

Losing your dad may not be the hardest thing

Taken



Rosemary Hayes



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RAVEN





One

What if she'd gone home the usual way?

Turned right outside the school gates, not left?

Would everything have stayed the same?

But she hadn't, had she? She'd gone the long way round, across the park, walking slowly, kicking out at the fallen leaves and daydreaming about Mark Ryley, the fittest boy in school.

Stop it, Kelly Wilson, he's way out of your league.

Still, no harm in a bit of fantasising. She could dream, couldn't she? Imagine a moment when she dropped something and he picked it up, his hand brushing hers as he gave it back to her, then their eyes meeting ...

She sighed.

Idiot. That is SO not going to happen!

She'd only come this way because she was on her own.

Usually she walked home with Lizzie, but Lizzie was at drama club.

Lizzie would have stopped her.

‘Don’t go there, Kell. It makes you sad.’

Aren’t I allowed to be sad?

Dad. He’d gone four years ago, at exactly this time of year and on a day like this, a still, sunny Autumn day, the air heavy with the scent of ripening berries.

Kelly walked slowly over to the chestnut tree – *their* chestnut tree. She’d been here with Dad ever since she could remember, in every season, sheltering under it, sitting against its huge trunk, playing games around it. There were conkers spread on the ground beneath it, shiny and unmarked, bursting out of their spiky shells. Kelly shrugged her bag off her shoulder and squatted down to pick some up, then sat back on her heels, staring at them lying in her hand, the memory still strong even after all this time.

The memory of that day, when Dad had been sitting right here beside her, gently stroking the gleaming sheen on the conkers before stuffing them into his pockets.

‘Too lovely to leave.’ Then he’d looked at her and suddenly turned his head away.

At the time she’d thought nothing of it, but afterwards ...

Kelly’s eyes filled with tears and angrily she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

How many times had she played those words over in her head?

She squatted there for a while, then sighed and got slowly to her feet and, as she did so, a tiny movement caught her eye.

It was so slight that she could easily have missed it – just a shifting of shadows in the distance, at the edge of the woods surrounding the park.

Her eyes were still bleary with tears as she whipped her head round, the skin at the back of her neck prickling, sensing she was being watched.

Oh god, it'll be Lycra Ted!

But Lycra Ted didn't usually lurk in the shadows. If he'd seen her he would have jogged over, puffing and wheezing from the effort. He was seriously boring, always looking for an excuse to stop and chat.

Lycra Ted was another reason why she and Lizzie didn't come home this way.

Kelly looked round. There was no one else in the park. Not even kids in the play area. Just her luck! There was some perv over in the woods – otherwise she was on her own. She shivered as she grabbed her bag and made a dash for the gates.

She was almost there, close to the gates and the road – where there were cars and people – when she stopped and looked back again.

Had she imagined it?

You're just jumpy because there's no one else around.

But as she stared, she saw that there *was* someone there. Almost impossible to distinguish from the shadows, until the tall figure (a man, surely?) moved and became briefly separated from his surroundings, before he turned away and was absorbed back into the darkness of the trees.

She saw it as he turned. Something about the set of his shoulders and the way he moved – not with an even stride, but with that stiffness in his right leg.

The stab of familiarity made her gasp.

For a moment she forgot how to breathe and felt her heart banging hard against her ribcage. She made a weak cry and took a few steps in his direction, her fist clenched tight against the conkers in her hand.

Her brain told her it couldn't be him. It wasn't possible.

And yet ...

Don't!

Kelly flung the conkers to the ground and raced for the gates. She should never have come home this way. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

She stopped when she was out of the park and stood by the railings, taking great gulping breaths.

What had she seen, after all? Some man she thought was her dad.

'You're nuts,' she told herself. 'It wasn't him. You *know* it couldn't have been him. It was just some perv. Which is why, Kelly Wilson, it is not a great idea to walk back from school through the park on your own.'

When she reached her house, her breathing had slowed but her cheeks were still red and her eyes puffy. She tried to slink upstairs to her room, but Gran was there at the kitchen door, a tea-towel slung over her shoulder.

'Good day at school?'

As if she cares!

'Fine,' said Kelly, her foot on the first stair.

Gran frowned and came closer. Kelly started up the stairs.

'Not so fast, young lady. Let me look at you.'

