

BARLOW

BY

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They had fought so many times before. But nothing like this, nothing had ever come close to this.

“How could you?”

She backed away from him, her hands groping the air behind her willing the kitchen bench to be closer in the hope of grabbing something to defend herself with. All the while pleading with him.

“Please ... please put the knife down, you don’t know what you doing.”

“Really? But you did, didn’t you? You knew exactly what you were doing.”

She was crying now, desperate. Hoping that the sight of her tears would soften his resolve somehow.

“Please ... don’t. What do you want from me?”

But his anger couldn’t be dissolved by mere water works. Not this time.

“You know what I want. You know what I’ve always wanted. But no ... you had other plans didn’t you. Well, too bad. You have made your choice, now you pay.”

He lunged at her. Thankfully, coordination was not one of his dominant traits. She easily dodged him and found the door. She flung it open and leapt through the portal. The door slammed into the wall and bounced back, briefly blocking his way giving her a critical few steps lead. She fled from the house knowing that he is in hot pursuit. Her legs, fuelled by terror, propelled her at lightning speed towards the town that lay at the end of the lane beyond the river.

So far ... too far.

Run girl run for your life, it’s your only chance.

She gasped for air from the exertion and the consuming panic. Each breath barely enough to sustain her as she desperately sought to outrun her attacker.

Oh, God ... someone help me ... please help me!

She stumbled and let out a scream of terror, but somehow managed to keep her feet and carried on running. But it gave him a chance to make up ground. Now she could almost feel him upon her. Maybe an arm’s length, maybe two at the most.

So close ... too close.

He was bigger than her and probably faster once he got up to full speed, but maybe he would also run out of energy first. She had agility. Her slight frame was more responsive and could duck and weave with ease like the gazelle being chased by the lion.

Duck ... weave ... jump.

If she could avoid his reach long enough he would have to give up the chase.

Duck ... weave ... jump.

Down the hill, towards the crossing, onto the boards. Stupidly she turned, trying to see how close he was in case she had to duck or weave or jump, losing her footing in the process. Suddenly she was flying, arms and legs flailing hopelessly trying to gain some traction. The surface rushed to greet her. She only had enough time to be aware that something bad was going to happen but not to take evasive action. With a sickening thud she crashed, bounced slightly and rolled off the edge. In an instant, blackness engulfed her and she ran no more.

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Johnson cradled the receiver and sighed.

Another one, that was the second this week and it's only Wednesday. Can't this lot just get on with each other?

He knew the answer to that question even before he asked it.

No, they can't. In fact, they don't even bother to try.

This was the new generation, a young but angry breed born into a world that couldn't give a stuff if they lived or died. In no time at all, they would become adults ready to bring the next wave into the world.

God help us.

He grabbed his cap from the front desk and stuck his head around the door to the office.

"Hey Sarge, action at the school. I'm off to sort it out."

There was a deep grunt as the Sarge lowered the veil of the local newspaper to reveal his moon like face brandishing a pair of thick-rimmed glasses above which two beady eyes glared at the interrupter of his otherwise zen, meaning doing nothing at all, like existence. He frowned and shook his head causing a ripple to flow across the expanse of skin that pooled under his chin.

"Again? That place is like a bloody war zone. Honestly what is wrong with kids these days?"

Johnson beat a hasty retreat before the Sarge could beat out another one of his 'in my day stories'. Sergeant Bartlett had plenty of those 'in my day' stories. He had collected a seemingly endless number of them during his time in the metro. He was

one of the old-school cops, farmed out to the districts so that the city could embrace modern methods without dinosaurs hanging around. It didn't seem to worry him. He was happy to live out the rest of his working days dealing with petty crims. Not that he did that much, he left the foot work to the constables, rarely leaving the warmth of the station except for food or the occasional community talk, but only if there was food.

Johnson, on the other hand, was desperate to get some real police action instead of treading water in the remote regions. He was meant to be transferred some time ago but somehow it didn't seem to happen no matter how many times he followed it up. They always seemed to come up with some excuse. They were lying of course, but he continued to live in hope.

