

SOFIA

With two chipped mugs balanced precariously on a tray Inspector Nunn kicked the door closed and placed the drinks in front of Jane. She hardly noticed the tea sloshing onto the plate of scattered rich tea biscuits.

"Sorry about that Mrs Terence. Please continue," said Inspector Nunn, as he reached for a soggy biscuit and dunked it in his tea.

"I noticed the man's voice, that second time I saw him. He was restrained and quite embarrassed to start with, calling out for his daughter.

"He didn't seem too worried and then there was a sudden, almost hysterical urgency in his call.

"Sofia! Sofia!"

"By now he was much more frantic and as he ran past me I saw his long brown hair unfurled from his ponytail. Ragged and knotted. He took a few steps along the path, and then his head swiveled round, as he scanned his surroundings. Helpless. Searching, with that haunted look. Perhaps that's why nobody helped. Not at first anyway.

"Sofia!"

"He shouted her name again and again; the last syllable stressed and short."

"Mrs Terence..." interrupted Inspector Nunn.

"Jane, please."

"Jane. When was the first time you saw him?"

"Sorry. We saw him only a couple of hours earlier. Ellie - that's my daughter - and I bumped right into him. Into him and his little girl. Sofia, I assume. The two girls started talking, in that peculiar fashion of four-year olds. There was silence, followed

by a couple of words, then some pointing. Ellie mentioned the sloth we'd just visited. That's why we hadn't seen them; we were blinded by the sunlight as we stepped out of the dark corridor. Ellie hadn't been too impressed by the sloth, if I'm honest. It did rather resemble a slab of fur..."

"Jane, what about Sofia? How did she seem?"

"She was happy, excited even. I guess it was her first time at the zoo. She was buzzing after their encounter with the golden tamarins; she danced around us, her light red hair floating behind her, the locks bouncing on her back. Beautiful. A tamarin had snatched the bottle of drink from the man's rucksack, but luckily the staff had retrieved it quickly. That explained why Sofia was clutching the bottle in one hand and in the other a sheep. I remember that. In a zoo full of exotic animals she carried around a cuddly sheep. Pretty boring, I thought."

"Did you try to help? Did you try to stop him? To talk to him?"

"He was too fast, you see. He didn't stop. Didn't even really say anything else. Perhaps I should have done something, anything. Yes, I was a bit afraid. After all I was on my own here, with little Ellie. I should have forced him to stop, tried to help him. He was just so large - a body building type with a tight black T-shirt with weird silver writing on it. Look at me. At five foot six, I felt tiny next to him. Vulnerable even. I did have to think of Ellie."

"Thank you for waiting Mr..?"

"Elwood. Martin Elwood. I don't know how I can help you. I didn't see anything."

"Anything you can tell us will help. Trust me. When did you arrive today?" asked Inspector Nunn, as he munched away on the final sodden biscuit, his tea long

since finished.

"I got here first thing this morning, just as the zoo was opening. In the summer we bought one of those Gold Cards, giving us free admission for a year. It's great value for money. Have you got any children, Officer?"

"Inspector. Yes, I have two. Carry on."

" Shh...Don't talk too loud, they're fast asleep, they've just had their bottles. It was my first time here with the twins on my own."

"The man, Mr Elwood. When did you notice him?"

"That was right away, in the car park. He was with the little girl in the van as I pulled up. It was a white van with the name of a builder on it. His own business I assumed, although I did wonder why he wasn't working. In this recession didn't think anyone could afford take time off willy-nilly?"

"How about you? Why were you here on a Tuesday?"

"I'm a pilot and work erratic hours - crazy working life – I bet yours is a bit like that, Officer?"

"Again, it's Inspector. Do continue but less about my life please," replied Inspector Nunn. "How did they seem?"

"Fine I suppose," replied Martin. "The girl was talking non-stop, playing with a little sheep. I saw her singing "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and that made me smile."

"Why?"

"Well, because it was a white sheep of course. The whole time the guy seemed distracted, stared ahead, ignoring his sweet daughter. That was pretty cold of him, if you ask me. I couldn't do that."

"Didn't he talk to her at all?"

"Oh, well, I suppose now you ask, he did look at her a couple of times, stroked

her hair even, but with sadness. I mean, why come to a zoo if you're going to be a miserable sod?