Kelly sighed. ‘Nothing to look at, Gran. I’m just the same as when I left this morning.’

‘That’s enough of your cheek.’ Gran frowned. ‘Have you been crying?’

‘No.’

Gran ignored her. ‘Something wrong at school?’

‘No,’ Kelly shouted. Then she ran upstairs and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She put some music on, turned it up loud, then flung herself down on her bed.

Idiot. Forget it. Whoever you saw, it wasn’t him.

But the image stayed with her, and that night she dreamt of him. When it had happened, she’d often dreamt of her dad and woken up sobbing, until Mum heard her and came in to comfort her. But she’d not dreamt of him for ages.

The next morning Mum was in the kitchen working at her laptop and Gran was leaning over her shoulder, making suggestions. Kelly could sense the tension in the air. Mum was trying not to show her irritation; she looked up when Kelly came into the room and closed the laptop.

‘Hi love,’ she said. ‘Sorry I was so late last night. I’d hoped to get in before you went to bed, but the meeting went on and then there was this dinner thing ...’

‘Yeah. Whatever.’ Kelly didn’t look at her and instead started making herself a drink.

‘Still grumpy,’ said Gran, folding her arms. ‘She hardly spoke a word at tea last night. It’s the hormones.’

Mum got up and came over to Kelly. ‘You OK, love?’ she said quietly.

Kelly shrugged her off. 'I'm *fine*.'

She immediately felt guilty. Mum was keeping them all together, going out to work, earning the money, putting up with Gran (who told her twenty times a day how to bring up her children) and still trying to be there for the two of them – her and Nathan.

'See,' said Gran. 'She's nearly fifteen and still not learnt any manners.' Then she went off on one of her child-rearing rants and Kelly tuned out.

'Sorry Mum,' she whispered. 'Didn't sleep too well.'

Mum smiled and briefly squeezed her shoulder.

Nathan shuffled into the room, yawning, his hair still tousled. He was clutching his phone and he didn't say anything, but headed for the fridge and took out a carton of juice.

Gran started on him. 'Don't bother to say good morning, Nathan.'

Nathan frowned and briefly focused. 'Uh. Oh, hi.'

Gran let out a loud sigh.

Some toast popped up and Kelly took a slice and sat down at the table. She looked from Mum to Nathan. Nathan had Mum's thick shiny hair – wasted on a boy – and regular features, even if they were covered in spots. And he was fine-boned, like her. Whereas she – Kelly – was tall and gangly with wild curly auburn hair. It was all the wrong way round. Mum said she had lovely eyes, but she was just being kind. What she didn't say was that she was a dead ringer for her dad.

Her dad.

Stop it! Stop thinking about it!

Nathan sat down and gulped his juice, still staring at his phone, constantly scrolling down. He didn't even look up when

Mum put a plate of scrambled eggs in front of him, but just began stabbing at it with a fork with his free hand, his eyes still glued to his phone.

Kelly sighed.

It was hard to believe that she and Nathan were brother and sister. They were from different planets. And, thank god, they were at different schools. Nathan was a geek and he'd got a scholarship to a fancy school the other side of town.

Kelly glanced at the clock on the wall. She scraped back her chair, kissed Mum, then ran out of the kitchen, grabbing her coat and bag from the hall as she went.

'Bye,' she yelled, as she opened the front door. 'See you later.'

Lizzie lived at the other end of the street.

'How's things?' she said, as they set off together.

Kelly pulled a face. 'Gran's ranting about my manners and Nathan's a smelly geek.'

'No change, then.'

Kelly grinned and shook her head. 'How was drama club?'

'Yeah. Good. I got the starring role!'

'Hey that's fantastic. What is it?'

Lizzie rolled her eyes. 'How many times have I told you? We're doing Romeo and Juliet.'

'Oh yeah. So you're, like, Juliet?'

'Duh! *Obviously.*'

'Who's Romeo then?'

For a second, Lizzie hesitated. She looked down.

‘Mark Ryley,’ she said.

Kelly swallowed, fighting back a wave of jealousy.

‘So, what, you’ll be snogging him and everything?’

Lizzie punched her on the arm. ‘It’s a *play*, you idiot. As in pretend – not real.’

‘Yeah, ’course it is.’