The Sarge never seemed to be very sympathetic.

"It could be worse," he laughed one day spitting out a salvo of cake crumbs that fell to the desk like snow, "you could be living in Midsummer."

I wish. At least they have enough excitement to warrant a TV series ... and that's not even a real place!

...

He passed a trio of over-weight middle age men cycling along the main road, each resplendent in vibrant lycra, pretending they were 30 pounds lighter and the same number of years younger. All Johnson could see were three oversized balloons stretched to breaking point.

Way too little shielding the world from way too much. Seriously, why isn't there a law against that?

He tried to distract himself from the grotesque vision by looking at the general vista as it passed by the windscreen. Barlow was an uncomfortable mix of ye old English style village and post-industrial wasteland that spoilt the western part of the town like a bruise on an apple. It was an ugly add-on to a once pretty location. Once upon a time it was a decent earner, way back when this country actually made things. But now it remained as a rusting memorial to a different time.

If one stood in the right place, and happened to look out at the right angle, one would see a picturesque hamlet sitting on the edge of a river fed by the mountains that disappeared into the clouds painting a brooding background. With a bit of

imagination, and tunnel vision, it was almost a postcard scene. Welcome to Barlow, your idyllic country location.

Everyone thinks the country is an idyllic place, except a large number of people who live there of course. Here, everyone knows each other. He parked the car outside the combined primary and secondary school, stepped out and put on his cap.

Yea they all know each other but not in the way most people think.

He trod the well-walked path to the principal's office, his shoes tapping out an authoritative beat that was met with visible disdain by a number of students that suddenly huddled a little closer to each other occasionally stealing guilty glimpses to make sure Johnson wasn't heading in their direction.

Up to no good as always.

In Johnson's day, school kids gathered to talk about the previous night's episode of the X-Files or how the favourite football team was going. Occasionally, a girl's name made it into the conversation but very rarely and nothing ever resulted from it.

This lot played by a different set of rules. School was a place where stories of conquests would be shared, usually in graphic detail, illegal or stolen goods exchanged and rendezvous arranged, no doubt to score more illegal or stolen goods to be exchanged the following day.

School here and now had little to do with education other than to allow the crims of tomorrow to hone their already expert skills. This lot didn't come here to learn. What were they going to do with it?

After all, how much education does one need to fill out a dole form?

Out of the corner of one eye he could see a figure prancing towards him, her actions exaggerated to draw attention to herself as if the minimal uniform that hugged the curves of her body with suffocating tightness didn't draw enough attention in the first place. She bounced around him like an excited puppy clearly trying to get his attention

"Morning Constable Johnson."

"Hello Aimee. How are you today?"

Aimee stopped with a flounce.

"I'm feeling very guilty." She pouted.

"Really?" queried Johnson not breaking his stride.

What is it going to be this time?

"And why would that be?"

She ran up to him and matched him stride for stride.

“I was a very naughty girl. I let some boys do things to me that I’m quite sure are quite illegal. I think it was all the drugs I took. You should take me in. I think I need some deep interrogation.”

*Oh for f**k sake, that is pathetic.*

She held out her arms wrists together

“You may need to put me in cuffs. I swear I’ll come noisily ... and often.”

Johnson smiled to himself.

Of that I am sure.

He had no doubt that everything she had just confessed to him was completely true and he was going to do precisely nothing about it.

“I think I will let you off with a warning this time. Behave yourself from now on.”

She giggled and fell away to rejoin her group, each howling indistinguishable noises of encouragement like pack animals.

Hyenas by the sound of it. The future leaders of society at their best.

Johnson passed through the entrance to the administration block leaving the zoo behind him.

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“It took four of us to separate them,” Burns’ whining voice greeted his arrival, “I had to lock one of them in the first aid room.”

Why do they still call it that?

The first aid room was once a first aid room but over time it had been emptied of anything to do with healing and it had been turned into a de-facto cell instead. It got a lot more use that way. Let’s face it, most injuries these days usually involved an ambulance not a Band-Aid.

