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ROUNDABOUT

YOUNG PICADOR



ON THE VERGE

The cars on the motorway zipped past in smears of colour. The girl standing on the sloped scrubby verge of the southbound carriageway lifted her head to stare at them as each mosquito whine built to a roar. Standing still, it was impossible to see the people inside the cars, but she knew that they would be able to see her and she imagined their eyes drawn up from the grey ribbon of tarmac to glance at her, before being forced back to the road.

She'd travelled enough herself to know that any driver couldn't help but notice her. The verges were owned by the council or the Highways Agency. The only people supposed to be here came to trim the long grass or plant hundreds of miniature trees, each a regulation distance away from its neighbour. Sometimes a car might park briefly on the hard shoulder and a man get out to piss in the bushes, turning his back to the passing traffic. But really this was wasted land; the only reason it existed was to cushion the motorway and block the sight and sound of it from the town.

Tess laughed when the next passing car changed lanes, moving from the outside to the median. She wondered if the driver thought she was going to step out on to the motorway in some crazy stunt. She wasn't that stupid. Even if you managed to duck the cars all right, the drivers all had mobile phones and police didn't appreciate being called out for a silly game. Instead she started to walk against the flow of traffic, making her way through the tangle of furze that dotted the verge. On the other side of the motorway there were fields behind the light screen of trees, but here the scrubland went back much further before coming up against the borders of Accleton.

There wasn't any place Tess had lived where she hadn't learned the roads and the short cuts between them. She knew the blank spaces on the maps that meant green belt or brownfield sections of land, the dotted lines of footpaths and rights of way, the snaking ladders of the railway lines and the crinkled edges of river courses and estuaries. To anyone else this was a bit of motorway like any other. But Tess had it marked and this stretch of verge, between the 'in case of emergency' telephone box to the south and the grey concrete bridge of the overpass to the north, was her territory. Not all the time, of course. She had other places up and down the country, little bits of wasted land that no one thought about. Not parks or recs, although she hung out in them too, but places that nobody came to at all. She was drawn to them precisely for that reason.

Tess stopped walking for a moment and hunkered down between the bushes, hiding herself from the road and the wind that whipped past with the speeding cars,

digging out the baccy packet from the pocket of her jeans. Even here the wind made rolling up difficult and she fumbled with the Rizla for a moment before sticking it down. Cupping her hand around the cigarette in her mouth, she had to spark her disposable lighter three times before it would catch, and then inhale quickly so as not to waste the flame. Standing up again, she took another deep drag on her roll-up and looked down at the cars. Her eyes watered as the wind whipped the smoke from her cigarette into her face and she blinked, looked away – and saw a flash of orange on the roadside.

It was a cone. As Tess wandered over to it she saw that it was the start of a line of cones that straggled along the hard shoulder, tied together with red and white tape. It wasn't much of a line and a couple of the cones had fallen over, but Tess eyed it suspiciously before dropping off the grass and on to the edge of the tarmac to follow it. The motorway curved slightly just before heading under the overpass, so it was a minute before she saw where the cones were leading. A yellow 'men at work' sign stood forlornly by the edge of an unexpected spur of fresh black tarmac that cut through the bushy wasteland, heading back in the direction of town.

Tess broke into a jog as she took the turn-off. Last time she was here, six months ago, there had been nothing, just more bushes and long grass. Another sign stood just round the corner. This one read 'WORKS ACCESS ONLY' in capital letters and Tess ignored it as she jogged past, following the road up to where it spilt suddenly into an open circle of raw earth surrounded by piles of

grit and sand. Heavy yellow earth-movers and bulldozers stood parked around the area, looking like kids' toys in a giant sandpit.

Tess stared, coming to a halt at the end of the access road and trying to orient herself. There was only about a mile of verge between the motorway and the town; if it wasn't for the piles of earth she would probably be able to see Accleton. There simply wasn't space to build anything here, not without it intruding on the edge of the town. And Tess knew exactly what was on that edge. What on earth did the council think they were doing, building here of all places? Dropping back into the scrubland, she started to circle round, heading in the direction of Accleton.

