

Don't let go!

There were railings now. White railings. A child could not reach the water. Other than that the canal flowed as it had fifty-one years before. Perhaps the banks were not so cluttered with debris then. Of course the water levels were the same, not deep - but deep enough to drown a child.

Conrad shuddered briefly. There had been no risk of that. The child had only been in the water for a minute. He looked about him. An old barge he remembered was still here, tethered by the road bridge crossing to the flour mill. Someone had kept it painted in its original colours. The mill had changed. Tall silos behind refurbished buildings, now surrounded by great lorry trailers waiting for the weighbridge. Turning full circle he saw the row of terraced houses facing the canal across an expanse of flour dusted grass. They would have been mill workers cottages once. There had been a considerable amount of renovation since he last saw them. The little shop was still there - the shop where he had left the soggy teddy bear.

The warm sun on his back reminded him of the summer day when he had stood here before with winter in his heart. "Conrad". She had spoken his name. Mostly he was known as Con. He was never sure why his parents had chosen the name. He suspected his mother liked it just for the sake of being different - perhaps because it was the name of a chain of luxury hotels. His father had not stayed around long enough for him to ask, though apparently, he was a well-educated man. As a young man, Conrad had dreamed he was named after Joseph Conrad. He read the nautical novels avidly. Perhaps it explained his love of water. Living alone with a mother he never really knew, did not prepare him for his romantic encounter with Louise.

A little girl shrieked as she ran behind him along the tow path. For a moment his heart missed a beat. He was relieved to see the child's mother walking quickly behind her and resumed his thoughts. *'Conrad!'* He had never forgotten the silky tone of her voice. They had stood just here that morning all those years ago. He could still see her. *'Louise,'* he had said. *'I think you're beautiful.'* She had turned her head away for a moment before looking straight at him with a new coldness in her eyes. *'Conrad. We've had a wonderful weekend and I am really grateful, but I don't love you. It won't work for us. I can see that now.'* Conrad was stunned with the force of a boxer's unexpected punch. She had been quiet at breakfast but that was not unusual. How little he had understood of relationships. Louise had said *'Sorry!'* and walked out of Conrad's life. He had made to follow Louise, protesting, but the child's urgent cry called to him. He saw her - just a little girl lying in the water, she and her teddy bear moving slowly with the flow.

Immediately he deduced what had happened. The child's teddy bear must have fallen into the water and she, trying to retrieve it had slipped and fallen. Conrad hesitated - torn between the child and Louise who was already striding away from the scene. He rushed to edge of the canal, slipping on moss, regaining his balance and jumped down into the water. He grabbed the child and stood her on the bank. She stared at him through penetrating blue eyes, her black hair dripping water - a round, full face made for laughter. *'Stand there a minute. I'll get your teddy bear.'* Suddenly, as waking from sleep, she shrieked, turned and ran off across the green. Conrad had to let her go if he was to retrieve the teddy bear. By now it was lodged in ropes hanging from an old barge. He pulled at the teddy bear. It came away in his hands minus one ear.

'Well done young man!' An older man, who had lazily watched the rescue, called down from the barge.

'I think she's all right.' Conrad turned away, wet and embarrassed. *'I'll find her and give her back her bear.'*

'She lives at the shop,' the barge man instructed him.

Soaked to the thighs, Conrad crossed the green to the terrace and the shop, wringing water from the teddy bear. He stood at the door and called. He was too wet to go in. He heard the girl crying again - scolded tears this time - and her mother's voice raised.

'I told you never to go there by yourself. Get those wet things off.'

It did not seem timely for Conrad to intrude. He put the teddy down to drip on a rubber mat inside the shop and made his way back to the bed and breakfast place where he changed his clothes and packed the rest of his things. Beautiful Louise had gone, swept away like a toy in flowing water.

Conrad had never visited this place of memories again until today. Now retired and unwell, fearing the years grow shorter he was travelling back upstream in his memories. He stared at memory pictures in the water. That day had been a defining moment in Conrad's life. Already something of a loner, the romantic failure had somehow made him fearful of other relationships. Unrequited love can leave deep wounds. If he had had a family life, he often explained, he would not have been able to give himself totally to his work in the Probation Service. Many lives would have remained unclaimed. But at the end there was this loneliness. All those years! Time had flowed on like the water in the canal while its course remained unchanged, imprisoned. Now it was no longer a memory but presently real all over again.

