

THE CANAL

The railings were cold to touch. Pressing her head between the upright bars left parallel rust marks on her cheeks, but Cathy was not conscious of the fact. Slowly her knees folded and lacking resistance, she crumpled into a semi-sitting position on the splintered, dark, oily, timber of the bridge deck. Unable to suppress a tiny sob, she drew the sleeve of her grubby chequered dress across her nose and looked up. The sky was heavily overcast. The clouds were low and grey. Outside it was grey. Inside, all was deepest black.

Would they discover her here, the other children? Would they follow her and taunt her the way they had in the playground and in the street? What could she do? How could she answer their incessant accusations and ritualistic chanting? How would she escape the torment? What else, but to run away? But, not home; no, she had no wish to go home. Not yet. Better to sit here under the labouring skies in the gathering gloom of this late Autumn afternoon and gaze upon the placid green water of the canal.

It had not always been this way! There had been a time, which she could recall, before her uncle came to live with them in their house, when the sun shone, when her mother would play games with her, when they went to the Zoo or went out on picnics. Sometimes they had walked together along the towpath, crossing that very bridge, passing on past the factories and the coal sidings, on into the open fields and flower-strewn meadows, cleaning their dusty shoes on the dewy grass, exploring little copses and woods, all under permanent blue skies. On just such a walk they had found Teddy, sat by a railway sleeper, worn and neglected, maybe forgotten, his mouth sewn up in a perpetual grin which always convinced Cathy he was pleased to see her. He was faded and dirty, inevitably damp, but her mother had cheerfully sponged him with carbolic and sat him down in front of the range where he had baked and steamed before their anxious eyes. Never once throughout this ordeal did he look away from her, or alter his reassuring grin. He became a member of the family that day.

On another day they had gone to the seaside in a motor coach which they had boarded outside the Town Hall. It had been a long trip and Cathy had been sick, but this had not been allowed to detract from the limitless pleasure of the occasion, the yawning sands, the vast sea, the tireless donkeys, and ice cream. Teddy had travelled on her lap, looking out of the window. Had the corners of his mouth actually dropped just a little when she was ill? It was all over very quickly, but she thought they had. The day had been a golden occasion.

Tears gathered. How different everything was now! At home her mother was peevish and her uncle was constantly critical. At school her teacher was impatient and the other children, intolerant. Only Teddy was constant. Apart from him, how different life was!

The girls were the worst. If she had been a boy, she could have fought with the other boys and, even had she lost, she would have gained some honour in showing the spirit to fight. But what could she do against the girls? What hurt her all the more was her inability to discover the reason for her torment. It seemed to stem from her mother, yet directed against Cathy it seemed designed to alienate her from her sex as well as her mother. If only she could have been an orphan. At least orphans did not have the liability of parents unless they were adopted. Then they would know where they stood, wouldn't they? Love would be constant and consistent. Teddy was an orphan, she knew that. She had adopted him and loved him, all the time. Teddy knew exactly where he stood.

The teacher complained about her inattentiveness in class. "She is a clever little girl," she told her mother, "but she is for ever in a day dream and she doesn't mix well with the other children."

“Your teacher says you don't mix well,” her mother had said sharply in one of her rare bursts of interest and she seemed concerned about her daughter's well-being. “Why don't you?” Cathy had not answered. How could she?

Below her the still, elastic, surface of the water stretched away towards the town. She was fascinated by its greasy, green appearance and tried to imagine how deep the canal was and what lay at the bottom. Folklore described sections of it as being quite unfathomable. A city double-deck bus had disappeared without trace, they said. Cathy could not forget the ghastly stories of children, like Mrs Henderson's daughter, all families even, drowning, trapped in the weeds. These tales were related by her mother who seemed to have a pathological fear of its waters and who had always grasped Cathy's hand very firmly as they gave the edge a wide berth in the days when they went on their walks together. That was a time before her uncle came. It was all very different now.

Children drowned? Little ones? What had happened to them? Had it been painful? Were they still at the bottom, or were they now with the angels, in Heaven, looking down upon her? Could that have been how Teddy came to be an orphan? Listen! Could she hear their voices, far off, calling to her, crying her name? Oh, how calm, cool, and receptive the waters looked. How inviting!

The voices grew into a tumult as a group of children led by two of the older girls appeared around the edge of a fence flanking the towpath. They were chanting:

“Cathy, Cathy Bloor,
Your mother is a whore,
We've told you so before.
Cathy, Cathy Bloor.”

It was the same rhythmic chant that accompanied the mindless skipping and ball-bouncing in the playground. They had found her!