The sky clouded over as Tess made her way through the scrub and she glared up at the grey threat of rain. The first pricks of it stung her face and arms with the feeling of pins and needles. She hunched her shoulders defensively, ducking her head so her long dark hair shielded her. It was stupid not to have brought a jacket, but she'd only intended to wander about for a while – having got into Accleton last night, she'd wanted to reacquaint herself with the place.

She came out of the scrub up by the side of the overpass. There was a small edge of pavement next to the verge where Tess stepped over the crash barrier. Her jeans were already sodden at the bottom and the crack in the sole of one of her boots was starting to let in the wet. She walked fast along the roadside, not looking at the cars, but when

one of them hooted as it passed her she glanced up to swear viciously at its tail lights as it sped away.

The pavement was more wet than dry now and the roads shone silver with the drizzle of rain. Tess's mood lightened when a shaft of dirty yellow sunlight pierced the clouds ahead for a moment: a spotlight on the junction with the ring road. Tess followed the pavement round to the right before turning aside where a gate appeared suddenly in a gap in the hedge. She let herself through it. Here in the passage between two tall hedges the rain was blocked out and Tess slowed her pace as she wondered for the first time what she was going to say when she got back.

Ahead of her the Traveller site shone wetly through the last of the rain, trailers and caravans damp and gleaming in reflected shafts of sunshine. The washing lines strung between caravans were still empty, but a group of little kids had started up a football game over at the edge of the site and their voices rang out shrilly as they quarrelled over the ball.

Tess thought back to what she'd seen on the side of the motorway. Whatever it was, it meant trouble. Tess and trouble were old acquaintances and she knew how to recognize it when she saw it. The construction site was close enough that other Travellers would have noticed it if it had been there for long, but no one had said anything about it last night. It wasn't normal to come in with bulldozers that fast unless there was some kind of emergency, but if there was an emergency there would have been men at work there today, Sunday or not.

Tess frowned, her dark eyes reflecting the storm clouds

above as she headed across the field to a battered trailer parked beside a brown van. The trailer door was open and Reenie was coming out with a collection of washing tubs.

‘It’ll be raining again in ten minutes,’ Tess said as she came over and Reenie glanced up at the sky before looking at her.

‘I know, but I have to get this wash on. You can take it to the launderette to dry later.’ Her eyes focused properly on Tess then and her face got a pinched look of annoyance. ‘What have you been up to anyway? Your jeans are all over with mud.’

‘I went out to the motorway . . .’ Tess began but Reenie was already shaking her head.

‘Some day you’re going to get yourself killed, hanging around the roads like that,’ she said, bumping and banging the laundry tubs as she set them out. She shot Tess another pinched look. ‘I expect you went out there to smoke, didn’t you?’

‘No,’ Tess said and Reenie’s mouth curled.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ she snapped, twisting round to pick up a load of clothes from the doorway. ‘You’re just like your dad, you are.’

Tess turned away angrily. Another couple of people were out on the site now and she saw a neighbour glance over at the sound of Reenie’s voice before returning to her own work.

‘Are you listening to me at all, madam?’ Reenie’s face was red with exasperation and Tess took a step away. ‘Don’t walk off when I’m talking to you!’

‘Why not?’ Tess glared at her. ‘You only ever listen to

your own voice anyway. I don't care; you can find out yourself if you're not going to listen to me. Probably when they evict you.'

Reenie had been talking over Tess's words, voice rising as she tried to drown her out, but now she came to sudden halt and Tess waited.

'What do you mean, "evict"?' Reenie's eyes narrowed suspiciously and Tess laughed at her sudden change of tone.

'The council are messing with the empty land down by the verge,' she said, 'not far from here.' She could see from the corner of her eye that the neighbour was no longer pretending not to listen and a couple of men had stopped unloading bags from the back of a car and turned to look at her.

