

Old Bruises

It had gone quiet in the public bar at *the Lobster-Pot*, apart from the dull rumble of the waves which thundered up the shingle beach, half a street away. It was a bleak January evening, and there was no chance that anyone but regulars would be in the bar tonight.

'The only way to keep 'em in line,' Mick said with a sneer, is to show 'em who's boss now and again.' He grimaced and cracked his knuckles.

The others looked at him doubtfully. 'Paul Tofts used to smack *his* missus about,' said Yoizzer, slouching on the bar while he toyed with his Carlsberg. 'An' she walked out and left him. With three kids, and all.'

A squall of rain whipped across the windows. 'Nah,' said Gary, the landlord, as he finished drying a glass. 'You can't push 'em too far. I just let my missus go on – yak, yak, yak – till she's done. Then I say, yeah, okay, you can have your new coat, or whatever it is. And then I just forget, like.'

Yoizzer laughed into his pint. 'Yeah. I know how your missus talks. Christ, mate, I bet the donkeys round your way ain't got no hind legs left!' He chuckled to himself, then turned to Mick. 'Your Stacey might do a runner, y'know. One smack too many, and she'll walk out on yer.'

Mick flexed his shoulders and slowly lowered his glass. He stared across the bar at the row of optics and said quietly, 'She wouldn't dare, mate. She knows I'd find her. Wherever she goes.'

Gary raised an eyebrow at Yoizzer. They both knew what Stacey's bruises looked like, where they came from and how often she got them. Yoizzer silently blew out his cheeks, while Mick watched their reflections in the mirror.

The door of the pub burst open, grabbed by the wind. A wash of rain fell on the worn doormat and a thick-set figure in a dark mackintosh strode into the room. The rain dripped off him and steamed on the floor.

'D'you want to close that door, mate?' said Gary, thinking of the gas bill that had arrived that morning. Yoizzer turned and leant back on the bar, eyeing the newcomer up and down. The man's sea-grey hair still carried a few streaks of black as it swept upward from his broad forehead. The face, once strong, had sunken in over a cage of soft bones. Yoizzer thought the face looked grubby, as if it needed a good wash.

'Mick,' said the man. The voice was deep and throaty, like an ancient diesel.

Gary swallowed. This looked like trouble. He knew what Mick was like – he could take offence at almost anything. Gary pictured smashed glasses, overturned tables, drips of blood on the floor... But apprehension gave way to shock when he saw that Mick had gone as pale as an old newspaper, his mouth hanging open like a fish's. Gary was afraid he was going to drop his pint.

'Dad?' Mick croaked at last.

The other was breathing fast. Gary thought he could smell smoke. 'Mick, I need to talk. Come on, now.'

The others braced themselves; no-one ever talked to Mick like that. But Mick just swallowed.

'Come *on*, Mick,' said his dad. 'I've got no time to waste.'

Mick tried to smile. 'Er,' he said. 'Wasn't expectin' you here, Dad. You never called...'

His dad turned and stomped out. With a final glance at Yozzer, Mick rattled his glass onto the bar and followed.

'Ere! Close the door!' called Gary.

Mick stumbled out, into the shadows cast by the meagre street-lamps. His dad was heading for the prom, disappearing round the corner with hunched back and hands thrust into pockets. As Mick hurried after him, the shock began to wear off.

'I thought you was never coming here again,' he called, as he caught up. 'Thought you was all settled, in Northampton or wherever.'

'Hurry up,' his dad snapped.

Mick sniffed. 'Someone's chimney's on fire,' he said. 'Dad, where are we going?'

'Down to the sea.'

Mick looked up; the rain was easing and a gibbous moon peered between shredded clouds. 'Look, Dad – what's going on?' he said, fighting to keep the tremor out of his voice. 'You're out of my life for ten years, then all of a sudden it's – it's let's go for a paddle!' It wasn't funny, and Mick knew it – but it was all he could think to say.

They scrambled down steep shelves of pebble, right up to the water's edge. Both men were panting; Mick could see sweat on his dad's grimy brow. At last his dad spoke. Mick couldn't see his shaded eyes, but he could feel them. He felt himself getting hot, too.

'Mick,' he said, 'Listen, and listen good. You got to leave Stacey alone. You got to stop beating her up.' He panted, and tried to loosen his collar.

