

2020

Life Writing Prize

STEPHEN CRAWLEY



LIFE WRITING PRIZE LONGLIST 2020

Down Ashton

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“Coming for a trip? We’re not going far. I’ve got crisps and pop here. You know me, don’t you?”

Outside were near half-dark. Way it goes early at this time of year, when leaves turn yellowy brown, and the air feels wet river damp, like wide mouth frogs slip-sliding-dancing off your skin.

Seen it a couple of times the car, circling. Filthy, dirty it were. Autumn headlights on full beam. Circus lights. Blinding people with their cheek.

Every Saturday, since mum and dad said I were old enough, I’ve been going shopping down Ashton with my big sister Franny for food for the weekend, especially dad’s favourite garlic sausage that he liked on a thick sandwich with Piccalilli, before having forty winks in front of the telly after he’d heard the footie results.

When we went shopping, Mum’s list’s also depended on what part of the year it were. Like buying Parkin cake for Bonfire Night, that went just right with hot jacket potatoes, cooked in silver foil in the bonfire’s embers, then pulled out for you safely with a big stick by your dad and juggled between your hands until they were cool enough to get your teeth into, as you watched the fireworks going off.

Usually though, we bought the same things, but shopping were still exciting because there were always lots to see going on. At the butchers, I loved watching bacon getting sliced and listening to the low swishing noise the blade made, then straight after sniffing at the bacon through the greaseproof paper it were wrapped up in, and that I let our dog Tassy lick,

when all the bacon had gone.

The worst thing about being down Ashton though were our Franny, who wouldn't ever let me watch at the things I liked for long enough. Always pulling me away from enjoying myself quick-sharpish she were, and not caring at all about any of what I was interested in. Saying I was just plain immature and not good for her image. That's mostly because she thought she were older than she were and really grown up, and it made her especially angry when people treated her like a kid. Me being with her made people do that she said. But she had to suffer it on Saturdays and have me there, to show me where things got bought and help her with the bags because mum said so, and Franny hated that.

Garlic sausage, and Sunday's bacon got, we made the last on our list visit to Woolworths, to buy a pair of tan tights and a Beatles record for our neighbour Shirley. She were going to be fifteen tomorrow, and the record and tights were a birthday present from all of us.

Then I were glad the shopping were done, because I liked to be back home and have my tea on my lap in time for Jimmy Clitheroe on the telly - Saturday being the only day we were allowed to eat in front of the telly because dad did. Not that mum liked it that way.

But then go and believe my flippin luck, and like she does because she can, Franny went into a Franny-tizzy and decided she had to go and buy a girl comic that had a special girl prize in it. And making me hold both the shopping bags, she swanned off to join the queue at the little paper stall. Blurting out bossy in my face as she went.

"Stand where you are, where I can see you. And don't even think of going into them men's toilets, even if you do want a wee, because a boy had had his willy chopped off in them toilets a week ago, and that will happen to you if you do."

So arms weighted down with the family grub, I did as I was told, which I didn't really like doing, and not only because of Jimmy Clitheroe on the telly but because the nights were drawing in and my bare legs weren't best friends with the creeping cold that came with them. Me, stuck there, like

a jelly at a funeral, trying extra hard to not think about Jimmy Clitheroe, having a wee, or getting my willy chopped off - my legs crossed tight, my eyes fixed scanning the brand new bus station in front of me.

Its olive-green paint not long dry, Ashton's new bus station were built of long shelters of glass that looked like standstill buses without wheels and all held together on the insides, with dull grey metal bars shaped and welded together into low fences for people to lean on and talk to each other as they waited for their buses, and that kids like my younger brother Peter liked to swing around on like they were in a park or something.

He's tough my brother Peter, and can fight just about anybody. Even boys and girls who were much bigger than him, and he got into trouble a lot, he did, doing all of them things that he was told he shouldn't. Getting in trouble never bothered Peter though, he just shook things off quick and then carried on getting himself into even more of it. Just because that were what he were like and nobody were going to change it anytime soon because they already tried. I've seen it so I know what I'm saying about that for definite.