She did not move. Instead she crouched and watched, like a trapped animal hypnotised by the headlamps of an oncoming car, as the phalanx trooped along the path and stamped its way up the steps and onto the bridge. Then she was surrounded, conscious only of accusative faces and the nightmarish fingers, wagging in time to the repeated, monotonous, verse. Petrified, she sank lower and shut her eyes.

“What's going on here, then?” called a deep voice. “Be off, you varmints!” The children fled. Like a pack of disturbed starlings there was a flutter and they were gone. Cathy was alone on the bridge except for the tall, swarthy, man who had approached along the bank, unnoticed by all until he stride onto the bridge-deck. “Hello, little girl,” he said, coming up and squatting close beside her. “Don't be afraid. They've gone. They won't be back.” Cathy studied him. In the gloom his face was shaded and most of his features obscured, but she could make out a dark, pointed, beard and a pair of bright eyes which were fixed on her from beneath his bushy eyebrows. “What's your name, mmmmmmmmm?”

She hesitated for a moment before whispering a barely audible, “Catherine.” The stranger nodded. His hand reached out towards her and a new kind of horror gripped her. In her mind she recalled the painful occasion when her uncle had taken her onto his lap and placed his hands up her frock. At that very moment her mother had come into the room and a dreadful scene had followed. She had been sent up to bed prematurely, not fully understanding why, but sensing some outrage of which she considered herself innocent. Her mother had screamed at her uncle, telling him that if he laid hands on her daughter again she would kill him. The thought made her shudder.

“Would you like a sweet?” said the stranger, fishing in his pocket. “Then, perhaps, we could take a little walk together?”

Terror flooded into her mind from all directions. Loud, and above all else, she could hear her mother's voice, repetitive, insistent, strict and forbidding. Instinctively she darted under the outstretched arm and fled, running blindly past the doorstep of the dreaded Mrs Henderson's house, not stopping until she reached the relative sanctuary of her own doorstep.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the gloom of that day blended into night. Cathy ate her plate of stew, chewed the hardened bread, and was taken and put to bed, unwashed. Teddy lay there, beside her. Throughout the evening her mother had appeared more irritable than was normal while her uncle has barely said a word, remaining slouched at the kitchen table, belching his way through several large glasses of stout. He would eye her across the table in a manner that made Cathy squirm and which added to her misery. Several times the thought of the bearded stranger passed across her mind like a dreadful cloud, but she dared not mention it.

But then, in her small, chilly, bedroom, in the darkness illuminated by a sole, short, candle placed by the bedside, her mother's mood changed. She efficiently tucked in the sheet and blanket and, smoothing her skirt, sat at the foot of the bed. Cathy could just distinguish her nose and her lips as she talked, but the remainder of her features and body seemed to be dismembered and blurred into the infinite blackness that lay beyond. "I am sorry, darling," she began in that tone which Cathy knew from long ago, and which she loved so, the voice that produced waves of warmth rippling right down to her toes. "I have made such a mess of things. I did what I thought was right at the time. It all seemed right, at the time. It seemed to be in our best interests, but it has all turned out wrong."

"Mummy?" whispered Cathy as the candle flickered and dimmed.

"Mummy loves you," she responded, leaning forward into the fading light. "Don't ever forget that, Cathy. Never!" Her lips burnt Cathy's forehead. "Mummy loves her little darling," she repeated. For a moment she held her child and hugged her, warm, alive and loving. Then a crash from downstairs, as if someone had upset the table and all that was on it, shattered the spell. Released, Cathy fell back onto the mattress and her mother extinguished the stub of the candle. At the door she paused. "I'll leave it ajar so that you can see the hall light and won't be frightened. Night, night! Night, night Teddy!"

It was her real mother, the one from long ago, from the days of their joint innocence. Joy and warmth filled Cathy's heart and suffused through her body and limbs until it reached the very extremities of her small being. A faint light reached her from the staircase and barely illuminated the bedroom. She turned on her side towards Teddy, and prayed. For her mother, with more compassion than she had mustered for a long time, and for Teddy, with an unspoken plea to God to keep his seams intact and his eyes in place. Then she lay awake for a long time, basking in a reverie of Christmas Eve excitement, until she dropped into a light sleep.

She dreamed vividly. There were the children, following her with sticks and jibes. There was the canal bridge and there, commanding her retreat, dark, foreboding, stood the bearded stranger, calling her name and beckoning. Suddenly she realised she was awake. It was dark and she was seized by a panic about school and the fresh torment and troubles that the new day would bring. Could she run away? But, where to? And while she was contemplating her pathetic options, she became aware of her mother's voice, raised in an argument with her uncle, below. The words were indistinct, but she heard her name mentioned, coupled with the phrase "her right", repeated several times.

