

LEMMINGS

A DEVIL'S POCKETBOOK TALE

ROSS JEFFERY

DARK SWARM PUBLISHING

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarities to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. No part of this book may be reproduced, redistributed, or resold without the author's permission.

Copyright © 2023 by Ross Jeffery

Cover Art © 2023 by Nathan Logan

All rights reserved.



CONTENT WARNING

The story that follows may contain graphic violence and gore.

PRAISE FOR THE DEVIL'S POCKETBOOK

"You will grieve the grief in *The Devil's Pocketbook*. You will bear the hope. You will discover, too, cruel wonder in a pod in a rocky bay, even as you think: get away. Ross Jeffery is the two things you long for most in an author of horror: first, he's fearless. Second, he's giving. Giving you, the reader, all that fear instead."

**-Josh Malerman, New York Times best selling author
of *Bird Box* and *Daphne***

"In *The Devil's Pocketbook*, Ross Jeffery marries a raw, unsettling, emotionally painful story with an isolated, stunningly rendered setting. The result? A harrowing tale that will haunt you and move you. A fantastic book!"

-Jonathan Janz, Author of *Marla* and *The Dismembered*

"Never has a study of grief been so masterfully rendered on the page. *The Devil's Pocketbook* is both breathtaking and unflinching; showcasing a writer at his very best and who has crafted a work of such horrific beauty that you'll struggle to look away."

**-James Frey, New York Times best-selling author of
*A Million Little Pieces***

"A Lynchian fever dream of love and loss. Haunting. Disturbing. Touching. Masterful in every way. A rare psychological terror. Not to be missed."

**-Eric LaRocca, author of *Things Have Gotten Worse
Since We Last Spoke* and *Other Misfortunes***

"The allure to keep reading was almost concerning. There's magic in these words. Good luck putting it down."

-Chad Lutzke, author of *Stirring the Sheets and Of Foster Homes and Flies*

"Every page of *The Devil's Pocketbook* is permeated with deep, dark grief, the kind that sweeps you under, that makes you do unimaginable things. There's an uneasy undercurrent from the very beginning, pulling the solid ground from beneath your feet as you watch a family descend too far, always knowing they're a breath away from going under. Ross Jeffery has written a story full of emotion and dread, all with the tang of salty sea air and the dark promises of what lurks in the deep "

-Laurel Hightower, author of *Crossroads and Below*

"A gut-wrenching, beautifully-written portrait of loss, grief and deliverance. *The Devil's Pocketbook* marries the emotional heft of a Kieslowski movie with the feverish, horrifying imagination of Barker and Beukes. Jeffery keeps getting better and better - and this one. For me, is his best book yet."

-TC Parker, author of *Saltblood*

"*The Devil's Pocketbook* strikes you with waves of folkloric darkness and visceral horror, but it's the irrepressible current of tragedy and loss which drags the reader under and refuses to let go.

This is a special novel, with a rare emotional weight which will make you want to hold those closest to you that bit tighter.

-Kev Harrison, author of *The Balance and Below*

ALSO BY ROSS JEFFERY

Metamorphosis

Harvesting the Nightmare Fields

I Died Too, But They Haven't Buried Me Yet

The Devil's Pocketbook

Only The Stains Remain

Beautiful Atrocities

Juniper (The Juniper Series)

Tome (The Juniper Series)

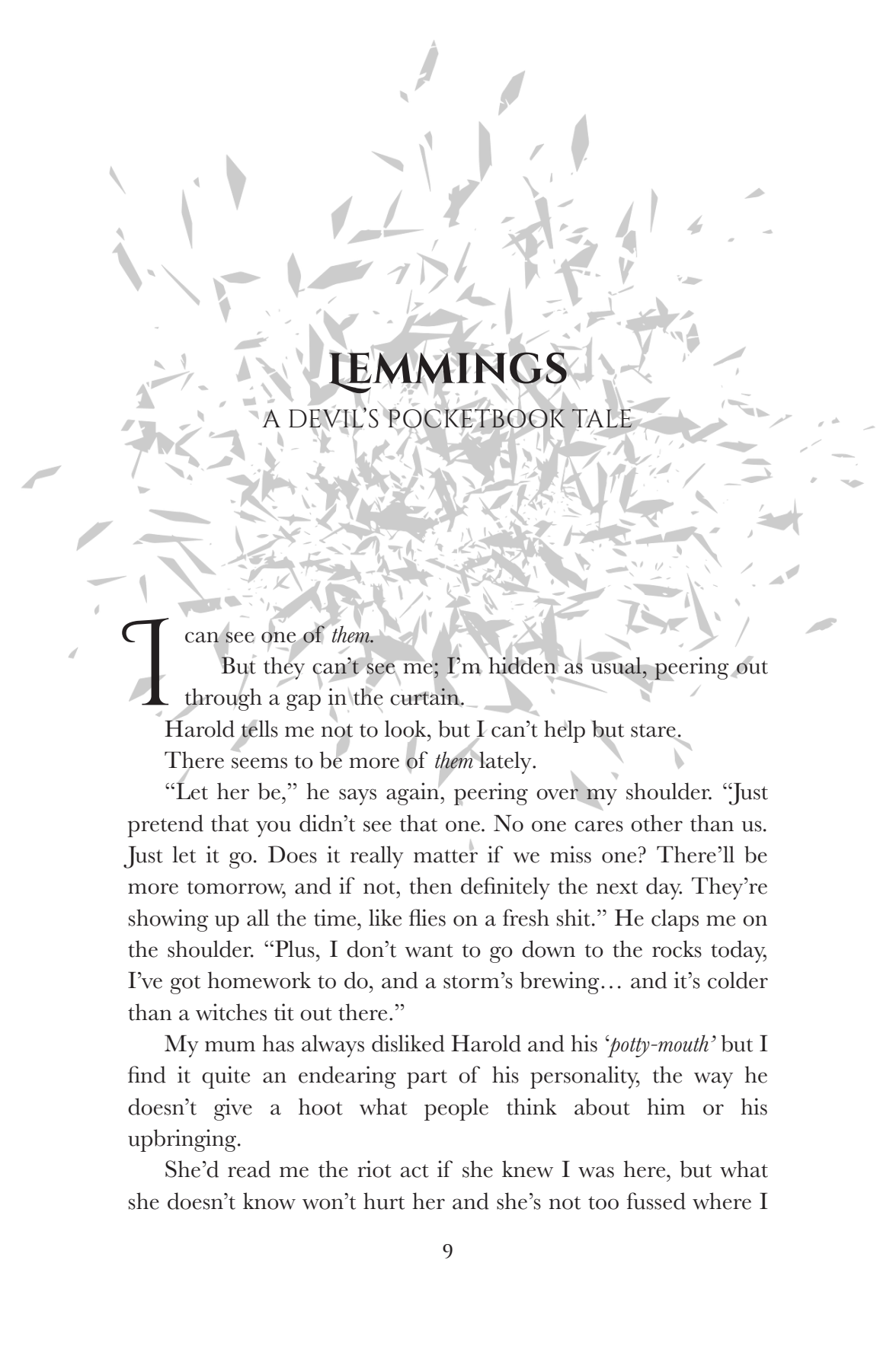
Scorched (The Juniper Series)

Milk Kisses & Other Stories

Tethered: A Novella-In-Flash

FOREWORD

Regarding the geography of Polperro, the location of the Chapel Pool was shifted slightly for the narrative of this story, but I have tried my best to keep the majority of this beautiful, idyllic coastal town as it is... should you care to visit one day.