The combatants were reunited to glare at each other from opposite sides of Burn’s office. Johnson gave each a stern look.

“Well?” He demanded.

They looked at each other to see who would crack first. Normally, the rule around here was never say anything to the cops but these two hated each other. Their faces revealed the internal conflict.

“He fucked my sister!” Mick, the shorter of the two, eventually blurted out.

“Language”, said Burns trying to summon some non-existent authority.

“Well he did!”

“So what,” retorted the other, “everyone has fucked your sister!”

“Language,” said Burns still hoping to make his mark on the conversation.

The boy had made a true, if not overly crude, statement. Sarah Riley was quite an attractive lass but her body image was such that she sought constant reinforcement usually through physical contact. Needless-to-say the local lads had no qualms about exploiting this to their own satisfaction. Sarah was definitely looking for love in all the wrong places and each time she was cast aside. It was a vicious circle and no good would ever come of it.

Mick launched himself at the other boy, knocking him over a wooden chair which fractured into several pieces. They rolled around on the floor each trying to pummel the other into oblivion before Johnson and Burns intervened, each grabbing a combatant and retreating to a safe distance with their writhing cargo.

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” Mick threatened wrestling against Johnson’s grip. The other boy just sneered in response.

“Language”, said Burns.

Johnson gazed at Burns with a look that said, ‘seriously, is that all you’ve got?’ For a school principal, he didn’t seem to carry any influence over the students. That’s because no one respected or trusted him. Everyone knew he was just marking time until retirement and that couldn’t come soon enough for all concerned. Johnson always thought there was something about Burns that he didn’t like, and he wasn’t the only one.

He was sent up here under suspicious circumstances. Rumour had it that he was a suspected kiddie fiddler although nothing was ever proved. If so then sending him up here would certainly curb his habits. Apparently, he wasn’t into girls and there was no way he was going to touch the boys without the risk of losing several pints of blood ... or worse.

Kids were brought up tough here from an early age. Johnson may have been the local police but he wasn’t the enforcer. Justice was painfully delivered out of sight. You would only know about it the next day when the accused would be seen sporting an additional bruise or cut or worse. That was how it was done, that is how it will always be done. It wasn’t civilised but it was effective.

But he was still the local cop and that meant at least going through the motions.

“Do you know what the penalty is for having sex with a minor?” Johnson knew that the boy knew. He had already been told on previous occasions.

The boy snorted with derision.

“What you going to do, arrest the whole town?”

Good point, you little bastard.

Barlow had a shocking reputation in that regard. As soon as a girl started to develop, the males started to gather around.

Like dogs to a bitch on heat.

Johnson was shocked that he could so easily think that.

Hmmm, that was a bit offensive even for me. But that is just how it is and let's face it, there was nothing else to do. Sex and crime, they were the new industries of Barlow.

Only a lucky few managed to find other things to interest them. Barlow did produce quite a few quality sportsmen and women. It was a means of escape and the lucky few tried their hardest to be the best to make sure they got out.

“The only decent ones are under age,” the boy continued easily brushing off Burns’ grip like one would an autumn leaf, “by the time they are legal, they've become right mingers. Wouldn't fuck 'em with a bargepole.”

"Langu..."

“Don't bother,” interrupted Johnson. Burns shut up and retreated to his corner unwittingly giving a good impression of Golem in the process.

"I'll be talking to your parents." Johnson continued, “You may be charged with sex with a minor.” He looked at the taller boy.

"You can go now."

The boy sauntered out the door. He didn't give a stuff. He knew nothing was going to happen. The law concerning sex between two under aged kids was hardly ever enforced. Even if the police did want to get involved, the prosecutors wouldn't pursue it. It wasn't worth it. There was too much happening and there were too few resources to deal with it. Tell the parents and let them deal with it. That was the usual course of action.

Now and again, a parent was done for prostituting their kids to earn some extra drink or drug money. But that was rare. Not because it didn't happen, it's just that no one ever said anything making prosecution almost impossible.

