

# Forgotten Horses

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**T**he promise, stuck so thin, the glue cracked wide in a harsh, March wind. By Central station - where the fast trains took lads like I'd once been away from the northern city - the promise was clean design, modern civic spaces, glowing on developers' billboards in computer-driven dreams. The new Deringate, the new Moorbank. Twenty-first century living for a twenty-first century town. Cranes and scaffolds, dust and diversions, glimpses of smoky glass, white cladding, stainless reimaginings of a filthy industrial past.

But the promise stuck thin as table veneer in the corner cafts of childhood, where Mum would sip her tea and dream while, bored, I'd pick and prise the orange formica, trying to make it lift, intrigued at pearls of resin, grubby splinters, under the wipe-clean top. Behind tomorrow's facade, a few old streets lingered: Lake End, Nightingale Lane, recalling times

more distant even than the sooty cliffs of cloth traders and rackety flats crumbling behind Central station. Blighted bricks from a different clay to the sleek shops of Horsefair.

Different and the same. When I was a kid, the textile sheds of Endsleigh Street produced bluff women in pinnies, chiselled hair under scarves and nets, strong bodies in macs and the violent florals native to the north. Still smooth cotton bolts in the loading bays, still scents of chemical colour washing through the air. But the women were in saris now, or jeans, or both, black hair gleaming through patterned scarves only vaguely recalling fiercely-tied gabardine. Chatting on mobiles, two languages at once. But the bosses were still men, still looked like bosses.

Nothing moved quickly in those streets, for all their industry. Like the whole city when I was young, they made solid things, things that took

time making. In Bank Street, in Northern Square, consultant strategic solutions suppliers grew product by the minute, wireless, always on. But, persisting in the damp jiggers and cuts from Central down to the river, the sound of machines fixed in rhythm, of work where the number today was the number tomorrow. No wonder they were doomed. Acquired, said the signs. Acquired for Development.

Mum left me run from early, content with tea and dreaming. I knew the city all through. To the river. I didn't cross the river. Us southsiders knew stories: how northside lads would stab you blind, how northside girls packed knob-rot. I'd stand at the griffins of Union Bridge - most grisly of crossings - staring at the tall grey flats risen from cleared streets, with that pure sense of needy panic relished when you're young. Take a pioneer step, two, then three. Scurry to the middle. To the black iron plate praising Alderman Jacks and the worthy Corporation, whose foresight and brass replaced the old bridge in 1852 with this monument to progress. For a nineteenth century town.

Tingling, wary for northside monsters, I'd lean out over the river, the drift of oily rainbows off the steel sheds at Dronhouses; the wood slats and inner tubes hoyed from back alley walls. I didn't understand when Mum lost the house, when we had to move somewhere different. Never knew about work and rent. Nor did she. Didn't know, till I was kicked, that a flat meant no hidden yard, no street to race, no stairs indoors to sled down. And northside. North of Union Bridge. In the grey towers where they sent us, where strangers shattered our terraced dreams. Mum withered, stopped going out. I got beaten.

Different and the same. The tow-

ers, named for villages on the moors, kept a sense of grey behind their blue and yellow panels, the new steel balconies, the community mural, the concierge block that closed the tunnel mouth where I'd run, bruised and hunted. Burnt mopeds instead of abandoned prams. Basketball hoops, not goals. Shops boarded up, but the clubhouse still had old-time sing-songs. Kids glared me over the border from road to estate. But now, I didn't care.

From bungalow town, an old boy, mountaineering on sticks, the built-up boots of some morbid condition a cartoon on his skinny pins. He had a box on his head, raised from his eyes on flannels. The side said This Space To Let and I thought he was some joker, till I clocked, front and back, the smudgy handwritten adverts: a man-with-van; a bloke who'd do your flat-pack, no job too small. A tortoise billboard on his rounds. When I left, he'd've just got his lay off, fat reducto in his pocket.

Buzzed the concierge.

'Alright?' Our town greeting.

'Visiting Clyster House.'

'Was' name?'

Twenty years vanished; my voice, tight and spiny as the day I hiked to Central in the rain. 'Yeah. Flat forty-seven, right?'

'I don't know you, pal. Could be anyone. Could be nutter. All these got a forty-seven. Was' name?'

He was being quite pally. But what was the name? Things change. 'Litherland.' Tried to be certain, throwing my weight at the vowels.

He buzzed me through. 'Take your tin hat.'