Kelly sneaked a look at Lizzie. She was dead pretty, small with huge brown eyes framed by long sleek dark hair. Mark was sure to fancy her. How could he not? Suddenly Kelly felt miserable. Her life was crap. Gran was a nightmare, Nathan was on another planet, Mum was hardly ever at home and now Mark would fall in love with her best friend. She sighed.

Who am I kidding? Mark would never fancy me anyway. Not in a million years.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, Kelly frowning and staring at the ground.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Lizzie. ‘You’re not upset about Mark and me being in the play are you?’

Kelly shook her head. ‘No, it’s not ... ’ Then suddenly she started to cry.

‘Sorry.’ She stopped walking and fished a tissue out of her pocket. She blew her nose. ‘I don’t know ... I’m all over the place.’

Lizzie took her arm. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing. I’ll feel better tomorrow. Gran says it’s my hormones.’

Lizzie snorted. ‘Typical!’

Kelly didn’t answer and began to walk on.

Lizzie caught her up. ‘Come on, Kell. What’s up?’

Kelly sniffed, then raised her head and met Lizzie’s eyes.

‘If I tell you, will you promise not to say anything?’

‘Hey, that sounds heavy. You’re not pregnant, are you?’

Kelly smiled through her tears. ‘Yeah, like a virgin birth!’

Lizzie grinned. ‘Phew! Thought maybe there was something you weren’t telling me.’

‘No. Nothing like that. But you really *can’t* tell anyone, Lizzie. Promise?’

‘OK.’

‘It’s so stupid.’

‘Go on.’

Kelly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘Yesterday, I walked back from school through the park.’

‘Idiot! Did some perv flash you?’

‘Shut up! No, it was worse.’

Lizzie’s eyes were wide. ‘Worse! Oh my god!’

‘Not that kind of worse.’ Kelly hesitated. ‘I ... I thought I saw my dad.’

Lizzie said nothing for a moment, then, gently, ‘You know that’s not possible.’

Kelly nodded. ‘I know. I thought that too.’

‘You told me you used to imagine seeing him, after it first happened.’

‘Yeah. But that was a long time ago. I haven’t done that for ages. Yesterday was different.’

‘How?’

So Kelly told her what she’d seen.

Lizzie frowned. ‘Did you say anything to your mum?’

‘Are you mad? Can you imagine what that would do to her?’

‘You never talk about him at home, do you?’

Kelly shook her head. ‘Not really.’ She started walking again, her hands in her pockets. ‘If he’d died *normally* – you know, been hit by a car or something – then perhaps we could. It’s just the way it happened ...’

Lizzie fell into step beside her. ‘You don’t see that counsellor any more do you?’

‘You *know* I don’t!’

‘Would it be ...’

Kelly turned, her eyes hard. ‘What? You think I’m going mental again? I tell you, Lizzie, I didn’t imagine it.’

She’d long ago accepted that her dad was dead, but what happened yesterday was different. She’d not been looking for him like she had in the past – and then suddenly he’d been there. Hadn’t he?

‘OK. I’m sorry,’ said Lizzie. ‘So, what are you going to do?’

‘You believe me?’

Lizzie looked down at the ground. ‘If you believe it, then I believe it.’ She hesitated. ‘Are you going to tell anyone else what you saw?’

Kelly shook her head.

‘You’re just going to leave it, then?’

‘Dunno. ’S’pose so.’

They walked on in silence for a while and then Lizzie cleared her throat. She spoke slowly. ‘They found his clothes on that beach, Kelly. And the note.’

‘I *know* that. But they never found his body, did they?’

‘Oh Kelly!’ Lizzie put an arm round her.

‘It’s just that ...’

‘What?’

‘Well, he might not be dead. He might still be alive. He *could* be, couldn’t he?’

They’d arrived at the school gates so Lizzie didn’t answer, and as they went into the yard Kelly whispered. ‘Promise you won’t say anything?’

‘Course not,’ said Lizzie, but later, as she watched Kelly hang up her coat, she frowned to herself.

Would she be able to keep that promise? What if Kelly was losing it again?



Rosemary Hayes lives in Cambridgeshire with her husband and an assortment of animals. She worked for Cambridge University Press and then for some years ran her own publishing company, Anglia Young Books. She has written over forty books for children, in a variety of genres and for a variety of age groups. Her first novel, 'Race Against Time' was runner up for the Kathleen Fidler Award and since then many of her books have won or been shortlisted for awards.

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