

OUT
OF
REACH

Other Stories

LLOYD REES

Lives in Limbo: A Tapestry of Human Connections

Across the patchwork of towns and villages that dot the landscape, lives hang in a delicate balance. In quiet corners and bustling streets, a diverse cast of characters navigate the complexities of the human heart:

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- Single parents struggle to stay afloat, juggling responsibilities and unfulfilled dreams
- Couples, outwardly content, harbour secret longings and unspoken desires
- Parents and children dance an intricate waltz of misunderstanding and tentative connection

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Through moments of humour and heartbreak, triumph and vulnerability, these stories paint a rich portrait of the human experience. They remind us that in our search for love, we are all more alike than we often realise.

Also by Lloyd Rees: *Voices without Parts*



OUT OF REACH

AND OTHER STORIES

Lloyd Rees

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DEDICATION

As ever, I am indebted to my wife, Rachel, for her patience and support. I would also like to dedicate this volume to my grandsons Jasper and Harri, who do not know it fully but who helped me no end by making me smile and be happy, even as I catalogued the unhappy circumstances of the characters, all of whom are fictional, in this book.

Author's Note

It might be helpful, though the stories are all stand alone, to note that a common thread runs through them, and also that characters can reappear. I toyed with a number of choices for a title for this collection. 'Twenty Different Colours', 'Marked for Life' and 'The Sudden Intimacy of Strangers' were strong contenders, but ultimately 'Out of Reach' was chosen because I believe it most exactly describes the angst and loneliness of so many of the figures in this book. Having said that, I hope readers will understand my desire to show that there is also frequently humour to be found in the sorts of situation in which these characters find themselves.

Some of these stories have appeared in a range of publications, including New Welsh Review, The Bridport Anthology and Cambrensis.

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OUT OF REACH

It was not till the third day that the lodger began to panic. Linda had told her husband that there was something weird about him, but Robert had dismissed her concern with a lazy shrug.

‘He’s just quiet,’ he said. ‘But he hasn’t missed any rent. You think everybody who wears glasses has a shifty look about them. He’s alright.’

Linda had not been so easily reassured. Once, when she knew their lodger would definitely be out, she had offered to go up to empty his meter. ‘It doesn’t need it,’ Robert sighed. She had taken the key anyway. She was back within five minutes but this was a couple of minutes too long. Robert looked up from his paper.

‘You haven’t been sniffing round in his room, have you?’

Linda blushed.

‘Oh come on, that’s not fair. He doesn’t bother us.’

She sat down next to him and put her hand on his leg. ‘That’s the point,’ she said. ‘I just wanted to know what he does in there all the time. He hardly ever goes out.’

‘He’s a single man in a bedsitter. What do you think he does?’

Linda shrugged. ‘Well, it’s clean enough, I have to say. Nothing in there really, just a lot of papers on the table, that’s all.’

Robert fought with his newspaper, in order to read the centre pages. He was not interested. After a while he said, ‘Well, he’s a student of some sort, apparently.’

There was no further mention of the topic until the man in the shop downstairs went away for a week’s holiday. Robert and Linda had the flat that occupied the two floors above a vacuum cleaner repair shop. They had decided to let the top bedroom when Robert

had lost his job. Arthur, the vacuum cleaner man, had let them put a card in his window and the silent lodger had turned up and moved in within the week.

On the Tuesday after Arthur had closed up his shop and gone to Bournemouth, or wherever it was, Linda was startled by the appearance of their obviously distraught lodger at the lounge door. He was still in a dressing gown, though it was late morning. His hair looked like a child's drawing. He had plainly washed it and slept on it without drying it. He pushed at his glasses and gave a sort of snort before speaking.

‘My letters,’ he said.

Linda stared in incomprehension.

‘My letters,’ he gasped. ‘They’re in the shop downstairs. I can’t get at them!’

She managed to get rid of him, though she didn’t say how when she was relating this encounter to her husband that evening. Robert nodded. Yes, he had noticed an electricity bill for them through the glass door to the shop. There were a few letters in there.

‘He’s desperate,’ Linda cried. ‘You’ll have to get them out.’

‘How can I get them? The door’s locked and we haven’t got a key. Arthur won’t be back till Saturday or Sunday. They’ll just have to stay there till he gets back, that’s all.’

Linda banged down his plate on the Formica kitchen table. ‘You can’t tell him that. Don’t leave me to face him tomorrow. Why couldn’t you come back earlier anyway? I was afraid he’d come down again. You’ve got to deal with it.’

