

ROGEY

Lately I've been thinking a lot about Rogey.

I first met him when he was just fourteen. I'd volunteered at a youth club in Falkirk in those long ago days before there was training, screening or anything much other than a naive belief that volunteering at a youth club was a good thing to do. He was a big boned boy, heavy muscled even then, tousle haired and unwashed, his large mouth framing uneven yellow teeth, a squashed nose, deep blue eyes. Sandy, another of the volunteers, told me on my first night that Rogey and his alcoholic great uncle lived together somewhere in the deserted Valley pass streets, with their boarded windows and roofs stripped of lead and slate. As Sandy spoke to me, I watched Rogey watching us across the room. He knew we were talking about him.

"I'm busy at weekends, me," he told us. Each week a different story. He and his great uncle'd stripped scrap metal from the derelict Valley pass houses. He'd made £80 helping on a farm job. They'd rowed out into the tidal Forth, poaching salmon. "That puts the muscles on you Mick." It took a while before Rogey began to latch on to me though. I've been thinking about that again recently. What I was like then. I just listened to him. Maybe that's what I'm good at. Just listening.

There was a Sunday outing to St. Andrews. Some picnic! The adults huddled together trying to find a bit of shelter from that biting North Sea wind while the

kids ran about mad with life. Rogey and a few others went swimming. "You're no fun!" he jeered, trying to get us closer to the water so he could splash us,

On the way back, I was driving the minibus and Rogey sat up front beside me. I nodded my way through his tales - travels in his uncle's rusty red Transit, engines he'd stripped, scrap yards where they'd cashed in their finds. After that, he seemed to come to me a lot. Where you could get the best prices for copper and lead. Who was doing what in Valleypass. There was something old-fashioned about Rogey, his turns of phrase, the little boy inside the coltish adolescent. Did I believe his stories? It didn't really matter. What did I know anyway? Fresh out of University. A degree in English Literature and Philosophy. Extra merit in bullshit. Working in a youth club to improve the CV I was going to put in with my Social Work training application.

The real turning point, though, had been when I pinned him down. It came out of nowhere. There was a game of cards at the table. Over in the corner some boys were playing darts. Three or four of the girls were together sorting out the social hierarchy. Next we all knew, there was uproar. Rogey'd turned over the table and was at the throat of another lad - Jamie - always a bit of a smart-arse. This wasn't a playground scrap. We could all see the look on Rogey's face, his teeth biting into his lip, his hands locked tight round Jamie's throat. Jamie's eyes were popping out of his purple face. I could see a vein standing out on his forehead fit to burst.

Sandy was pulling at Rogey's shoulder and Jamie wasn't struggling any more, but Rogey wasn't stopping. I surprised myself. I just jumped in, pushed the others aside and pulled at his fingers, one by one. He was a strong lad and I

had to dig deep. Eventually I rolled him over and had him pinned on his back. Sitting astride him, with my hands on his wrists and my knees on his shoulders, I looked at him as he struggled to get free. I could see his eyes bulge and his tight white knuckles. There were no words. Only when he realised I wasn't going to let go did I feel the body relax, the breathing ease. He knew it was me and somehow I knew it was going to be OK. Sandy had cleared the hall.

“Are you calmed down?” I asked. He didn't answer so I slackened my grip just a little. At that he heaved up and managed to lift one of my knees an inch or two, but I could tell he was done. I forced him back down, hard. “Rogey, are you calmed down son?” I asked again, close in. He looked away. As he turned his head to the side I saw a glint of moisture in his eye. I left it a few more seconds and felt his arms relax, the fists opened. “Rogey,” I said, “Are you calmed down?”

“I'm calm Mick,” he answered, hoarse.

He seemed to accept that I'd taken control of a rage that he couldn't. We sat for a while after that without speaking. I could hear his heavy regular breathing. He ruffled his hair, his face still flushed. I saw Sandy hovering at the door and waved him away.

“I'd better go,” Rogey said.

I walked him to the gate, then down the road. I asked him what'd happened but he cut me off. We stopped at the entrance of the Valleypass estate. He didn't want me to go further.

“Are we OK Rogey?”

He looked at his foot describing little circles on the pavement.

“Yeah, we’re OK Mick.”

But there was no smile now. He turned and walked away, kicking at a little stone off the pavement.

When I got back to the club, Sandy told me that Jamie'd recovered, apart from a little bruising on his neck. As was the way in those days, before we knew what child protection was about, that was the end of it – you dust yourself down and get on. I could see Jamie over in the other corner. A group of girls were crowded round him. He would do alright out of it.

