

PATRICK
NEATE

SMALL TOWN HERO

'An irresistible lead character
and a plot that will melt your
brain out of your ears'

PATRICK NESS

First published in English in 2020 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 967 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

PROLOGUE

THE FUNERAL

The first time I ever saw Uncle Jesse was at the funeral. He gave a speech all about his brother, my dad.

Mum says this wasn't the first time because he visited when I was little. But I don't remember, so it doesn't really count, right?

I said this to Mum. I was all, like, 'If you don't remember something, how can you be sure it even happened?'

She showed me this photo I swear I'd never seen before. It was taken at the rec: me sitting on Dad's shoulders – not a baby, more like four or something – and Uncle Jesse next to him. They're both smiling, but weird faraway smiles; like they don't really want to be smiling at all. Dad's hair's a bit long, but not as long as Uncle Jesse's.

I wanted to ask Mum loads of other questions, but she was pulling a face that told me that whatever I asked – like, even: *can I get on the tablet?* – she might get upset. So I stayed quiet. Mum pulls that face a lot these days. She says it's because she's *stressed*. It took me a while to figure out this is just a word she uses so she doesn't have to keep admitting she's sad.

At a funeral, they use all sorts of different words for stuff you already thought you knew: like, a bunch of flowers

becomes a *wreath*, a coffin is a *casket* and the kind of speech that Uncle Jesse made is called a *eulogy*. I don't know for sure, but I reckon they use these words so you don't have to think about the funeral all the time. Like, if I'm asked to make a speech thanking Mr Bowler for coaching the team this year, I don't want to have to remember Uncle Jesse's eulogy, because then I wouldn't want to do it.

I didn't see Uncle Jesse come into the church but I noticed him across the aisle from us – this big guy I didn't recognise, just weeping into his hands. I asked Mum, 'Who's that?' But she didn't answer, because she was crying too and trying not to by taking short little breaths.

My big sister Hannah leaned across Mum and hissed, 'That's Uncle Jesse!' like it was obvious. But it wasn't obvious to me. Can you imagine you're thirteen years old and you see your own uncle and you don't even know who he is? Savage, right?

I kept watching him but I couldn't really see his face on account of the way he was crying. Then he got up from his seat and walked right out of the back of the church like he just couldn't take it any more. Nobody looked at him as he went past. It was like they were all embarrassed or something. But I saw him go all the way out of the door.

The priest spoke for a bit. Then he goes, 'Jesse Douglas will now say a few words.' I swear this was only, like, thirty seconds after he'd gone, so I actually looked round to see him come back in. But instead Uncle Jesse just appeared from the side like he'd been waiting there all along and he didn't even look like he'd been crying at all.

I was so shocked that I went, 'Did you see that?' I didn't mean to. I couldn't help myself. Mum took no notice – she was lost in her own thoughts. But Hannah bent forward to glare at me. I didn't care. I was looking around for someone to confirm my amazement, but nobody met my eye except this woman across the aisle who must have been sitting right next to Uncle Jesse. She was really pretty – she looked like she was in an advert or something. She gave me this weird little smile without teeth.

Uncle Jesse had to adjust the stand to make the microphone reach his mouth and it made a funny grating noise. He began, 'Billy was my big brother and best friend.' But I don't remember anything else he said because I had too much going on in my head.

First, I felt kind of vex because everybody knows Dad's best friend is Olu Adeyemi from work who buys me the sticker album at the beginning of every season; even though I'm, like, way too old for it now.

Second, I was still trying to work out how Uncle Jesse got from the back of the church to the front like that. I figured it was just about possible if he went out of the back door and sprinted round the side. But that didn't really make it less weird, only possible.

Third, I just stared, because he looks such a lot like Dad, only stretched like people do when they're messing around in an app on their phone. He's taller and thinner and he has a longer nose, longer hair and bigger ears – like a wizard. And he doesn't have sparkly eyes. He's got serious eyes.

Suddenly I felt mad lonely. I glanced at the Adeyemis a

few rows back – Olu and his wife Femi with the baby, Chibs, on her lap, then Juliet who’s in Sixth Form, and Pamilekunayo. Pamilekunayo’s a bit of a mouthful so he’s usually called P. He’s been *my* best friend since, like, for ever and I wanted him to look at me but he didn’t. I got the idea he didn’t dare – some people seem to think grief is catching.

I felt so sad. But I didn’t cry.