LEMMINGS

A DEVIL'S POCKETBOOK TALE

I can see one of *them*.

But they can't see me; I'm hidden as usual, peering out through a gap in the curtain.

Harold tells me not to look, but I can't help but stare.

There seems to be more of *them* lately.

"Let her be," he says again, peering over my shoulder. "Just pretend that you didn't see that one. No one cares other than us. Just let it go. Does it really matter if we miss one? There'll be more tomorrow, and if not, then definitely the next day. They're showing up all the time, like flies on a fresh shit." He claps me on the shoulder. "Plus, I don't want to go down to the rocks today, I've got homework to do, and a storm's brewing... and it's colder than a witches tit out there."

My mum has always disliked Harold and his '*potty-mouth*' but I find it quite an endearing part of his personality, the way he doesn't give a hoot what people think about him or his upbringing.

She'd read me the riot act if she knew I was here, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her and she's not too fussed where I

am at the moment, as long as I'm out of the house and keeping my nose clean.

I left her at home, sleeping.

She spends a lot of her time sleeping now, since my sister left.

And with Dad out of the house more often than not, fishing or drinking – two of the things he does best – doing whatever he needs to cope, I'm free to please myself at the weekends, and spending time with Harold is top of the many things I could be doing and at the bottom of that list of things to do is homework.

I peer up at the sky. '*Pregnant*' is what my dad would have said on seeing it, fit to bursting.

I think Harold tolerates me sometimes, treating me like a stupid little kid brother.

Of course, I'd noticed it was cold outside. *That's why I was wearing my fingerless mittens* I wanted to say, but I didn't; because using a word like mittens in Harold's presence wouldn't earn me any favors with how he sees me. He'd probably say something about me being a mummy's boy and so, I stay silent.

I glance down at my mittens, flex my fingers and wonder at how blue they'll be by the time we get back from our haul.

Just staring at them now makes me really want to take them off, stuff them in my coat pocket and bear the cold like Harold does, but I know I won't, because it's freezing out and I'm not manly enough. And I am a mummy's boy.

Harold's got really rough hands, like sandpaper. Mum used to say that I had '*pianist hands*' and she used to play with them, stroke my palms and intertwine her long fingers with mine, giggling at their smoothness. When it was cold like today, and I'd come home from playing outside, sometimes she'd cup them in hers and blow hot air on them until they'd thawed or got their color back. I miss those times, because now she doesn't really know I exist with all the sleeping she does.

'Soft as a baby's behind,' had been her common refrain.

And that's why I won't take my mittens off, because I hold out

hope that one day she'll say it again, or I'll hear her infectious giggle as she warms my hands. How I long for that instead of sobs and grunts and moans – because now, that's all I'm treated to.

My eyes quickly snap back up to the curtain, and the window, and the *thing* beyond the glass which sways backwards and forwards, like a plastic bag being thrown around by the wind.

I need to keep tabs on her just in case she does fly away, or gets blown down a side street or even worse, into the water. But above all else I *need* to make sure we don't lose her because timing, in what we do, is everything. Something we've learnt the hard way.

If it's not me, not us who keeps tabs on them, who else would bother?

I'm already wondering if she'll go where all the others go.

Maybe she won't?

But I know she will, they all end up there.

We've often wondered why they're all drawn to the same place. But after many lengthy conversations and debate, we're still none the wiser.

We've worked out though that something calls them there, because more often than not they talk to it, but whatever *it* is, doesn't reply. We only ever get to hear one side of the conversation, and that's if we make it to them in time. Which is why we need to keep watch.

The million-pound question though is not *who* they're talking to, it's what do they hope to find when they get to where they all end up?

What we've observed is that they never find what they're looking for. But it never deters others from seeking out whatever elusive thing it is that brings them here, each trying their luck where a great many others have failed.

Although they're all different – height, weight, ethnicity and looks – there's something oddly similar about each of *them*. The

out of towners especially. Whoever we follow, they always appear vacant. An *out at sea* expression on their faces; as if they're lost in some way. And it's that oddness, that bug-eyed expression on their faces which I can't help but stare at, because I know they've got it: *the sickness*.

There have been many villagers come down with the sickness, but it's the out of towners (*it's a strange term as we're a village, but it's stuck*) that are the most peculiar. They don't seem like they quite belong, and I don't mean here in Polperro, but in the land of the living.

Harold says they're zombies, but he's full of shit.

I know for a fact that zombies only ever show up if there's a meteor shower. I don't think they're real anyway, just a load of hogwash (*as my dad would say*) because only last month, we followed Mrs. Kinderman, who teaches me English. Although she was old and looked like a zombie, if she was one of them – a zombie like Harold said – then surely, she'd have tried eating our brains during second period long before she did what she did.

I know Harold's wrong. These *things* aren't the undead, because they're living, breathing, searching human beings. *Until they're not*.

But however hideous they soon become, there's just something so deeply *alluring* about them.

Alluring

That's what Harold called the sensation when I explained how I couldn't look away, how I couldn't stop staring at *them*, and thinking about them at night when I was all tucked up in bed. More often than not, they were also the first thing I thought about when I woke up too. I often didn't even think of what I was having for breakfast, or what day it was. The only thing on my mind was *will I see another one today?*

Harold's good with words and maths you see, and he never needs an excuse to show off how clever he is... and when he does, it reminds me of how stupid and childish I am.

He's always using his *big words* to show his intellectual superiority over me, further strengthening the big brother/little brother relationship we've got going on.

He's only a few years older than me, but those years often feel like a lifetime.

He's even shaving now – if you can call the removal of the few scraggly hairs on his chin, which look like the few pubes I have on my balls, shaving – and don't we all know about it. Harold never misses an opportunity to raise it in conversation at school, showing off to the girls and the boys, as if those few hairs somehow make him a man now.

He's one of the only friends I have here though, and so I entertain his incessant conversations about shaving and all of his *big words*. He's the only one I've ever confided in about *them*, because everyone else in this place doesn't seem to notice what's going on.

They see *them*, I'm sure of it, but they choose to look the other way, failing to acknowledge *them*. As if not giving *them* the time of day means they don't truly exist.

