

Lilly

“Mrs Angie Grimes?”

The policewoman was addressing a grey-haired head that had appeared tentatively around the battered front door. Acknowledging the slight nod, she said, “I think I had better come in Mrs Grimes, I’ve got something to tell you about your daughter, Lilly.”

Angie opened the door and waved the policewoman inside.

Jake Stones poured himself a large glass of whiskey and dropped in two cubes of ice. Standing in front of the heavily misted window, he rolled the outside of the cold glass against his forehead. It felt good.

Dragging a chair up to the kitchen table, Jake sat down and took a deep sip. The warmth of the alcohol comforted his body. Putting aside his glass, he reached into his canvas shoulder bag and carefully placed his portable recorder in front of him. With narrowed eyes, he stared down to look at its’ orange screen and let out a deep sigh. Although the device was not switched on, the contents of the machine’s hard drive drifted up to his ears. One by one, his past encounters with the Shropshire public eerily whispered into his ears. Being the senior reporter at the Shropshire Star newspaper meant that Jake had recorded countless interviews into this tiny appliance and in the silence of his sparse kitchen he could hear the past voices of local people recounting their many individual stories.

Some were distressing; the elderly being conned out of their life savings by unscrupulous individuals, or others battling their individual perceived injustices. Some were more enlightening; good-hearted folk famed for their charity work and campaigning for local causes.

Jake wiped his eyes with his crumpled white handkerchief. The interview he had just led with a recently bereaved mother had left him with a strange impression, unlike anything he had experienced before. It was as if an unseen hand was gripping his insides, pulling open a portion of his personality that was previously hidden from him.

Shocked to hear his voice, Jake suddenly blurted out, “If there is a God, why would He single out this gentle woman to this unimaginable suffering?” He spoke out loud, for his ears, or indeed, if there is a God, for His ears as well.

Deep in thought, Jake swirled his glass and abstractedly viewed the ice cubes dissipating slowly diluting the whiskey. It was his interviewee Angie Grimes's suggestion that they meet in the local park. The weather was set to be fine and as Angie said during their short telephone conversation, she felt she would feel more at ease within the vibrant flower gardens, grassy areas and fountains of Shrewsbury’s Dingle Gardens.

Angie Grimes was already seated when Jake arrived. She had described herself as “*pushing sixty-five*” but at first glance, she looked considerably older. Her slightly untidy hair was silvery grey and fastened down over her wrinkled forehead by a faded yellow headband. Jake

was immediately drawn towards Angie's eyes. They seemed colourless and eerily hollow. As he settled himself down next to her, he silently hypothesised that the past ten years had taken away their life from them and turned it into physical despair. The residue of her suffering had descended her face, filling up her pale sagging cheeks.

They sat on a wooden green slatted bench and exchanged a silent brief greeting. Angie signalled her ascent when Jake placed his recorder on the seat between them; he tried to put her at ease, "It's a memory thing, Mrs. Grimes, I'm not getting any younger and I don't want to miss out on anything important," Jake smiled brightly at the wearied figure seated next to him.

He could see that she tried to smile back, the corners of her mouth flickered momentarily, but she couldn't.

Angie hadn't smiled for years.

With just a flicker of eye contact, Angie addressed Jake. She spoke slowly; in a local accent, her voice was full of hesitation. "This is how I want Lilly remembered, not what she looked like at the end," Angie's stout fingers fumbled with a creased brown A4 envelope, sliding out a picture, holding it in both hands in front of Jake. He took it from her and examined the photograph carefully; it displayed the picture of a teenage girl, smiling impishly at the camera proudly holding a CD in her hands.

He saw that the album was 'Greatest Hits' by the Spice Girls. "That's my Lilly, Mr Stones, isn't she beautiful, my little angel." Angie wiped her eyes on a piece of half-shredded kitchen roll.

