

Drifters

Sally Gander.

Frank knew she would never let him keep the boys, not forever anyway.

As he stood at the sink and washed the black soot from his face he could see them walking into school that morning, pensive and sad, their last day. He pushed the image away and looked up at himself in the mirror. The black streaks across his cheeks, the deep set eyes, rapidly receding hairline, it was his father looking back at him. His father the hero.

Frank had always known he wanted to be like his father, to be a fireman. So when Frank told him he was going into the service too, Frank knew to listen to his advice. 'You'll see things,' his father had said. 'You won't be able to get them out of your head. If you want to do this job, Frank, you've got to keep it all in, lock it inside and whatever you do don't let any of it out, don't lose that control, because if you do you'll never go back into a burning building.'

Over the years this had proved to be good advice. For a firefighter. Not for a father. Frank dried his face and opened his locker. As the guys passed by they patted him on the shoulder.

'Good luck, mate,' Jimmy said.

They all knew what he had to do today. Most of them knew how it felt, to be parted from their children. Most of them were either divorced, separated or single.

Frank closed his locker door and flung his bag over his shoulder.

'See you tomorrow, Frank.'

'Yeah, Steve. Tomorrow.'

What would tomorrow be like? Leaving an empty house, going home to an empty house, and in between a shift that could throw anything at him, all the while keeping it inside, staying in control. It was a mantra he said to himself as he drove home.

Lock it away, stay in control. Lock it away, stay in control.

The boys were across the fields when he got home. They'd left the back door wide open, their school bags and shoes scattered across the floor, their muddy boots gone. This time he wouldn't shout at them when they got back and he felt regret for every time he had.

He made tea. That's what people do, he thought, on the brink of a crisis.

His boys wouldn't like city life, he knew it. They might be persuaded into museums or art galleries, they would like the cinemas, the bowling alleys, the takeaways delivered to the door, but these would be small consolation for the loss of their freedom. They'll have a new father too, a stepfather.

'Come and visit, Frank,' Mona had said on the phone that morning.

Frank pretended he didn't hear. Throughout their marriage this pretence had served him well.

'They'll be on the five-fifteen,' he'd said. 'Be with you by seven.'

'There's room for you to stay. Don't lose touch with them, Frank. I know your job makes it difficult but...'

'Sorry, Mona, the doorbell. See you.'

He knew he wouldn't visit them there, sit in the same room as Mona's new husband dishing out discipline to his boys, be shown around their freshly decorated home, invited to see his boys once a month. Maybe they'd come back to stay with him sometimes, but he could see the future clearly, the visits would become less and less as they fitted into their new life and made new friends. This was the end of the line for his family of three.

Frank sipped his tea, too hot and it burned his lips. He liked the pain, it seemed to clarify his thoughts so he took another sip, then another.

He went to the back door to see James and Connor walking towards him. Usually they would be running, but he could see they wanted this last forage across the fields to take longer, to feel the earth sticking to their boots.

'Is it time, Dad?' Connor asked, the youngest, more sensitive than his brother.

'I'll get the bags,' James said, not looking at his father, keeping his distance.

'Dad.' Connor stood looking at him. Frank pulled him into a hug and buried his face in his hair. It smelled of wet grass and earth, only the faintest hint of pine shampoo. Frank loved their smells. That pungent musk when they kicked off their trainers, the ripeness of their bedrooms after a night of restless dreaming, the ink and paper smell of their school bags.

Mona would have forgotten these details. She hadn't seen them for eighteen months. When she left, Frank had supposed the realities of life were getting her down, but he wouldn't let her bear all the blame. In fact, in the last eighteen months Frank came to realise what had pushed her away. It was him. The hours he worked, the job he did, but mostly the way he dealt with it. The silence, the tough veneer. It drove her mad.

So she left, only in contact on birthdays and Christmas, but apart from that barely a word. And he'd coped, he'd coped very well. They had a routine going, a kind of understanding; they were in this together and they could solve any problem, together.

But he knew she would want them back, eventually.

'Bags are in the car,' James said, standing in the doorway. Another year and he'll fill it like a rugby player.

'Okay,' Frank said, letting his hand slide over Connor's soft hair. 'You're going to have a good time with your Mum, and there's a lot to do in the city. It'll be great.'

He managed to sound sincere, but Connor looked up at him with so much doubt in his eyes that he had to turn away.

'Come on,' Frank said. 'You don't want to miss the train.'

They were silent in the car, watching the countryside pass by, deep in their own thoughts.

Frank let the mantra roll over in his head. Lock it away, stay in control. Lock it away, stay in control.

They were there too soon. There were no red lights to stop at, no roadworks, nobody waiting to cross at the zebra crossing.