Harold said: 'The town treats them like stray dogs; and that's why people don't pay them any mind, because if you name that stray, you can bet your arse you'll be out there every day feeding it scraps, checking that it's okay. Hell, you'll probably find yourself giving it a home.'

The village wants to forget them, but I won't, we won't.

No one should ever leave this world alone.

My case in point; there's one of them outside now, strolling about in the daylight – or what's left of it – and they're being ignored. Ignored by everyone in the village but us.

I see you; we see you.

You are not alone.

"Look, Harry. Look... she's right there."

"Where," Harold says, barreling his way to the window, parting the net curtain with his rough fingers. He rubs at the

condensation on the windowpane with the heel of his hand. "I don't see shit, you've gone and steamed it all up with your heavy breathing... you scared or something?"

"No," I fire back, but I am; I always am.

How can he not be?

"Look, there." I nod at the window.

"Where?" Harold says, pulling the net curtain wider.

I point at the window. As my fingertip touches the condensation, it beads around the pad of my finger before running down like a tear.

Harold follows my pointed finger.

I'm pointing right at her.

How can he not see her? Or is he like all the grown-ups – indifferent and blind to them – now that he's shaving?

I turn from the window, eye him sheepishly.

He's gazing out across the water, stroking the fuzz on his chin.

Maybe when you hit puberty you don't see them anymore? I wonder, but soon rubbish the thought, because we've seen our fair share of them since the fuzz erupted on his chin.

"By 'The Smuggler's Inn'," I whisper, turning back to the window.

She's still there, rocking.

"By the path up to the cliffs, near the bushes," I say breathlessly.

"Oh, she doesn't look like the others. She's much younger. Attractive, too. How'd you know it's one of *them* and not someone who's genuinely lost, looking for directions?"

"Her face, I passed her before knocking for you... it was like all the others, her eyes were all... all vacant. She didn't even—"

"Is she an out of townner? Like, did you recognize her?"

"No, never seen her before. So, I guess she's an out of townner, but even if she wasn't we'll have to go... we always go, right?"

"Hmm," Harold offers, letting the net curtain fall as he turns away.

I keep watch.

The woman – attractive or not – is like all the others we’ve seen wandering around as if they’ve lost something. Like old people don’t you know, when they get that Alzheimer’s thing. My nan got that, and she’d always be wandering around not knowing where she was. Once she bought herself fish and chips and then went in to the launderette, put her food on a spin cycle thinking it was her microwave. Dad was called to come get her, and the thing is, she had no idea what she’d done or where she was. She still has no idea where she is, but we know. She’s in St Catherine’s Care Home. Last time we went, she didn’t even know who I was. It’s a shame because she always sent me five-pound coins, wrapped in cotton wool inside my birthday card. Now I don’t get any.

I have wondered if these people are like her in a way; maybe they’ve all lost their marbles? Dad said that’s what happened to Nan. When I asked him about the marbles she’d lost he’d said it could happen to anyone, really, said ‘crazy doesn’t discriminate’. Maybe he’s right because he also sat me down a while back and said that ‘*Mummy damn lost her marbles too*’; that was when my sister left, and the way Mum’s been acting, I don’t think she’s found them yet – her marbles – and if I’m honest I don’t think she ever will.

Maybe they have lost their minds?

Because I don’t know any sane person who would do what they all do in the end.

I watch her swaying.

There’s not a soul out there, and she sticks out like a sore thumb, so I don’t know how or why Harold can’t see her. Maybe he just chose not to see her because he knows what we’ll need to do next and he’s already told me he’s got things to do today.

The boats in the harbor are all moored, their catches stowed and shipped off to faraway places.

The shops are closed, but they always seem dead in the off

season; people tend to close up early or not open at all when the nights draw in.

Patrons of the pub are already locked in for the night, which will soon include my Dad – *unless he's already in there* – drowning his sorrows. He'll most likely be sharing a table with Harold's parents, who I think might have a drinking problem, because they seem to spend a lot more time there than they ever do at home with their son.

Drinks will soon be flowing and later, sea shanties will be sung.

I peer down from the large bay windows of The Smuggler's, and notice the woman's turning in circles now, peering first at the ground before lifting her head to the darkening sky. She spins around three times and then suddenly snaps her head to the path, the one which leads up to the clifftop and beyond; as if someone had just called her by name...*maybe they had?*

"Well, it won't be my problem for much longer. Soon, you'll be doing all of this by yourself," Harold says, quietly.

"What do you mean?" I turn from the window, find him slumped in a chair.

"Well when I'm eighteen, I'm gone; you won't see me for dust."

I don't want him to see how much his words hurt, so I stare down at my feet, which are kicking the tassels at the edge of the rug. I'm the picture of a sulking toddler.

I don't like it when he talks like this. His *big dreams* about the future, a future that doesn't include me.

He's always talking about how, when he's old enough, he'll blow this village. Find himself a job in a City. I've always thought it was talk, but as the years tick by, it's becoming more of a truth that he'll leave me behind and forget about me. There's something in his tone, today especially, which make his words and their meaning a certainty, not just a pipe dream, and it scares me.

Not that I'll be doing this alone from here on out, but I'll truly be alone.

"You're going to leave?" I mumble, don't look up.

"You know I can't stay here Micky," Harold says as he starts pulling on his wellies.

"Michael," I fire back, lifting my eyes to him.

Harold looks up, one boot on, the other tipped over on the ground.

"What?" he says incredulously.

"You know I hate it when you call me Micky, makes me sound like that bloody mouse." I offer.

"I know." He says and winks back.

"Anyone ever tell you you're an Idiot?"

"That's the common refrain of my life..." he says and we laugh.

I don't know what '*refrain*' means but I laugh all the same.

Drink in the joy of the moment.

But the sound doesn't bring me much comfort – the laughter of friends – because right now, none can be found, because he *is* going to leave me, *eventually*.

As our laughter dies we eye each other cagily because we know what's soon to come, and not even the laughter of friends – the best of friends – can gloss over *that* fact.

Soon, we'll head outside.

Scurry over the footbridge.

Traipse around the harbor and venture up the path.

Following the woman.

Wind our way up to the cliff edge and discover what awaits us at the top.

Eventually, in an hour or so – it's always hard to guess how long it'll take, each one is different – we'll scavenge what we can from the *thing* we'll discover not at the cliff edge but at the bottom, from the *thing* which was once human.

Harold pulls on his other boot with great difficulty, grunting as he does about the simplest of tasks.

“Two years buddy, that’s the time we got left, then you’ll be doing all this by yourself, or you can always bring someone else in to replace me.”

“I don’t want to replace you.” And I don’t; more than anything I want things to remain the same, Harold and me, together forever.

“But you might have to, you can’t be going down there by yourself. Something might happen to you, and I couldn’t forgive myself if it did, and I wasn’t there... promise me when I go, you’ll find someone to go with you on these missions... I’ll even help you interview people if you like?”

