

Untitled

Clare flicked on the windscreen wipers and used her sleeve to clear the misty glass. It was freezing outside and even colder inside the tiny car. The broken heater leered up at her, taunting her, laughing with its cracked teeth as she pulled her jacket tight around her. Blobs of sleet bounced off the window, the wipers jerked their way backwards and forward, sticking every now and then and freeing themselves with a shudder before ploughing on to the other side of the windscreen.

Clare drove on, not really caring where she went. She had nowhere to go, she was driving for the sake of driving, sitting in a car because it was better than sitting in a dingy little flat reflecting on the mess she had made of her life. And she had made a mess. She had left school too early, become pregnant too soon. Grown up too quickly. She had kept the baby because it had seemed like the right thing to do and she wanted to do the right thing — but look where that had got her. Driving up and down the A9 looking for hitchhikers to pick up because she needed someone to talk to, someone who would talk back. She needed to speak to somebody who wasn't eight months old. In other words — she was lonely.

She could see one in the distance, a man she thought, but it wasn't always easy to tell. She drove on, her eyes fixed on the hitcher. He was leaning forward with his arm stretched right out, his thumb pointing towards the grey sky — a desperate plea. He saw her coming and his eyes widened hopefully at the thought of a lift but glazed over again when he saw the driver — a young woman alone in a car — it was unlikely she was going to pick up a big man like him.

As the car whizzed past, Clare caught a glimpse of fair hair, big muscular arms and, most importantly, a friendly face. She turned the car around at the next junction and drove back, moving her handbag off the passenger seat and onto the floor behind her.

'Hi.' She leaned over, swinging the door open, her seatbelt straining against her chest. 'Where are you heading for?'

'Glasgow, but anywhere in that direction is fine,' the man said, sliding into the seat and bringing with him a blast of icy air. 'Christ, it's cold out there. Thought I would die of frostbite before I managed to get a lift.'

Clare laughed and indicated the broken heater. 'Sorry, it's not much better in here.' He smiled and leaned back in his seat, pulling the belt over his rather fatty middle. Clare started up the car and pulled away from the grassy verge, back onto the road.

'I'm Clare, by the way,' she said, hoping to start a conversation with her new passenger.

'Rob,' said the man, twisting in his seat to get a good view of her. 'You have no idea how grateful I am.'

Clare nodded, happy for the moment just to have someone else in the car with her. She hated being alone. He was well-dressed, unusually so for a hitcher. And older than most too. Clare guessed he was around fifty but she wasn't entirely sure. He seemed like the

kind of man you would expect to find driving an expensive car rather than accepting lifts from innocent young girls. She shook her head slightly. It didn't matter why he was there, the important thing was that she wasn't alone.

Clare shifted impatiently in her seat, glancing at her passenger out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting with his hands folded neatly in his lap, content to stare out of the window, effectively ignoring Clare. She frowned, tired with the silence, craving human conversation. She racked her brains for something interesting to say.

'So what are you doing in Glasgow?' she asked at last, hating herself for not thinking of something more engaging.

'Work,' he answered, shrugging and tearing his gaze away from the beauty of the Scottish countryside. 'Nothing interesting.'

Nothing that would interest her, anyway. She was just a kid, no older than Megan or Emma. What did she think she was doing, picking up strange men like that? You couldn't be too careful these days with all the weirdos out there. Muggers and rapists. Not that he was anything like that. He was just an honest man trying to get to Glasgow. His car had broken down halfway along the motorway and the recovery folk weren't going to be there for ages.

He couldn't figure her out, sitting there, looking about thirteen but with eyes that told him she had been through more than any girl her age should. Those eyes. They were so sad, but angry too. Angry at what though? And there was something else. She wanted something from him. Well, he had nothing to offer someone like her. He had kids of his own, and grandkids too. He didn't need a troubled teenager to add to his list. She could just drive him to wherever she was going, let him out and then drive off, back out of his life.

Clare sighed. They had been driving for almost half an hour and he had barely said a word. He was the wrong sort. He was too old. And he was a man. Women were better, they liked to chat more. It was a pity but it was life. Anyway, just having him there, breathing his breath against the steamy window, making the occasional noise and filling the space next to her left elbow had made her feel better. She looked across at him and smiled. She did feel better. She was ready to go home. Back to the life she had created for herself.

'This is as far as I go,' she said, slowing the car down. 'I'll drop you just along there.'

He nodded and cleared his throat.

'Thanks. That was brilliant.'

'It's fine. I hate driving alone.'

'You should be careful, though.' Rob's forehead wrinkled in mild concern. 'There are a lot of weird people out there.'

Great, thought Clare, just as he leaves he starts to talk. She nodded, 'I know that. I'm always careful.'

'Still,' he said, unfastening the seatbelt and pushing the door open. 'If you don't like the silence, maybe you should buy a radio. Thanks again.' He stepped out, slamming the door behind him, sealing Clare back into her lonely little bubble.

She shook her head to clear it of disappointment and turned the car around, driving off, her eyes scanning the wet road for a better prospect.