For something to do, and much closer now to getting frostbite, I concentrated my mind and remembered the thin little terraces with their dolls house windows and smelly old drains that used to be here before the new bus station came. Just a few streets of them there'd been, and pulled down because they'd got something nasty growing in between the bricks and mortar that were a serious threat to the health of the whole of mankind so my dad said.

Looking down over the shelters, with the bus inspectors' offices underneath it, were a great big spanking clean café that opened really early and shut really late, and had fluorescent lights everywhere that flickered on and off sometimes and made your skin look bluey purple as if you'd had an operation to have your tonsils out, which I had. I'd only been in the café a couple of times myself, when it'd had been cold, or rainy, or if

buses were late. I never went in there regular on my own or nothing. But when I did go in I were always pulled automatic by myself towards the tall and wide churchy looking windows to watch at everything going on down below outside.

Seeing the world passing by, when I'd been up there, reminded me of sitting in the balcony at the pictures, except there were no *James Bond* or Disney's *Mary Poppins* to see. Up there once I did see an old man get blown over by the rough wind, then nearly got run down by a bus before he could stand himself up. That were frightening that were. Especially when you could see from up there that the driver hadn't seen him, and had only stopped the bus just in time because another bus conductor saw the old man fall and ran in front of the bus waving his hands fast. Just like one of those quick and exciting things though that you might see in a film that makes want to put your hands over your eyes and peep through your fingers at it because it were dangerous and frightening. This here were more real than the pictures, but I were happy the old man didn't get hurt or die, and I breathed a big glad breath to myself to feel better about it. Like your mum rubbing butter on a bump on your head when you've banged it.

Over my shoulder, with our Franny still queuing, I were getting real extra fed up now, even with all that looking and remembering. Out here it had gone extra freezing cold real quick, so I turned and shouted, "Hurry up you can't you?" to Franny, who pulled a proper ugly face at me then showed me her fist.

I don't know why she wanted a girly comic anyway, because she played football with the boys on our street most of the time, which I knew mum were embarrassed about because I heard her telling dad once, and he told mum not to be daft. And daft was just how I felt standing here like a jellying jelly fish.

Then at last I spotted Franny getting served and I thought hip-hooray, but then the big show off went and shouted over that she were going for a wee because she were bursting her knickers down and I weren't to move

nowhere from where I were, before she went traipsing to the ladies to do hers. Cheeky rotten mare she were.

Always did what she wanted. Always. And even now when I were near shivering my bones to death. So I put the bags down to bend over to pull my socks up my legs as high as they would go, and looking up when I did it I saw two people up in the bus station café window doing a long slobbery kiss. Flippin-heck I thought. Flippin-heck. Seeing them two kissing made me think of a Lassie film I'd seen the week before that had made me cry to myself, which I thought I definitely might do again in a minute if it got any colder than it were, so to stop myself acting like a baby, I went and imagined eating a bowl of mum's potato hot-pot that heated your insides up and just right for when it were cold like this.

Ashton's Pennine landscape all around, the market hall's big clock flooded out loud over the stripey tops of the market stalls, the purpley-blue whiteness of the bus stations' lights trying to bleach out peoples wobbly shadows. All of them, hop-scotching in and out of the florescent brightness hurrying to catch buses home.

Then in front of the stalls, the multi-coloured bulbs of the market's roundabouts bounced about on electric wires to tinny sounding old fashioned music, with children's balaclava covered heads bobbing up and down in little cars - laughing and waving to their mums and dads and everyone, as the roundabouts went round. Happy eyes, like you have in Blackpool on the beach and on the trams. Big Tower lights flickering hello. Everywhere, about them all there down Ashton, shining and damp with November cold.

The twilight mist dropping hard, me still cross-legged waiting, that were when the car came back round again, slowing right down this time. And it were here, there, then, that certain things about people I'd been properly warned about were brought forward to me in an uncomfortable strong way.