The scullery door was flung back and the argument was lucid. Her mother was shouting, shrieking. "If that happens, I'll kill myself! Do you hear? I'll take my own life! I'll, I'll jump in the canal, like the Henderson girl! That's what I will do! You don't think so? You don't think I mean it? Oh, but I do! How I do!"

"Do it then, you stupid cow," cried her uncle. "Only keep your sodding voice down. The bleeding neighbours will hear every word!"

“Neighbours? Neighbours?” Her mother's voice was raised to a new intensity and pitch. “Let them all hear! What do I care?”

“Come here, you drunken bitch.”

“I'll let them know! I'll let them all know! They're always into other people's business, poking, prying. I'll tell them! I am going to tell them and the whole world about you!” Her mother was now in the hall, at the front door. Cathy heard the screech of a bolt being drawn, followed by a muffled scraping and a dull thud as something was knocked down.

“Come here, you bitch,” cried her uncle as if through clenched teeth. “I'll teach you!” There was a further crash as somebody collided with the front door, followed by several thuds, then silence. Unable to resist, Cathy crept from her bed and peered through the crack in the bedroom doorway. Her view of the hall was restricted, but below she could see the outline of her uncle, breathing heavily, slumped against the front door as if holding it shut against the neighbours and the rest of the World. At his feet, partly obscured by the banisters, lay her mother, sprawled across the floor. As she watched, he kicked her mother's ribs, then prodded her unresponsive body with his toe. Cathy's first thought was to run downstairs to her mother's side, but an unknown and powerful force held her back. Quietly and secretly, she crept back to her bed and lay very still, holding her breath and listening very carefully. All was silent now except for the beating of her heart, and the heavy, disjointed, mutterings and breathing from her uncle. Was it getting louder? Was he coming up the stairs and to her bedroom? Cathy screwed her eyes tightly shut and pulled the blanket up over her head.

A little way off a locomotive hissed and whistled at the truck as they cannoned into each other, complaining with their squeaky wheels and rattling chains. Farther away, a clock struck once, and there, in her mind, was the canal, languid and inviting. She slipped slowly into the caressing and soothing waters, down below the dreamy surface and, without realising it, she was asleep again.

A groping, impertinent, ray of sunlight awoke Cathy next morning. For several minutes she lay still, enjoying the feeble warmth. Then she was chilled by the recollection of the night's events. Had it really happened? Had she really seen her mother prostrate in the hallway? Or had it all been a dream? Her gaze swung from the window to the door. It was shut. Perhaps it had all been a dream, both her mother's visit and the quarrel.

Her uncle was calling her name from the bottom of the stairs. His voice penetrated her head and scattered her thoughts asunder. She was to get up. Time was getting on! She dressed slowly, singing below her breath then, wearing that week's clothes, she descended the uncarpetted stairs and went out into the dim, damp scullery.

“Come along, young lady,” grunted her unshaven uncle. “Yer ma's got one of 'er 'eads. She's sleeping it off. We won't be seeing 'er this side of the afternoon.”

The porridge was luke warm and lumpy, but Cathy enjoyed the bread and dripping. Then her uncle was hurtling her out into the hall. She wanted to go upstairs, to say good-bye to her mother, but his scowl froze the request on his lips. She remained silent.

Cathy crossed the uneven cobbled street. In the shade, a few doors away and always given a wide berth by the children, stood the dreaded Mrs Henderson, old, bent, wizened, demented and witch-like. At least, it was local lore that she was a witch. Inquisitively, Cathy always turned one eye towards the house to see if she could glimpse the broomstick the children gossiped about, or the point of a hat appearing above a window cill, but she was always disappointed. Mrs Henderson was not that indiscreet. “I can see ye, Cathy Bloor!” she cackled, waving an accusing bony finger which, for all Cathy knew, might have been used that very morning to transform a number of frogs. “Ye'll be late for school and the devil'll catch ye!” The vision of the bearded stranger arose and, once again, Cathy was running.