Inside, the block hadn't changed much because nothing much could change. Walls painted, lights brightened, CCTV on spaces that were my nightmare, still, of torture and defeat.

Walked up steady, wouldn't run, wouldn't look over my shoulder. Met every eye that glared my way. Wanted: 'Alright?' of their silence. Swaggered the deck like a Home End lad at closing. Nobody knew me. Nobody knew why I'd come.

Forty-seven. Door was changed: heavy, self-closing, spyholes top and centre. Only door on the landing without a security gate. That figured. Security cost. Went to the balcony end, leaned out, looked over. The waste at the back of the flats, down the embankment, was tidied. They'd cut the stray trees to nothing; lifted the disused tracks and paved the cinders. Put in little signs I guessed would say Community Greenspace Leisure Challenge Resource Link or something. Sectioned a bit of the rough for a kiddies' playground: boat swings, tiny plastic slide, too small for big kids. The grass looked hoovered, neatly-cut paths invited enquiring feet. I felt sick. I knocked the door.

Not once had I thought what I'd do if no one was home. I wouldn't've come, wouldn't even begun, if I'd let myself down that way. From the sugar-glazed south, through the business-park midlands, to the cheerlessly hopeful north, I stared out the train, settling what I'd say, not thinking once what I'd do with no one to hear it. Knocked again. A lad stopped too close behind me. 'Alright?' He went his way. Lads his age chased me down as a kid, beat me to feathers. No more.

So rat-like: scratching in the wood; a bone-dry cough; a stumble. A clink of keys. Hesitation. 'Hello?' A choking rasp. Swearing. 'Who's tha'?'

I looked at the wheezing door. Had to talk my way through it. 'Janice?'

'Who wants her?'

'Is that you?'

'Who wants her?'

'Me. Philip Bradshaw.'

Audible drawing-breath. 'Fuck-off-whatever-you-are-I-don't-wanna-know-you-fuck-off.'

'Me. Philip.'

'Fuck-off-whatever...'

'Ask me.'

'What?'

'Ask me something.'

'Ask you what?'

'Owt.'

'Owt about what?'

'Me.' My careful pose gone, my camouflage. I didn't care. Knowing she was alive was the bullet I'd not dodge. I'd scuff-up her doorstep long as it took, a day, a week, whatever.

More breathing, building to words. 'Name-rank-number.'

'Three-six-one-treble-four-two-nine Second Lieutenant Bradshaw, Philip Michael, Advanced Surveillance Detail, Royal Engineers.'

'Who was your Mam?'

'Rita. Rita Skelton.'

'What you most feared of?'

In some foreign field, crazies shooting rockets like Guy Fawkes? On the redeye, under the radar? Black mambas on the roof? HIV? 'Horses.'

A riot of coughing, keys dropped and cursed and dropped again. Locks getting jiggered. The door.

What did I reckon, twenty years gone? That she'd be preserved, like Mum's wedding cake in its moonshot souvenir tin? The air had got to Janice. The wind and rain. Northern light and dust off the moors. She was there, maybe, behind the cracks, beneath the stringy hair. Maybe inside the shapeless clothes, a butterfly returned to stodgy larva. Her polished stillness was there, maybe, between the ticks and twitches. What did I reckon, she'd be seventeen? The scent off the doorway said, maybe, she'd stayed home a long time.

'You're in civvies.'

'Don't do fancy dress.' Places I go, best not.

A convulsion shook her down. They seemed to come clockwork. Her face gurned as the tremor worked through. 'D'you wanna come in?'

Did I think she'd be pleased I was there? Did I reckon on a red carpet? Magic carpet, more like.

The place was filth as I knew it would be, everything mould and rotten. Stench ripe as blood, as bodies. Boarded windows splintering light on towers of papers, stinking plates, corner heaps of fuck-knows-what that seemed to churn and shiver, in mirror of her skin. Primed for dark, for deceit, sharp as on manoeuvres. Never enter a dwelling alone without reporting your position: upcountry, one-o-one.

'There's no tea.'

'How's you?'

She peered through the gloom. 'T'is you, in't it?'

'Yeah.' Tried a smile. Didn't fit.

'How's you?'

'Seen your Mam?'

'She's dead.'

'Yeah.' In echo of some young day, she began a hand through her hair; it jammed in the knots. 'Not gorrit done lately. Too much doing.' The spasm welled and passed. She still held the knife: it snagged stray light, a thin diamond. She saw my reflex. 'Can't be too careful. There's all sorts knock the door round here. Get careful, on your own.'

