

YOU

by Laura Barnett

These are the things I know about you.

Your name is Louise. Your middle name is Anne.

Your hair is shoulder-length and brown. You think it a dull colour, because you don't see how the sun's sideways glance draws out its reds and golds. Your fringe needs a trim; you keep having to sweep it out of your eyes. When you're concentrating hard - as the playground swing traces its slow arc, or as you crook your arm around the blue-lined page - you let a few strands fall into your mouth. Later, their

dampness surprises you.

Your coat is green, with a trim of soft white fur. Or black and padded, like a sleeping bag.

Your eyes are blue. Your ears are perfect whorls of pink-white skin.

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You are nine today.

I remembered this morning, after I'd stumbled, gummy-eyed, from sleep. There was the same old chatter on the radio. Someone talking about Greece; someone else talking about Italy; new faces for the same old crises. And in amongst it all, the date: Tuesday November 8th. I had forgotten. I had let the days slip through my fingers.

I wondered what you might be doing, in that moment, as I spread my toast and waited for the kettle to boil. There would be cards, presents, twists of polka-dotted paper discarded on the floor. New

clothes. New toys. A bicycle, perhaps.

Or maybe none of these: you could be sweeping the marmalade crumbs from some bright, gleaming object whose function, to me, is entirely obscure. I know you have a mobile telephone. I saw you speaking into it once, quite loudly and firmly, like a stiletto-heeled office girl out on her lunch hour. All I could think of, as I watched, was what those uncharted waves might be doing to the soft, developing tissues of your brain.

The kettle hissed and clicked. Horace performed his sinuous twirl around my legs, drawing attention to his empty bowl. The voices on the radio talked on, and the hours stretched before me, empty and endless, and all I could think about was you.

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For my ninth birthday, I did get a bicycle. And a battalion of tin soldiers, their guns cocked uselessly, waiting, blank-eyed, for me to paint them.

The bicycle was by far the more expensive present - we were not well-off, and my mother must have been eking out the housekeeping for months. But I much preferred the soldiers. I did not paint them; I chose instead to carry a couple with me at all times, deep in the pocket of my coat. I would reach in, worry the rough metal between forefinger and thumb, just to check they were still there.

I didn't take them out at school and show them round, as other boys might have done. But I did show them to Mr Henderson.

I remember him as a tall man - but of course, when you are nine years old, everyone is tall - with a long, thin face, and a crop of thick dark hair. He wore a full suit, complete with waistcoat and pocket handkerchief, even in summer. This was unusual, you understand, in our part of town, where the men were mostly blue-shirted and flat-capped, and went off in the grey mornings to the steelworks. Perhaps that was why I chose to sit next to him on the bus, that first time.

No other boy on our street took a bus to school. My father was a foreman, a man with ambitions, plans; he sent me not to the local

primary, but to another, smarter school on the other side of town. I did not fit; my mother did her best, but my shoes were always scuffed, and telltale threads escaped from the cuffs of my jumble-sale sweater. The other boys eyed me strangely; they were not unkind - not all the time - but they kept themselves rather aloof. I grew used to being often alone.

You are driven to school, protected from the many creeping dangers of the road. But things were different then. My mother would wrap a packet of sandwiches in greaseproof paper, hand me my satchel. When we saw the bus broach the corner of the street, she'd send me out, my fare growing clammy in my fist. And I would clamber aboard, so consumed with excitement at the prospect of seeing Mr Henderson that I would often forget to wave to the shadow of her face.

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When I first saw you all those months ago, I couldn't be quite sure that it was you I saw.

You were crocodile-marching, lifting your little legs in their grey tights. Your arm was daisy-chained to another girl's, your faces half-covered by curtains of hair. In that thirty-strong line of miniature replicas, you were unique, luminous. I heard your presence like a shout.

Your teacher strode out into the road to stop the traffic; another walked behind you, shepherd-like. I stood where I was, outside the post office, waiting for you to notice me. But you didn't, of course; you were still deep in whispers. And by now, I'm sure, you wouldn't know my face. To you, I would be indistinguishable from any other white-haired old man - tired, unremarkable, wearing a black wool coat that has seen better days.

I began to doubt myself: perhaps it wasn't you. Perhaps I had invented the resemblance: the snubbed upturn of your nose; the familiar curve of your cheek. I hadn't slept well - I don't ever sleep well now. Perhaps I was half-dreaming. What might the doctor call it? A "dissociative episode". There had been worse.

But I followed the line as it snaked along the few streets to your school, noted the name. Just to be sure.

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Mr Henderson and I would sit together on the top deck. I'd climb the stairs and he'd turn and smile, pat the empty space next to him, produce a paper bag of boiled sweets. I'd sit, swing my legs, let the first sweet melt slowly in my mouth as the bus lurched across the brightening town, and we watched the roof-slates and shop awnings and the tops of stunted trees.