Janey, one of the other volunteers, her Devon accent thick as clotted cream, told me how it happened. “Rogey’s mother's a bit of a drunk. Passed Rogey on to her uncle when he was a wee boy. They say she likes the young boys. Jamie said he'd shagged her.”

I looked over towards Jamie and his posse of girls.

“You know,” said Janey, “When I saw Rogey on top of Jamie, I thought ” she paused then carried on in a theatrical whisper that I still remember, “I thought he would kill him. He’ll end up murdering somebody, don’t you think? Behind bars for life.”

I didn't feel comfortable about the youth club after that, and later on stopped going altogether. Life took over my life. I didn't go into Social Work after all. They turned me down. It's all a bit of a blur really, those early years. I got

engaged. Then the first baby came along. I got a Council job in the 'policy' office. I've always been good at bullshit. It paid and we needed the money. One thing comes along, then another; before you know it, you're middle aged. The ambitions of youth are distant echoes. Except Rogey. He was no echo. In one way and another he's been with me all the way.

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Not long after I got married, he turned up at my door about 9 or 10 o'clock, taller than me now but still broadening out. He must've been about 18 by then. He would've made a great wing forward. "It's me Mick," he grinned, "Long time no see, eh? I was back up in this dump and thought I'd look up my old pal." He'd lost his Scottish burr and it was all a kind of mock-cockney now, but forced. He was showing he had moved on. Cosmopolitan now.

I stood for a moment. My wife, our baby, our secure little home. What was I to say?

"Can I come in then, Mick?"

That's life, isn't it? These quick decisions. On the door step. Can I shut the door on that grin? No I can't. Am I comfortable with letting him into my house? Not really.

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Come in," I said.

Christine's a nervous woman. I took him through the back to the kitchen. I didn't want them to meet without me warning her. I showed Rogey the kettle, the mugs, the tea. While he was occupied, I told her he was only in for a chat.

After a while Christine came in before going up to bed. Rogey was respectful, polite - I was surprised, impressed even.

Rogey and I sat with our tea, four sugars in his, one in mine. He told me he'd been touring with the 'shows', taken on by a guy who ran the waltzers. Round most of Britain by the sound of it. I could picture him as a fairground boy, jumping from chair to chair, enjoying his strength and skill, spinning the girls till they screamed, telling his tall stories, laughing the while, holding his own with the boys in the little towns, giving as good as he got. But why was he here, now?

"Just thought I'd visit you," he'd said in a matter-of-fact way, as if it was just what people did, what he did. Daring me to say different. I couldn't.

"So are you coming back to live here?" I asked, a little nervous of the answer. "It sounds like you had a great life on the shows."

"Not me mate," he said, man to man voice, "It was time to move on. Don't get me wrong, I was in charge of the ride, putting up and taking down, fixing the gearing, that bloody gearing, he wouldn't spend money on it." He laughed a little at some memory, scratching his ear. I noticed the oily grime under his nails. "I fell out with the boss man. He tried to cheat me out of some wages." A dark cloud came over his face. "He was a radge bastard!" I remembered Janey's words.

"Sorry Mick, got a bit carried away there."

I laughed. "Hey don't worry. I've heard worse."

I poured another cup of tea.

"You've got it made here Mick, haven't you? The big house'n that? The whole deal, ain't it? I'd miss the lassies but, if I was married. You meet some braw lassies on the shows Mick," he laughed, "They know how to treat a boy alright." I nodded. At his age, I wouldn't have minded meeting some of those lassies too. I still wouldn't." Anyway, I've got another job, ain't I? It's with the big lorries. Long hauls. Italy. Spain. You know. I've got my HGV."

Still the tall tales Rogey, I thought. "Do you have to learn some Italian?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. We get special classes. *Parliamo Italiano*." He threw his right hand out in a dramatic gesture, daring me to say otherwise. He was always so plausible.

"Thing is, Mick, I need you to put me up for the night? I've got nothing else set up yet and I knew I could count on you old pal." I hated him putting it on to me. This wasn't the first time he'd had to look for somewhere to sleep, for sure. He'd have learned to kip out. Why couldn't he have done that? And how come he knew where I lived? I heard the kitchen clock ticking. Christine. The baby. Another decision.

"OK Rogey," I said, "You can crash downstairs here, but there's other people coming tomorrow so it'll just be tonight." I sorted him out with some bedding and set him up on the couch in the front room. I showed him the outhouse toilet.

"Upstairs is out-of-bounds," I said.