He cares, he cares.

He’s staring at me, peering out from under his mop of brown hair. He’s been growing it long, telling me that’s how bankers wear it. *More like wankers*, I’ve thought on the occasions he’s brought it up. But I wouldn’t tell him that, it’d hurt his feelings, and anyway, it suits him, he looks rather handsome.

I feel a blush warming my cheeks at the thought.

I hope he doesn’t notice.

“Promise me?” Harold says, smiling that cheeky-chappy grin of his.

He hasn’t noticed my flushed cheeks. I don’t know how; my body feels like its housing a furnace. I’m surprised there isn’t steam coming out of my ears.

“I promise...” I offer, meekly.

“What?”

“I promise that I won’t go alone, not now, not ever.” I feel like crying as the words leave my mouth.

“Good. I can’t bear to think of you doing all this on your own when I’m gone.”

“Then don’t go.” I hope he doesn’t hear the desperation in my words.

“I’ve got to Mick...Michael.” He corrects, before continuing. “I’m not sticking around here any longer than I have to. Hell, when you’re old enough, you can come and join me,” he says enthusiastically.

My heart hammers at his words and the thought of us being together, again.

“...I don’t know if I’ll have a girlfriend or a wife by then, more than likely I will have, because you’ve got to chase those dreams, right? I want a family...and I don’t want to be one of those old dads, you know, like Abigail’s. Whenever I see him picking her up from school, I’m always like, ‘who’s grandpa’. But regardless, girlfriend or wife or kids, you’d always be welcome buddy, you could crash on the sofa, get yourself all sorted before finding a place of your own.”

A place of my own...

Where I’ll be alone...

Again.

Lost, but surrounded by people I don’t know, people who aren’t Harold.

My heart shrivels up in my chest at Harold’s plans. His many plans that don’t involve his best friend. He’s got his life all figured out it would appear; wife, children, house... the whole white picket-fence deal.

I’m struggling to breathe as the enormity of Harold leaving sinks in.

But suddenly the pressure around my chest lessens and my withering heart kick-starts again, because I know Harold’s full of shit. He, like me, will never leave this place. He’ll dream about leaving, sure, we all do; and I’ll let him because he’s my friend, my best friend, but when it comes time to putting one foot in front of the other, he’ll stall. I’ve no doubt about it. Because in my short life – fourteen-years-young – I’ve never seen anyone leave this place. A lot of them have tried, had grand ideas of escaping and becoming something other than a fisherman or a

fisherman's wife. But Polperro has a way of keeping its people here; close, isolated and trapped.

So, why am I so worried that he'll leave, if we're destined to stay?

I think it's because in life there are sometimes anomalies and I think Harold might just be that. An anomaly, but my anomaly. Another word he taught me.

I won't tell him he's full of shit and that he's destined to stay here with me and that he'll probably end up marrying someone from his class instead of the busty red-headed waitress he'll meet in London or Bristol or Manchester, the one who needs a good man to come save her. *His words, his dream. Not mine.*

I won't tell him he's deluded and his dreams won't amount to anything, because it'll destroy him, and I love him. But I know – without a shadow of a doubt – that he'll end up *being* what every boy in this town becomes: a fisherman. Whether we like it or not, we're all destined to become fishermen, just like our grandfathers, fathers, uncles and brothers.

We should be thankful we were born with dicks.

Because the women... well... there aren't many of them left.

There's plenty of girls in my class at school though, and they'll grow up and turn into women, with boobs and hips, and if they're lucky, a litter of children. *But not all of them.* Some of them, probably half, and that's thinking positively, will develop the sickness... the *Lemming Plague*.

It's not an official name or anything, it's what we came up with when we started paying attention, when we started following those who'd caught it. Or as Harold said, 'those who were *afflicted* by it.'

The girls at our school aren't allowed out by themselves, ever. They're escorted to school in the morning and dutifully chaperoned – another word Harold taught me – back home once the day is done.

One other thing is that they're never, ever, allowed to go near

the water. A difficult rule to follow, given we all live in a fishing village, but it's a rule which was followed to the letter.

"Hey, cheer up."

Harold's voice pulls me from my thoughts of the silenced and somewhat absent generation of girls.

"Why do you think it's only the girls? Only the female..." I air quote the next bit, as I saw Harold do once. I don't know what it means but sometimes I get it right. "'out of towners' that get the sickness?"

"It's not," Harold says, before standing. "Don't you remember the second one, or was that before I brought you into the fold?"

The fold.

That's what we call this thing we do. Everything should have a name, right?

Harold was the one who officially named us, so if it sounds stupid, that's on him, not me.

He'd said we couldn't call it what it was, there was no way he wanted his parents – or mine, for that matter – finding out what we got up to. Although I think they knew where all our trinkets were coming from. They just won't speak of it. And why would they, when it appeared that all the adults in this town were intent on hiding what's actually happening around here, all of them pretending that everything's *A-Okay* in this strange village we call home?

So, when Harold had brought me into this club (*can it be a club with two people?*) he'd told me he was bringing me into *The Fold*. There was an initiation of course, he needed to know he could trust me, and because I wanted to impress him – *I always want to impress him* – I did it.

I'd do anything for Harold.

He's the sun I orbit, after all.

The initiation was typically childish, as one would expect. I had to bite the head off a fish, one pulled from the sea, still flap-

ping and wriggling around, mouth opening and closing, gills doing the same. I did it without question, without delay, because I craved his approval, and I wanted more than anything to be part of The Fold, because it meant time spent with Harold, alone... not intentionally alone, but because there were just the two of us.

As he stands, his gaze falls on me, and I'm reminded again that I still crave his approval more than ever, and I'd do anything to make him stay if his plans to leave become more than just plans and dreams of escape.

"So, was that before or after you joined?" He asked again.

"Sorry?"

"The guy? One of the Lemmings?"

"I think that might have been before—"

"No. I remember now, it was one of your first, he had that yellow slicker on, we thought he was a local, but it was just for show. Don't you remember?"

I shake my head.

"Yeah you do, you took his Walkman, it was all smashed up..."

I screw my face up, try to imagine it, nothing comes.

"It had that cassette trapped in it... the one we joked about." it's Harold's turn to screw his face up in concentration as he tries to search his memory of that day. "What was it again... I can't quite remember... moody... moody..."

The memory strikes. I remember pulling the tape from the broken cassette player and listening to it, listening to the last song that guy ever heard. It wasn't moody in the slightest, but it was blue, sad and melancholic.

"The Moody Blues," I blurt out.

"That's the one," Harold says triumphantly as he grabs his coat, sliding one arm into the sleeve. He struggles to find the other sleeve behind his back, twisting as if he were in a straight-jacket. "He was a big bastard, wasn't he?"

I mutter a half-hearted agreement, but the truth is, I don't remember what he looked like.

Is that bad?

Maybe it is.

They deserve to be remembered, each and every one.