'What's that got to do with anything?' Reenie was winding herself back up again but Tess wasn't having any of it.

'There's a big works site been set up,' she said. 'Bulldozers and earth-movers all over. The council's building something.' She waved her arm vaguely towards the hedge at the edge of the site. 'And keeping it secret too. There's hardly any signs or anything. Just bloody big piles of earth.'

Reenie opened her mouth to speak, but noticed their audience just as one of the men by the car made up his mind and came over.

'You saw this?' he asked Tess and she nodded.

'Just now,' she said. 'You can't miss it.'

'So they're building something,' Reenie said, her

washing abandoned as she looked from the man to Tess. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

'Want to bet?' Tess asked and the man nodded.

'Let's go and take a look, shall we?' He turned to look back at his mate and waved him over before fixing Tess with a dark look. 'Swear you're not making it up?'

'Not likely,' Tess snapped at him and he laughed.

'All right then. Don't you follow us, we'll find it ourselves.'

He and his friend set off towards the stile. The woman who'd been listening came closer, looking worried, and Reenie glanced around at the other onlookers with a brief look of embarrassment before turning her attention back to Tess.

'Honestly,' she said, 'you're soaking wet. Look, get inside and change those jeans and I'll make you a cup of tea, all right?'

Tess hesitated and their neighbour said quickly 'I've got a kettle boiling right now. Let me make it.' She looked hopefully at Reenie. 'Then maybe your daughter will tell us some more about it while we wait for the men to get back?'

'Thank you,' Reenie said as Tess turned her back and headed inside. 'I've got all this washing to do for one thing . . .' Her voice trailed off for a moment and Tess's ears pricked up, waiting for what Reenie would have to say next. 'She's not mine though – my brother's child.'

'A bit of a tearaway, sounds like.' The neighbour had dropped her voice but Reenie didn't bother to.

'That's for certain. My lot are boys, and you know where you are with them, don't you? But madam in there's

been a right handful ever since she was a tot. I thank my lucky stars I only have her once in a while. It sets my hair on end the things she gets up to.'

Tess struggled with the knots in her laces and kicked her boots off on to the floor. Her right foot was soaked through and she peeled off both her socks before skinning out of her jeans. As she changed clothes she could hear the voices continuing outside. The neighbour had brought out tea and Reenie was using it as an excuse to gossip. Fragments of sentences floated in through the door, which was still ajar.

'... her dad's up north somewhere ... blood's thicker than water ... had to take her in ...'

'... nowhere else she could ...?'

'... not the only one ... sends her to whoever'll have her ... no end of trouble ... just like her dad ...'

'I can hear you out there!' Tess shouted suddenly through the walls. 'Telling my business ...'

She pulled her boots back on and came out of the trailer. Reenie looked annoyed, but the neighbour was embarrassed and stood up to bring Tess her cup of tea.

'Get that down you, love,' she said uncomfortably. 'You'll feel better then.'

'Fetch out those wet things so I can wash them as well,' Reenie added in a conciliatory tone of voice. 'No sense in leaving them for later.'



It took the men over an hour to get back and by then the news had spread across the Traveller site, from the

temporary pitches on Tess's side to the permanent ones at the far end.

People gathered around Reenie's trailer, casting dark looks at the prefab huts that formed the site supervisor's office.

'It's the council,' one woman said bitterly. 'They never wanted us to get this site in the first place. Didn't matter that we'd been using it for hundreds of years . . .'

'Yeah, now they've come building their new road or whatever it is right up against the back of our site,' a man agreed. 'If they can't get us out legally, they'll force us out with traffic fumes and road noise.'

'Don't go jumping to conclusions,' someone else warned. 'We don't know that this building work has anything to do with us.' But around the circle people snorted. Tess could feel trouble brewing as thick as the cups of strong tea being passed around.