I don't remember much of what we talked about, but I recall that I would save up things to say to him, carrying the previous day's small triumphs and disappointments like a cache of marbles in a pocket. I suppose I was flattered by the fact that Mr Henderson was willing to listen. Grown-ups didn't often listen to children, back then. We were loved, yes, if we were lucky: fed and clothed and read to, tested on multiplication tables and verses from Shakespeare. But our fears, our thoughts, our opinions were not central to our parents'

lives. Tantrums were strictly forbidden: had I thrown my small thrashing body down onto the floor, I believe my mother would have lifted up her low-heeled court shoe and stepped right over me. My father might well have taken off his belt.

But Mr Henderson was different. He listened. He asked questions, and gave my answers serious consideration. I can still see the quizzical tilt of his face: with the strange idiosyncrasy of memory, it has seemed clearer to me, in recent months, than the face of my own father. And certainly clearer than the sepia-tinted features of my two grandfathers, each one straight-backed and severe inside his silver frame. Both had died before I was born. Once, when I was very small, I saw my mother dusting her father's portrait, and asked her why she took such care of a stranger's photograph.

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Your school is halfway up a hill; the streets around it rise sharply, and I have to climb them slowly, pausing to catch my breath.

From the street above your school, a passerby can look down on

it through the diamond panes of wire. Four low, flat-topped concrete buildings. Those blue felt boards pinned with drawings (which of these, I wonder, might be yours?). Your playground, with its bright red climbing frame and swing, and a painted snake for hopscotch.

You blue-grey children are less easy to distinguish - you sit in tight groups under the strip-lights; you run around the playground in packs. It took me several days to find you. I came first in the morning, as the cars disgorged their noisy cargo onto the yellow lines; then again at lunchtime, when your shouts caught on the still air; and finally at half-past three, when the mothers' convoy again choked the surrounding streets.

It isn't easy to watch without being watched in turn. I traced a long, slow, unobtrusive path along that street, first one side, then the other. I was in luck; nobody noticed me. People rarely do. When I was younger, I was tall and vigorous, and women's eyes would rest upon me for longer than is strictly polite. Now, I am thin and stooped; I wear a hat to hide my baldness, and my skin has acquired

the pale translucence of bleached bone. The women I pass look beyond me, as if I'm not there at all.

So I walked and watched and waited. And then, one fog-patched morning, there you were: green-coated and mittened, holding your mother's hand.

My next breath didn't come. I stood quite still, as if I had taken root, wondering what Frances would have done now. Surely, I thought, your grandmother would have done something more than stand and stare.

*

We didn't hold you on the day you were born.

The long, slow slippage by which your mother distanced herself from us - barely noticeable at first, then suddenly screeching and tearing, a branch ripping from a tree - had already begun. She made it clear that we weren't wanted at the hospital. We went anyway. "It's just exhaustion," Frances said, her mouth set in a thin, pinched line.

"Of course we have to go."

Your mother was pale, her eyes smudged with shadow: she was slipping in and out of sleep when we arrived, too drowsy to raise any objection, so your father brought you to us. You were tiny, of course, and cotton-swaddled, mouth monstrously gaping in your pink screwed-up baby face. Your eyes were blue and huge, like an adult's eyes, plucked from another face; you stared at me with them. You smiled at Frances. Your father took a photograph. It arrived in the post a few days later; Frances went straight out and found a frame, placed it in the centre of the mantelpiece. It is still there now.

We saw you three more times. Once at Christmas, when you peered, bug-eyed and fat-cheeked, at your great pile of presents, and your mother fed you and burped you and barely spoke to us at all. One birthday, and one sunny August afternoon when you were learning to be steady on your feet, and you and I chased Horace through our garden's long, tough grass.

Your mother's letter arrived not long after that. I was struck by

the fact that she had written us a letter; nobody of her age writes letters any more, I thought. Nobody but solicitors and bank managers, and others with something very serious to say.

Her tone was brisk and businesslike, the typeface dark and densely packed, each word a tiny bullet. She had become fluent in the lexicon of resentment. *You must see why... never felt loved... at least respect my decision.*

I remember that I read the letter first. The colour must have drained from my cheeks, because Frances asked if I needed to sit down. Then I passed the letter to her, and a cry came from her throat.

We tried, of course. We came to the house - the house you lived in then. We apologised for faults we did not understand. Hadn't we always, Frances said, done as much for our daughter as any parent might? Where, we asked her, had we gone so wrong? Your mother wouldn't answer. She closed the door in our faces: your father, a few moments later, came out alone to the car. "I'm sorry," he said - and I think he truly was. "I think you'll need to give her some time."

There, as we sat motionless in the car outside your house, I seemed to see a sequence of images spooling out like a film before my eyes. Your mother, baby-plump and toddling; smiling and crawling; gurgling and laughing. Or maybe it was you: I wasn't sure. I couldn't tell your face from hers. You are the image of each other, after all.