It's an intimate thing when we find them, not what we do after, but during that first contact. Their faces should be seared into my brain, for then and always. They deserve that at least, the respect of me remembering them, because who will remember them once what happens, happens.

Harold's got his other arm in his coat, his hands now fussing with the zipper.

He removes his leather gloves – not mittens – from his pockets and begins to pull them on, like a doctor preparing for an examination. They're skin-tight. Once on, he flexes his fingers, balling them into fists. The leather of the gloves creaks and it reminds me of the sounds we've sometimes heard coming from their throats. Their last words or their final breaths.

I feel bad at not remembering them, not remembering *him*, but there've been so many over the years I've lost count, all of their faces blending into one big and ruddy scar.

I try to picture the shelf in my room, my trophies from the dead and dying.

It's a macabre gallery of finds.

Macabre.

Another of Harold's *big words*, but I couldn't think of a better word to describe the flotsam – *another big word for a little kid, but when your dad's a fisherman, some things tend to stick* – we've pulled from the waters around them, but more often than not, we find the good stuff in their pockets, and purses, and wallets.

Harold said there's a thin line between theft and acquiring things, and seeing as they won't miss the things we take, we've decided that we *acquire* these treasures. What happens in The Fold, stays within The Fold.

“Is she still there?” Harold asks, pointing to the window.

I shake my head and attempt to bring myself back from picturing the items on my shelf. Each item is a body, a person, a corpse. Pocket-watch, hair clips, dolls and keys.

I glance out the window, and the woman has shuffled closer to the path. Soon, she’ll begin to climb and then we’ll acquire her belongings.

“Yep, but she’s on the move.”

“Let’s get a shake on then. Sooner we get this done, the sooner I can get back to the books. If I’m going to blow this town, I need to knuckle down and get that pass from Mrs. Adams. She’s got to be on her period or something, she’s...”

I don’t hear the rest of Harold’s words as I’m too busy repeating his words.

Again, and again.

If I’m going to blow this town... blow this town... blow this town.

“Are you coming?” he offers.

Harold’s staring at me, one hand on his hip, the other gripping the door handle.

I nod and walk across the room to join him.

He opens the door and the wind rushes in, pushing us back.

A storm’s brewing far out at sea, but we both know as we head out of the house, that an entirely different storm’s already raging, and we’re about to walk into the eye of it - again.

We head around the harborside, and I spy Dad’s boat, tethered to a mooring ring.

As we approach, I peer into the portholes, but he’s not there, and my eyes flit quickly to The Smuggler’s Inn. I know he’s probably a few beers deep already.

We’re silent as we move, but I’m unsure whether that’s because of the woman and what we’re about to do, or because Harold gets spooked whenever we pass my Dad’s boat. I peer over at Harold. His head’s down, focusing intently on the ground

before him. He doesn't look towards the boat, but as we pass, I do. I always do.

On the starboard side near the prow is my sister's name.

Elizabeth.

She left, but part of her still remains in the nine black letters.

She drowned, two years ago.

Drownings in a coastal village are sadly a common occurrence, but even though Elizabeth drowned, she didn't drown in the water. Well that's a lie, she did drown *in* water, just not the vast, endless sea which licks at Polperro's shore.

She drowned in ten inches of the stuff. At home, in the bath.

We leave the boat and the memory of my sister stored in those nine letters, and make our way around the edge of the harbor, nearing Smuggler's. Approaching the Inn, I hear the sounds of revelers enjoying their drinks and forgetting their problems. In Polperro, there are a great many of those.

I glance ahead and the woman is now slowly climbing the path, her scarf billowing out behind her, a skinned snake flapping about her neck.

I want to ask if Harold's okay, but I don't. I respect the way he deals with my loss, quietly and broodingly. He's never experienced death before. Well, that's another lie, we experience it all the time with our observations of those with the Lemming Plague. But he's never experienced the personal loss of someone close, and in a way, I hope he never has to. But I know that's foolishness, because everyone dies in the end. But the longer that personal grief stays away from him, the better.

He's the reason I refer to my sister's death as her *leaving*, because I want to keep him free of the pain and suffering the word *death* brings. He's never said it outright, but I think he loves me the way I love him, and he hates to see me hurting, reliving that suffering. Saying she left helps put a greater distance between the obvious. It makes the sting and the finality of death a little easier to swallow.

“You okay?” Harold asks, as if reading my mind.

“Yeah I’m good.”

He doesn’t hold my hand or anything but the concern in his voice makes me picture him doing just that, squeezing tightly and leading me on.

We quicken our pace as the woman disappeared from view.

The path up to the cliffs twists back and forth. We want to ensure we observe her before she follows all the others, because sometimes we hear their final words. That’s important to me, because if we weren’t there to listen to their final remarks, their pleas for forgiveness, and their weeping confessions, they would be nothing but dead, silent words.

‘If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear I,t does it make a sound?’

That’s what Harold said once, and its meaning struck a chord, deep within me. It made me think about Elizabeth.

Did she speak final words? And if so, what did she say?

The thought of discovering her final words has kept me awake at night more often than not. Sometimes I even dream about them. I walk into the bathroom, stare at the bathtub. It’s empty – thank the heavens – but I hear her words. I can never discern them though. They drift up from the drain, but their sound and their meaning are grotesquely distorted by the echo. More animalistic than anything human. So, her final words, the last words she ever spoke on this earth, remain lost.

I made a promise to myself that I’d listen to *their* last words, because in doing so, I’ll be giving their life meaning at the end. Their words, their final utterances will live on in my remembrances of them, once their lives have been extinguished.

Up the path we climb. Each switchback we turn, we catch a glimpse of her scarf as she turns the next but we’re gaining on her. Soon we’ll reach the top and I pray we’ll get to her in time, so we – I – can commit her last words to memory. So that in her dying, she still might live on.

Harold, I'm quite sure, thinks I'm mad.

I showed him my album once. Never again though.

The way he looked at me afterwards, I never want to see him look at me like that again.

The album, which I keep under my bed – a sacred space for all young boys – is full of the photos we take from the Lemmings. I've got forty-six so far, and after today, I might just have forty-seven. Not all the Lemmings bring photos, so I can't be too presumptuous about it; *chickens and eggs and all that*. But I do live in hope. It's odd, I know, but if they bring photos it helps me catalogue them better, helps me remember each of them in their own special way.

On the backs of the photos I usually find words, scribbled on them; a name, date, location. To these scribblings of the recently dead, I add my own scrawl, noting their final words. Not all of them though, because some of the confessions we hear are wordy, but I sum up their last words with bullet points.

"You ready?" Harold says as we near the final bend.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I offer back, as the wind howls around us.

We turn the corner, and standing near the cliff's edge, hair whipping and dancing around her head, is the woman.

She doesn't see us because she's gazing out to sea.