The platform was cold and windy. The large round clock above them ticked with hollow severity. Frank wanted to pick up a brick and throw it, make the hands stop. And for a moment time seemed to stand alone, as though he'd willed it to happen, all three of them motionless on the platform, silence, etched in glass. Even the sound of his heart, a low thud in his ears was barely there. The white breath coming from Connor's lips bellowed out and drifted, hanging like a single cloud on a still day. There was a faint rumble and he turned his head to see a train crawling from the mouth of the tunnel. Time was starting again. The rumble got louder until there was a rush of warm air on his face and the rumble had turned to a roar.

Then it was all over in a moment. Time sped on. The boys kissed him, hugged him, heaved their bags onto the train. He could see the shape of them looking for seats, their faces peering out the grey smokey window. A shrill whistle, the train jolted forwards, and then they were gone.

Frank was on the platform as silence descended, and time stopped again.

'Are you alright, mate?'

Frank turned to see the train guard looking at him.

'Yes, sorry. I'm fine.'

'Get yourself a cup of tea, I would. You look half frozen there.'

Frank walked through the station and onto the high street. He didn't want to go home.

It was market day, so the road was closed off to cars and instead crowded with shoppers. Above the yellow and white striped awning of the fish stall was a neon sign for the cinema. He used to take Mona every Saturday night after fish and chips in the cafe on the corner.

At the door the sign said 'Audrey Hepburn Season. One Showing Only, 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'.'

Years ago he and Mona had watched from the back seats as Audrey Hepburn radiated from the screen, beautiful in her slim black dress, hair piled on top of her head.

They'd sat close together, feeling the goosebumps of each other's arms. But that was all he remembered, a black dress and goosebumps.

He looked at his watch. The film would start in five minutes, so he paid for a ticket and went in.

It was comforting to have the darkness envelop him, as though he was absolved from his responsibilities for the next hour and a half, he could just sit down and let Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard take over. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he could see there was no-one else there. He had walked into a cocoon, dark warmth to aid recovery.

The music started, the brown ragged curtains swished open and there she was, early on a New York morning, climbing out of a yellow cab with a cup of coffee in her gloved hand and an irresistible desire to gaze into the window at Tiffany's. Just the sight of her made his mouth dry, as if all that mattered in the world was this woman, her face, her beauty.

The story rolled on, much of it was unfamiliar to him, it was such a long time since he'd sat there with Mona, more wrapped up in each other than the film.

Then for the first time Audrey Hepburn appeared without a ballgown or pearls, barely any make-up, just a girl in a sweater with a small guitar. She sat on the window sill, rested her head back and started to sing. George Peppard came to the window above and Frank knew how he felt because he felt it too, the tingling down his spine, a slight shortness of breath.

'Moon River' was Mona's favourite song, they'd danced to it at their wedding. Frank had forgotten it was in the movie. He pressed his teeth into his lower lip, pushing the meaning away.

Keep it in, stay in control.

But then, softly she sang, 'Two drifters off to see the world. There's such a lot of world to see...'

The tingling up his spine turned to a raging pain throughout his body and he couldn't breathe. He was sobbing. He covered his face with his broad hands and let the pain take over, his control gone.

He cried for his sons who were now lost to him, he cried for all the sons and daughters he was unable to save over the years, all the mothers without their children, all the children who'd lost their parents. All of them, he'd wanted to save all of them.

Frank sat for a long time with his hands covering his face, letting his tears slip between his fingers, sensing the consuming pain dwindle to an ache that seemed to stop him from moving. He looked up to see the final scene. Audrey and George, both soaked to the skin, a look of desperate hope on their faces.

The credits rolled, the curtain came across, the lights went on. Frank stood up. His legs were stiff and his throat felt raw.

Outside the sudden brightness made him shield his eyes and he smiled, for the first time that day. There was a burden he had carried with him for years, through every shift, at home with the boys, even while he slept at night, but now there was just an imprint left and he was comfortable and free.

He took a deep breath and felt dizzy, as though this unexpected lightness would make him drift up to the sky amongst the grey clouds. He didn't want to be surrounded by grey, he wanted the colour.

Frank walked back through the market and saw the people, their faces, they all looked at him and smiled because he was smiling at them.

At the train station he ran his finger down the timetable. Two hours until the next train. He went to the platform and sat on the cold metal bench. It didn't matter how long it took, he would wait all night if he had to. Two hours was nothing.

He would see that James and Connor were okay, meet Mona's new husband. Who was this man who wanted to be a father to his children? Frank didn't even know his name, what he did for a living, what sort of a man he was. Did Mona choose someone opposite to him? Someone more expressive and loving? He hoped so, she deserved it. If Frank accepted him, the boys would too. This man was going to be important in their lives, but Frank was their father. He would always be their father.

END