

Hilary Taylor
Sea Defences

I'm in the police station. Again. But this time it's different because of the shoe. And because Mumma's not here. Normally she waits outside while they tell me off about my job (you can't keep doing this, Michael) and then we get chips and go home.

5 Mumma was trying to save me, but she couldn't. There was blood and mud on her face, and her eyes were shut. Her skirt was up round the top of her legs and they put a blanket on her and took her to hospital. There was an ambulance and three police cars and blue lights flashing.

The red shoe was dangling from the broken floorboards over the cliff, like a drop of blood from a wound. It was a wound – what had happened to our house. Half of it smashed on the beach all mangled up with those big concrete blocks they call seedy fences, half clinging to the land's edge, its innards on display.
10 The storm that did it is called Angus so it's like a person did it. On purpose.

When she saw the shoe, she looked at me through the rain. Strings of wet hair flung themselves about her cheeks.

"Oh, Michael," she said. "What have you done?" The wind hurled her words into the sky.

I wanted to hide my face in her chest. But I stood shivering beside her. "It wasn't my fault, Mumma."

15 But it was my fault. That's why I do my job. I have to keep the children safe to pay for what I did. If it hadn't been for me, Hannah Bird would be a grown-up lady now, with lipstick and high heels and a go-away-leave-me-alone curl of the mouth. Like all the rest.

Mumma crawled into what was left of my bedroom which was sloping down the broken cliff. The wind howled and clouds flew across the sky like bits of ghosts. Waves crashed up the cliff. She lay down on her stomach and stretched, but there was a creaking cracking sound and another bit of my bedroom broke off
20 and Mumma and the red shoe and lots of bits of wood fell down on to the seedy fences.

There's a new police officer called DI¹ Sally Lincoln and she has a smile that she can turn on and off like a light switch.

"So, Michael," – the smile is on – "You keep an eye on children. Make sure they're okay. Is that right?"

25 "Yes." I thought I was here because of the shoe. Why is she talking about my job again? What's their problem with it?

In summer the beach gets crowded. People jam-packed with their pop-up tents and dogs and picnic baskets and buckets and spades. Parents turn their heads. Children wander off. If they didn't have someone like me to watch out for them, they'd end up like Hannah Bird.

30 So that's what I do. All year round. Up and down the beach, round the park, across the green. I keep guard. Pick them up if they fall. Make sure they never go near the road. Outside the school at home time just in case. All the time I'm waiting for someone to say *It's all right, Michael. You've done enough. Paid the price.* But they never do.

35 There have only been two times in twenty-nine years that anyone has said thank you. Once it was a lady on the beach who was crying *LucyLucyLucymybaby* and I brought her a little girl I'd found playing behind Molly's kiosk and she cried more and said thank you about a million times. And once I was walking along the beach with a little boy, holding his hand, and a lady with silver sunglasses ran and squeezed him tight enough to stop him breathing and then she said thank you but her face looked angry.

40 Mostly people call the police. That's why I've been here so many times. The police don't know what to do about me. *Harmless*, one of them will say, and then another will say *wouldn't want him near my kids*, and someone else says *locked up*. But they can't do that because I'm not doing anything wrong.

But this time it feels different.

¹ Detective Inspector

“Is that what you were doing on the day Hannah Bird went missing? Keeping an eye?” The smile is still on.

45 “No. I didn’t start my... doing it till after that.”

“After what?”

“That day.”

DI Sally Lincoln looks down at some papers. Leans back in her chair and looks at me again. “So, Michael, tell me about the shoe that was found in your house?”

50 “It wasn’t in my house. My house isn’t – ”

“Yes, I’m sorry about what’s happened to your house, but – the shoe?”

“She couldn’t reach it. She stretched and then she fell.”

“Who couldn’t reach it?”

“Mumma.”

55 “Why did she want to reach it?”

“I don’t know.” I do know though. She was trying to save me. From this. She didn’t want anyone to find it.

“Where did you get the shoe, Michael?”

“I found it on the beach.”

60 “When?”

I don’t say anything. Does she mean what time of day? What day? What year?

She asks the same question again.

“Afterwards,” I tell her.

The smile switches off.

65 Hannah Bird was lovely. Sunshiny smile, hair like a dandelion clock. I didn’t know she was called Hannah Bird then. She was just a little girl in a shiny yellow jacket, poking at the mud with a stick. It was October, but it was past five and the beach was almost empty. Orangey light glowed over everything like it had been washed in gold. Near the steps a man was walking along with a toddler, and further down a lady was throwing a ball for a dog. Mr and Mrs Bird, and Anthony, aged three. But I didn’t know that then either. I still don’t know what the dog was called. They didn’t put that on the telly.

70 What they did put on the telly was that Mr Bird thought Hannah was with Mrs Bird and Mrs Bird thought Hannah was with Mr Bird. And when they found the body, there was a photo on telly of the shoe she had been wearing.

75 She kept squatting down to look at things. There are loads of fossils. I looked for them every day then, before I started my job. I’d left school four years before, but Mumma said I shouldn’t worry that no one would give me a job. “I’ll always look after you,” she said. I’d found something really exciting, past the great jumble of seedy fences on the Point. I could show the little girl. It wasn’t far.