‘I’m sadder than the weeping willow in Misery Park in Sadville.’ That’s how Hannah said she felt the night before the funeral. It kind of sounds like she was joking, but she wasn’t. That’s just how she talked. For a couple of months, everything that came out of her mouth was these stupid comparisons: *fatter than a fat man eating fat chips in a fat suit* – that kind of thing. She doesn’t talk like that any more.

But me? I felt like I was empty and mostly I still do: not like I’m hungry, but like there’s a hole inside me so deep and dark that all my innards, everything I ever wanted, all the love I feel for my dad, even Dad himself, have been sucked inside like matter gets sucked into a black hole in space.

Do you know about black holes? They’re crazy interesting. You should read about them, or there’s some good videos online. They’re parts of space where gravity’s so strong that nothing can ever escape – not even light. And I’ve got a black hole inside me.

After the funeral, everyone went to the church hall and talked in quiet voices and we had sandwiches and tea in proper teacups with saucers (otherwise, I guess, you’d be thinking

about the funeral every time you had a brew). There was lots of standing around which I know Mum hates because of her hip, but it's not like she had any choice. All these people came up to her and said *Beth* and gave her a hug. Some of them gave me and Hannah a hug. Some of them didn't.

Uncle Jesse came up to Mum and said *Beth* too, but he didn't give her a hug. He just stood there, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world.

Mum said, 'It was good. What you said about Billy . . .'

Hannah and me both looked up at Mum, because the way she said *it was good* made it sound like she didn't mean it.

But Uncle Jesse didn't seem to notice. He goes, 'Really?'

And Mum said, 'Really.' Like she didn't mean that either. And Uncle Jesse nodded.

Uncle Jesse was with the woman from the church: the pretty one who did that weird smile. She's called Daisy – *his girlfriend*, Hannah said. Daisy's the right name for her because she looks a bit like a daisy – long and thin with an orange face and lots of blonde hair (*platinum blonde*, Hannah said).

Daisy goes, 'Beth', and she put her hand across her chest, fingers spread. Her nails were painted pale pink. Then she gave Mum a hug and it looked awkward, partly because Daisy's so tall and partly, I guess, because they'd never met before. She hugged Hannah and me as well and it was like hugging a bag of coat hangers.

Uncle Jesse cleared his throat. He said, 'If there's anything I can do . . .'

This is how people spoke at the funeral, without finishing their sentences: *Beth . . . What you said about Billy . . . If there's anything I can do . . .*

Mum looked at him. She goes, 'Like what?'

Uncle Jesse shifted uncomfortably, like he hadn't any idea where that sentence had been going. He said, 'I don't know. I'm sure things must be tight right now. Did Billy have life insurance?'

Mum goes, '*Life insurance?*' And she made a noise like a laugh, only it wasn't a laugh and Hannah and me both glanced up at her again. She shook her head and said, 'Right. No. But it's fine.'

Daisy said, 'We should probably . . .' And Mum nodded and Daisy said, 'Friday afternoon. Motorway will be hell.'

Mum said, 'Sure.'

They were leaving.

Uncle Jesse frowned and turned away. But then he turned back and goes to Hannah, 'You're the spitting image of your mum, you know that?' Suddenly he dropped to his haunches in front of me like he thought I was a little kid. For a second, I was worried he was about to give me a hug, but he didn't. He just goes, 'But you're Billy's boy all right.' Then, almost whispering, 'I'll see you soon, Gabe, OK? When you're ready . . .'

Although this was another unfinished sentence, it sounded like a question and he looked at me so hard that I felt kind of awkward. So I said, 'OK.' Because I had to say *something*.

Uncle Jesse nodded, straightened up, and he and Daisy

walked away. Mum put her hand on my shoulder. She goes, 'What did he say?'

'He said he'll see me soon. When I'm ready.'

Mum sniffed and goes, 'Oh, for goodness sake!'

Grandy came over then and he said, 'Beth . . .'

And Mum goes, 'Leave it, Dad,' like she was angry with him, even though he hadn't done anything.

I looked at Mum. She'd been crying all day. In fact, she'd been crying ever since the policeman stood in our hallway and said, 'Is there somewhere we could sit down?' And he hadn't even told her what had happened yet. But she wasn't crying now.

Have you ever been to a funeral? I've been to two – Granny Hannah (who my sister's named after) and now Dad. It's not like I'm boasting; funerals suck. I wish I hadn't been to any and never had to go to another one.

I think Dad's funeral was worse for three reasons.

First, it was Dad. When Granny Hannah died, she'd been sick for ages and people said stuff like *it was her time* and *she had a good innings*. Nobody said that about Dad. It wasn't his time and he didn't have a good innings. He was just there one day and gone the next. I think that's why people said to Mum, *Beth . . .* Because they didn't know what else to say.