We scurry to our usual spot and hide ourselves behind some bushes, which gives us a temporary shelter from the lashing wind, but is still close enough to hear her words, should she speak any.

We huddle there quietly.

Close.

I can smell Harold's aftershave. It's overpowering but manly.

I turn slightly, just to watch him watching her.

His face is drawn, concentration creasing his youthful brow. For the briefest of moments, I can picture him as the banker he so longs to be.

He turns and catches me watching him, but he doesn't chide me for it. He just nods towards the woman, *our Lemming*.

"You're missing it," he says in a whisper.

I can smell mint on his breath, toothpaste or chewing gum. It doesn't matter, but his warm, minty breath on my face is a balm, and I can feel myself blushing again.

I turn away from him, peer through the branches of our cover.

The woman is swaying, as if dancing to a song only she can hear.

All I can concentrate on, is Harold's heavy, expectant breathing, the bush rustling, and the wind howling. *We all march to a different beat*. I heard someone say that once, and it's true. Her beat has led her here, to the edge of the cliff, whereas ours has led us to huddle behind a bush to watch the drama unfold and the final curtain being drawn closed on her life.

"Go on little lemming..." Harold's voice is a whisper, urging the woman to take flight.

Harold has said lemmings are little rodent-like creatures which commit suicide when their population gets too big, each following the next to death, over a cliff. I don't know if it's true, I've never seen one; but the name's stuck, because they do seem to follow each other over the cliff's edge. Not in herds though (*if that's what they call a group of Lemmings*). It's more a steady trickle.

The woman lifts her arms to the sky and opens them wide, as if she's bathing in sunlight. But there's nothing before her but the darkening, rumbling sky.

I see something in her hand. A piece of paper? No, a photograph.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of it.

Another picture to add to the growing collection. That is, if she's able to keep hold of it on the way down. Some don't, but most of the time I have to pry the pictures from their broken, twisted and locked hands. On a few occasions, I've had to break

fingers to release their grip. Funny how we cling to all manner of things in life. In death, I've discovered people cling to those things all the more.

Harold taps me on the shoulder and I turn to him.

He doesn't speak, just points to his ear and begins to mouth something to me.

I stare at his lips – I've an excuse for once and so I take my time – to read his words.

Can you hear her? He's mouthing.

I turn my head away from his plump lips and listen.

I return to face him and nod.

She's talking, mumbling. Pleading with something or someone we can't see, someone or something we never see... but we – I – feel it, usually moments before they give in to gravity's pull, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

She lifts her leg, stretches her foot out before her, and begins to slowly rock forward.

There one moment.

Gone the next.

She falls silently.

No screaming. No shouting. No fuss.

Only acceptance of her end.

Although she's gone over the edge, her final words linger on the clifftop, carried to my ears by the many voices of the wind. I hear them the split second before I hear her body land with a crunch on the rocks below.

"I didn't mean to do it... I'm sorry... I didn't want you hurting anymore."

However-many-times we've observed their behavior, there's something about the finality of their choice which is chilling. I can't help but watch them choose their end.

It's that word again: *alluring*.

Harold begins to shuffle from our cover, peering up and down the coastal path, checking that we're not being watched, because

sometimes, we are. Sometimes there's a girl watching us. I don't know who she is or where she comes from. She certainly doesn't go to our school. But she's there more often than not, watching us from a distance, or we catch a glimpse of her lurking behind a rock, or a tree, or a bush.

She never fully breaks her cover. It's as though she doesn't want us seeing her.

Maybe she's got her own club? Her own Fold?

Maybe she watches the people who watch the Lemmings?

But if there's a club that does that, then which club watches her?

"Get over here, will you?" Harold shout-whispers and gesticulates for me to join him.

I take another glance up the path before shuffling out of the bush. I cast my eyes down the path to the village but with all the switchbacks I can't see much.

I hate this part, looking over the edge, spotting our find on the rocks below. I'm always scared the clifftop's going to crumble away from beneath my feet and I'll find myself falling down there too. I dislike it, but Harold enjoys this part, seeing how they've landed, like broken dolls on the jagged rocks. From this distance, it does remove some of the horror of what we'll find when we get down there. Harold says it desensitizes us from what we're going to do, and I have to say, it's worked up until now.

I step closer to the edge and Harold reaches out a hand, grips me by the arm.

I feel his fingers bite into my arm through my coat. I wish I didn't have it on, so I could feel his rough fingers holding me firm. I feel my cheeks flush, but I'm not worried he'll notice this time, because taking one look at his face tells me that mine will look the same, reddened by the Baltic wind screaming off the sea and into our faces.

She's down there. Arms and legs splayed out, broken and disjointed but still all part of the whole.

She's landed face down, which I'm grateful for. At least with

the way she's landed we won't have to see the remains of her face. Sometimes the face is the worst part, because they've usually connected with rocks on the way down, or the force of hitting the ground has split their heads wide open, allowing all the insides to rush to the outside.

"What does she look like to you?" Harold says.

His breath fogs around us in minty clouds before the wind whisks it away.

I stare down at her broken body, shrug.

"She looks like a human starfish, right?" Harold offers with a giggle. Nerves or fear, I'm not sure, but it's certainly not because it's funny. It's far from that.

And she does, I'll give him that.

And that's what she'll remain to me as we climb down to claim our rewards.

A human starfish.

Desensitize.

"Come on," Harold says. "Before someone finds her or the sea takes her, as it will. Tides are on the rise." He's already pulling me away from the edge, and I follow without protest because I'd go anywhere with him. Even the City, should he ask me.

But I know he won't, as none of us are ever leaving this place.

Climbing down is easy, we've walked this path many times and I could probably do it with my eyes closed, but I won't. I follow Harold, as I always do. He likes to get to the bodies first, as if he's some pirate, invoking his right to the first spoils of the treasures we'll find. He often goes straight for the pockets, searching for money. He's got a '*nest egg*' apparently, but it doesn't look like any egg I've ever seen. It's just a plastic jar with a red lid, full of notes and coins. He says that when it's full, he'll take it to the bank and have enough for a house.

I glance back the way we've come and I notice someone duck behind the rocks. They think they're hidden but I can see their

blonde hair fluttering about. It's the girl, watching us watch the woman.

"Harry!" I shout, because he's already at the body, turning out the back pockets.

"HARRY!" I holler at the top of my voice to be heard over the wind and the crashing waves. His head rises, but his hands remain sifting through her pockets.

"WHAT?" He shouts back.

"The girl...she's back." I turn and point up the way we've come, but she's no longer there. The wisps of her blonde hair are suddenly absent. I turn back to Harold, who's shaking his head and staring up at the rocks.

"I don't see shit," he says. "Get over here will you, I need you to help me turn her a bit. There's something in her pocket."

I glance once more up at the rocks, but Harold's right, she's not there.

I traipse my way over to the starfish woman and help lift her body, grabbing her by the belt loops of her jeans, lifting her hips from the ground so Harold can get his hands deep into her front pockets.

