAY 1 : RTC

I was never much of a reader before Laney Grey touched my life. Not even newspapers. I got what I needed in the way of information or entertainment from TV, or off the net. On holiday I might pick up a thriller to read on the beach, but if I didn't finish it in that week or so, I probably never would.

And I certainly didn't read poetry. Not since school, anyway, where the English teacher's earnest attempts to open our young eyes to the richness of our literary heritage had failed to reach the back row of the classroom.

There's no reason to believe that anything would ever have been different if Laney hadn't catalysed change. It wasn't as if I was discontented with my life. There were no inner yearnings for depth and meaning, no navel-gazing angst about some undefined need. The truth is that I was perfectly happy with things as they were.

Then Laney stepped so briefly into my life, and so swiftly out of hers.

I only really saw her for one fractional moment. A young woman, smooth dark skin and frizzed hair, stepping out from behind a parked car into the spray and driving rain from a sudden shower, and then another step out into the road before just stopping. She was looking at me, water running down her cheeks, but no surprise or shock in her face. There were just those dark eyes, meeting mine, and in my memory they were huge and deep and calm, though no

picture that I ever saw showed that. No photo ever captured what I saw in that moment; what I still see when I think of her.

I don't remember the actual impact, or anything that happened immediately after. I was told that my van was doing about forty when it hit her, and the impact flung her ten feet in the air. When she came down, her head struck first, on the asphalt. She had a cracked skull and a broken neck and a ruptured spleen, and both lungs were pierced by broken ribs. She was already dead when I reached her and picked her up and held her. They say I was pleading with her, begging her to live, and trying to give her mouth-to-mouth. They say that my tears were mixing with the rain and her blood, soaking together into my t-shirt and her denims.

But I can't remember any of that.

The rest of that day comes back to me only in a jumble of disconnected images. I can remember being at hospital. I can remember asking, "How is she?... Will she make it?" I think I must have been asking that a lot, but I don't remember what answers I got. I suppose I was there to be checked myself, because later on I had a dressing over my right eye. I don't remember it being put on, or how I got the injury.

I know I spoke to the police. Of course, they had to investigate. They had me blow into something, but I hadn't had a drink since the previous evening, so it must have been negative. At some point they told me that they were taking the van away for forensic tests. And they asked a lot of questions. I don't remember what.

The one clear thing in all that time was how I felt. The desperate fear that I had done something terrible; that I had taken a life. The fear that slowly shaded into despair as I realized that she was dead. I suppose someone must have told me. Perhaps I was told several times.

Eventually they said I was OK. The coppers took me down to the nick, and I realized that I'd been arrested. They booked me in, gave me a cup of tea, and sat me in a cell. I was feeling too numb to care.

I'm not sure how long I was there for. Somewhere along the line they brought in a meal – nothing fancy, just something microwaved.

Since that and takeaways are mostly what I eat anyway, I had no complaints, and I felt better for having eaten. My brain began to work again, and I could start to remember events more coherently.

Shortly after that they took me for a formal interview. Two coppers: a young lad who said very little and a stocky blonde woman who introduced herself to me and the tape as PC June Henshaw.

"Can you confirm your name, please?" she asked formally.

"Seaton. Robert David Seaton. And it was an accident. Really. She just stepped out in front of me."

Henshaw raised an eyebrow. "You didn't seem so sure when we talked to you at the hospital."

"I know. I was confused. Couldn't think straight. Shock, I suppose." I shrugged. "Now I've had time to think, it's clearer. Some of it. I don't remember the... the actual..."

Somewhat to my surprise I found myself choking up at that point. Her face was suddenly clear in my mind, staring calmly at me as I bore down on her, my foot jamming the brake down as hard as I could while I heaved on the wheel.

"I tried to brake. I tried to turn. She was just too close."

PC Henshaw nodded. "Do you remember how fast you were going?"

"Forty. No more than that. The speed cameras along that stretch are lethal. Those average speed things. A lot of my mates have been caught out by them, so I'm always careful along there."

"You use that road a lot?"

I nodded. "Part of my regular route."

"I see. Well, Mr Seaton, what you've told me is consistent with what we've heard from several witnesses, and other evidence."

That sounded hopeful. "Other evidence?" I asked, anxious to hear that my story had been confirmed.

"We've reviewed CCTV footage – we were lucky, there's a camera near the scene that was pointing that way. And RTC Investigation have given us an initial report. It all confirms that she

stepped out in front of you and that you had no chance of avoiding the collision.”

It seems ridiculous to say that a weight lifted off me, but that’s exactly what it felt like.

“We may have to ask you more questions later. There will be an inquest at some point, and I expect you will be required to give evidence then. But for now, you’re free to go.”

“So – I’m not under arrest any more?”