Things get distorted in the night don't they? I lay awake remembering Janey's words, that creepy look in her eyes. Could I pin him down now if I needed to? I kept listening for the stairs to creak but he never came up. Never even heard the front room door, its squeaky hinges.

I woke with the alarm at 7 and went downstairs, rubbing my eyes. I found the bedding neatly folded. Rogey was in the kitchen, a big friendly smile, sugar spilled on the table and a mug of tea, his thick clumsy fingers on the handle.

"A fine cup of tea you have here Mick."

He was gone before Christine got up.

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Later that month, I met Janey at a bus stop. She told me he'd gone to her house as well. She'd kept him at the door, told him she couldn't put him up. "Weren't you scared, letting him into your house?" she said. I felt a bit stupid. She'd even got more out of him than I had. Rogey's mother'd died and he was back for the funeral. He'd been to see Sandy as well. "You know of all the difficult kids I've met, he was the one that scared me most," she said, "I think it was his hands, those big hands."

Rogey and I had an on/off relationship after that. Sometimes two or three times in a year. Other times several years in between - sometimes I wondered where he was, what he was doing during those long gaps, I imagined him in prison. What he might have done.

He'd phone or visit out the blue as if we were best of friends. "Guess who it is, Mick?" I pictured his grin, teasing me, my secure little life. He'd tell me his tales. He was a city trader. He was buying and selling wine. He had a Jag. He had a wife. He was separated and not allowed to see his kids. He had another wife. He had an engineering business. I never quite believed him, but with Rogey you never knew.

Once or twice he made me speak to someone else on the phone. I remember one girl in particular. They were both laughing. She'd be like me, finding it hard to believe him. "Mick, now you know how I was, don't you? You'll tell the truth won't you?" There was an insistent tone in his voice, then her light flirty voice, intimate, close in my ear.

"He told me that you were his best teacher and that he was really good at school. Is that true?" She giggled. "Stop that Carl," she squealed then giggled again and I could hear his laugh, earthy, lewd. I heard a glass clinking. I imagined them in bed together. I could just hear him. Showing off. If you don't believe me, Rogey'd've said, let's phone my old teacher.

What was I going to say?

"I guess... kind of.. he was a good lad..." I said. She giggled again and passed him the phone. "He sounds dead posh," I heard her say.

"So what're you up to now Rogey?"

"You know me, Mick," he said, "A little bit of this and a little bit of that. I've got some guys working for me now in the garage. You know, we do up fancy cars - that sort of thing." I could hear her in the background, "...stop that....." then

she giggled some more. I heard his heavy breathing. I pictured what they were doing. "Thanks Mick mate. I'll see you soon eh?" and he was gone.

A few times he turned up at the door. I never saw the Jag, but once or twice he looked almost respectable. When he wore a suit it looked one size too small, his big head jutting up, the trousers a little too tight, but his black nails were scrubbed and those grimy pores had somehow been cleansed. That was when times were good. I should've written down all the stories so that I could've kept track of his children, his girlfriends, his wives, his addresses.

He took an interest in my kids, Rogey, I'll say that for him. When they were still at primary school, I watched him one afternoon sitting in the window seat, reading them a story as the sun streamed in. He bounced them up and down, one on each knee. 'My wee radgie gadgies' he called them. As I watched them that day, my imagination saw him turning from Jekyll to Hyde, his laughing face distorting into an ugly leer. I felt uncomfortable, yet he'd given me no reason. These thoughts made me feel guilty. When Christine said she didn't want him in the house, I'd rebuked her, angry with myself more than her. Christine, ageing but still pretty Christine. I've been a willing enough captive in her tight little domestic prison.

Recently times'd got worse for Rogey. He phoned me one time to meet him outside a pub. Would I bring some money? He looked harried. I saw a couple of guys were hovering nearby, watching us through their cigarette smoke. I lent him 200 quid. What was it to me? Mortgage almost paid off, kids through University and earning money. I knew I wouldn't see it again.

It was twilight, when no-one looks at their best in a damp city street, but I remember thinking that he looked grey. He was ageing. No longer Jack the lad. Those big fingers were fatter, dirtier, that thick grime from long ago was back under the nails. A sour smell around his unkempt hair. Dealing with people outside his league. I'd given him a card with my new mobile number.

"I'm keeping this secret," he said and tucked it away.

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I didn't see or hear from him for the longest time after that. Five, maybe ten years? How much time do you serve for murder these days?

I remember the next call very clearly. It's quiet in the evenings, our house, everything tidied away in the kitchen, surfaces dettol-sprayed, doors shut, Christine and me in the front room with its matching lamps. I didn't hear the phone but I sensed her looking over. I knew I'd done something wrong. I often do.