People were still discussing the situation when Reenie's husband came back from the pub and looked askance at the signs that dinner would be late. Hurriedly bundling up the bags of wet washing, Reenie shoved them at Tess and started clanking and crashing pans on the stove.

Hefting the bulky bags awkwardly, Tess made her way across the Traveller site. The short fence that ran down the middle divided the temporary side from the permanent pitches, but on both sides there were clusters of people with worried expressions.

The Travellers had long fought the council over the right to a site here. Tess had seen the saga progressing year upon year as she came back to Accleton with Reenie or

other relations. A lot of people had got disillusioned and given up, but there were always some willing to fight, to struggle with the masses of paperwork needed to prove that gypsies and Travellers had been using the land to the west of town for as long as anyone could remember. Eventually they'd won half of what they'd been trying for. Half the site was now officially recognized as permanent, and the Travellers who lived there could keep their pitches year upon year. The second half, Tess's half, was different. You couldn't use a pitch here for more than six months and there were stricter rules about how and where you parked. And the Travellers were painfully aware that it might not be theirs forever – in the future, they might have to fight for it all over again. Both sides were administered by a supervisor appointed by the council: a woman whom everyone united in disliking.

It was the same in lots of places. Travellers didn't get much provision anyway and most councils seemed, to Tess, to want to make their lives harder still. Tess's dad said it was racism, pure and simple, and that people had been against gypsies and Travellers so long now that they didn't even notice it any more and there wasn't a cat's chance in hell things would ever change. But to him Travelling wasn't something you chose, it was something you were born to. Even some of the Travellers weren't really gypsy enough for him. When he'd got worked up enough, he would tell Tess about her history. She had Romany blood in her, he said, even if it came from way back. Romany and Tinker and Irish all together, her dad claimed.

‘You’re descended from the freest people in the world, darlin’, and don’t you forget that. You don’t have to live by anyone’s rules.’

She hadn’t forgotten. Maybe Reenie didn’t get it, but all those rules were made to be broken: the no-smoking signs, no-trespassing warnings, no ball games on the grass, no running in the corridors, no over-elevens on the swings. They were rules made by narrow minds to keep you down. So, like her dad, Tess did what she wanted. Tess was free.

But as she reached the main entrance, where the site joined the Accleton ring road, Tess looked back and saw the Traveller site from the outside. It was a miscellaneous assortment of caravans, trailers and cars, each with their own arrangements of washing lines, lean-tos and collections of random stuff that people used or traded or had simply picked up. Kids and dogs played between the trailers and the only way in or out for the vehicles was the entrance; chain-link fencing blocked off all the other sides.

Despite their partial victory over the council, the Traveller site still wasn’t considered part of the town, Tess admitted to herself. Out on the edge, no one saw it and no one wanted to. Other people only came here on their way past to somewhere else. Whatever the council were building out by the motorway, they had put it there thinking the Travellers’ land nearby wasn’t important.

But, Tess remembered, there was something else her dad had always told her. They may be exiles in their own country, pushed to the edge, backs against the wall. But that was why they had to stand their ground. Or lose it. A

chill went through her and Tess imagined the bulldozers moving up the hill, tearing through the scrubland, men laying concrete as they went. This was her space and she wasn't going to let anyone take it from her.

Back at the site Reenie and the others had looked scared and resentful, but they'd still tried to tell each other it was probably nothing to worry about. Tess wanted them to get angry, as angry as she was, so that they'd fight if the bulldozers came. Her dad would have done, Tess was sure; he'd have rallied the others together, got them to build barricades or something. But most likely the rest of the Travellers would just let it happen, swearing a bit the way they did when the police moved them on but giving in all the same, as if there wasn't anything they could do about it.

'We have to fight,' Tess said out loud, clenching her fists as she looked at the grey blockish buildings of Accleton and the dismal little parade of shops that was all there was on this side of town. 'We've got rights, same as anyone else. We've just got to stand up for them.'