That morning at school passed relatively uneventfully. Even the other children were muted in their attacks. Nevertheless, Cathy deliberately meandered and detoured from the direct route home at lunchtime. It avoided confrontation with the children, and the canal drew her, like a magnet, to its banks. She sat on the bridge and without interest, almost unconsciously, watched several policemen moving along each bank, looking in the water and raking about amongst the weeds and debris with long poles. Her thoughts ran aimlessly over the events of the last day, without her once wondering what the police were doing there. It was a pang from her stomach that brought her to her senses and she stood, ready to continue her journey home. And there, coming from the direction of the colliery, was the bearded stranger. He had spotted her! He was running towards her calling her name! Cathy needed no bidding. Mrs Henderson's prophecy was about to be fulfilled. So she ran, pausing briefly at the end of the fence and a bend in the towpath to look around. A confused scene greeted her eyes. The man, intent on her, had not, at first, noticed the police. They were now chasing him along the opposite bank. A whistle blew and more policemen appeared, springing up like magic, like the Prometheans out of the very ground. In a brief, helmet-rolling, struggle the stranger was overpowered. Cathy watched him led away. Not once did he glance in her direction.

At home the house was empty and uninviting. A misspelt note in untidy capitals that had never gone to school informed her that both the writer and her mother had gone out and that her lunch was in the bread bin. There she found a single, rough-cut, cheese sandwich, which she washed down with water from the dull brass tap. Far off she heard a clock strike, the same clock that she had heard during the night. A shadow formed and grew in the scullery as an irrational fear of the hallway and the foot of the stairs possessed her. Then it was gone, lasting no more than a minute, but as she closed the back door behind her and went out the gate, running back to the school as fast as her legs would carry her, something of its essence remained.

The afternoon held a surprise for Cathy. Halfway through a dull arithmetic lesson the classroom door opened and the stern, aged, headmistress appeared. Slightly alarmed, her sharp, youthful, teacher swished around the desks and the two women met near the huge, cast-iron, steam-fed, radiator on which the children dried their clothes. They talked in subdued tones and Cathy was unable to hear what passed, but their glances in her direction confirmed that she was both the subject and the objective of their conversation. She blushed deeply and instinctively looked towards the doorway. There, dirty and unkempt, filling the frame, was her uncle.

Flustered she shuffled her school books and replaced them below the well-polished lid to her desk. "Come, Cathy, come here," said the teacher in the softest voice Cathy had ever known her to use, beckoning and shaking her head sympathetically. The eyes of the other children seared her neck as she made her way to the door and left the classroom for the last time. Her teacher's attitude was not matched by that of her uncle. "Your mother 'as gone away," he snarled, tugging her arm as they descended the hollowed stone steps below the palandromic date and passed out through the wrought-iron gates. "We must follow 'er."

At the house Cathy went up to her bedroom. Passing her mother's room she noticed that several drawers were pulled out and were now empty. In her room she stood at the window and watched the steam rise in a black and grey cloud above the goods yard. Pack her belongings? Where was she going? Teddy looked at her from the bed. In his fidelity, he was pleased to see her. She picked him up and hugged him tightly.

"Come and 'ave dinner," called her uncle from the bottom of the stairs. Puzzled she took her place at the wooden table and eyed, without enthusiasm, the revived portion of the previous day's stew. Opposite, her uncle sat, studying her with an odd, leering, expression. "You're a pretty girl," he said at length. "Prettier than your mother." He fidgeted on his chair and rubbed the palms of his hands on his trouser-legs. "I'm sure we can get along together, Cathy. Get along fine. As long as you're a good girl, eh? You know what good girls do, don't you?"

An Arctic wind swept across the ice caps and froze Cathy to the chair. "Where's my mother gone?" she blurted. "What have you done to her? Has she jumped in the canal?"

Her uncle's eyes closed until the narrow slits looked like letterboxes. "Canal?" he hissed. "What makes you ask that?"

The wind blew stronger, but the ice was breaking beneath her feet. Great cracks appeared, yawning crevices running zig-zagging away, bottom-less chasms surrounded her, and with it all, came naked terror. He started to rise, towering above her, threatening, about to strike. She had to answer. "Last night," she cried, "I heard"

Surprise registered on his features before his face contorted into an evil grimace. "What did you hear last night, Cathy? You must tell me. What did you hear?" She looked into her lap and prayed that God would forgive her.

"Nothing," she whispered. "I hid under the blankets. I was afraid." The crevice had been too wide to jump but slowly it was closing. Soon she would be safe.

Her uncle moved away, crossing to the sink and, leaning on the edge, peered intently out into the yard. "The canal," he repeated to himself several times in a reflective whisper which was deliberately loud enough for Cathy to hear. "The canal! She wouldn't, though would she? Could she?" He swung around and faced Cathy, his face grotesquely animated as he pounded one fist into an open palm. She trembled as her heart raced and Teddy was squeezed even tighter. What was going to happen now?

