

## **VERONICA BRIGHT**

### **A Hole in the Sky**

“You sure you’ll be all right, son?”

I press my teeth together, turn my head away. “I’ll be fine.”

“It’s just that... well, I could see you to the bus stop, get you on OK.”

I grip the arms of the wheelchair. “Why don’t you come all the way with me? Right into the interview room. Make sure I can manage in the toilet.”

“Douglas.”

I look up. She’s got tears in her eyes. Twenty eight years old and I make my mother cry on a daily basis.

“I’ll be all right. Got to be, haven’t I?”

Mum opens the front door, pale-faced, frowning. “Just ring me if, if you need me.”

She walks down the path, opens the gate. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I turn into the street, concentrating. The pavement’s not that smooth. I want this job more than I’ve wanted anything in my whole life. Except one thing perhaps. One person. But I can’t have my legs back, can I?

I round the corner, reach the dip in the kerb. It’s difficult to look left and right from down here, with all these parked cars. I was here one day and some well-meaning geezer asked if I wanted to cross; thrust me into the road, in the path of a kid on a bike. Frightened all three of us.

I need a label round my neck. “Go away. Leave me alone.”

I ease myself off the pavement, hands turning the wheels that manoeuvre me along. Didn’t want one of those motorised efforts. Independent. Always have been.

“You trying to prove something?” Mum asked.

“What if I am?”

At the main road, I manipulate myself towards the crossing. The green man flicks to red before I get there. I glance at my watch. Where did all that time go? Mum, yacking at me, she’s to blame. I stare towards the bend, and as I wait, the 81 cruises round the corner. It speeds past the bus stop before I can get there, and I swear out loud.

A memory leaps into my head. Nicola, in a dress in that exquisite colour of apple blossom before it starts to fade. She's walking along beside me, in those tall high heels she loved, her hand in mine. Then I had to run for the bus, plead with driver to wait, just a second, I said, and once he'd seen her, he didn't mind at all.

I mustn't panic. I need a plan. I won't get that job if I'm late.

I wheel myself towards the place where the chain ferry lands. It can't be that hard, getting on in a chair, can it? I know there's a downward slope to manoeuvre, but I've got a brake. The buses are more frequent the other side of the river.

It's got to be done.

It's cold down here by the water. Waves bounce; splashes curl, white

tipped. I wait by the railings and watch as the side-chain drags and pulls, fighting the tide. The ferry lowers its jaw; it's time to move.

"Want a bit of help, mate?"

"Nah, thanks. I'll be OK."

I fight the slant of the gradient all the way to the passenger ramp. I stare ahead, brow set. I will do this on my own. My arms ache. My jaw's set. A new challenge every day. Isn't that what I used to love about life?

It's become a mantra I repeat against the uselessness I feel.

I park up in the passenger area, lean back, arms drooping. I catch a woman staring at me. She looks away quickly, but I sense something, in that glance. Go away, I want to scream, I don't need your pity.

In the distance, beyond the bobbing water, there's a view of the next town. White houses, slate roofs. The bridge. The road where it happened. I relive the sound of the bike roaring in my ears, the tarmac coming to meet me, the exhilaration of spring and sunshine and speed. Lambs in the fields, catkins in the hedges. Nicola waiting for me at her Mum's house. I can't remember the rest. Death was cheated but the price was freedom.

Departure time. The ferry clanks. I close my eyes, experience the noise, the vibrations. When I was a boy I imagined giant metal legs sprinting underneath us, thump, thump, thump. All I hear now is desperation.

As we dock the other side, I brace myself. The gradient is not going to defeat me. I start turning my wheels. Immediately one of the ferrymen is behind me, pushing my wheelchair. He's puffing when we reach the road. I force myself to thank him.

"No problem." He swaggers off, and I catch sight of one of his mates doing an

impersonation of him struggling up the slope. Years ago I'd have laughed. These days I don't find anything funny.

A bus arrives. The driver lowers the platform, and I roll myself on. There's a pushchair opposite my space.

"What's that man doing?" says the owner of a small voice. "Why man pushchair?"

I look across at the mother. She's not much more than a girl.

"Hush," she says.

I stare out of the window, refusing to speak. Why should I help her over her embarrassment, when I'm stuck in this chair; stuck in this life?

When they get off the bus, the child gives me a smile, and a wave. And I've left it too late to make it all right.

In the city, the driver lowers the platform, and I get off the bus. And suddenly there's Nicola.

"Um, hi."

I can't reply. I haven't seen her since I came out of hospital, and I put that down to her mother. She wouldn't want her darling daughter saddled with a cripple.

"How are you, Doug?"

All I can do is shake my head.

"Got time for a coffee?"

I look away. "Got an interview."

"Good."

"Newspaper Offices."

"I'll meet you afterwards if you like."

I want to slam off in disgust, push myself away from the girl who abandoned me.

"Why aren't you at work today?" I ask.

She reaches out a hand, ready to ruffle my hair; thinks better of it. "School holidays," she says. "Teachers' playtime."

I start moving. "Of course."

She walks beside me, chatting about the children in her class. Avoiding all mention of the accident, what I've been through. Well, that's what I want, isn't it? I don't want to be somebody people have to pity.

"Will you hear straight away, about your job?"

"I don't know."

"Meet me for coffee or something? Tell me all about it?"

I pause. That's what I want too, isn't it?