Three passengers the car had on board, I could see now. Two grown ups and a lad. The lad I knew straight off. My age he were, with bags of confidence, and that jokey grin of his on him that shouted dangerous fun, and made me feel giddy and a bit scared both at the same time.

“Coming for a trip? We’re not going far. I’ve got crisps and pop here. You know me, don’t you?”

Most usually I only saw the lad on Saturdays on the inside market when me and Franny were doing the shopping, him giving an hand to them stallholders who wanted his help, outside stallholders included. Doing things like sweeping up and folding cardboard boxes he’d be. Or running for cups of tea and balancing them back to his boss of the day with a bag of Eccles cakes. I’ve even seen him getting plates of pies paddling in gravy puddles with splodges of peas sliding into them and near coming off the plates altogether.

A mini landslide happening in the palm of his hand. Him cool as a breeze not even flinching. Whenever he were doing stuff like that I’d watch hard at the way he got on with everything. Really extra brave I thought, and knowledgeable, as if he’d been trained by everyone on the market to do whatever they asked him, and as good as *they* could do it without him even being old enough to speak about their sorts of things or interests. Laughing along with them and pretending that he knew what the punchline to every interesting joke or conversation was about and what it meant in life’s programme of things. His grazed, knobbly-kneed legs jerking, him wanting to add his say, as if he sensed the people who mattered were making notes on him for a later date when they might need his services again. When he were really busy, and saw me watching him, he’d always give me a rapid nod hello as if I were his favourite pal in the world and he were asking without talking for me to take part in things. Us in our identical grey shorts, me nervously twisting my fingers, my hands

a bit sweaty, my brain and the whole inside-outs of me gawping at the excitement of it all.

At those times, right there guaranteed, I reckon nearly anybody on the planet could have taken the lad's photo if they wanted, and straight off win him the personality-boy-of-the-year photo competition. Won without even trying, because everything he did came so easy. Even just doing alive and breathing. Like once, when I saw the butcher giving him two chickens with their heads still on and he skipped on the spot like a pantomime actor who's just got into Aladdin's cave and found all the gold and jewels and those colourful silky things that people from abroad wear without blushing because those things have always been part of who they are.

There were also the time I saw the skinny biscuit man give him a one pound note along with two boxes of custard creams and he ran about in small tight circles, Jack Russell jumping, whistling his grin all over the shop. It were near Christmas, and obvious why the skinny biscuit man did that I suppose, but as good a Christmas present as anybody could want.

Another thing as well about the lad that I liked was that he seemed to know loads of people, old and young. But I don't know whether that were because it were in his particular character as to who he was as a person to chat to all and everybody. The same as a bird chats you up in the morning from sleeping till you make a move. Then when it knows you're awake it flies off to another tree or windowsill to do the same to somebody else.

But it didn't really matter how many people this lad knew because to everybody who worked in the market he was who he was. Though when he were showing off once in the usual way that he did and not harming no one, I overheard a fat woman, with a hard poker face, say to another sour-mouthed looking woman, that he were a cheeking urchin with an eye on everybody's purse and that decent folk were to watch out for him - poverty and a big family being the culprit, the Herrings said. And for him, there'd be no future that needed books or certificates, his dirty bare hands wedded to a life of common graft and chip papers covered in weeks old

filth, and for the rest of his days he'd be existing on scraps and handouts, him and his would be. According to what they said, the backyard hard-up were meant to stay backyard hard up because that were best for everybody.

And that's where any proper friendship between me and the lad started and finished, my mum being pretty much on the Herrings side, and her glad I'd heard it from elsewhere so she didn't come across as just plain spiteful. Saying to me to make it straight, that his family were nothing but rough, which were a bit difficult for me to understand not really understanding what rough was. We lived in a council house with only one carpet, no telephone, or soft toilet roll, and a dirty coal fire that was my job to set every day and that gave me housemaid's knee when I was ten. So I don't know what was tops about that lot. But my mum, with her nose higher in the sky than the clouds, still kept on that we were better than everyone else. She spoke posh whenever she saw a teacher and when the insurance man visited, which made me believe she'd done stuff and been to places that I'd only go to when I were older like her.

“Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?”

The mucky circling car were at a complete stop now, but with its engine still running, and I saw the lad say something to the man and the woman and they all gave me a quick look. That's when I got a proper stare at them.

The woman had a trendy blonde beehive a bit like Dusty Springfield's, and it were obvious even from where I were stood that blonde weren't her proper colour but it were right for the times it were. I don't know whether Dusty Springfield's hair were original either but I still liked her.

My mum had recently had hers dyed Dusty blonde and she were mousy-brown in real life. If you met my mum you might have thought she were a girlfriend of one of The Beatles because she were pretty and could rock and roll jive properly like they did on the telly. Only lasted a weekend

though, mum's "bottle blonde," and were a big mistake from start to finish. The rotten cheap bleach burnt her scalp all red-raw and itchy and my dad saw it and told her she looked like a street walker or something like, and was to run back sharpish to Joyce's hairdressers and change it or she'd be in for it extra time with him if she didn't. Dad had been in the navy for fifteen years and you all did as you were told or suffer for it, mum included. I know for definite he loved her loads, but she still got it in the neck.

This woman's hairdo weren't like brand new like mum's was, but really well settled in as the roots were showing a lot. I thought she best not bump into my dad and look at him twice. Not if she had anything about her she hadn't. All around this woman's eyes and as mucky looking as the car, were dollops of mascara, smudgy and tired looking, like the same as Dusty wore on the telly when she sang one of those songs that made you go shivery, as if a fast train was about to smash you down and kill you where you stood but it never arrived.

This woman wasn't singing though, but more sort of hurting and enjoying it, and when she saw me looking at her, she started to smile then stopped herself. I hated that because she were telling me something about herself that she didn't want to, and that I had no chance of ever understanding. And it wasn't only due to me being a boy and her being a fully grown-up person either. I'm talking uncomfortable thoughts and things, that no matter how you want them to, they don't come across right. Same as jumping when you see a weird looking picture in a comic or a book when you least expect it. I don't like things like that, they're like the dark dreams, you have without wanting them.

Because of that trembly feeling I got, I made myself look away. But inside I knew she'd really made me wonder about her and stuff and I slowly looked back again. She were turned away now, like she were talking about me again to the lad and the fella who got what she were saying straight off, because the fella started looking alligator-eyes dead at me, and I jumped at the scariness of them.

Top greasy he were, and his skin hung on him like it were too big for his body because I saw his skeleton bones more than I did him. And when he looked at me he sort of mouthed something I couldn't hear, that was aimed at being friendly but made me feel awful weird inside.

I didn't know him and decided immediately because of the way he was that I didn't want to. It were more than clear he wanted to get to know me - and in "funny ways". That were a saying I got off mum from one day when we stopped for petrol and two handsome men who wear sitting in a car next to us and wearing ladies eye make-up just stared at me but nicely with no harm done. Until my mum saw them and me looking at each other that is and near twisted my head off with her tongue, saying that men like them have "funny ways" and "normal boys" as I were, "have to be careful, walk quickly away, and not ever even speak or think of speaking to them". So because of the way mum had said it I never did speak to people I didn't know, and especially men in ladies make-up. But I still looked if they looked at me.

This fella in the car were nowhere near like them ort of fellas, and I saw him wink at the lad to egg me on - me on the edge of the kerb gawping, me balancing my body with the weight of the bags and near falling over with all of it, trying to do too many things at once.

Then the lad went and smiled at me. Showed me all the smile of his that I knew, and opened the back door window and shouted out loud to me.

"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?"

And the greasy fella turned right round in his seat and leaned his skeleton body right over the lad and shoved the back door open and he winked properly horrible at me when he did it, his thin mouth opening up slowly a little bit, like a poisonous snake does just before it bites you.

After the lad had shouted that at me, all three of them stared full on at me now, but the lad were the only one I could see who were being nice

about it. The woman and the fella were just too rotten strange, and they had really wet lips. The sort you have just before you eat Sunday dinner when the gravy's been poured. Or the sort your mum and dad have after they've been kissing for ages. Only I didn't think the woman and the fella were the lad's mum and dad.

