

Birthday Boy.

She stood at the school gates long after most of the other parents and carers had borne their charges away, glancing impatiently at her watch every now and again. How come he was always the last one out anyway? She walked further down the metal fencing, hoping to catch a glimpse of him as he came around the side of the gym. Nothing yet – if he'd been kept in after school for being naughty again, she'd ... no, she wouldn't. Not today anyway; today was his birthday and she was determined to keep it special. She tried to remember what coat he was wearing today, was it the blue waterproof one, or the much cooler green canvas one?

She grew troubled as she tried to picture him leaving the house. She frowned in concentration, and then looked up at the sky. Her expression cleared. Of course, he wouldn't be wearing any coat, the weather was far too nice to bother with one today. Still, she wished she could remember for sure.

She became aware of the few remaining adults looking at her warily and grew irritated with them; what on Earth was the matter? She self-consciously touched her hand to her hair to feel if it had flown out of the neat French plait she had tied it into. *(Hadn't she? No, it was loose and hanging to her shoulders, no French plait. Her frown returned; she could have sworn ...)*

Where was he? For goodness sake, he was almost twenty minutes late today, later than he had been in ... she shook her head, the days blurring into one as they did so often lately. She put her hand into her bag and smiled. He would love the present she had bought for him, he had wanted one of these electronic games for so long now, and finally she had been able to afford it. She pictured the look of joy that would cross his adorable, freckled little face as he opened his birthday gift, and her

own smile widened. God, but sometimes she was overwhelmed with the purest, simplest love ... he was her precious boy, and he was seven years old today. How the time flew.

She caught another parent looking at her worriedly and was barely able to keep from scowling at her in return. Instead she craned her neck for a sight of him, no doubt his bag would be hanging open, carried by only one strap, trailing P.E kit along behind him like the tail of a ruffled and cheerful kite. He would catch sight of her, wave and start to run, as usual he would drop at least one of his books, or his coat – wait, no, he wasn't wearing one today. Was he?

She still couldn't see him, and now she was the only person left at the school gates. The day grew slightly darker as a cloud passed across the sun and she shivered. Just for a moment she had a sense of deep sorrow, chilling her bones and twisting her heart, making her want to collapse where she stood and weep forever, but the moment passed with the cloud and she smiled, unable to understand why she had felt that way.

She grew slightly annoyed. Should she go into the school and look for him herself? The teachers didn't like that generally, so she would give him just a few minutes more, and then there would be trouble, by God, birthday or no birthday. Then she had a sudden image of him as he had slept last night and her expression abruptly softened; (*was it last night though? She couldn't remember....*) she had peeked in on him, ready to read him the riot act as she saw the mess that his clothes were in on the floor, and paused as she realised he had fallen asleep with his favourite book covering half his face. He had looked so small lying there, so innocent, that she wondered how she could ever have been angry with him.

Feeling the slight tingle in her nose that signalled the familiar onset of emotion, even tears, she had straightened his duvet and carefully removed the book, the page lifting as it came away from his warm, flushed skin.

And here she was getting annoyed with him for simply being late out of school – it wasn't right. She would go in then. She would go in, and he would be helping his year 3 teacher put the books away, or clear up after artwork, or something.

She would say how pleased she was with him and he would melt her with that special grin of his, the Just William face crinkling and the shiny red hair flopping over his blue eyes, that gap in the front of his mouth hidden as he covered it self-consciously with his hand.

Suddenly desperate to see him, she started through the school gate, and towards the office where she would declare herself before heading off to the classroom with the scaled down furniture that reminded her so strongly of her own school days.

As she crossed the playground she smiled in anticipation, but who was this coming towards her? The headmaster and that nosy parent who had been staring at her by the gate, and they were looking at her with expressions of ... what? sympathy? Discomfort? A patronising mixture of both, to be truthful, and that bleak feeling swept over her again, that weakening of the muscles that made her suddenly sure that her legs would not support her for a moment longer.

This time the feeling did not gust away with the breeze dispersing the cloud. This time the cloud stayed, turning everything dark grey. She heard the murmured words, disjointed sentences that she was not supposed to hear, still they invaded her consciousness anyway;

‘Still? After all this ...’

‘Almost a year now ... Where's her husband?’

‘Will you talk to her or shall ...?’

But they didn’t need to talk to her; she had come back to the cold and terrifying world where everyone else lived. He would never be coming out of school again, would he? The vision of the twisted bicycle and the small, huddled shape beyond the traffic light swept cruelly, unbidden, into her mind, obliterating everything else. The silence that had roared at her as she’d stared with disbelieving eyes, then the screaming echoes of her own horrified cry swept through her silently, as she remembered it all with sickening clarity.

She closed her eyes and *tried*, tried with all her strength to go back to where he was still alive – back to the world of just a year ago. Such a short time ago ... suddenly she was there, she was really *there*, and as the headmaster’s voice spoke quietly to her, she smiled serenely and turned inward to the reality where her son grinned at her, covering the gap in his front teeth with his grubby little hand. She would never leave him again now, she knew.

‘Happy birthday, darling.’ She said.