Robert winced at the prospect of this irksome task, but when she refused to talk throughout their meal, and then raised the matter again as he went to switch the television on, he snapped. ‘Alright,’ he said. ‘I’ll speak to him. I’ll see him in the morning.’

He was forestalled, however. There was a sharp rap at the door, just as the News was coming on.

‘I need a tobacco tin. I don’t smoke, you see.’

Robert looked at him properly for the first time. His hair was still wild and he hadn't shaved. It must have been something of a shock for Linda.

‘What?’

‘You must have a tobacco tin or something like that.’

He hovered on the threshold as Robert stepped back inside the lounge. Robert shrugged at Linda and opened a drawer where there was an old tin he kept elastic bands in.

He handed the tin to the lodger.

‘Weights.’^t

Robert misunderstood. He waited.

‘I need weights,’ the lodger insisted, his voice sticky and dry. ‘Do you fish?’

Robert shook his head. He wanted to help. Or rather, he didn't want not to help, but the young man's monosyllabic nature was disturbing.

‘Can you wait here a minute,’ the man said. Robert obeyed. He didn't want to catch Linda's eye, so he stood in the doorway, his head resting on the arm that held the door open. Within a few seconds the lodger had reappeared. He was shaking the tobacco tin, holding it to his ear, testing it with a thumb.

‘Water's no good,’ he sighed. ‘The tin leaks. Is this the best you've got?’

Robert ignored the question. ‘What on earth do you want it for?’ he said.

The man tufted. ‘I need something heavy,’ he said. ‘to put in the tin.’

Robert looked around, but they were standing in the hallway. There was nothing but an upright vacuum cleaner in the way of anything heavy.

‘Plasticene. Or play dough,’ the lodger exclaimed.

‘Blu-tack?’

‘Yes, that might do it.’

Robert went back to the drawer where he had found the tin and brought out a new packet of the adhesive gum. The lodger was bounding back down the stairs, having raced up to get rid of the water. He seized the adhesive, rolled it into a sausage and pressed it into the tin. He carefully rolled a thin strip around the edge of the tin and pressed the ill-fitting lid back on.

‘Not bad. Sellotape to make sure though.’

Robert wanted to point out that he didn’t run an office supplies outlet, but he obediently fetched some tape. The lodger wrapped a long strip round the tin and weighed it in his hand.

‘Fine,’ he said. Then he took out a piece of string from his pocket and held it against the lid. ‘More tape,’ he demanded. Robert held it out and the lodger bit off another long strip. Robert watched, intrigued, as the string was attached.

‘Just need a rod now. Hold that.’

Robert took the tin and felt a tackiness on the underside. The man had pressed on some adhesive tabs. He must have been doing this as he ran from his own room back down the stairs. Robert realised the madness. Late night fishing for letters, through the letterbox of a locked door. He said nothing, however, when the man returned with a piece of white plastic tubing. It looked like part of a frame from a child’s playhouse. Robert couldn’t imagine where he could have found it. He watched as a knot was expertly and quickly tied and he followed him downstairs to the glass door, where a small heap of letters lay temptingly in view.

Two men in a darkened shop doorway, Robert thought. If a policeman passes, I’ll just say I found him inserting this tin through the letterbox and I stopped to see what he was doing. Much the same as you, officer.

‘That’s yours on top,’ the lodger said.

Robert smiled thinly. It was a bill. There would be a reminder in due course anyway, and this could take hours. He remembered playing a machine at the fairground where you tried to seize hold of

a shiny metal cylinder with a packet of ten cigarettes perched in cotton wool on it. There you used a metallic grab that invariably slipped off the prize and deposited air into the win chute. Clearly the lodger had never been to a fairground, or was possessed of more patience. He lowered the sticky tin down through the letterbox and waited as it spun, then he eased it on to the manila envelope. He tried to drop it down heavily to make it stick, but the first three or four times the reeled up nothing more than a tin of blu-tack. Then it worked.

He eased back the plastic tube then seized the string and delicately reined in an electricity bill to within an inch of the letterbox. Agonisingly, the friction against the door caused the letter to dislodge and flutter back down to the floor.

‘Do you mind if I go back for that one later?’ the fisherman said, desperation glinting in his otherwise darkened face. Robert shrugged. He was hooked on the man’s strength of purpose now; he was almost enjoying himself. The lodger had not waited for an answer but had turned back to his task. The second time he was successful, slipping two fingers through the spring-loaded letterbox and working his rod hand so carefully, an operation which took several minutes. The third time the tackiness of the adhesive labels on the base of the tin was no longer strong enough, and the tin had to be withdrawn and re-labelled.

