

ANOTHER STATISTIC

Sixteen people. Only sixteen people came to farewell Emily Brown that cold April day, sixteen people not counting Paul and as he stared at the coffin, he tried to visualise her as he had known her before the poison took control. With long dark hair, brown skin and brown eyes, she could have been a model he once told her, but she laughed and said she was too fat.

“You fat?” he raised the kettle, “that’s a laugh.”

She poked her tongue out behind his back; he knew she was doing it, but she was a bright kid and he let her get away with things other kids wouldn’t have dared try. Not that Paul had much control over his kids; he was just the after school tutor, finishing his teaching degree and trying to earn a bit of extra money.

She thumped the table accidentally and let out a curse, he turned to find her rubbing her wrist, a look of pain on her face; his eyes fell to the bruise on her wrist.

“Shit,” he set the kettle down, “that looks nasty.”

“It wasn’t from the table,” she muttered and hastily pushed her cuff down.

“Let me see,” he spoke quietly, “the bruise.”

She looked away and Paul felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, something had changed in those last few seconds, the laughing, wisecracking schoolgirl looked old. He sat opposite her and stared her down, she replied with a cold glare.

“The bruise,” he repeated, “let me see it.”

She sighed and unbuttoning the cuff, yanked the sleeve past her elbow.

“Satisfied?”

Paul stared at the row of purple bruises on her forearm, the reality slowly sinking in. A kid who couldn’t get good grades at school in spite of above average intelligence, inability to concentrate, intervention by a social worker from Alloa. He tried to reassure himself that the bruises were the results of an abusive father or one of her mother’s boyfriends, but she had never known her father, and her mother had never had a boyfriend in the two years he’d been in the village. It was through her mother that he had come into contact with her; Emma’s mother Catriona, worked at his local and one night they’d talked about work and more specifically, her daughter’s poor grades.

“How long have you been using?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“You in love with me or something?”

Her eyes were like saucers, staring defiantly through him.

“No,” he replied, “but I do care, heroin kills, you know that.”

“Aye, I ken,” she snapped back, “and you’d ken all about it, wouldn’t you?”

“I lost my best friend to heroin,” he replied slowly, “he was a year younger than you.”

“I’m sorry,” she wiped her eyes suddenly, “I didnae ken.”

Paul leaned against the chair, trying to formulate a response.

“Does your social worker ken?”

“No,” she replied, “and don’t you tell her either, I’m in control, I can stop.”

He stared at her and shook his head.

“Everybody says that.”

She pushed her sleeve down suddenly and stood up.

“I ken’t you’d say that, I thought you’d understand, it wasn’t so long ago you were my age.”

“Six years ago,” he nodded, “but I also understand that everybody says they’re in control; if you’re in control, can you stop taking it right now?”

“Sure,” she replied.

“Prove it.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

But she wasn’t there tomorrow or the next day and when she finally turned up for a lesson, Paul was on his way out with his girlfriend. He could tell she was high by the glazed expression in her eyes

and her inability to formulate a response to his questions; it was like he was from another planet. That was the first time Paul noticed him, the kid with the bleached blonde hair. He vaguely recalled seeing him a few times recently when he drove through the neighbouring village. He was waiting across the other side of the road, nervously puffing a cigarette, eyes darting anxiously from side to side. Their eyes met and he stared through them as if they were dirt, and he was the respectable member of society. They embraced as Paul drove past and he could feel eyes in the back of his head boring down to his brain.

“What’s his problem?” Kate asked him.

“Dinnae ken,” he shrugged, “just another druggie.”

“I thought he was going to start on you or something.”

The lessons resumed a week later and she told Paul she was off it; he doubted her at first but the bruises were healing. She told him Kenny was her boyfriend, but he had gone to jail at the end of last week on burglary charges. They’d had a big fight and she admitted that he was the dealer who had gotten her started on the stuff. They talked about drugs, about the damage they did, and to his mind she seemed to take it all in. She looked up to him, he knew she liked him; he had seen that look in a woman’s eyes more than once. But Emma was a kid, a seventeen year old girl trying hard to be a woman, and in spite of a fleeting fancy, he fielded her clumsy attempts at seduction. He could see her falling away shortly afterwards; the little tidbits of conversation died and eventually all she wanted to do was finish her studies and get out.

Summer holidays arrived and although the offer of lessons was still open, she was desperate to get out into the sunshine. She sent him a postcard from Spain; it began: To Sir with Love. It was with a sense of irony that Paul held her postcard in one hand and a letter from Kate telling him that their relationship wasn’t working out; she had the travel bug and he just wanted to settle down and get married. That night Paul dreamed of Emma lying on a beach beside Kate, two women both very different who had come to mean a great deal to him, now both unreachable. He awoke somewhere in the middle of the night and stared at a big yellow moon, feeling he had reached his Rubicon only to find his heart had failed him.

Kenny was waiting for her when she got back and Paul stopped and stared out the window as he saw them walking down to the Co op. She seemed to sense his gaze and turned around but didn’t acknowledge his look of sorrow. He called her that night and she shrugged it off, as if Kenny was a dead issue, another broken heart; she didn’t say if she was using and he didn’t ask. She dropped in to see him a week later and told him that her grades were improving and could he write her a reference?