Johnson spun Mick around so they were face to face.

"Again?"

Mick threw his hands up in the air in frustration.

"What am I supposed to do? She don't know no better and Ma can't control her. If I don't do something she's going to end up pregnant with no one to look after her."

He was right of course, that was the fate for many of the girls of Barlow.

Mick was a good kid. He looked out for his sister and his mum. He worked part-time in a take-away to put some food on the table that actually wasn't take-away. He had become the man of the house since the old man had decided that caring for anyone other than himself was beyond him. He had performed an emotional trade in where by his wife of eighteen years was exchanged for a younger model with no attachments. Mick's mum never quite got over it and tried to replace him with the bottle. It was a destructive relationship that saw her sink further into the abyss.

Johnson liked Mick. He was one of the few good ones who had the talent to get out. He was an excellent forward and had already been promised one or two opportunities when he finished school. Chances were that he wouldn't leave his Mum and sister though which would mean that he would end up rotting in this place.

Such a waste.

Johnson threw his cap on the passenger seat and slammed the car door shut. 'Six months,' they told him. Six months to cover for a constable who went away with stress and then he could transfer to somewhere decent. That was a year ago. The constable never came back having found the end of a rope a more preferable option. Johnson was left to fill the void until a replacement was found. He was still waiting and wanting. Constable Peter Johnson was a copper still hanging onto the last vestiges of youth with just one ambition, to get the hell out of here before life completely passed him by. He didn't care where anymore, just not here.

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Once upon a time, in a different age, Barlow was quite the thriving centre. Barges brought in raw materials from upstream where they were manufactured into goods that were sent downstream to be shipped worldwide. Then someone decided that it would be more efficient to underpay Asians to make the same goods so the barges floated straight passed Barlow. Then, later on, probably the same someone decided that they could underpay some other Asians, or South Americans or whomever for the raw materials and so the barges stopped altogether.

The days of dirty industry were over. The problem was that no one gave a thought to what was going to replace it so towns like Barlow went into decline. There was still activity in the farms but it wasn't enough and the population of Barlow slowly watched things being taken away from them. Companies closed, services were rationalised, jobs were cut.

On the TV, the economists and politicians boasted about the success of the new economy and how everyone was better off. But they never came to towns like this. They were too busy buying investment properties in the big city, driving up the prices beyond the means of those who actually wanted somewhere to live.

Economists and politicians had no time for towns like Barlow.

After a while, the population got used to the fact that no one cared about them and so they too stopped caring. It was all very depressing and the cops got to see the result of it every day.

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Johnson's stomach declared lunchtime so he headed towards the local mall for something probably not recommended by the health authorities. Barlow Central Mall was the economic hub of the town. It was here that money, mostly unearned because there were so few jobs, was exchanged for the crass, the cheaply made and the unhealthy. Johnson was a regular visitor having long outsourced his culinary requirements to the Chinese restaurant, the various other take-aways each presenting their variation of deep or shallow fried goods, or the freezer section of the supermarket.

Owner, Geoffrey Samuels was a big fish in a very small pond. A very big fish. Perhaps whale would be a more apt description. He seemed to prize his size in a way that said, 'I can afford to be fat so I am'. He loved status and surrounded himself with what he thought were symbols of success. He had a mobile phone long before anyone else. It was a useless tool as there was hardly anywhere in the town capable of a signal strong enough to hold any more than a fleeting conversation. But that didn't diminish the fact that he had one. It went with his fancy car and fancy suits and shiny shoes.