Then, over the space of about forty minutes, six letters were delicately retrieved. The electricity bill lay almost within reach but several casts failed to land it.

‘Do you specially want that one?’ the lodger said. Then, ‘I’ve got one here for you. Looks like it’s a council tax one. And there’s one here for the shop.’ He pushed the letter back through the opening and flung it as far into the shop as he could.

Robert said, ‘I don’t specially need it, but here, give me a go.’ He twisted the tin and thrust the tube back and fore until he finally managed to land it on the cellophane window of the envelope. The lodger did not take his eye off the operation, despite the fact that he had a small wad of envelopes of his own in his hand. Robert

managed to raise the bill till one corner was resting on the frame of the letterbox.

‘This is the awkward bit,’ his friend advised him.

Robert got two fingertips to the envelope and pulled it, crumpled, through the slot.

‘Got it!’

‘Well done. ‘

‘That was a good idea.’ Robert paused. The lodger had of course said his Christian name when he first came to the house, but Robert had never had cause to use it and he was embarrassed for a moment as it eluded him.

‘Simon.’

‘Yes, sorry. I’m Robert.’

‘I know,’

They stood for another few seconds, looking down at their haul of letters.

‘Better go back up then,’ Robert said at last.

The man nodded.

Linda was in bed, but awake, when Robert re-entered the flat. She moved her swollen body across to her side of the bed as if it was someone else’s body, or an inanimate thing, and Robert slid between the rough sheets.

‘It’s cold,’ he said.

‘You’ll warm up,’ she murmured. He did not reply. ‘What was all that business with the Sellotape and the blu-tack? That man’s weird. I told you he was.’

‘He’s alright. I’ll tell you in the morning. I’m tired now.’

She did not pursue the matter and presently her breathing slowed and her body lurched in a last spasm before deep sleep. He listened to the traffic outside. The house was a hundred yards from a set of traffic lights so there would be a lull for a while, then a burst of cars, invariably changing into third as they roared past. He had got used

to this pattern of noise since they had moved in, but he could not blot it out tonight as he lay wide-eyed staring at the ceiling. He was suddenly bitterly alone.

Upstairs Simon was at his table with four identical slim white envelopes in front of him. He would be smiling now, devouring words slowly like a beautiful meal. A floor below, in an unlovely bedroom with an unopened council tax demand and an electricity bill on the bedside table, Robert lay stiff as a stained handkerchief. Out of reach.

TWENTY DIFFERENT COLOURS

I was at a loose end. In the four months I'd been in Northampton I'd only met one person I could get on with, and that was one of the other drivers, Dave. I'd had a drink with him a few times after work and once we'd had a takeaway back at his flat. He was pretty tied up with this girlfriend over in Cambridge though. To tell the truth we weren't that matey, I suppose. I mean, I couldn't ring him to go out for a drink; it was just if we happened to be coming off work at the same time we might call in for one before going home. All the same, I went round to his flat this one Friday evening. I just couldn't stay in on my own again.

There was no answer when I rang. I was fairly sure it was the bottom bell, but there were two flats on each floor, so I tried to convince myself I could be mistaken when no one answered. I stared at that plain blue door willing him to come and open it, and when he didn't, I couldn't stop myself, I rang all the other bells, my hand on the buttons for too long. It was the awfulness of the thought of trudging back through the rain-slimed streets to my bedsit that made me do it.

It seemed like everybody had cleared off for the weekend. No one answered. Then, just as I was turning away, I heard a sort of flopping sound coming down the corridor. I steeled myself for some old guy in carpet slippers, who'd glower at me and send me packing with a flea in my ear for disturbing him from his early evening nap. But it was a woman.

'Oh, hello,' she said. She had slippers on, but she was quite young, and sort of pretty, though a bit made-up, and made-up badly somehow, as if she'd been trying on different shades of the stuff.

'Um, sorry, I must have rung the wrong bell,' I said. 'I was looking for Dave.'

‘Oh, Dave. He’s gone out. I think he has anyway.’ She wiped the corner of her eye with a knuckle and looked at me. ‘D’you want to come in and check?’ she said.

I had a funny feeling, but there was nowhere else I was going. ‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘He might have his stereo on or something,’ It wasn’t likely. We were standing a few feet away from his door and there was no sound coming from his flat. ‘Best to check, you’re right.’