She shook her head and she smiled. Just a faint smile, but it lightened her face, turned her into a different person. “No. We’re dropping the charges. Pending further inquiries, that is. Your van will have to be examined, to rule out any mechanical problems that may have contributed to the accident. And there are still some witnesses I need to speak to. But we have no reason to detain you any further.”

“Thanks.” That sounded a bit too casual somehow, so I said it again. “I mean – really, thanks.” I shook my head, not sure what I wanted to say.

“That’s OK; just doing our job. It’s been a pretty bad day for you, hasn’t it, Mr Seaton?” She smiled again, with the same effect as before, but this time she was conveying sympathy. “Understatement of the year! But if you need to talk to someone about this, I can put you in touch with an independent counsellor.”

I shook my head. Where I come from, blokes don’t go to “counsellors”. You man up and deal with it yourself. “No thanks.”

“Do you have anyone you can talk to about it? Family or close friends?”

My closest living relative was a cousin in Blackpool. The last time we’d met he’d given me a black eye and I’d bloodied his nose; I was eight and he was nine or ten. I was currently “not in a relationship” and, although I had plenty of friends, I didn’t want to talk to any of them just now.

“I’m fine,” I told her.

She offered me a lift home, but I said I’d walk. It had stopped

raining, I needed some space to clear my head, and my flat was only a mile from the police station.

I walked for more than an hour, going over it all in my mind. Thinking that if I’d seen her a moment sooner... if I’d been driving just a little slower... if I’d taken a different route. Planned my drops in a different order. Pulled a sickie and taken the day off. If, if, if.

But there was no if. There was only her face, her eyes meeting mine – the last thing she saw in this life.

When I came out of it, I was on a street I didn’t recognize. I had to bring up Google maps on my phone to find out where I was, and it showed me further from home than when I’d started. I’d done enough walking. I called a taxi.

The driver gave me a strange look when he picked me up, and another as I was paying him after the short trip.

“You OK, mate?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said for the second time that day.

It wasn’t until I got inside and saw myself in the mirror that I understood his concern. My eyes were red and swollen, but tears were still trickling down my cheeks, and my blood-stained t-shirt was sodden.

DAY 2: ACCUSATIONS

Next morning I woke up late. The first thing that came into my head was, “You killed someone yesterday.” I wanted to go back to sleep and forget.

I couldn’t, of course. Instead I just lay in bed with the thought going through my head: “You killed her, Rob. You. Robert David Seaton. You hit her with your van. You killed her.”

After ten minutes of that, I was near to tears again. I didn’t want to go there any more, so I got up, showered, and phoned work. They told me to take the day off. Several days if I needed them. It wasn’t what I’d wanted to hear. I would have preferred to be with people and doing something. But there was no point in me going in anyway, as the police had taken my van. So I sat with a coffee and caught the last of the breakfast news.

It hadn’t made headlines, of course. What’s one more fatal RTC in a world full of major tragedy? The main stories were a natural disaster in the Far East and shoddy politics exposed in Whitehall. But the local news had a short piece on the death of Elaine Josephine Grey, a well-known poet.

I hadn’t known her name. If I’d been told, it hadn’t registered. I hadn’t known that she was a poet. I wouldn’t have known it was her at all except for the picture they showed.

I dressed and went out to the paper shop for milk and the local rag. It had a bit more information, mostly details of the accident,

but some background about her as well. I read it through several times over my cereal.

Elaine Josephine Grey, better known as Laney. Thirty years old, two years younger than me. Born and bred in this part of town, went to school just down the road from my flat. She’d been writing then, writing some quality stuff, it seemed. At fourteen she’d won a national competition. But the early promise had faded. The article recorded nothing else until she published her first book of poems, twelve years later. There had been two more since.

The reporter made much of her contribution to the cultural life of the community, making particular mention of her readings for charity and the poetry workshops she’d run in schools and community centres. Her death was such a tragedy, such a pointless waste.

It hurt to read that. Not that there was any suggestion of blame. My name wasn’t even mentioned, which I was glad about. The article merely said that the police investigation was continuing. Nevertheless, the thought that I had caused this loss left me somehow hollow inside. As though part of me had died with Laney.

I dug out my laptop and went online. The first thing my search brought up was her website. Why was I surprised to find she had her own site? Just about everybody did nowadays. Everybody except me, perhaps. In any case, there it was: “Laney’s Lounge”. The usual sort of stuff. Photos, a short bio that added nothing to the newspaper report and was probably its main source. Some samples of her work that I skipped over, links to her books on Amazon, an itinerary. I looked too closely at that. She was supposed to be leading a poetry workshop today.

She had a blog as well. Last entry four weeks ago. Something about the frustration involved in being a poet. It wasn’t something I connected with, so I skimmed over it, and moved on to the forum.