Samuels had long believed that he could rescue the dying town through entrepreneurial vigour alone. He had tried a number of daft gimmicks in the past. On one occasion, he had one of his staff call the cops to report a major crime was in

progress. It was a pretty exciting event by the sound of it and the cops turned up in force. In force, by the way, consisted of three cars with two cops in each! Not big by city standards but around here it meant that something bigger than the usual violence, break-ins and family feuds was going down. This resulted in a sizeable crowd gathering at the market place, which was exactly what Samuel wanted. It turned out that he was having a sale where 'prices were so low they were criminal!' It was a pretty pathetic really. His excuse was that he was just trying to inject a bit of excitement into the town. He only got out of being charged with wasting police time with a few choice reparations and the fact that the sausage sizzle had attracted a large group of people including one particular thief who had been in action in the area. The Sarge had finished sausage number two and was on the way for a third when he caught sight of the cheeky bugger out of the corner of his eye. Free food and a catch to boot.

As if on cue, the Sarge's voice demanded Johnson's attention.

"Base to Car 2."

"Car 2, Johnson here."

"Another incident at the school, ambulance on its way."

Johnson sighed and fired up the motor.

Where did my life go so wrong?

...

He hadn't always wanted to be a policeman. As a kid, he probably wanted to be the exact opposite. He kind of liked the idea of being a bit of a criminal himself. Be a bit dangerous, king of the underground, be surrounded by diamonds and loose women. He had a promising start. He had managed to steal three chocolates from the local shop and young Janice Burston used to call around to do homework with him two nights a week. Actually, the homework thing was just a ruse. Janice was his first love even though they hadn't moved beyond holding hands. However, with a bit of imagination, he could see this as the beginning of a badass future.

But it couldn't last. The problem was that he got too ambitious. He was trying to prove himself worthy of being totally hard-core one day and went for a family size Cadbury block. But he hadn't planned the heist and he was totally unprepared for a haul this big. He was only wearing a rather tight pair of shorts and a t-shirt leaving him with nowhere to hide the loot.

In an act of desperation, he shoved the chocolate down his front and attempted his escape. Needless-to-say the boy with the strangely misshapen crotch didn't make it out the front door. Johnson's criminal career had suffered a major setback.

To make it worse, the Burstons moved away a month later. He had lost both his ho and was now serving time having been grounded for his sins. It was a time for Johnson to re-evaluate his life. He did and joined the police ... a number of years later of course.

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He dried the same three dinner items, one plate, one knife, one fork, and carefully placed them in their allocated place on the shelf and in the drawer. So little to clean up. That's because he never cooked. There was no need to when the shops were less than half a mile away.

If it came in a box, then a few minutes in the microwave and dinner was sorted. If you were lucky it might even slightly resemble the image on the outside. If you wanted to fill in the time until the bell, you could look at the side of the box where you were faced with an assortment of numbers meant to represent several preservatives and flavour enhancers. Occasionally, an actual identifiable food based ingredient starred in the first six items listed. But it didn't really matter as long as it killed the hunger pang. The glass stayed out. He still had use for that. He always had use for that.

He stood at the window of his humble rental, now full glass in hand. The village lights peered back through the veil of evening rain. He longed for more lights, and neon signs, and noise and people and ... everything this place couldn't offer. He emptied the glass, then filled it again. What else was there to do?

On the TV, James Bond was battling evil in 'Golden Eye'. Flying from one exciting place to another and getting his man and his woman. Johnson sipped from his glass and allowed himself to daydream. For a moment, he was 007. Suave, sophisticated and always able to save the world at the last moment. But he wasn't Bond. He's just an accidental county copper who rarely got his man and certainly not any woman. There was nothing here worth saving and certainly no glory. He looked out the window some more.

Just this but no justice.

He finished the bottle and stumbled to bed.

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There is very little to do in Barlow, especially for the young and angry. At night, they would gather around the shopping centre playing the fool and getting drunk on cheap booze illegally supplied to them by the always-present dirty old men of which Barlow has no shortage. They had long ago discovered that the local youth had a value all of their own and the old leaches were more than happy to cash in.

A pack of fags and some beers could easily be exchanged for a few favours by a local lass. If they were lucky, she would take her top off as well. Something a bit more top shelf could get you a whole lot more. It was a simple transaction negotiated before the goods were purchased. Then a short walk around the back to complete the deal. Not too far though, so the boys could keep watch and jump in when things got out of hand and someone tried to take more than what was on offer. The price for protection was a share of the goods.