Now Mick saw the sootiness of his dad's skin, black against moon-silver. He raised a finger, tried to sound brave. 'Dad – just mind your own business, right? Are you saying you came all the way down here just to interfere? It's my own life, innit? I'm telling you, Dad – lay off. And anyhow – what do *you* know?' He thrust his jaw forward, jeering now. 'Your wife ran out, didn't she? Or maybe you'd forgotten? Your wife ran out, and me and Karen was left without a mum. So why don't you just eff off, and mind yer own business?'

His dad shut his eyes tight; with horror, Mick saw he was shaking. 'Yeah. That's what I *told* you, son.' There was a quiver in his voice, and the words came grudgingly. 'See, I used to knock your mum about. Like you do to Stacey.'

Part of Mick wanted to thump his dad; the rest of him wanted to run. 'How do know, anyway? You've hardly seen Stace since we got married.'

His dad ignored him. 'One day, see, I hit her too hard. She started screaming – I had to stop her...'

A large lizard was crawling around in Mick's stomach, and his mouth was like chalk. 'Dad – what did you do?'

'Her neck was soft, see. Never thought it'd be so soft. And then I couldn't wake her up. Nearly called the ambulance. Argh!' He slammed his eyes shut and bent low, grasping his belly.

'Dad! What's up?' cried Mick, reaching out a hand.

'No!' cried his dad, stepping back. His skin was really black now, like flaking paint on a drainpipe. 'You got to listen. I took her to the gravel-pits, Mick. I killed her!' He was screeching now. 'I took a life!' he cried, and doubled over again.

'Dad – Dad, it's not true! It's not true, is it?' stammered Mick. 'I'll help you. Got to get you home. You can stay over – ' In spite of himself, Mick looked around for the source of the burning smell.

'You got to go now,' cried his dad. 'You got to go. Just – just leave her alone. Leave Stacey alone, that's all I can say.'

'Dad – ' Mick broke off. He was sure his dad's skin was blistering, and the stench of singed hair was overpowering. He held a hand up to his mouth.

'Get – get away!' cried his dad, and Mick ran. He turned and scrambled up the beach, the pebbles running in avalanches as his feet ploughed and clattered into them. Twice he fell, but he clawed himself upward with his hands as the breakers roared behind and the dead lights along the prom swung in the rising wind. When he turned and looked back, his dad had gone.

It was scarcely half ten when he reached his flat, on the third floor of a decaying council block. A bunch of teenagers stood back to let him pass; they knew Mick well. He could smell the sweat from his own armpits as he fumbled for his key. He breathed deeply twice, three times, trying to rid his lungs of the tang of burning. Gently, he turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

'Who's there?' came a voice, and Stacey's thin, lined face appeared round the kitchen doorway. 'Oh,' she said.

They stared at each other, and his gaze rested on the navy-ochre bump on her forehead. She'd tried to cover it up by combing her thin blond hair forward. He swallowed.

'You all right, Mick?' she said. 'You're back early. Has anything happened?'

He swayed a little, then gave a brief shake of his head. For a second, the burning came in his nostrils again. She was watching him, and he thought he saw something different in her pale eyes. Is that what pity looks like, he thought?

'You look all in,' she said. 'D'you want a cup of tea?'

'Yeah,' Mick said, with a brief nod. 'Yeah, that'd be good.'

He went into the room they called the lounge and switched the telly on. He stared at it, trying to get interested in the football, or the anonymous US sitcom, or CSI Miami.

'Ta,' he said, when Stacey brought the tea. He knew she wasn't going to ask him what had happened. She wouldn't dare. And anyway, what could he say?

He slept badly. What should he have done about his dad? He wondered where had his dad gone, and where he'd be spending the night. Should have brought him back, thought Mick, or at least got him to the *Lobster-Pot*... In the end he fell asleep, his head full of images: his mum, long ago; his dad's haggard, black-blistered face; Stacey's bruises; and a flooded gravel pit with ripples on the surface...

Stacey woke him, the grey light following her through the bedroom door. 'Mick,' she said, 'Mick! It's the Northampton Police on the phone. They say – there was a fire, last night.' He saw that she didn't know whether to cower in a corner, or to take his hand. 'Your dad's house – he never got out...'