80 It was the hurricane that had done it. Everyone was talking about how the weather man had got it wrong and how thousands of trees had fallen down. But what the hurricane did here was: number one, break off most of our garden and tumble it down the cliff, which upset Mumma, but I didn’t mind because I liked my bedroom window being on the edge of the world; and number two, swoosh some of the sand away, leaving hard mud in layers. I found the footprints the next day. Now, everyone knows about them. They’ve put plaster casts of them in a museum in London. They’ve measured them and worked out how tall the people were and how long ago they walked there. But back then, no one knew except me.

85 “Are you looking for fossils?” I said.

“I found this.” Her voice was a surprise – all rough and grainy. She uncurled her fingers.

“It’s a stick,” I said. It was black and shining.

“No. It’s a stone.”

90 “It’s a fossil stick,” I told her. “Once it was wood, but now it’s turned into stone. It’s like magic, but really it’s science.”

“Oh,” she said.

I took a shark tooth from my pocket. "I found this today," I said. "It's a shark tooth." I had lots. I hid them in a box under the floorboards in my bedroom because Johnny Fowler said he'd get them off me and sell them.

95 "Real sharks? The tooth fairy would be surprised to find that under your pillow." She grinned. Both her top middle teeth were missing.

I laughed. "You look funny."

"I know. Look." She pushed the tip of her tongue against the gap.

"I know where there are more fossils," I said. "Special ones. D'you want to see?"

100 "Can you get me one?"

"No. They're part of the ground. Past those fences."

"Fences?"

105 "They're called seedy fences – those big blocks. They're to stop the sea hurting the land. I can help you climb. We'll have to be quick because the tide's starting to come in and you can only see them when it's right out."

She turned and looked at the figures down the beach, so I did too. The man was playing run-away-from-the-waves with the toddler, and the woman had walked further on with the dog.

"Okay. But I can climb all by myself."

110 She could. We scrambled down the other side and there were the layers spread out in front of us, dark and glistening like squelchy mud, but hard like rock.

"Come on! Quick!" I grabbed her hand and we ran towards the water. The top of the beach was in the shade, but down here by the water we were on the shadow's golden edge. The wind had got up again.

"Where are they? The fossils?" she said in her funny, gruff voice.

115 "Here." We stopped short of the breaking waves, which were bigger than they had been all day. It was going to be another wild night.

"I can't see any fossils."

"Here. They're footprints. Look. Here's one. And here, look. This one's about your size." The dents were full of water, tiny puddles, twenty or thirty of them scattered over the rock-mud.

120 "Is it? I'm going to see." And she bent down and unbuckled her shoe and took it off. She took off her sock and put her foot in the fossilised print.

"Perfect!" she said. And it was. She stood there, laughing, with her back to the sea, her red shoe in her hand. The sun shone on her face, and the wind blew her dandelion hair.

And then I saw it, a giant wave, rolling in higher than the others, curling up and over, ready to slam into her back.

125 I lunged towards her as the wave crashed; I reached for her hand, but there was nothing there. I lost my balance, tipped over into the swirling foam. Salt stung my eyes, my nose. Stones battered my skin. The current tugged. Couldn't find the ground. Couldn't breathe. Arms and legs thrashed.

Then – back on my feet. Breath heaving, heart pounding.

She was gone.

130 I stood shaking, looking at the empty sea.

"Help, oh Mumma, help," I heard myself whisper. And then the fear hit me like the wave itself.

They would ask questions. They would say it was my fault. There'd be tape recorders and shouty policemen. I'd seen it on telly. Fierce hands banging on prison vans, placards, and angry, roaring mouths – "You'll pay for this!"

135 I must have stood there a long time, because the tide had covered the mud layers by the time I turned to go back, and it was dark. Something snagged at my foot. I bent down and felt about. It was her shoe. I picked it up.

When I got home I lifted the floorboard and hid the red shoe with my shark teeth. I couldn't tell Mumma.

140 And the next day, I started my job.

DI Sally Lincoln's smile stays switched off, so I stop looking at her face.

"You said *afterwards*," she says.

It isn't a question so I don't say anything.

"What did you mean? After what?"

145 "After..?" But no more words come.

"What did you do to Hannah Bird?"

Hannah Bird. I think of her sunshiny smile and her dandelion clock hair. I think of her gruff voice and the gap in her teeth. I think of her little white foot fitting exactly into a footprint that turned out to be a million years old. Something flutters in my chest and my breaths go in and out too quickly. It hurts behind my eyes.

150 Oh, haven't I paid for what I did?

"I... I didn't look after her." It comes out as a whisper and then my eyes are wet and I can't breathe properly and oh Mumma-in-the-hospital what will happen to us?

Then the door opens and someone comes in and whispers to DI Sally Lincoln. She nods and puts her elbows on the table and her hands together. Like she's praying.

155 "Michael, I'm sorry, but your mother's injuries were severe. I'm afraid..."

I don't want to hear any more of her words so I put my hands over my ears and inside my head the wind roars and the sea crashes against the cliff and the house creaks and groans and splinters. A giant wave towers over me, black and shining. I hold my breath.

And then it breaks.

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