

Mackerel Point

by Richard Lakin

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TODAY WOULD BRING ANOTHER CARD, but there was no sign of the postman yet. She leaned on the sill to watch the street. Tony was pushing his bike along the pavement, his satchel swinging at his knees. He needed a trim, his hair lank against his collar. He'd almost gone past when he ran a hand through his fringe and glanced up at their window. Brenda busied herself with dusting, fussing with the things on the windowsill: a Wedgwood vase and a cork box stuffed with crumpled receipts, coins, a broken earring. Tony had failed his A-Levels and his mum Sheila had tried to put a brave face on it. Brenda bumped into her when they were getting their tickets at the rotisserie and Sheila said Tony had 'got his foot in the door' at the council. The council would have anyone, Brenda had thought. She knew her Michael would've done better. Sheila knew it too. And, until their numbers were called at the counter it hung in the silence between them.

Brenda tilted the cork box and it rattled, the pesetas and dinars coming to rest against the velvet lining. Colin had wanted to give them to the cleaners and waiters on their last day in Dubrovnik, but Michael wanted to keep them as souvenirs and she'd let him. The idea was that

he'd start collecting and she'd bought him a folder with little plastic sleeves for the coins. He'd got bored and started scribbling stick men on the corner of the pages so he could flip them and make the men run and jump. The coins had found a home among the things she couldn't bear to throw away.

She turned the Wedgwood vase till she was happy it was centred and cussed at the fine layer of talc Colin left from bathroom to bedroom. She flapped the yellow duster at it, leaning close now Tony had gone so she could get a clear view of the Avenue. She stood with her palms outstretched on the white gloss of the windowsill, angling her head to listen for the low rumble of the van. Colin's silence downstairs meant nothing. He was watching and waiting too, but from upstairs she'd be first to catch sight of the little red van as it edged beyond the privet.

Colin was sitting at the table. His tea was untouched, a thin milky film forming on the surface. He hadn't eaten breakfast for years, couldn't face buttery toast, couldn't face milk sloshing about in his gut. He had the review section of the newspaper spread out before him, studying the programmes he'd marked out for the week. The floorboards creaked above and he pinched the bridge of his nose. He could track Brenda's movements with precision as she crept from

dressing table to window or sat on the edge of the bed. The boards groaned and the hangers in the wardrobe tinkled against each other.

‘Well,’ he shouted. ‘Has he been or not?’

Silence. Colin massaged his forehead with the heel of his hand. Has he been? He made it sound like Father Christmas. He went to sip his tea and scowled as the rubbery film met his lips making him cringe. He knuckled his eyes, unable to deny the memory that began to play out. His brain was wired that way. It wasn’t the obvious things that got him, like the anniversaries or the birthdays – those were Brenda’s domain. For him it was the smell of lawnmower petrol and fresh-cut grass, a football score at Saturday teatime or kids squabbling over ice-cream and sherbet. One thing would set another off by association, so they became a chain and though he knew what was coming he was powerless. He could do nothing to stop the pain that came in his throat. Christmas meant the train set. Christmas meant the right bloody job he’d made of fixing the tracks to the plywood boards he’d nailed to the beams in the attic. He’d hammered his thumb, knelt on a tack and very nearly put his foot through the plaster.

‘Well has he or not?’ Colin shouted.

Brenda stood at the top of the stairs.

‘He’s missed us then,’ Colin said.

‘He’ll be back.’ Her role, as always, was to deal with reality, to face up to truth. One of them had too.

‘There’s nothing for us then, love. What did I tell you?’

Brenda gripped the banister and sighed. She knew with certainty that another card would come; another card that would be added to the ones they’d given to the police. There was only ever one word written on them. Their address was printed on a neat white label. The postmark was Liverpool. She stood at the window, watching Tim the postie’s meandering progress along the block-paved and gravelled drives of the Avenue. Tim had been their postman for years and was approaching retirement. He wore shorts and went barefoot in sandals that looked better suited to the beach, whatever the weather. Brenda didn’t like seeing men’s toes. Tim got as far as the Hills’ place when he stopped and rubbed his back. Brenda’s eyes narrowed as Tim turned to glance back at their house. Brenda could see, despite the distance, that he was holding a plain white postcard. She swallowed, felt the bruise move from her throat to her gut. Tim knew about the cards. Word got around

years back when the police were called and questions were asked at the sorting office. Inspector Liddle had taken tea with them, telling them he was sorry but there was nothing he could do.