After rummaging for a while, he removes his hand. Clutched within his fingers, is more money than I've ever seen. Green ones, orange ones and quite a lot of red ones. I only have to look at Harold's face to see that he's hit the jackpot.

I let go of the woman and her body squelches back into the rocks.

I can't stand the look of joy on Harold's face at finding so much money. It's made his dream of blowing this town even more of a reality, so I turn back to my own search. It doesn't take me long to find something of value on the woman who found no value left in her own life.

Clutched between her fingers is a photograph. It's all crumpled because her fingers have squeezed into a fist, either on the

way down or due to the impact when she landed. Either way, it'll soon be mine.

I clamber around the body and rocks and start to pull the photograph from her hand, but she won't give it up. I hate having to touch their flesh, they always feel cold and clammy even though they were living, breathing things moments before. But I'm not leaving here without it and so I peel a few of her fingers back. One of them snaps, but soon, it's mine.

The photograph is black and white, of a man with a little girl sitting on his lap.

Smiling faces, happy faces.

"Three-hundred-and-forty-five pounds!" Harold exclaims.

I turn to him and he holds up the money, the wind threatening to rip it free.

"Did you hear me?" he offers.

I nod, give him a thumbs up.

"Wow, what I can do with three-hundred-and-forty-five pounds—" he pauses, points at me. Well not at me, at the thing in my hand. "What you got there?"

I try to hide it from him, move my hand around my back.

"Hey, no fair. Show me what you got?"

"No, it's silly."

"NOW!" Harold shouts and I can tell he thinks I've found more money, more plunder. *His* plunder.

"I don't want to. It's silly. Look, you got yours and I got mine, fair's fair."

My words sound childish and stupid, and I know they won't stop him.

I can tell they won't by the look in his eyes, which suddenly burn with greed.

He pockets his money before the wind can run away with it, and rushes over the slick rocks toward me. I shrink back, thinking he'll hit me. He never has, but I've also never seen him like this and there's a first time for everything.

He reaches around me before pulling and twisting my arm out from behind me. It hurts, and I cry out in pain, but he doesn't stop.

"Give it to me," he growls, and I let my hand open. The photograph is crushed even more than it was before. He snatches it from me, smooths it out. His deep frown begins to soften, his lips curling at the edges. A smile graces his lips.

He lifts his eyes to me and stares at me through his shaggy hair.

"Sorry," he offers, and hands the photograph back. "I thought... I didn't... I'm sorry."

I shrug my shoulders. I hate seeing him like this. It pains me, knowing I made him feel bad. "It's okay; I'm okay." But I'm not. I rub at my elbow before taking the photograph back and sliding it into my back pocket for safe keeping.

"You *still* collect those things?" Harold offers sheepishly.

"Yeah, I've still got that album, the one—"

"Cool, well now you've got another one to add to the collection."

"Yeah. I guess I do."

We stand for a moment in silence. Something's different now.

I peer out at sea and realize that the light's beginning to fade from the sky.

We're just two boys, standing on a rock, with a chasm forming between us.

A dead woman at our feet. Plunder in each of our pockets.

One boy dreaming to get away from this place, whatever the cost.

The other dreaming that we'll stay here, together forever.

"I guess we should head back," Harold says matter-of-factly, and turns away.

"Yes, I guess we should... it'll be dark soon." I say this, but he's already walking away.

"I'm sorry," Harold says again, head cocked to the side, speaking over his shoulder.

"It's fine Harry. I'm okay."

"Good, I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine. Honestly, I should have just shown it to you, but I thought you'd laugh."

"I probably would have normally. I just felt bad... you know... for hurting you."

We're at the top of the cliff now, walking the path back to the village. I glance around to see if the girl's watching us. I often wonder if she goes down after us, picks over what we may have left behind. But she's not there and so I turn back to the path.

"I know you didn't mean it," I say, just to fill the awkward silence. But in my heart, I'm wondering if Harold's desire to get away from this place is stronger than I've ever believed.

Would he have pushed me into the sea, or caved my head in, if I'd revealed a wad of cash instead of the photograph?

"What are you collecting those photos for anyway?"

"Oh, it's silly. You'll only laugh at me."

"Go on, please, I won't, I promise. You've got me curious now."

My hand goes to my back pocket and I feel the photo crinkle at my touch.

"Well, if we don't remember them, then who will?"

"So, you like... catalogue them?"

"I just... well yeah, kind of if you want to put it like that." I don't tell him that I write their final words on the back of their photographs, or that sometimes I read all their petitions, promises, regrets and pleadings. Or that sometimes – well, most of the time – when I read them, they make me cry.

"So, like, how many do you have?"

"About forty-six," I say nonchalantly, but I know their exact number. It'll be forty-seven when I get this one home and

inscribe the words of the dead woman on the back before slipping it in with the rest.

“Forty-six! Wow they sure do add up, don’t they?” Harold says as he ruffles his shaggy hair. He’s thinking of something, I can tell.

“But that’s only the ones that have photos with them. There are a lot that don’t.”

“Yeah, I guess. How many do you think we’ve followed?”

I pause for a moment as we approach the crossroad, where I’ll turn left to head home and Harold will continue over the footbridge and back to his house. I pretend to give it some thought, but I know the number, because when I don’t find a photo, I usually take something else from them, little knick-knacks to remember them by, and those sit on my shelf.

“About...sixty-four, I guess?”

Harold whistles.

“Sixty-four bodies. That’s insane. There’ll be more though, won’t there? This Lemming Plague has gotten pretty bad. You might need to get another album.”

The true number is near the hundred mark. Ninety-six. I don’t know why I kept that from Harold, but a part of me thinks it’s because he doesn’t see them like I do. He sees them more like cash-cows, little money boxes that tumble off the cliff and scatter their savings on the rocks below, for him to collect. He wasn’t always like this, though.

When we started, he’d usually treat them with respect and talk about them for days afterwards. Now, he’s down there as quick as a flash, hands riffling through pockets for money, desperate to get enough cash to get away from here. He’s desensitized, disinterested, and the person I love is disappearing fast.

He forgets them so quickly, and it’s what I imagine it’ll be like if he does beat the odds and blows this village. He’ll forget me in time, too. He’ll forget all of what we’ve done and experienced together. I’ll be someone who, when his wife or kids ask who he

grew up with, he'll look to the ceiling trying to remember my name and face. Then he'll lower his head and say, *'You know what, I can't remember.'*

"Well, I guess I'll knock for you tomorrow." I hoist a thumb over my shoulder.

"Sure," Harold offers, nonplussed. I glance down and notice his hand already at his pocket, feeling the notes he'd salvaged. His eyes seem distant, and I imagine he's running the numbers in his head, totting up his own little piggy bank; his ever-growing nest egg.