"Mick!" she said, "That's the phone!"

I jumped up to answer it.

"Mick, guess who this is!"

Even on the phone you could hear him smiling for the sheer hell of life. Or maybe it was laughing. Laughing at me with his gat-toothed grin.

"Rogey," I said, "How are you?"

"Thing is Mick, I'm back in town'n I need to see you," he said.

What could I say? He'd claimed me a long time ago. Claimed me when I pinned him down. When I trusted him to stay calm.

I was pleased enough when I saw him. He looked better than he had: thinner, greying temples, clean. We sat in the kitchen, drinking our mugs of tea, his with a ladleful of sugar as if there was no time since the last time.

"How long have I known you Mick?"

"I don't know," I said, doing the subtraction sum in my head, "30 years maybe - hard to believe."

We got to talking.

"What about your kids Mick? I'll bet they're doing great - your wee radgie gadgies?"

I prattled on a bit - University, gap years, internships. I really believe he was happy for me, that he wanted to know that in some parallel life there were people like me. People to whom nothing happened. People for whom things worked out OK.

"Not like you Rogey, eh?," I said, "No-one can accuse you of playing it safe, eh?"

We got quite philosophical.

"What's the best thing you've done Rogey?" I asked. "What's made you feel proud of yourself?"

“Well there’s a question,” he laughed, “Always one for the questions Mick, aren’t you?”

He shifted his mug around the table. I looked at those big hands and I thought of Janey.

“You remember Caitlin, don’t you?” He’d probably told me. Maybe it was that girl I spoke to on the phone. I nodded.

“The mother of my kids she was, well three of them anyway. I loved her Mick. I can’t see them now, not them three and not the other three neither. Little bitch. I miss her. I fucked up there Mick, sure I did.” His face darkened - the troubled violent man inside the muscled body. Had he beaten his wife? Had he done time for her? Then he laughed again, that easy laugh, “Still I’m sure they’re doing better with her than with me around, eh Mick?”

He needed me to sign a passport form - Brian Thatcher. He told me he’d changed his name from Carl Rogan a few years back. There was a story about going to the States at short notice - family over there. He’d been offered a job. I listened but didn’t believe it. He could as easily been trying to escape from loan sharks, or drug dealers he’d swindled, or a warrant for his arrest.

The same Rogey.

We parted in good spirits. “I can always count on you, Mick, can’t I?” he said at the door, the smile still there. “Sure,” I said, not quite believing it, or why he would count on me. Were there others that he went around? We shook hands.

It was only a few weeks later that I got the call on my mobile.

“South Wales Police, Cardiff. Sergeant Evans here.” I think it was Evans. Or was it Jones? “We think you can help us. We found your phone number written inside a pair of jeans. Trouble is that the man wearing them is dead. That’s why we’ve phoned you. There's no identifying features, no I/D, nothing. Just your number in black ink inside the waistband.”

I knew straight away it was Rogey. Who else was it going to be? A guy from the golf club? I went to Cardiff. He'd been beaten repeatedly over the head and dumped on a bit of waste ground. His tousled hair matted with his own blood. A smell of stale beer. I wanted to touch his face, to say his name.

There'd been nothing on him. They tried all the usual things. National adverts, missing persons' register, police files, DNA database. I can only imagine he used different names in different places, but there was nothing on Carl Rogan; nothing on Brian Thatcher, anywhere. No marriages, no tax records, not even a criminal record. No-one came forward. He wasn't a person at all.

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I arranged for Rogey to come back to his home town.

I tried everything to locate his wives, six children, Caitlin. I imagined all the tears she might've shed and would shed again if she knew. Or did he really have six children at all? That was it with Rogey wasn't it? Reality and fantasy. Not like me. Nor him either. Not now.

It was a good funeral, if there is such a thing. Just last week, over at the crem. I spent more on him in his death than I did when he was alive. I bought in a young humanist minister. Sandy rounded up some people. I said a few words. His big smile. His tall tales. Wee Geena from the youth club was there, just the same but with more lines on her face. She was there that night, when I pinned him down. Sharp as get out Geena is. She works in Asda. Six grandchildren already. It was Geena who suggested 'Bat Out of Hell'. Thirty of us stood to listen as Meatloaf blasted the crematorium speakers and the coffin trundled behind the curtains:

*"I can see myself tearing up the road
Faster than any other boy has ever gone
And my skin is raw but my soul is ripe
And no one's gonna stop me now...."*

I was laughing and I was crying. For him. For me.

I still am.