‘It’s very difficult to stop it.’

She knew it wasn’t true but Brenda had asked if whoever was sending the postcards had done something to Michael. Liddle shook his head. His tea was untouched. ‘We don’t believe so.’ Letters always followed a few weeks later, stuffed with twenties. Brenda had given it all to the lifeboats. Whoever he was, she didn’t want his money.

Brenda made her way down the stairs. She paused halfway to look at the photo in the recess on the landing. Michael was grinning, holding a crab and making a pincer with his free hand. It was ten years to the day. The doorbell rang and she swallowed and straightened her lapels. She saw Tim’s red uniform through the frosted glass.

Wednesdays were ringed in red ink on the calendar above the toaster, not that he’d ever forget. Wednesdays came around fast, the same as Mondays did for other folk and Eric hated them. Wednesdays meant swimming lessons. He had an unwritten list. He hated the smell of

chlorine in his hair and on his skin. He hated the thought that people pissed in the water. He hated that the water was so cold and that the showers never worked. He hated the ribbed and dimpled tiles that made him walk awkwardly on arched feet. He hated the way his fingers wrinkled in the water and the touch of the cotton or wool of his clothes that made him cringe when he was dressing afterwards. He hated everything about swimming. The whistle blew as Eric pushed through the barriers and the kids' lesson began tipping out. He picked up an armband where it had fallen in the little stream between the tiles and handed it to a girl. He didn't get a thank you, she just snatched at it. He got odd looks from her mother so he found his own cubicle as far away as he could.

He bolted the door, stripped and folded his clothes in a neat pile he could compress into his backpack. He was already wearing his trunks, having changed in the toilets at work at lunchtime. He tiptoed out of the cubicle and pressed the chrome button on the wall. It was streaked with lime-scale and didn't budge so he had to grip his thumb with fingers and give it a real jab so the shower spluttered and spat at his shoulders. He ran a hand through his thinning hair and made his way, head bowed, to the shallow end. The tutor was sitting on stepladders checking his

watch. He was called Dane and he must've been no more than nineteen. He wore a canary yellow polo shirt, scarlet red shorts and tennis shoes and fancied himself rotten. He took the whistle on the string around his neck and gave a short parp, clapping his hands as it dropped back to his chest. 'OK then, people. Let's have you all lined up and ready.' People, Eric thought. They got this rubbish from TV. Here was a bloody kid teaching adults how to do the doggie paddle and carrying on like he was some chief exec. Eric gripped the rail and got into the pool inch by inch, trying not to shiver. He resisted the temptation to clasp his goose-pimpled arms around his chest and risk a tumble. Eric knew people were looking at his birthmark. They'd been cruel at school and the jibes had never left him. They'd pointed and laughed so he never wanted to take off his shirt. He dreaded the baking hot July days when they'd all wander down the field. All the other boys would take off their shirts and they'd taunt him. Paint splash, he got called, or simply Splat. It was blood red and stamped on his chest like spilt paint. Sticks and stones, his mum always said as if that made it any better. People didn't point like they used to and they didn't mock him, openly at least, but only because he got to keep his shirt on these days. When they saw him swimming, they nudged each other or pulled a face. Here he was paying

twenty quid to do something he'd loathed when he was eight.

The 'No Petting' signs had gone; the verruca pool too. But there was no escaping the sense of failure. Thirty odd years had passed and still he couldn't do it. Dane blew his whistle again and said, 'Come on Mr Prentice; that means you too.' Eric flushed at the mention of his name and waded through the waist-high water to his preferred spot. He took a foam float from the side of the pool. Dane told them to push away and kick. He made the motion with his arms, up and down like a diver's legs. Twelve of them had turned up for this week's lesson. There were no new faces. Eric had seen them come and go. Most learned in a few weeks or months but he'd been coming for years on and off. What was worse was knowing they talked about him as if he was one of those idiots who took 30-odd attempts to pass their driving test. He'd been in the cubicle when Dane had been chatting up one of the girls.