Then she drops the bombshell. "I'm OK for time. I'm not meeting my boyfriend till six."

It's like being socked in the jaw.

"Ring me when you've finished." Nicola's finding a pen in her bag, a scrap of paper. "Here's my number. Good luck, Doug. Heaven knows you deserve it."

At the newspaper offices, I wheel up to the desk, introduce myself, produce a smile. I want this so much.

I am shown where to wait. A phone rings, someone laughs, a door opens and closes. There are people here with a future, things to look forward to, weekends in the country, holidays in the sun. A girl like Nicola with her hair and her legs. And her smile.

My hands feel hot and clammy. A thin man with sandy hair leads the way into the interview room. There are five people, three men and two women. Sandy hair introduces them. I force myself not to look down. But I know, I know already. They don't want me, not even the one with the red dress and the kind face. She feels sorry for me, but you don't get offered a job because of that, do you?

I answer their questions. I'm angry with myself at the trite things I come out with. Yes, I can write copy. They have the presentation I submitted in front of them, for goodness sake. Yes, I am willing to start at the bottom and work my way up. What else can I do? I have no choice. People like me have to prove themselves, time and again. And yes, of course I can work under pressure.

That a lie. I can't do anything under pressure any more. I can barely cross the road and catch a bus. My mother is on perpetual alert for me.

"Thank you for coming." The sandy-haired man looks at me, his face unemotional. "We'll be in contact after we've made our decision."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," says the woman in red. Does she say that to everyone?

I can hardly face the people out in the street. I have nothing. I am a bloke,

twenty eight years old; a cripple who lives with his mother. A caged man. I want to kick something but I can't move my legs. I'm no longer a free man.

And that's not all, is it? I've trapped my Mum in the cage with me. Worrying like a dog over a wounded leg, she hovers round me, afraid to let me out, fearful of my state of mind, my temper.

I don't phone Nicola.

I push myself to the bus stop, start the long trek home. A group of youths overtakes me, laughing, teasing each other. My phone beeps. There's a message on the screen.

'Where R U?'

I don't reply. There's no point.

As the ferry clanks its way back across the river, I sit in the bus and watch a seagull ride the wind. That's what freedom is, moving with agility, going where you like.

The bus driver lowers the platform and I get off the bus. I wheel myself along, the gale buffeting my hair. I arrive home exhausted and cold.

"Tell me all about it," says Mum. She hides behind the usual grey smile.

I shake my head.

"Maybe after tea," she says. I feel I've disappointed her. Again.

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I've caught a cold. Mum fusses. She says she knew it would all be too much for me. She's shocked that I went on the ferry as a foot passenger. She says it doesn't matter what those people at the newspaper office think of me. Something else will turn up.

The doorbell chimes and it's Nicola. Mum shows her in.

"You didn't ring."

"I'll get you a cup of tea, dear." Mum always had a soft spot for Nicola; thought of her as a future daughter-in-law; probably romanticised about grandchildren, too.

Nicola sits down, puts her bag on the carpet.

"I suppose the interview was bad," she says after a while. "That was why you didn't phone." She looks round the room. "Not much has changed. Except your Mum. She used to be so full of life. When I think of her, she's laughing."

"She hasn't got much to laugh about these days."

“You used to be able to make her laugh, Doug. You could always cheer her up. It must be hard for her, seeing someone she loves suffering so much.”

“If you’ve come round here to feel sorry for me...”

“I haven’t. I wanted to ask you if you’d like to come to the pub with us, with me and my boyfriend, and a couple of other people.”

“There, I knew you felt sorry for me.”

“You were brave, Doug. But then you were angry, and... I couldn’t bear seeing you like it. You were someone I didn’t know any more.”

From the kitchen comes the sound of a radio.

“When I met you in town, the other day, I could tell, you were still that angry person. I feel sorry for your mother, because she has to live with you all the time.”

Nicola talks about her job, her boyfriend, her life after me. The world goes on, doesn’t it? Life goes on. And Nicola’s gone on.

But when I listen to her, she’s still the same - young and enthusiastic and wonderful. She’s telling me about a kid at school, how he’d brought something for her.

“He was feeling in his trouser pockets, and I asked him what it was. ‘It’s a slug, Miss,’ he says. You can imagine my face. ‘A slug?’ He carries on fishing about. Then he looks me in the eye. ‘Bother,’ he says, ‘I left in in my other pair.’”

Nicola’s face is alight with joy, and I laugh, a huge explosion of sound that brings my mother running from the kitchen.

And there’s a hole in the sky of my anger.

And I’m telling them about the day I went for the interview, how rolling down the slope onto the ferry was like being on a self-propelled roller-coaster.

“You want to borrow this thing and try it,” I say to Mum, and she fills the room with laughter. Just like she used to.

“The pub, Doug. You will come, won’t you?”

I’m still smiling. I nod.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, and my mother’s face holds a smile from the past.

*Veronica Bright lives in Cornwall and loves to create stories, a skill which came in handy when she worked as a primary school teacher with delightful, bouncy, and exhausting four and five year olds. Now retired, she writes*

*short fiction, for which she has won a number of prizes. Her recently completed novel for eight-twelve year olds is out in the world searching for an agent, while Veronica is busy working on another. She appreciates the peace and quiet now that her children have left home, but welcomes interruptions that involve tea and chocolate biscuits.*