Last I heard she was getting hitched, some fitter from Crowndale way. Some Johnny No-neck. 'How's Johnny?'

'You're running behind it, mister. Left me, six year back. When this,' she shivered, 'got killing.'

'He's a fool.'

'No he's not. Runs all through, this.

Shakes and poison. He said it were like dipping his wick in battery acid. How were I to know? He's best gone.'

Twenty years, signed up. Been keen a bit. Been stupid. Been thinking where to begin. Nothing happens back home till you go there. 'Town's changed.'

'Don't get to town. Done it all up round here. New kitchens and bathrooms and that. I didn't have it. Didn't want...Done out the back. The green.'

The flats were on old pit streets, back land kept by the mines. Been left waste years. 'They chopped our green.'

The spasm left her twisted, posed; a ghost burnt by daylight. 'They cleared it.'

'The horses?'

A spazzy kid from south of the bridge; a tomboy no one fancied. Nobody but each other. Reaching for fields, for space from mothers gone claustrophobically mad.

'You're running behind it, mister.' She sparked up with dancing hands. In the airless room her smoke hung, creamy as a low day on the moors. 'Don't reckon you'd fear 'em now.'

'On the job, you're either scared or dead.'

A moment's stillness. 'You killed people?'

'Some.'

'S'pose it gets easier, eh? They killed all them. Horses. Meatman from Flixton came round. Fed 'em t'dogs.'

Tripped by love when I was nine. Miserable birthday. No cake, no toys: Mum too skint and imaginary aunties long gone. Mum's card like a joke, by itself on the mantle. Worse than none at all. Then the letterbox, the scuffed envelope: I kept it years. Janice drew me a card special. Wrote 'Phillip' with two 'l's then scrubbed one out in felt tip. That's when I knew she cared. She

mended me, from the horses. The dead horses. 'Thought they'd go sanctuary or summat.'

'Had their day.' She struggled some pills from a jar, gulped without water, grimaced. 'These do no good. Meant to block it. Signals. No good.' She shook her smokes. 'Gave up, didn't you? Clean living, you. I need. For my nerves. D'you see all the ladybirds been coming out, waking from the woodwork? Go out a bit, come back when day gets cold. In the night, there's 'undred of 'em, crawling in my mouth. Choking black and red. Come to and I'm dreaming. Have it dark so they fly to the light. But they don't forget. Not like people forget. People, horses, turned loose, best forgotten.'

We slid down the embankment, over the tracks still in their black Christmas of coal dust. The wild barley and thistles springing lively cuts on our skin. Explorers, pioneer corps: me and my beautiful friend. Old winding gear in distant fields; never thought what came of the horses when they closed the last shafts out. 'Here now, in't I?'

'You're late.' Her fingertips strummed the papers. 'Check every week, to see you been killed.'

'I've not.'

'Just not said. Weren't always the hero, were you?'

Forgotten horses, turned loose in the waste, surprised by nettles and marigold fields from a life of yards and scuttles. Free. Terrified. The men thought horses could learn the green, thought they'd be alright. Men had their own freedom to suffer. I didn't know horses: thought they were tame. Wanted to show off to my friend. Bit to the bone by creature scared as I was. Janice saved me. I'd've died for blood on my own. My ignorant, innocent little-boy blood dirtying the

flowers. Where I learnt pain, whispers of death, are just words. 'They killed the horses?'

'Bolt gun. Said they were good for nowt. Few faces made fuss.' She shivered. 'Who cares. Few got a roast for their Sunday.'

I've done worse. Who cares? You cut what's left for curry.

Pills and smoke. A sudden, hard look. 'No fucking white knight, are you? No hero with love in your hands. I gotta shift, get money.'

'D'you want...?'

'No.' Sharp as the blade. 'I got ways. I'll find.'

'You saved my life when I was bit.'

'What does that mean now?'

The door let through a scruffy sun on her forgotten existence. A ladybird flickered by.

'I'll keep eye out for the funeral.'

At Central, jumped the fast. I'd argue the price when they caught me. Squatted First Class, for rest. I'd argue that too. Read the letter again: fat payoff, or sign for five more years war. Maybe top out as Captain. Not bad for a runt, dodging games. Took out the little box, the engagement ring, fragile-looking in my hands. Hoyed it below for the cleaner to find, stared out as the train hit speed, as fields and horses vanished into the blue.