Second, at Dad's funeral there were so many people I didn't recognise – all these work colleagues and friends from school and the football. It made me realise that Dad had a whole life before I was born that I didn't really know

about, a life full of people I'd never even met. He was twenty-four when I was born and thirty-seven when he died. That means that for most of his life I wasn't there and he didn't know anything about me. That freaks me out.

Third, there was Uncle Jesse and he freaked me out too: because he did that weird thing at the church when it was like he was in two places at almost exactly the same time; because he acted all strange and Mum acted strange around him; because he said he'd see me when I'm 'ready'. I mean, I guess that last one doesn't sound odd to you. Like, he could've meant, *I'll see you when you're ready to come visit* or *I'll see you when you're feeling a bit better*. But you'll just have to take my word for it that he didn't mean it in either of those ways. And I'm pretty sure I'm right because the way he said it, all I could think was: *ready for what?*

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STORIES

Sometimes, if I tell a story, it's like I'm right there. I don't mean I'm there in my imagination, I mean I'm *actually there* and I can see everything, hear everything, smell everything and feel everything. It never used to happen. It's only since the funeral and still not always, but if I close my eyes and really concentrate, I start to glimpse a shape or two, or a face, like I'm looking through clouds or deep water; then I hear scraps of noise, maybe voices; then it's like I'm falling and I hear this rushing, whooshing, ripping sound . . .

Say you're lying in bed and you can't sleep and your mum's told you to think cheerful thoughts or whatever, you'll probably picture something really cool. Like, for me, I like football and I support Watford, so I might make up a story about scoring the winning goal in the Champions League Final (Watford in the Champions League? I know. But it's my story, right?).

Before Dad died, I'd picture Moses Hayes (my favourite player) running down the wing and he'd cross the ball and I'd throw myself at it, a diving header into the top corner, and it would be like watching myself on TV – '*Hayes! He fires it across! Gabriel Douglas! Goal!*'

But, last time? I was there; I mean, *I was actually on the pitch*. I was different too – bigger, older; not like a grown-up, but at least like eighteen or something. I heard the thud of Mo's foot on the ball as he sent over the cross. My eyes were stinging with sweat. I felt the centre back's fingernails scratch my back as he tried to hold my shirt (we were playing Real Madrid who are well dirty). I was blinded as my head made contact with the ball and winded as I hit the ground.

I heard the roar of the crowd. I ran towards our fans and I could pick out every face.

You don't believe me? Right at the front, there was this big guy with a shaved head and glasses in a Watford shirt who was shouting all kinds of swear words. I mean, I guess he was happy, but he'd totally lost it and was kind of threatening. That's not the kind of thing you'd picture in your imagination, is it?

The fan leaned forward and tried to grab me, but one of our players pulled me away. I didn't recognise him, which was weird because I know our whole first team squad back to front. But he was ruffling my hair and shouting too – something in a foreign language I didn't understand.

Sounds pretty cool, right? Not always. I'll show you. Let me close my eyes and concentrate.

It's Mum's birthday. Hannah and me should be on our way to school, but Hannah says she can't find her maths book and I'm pretending I can't find my trunks. Mum's at the bottom of the stairs. She doesn't like coming upstairs if she

can avoid it because of her hip, which is bad in the mornings. She's getting cross. She says, 'If you can't find your trunks, just swim in your shorts.'

I go, 'We're not allowed.'

Mum says, 'Oh, for goodness sake!' and stomps into the kitchen.

Hannah and me look at one another. We're both kind of hyped because we're in on the secret – this is all part of Dad's plan.

Yesterday, Dad went to Glasgow for work. He's a salesman for Betterwares, who make office furniture. There's a new business park opening and he wants Betterwares to fit it out. He was meant to stay over. He said to Mum, 'Sorry, Elizabeth, I know it's your birthday but there's nothing I can do. Think of the commission.' Dad likes calling Mum *Elizabeth* instead of *Beth* sometimes because he says she's the queen of our house. Then he turned away and winked at Hannah and me.

Three days ago, Dad sat us down in Hannah's bedroom after tea while Mum was loading the dishwasher. He told us he was supposed to be away for Mum's birthday. He told us he was going to drive home overnight instead and be back in time for breakfast. He told us to pretend we'd forgotten about Mum's birthday. He showed us what he'd got – a bottle of champagne and a fancy black dress with sequins that he bought online.

Hannah examined the dress. She thinks she's a fashion expert. Dad said, 'You think it's OK?' He sounded kind of worried.