"Her story needs to be told Mr Stones, if only to help others who get themselves into a similar situation. These street sleepers have a past, a family, you know, people who loved them and often still do. There are too many of them, street sleepers, Mr Stones, things are getting worse, but the higher-ups don't care. It's up to likes of me to try to give them a voice, do you get me?"

Jake inclined his head. "I do, Mrs Grimes," he answered quietly.

His eyes returned his gaze to the picture. The girl had brown straight hair cut with a long fringe just finishing just above her startling bright blue eyes. Her clear complexion was enhanced by just a hint of pink lipstick with similarly coloured long fingernails. He noticed a string of greeting cards in the background. Angie leaned forward, "It was her fifteenth birthday, Mr Stones, we couldn't afford much, but she was always singing those Spice Girls songs, so I put a tenner aside to get her that CD. It's not much I know, but money was tight back then," Angie paused and looked across the park. "It still is," she added wistfully.

Jake took a sharp intake of breath and placed the picture carefully onto the bench. Something pulled deep into his insides, transfixing him for a solitary moment. The girl in the photograph kept on smiling up at him from the bench. Jake swallowed involuntarily. Something in the girl's smile aroused an intense desire to know her story.

Angie ran her fingers through her hair and adjusted her headband.

“Lilly was a good girl, Mr Stones, she helped me a lot, I was a single mother. Jack, Lilly’s dad cleared off soon after she was born, I still don’t know what I saw in him, bloody waster,” Angie glared at Jake, her previously empty eyes instantly filled and darkened for a few seconds. “She had to grow up quickly, we didn’t get much in benefits, and I had a cleaning job, mainly early mornings and late evenings, so Lilly had to learn to look after herself.” Angie paused and fiddled absentmindedly with her makeshift paper handkerchief.

“She wasn’t very academic, if you know what I mean, Mr Stones, but she tried hard at school. She got several GCSEs, I was very proud of her.” Angie again wiped her eyes; the kitchen roll was now broken into small bits, Jake offered her his handkerchief. Angie accepted it with a slight nod of her head.

“Go on, Mrs Grimes, take your time,” Jake said encouragingly.

Angie told her story.

Lilly left school at sixteen. She immediately got herself a job at the popular bakery store, Greggs. They had just opened a new shop in the precinct. That’s where she met Dessie. “He was a nice lad, Mr Stones, they were good for each other, he was an apprentice carpenter for a shop fitter firm; he worked all over the Country. It was whilst he was working on a job in the precinct that he met Lilly. He had his lunch each day in Greggs.”

A young romance quickly blossomed, although Dessie was away often during the week, he would rock up with his cheery smile at the Grime’s home on a Friday evening, usually clutching a bunch of petrol station flowers for a blushing Angie. “He always stayed the weekend ... in Lilly’s room,” a disproving tone was plain in Angie’s voice.

Angie's instincts were proven to be correct even before Lilly had dragged her into the backyard by the elbow, with an ‘I’ve got something to tell you’ look on her face. Angie had heard the coarse retching coming from the bathroom two mornings in a row. Pregnancy was confirmed by the Boots test and no she wasn’t going to ‘get rid of it.’ Lilly was determined to become a mum. “I’m happy and so is Dessie, he is right with me, we are determined to make great parents, Mum.”

Lilly’s words resounded in Angie’s mind.

“She was about eight and half months gone when the baby’s heartbeat was lost, it was during a routine test. At first, we thought that there must be a mistake, you know, a faulty machine or somethin’ but I could tell by the look on the faces of the medical people that they knew.” Angie was staring straight at Jake; her hands gripping the side of the park bench, Jake saw her knuckles whiten.

The pregnancy was induced immediately and the baby was born naturally, stillborn.

“He was perfectly formed, normally looking, warm, but still and silent. He looked content even. The nurses wrapped him up in a white blanket and offered him to Lilly, but she just looked away, I could just about make out her brown hair as she buried herself deep into the bedclothes. There were no tears, from either of us.”

“And Dessie? Where was he?” Jake asked.