It was mutually beneficial. The kids just wanted to get drunk and the olds wanted to get their jollies. Everyone was happy. Well ... in reality, no one was happy which was why they were here.

Occasionally someone ended up in hospital after being beaten to a pulp, or pregnant, or in need of a course of drugs to cure something nasty. But that was life ... around here anyway.

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“All I am saying is we need to do something about law and order in this town. These kids need to be put in their place.”

Johnson hated community get-togethers. It was just an excuse for a bunch of Barlow’s old crankies to vent at the police because things were not like in the old days. Everything was better in the old days so they say.

That’s because they are too senile to remember what the past was really like.

“Conscription, that’s the answer. Put ‘em in the army. Teach these young thugs some respect.”

Oh yes that’s a great idea. Take a bunch of angry misguided youth and teach them how to kill... brilliant!

“I think that’s outside the control of the police Mr Jones.”

Out of the corner of one eye, Johnson could see the Sarge stuffing his face full of cupcakes that he had loaded onto his plate in the shape of a small pyramid. All while

charming a couple of old spinsters. The constable had to admit that Sarge was a smooth operator. A few choice words at a community meet and greet would generally result in a freshly baked multi-layered creation making its way past the front counter to his office in the next day or two. Here was a man at the top of his game.

Johnson let the old man rant about law and order and how in the old days kids were given the strap for no other reason than they were kids and needed respect beaten into them.

What does he expect us to do?

Five more minutes, he told himself and then he would find some reason to excuse himself. It was at that moment that a familiar voice was tossed into the rather one-way conversation like a life raft to a drowning man.

“Constable Johnson, I wonder if I might steal you away for a minute.”

Why wait five minutes? Why not now?

Johnson turned around to see the smiling face of Amy Jones.

“Ms Jones, such a pleasure. Of course you can.”

He turned back to the old man who looked like he was priming himself for round two ... or three ... or whatever.

“Would you excuse me? I think I am needed over there.” He pointed in no particular direction. The old man pouted but relented and went off to find someone else to grumble to. Johnson breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you.”

“You looked like you needed saving.”

Amy was a teacher in the primary section of the school and enjoyed working with the young. At that age, they still had hope and a certain amount of innocence before the senior years would transform them from Jekyll to Hyde. This was reflected in her demeanour, which was still positive with a hint of innocence as opposed to her senior colleagues who were far more battle hardened and scarred, in some cases literary.

“Of course, saving you doesn’t come cheap. I’m hoping that you will agree to give a talk to the children sometime touting the virtues of being a good citizen.”

A waste of time of course but how can I say no.

His smile hid his thoughts.

“I’m sure I can fit that into my busy schedule.”

They strolled off together engaging in polite conversation about nothing important. It was enough for a few of the old biddies to exchange knowing glances that suggested the possibility of love being in the air.

Johnson quite liked Amy Jones and almost regretted not feeling any real attraction to her. Not that there was anything wrong with her. She appeared to be a normally constructed human being with all the right parts in all the right places, and quite a sweet face to go with her equally sweet personality.

The problem was that she was too real. His taste had long since been tainted by the unrealistic and unattainable Photoshop fantasies that adorned his computer screen most nights. He almost forgotten what a real woman looked like and when faced with the potential of actually being with one, had no idea what to do. Often, he would lament his position but instead of doing something about it, he would just sink back into fantasy. Once home, he distracted himself by turning on his computer and allowing the modem to screech into life and call forth his desires.

...

Barlow is not a place of hope. It is not a place where dreams are made or the wishes of children fulfilled. Here, reality is a miser who gives nothing in exchange for an endless struggle just to scratch out an existence. All too soon, the innocent faces of the young will become etched with harshness before their time. Their features hardened by their environment, sprouting the underpinning rage that accompanied the onset of adulthood.