His face changed and a crooked smile appeared. "The canal!" he exclaimed. "We must go and look there! Tell you what, you go on, Cathy, quickly now. I'll clear up here and follow!" His outstretched hand caught her shoulder and unwittingly she revolved. "Go on," he extolled. "Run as fast as you can. Don't stop and talk to no-one!" The rough hand now fumbled her neck and sent a creeping paralysis down her body as Cathy found herself hustled to the front door and out, onto the pavement. "Go on!" he commanded. "Run!"

Without thought or knowing why, she ran to the end of the street, straight past Mrs Henderson's step, but once around the corner and out of sight of the house, she slowed to a walk. In her mind she could see nothing but the green, stagnant, water and, superimposed, the spectre of her mother, lying at the bottom of the stairs. Suddenly she was in the water, sinking below the imagined placid, restful, surface, watching the sky disappear after it had changed to green. "Oh, no Mummy!" she exclaimed aloud, and broke into a run again, clutching the bear even tighter.

Ten minutes later, Cathy's uncle stepped into the street. Two doors away Mrs Hopkins eyed him with hostility and laid down her brush. Beyond stood Mrs Henderson with her insane smile. "Have either of you seen our Cathy?" he called anxiously. "She was at 'ome one minute but when I looked, there she was, gone!" Mrs Hopkins appearance softened and she waved her hand.

"I saw her a little while ago. She was running down the road. Is anything wrong?"

"She'll be in canal by now," cackled Mrs Henderson. "Devil'll take her."

"Shush you silly woman," hissed Mrs Hopkins. "Don't y'know what's happened?" The mad woman shook her head.

"It's all the same," she muttered. "We'll all end up there, dead, dead, dead." As he reached the end of the street he heard her front door slam.

The weather had changed again. At the canal, Cathy sat in a gloomy semi-darkness under a heavy cloud, pregnant with rain. The light grew dimmer and dimmer, but she could see the indistinct figures of a group of men approaching. There was no sign of her mother. Were they looking for her, too? Weakness sapped her limbs as she recognised the bearded stranger amongst them as they advanced slowly and cautiously. They were examining the canal again.

Before she could move to safety, a force gripped her arms. Dark and menacing above her stood her uncle. His teeth gleamed as he smiled and she thought she saw a red light in his eyes. Terror and pain wracked her tiny body as he thrust his free hand across her mouth, half-

suffocating her and suppressing the scream that would never have come, anyway. “Don't you dare,” he hissed. “Not a sound out of you, you little bitch! You understand?”

From what seemed to be far off she heard someone shout and for a brief moment her uncle's attention was distracted. Cathy suddenly twisted out of his grip and darted under his arm, clattering across the loose planks, now down the steps, now across the towpath, now into thin air. The coldness and the force with which she struck the water shocked her. Almost stunned she seemed to float on the surface for ages, conscious of the dark sky above her, then the undulating colours of the banks before, slowly, almost with reluctance, the waters opened and she felt herself sink below the green blanket. At first the taste was vile and she choked, rapidly expelling the little volume of air that remained in her lungs. Then she inhaled water, and a serene and beautiful aura overcame her. Calmly, peacefully, instinctively, she began to pray and saw her mother reaching out to her. She could see how happy they would be, together again. Consciousness and unconsciousness merged and Cathy could no longer distinguish between the two.

On the towpath the group of men stood, stunned, and watched as Teddy, making a valiant, inanimate, effort, floated to the surface, limbs outstretched, like a buoy marking the spot where his mistress had plunged. But the water seeped through his skin, saturating his very stuffing, and he sunk, slowly oscillating, like a last leaf falling in the still of a mist-laden November day. Never once did he remove his glassy stare from the onlookers. Then he was gone and only a diminishing gap in the crust and the occasional bubble of air marked the dreadful spot.

Cathy was assailed by voices from all around. From behind her she could hear the voice of her father, living and vibrant, calling her name, but gradually becoming more and more distant. Before her, seemingly at an immeasurable distance beyond life, bland yet soothing, she could hear her mother. In that instant she knew the truth. Not only was she initiated into the vast universal truth that had existed since time began, but also that which encompassed her microscopic brief life. Her father was calling out, from life, to no more than an illusion, a something that once had been. Cathy knew.

A short time later a sad cortege made its slow way along the ash-black of the towpath; the policemen, the merchant seaman who had been released from the distant prison in which he had long been, unjustly, incarcerated, and his handcuffed brother. Very gradually they became distanced, fading into the grey, polluted air, and were gone. The curtain of slime, which previously had parted briefly, drawn by invisible forces, closed again, a barrier between the living and the dead, until under the bleak, sunless sky, the canal lay, solid, marble-like, and still.

THE END

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