He walked across to the shop. More a little tea room than a shop today, though it still had its bay window full of confectionary for sale. A sign in the window told him that teas and snacks were available from ten till four. His watch told him it was now ten past four. He pushed the door. A bell tinkled. He heard shuffling inside, then a woman's voice from somewhere in the house.

'We're closed!'

Conrad drew back and as he did his heart quite literally skipped a beat. Hiding behind the curtain, pulled right back into the window, was a teddy bear. He drew closer. It was! He had seen it so many times in his dreams. He had imagined it hugged fiercely amid long black hair, bouncing to a child's laughter. With its drunken, wrung-out expression and torn-off ear it could only be his rescue bear!

He had to make the connection. He knocked on the part open door which was pulled back straight away. A man, a little older than himself, stood staring at him through glazed, dead eyes. *'It's all right Dad. I'm here now.'* The man drew back into the tea room without a word. *'I'm sorry, but we have to close at four'* The tea-shop owner smiled at him. *'I have some things to do and I have to get my father's meal first.'*

Conrad responded to the smile. A warm tired rounded face, deep blue eyes and shoulder length black hair, with a few natural grey highlights.

'I don't want tea, thank you. It was the teddy bear.' He pointed to the window.

'Oh, he's mine! He's not for sale.'

'No. I know he's yours.' She looked hard at him. Conrad went on. *'It was a long time ago. I pulled him out of the canal and brought him home. If I'm not mistaken you were very wet at the time.'*

'Well!' There were no other words. Well! said it all.

'I'm sorry I can't stop now. Could you come back this evening I'd love to talk to you?'

It proved to be an evening which neither Anne nor Conrad could believe was real.

'I've always hoped you would come back.' Anne told him. *'That's why I left teddy in the window. That was after Dad came back. Sorry, I'd better tell you the whole story. I was so upset that morning by the canal. I was just four years old and missing my Dad. He had gone away. Mum said he had to go away to work. Then that morning when I'd asked for the hundredth time - When will Daddy come back? - she told me he was never coming back. She never told me any more after that. Every time I asked she simply said 'He's had to go away. Like when he was a soldier. I'll tell you all about it when you're older.'* I was a lot older before I really found out why he'd gone. *I used to get ribbed at school when I said my Dad was away. You know how it is - they talked about him going off with another woman and the like. It was when Mum died I found out the truth from my aunt Jenny. Dad had been a soldier, but when he came back he developed what they call now post traumatic stress disorder- although there were other things besides. He had gone away into hospital and Mum had said she could never have him home again.'* Anne hugged the teddy bear. *'You know, when you brought teddy back I got the idea that my Dad would come back and I kept teddy in the window to watch for him.'*

'And he did come back.' Conrad nodded towards the next room where Dad sat staring at the television.

'I brought him back! I went to visit him often and eventually I had him home for short spells. Now he stays most of the time. I had to give up work, but with the teashop and part-time jobs I get by.'

She paused and looked straight at him again - a serious laughter face reminding him of the day when it was streaked with tears and canal weed.

'That's why I've always wanted to thank you. You gave me hope. You brought my Dad back!'

Conrad shuffled in his chair, still uncomfortable with compliments, but before he could say anything Anne went on. *'That's why teddy stayed in the window. Poor thing! He never looked himself after his dunking in the river. I purposely left his damaged ear - so you would recognise him.'*

They shared a wonderful evening and even Dad woke up a little to engage with their laughter. At the door, Anne asked. *'Conrad. Will you come again? I have so enjoyed your visit.'* *'Yes! Of course,'* he responded. *'I'll be around for a bit. I'm thinking I may retire somewhere near. I came to look around - to see if I can wash away some memories. But not all of them,'* he added quickly. *'I want to let some of them flow away down the canal.'*

With mention of the canal Anne's smile faded. *'There's something I haven't told you. When you saw me by the canal I was so angry with Dad for going away. I hated him and I hated the teddy he'd given me. You know I wasn't trying to save my teddy bear. I was throwing him away but I forgot to let go!'*