

ADULTING

Leone Ross

for Steph & Wendy

The girl is thirteen years old and she goes down to the riverbank nearly every day after school, slinking past the Cutty Sark and the tourists, slipping over locked, rusting gates, down metre-long, moss-covered slippery steps that lead out towards a tiny inlet, small enough to keep her snug. The sky is baby blue, cornflower, purple seeping in at the edges, and her bit of the Thames is a surly wedge of olive water.

The girl is tired, so she falls asleep. It's cold and foolish, but the sleeping problems that will trouble her for most of her life have already taken root: 2am urban foxes shrieking at the bins; her insomniac mother creaking to the loo; thin walls; and a father she won't have seen for two weeks on Sunday. There's a picture in her head of him, wrestled through the front door by the police and his one remaining mate, Sam.

A mad dad, that's what you have, everyone at school says it. The day after he was taken away, she'd crunched back and forth on the bank for hours, algae and stalagmites dripping under the pier, writing her name in the virgin sand with sticks. She loves the sound of glass and bone underfoot: it makes her think of Victorian times. She once found a pig's mandible and some bones so big they had to come from horses. Others were human, she was sure. She found an injured moorhen beached on broken glass and lifted it up to the wall and set it down somewhere quiet to die.

When she wakes up, there's a middle-aged man lying near her. The light is fading fast and she wonders if he's even seen her. He has jowls and belly and thinning white hair, and he's clearing his throat, sighing and shoulders hunching. He's probably a kiddy-fiddler, she thinks, but she can run fast and hard if necessary.

The man's soaking wet; he passes his hand over his skull and face, shovelling water off himself, as if it's thick. She shifts, alarmed. He's wearing suit trousers, one sock on, an expensive shirt.

'Terribly sorry,' the man says.

She mutters yeah into her coat.

'I was just having a bit of a swim,' says the man. 'Things got a bit rough.' He gestures at a huge mud-drenched chain, tethered to the water like some prehistoric spine. 'Grabbed that and managed to get in.'

'OK,' she says.

The man continues to scrape water off his head.

'I *am* quite proud of myself. You see, I've been wanting to swim the Thames all my life. Like the kings before us, don't you know.' He laughs shakily. 'Edward II. King Charles II.' He looks at her and at the squawking gulls as if they only exist in his personal adventure story. 'Went down the steps at Globe Wharf. I live in the flats nearby. Great view.' The girl doesn't know where that is. 'First I thought I'd just swim across.' He pokes his belly. 'I used to swim three miles at my local, five days a week, first thing.' He laughs. 'There's a woman there who didn't like me. She was quite a good swimmer, faster than me, actually. But she had bright red, fake nails and I couldn't take her seriously.' He laughs again. 'Once she swum past me and raked me all the way down the side with those talons. It was quite a shock.'

'Oh,' says the girl. He's talking so much.

'Anyway,' says the man. 'I decided I'd do it. But the tide took me. I know it sounds mad. Sorry.' She realises that he's about to cry. 'I've been struggling, trying to find something to hold onto, it's been forever. My arms are lead. I was going to give up.' The hand over the face. 'Jesus, I think I might just have nearly died. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

'Okay,' says the girl. 'Are you alright?' She doesn't want to know. She's tired and suddenly, she wants to smash his face in. She digs her fingers into the pebbles and cuts herself. Stupid. She puts the bleeding finger in her mouth. She doesn't think she's ever hated anyone as much as she hates this man who didn't drown.

She thinks of her father, ranting, fresh cup of tea on the floor beside him, saying devils were coming out of the telly, coming for his mum. She never did anything, he said. Just walked the Meridian line through his school every tea-time and went to the Chinwag Club with the other squawking hens. Pleased as punch she was, when Greenwich became a Royal borough, and she could send postcards saying so. She told him about the war and the bombs and if you went up Greenwich Park, you could stand there and look across the expanse and see your entire life: the bank where you worked, the places you went of a weekend, see all the times you ever shat or pissed or made love.

The girl can't tell why her dad is mad, because it didn't seem like anything had ever happened to him that was as bad as what was happening to her now.

'Man or dog?' her dad asked, pointing at his chest. 'Tell me now. You all know. Man or dog?'

'Shut up,' she hears herself saying to the wet man. 'Shut up. You should've died. Why didn't you die?'

He looks at her, mouth slack. Gulps it shut.

In the long silence, they shake.

'Are you alright,' he says.

'No,' she says.

He nods, shuffling, as if this makes sense to him. Like he's waiting for her to continue, but this isn't a film. She passes her hand over her face, marvelling at the wet there and the cold and the perfection of her own cheek. There are bright lights across the river: orange and red. The man is useless, she thinks. She understands that she's bewildered him.

'If you go up to the pub, they'll call an ambulance for you,' she says. 'It's quiet on Tuesdays. They might have a blanket.'

She has capitulated. He nods, eagerly, head bobbing like a small dog.

'I'll show you,' she says. She should be getting home. Mum would worry. Seagulls are circling under grey, alien clouds. The tide will take them if they don't go, now. They stand, her first; him shaky. She guides him by the elbow.

Up near the ship, a row of Italian exchange students point their phones at the water and the moon is white.