I can't look at him anymore, so I turn away and head for home. It hurts to see him already forgetting me. No one ever tells you that the love of your life could be your friend. But it's true. I love Harold, and I don't ever want to be someplace he's not, but it'll happen sooner, rather than later, and so I just wave back at him as I walk away.

In time, I'm sure he'll wholly forget who I was.

There are tears welling in my eyes at the thought, and I'm glad he can't see them.

By the time I walk the lanes and get home, it's full dark.

I let myself in, which has become something of a habit of late, what with dad at the pub, mum in bed, and my sister gone. I climb the stairs, pulling out the photograph en route to my bedroom. I glance down at it once more, commit it to memory. As I do, I imagine Harold at home, committing his own faces to memory: Florence Nightingale, The Duke of Wellington and William Shakespeare. All the faces on the bank notes he's carefully counting.

The door to Mum's room is open and I peer inside to check on her. It's always so dark in there. I peer intently into the room, wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and that's when I discover her. The black shadow and outline which she's become of late.

But she's not huddled under the duvet, she's sitting on the

edge of her bed. Arms hanging down loosely at her sides, hands resting in her lap. She's gazing out the window, at the night and the coming storm. She doesn't hear me or see me, doesn't even see my shadow dancing over the wall from the light behind me, which steals in from the crack of the door.

"Night Mum," I whisper, but she doesn't flinch at my voice or move. She just sits there in her dressing gown, oblivious to my existence.

I pull the door closed and head to my room.

Inside, I place the photograph on my desk, flick on the lamp and scamper across the room to my bed. Bending down and searching blindly beneath it with my hand, I soon find the album. I pull it out and return to the desk, sit down, and place the album flat on the desk.

I flick through the pages and see the many faces of those who've passed, or those whom they wanted to remember in their final stages of their sickness.

A picture says a thousand words.

There's no need for me to read the words I've scribbled on the reverse of these photographs because Harold said once that '*A picture is worth a thousand words.*'

But if I did, I know it would only serve to remind me of how lonely, lost and regretful they were. And currently I'm feeling all of those things deeply, so there's no point wallowing in it. Not tonight. Not after Harold telling me, in no uncertain terms, that he's planning on leaving me.

I turn the photograph over and smooth it out.

I reach for my pen and begin to write down the Lemming's last words.

The words she'll be remembered for, by me at least.

I hear something outside and stop my scribbling.

I was wrong, the sound is not coming from outside, it's coming from inside the house.

I glance down at my watch. 6:55 pm – too early for Dad to be returning from the pub.

It comes again.

Scratching?

No. It's not that, it's something else, something I know.

Shuffling, that's it. The swish-scape of slipped feet on floorboards.

Which is soon followed by soft thuds.

One, two, three. *Creak.*

I roll my chair over to the door, open it a crack.

Mum's standing on the stairs, staring off into the distance.

"Mum?" I offer quietly, so as not to scare her.

I'd heard once that if people are sleepwalking and you scare them awake, you could quite possibly scare them to death. She takes another step, then another, her head disappearing below the landing.

"Mum, what are you doing?" My question is met with silence.

I try again.

"Mum, why don't you go back to bed, Dad will be home soon."

I hear a few more steps and then she's shuffling again.

I return to the photograph, finish my scribbling. Once I've filed and catalogued it like the rest I'll head down and fetch Mum a cup of coffee or something to eat, whatever it is she's hoping to achieve down there.

I slide the photo into place.

Pause.

Was that the door?

I stand and go to the window, peer out and down at our steps.

Mum's just standing there in the street.

"MUM?" I shout as she takes a faltering step onto the cobbled stone path.

"MUM, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" She looks around,

but not at me, not at my window. She's peers up the path, then turns slowly to look down the path, towards the harbor. Suddenly she's shuffling off in that direction, and I know something is wrong because I realize she's still in her dressing gown, which billows around her as the wind whips through the narrow street.

"MUM, COME BACK... MUM ST—" The words die in my throat when I see her. Not my mother, but the girl. The one who watches us.

She's at the end of the road, peering around a house, with her hand outstretched to my mother.

Mum begins walking towards her, quickly taking the girl's outstretched hand. Then they're walking away. I bang on the window but they don't hear me.

"MUM, NO. MUM, COME BACK!" I scream, and suddenly I realize that tears are rolling down my face. I wipe a sleeve across my nose in an attempt to rub the wetness away, but it's quickly replaced by more.

Turning sharply, I run to my mum and dad's room for a better view. I stumble over various things in the darkness which litter the floor, and clatter my way to the window, which overlooks the harborside.

I don't see them. They're still hidden by the many houses between here and the water but suddenly they appear, walking slowly around the dockside, hand in hand.

I don't know what to do. We're not allowed to go out at night, warned against it from childhood. I just stand at the window crying. Watching my mother hold hands with *that* girl. She's walking away from me. No, being led away from me.

She's approaching The Smuggler's Inn.

Maybe they're going to get dad?

But they don't go inside, they skirt past it, and approach the path to the clifftop.

THE LEMMING PLAGUE! My mind screams, but all that comes out of my mouth is:

“MUM... DON’T LEAVE ME!”

They pause momentarily.

The girl tugs at my mother’s hand, encouraging her to follow but Mum pulls back and turns to face me.

Did she hear me? Did she hear my heart call out to hers?

She’s so far away that I can’t see her features clearly but I think she’s smiling. I know this, because the emotion looks strange on her face, like it doesn’t belong, or it’s been so long since she last smiled that she’s forgotten how to do it.

She lifts her hand, the one the girl isn’t clutching, and waves at me.

Is it a wave of hello? Of acknowledgment? Of hearing me call after her?

My heart answers and silences every question.

She’s waving goodbye.

I crumble to my knees but still gaze at her from the window.

I watch her turn slowly, finally giving in to the girl’s constant tugging. She is being drawn away from me toward the cliff. Toward the finality of that choice which awaits her, when she steps free of this world and relinquishes herself to the next.

I’m a blubbering mess, my face slick with snot and tears.

I plead at the top of my lungs, one final time in the hope that she will hear me over the chasm that’s formed between us, widening with each step she takes.

“Mum... don’t leave... me... don’t leave... us... please... please... ple... pl... p...”

But she does, and she’s gone, and now I’m alone.

Why does everyone I love keep leaving me?

But the darkness doesn’t answer.

I realize for the first time in my life that I’m completely and utterly alone.

And it terrifies me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ross Jeffery is the Bram Stoker Award and 3x Splatterpunk Award nominated author of *Tome*, *Juniper*, *Scorched* (The Juniper trilogy), *Beautiful Atrocities*, *Only the Stains Remain*, *Tethered* and *I Died Too, But They Haven't Buried Me Yet*. Ross's fiction has appeared in various print anthologies and his short fiction and flash fiction can be found online in many fabulous journals. Ross lives in Newport, Wales, with his wife and two beautiful daughters.