"At the entrance till we stood behind him. He was one of those who obviously don't feel the cold. This morning there was still a slight frost, early for mid-October, but a definite chill and even I got my coat on. He seemed one of those macho types, wearing just a T-shirt advertising a heavy metal band or such. What a contrast to the girl! What was her name? Sophie you said earlier?"

"Sofia."

"Sorry, Sofia. She wore a pretty red dress with lots of layers, a red cardigan with white lace and matching white plimsolls. Dressed for a party I thought. The zoo does hold them you know but it did seem odd, as no one turned up to greet them and there were no other children in party clothes."

"When did you see them next?"

"Quite a bit later, by the giraffes. The man was a bit more engaged then, you could say. The girl was on his shoulders, and she reached out with her free hand to stroke the giraffe. It lowered its head and then suddenly stuck out its tongue. A thick wedge of black flesh licked her hand, she squealed in shock, startling us all. Her dad took a step backwards and stumbled over the pushchair. It nearly tipped over and with a scream my boys woke up. Great, they'd only been asleep for a few minutes! Yes, I suppose that is selfish but I - they - needed their rest. The man did say sorry but his accent was so heavy I barely understood him."

"He wasn't her father."

"That's strange, who was he then?"

"Her uncle."

"Good Afternoon Miss..?"

"Beaumont. My first name is Bethany. I just heard the witness muttering as he left. Something about the guy not being Sofia's dad. Are you sure? They seemed so close."

"Please Bethany, tell me first what were you doing here today? And why were you so sure that they were father and daughter? What makes you such an expert?"

"I never said I was an expert. I just see a lot. I've been working here for two years; came straight from school. I pride myself on working out the visitors relationship to each other, kills time at the ice-cream kiosk I tell you.

"He acted with the love of a father. Sure, he looked different, but I'm not your normal twenty-year old either with all my piercings.

"My Mum despairs, especially when I had my tongue done last month. Sofia liked it though; she touched the stud and all. Her dad...uncle...didn't seem to mind at all.

"She'd just come from the African area and the giraffes. There was a bit of a scare I heard. The ice cream was to comfort her. The Calippo lolly was clasped in both her hands, they must have been freezing. A sheep? No, I didn't see her holding anything, just the ice-lolly. The man wasn't holding anything either. He bought a 99 Flake and we had a long chat about that. Yes, he did seem foreign but his English was fine. What did we talk about? Oh you know, the usual, in this case the ice cream. Why didn't it cost 99p instead of the two pounds? Inflation, that's what I said. Of course it didn't help that he had all the trimmings, including a flake, sprinkles and sauce. They seemed like any normal visitors – no, I take that back. They were different, friendlier, not too many stop for a chat with me."

"Mr Cartwright, you seem to be one of the main witnesses to today's incident. What position do you hold here at the zoo? In your own words what happened?" asked Inspector Nunn firmly. The fourth interview of the day and after three cups of tea and two coffees his mouth was as furry as the cuddly toys in the shop outside.

With a self-important cough Jason, in the director's visitor chair, looked over his desk to the Inspector.

"Firstly, I'm manager of the zoo - and that's my desk you're using."

Expansively Inspector Nunn waved his hands in thanks, in acknowledgement.

"We do appreciate your help. Can you tell me what happened here today?"

"I saw it all - something I'll never forget.

"There was an emergency call to me mid morning of a lost child. I initiated the search and lockdown policy. Nobody was to leave and no new visitors were allowed to enter. You - the police - were informed. Blimey, you got here fast, just like in the TV shows. Unfortunately not fast enough though, was it?

"Usually the lost child is found within five or ten minutes. I understand twenty minutes had passed. The man was incoherent by the time I got to talk to him. He'd been frightening the staff and other visitors with all his shouting, dashing back and forth. Grabbing people by their coats and screaming her name in their faces.

"We tried to help. First of all by setting up a search team. On top of that he'd abandoned the rucksack by the park, as you know. The bomb squad was quick on site and made sure it was harmless. Their presence was rather extreme, if I may say so.

"The man kept mentioning sheep, a white sheep; so we sent two staff to the farm enclosure. No one was there. By now forty minutes had passed and the man..."

"Tarik. None of you ever asked. His name was Tarik."

