

## His Mother

In her bag, Sonya has a paint scraper, a cloth and a big bottle of soapy water. She has tried to work methodically, moving in succession along each of the radial routes coming out of the town. It's been a laborious process. She looks for green electric boxes and lampposts, the black street bins, but it could just as easily be gable walls, or even corrugated iron, the shutters of shops that have been empty for six months or so. She looks for anywhere where she can still see her son.

They had not agreed on the photo for the poster. Jade, Curtis's girlfriend, hadn't liked the passport picture Sonya wanted to use. It looks nothing like him! she said. Nobody'll recognise him! Jade wanted a photo of Curtis on holiday, where he was sitting outside a bar, a bottle of beer in his hand. Sonya asked Logan what he thought. He was studying the ordnance survey maps that he'd been given of forest areas in the locality.

Logan, Sonya said. Logan, did you hear what I said?

As long as you can see him clearly, does it matter which photo? Let's just get those posters out there. That was his answer.

By the time Sonya had got the pages photocopied in work, you could hardly see that fair hair that he got cut every three weeks without fail. A falling shadow made him look like he had the dregs of a black eye, when he'd never been in a fight in his entire life. It was his old football club that put the posters up the length and breadth of the city. They'd got in contact. Teenagers putting the posters up on electric boxes and lampposts even though they'd never heard of Curtis Rea. But she's cursed them sometimes over the last few months, cursed their commitment to the task.

Some put them up with Sellotape. Those ones have now long gone. The tape turned brown and then loosened. But the posters stuck with wallpaper paste have remained for much longer; they have taken the splatters from dirty puddles, got bleached by the sun. Posters that asked 'Have You Seen Curtis Rea?' ended up next to adverts for a taekwon do club, a splashy flyer for a Back to the 60s night, a handwritten note about a missing cat called Boogie.

Curtis went out before his tea but didn't come back.

He'll be round Jade's. Round a mate's, Logan said. There was no need to be concerned.

Well, if you think so, Logan, Sonya said. I wouldn't want to make a fuss. It's not like him though.

In the morning he still wasn't there. They were sheepish calling the police, expecting to be dismissed as timewasters. By the end of the day, however, the police had found Curtis's car, his Corsa, left in a hotel car park near Shaw's Bridge.

Things happened to people. There was always that. They fell and hit their heads on pavements. Didn't even

remember their own names. Ran into friends, ended up at crazy house parties, went off the radar.

The policewoman nodded when Sonya said these things.

What was his mood when he left the house? she asked.

Fine, she said. Tell you what, see those oven chips? Sonya remembered him saying as she was putting them on the tray. Make sure you don't take them out too early, give them a decent blast. Them ones are rotten when they're soft.

Enough of that or you'll be the one getting a blast, she said.

I'm only saying. They're rotten when they're soft. Gonna love you and leave you here for a min. Just nipping out.

But your tea is going to be ready soon!

Just nipping out.

Sonya sees the remnants of a poster on a lamppost. It's there just above the steel cable tie. She soaks the cloth with water from the bottle, then presses it to each of the corners, before moving to the rest of the poster. The cloth needs to be saturated for it to be effective. Sometimes the scraper lifts paint as well. The metal of the lamppost is surprisingly soft and she'll leave it scored and tracked. Sonya flakes off the faint digits of her own mobile phone number, the old one anyway. It had to be changed because of the number of calls she got. Well-wishers, but also kids. Hey missus, I think I seen Curtis Rea. He was having a pizza at the Ice Bowl. Hey missus, how much do you charge for a blowjob? On this lamppost, there is a religious sticker. It bears a Bible verse and a rainbow. In the weeks after Curtis, people from a church visited. Logan went along to a few meetings.

You could come, Sonya, he said. You get coffee. There's no sermons.

Not interested, she replied.