“Oh, he was working away in London, we eventually got a message to him but there was a train strike on at the time and he couldn’t get up here.” Angie loosened her grip, the park bench’s green paint had stained her fingers; she wiped them clean with Jake’s handkerchief.

The funeral was swift, Lilly had refused to attend. The boy was given the name Sam. It was the first name that came into Angie’s head. Whilst the brief ceremony was being conducted by a downcast vicar and attended by a grim-faced nurse alongside a weeping Angie, Lilly had busied herself packing away her things into a canvas holdall. She was escorted out of the maternity unit, flanked by two midwives ushering her away from the other mums and their newly arrived offspring. She knew that they meant well, they thought they were sparing her from more grief, but Lilly felt as if they were bundling her away like a blanket-covered criminal after a court hearing.

Did they see her failure to produce a living baby as some sort of failure on their behalf?

Lilly felt it.

Social workers and health visitors came and went. They tried hard, but Lilly knew that they would rather be in the company of a healthy baby and beaming mother, billing and cooing whilst advising on breastfeeding and nutrition. School friends and neighbours dropped by but Lilly shut herself away from them. Dessie tried equally as hard, but there was a limit to all the coaxing and encouragement a young man could do. His visits became infrequent and when a job offer came up in Dubai, he took it.

Lilly and Angie never saw him again.

“I knew she was depressed, Mr Stones, but what could I do? I mean she couldn’t help herself; she just sat in her bedroom listening to gloomy music, all the life and vitality she had seemed to have had been wiped away in that delivery room.” Angie was twining the handkerchief furiously between her fingers.

Jake placed his hand on hers, “It must have been difficult for you.” He felt stupid the moment he said the words.

A brief, handwritten letter signed, ‘Love Lilly’ greeted Angie when she returned from her morning shift. Off to ‘To get my head sorted’ was the opening line, ‘Don’t worry’ was the second.

“I never saw her alive again, you know, she was spotted here and there, Birmingham, Manchester and that, living rough, but every time I got close to tracking her down, she’d moved on. I got the Sally Army involved, they did manage to speak to her but she wouldn’t come home, she felt she had let me down.” Angie was now openly sobbing. “Let ME down,” she called out, “She’d let no one down, if anyone did any letting down it was me.” Jake took a deep breath; he produced a bottle of water from his jacket pocket. “Here Mrs Grimes take a sip of this.” It was an inadequate gesture and he knew it. “You did your best.” Equally inadequate words thought Jake.

“She did want to come home, Mr Stones, I know she did. Look she had written her name and address on the back of the photograph,” Angie turned the picture over. Jake saw the neat handwriting, ‘Lilly Grimes, 24 Orchard Gardens, ST21 1SS’. “She wanted to be found,” added Angie, her voice was now starting to strain. She shuffled, agitated, pushing hard down on the park bench.

Jake helped Angie set up a ‘Just Giving’ page to help pay for Lilly’s funeral. His skills with Social Media and with the help of the Shropshire Star, money started to roll in. Angie was shocked to see the amount of donations being added to the page each day. Small amounts, ten pounds, fifteen pounds often accompanied by carefully chosen words. Some anonymous, some from school friends and a Greggs staff whip round exceeded the set target with a generous contribution.

Jake felt compelled to go to the funeral. He stood quietly at the rear of the chapel. As the service was delivered, he could picture the fifteen-year-old Lilly on her birthday. The Spice Girls song ‘Viva Forever’ was played as the curtains closed around the coffin - a tune that was now destined to stay with him forever.

As Jake slipped quietly away from the Crematorium, he heard Angie’s distinctive voice calling him from behind.

“Here Mr Stones, please have this,” she pushed a brown envelope towards him. “It’s the picture. You know the one of Lilly on her birthday, I want you to have it, for all your help, you know.” Jake took it from her. His eyes were drawn to the bottom of the picture. It just read;

Thanks

Angie Grimes - Mother of Lilly.