*

I don't think I will go to your school today.

I come less often, now - just once or twice a week, when the plates are washed and dried and stacked, and the tick-tocking of the kitchen clock has grown too loud in the silent house. Even a man as invisible as I am needs to be careful; people can make the most dreadful assumptions. I have, on several occasions, caught the eye of a young woman who sits alone with her computer at the lighted front window of a ground-floor flat; each time, I have smiled, but she hasn't quite smiled back. Sometimes, in that moment, I have been assailed by wild thoughts: to knock on the door, to ask her what she

is writing. To sit inside that warm room, to talk, to be handed a cup of tea.

Frances would have known exactly what to do. Your grandmother was a capable, bustling, brisk sort of woman; the sort with a place for everything, the sort who gets things done. The sort whose presence is so solid, so immutable, that it seems impossible that she could ever disappear.

Her spirit faltered, after we lost you; she smudged a little at the edges. I'd come home sometimes to find her still sitting in the kitchen chair where I had left her, the crumbs turning hard on her unemptied breakfast plate. "Oh, is that the time already?" she would say. And I would lift her, gently, from the chair, guide her upstairs and lay her down to rest, her shoulders brittle and bird-thin under my hands.

*

One morning, Mr Henderson invited me to his house for tea. He tore a sheet of paper from his pocket diary, wrote down the address: told me exactly how to find it, that he would expect me there at four

o'clock on Wednesday. "Go home and tell your mother," he said.

"Ask her if she would like to come. If it's not convenient, tell her you can both come at the same time next week. Wednesday is my half-day."

I don't remember telling my mother - so much of her has become a blur, her quick, sharp-nosed face reduced to a faint outline. I assume she must have been surprised: had *your* mother come home one afternoon, aged nine, talking of friendships with strange men, I suspect we would have gone straight to the police. But perhaps my mother was impressed by Mr Henderson's address, on the leafy fringes of the town. Or perhaps she was just tired of the usual routine - the cooking and sweeping and mangling that measured out the slow, steady rhythm of her days.

In any case, we went: she met me, neatly gloved and hatted, at the school gates, and took the bus with me back across town. I remember that Mr Henderson answered the door in his three-piece suit; that a grandfather clock chimed four in the dim shadows of the

hallway; and that a table in the front parlour was set for three: three fine china cups, three saucers, three chocolate eclairs on flower-sprigged plates.

I can see my mother there, gloves laid on the tablecloth beside her plate, leaving a small pink lipstick-blush on her cup. I can see her asking questions - polite enquiries after Mr Henderson's health, his business, his family. Most of his answers I do not recall, but there is one that lodged itself quite clearly in my mind, and that time has not erased.

"I have no family," Mr Henderson said. "I lost my wife. I lost my son. As you can see, Mrs Lewis, I am quite alone."

I barely spoke all afternoon; with my mother there, in the starched confines of Mr Henderson's parlour, I was struck quite dumb. I ate my eclair, and then my mother's, and when it had grown quite dark outside, she said we should be getting home, that my father would be wanting his tea. I remember the sudden chill of the street, the looming bricks and chimneys of the surrounding houses -

each one standing proud and apart, not like our own crowded terrace, the houses all huddled together like rabbits in a hutch. I remember looking back, watching Mr Henderson's silhouette grow smaller as we walked away.

After that, something shifted between us, almost imperceptibly: I still climbed the stairs on the bus to take my seat next to Mr Henderson, but I no longer rushed from the house with the same delicious sense of anticipation, no longer stored up the days' events to share with him. My mother's intrusion might have snatched the intimacy from our shared journeys, tarnished their allure - or I might have finally fallen in with a group of boys at school. All I can remember, now, is that one morning a few weeks later, I chose another seat on the bus: a seat downstairs. I did not sit next to Mr Henderson again.

All thoughts of him slipped quickly from my mind, replaced by other, more immediate concerns; in all these years, in fact, I've barely thought of him at all. And yet in recent months I have found myself

picturing Mr Henderson so clearly, sitting up on the top deck as I sat below. I can see him there; staring straight ahead, watching the road unwind in front of him, wondering what he has done to deserve such loneliness. And I find myself wishing, now, that I could walk up those stairs, sit down beside him, and offer him the meagre comfort of my company.

*

Perhaps I will go to your school tomorrow. You will be full of post-birthday swagger, wearing your new coat and scarf; and maybe, just maybe, riding along behind your mother on a new bicycle.

Perhaps tomorrow, for the first time, you will look up at the street that rises high on the escarpment above the playground. Perhaps you will see me then, threadbare and old and coat-wrapped as I am.

Perhaps you will look at me. Perhaps I will wave. Perhaps you will wave back at me, lift your mittened hand, shift that shining brown

hair from your eyes, and offer me a smile. And perhaps that, just that,
will be enough.

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