More recently he has started going to an evening class in A-Level Psychology. The fat textbook is always sitting on the sofa. At the beginning it was all, Listen to this, Sonya. He'd read something out as though it was a discovery. Do you think, you know, do you think, that that might have been something to do with it? Neurons was a word he used a lot.

I really don't know, she said. Because they really didn't know.

There were two weeks of coordinated searching of forest areas. So many people helped. Logan went, but not Sonya. Craig wanted to, but he was too young. He was angry when they said he couldn't and shut himself up in his room. Logan came back, his big hands torn with briars. Cold nights with the wind howling up the old chimney breast and Curtis was out there somewhere. When he was young, he always wanted the hall light kept on when he went to bed.

There came that afternoon when she broke off from cleaning the kitchen to see that she had six missed calls from Logan. Sonya knew that was it. She knew what that meant. But she couldn't bear to speak to him yet. When she heard the car in the driveway she began shaking so violently that she couldn't utter a word. When Logan came in he said, We've got him, Sonya, we've got him. And then he sat down on the bottom stair and started making a noise like a small animal.

They put Curtis in his good clothes for the funeral. Sonya took forty minutes to press his shirt, cleaned the expensive white trainers with the tiny silver lettering that were clean anyway. It was a sunny day at Roselawn. Logan stumbled his way to the end of a bible reading and Jade read some poem, breaking down halfway through. It was decided that the last song as people were filing out should be one that Curtis liked. Craig picked something.

Is it his favourite? Sonya asked.

Dunno, Ma. We didn't sit around making lists of our favourite tunes, you know? just know he liked it.

It was called 'Your Love' by Frankie Knuckles. It was pleasant enough at the beginning. But then a guy started sighing, huffing and puffing in a sexual way. Sonya didn't feel it was suitable for a funeral. But nobody seemed to notice, or if they did, they didn't say anything. Craig managed to get a paper cut from the edge of one of the programmes they handed out and got blood on the cuff of his shirt. After Roselawn they went to a golf club. Sonya busied herself helping with the food, which was chicken curry or beef bourguignon. Nearly everyone took the chicken. She couldn't stand it when Curtis's friends hugged her, the softness of their necks, the smell of their aftershave.

Sonya passes a bin but she doesn't see Curtis, only a poster for a long-past demo at the City Hall against pay cuts. Further along then, there's an electric box. A noise comes from these boxes, a hum like a pylon. When she moves away she imagines she can still hear it, the air quivering with the painful, insistent sound. Those placid

people at the bus stop, can't they hear? Two young men walk by, laughing at something, and Sonya's watching hard. It seems like they're laughing, certainly, but the one on the left, is he really? She's done those oven chips over and over again and they are just right every single time now, just right.

It was a month after the funeral. On Sundays they always sat in the good room with the papers. The fire was lit and Logan had dozed off after lunch, the colour supplement across his chest. Logan didn't sleep at night either; she felt him twisting, getting up for glasses of water, checking his phone. As usual, Craig was upstairs. The clock on the mantelpiece said three o'clock. Beside it was their wedding photo and that orchid the people at work had given her as a birthday present. And then, propped up against the orchid, was the picture of the four of them in a restaurant in the town. At the end of the mantelpiece the old school photo of the boys sat, Curtis with his arm round the four-year-old Craig. Curtis's new teeth with the jagged edges were just coming through. His tie wasn't straight and the collar was pulled to one side. Could those dopey teachers not have tidied you up a bit before they let the man take the picture? she had said. In a rush it came to her that it was raining outside, and Curtis was out there, dispersed all over the city on the posters, the rain coming down on him. She grabbed a knife from the drawer in the kitchen and got into the car, Logan still asleep in front of the fire.