Then sudden like, as if every single light bulb in the world had gone out a sharp slap brought me back home to myself. It were our Franny. "Eh, what you doing!?! You know you're not allowed to get in cars with strangers." And with the biggest children's rule ever decided by adults echoing around my ears, the car door got quickly banged shut, and went off faster than fast, as if them in it had just robbed a bank, the three of them disappearing into the thick autumn mist that had arrived nearly as suddenly as them.

"I've got crisps and pop here. You know me. Don't you?"

The back of my neck still smarting from her slap, Franny dragged me and the bags away as I looked quick but careful over my shoulder seeing the lad grin at me, then wave through the cars grimy back window, like he were saluting. Only I couldn't smile or salute back because I didn't really know what to do, or what to think because Franny had just done all of that for me when she pulled me away. And so I just watched after the car as it went and breathed a heavy sigh as I did so. My misty breath mixing in with everybody else's.

The lad's brilliant smile stuck hard in my head, I shoved the bags at our Franny and went and had the longest shivery wee ever, and watching all the time I was in the lavvy, that no one was nearby to cut my willy off.

When we eventually did get back home, Franny, as was her job as she saw it, went and told mum and dad what she thought I was about to do,

which I never were at all. But dad didn't want to know that and he still half-murdered me, with mum chipping in her five bob's worth from the side-lines, before I was sent to bed without any tea and not allowed to watch Jimmy Clitheroe either.

I did get a sneaked apricot jam sandwich after an hour in bed off Peter, who tiptoed it into me. But no kiss goodnight off anyone - which I hated. So I just lay down and whispered night-God-bless to myself. And not long after with the them three in the car, and the roundabout lights and the market spinning round my mind like an old Charlie Chaplin film, I dropped off to sleep. All through that night I woke up a lot. My eyes being made to open by bad dreams, as the lad, the man, and woman, and the market, and all the market people and their different lives jumped in and out of the dreams. The lad's face getting more twisted up. The man and the woman getting more and more especially horrible as the nightmares went on and on. Me worrying and wishing I hadn't seen anything.

Next day morning everything were still knocking about in my head, and I felt like I just wanted to see the lad again before anything else occurred. Just to make sure things were ok with him. Just so I could prove all of the bad things I dreamt of were wrong. And then without really thinking of it I remembered what my gran told me once when I'd had a bad dream.

She said, "Dreams weren't ever at the same meeting as real life. Awake and asleep, being two different ways of being alive."

So I tried that, but it did me no good listening to what gran said, what with all that worrying and scary thinking. And then underneath I were also much too scared of what mum and dad might do to me if I were to even ask if I could go and find out if the lad were ok. I was so churned up inside about those two that I never bothered.

To try and feel better I whispered words to myself. "Where it's green, is life serene and hope is more then just a dream." I learnt that at Sunday school I did and whispered it to myself whenever I were coming over sad.

“You know me. Don’t you.”

After all that had gone on, and I’d near gone and forgotten all about what had happened, the next time I did see the lad, were a week later. His face, right there, on the front of the Ashton Reporter. His jokey grin shouting out stories to me. Some big scary letters underneath it saying: TWELVE YEAR OLD BOY. MISSING! *“Coming for a trip? We’re not going far. I’ve got crisps and pop here. You know me. Don’t you?”*

BIOGRAPHY

STEPHEN CRAWLEY hails from Ashton under Lyne in the foothills of the Pennines, a town considered “bare, wet, and almost worthless,” until the introduction of the cotton trade. From that historical perspective Stephen prides himself on being a working-class writer, his heroes being Barry Hines, Alan Sillitoe and Nell Dunn, who have all influenced his work, and being a Northerner, Stephen isn’t scared to proudly admit that fact. A late starter writer, Stephen enjoys constructing first person narratives, and began taking writing seriously after receiving a screenplay commission from Film Four without any writing experience or educational qualifications under his belt.