Often it would manifest itself in the self-destructive and the brutal, the result of which would often be seen in the emergency ward of the local hospital. And that was not mentioning what went on in the privacy on the other side of the closed doors. No one mentioned what went on there. No one needed to.

Opportunities were rare in a place like this but the locals could be resourceful. Out here, a baby meant income from the government, plus other concessions. It was a pretty sweet deal that many a lass had cashed in on. It was all part of a cycle reinforced with each generation. It brought enough money into the town to keep things ticking over. Samuels would be able to buy a new mobile phone with the takings and continue to grow in 'statue' off the earnings of the poor and gullible. Elsewhere in the world, the aspirational sought promotion and the trappings of wealth and power. Their self-worth linked to their trinkets, which they paraded for all

to see like peacocks. But in Barlow, success went no further than a guaranteed government hand-out.

Often the powers to be would rail against the drain on the public purse from all these teenage pregnancies. The politicians would take time from their corporate sponsored dinners to pour shame on such young and irresponsible youth.

But what else are they to do when all other options are taken away? By their actions, the politicians virtually impregnated each one themselves.

And let's face it, they pretty well raped everyone else.

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Another day, another school 'visit'.

Another lecture, another shrug of the shoulders.

They don't care. No one has taught them how to.

It was going to be another week forged from the same broken cast just like the rest of them. Johnson dragged himself through the routine holding on in the vain hope that one day the transfer would come through. It was the only thing that kept him going. In the meantime, there was a report to file.

On his arrival at the station, Johnson immediately noticed that something wasn't quite right. Mainly, the Sarge wasn't doing the crossword or eating. Something big was clearly going down. He cradled the phone as the constable entered and immediately barked instructions to the other.

"Right, Johnson, I want you to head off to the hospital. A young lass has been fished out of the river and is currently recovering from her little dip. Hop down there and find out who she is, why she decided on having a bath and ... "

The Sarge's voice appeared to fade into nothing as Johnson tuned him out. He already knew what to do.

At last, something different.

He flicked a, 'Yes Sarge' at the other, performed a neat pirouette and with a spring in his step, was out the door in no time.

...

It was wrong to say nothing ever happens in Barlow. In fact, lots of things happen here. It's just that very few of them are good and all too many of them involve a visit to the hospital. The boys are the worst. A combination of boredom and just being a teenager is enough to turn most boys into henchmen of the apocalypse ready to

unleash armageddon on either themselves or anyone else stupid enough to be within range.

After a while, the blood and guts become depressingly routine. The tiny hospital patches them up and sends them on their way till next time. As with the school, the local cops are regular visitors, taking notes for files that never get read.

...

"She'll be ok. The couple camping up the river managed to fish her out of the water in time and perform CPR. Damn lucky too. A moment later and she would have been gone."

"Any idea who she is?"

"Well she didn't have any ID on her so I did a bit of investigative work. Hope you don't mind. I figured since Clarach is the only town close to where she was fished out, she must have come from there. So, I phoned my old hunting mate who runs the pub. He identified her as Kate Ferryman from up Parsons Lane."

Johnson smiled and gave the doctor a look of mock admiration, "Nice bit of police work there Doc. You'll be taking over my job next."

The doctor shook his head, his face displaying a genuine look of horror.

"Not bloody likely."

"Do you reckon I will be able to talk to her?"

The doctor gave his request some thought.

"Well we can see if she is awake if you like, although I don't reckon you will get too much out of her yet."

Kate was in ward 2b in the far bed surrounded by curtains to protect her privacy mostly from the local paper that had already sent a reporter around to grab some headlines for the next edition. The doctor parted one of the curtains so he could check Kate's status. Johnson stole a glimpse of the girl and caught his breath with surprise.

Kate Ferryman was stunning, not just compared to the locals but anyone anywhere. That was a pretty big call especially considering that they had only fished her out of the river a few hours ago and she had her head wrapped in a bandage.

Howin that limited gene pool did someone like her be created? Normally up there you could trace the origins of almost everyone to one or two sources and they were about as pretty as the arse end of a sheep!

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