She stood right next to me as I banged on the plywood door. It was obvious he wasn’t in. I’d already told myself he must be in Cambridge, but I had to go through with the charade now. The woman was wearing a housecoat thing, and she kept pulling it together in front with her fist, which was strange because I’d already seen she was wearing a jumper underneath, and she was wearing jeans too.

‘No good,’ I said.

‘Do you want to wait?’ she said.

I looked at her.

‘You can have a cup of coffee and give him a few minutes if you like. Perhaps he’s just popped out.’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘My flat’s the back one,’ she said.

I followed her down the dingy corridor to an identical plywood covered door, and then into her living room. The first thing to strike me was this huge parrot she had in a cage hanging from a hook in the ceiling. The cage took up most of the window.

‘That’s a colourful bird,’ I said. ‘What’s she called then?’

‘That’s Henry,’ she said. She looked down at herself and seemed surprised that she had this tatty nylon housecoat on, and she ran off to another room. She came back a few seconds later in her jumper and jeans.

‘Well, I’m Mick,’ I said. ‘Nice to meet you, Henry.’ The bloody bird turned round and bobbed his arse feathers at me for my trouble.

‘I’m Sandra,’ the girl said. ‘Ignore Henry, he gets offended when

I have company, he's always like that.'

I stayed standing while she went into a little kitchenette - it was more of an alcove off the living room really - to make some coffee. Then I sat down on one end of a long settee that took up most of the space in the middle of the room. She brought the coffees back and stood in front of me by the gas fire in the grate holding her cup and twiddling a bit of her hair, like she used to have it longer and was wondering where it had all gone. She asked me how long I'd known Dave and said she hadn't seen me calling round before. I had to admit I'd called on the off chance, more than anything. I asked her how long she'd been in her flat. Stuff like that, designed to last the five minutes it takes to get a cup of coffee down without burning your lips.

Then she seemed to relax all of a sudden and it put me more at ease. She started pointing out these photos on the mantelpiece and a big, expensively framed one on the wall. They were all of her, and her hair was a million different lengths in them. Twenty different colours too. She'd been an air hostess, she told me. Travelled. Travelled everywhere. And ended up here, I thought, as I looked for somewhere to put my cup down.

'Look, I'm sorry I haven't got anything else for us to drink,' she said. 'I sometimes have a bottle of wine here, but I'm right out tonight.'

I'd already noticed a couple of empty bottles in a corner of the room and there was another one on the table by the window, just underneath the parrot's cage, with wax dribbles round the top but no candle in it.

'I should have brought a bottle,' I said with a laugh.

She joined in laughing. We were both finding it funny that, despite never intending to come here, I was rebuking myself for not having a bottle of wine about my person. Just in case I stumbled into someone with nothing but a parrot, some empties and a few photographs to her name.

'I could go and get one,' I said, suddenly tense with all that the

offer presupposed.

‘The off licence is a couple of miles away,’ she said. She spoke as if the distance was a special grievance to her. ‘Um, d’you want to borrow my car? I’d go myself but ...’

‘Well, I’m afraid I came here on foot ...’

She turned round and picked up a bunch of keys off the mantelpiece behind her and she tossed them onto the settee next to me. I noticed all the keys had these different coloured rubber things you put over the top to identify which one’s which. This careful labelling seemed an odd clash with the disorganised state of the room, the scruffy housecoat and her messy make-up. She told me her car was the blue one on the opposite side of the street and said where the off licence was, and I rushed out. I didn’t want her to change her mind or start yelling ‘Stop thief!’ down the corridor and me be caught disappearing with a stranger’s keys and no believable explanation.

I was back in less than fifteen minutes clutching a bottle of Valpolicella. She’d changed out of her jumper into a faded denim shirt, but she still had the same jeans on. I put her keys back in the exact position on the mantelpiece, which was something I thought she’d appreciate. Then we started in on the wine. Before the bottle was halfway down, I’d heard all about the succession of blokes who’d done their level best to wreck her life. Well, I say succession, there were three main ones and a few other more shadowy characters. I was surprised in some ways. I’d put her at about twenty-eight, nine, but she seemed to have packed a lot in, if I was right about that.

I mentioned Allison, and how I’d decided to start up afresh in this new town, but I didn’t say too much. I thought it’d spoil the moment, or rather, spoil the moment I was fully expecting to arrive any time now.