The Ormeau Road was one of the places that she knew they'd put posters. She remembered them saying, we did the whole length of the Ormeau. The first poster she

saw was on a metal shutter. It's okay, son, she said, as she started scraping with the knife. It came off in long strips that time because even though she didn't have any water, the paper was soaked with the rain. But there were so many! She could see another poster across the road on the bus shelter outside the Indian takeaway, and another one further down on a lamppost. That one was not so easy to remove, being on a curve, and the knife slipped, so she sliced between her finger and thumb. She was wet through in the rain with no coat, but she had to take off her cardigan to wrap it round her cut hand.

In the early days, Jade still used to call round. There were dark roots where before there was honey blonde. Jade always liked to reminisce about the holidays that she and Curtis had taken. Sonya, she had to admit, enjoyed seeing Jade more now than she ever did when she was with Curtis. One night after she had left, Craig said, why is she even bothering coming round here when she is seeing somebody else now?

That's not true, Craig.

Yeah, it is.

But it would be far too soon, Sonya said.

Well, you might think that. Doubt she does.

Jade cancelled coming to the house two weeks in a row. When she eventually did appear, Sonya wasn't wanting to ask.

Sonya, Jade said. No doubt you've heard.

Heard what?

About me.

What about you?

It's nothing serious.

Your life, Sonya said. Up to you.

When Jade left, she told Logan.

He shrugged. Just the way it goes, he said.

She's a skank anyway, said Craig. Curtis could have done way better for himself.

That's enough of that talk, Logan said.

Well, she's a skank. Isn't she, Ma?

It's a relief that there are fewer posters to find these days; it's reassuring going back over roads where she's been before. People defaced them sometimes. They poked out his eyes, or drew glasses on him. She has seen approximations of penises, various shapes and sizes. Curtis wouldn't have been offended by that. She was called into the school once because he had drawn something similar on a textbook. He would probably find it funny.

When a woman in work's son got married, it was all kept very low key. Sonya got asked to the evening do, and she stuck the invitation on the fridge although she'd no intention of going. Just after the funeral they did a fundraiser, a 10k race, and the money went to a mental health charity for young men. Even Sonya ran in the relay, her thighs rubbing together, the tightness in her chest killing her. Next time round though, in a few months, they will be doing it for a premature baby unit.

She has sometimes wondered if she should join Curtis. It has crossed her mind. She went to the doctor's, and he gave her some tablets and suggested a group that met in a school a few miles away. There were a lot of other groups there on the same night. There was line-dancing in the

hall, the sound of banjo and pedal steel. She asked a group of women in the hallway what they were there for and it was Spanish conversation. Down the corridor she looked through the square panel of a door. They were in a circle, holding polystyrene cups. There weren't any more seats. She didn't feel like talking anyway, and she didn't feel like listening.

The wooden hoardings around the derelict shop are painted blue. There's a poster for a new club in the town, a list of the DJs and the various nights they are there. There's part of what she thinks is one of Curtis's, but it's already mostly torn off. She is pretty sure that she can see the dark corner of the passport photograph. Hardly worth bothering really but she gets out the water, the scraper and the cloth anyway. Those DJs, that club, Curtis might have enjoyed them. But over there, on the electric box, how could she have missed that one? But it's spanking white. Pristine. Stuck on with new Sellotape. It is not the passport photo. Because it is not a photo of Curtis Rea. It is a photo of Tony McCartan, and he's smiling, leaning against his car in a short-sleeved shirt. Missing since June 17<sup>th</sup> 2019. The numbers to ring are in dark, bold text beneath.

Sonya is almost indignant. So there's a new guy, another one. Curtis is what, old hat now? The number for the police is different to the one that was on his poster—must be a different area. The electric box is humming and when Sonya looks at Tony McCartan—the edge of his shirt where it touches his arm, the smiling face—the things fall from her hands, the water-bottle and the cloth and the scraper. She sees his mother, getting the posters photocopied,

## DANCE MOVE

sitting on her son's old bed, folding his old clothes, lying awake in the night. Tony McCartan's mother. The box is vibrating. The air is pounding. Tony McCartan's mother, where is she? Sonya wants to fall into her arms so they can grip each other tight.