'Jesus, is he still coming?' she said. 'He brings his own float, doesn't he?'

'Mr Prentice is one of our regulars. If he ever learns to swim this place will go bankrupt.'

Eric could've had their jobs, but he'd been too ashamed to leave the

cubicle. He kicked as hard as he could. He felt their stare and his cheeks burned as his legs thrashed and he struggled despite the float, spluttering and coughing as his feet sought the smooth tiles beneath him. Sometimes he'd wipe the stinging water from his eyes and he'd see an old dear watching him from the little café behind the glass and waving or trying to gee him, give him a little encouragement. It only made things worse. Eric hated that. Or he'd get there early and see some snotty-nosed kid do a length and punch the air as claps and cheers rang out in the gallery. After ten minutes of splashing and thrashing Dane blew the whistle and told them to put their floats aside. Eric's heart began to pound as he threw his float into a pile at poolside. A sign stood a few metres away. It read 'Swimmers only.' It might as well have read 'Here Be Dragons.' Eric have never gone beyond it and he doubted he ever would.

'Well then Mr Prentice. Is this going to be your week?'

He spread out the tartan blanket he'd brought from the boot. He lay down on his front and cupped his chin in his palms. He'd forgotten his sunglasses but if he squinted and used his folded newspaper as a kind of visor he could make out the jagged stretch of coast close to the

horizon. Far beyond, on a clear day, were the mountains of Ireland but the mini-heatwave everyone had got so excited about had put paid to that. He took out a tartan flask from his bag. It'd been his mother's and he'd caught folk smirking when he used it, but it still worked. He unscrewed the square bone-coloured cup and poured some steaming orange tea into it. It was still and he could smell the flowering gorse and the trace of an illegal fire that had been cut in the peaty turf. If it warmed up a little more he decided, he might take off his cardigan. He took out his book and the two small and smooth pebbles he'd selected on the beach. He opened the book and set a pebble down at the edge of each page. He hadn't read more than a few lines when he heard shouts echoing from the cave below. Eric was in a favourite spot, a dip in the headland sheltered from the sea breeze and overlooking the golden sands of the cove. Picnic blankets were laid out, a game of cricket was taking place and a giant heart was being scrawled in the sand; an arrow being struck through it with driftwood. The kids explored the cave but Eric knew they couldn't go far and they threw stones at the rocks instead, bawling and shrieking till they grew tired of the echoes. Eric snuggled down into the blanket, closing his eyes until the sun began to burn his back. He poured more tea, watched the same kids scurry like

ants from the rocks into the retreating waves.

There must've been a dozen fishing boats out there; dark specks that broke the golden, shimmering water; weekenders and caravan owners hoping for a catch for tonight's barbecues at Mackerel Point. The rocks were purplish, or a faint grey in the haze reminding Eric of a collage he'd made with tissue paper at school.

The kids were digging a trench, building walls either side to channel the seawater. One of them had got hold of a lilo. He dragged it into the shallows and jumped on it sliding off and bouncing into the surf. The lilo floated a little way and he dived again grabbing it in a hug. Eric watched, raising his head now and again between lifting the stones to turn the pages. Despite the sunlight, he knew it would be bitter, bone-numbingly cold in the water. Some of the others grabbed the lilo and dragged it back on shore. There must have been a loop or a toggle or something and they tied a length of rope they'd found in the seaweed to it. The first boy sat on the lilo and two of the others dragged it into the water. They gasped as waves fizzed and splashed against their bellies as they stomped out from the shore. They were some twenty metres from the shore, up to their chests and staggering and stumbling as the current tugged at their legs. Eric was squinting, developing a headache