In the event I never had to wonder how I was going to make a move because I didn’t have to. ‘D’you want to come into the other room?’ she said. I threw down my last half inch of Valpolicella and stood up to try and kiss her, make it more my idea, so to speak. She

avoided my outstretched arms and just caught the tips of my fingers. She led me round the edge of the settee like we were in some Indian or Chinese dance or something. It was that slow and sort of stylised. I felt a bit of a fool, to tell the truth, not least because I was holding the empty wine bottle in my other hand. She took it off me and put it down in the corner with the other empties, then swirled over to me again like a sort of more staggering Jayne Torvill. All of this wasn't making me exactly comfortable, but I was thinking at least I was having an eventful evening. More eventful than if Dave had been home and we'd gone for a pint somewhere anyway.

She started taking her clothes off as soon as we were in her bedroom. I went round the other side of the bed and prised off my shoes by wedging each heel in turn under a big brown wardrobe and sort of stumbling forward. I was trying to catch up and synchronise our undressing, but I kept fumbling at my buttons, while she had her denim shirt off in a moment. It had poppers rather than buttons, I realised. She took off her bra more slowly, as if in time to some sleazy music only she could hear. It was quite dark, the only light coming from the lamp in the other room, but I saw her skin shimmering and pale and I was transfixed by the shock of her dark nipples against the whiteness of her flesh. She pulled down her jeans in one and dived under the sheets while I was still struggling with my last shirt button. This left me having to get my own jeans off clumsily, knowing I was being watched. I might have even blushed there in the dark. Certainly, the erection I'd started to get began to collapse, which made me hurry all the more. I slipped into the bed and felt the coldness of the sheets almost like a blow. She put her hand on my leg and that was freezing too.

'Love me,' she said.

I didn't know whether to respond to this as a question or a demand, so I didn't say anything. I kissed the top of her head, because she was snuggled into me, and it was all I could reach. Then we kissed properly, and without saying anything we managed to make love. It was a quick, bittersweet, sharp experience for me. She didn't comment on the brevity or throw her arm dramatically round

her head and stare up at the ceiling or anything. In fact, as far as I could tell, she was asleep within a few minutes, and it was me actually who was left gazing up at the ceiling. I can see it now; it had those awful polystyrene ceiling tiles people used to have. There was a crack in one.

I don't know what time I got up. I spent ages doing it, like a parent who's got into bed with a distressed kid and wants desperately to sneak back to his own bed, but who's terrified of waking the poor kid. My clothes were in a heap at the side of the bed, my jeans inside out and one of the socks caught up in a leg, as always seems to happen, so I picked up the whole bundle and tiptoed into the room next door. I knew we didn't owe each other anything, but I still felt guilty and afraid she'd wake up. As I'd been edging out of the bed I'd looked at her face and it was big and blank with sleep, but I could see at close-up her smeared mascara and the faulty line of her lip gloss. I'm glad she didn't get the chance to study my face at such close quarters, was all I could think.

As I was dressing by the fire, though it was out, of course, I had another chance to look at the photos of her when she was younger, and a lot happier, by the look of it. There was such hope and brightness in her expression in all of them except for the big, heavily framed photo. I went up close to that one. Before I could really decide what it was that made her look sadder here, however, there was a noise which nearly made me jump out of my skin. It was the parrot squawking at me. I pulled my shirt together - I'd just thrown it on but I hadn't buttoned it up yet - as if it was my nudity it was complaining about. Then I went up to his cage and glared at him.

I was daring him to squawk again, and he was looking back at me massively unimpressed. It wasn't much of a stand-off. Then I found myself starting to inspect all his colours. There was every colour you could think of in that plumage - the most passionate reds, the most golden yellows, blues like you only expect to see scuba diving off Barbados or somewhere. I wanted him to utter something again, a word maybe. I tried a whispered 'Pretty Polly', then 'Pretty Henry' as I remembered his name. Nothing. He had nothing to say, or

perhaps something to say, but nothing he was going to say to me. Not tonight anyway. I give his cage a nudge, but he hung on to his gently swinging perch with total indifference.

From the bedroom I heard a groan. I froze, hanging on to the cage in mid swing, although it wasn't creaking or making any noise. I listened hard, but it was the groan of someone turning over in bed, not anything more disturbing. I put my finger to my lips to gesture Henry to be silenter than he already was. Then I finished getting dressed and slipped my shoes on. At the doorway I turned back, and the parrot was lifting its beak up at me as if in preparation for the loudest squawk it'd ever made. The noise reverberated after me as I clicked the door shut. Ever since that day I've thought about it and I know it was a word, not just a squawk. I always try and convince myself I don't know what that one, terrible word was. But I can still hear it.