A few days later, Catriona phoned to tell him Emma had been admitted to hospital suffering from a drug overdose. She was crying and asked if he’d known anything about it; Paul had to confess then that he had known and they’d talked about it. The truth came out and she thanked him for his help and asked if he would come around to visit. That visit was the worse he could imagine. It was like talking to another person, a complete stranger, she listened to him and dismissed him as if he was a midge; they parted on cordial terms, but he felt it was like he was saying goodbye forever.

It wasn’t goodbye, more like the first in a long series of confrontations over the next thirteen months. She would turn up at his place stoned out of her mind and crash on his couch; he would force her to call her mother before she fell asleep. Over the course of that year he spent untold hours in her home with Catriona as they both tried valiantly to save her daughter from herself. Sometimes he held her in his arms and promised he’d take care of her daughter. He would feel the tremors move through his body as she held him tightly against the raging storm.

One night she turned up stoned again and Paul let her stay in his bed; it was the longest night in his life. He crawled into bed with her but kept his clothes on and stroked her face, as if that would drive the demons away. But in the morning she left to sign on at the Job Centre in Alloa; it was the second last time he saw her. Catriona rang three days later to say she’d moved in with a friend in Tullibody and could he come around and help her move a sofa?

Catriona kept contact with him; they were mutual survivors in the storm that was Emma. She’d drop into her mother’s from time to time; Paul had gotten a teaching appointment in Paisley and

never saw her, but Catriona would keep him posted. She was supposedly getting better, she was using less and less and had been looking into going to university.

A few months later he saw Emma outside Tesco in Alloa, her hair was disheveled, her jeans torn and her eyes were vacant, until she saw him. She skipped across the carpark and threw her arms around him, hugging him for all she was worth.

She asked him for a tenner, he gave her twenty; he knew what it was for even though she told him it was for food. He watched her go into Tesco and come out with a packet of tens. Kenny was waiting for her, he had another girl on his arm and he grabbed her roughly and hauled her aside. He held her against the wall and she handed him ten pounds. He slapped her once and then again before walking away shouting obscenities. She was crying as Paul walked towards her, she tried to ignore him but he forced her to look at him.

“Come with me,” he grabbed her arm, “I’ll show you a real man.”

He bought her some messages, enough food to last her the week, and then took her upstairs to the restaurant and made her eat. Outside in the carpark she vomited black bile and cottage pie, and he knew she wasn’t long for this world; he drove her back to the flat in Tullibody and made her promise to call him in the morning.

“I can help you,” Paul stared into the gloom, “Kenny is the problem, but you can break this if you call me tomorrow.”

“I always wanted you to be my first,” she replied quietly, “I knew you wouldn’t, but I always wanted you to be my first.”

Paul stared blankly at her, not wanting to believe what he’d just heard. Emma had always been known for her brutal honesty; had she seen something in his eyes before the poison took her soul nearly eighteen months ago? Had he acted improperly? He swallowed as she turned away, sensing his nervousness and something surged inside him, something precious, was it love or lust? Paul opted for the first and touched her leg, letting his hand stay there a little longer.

“I’m still here.”

She embraced and kissed him, forcing his lips open hungrily, savouring him as if he was the only living creature on the planet.

“Call me,” he begged her as she backed out of the car with her messages.

“I will.”

Emma died at two in the morning from a dirty hit. Her mother called in tears to tell him and he went around to comfort her, trying to keep his eyes from the pictures on the sideboard. Kenny had come around that night and hit her up one last time; it must have been a dirty hit or maybe he just didn’t care anymore. The police had taken him in for questioning and then released him on a good behavior bond; he would front court on possession charges in a few months. He was still out on parole but according to his social worker he needed counselling, not a custodial sentence. Paul spent the night with Catriona and they held each other long into the night. He stroked her face until she fell into a restless sleep and like a watchful guardian of the night, he lay silently smoking until exhaustion claimed him sometime before four. When he awoke, she was sitting at the kitchen table holding Emma’s picture. She looked up through tear strained eyes and he stepped around and put his arms around her, letting the hurt fill his soul.

As they watched earth hit the coffin that day, Catriona clung to him and sobbed hysterically and in the distance he saw Kenny leaning on the fence a stony look on his face; fortunately for Catriona he left in a hurry when a police car arrived.

Nevertheless, as he drove out of the village that night he saw him leaning against the wall kissing a girl, a girl like Emma; he looked up and gave him the finger and spat contemptuously.

The next day he saw him walking past his window; he looked up and gave him the finger again.

“Yer windaes ur in!” The curse battered against the window panes, “ah’m gonnæ cut you wi’ a knife, junkie bastard!”

Paul’s hand found the handle of a knife, the blade was seven inches long, surgical steel, deadly sharp. He can see it sliding into his stomach, spilling gastric fluids into his body, up through his left lung. Kenny vomits blood as he pushes harder. His hands try to push him away, but he has no

strength anymore as he rams it suddenly upwards and punctures his heart, splitting the pulsating muscle, spilling blood into his body. He arches his back and the light goes out of his eyes, just like it went out of Emma's eyes.

"You hear me, junkie poofter bastard, ah'm gonnae dae yer windaes in, an' then ah'm gonnae dae you in!"

Paul's hand fell from the knife as the blind hatred penetrated his every fibre, Kenny is an animal, a cancer on society and only his death will heal the scar, but he is not Kenny's executioner.

Paul turned away, naked terror flooding his being.

Written by Alastair Rosie June 2006 ©