and cursing he'd forgotten his sunglasses. One boy let go, then the other did too. The glare made Eric close his eyes and when he did he saw a relief of the coast. They were shouting but a little wind had got up snatching their words and carrying them out to sea. The lilo drifted a few metres further and Eric got to his feet. He went to speak but felt stupid for how could they hear him? The two boys who'd towed the lilo were wrestling in the shallows, flipping and tumbling as if they were practising judo. The lilo drifted further from the shore and the boy got off his bum and onto his knees. He sat up, framing his eyes against the sun as if he was scouting for landfall. A little wind had got up and Eric drew his cardigan tighter at his neck. The golden water was no longer a millpond. The boy shouted something but his friends didn't hear. He was thirty, maybe forty metres from the shore now. Eric shouted for him to paddle, to kick but he wasn't heard. Eric never could whistle. The boy drifted further out. Eric shouted and pointed and jumped up and down on the spot till he felt the soft earth shake beneath his feet. 'Help him! Somebody help please!' The ice cream van played 'Half a pound of tupenny rice' and a motorbike roared off doing wheelies. There were shouts of 'Out!' from the beach cricket and a song Eric didn't know blaring from the radio.

Now, at last, the boy was shouting too. The boys on the beach were doing forward rolls and flips. The lilo was at the mouth of the bay where the headland began to turn for Mackerel Point. White water broke over rocks and Eric feared the boy would be drawn toward them. Eric ran to where the boy was drifting and scrambled his way down the headland. The lilo had turned a little and Eric shouted as the boy headed his way. He had to get down on his backside and grasp at loose rock and clumps of turf as he shuffled down. Eric got to the edge and then another layer of grass and rock opened out. Far below the sea shimmered and Eric tried not to think about the drop. The boy was screaming for help, but it came in drifts when the wind carried it. He grabbed at anything he could. Flinty rock broke free and scattered below. Eric sat on a ledge trying hard to focus and slow his breathing. The lilo had slowed and was bobbing back and forth on a swell. The boy had his back turned to Eric. He was crying and seemed to have given up shouting for help. Eric swallowed. He was jittery with adrenaline, his legs wobbly as if they might buckle at any moment. If the lilo kept drifting, he calculated it would pass right beneath him. He didn't have a rope but he had to do something. Eric had to turn to face the rock and he clung to it, pressing his cheek against it as he felt for a way down the last few metres. The

boy had seen him, but Eric didn't dare turn for fear of falling.

'Help me! Come on, help!'

Eric's forehead was beaded with sweat. I can't, he thought. He glanced over his shoulder and the rocks and the sea span as if he was on the deck of a ship in a storm. He swallowed back bile.

'Jump in. It's nothing.'

'I can't,' he said, almost a whisper.

'Help me, please!'

Eric wedged his fist in a cleft in the rock, crying out as he skinned his knuckles. He twisted to see the boy drifting away. Five metres became ten and then he rounded the rocks at the point and the current took him and Eric cried and said he was so sorry. When he opened his eyes the boy was a speck drifting away to Mackerel Point. When Eric got back the tartan blanket and his bag and his book – weighed down with the two stones – were where he'd left them. Everything was as it had been except the tea was cold. But nothing would ever be the same. He poured the tea away into the spiky headland grass and screwed the cap back on his flask. He sat on the blanket, head in his hands, as the Coastguard helicopter swept overhead and out to sea. It was only when

Eric got back to the cottage he realised his mobile phone had been in his pocket all along.

He swiped at the tiles and missed. His head plunged and there were gasps in the gallery as he sank beneath the surface. Folk were on their feet in the gallery. He kicked hard, one last stroke, and he grabbed the side gasping. They were clapping and cheering and Dane had got the staff lined up at the steps. Eric got out dripping and shivering and they shook his hand in turn, patting his back and telling him he'd cracked it. Afterwards, when he'd dried himself Eric got a coffee but he spilt the sugar his hand was shaking so much. He took a pad and a fountain pen from his backpack.

‘Writing to tell everyone?’ Dane said.

Eric managed a grin. ‘Something like that.’

He took a sheet of blue paper and he began to write Sorry. He crumpled the sheet and started again. For ten years, he'd written ‘Sorry’ and never got any further. He would write a letter and there would be no money. He would tell them and then he would stop.



Richard Lakin studied chemistry and has worked as a labourer, a journalist, and a policeman on the London Underground. He has published short stories in journals including Londonist, Structo and The Oxonian Review. He has won the Guardian family travel writing prize and Daily Telegraph's Just Back, travel piece of the year. He lives in Staffordshire and blogs at www.richlakin.wordpress.com