

A RANDOM ACT OF KINDNESS

CRUEL TO BE KIND

One more event, the Boxing Day walk, to endure, then he could reasonably retreat to his room, and tomorrow he could head off at the crack of dawn, back to his small flat in Richmond.

Christmas had been as grim as Ben feared, the constant jibes from his stepmother ringing louder in his ears than the gentle Carols from King's. Even his carefully chosen gift, a set of jams from Fortnum's, including the champagne strawberry conserve that the eager young assistant had advised was a huge seller this year, was simply met with a terse, "Well, I see you want me to get fat!"

"GET fat..." he'd thought to himself, noticing the waistband of her garish skirt straining even more than it had last year. How he wished he was the sort who could throw in a pithy response, but instead he lowered his eyes and stared at his remaining brussels sprout.

Ben had but a distant recall of his mother, who died in an accident when he was small. His elder sister had provided him with details of her beauty and gentleness, and occasionally he experienced a whiff of her memory, but never enough to sustain his spirit. By the time he was twelve, his father had found love again. At first, Ben and Lucy were delighted for their Dad, kind-hearted and generous as he was, but then they met Medusa, as Lucy and Ben dubbed her (she never seemed to have control of her hair). All brash get-up, that harsh voice grating across any room. Lucy reckoned Dad had lost his marbles, but she came to accept their new stepmother by ignoring her. It was easier for Lucy; outgoing,

beautiful and smart, she was only at home for a few years before taking off to university, returning for occasional, brief holidays.

It was so different for Ben, who had struggled with a stammer and found social situations painful. His stepmother seemed to find every fault in him, even if there wasn't one. Many years later, he would discover the source of her resentment was probably her inability to have children of her own, his presence like a claxon, reminding her of her predecessor's fecundity. Throughout school, even though Ben's academic achievements were impressive, his shyness meant he was never the golden boy, never popular and thus, receiving few party invitations, he spent more time at home and in her direct firing-line. Dad never seemed to notice her barbs, her cruelty; maybe he just wanted a peaceful life.

Ben pulled on his walking shoes, resentful that Lucy had, yet again, managed to cry off Christmas; something about in-laws having had a difficult year. This conveniently happened every year, Ben noted, although it was never mentioned. Two of his stepmother's cousins were present, and the chatter of this threesome echoed throughout the house like fingernails down a blackboard. Dad seemed quieter than normal, and Ben's anger rose as he noticed that Medusa was now picking on his gentle father.

By the time they set off on Boxing Day, after admonishments about Ben's shabby outerwear, a light rain had set in, and the wind was beginning to whip through the trees. Their traditional walk took them inland, through a copse, but Medusa declared that this would be unpleasant in the weather, so why not take the coast path, over the cliffs? The cousins inevitably agreed, and as neither Ben nor his Dad seemed to have the energy to argue, they found themselves trudging upwards, out of the town, towards the white cliffs.

Ben tried to ignore the cousins' enquiries about his work, knowing it would elicit yet more scorn about his chosen path as a private gardener to city folk, but it seemed this was exactly what Medusa had been waiting for. Her insults ringing in his ears, Ben picked up his pace and walked sufficiently ahead of the group, trying to find some peace on an unseen, remote section of path. The wind now blew in violent gusts and it was all Ben could do to keep a safe distance from the cliff's edge. He didn't notice anybody around him when suddenly, Medusa caught up with him.

"Don't walk away from me!" she squawked as she staggered up to him, the effort of the climb evident in her bright red cheeks and gulps for breath.

Ben marched on.

"Turn around," she gasped. "Listen to me!"

Most of the words were lost on the breeze, and he was just turning to meet his fate, when something rushed past them, a small dog.

"Hercules!" another voice carried on a gust of wind in their direction, but the dog appeared to have no desire to stop.

Then things happened so quickly, Ben was never able to ascertain the order of events. The dog barked, the wind blew, there was a scream, then another scream. By the time Ben took in the scene, a girl with blonde curls whipping about her face was staring at him in horror.

"I... I... what have I done?"

Ben looked around; just the three of them. Ben, the dog – Hercules, presumably – and this stricken girl.

"She's... she stepped back when Hercules..."

The girl was fumbling for her phone when it dawned on Ben what had happened. In the calm between gusts of wind, he edged towards the fringe of the cliff and peered over, recoiling immediately. And yet, a warm peace crept over him and for the first time since his childhood, he felt in control.

“No... no signal...” The girl, still fumbling, looked at him.

He noticed the soft blonde locks, the huge violet eyes, and the sheer terror etched on her face.

“Go,” he said. “Nobody’s around. I’ll head back to my family and call help. But, you go. It wasn’t your fault. Just... go!”

He peered over the edge again, just to make sure. Yep, no coming back from that angle.

“But... I’ve killed her!”

For some reason, Ben was tempted to look again. No change; the fates were finally smiling on him.

“Well, not you. The dog just... and she stepped back and... where is Hercules?”

“Oh, God! Hercules!” and with that, this vision, this angel, was gone.

“She was evil,” he called after her. “You’ve done us all a kindness.”

Events unfurled as they were bound to; an inquest declared a verdict of Accidental Death; nobody questioned it.

“Fortuitous death,” Lucy remarked.

Ben moved back home to be with his father, now a relaxed and jovial figure with renewed confidence. Lucy and her young family became frequent visitors.

Some months later, Ben sat nursing an early-evening pint in the local pub when a flash of blonde curls swept past his table, pursuing a familiar canine companion. They looked up at the same time, and recognition dawned on them.

“No, no...” Ben stood to reassure her. “Please, don’t be scared.”

She looked around, fear again stalking her face, and managed to whisper, “I’m so sorry...”

“No. Join me.”

Years later, whenever anyone asked how Ben and Molly had met, they locked eyes.

“Molly did my family a great kindness,” Ben would declare.

“Random,” Molly would respond.

(1192 words)