'Okay. Tarik was angry by now. I saw he was fighting with you too for a while

whilst you were all asking him questions. He became more and more agitated and then I saw him make a run for it. Reckon he must have been an amateur rugby player. Even now I find it hard to believe he was a manager like me, albeit, a manager for rock concerts. Unbelievable. They say he was quite famous in Bosnia.

"I followed him at a distance, behind you and the rest of the police..."

"I should never have bought my daughter, Sofia, the sheep. I got it for her on her third birthday after her birthday party at the local farm. It's hardly left her side since. All of this for a stuffed animal. It seemed so harmless."

"Please, madam. You can't say blame yourself. I've learnt that from experience. I'm sorry to trouble you at such a difficult time but please what is your full name and relationship to Tarik?" asked Inspector Nunn, as he sipped water from one of the two crocodile glasses on the table.

"I'm Marija Longmire. I came here from Bosnia ten years ago and then met and married my husband. Tarik is - was - my brother. He'd do anything for his niece. She was so excited about going to the zoo today. Her first time here and of course she insisted on wearing her best party clothes. Tarik said that was fine with him and as he was looking after her today for me..."

"Is that usual?"

"No, he only flew over yesterday to help. After my husband was killed at work in a building accident. God, I haven't even told Sofia yet."

"And Tarik?"

"Tarik would do anything for Sofia, he absolutely adored her. He always was selfless."

Silence reverberated around the room. Sitting up Inspector Nunn straightened

his blazer, unraveling his twisted tie. It had been a long day. Marija sat motionless, straight as a model, skinny legs crossed. Her fingers of her right hand tapped anxiously on the table.

"All these questions Inspector. Please, can you tell me what happened here today? No-one has told me anything, except about Tarik."

"Of course Mrs Longmire. We are so sorry.

"Tarik lost Sofia about three hours ago. It seems she ran away to search for her lost sheep, she must have wandered around for a while and then recognised the African area from earlier."

He paused for a moment, lifting the glass to his lips and took a sip. Nothing. Empty. With frustration he banged it to the table and looked across at Marija.

"A youth found the toy and for fun, so he claims, slung it into the enclosure. As bad luck would have it, Sofia came round the corner just in time to see her beloved sheep flying through the air towards the giraffes, zebras and rhinos."

"Have you arrested the guy? It's his fault, all this. Can I see him?" Agitated Marija stood up and paced round the office.

"No, the youth has gone home now. It was just a silly prank. Believe me, knowing what his actions caused is punishment enough."

"What I don't understand is why Tarik entered the enclosure anyway. He isn't that reckless. He knew Sofia and the sheep were inseparable, even so, I can't see him risking his life for it."

"There seems to have been a plastic chair by the wall. No, you're right, it should never have been there, placed there no doubt yesterday evening by an employee having a smoke.

"We, including Tarik, arrived just as Sofia climbed onto the chair and she stood

precariously balanced, shouting for joy at her long lost sheep. The wall is low but safe. It's unlikely Sofia could have made it into the enclosure. However, Tarik didn't want to take a chance.

"It was a long way round to reach Sofia. The quickest route to her was the shortest, directly across the enclosure, past the animals. Sofia laughed and looked at Tarik, gesturing to the sheep. He shouted at her to wait. Then he vaulted over the wall like an Olympic athlete. He dashed past the bemused giraffes and zebras, which scattered. All that remained were the rhinos. He slowed for these, walking patiently past them. I thought he was safe, we all did. The rhinos seemed disinterested. Even slightly scared, edging away.

"Everything seemed fine until Sofia started screaming, screaming and crying. Her whole body shook. I reckon she suddenly got scared, for herself, for her uncle. Who knows? She was calling for you then. For you and Tarik.

"At the sudden noise one particular rhino raised his head and at a lumbering speed headed towards Tarik. Tarik tried to run away but no amount of vaulting, dodging, running would be enough. I've seen rhinos run here before, they're fast, unexpectedly so.

"The doctor with us here today say he died instantly. I am so sorry. He wouldn't have felt a thing."

Marija sat silently, then nodded.

'How is Sofia?' he asked.

"She's bearing up. Tougher than I thought but still distraught. Talking, then suddenly an eerie silence comes over her, confused tears rolling down her cheeks. As for me, the two most important men in my life are gone. How does anyone cope with such a loss? For Sofia's sake I have to survive.

"As to the cuddly sheep. She never wants to see it again. Sofia just threw it away."

The End

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