There were a lot of threads listed, covering a range of topics to do with poetry in general and Laney’s poems in particular. But the most recent thread was labelled “In Memory”. It had been up for

less than twenty-four hours, but it was already the longest one, as people who had known Laney poured out their shock and sorrow and incomprehension at the suddenness of the tragedy.

I scrolled down, not wanting to read them but feeling that I was somehow obligated to give them some attention. I had to acknowledge what I had done. But neither could I go through them in detail. Instead, I glanced through them, picking up words and phrases here and there. Many of them repeated.

“Heartbroken...”

“Shocked...”

“Tragic...”

“Murder...”

That pulled me up short with a sudden twist in my guts. I read the entire post. Just one sentence: “I just hope that the bastard who did it goes down for murder.”

Underneath someone had added a correction: “Not murder. Manslaughter. And they’ll get off with a slap on the wrist.”

Further down I read: “Drunk driver, probably. Or on drugs. Hope he BURNS in HELL!”

I couldn’t read any more. The screen had blurred, my cheeks were wet.

I wanted to apologize; to say I was sorry, it was an accident. I was sorry, sorry, sorry. I wanted to explain that I hadn’t been drunk, hadn’t been speeding. She just stepped out in front of me. I hadn’t meant to hit her and I was so, so sorry. And I could have done that – added my message to the others. But instead I sat and stared numbly at the screen. I was afraid to expose myself to that level of anger, and I felt too guilty to defend myself effectively.

The ring on the doorbell was a welcome intervention, dragging me away from the accusing words on the screen. Discovering two coppers on my doorstep was a lot less welcome. Plain clothes; one a bit plainer than the other. The officer who introduced himself as DS Fayden was very sharply dressed: full three-piece suit, and it didn’t look cheap either. The DC with him looked a little dowdy in

comparison; DS was apparently higher up the pay scale than DC.

With the word “murder” still branded on my mind, I assumed that they were there to re-arrest me. But they reassured me on that point. Just a few more questions, they promised. A few points to clarify.

So I made tea, and went over it again. Where had I been going? How long had I been driving that day? Was I late? In a hurry? Was this a regular route? And so on. They were thorough, but didn’t probe. Just asked the questions and moved on. All routine – at first.

But then the questions took a different direction, and a different tone. Had I known Ms Grey before? Had I ever met her? Did I know any of her family? Her friends? They asked all these several times, in different ways, talking in turns to rapid-fire their queries, keeping me off-balance. Fortunately, the answer was a simple “No” in each case. If I’d been lying I would have struggled to keep thinking of the answer.

They moved on to places I might have been where I could have met her. Names of people who might be connected to her. Did I know Kev Dixon? Sadie DeSallas? Ahmed Moshin, Cody Bryson, Dougie Keen? Anyone known as Jag, as Stubby, as Greek Johnnie...?

The last name finally rang a bell, though a faint one. Buffeted by the stream of questions, I couldn’t have even thought about denying it, even if I’d wanted to.

“Johnnie Papadopoulos, you mean?”

“You know him, then?”

“Not well. Met him a few times, that’s all. He used to drink at the Duke of Clarence, just down the road from here.” I frowned, as memory kicked in. “Haven’t seen him around for a while, actually. I did hear that he’d been sent down for supplying drugs. But what’s that got to do with an RTC?”

The coppers exchanged a glance.

“There are aspects to the inquiry that we’re not at liberty to discuss,” said one of them. “But I think we’ve got all the information

we need from you for the moment. We'll be in touch.”

After they'd left, I slumped back down on the sofa, feeling emotionally drained. I couldn't understand the drugs thing at all – though it did at least explain why CID were involved.

I went back to the laptop, wondering if there was any connection between the online accusations and the CID visit. A new post had appeared, from someone calling themselves BookLady: “Dear, dear Laney. Your black gull finally landed, and we are all poorer because of it.”

It made no sense to me. I went back to bed.

DAY 3 : THE WAVE

I had only meant to take a short nap. I woke up about three the following morning, fuzzy headed but unable to go back to sleep. The remnants of a dream were still hanging around my consciousness as a vague sense of unease and the image of a black seagull.

I made some strong coffee and sat puzzling over it. As is normal with dreams, the harder I tried to remember it, the more insubstantial the memory became, until I was no longer certain that the black gull had featured in the dream at all. Perhaps I had merely remembered it from the blog post? For something that made no sense, it was remarkably difficult to forget.

As the coffee took effect, it occurred to me that it might be a reference to one of Laney's poems. So I went back to the internet. I didn't want to face any more accusations, so I avoided her site. Instead, I did a search for her books.

All three were available, on several sites and in various formats. I also found some reviews of her work. They tended towards the positive, with a good number being downright enthusiastic, but none of them mentioned gulls of any colour.

Delivery of a paperback copy would take several days, and of course I didn't possess an e-reader. But they were also available as pdf files. On impulse, I downloaded one: *Postcards to Myself* – the first she had published.