Ruth Rendell

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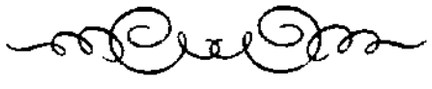
HARM DONE

An Inspector Wexford Mystery

Harm Done

AN INSPECTOR WEXFORD MYSTERY



RUTH RENDELL

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THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE, HE CALLED IT AFTER IT WAS ALL over, because children played such a big part in it. Yet it wasn't really about children at all. Not one of them was physically injured, not one of them suffered bodily pain or was even made to cry beyond the common lot of people of their age. The mental pain they endured, the emotional traumas and psychological damage—well, those were another thing. Who knows what impression certain sights leave on children? And who can tell what actions those impressions will precipitate? If any. Perhaps, as people once believed, they are character-forming. They make us strong. After all, the world is a hard place and we may as well learn it young. All childhoods are unhappy, said Freud. But then, thought Wexford, some childhoods are unhappier than others.

These children, the crusaders, were witnesses. There are many who believe children should never be permitted to be witnesses. As it is, laws are in place to protect them from exploitation by the law. But who will stop them from seeing what they witnessed in the first place? His daughter Sylvia, the social worker, said that she sometimes thought, after what she had seen, that all children should be taken from their parents at birth. On the other hand, if any busybody of a social worker tried to take her children away from her, she'd fight him tooth and nail.

The children in question, in Wexford's questions and questioning, came from all over Kingsmarkham and the other small towns and villages, from an estate the newspapers, in their current favorite word, called "infamous," from the millionaires' row they called "leafy," and from the middle class

in between. They were given, or occasionally baptized with, the names that had become popular in the eighties and nineties: Kaylee and Scott, Gary and Lee, Sasha and Sanchia.

In one class in Kingsmarkham's St. Peter's Primary School it was tactless to ask after someone's father because most of the children were unsure who their father was. Raised on crisps and chips and chocolate and take-away, they were nevertheless the healthiest generation of children the country has ever known. If one of them had been smacked, he or she would have taken the perpetrator to the European Court of Human Rights. Mental torture was another story, and no one knew what that story was, though many tried to write it every day.

The eldest of the children Wexford was interested in was on the upper limits of childhood. She was sixteen, old enough to marry, though not to vote, old enough to leave school if she so chose and leave home too if she wanted to.

Her name was Lizzie Cromwell.

CHAPTER 1

ON THE DAY LIZZIE CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD THE POLICE and her family and neighbors had already begun the search for her body. They worked on the open countryside between Kingsmarkham and Myringham, combing the hillsides and beating through the woods. It was April but cold and wet, and a sharp northeast wind was blowing. Their task was not a pleasant one; no one laughed or joked and there was little talking.

Lizzie's stepfather was among the searchers, but her mother was too upset to leave the house. The evening before, the two of them had appeared on television to appeal for Lizzie to come home, for her abductor or attacker, whatever he might be, to release her. Her mother said she was only sixteen, which was already known, and that she had learning difficulties, which was not. Her stepfather was a lot younger than her mother, perhaps ten years, and looked very young. He had long hair and a beard and wore several earrings, all in the same ear. After the television appearance several people phoned Kingsmarkham Police Station and opined that Colin Crowne had murdered his stepdaughter. One said Colin had buried her on the building site down York Street, a quarter of a mile down the road from where the Crownes and Lizzie lived on the Muriel Campden Estate. Another told Detective Sergeant Vine that she had heard Colin Crowne threaten to kill Lizzie "because she was as thick as two planks."

"Those folks as go on telly to talk about their missing kids," said a caller who refused to give her name, "they're always the guilty ones. It's always the dad. I've seen it time

and time again. If you don't know that, you've no business being in the police."

Chief Inspector Wexford thought she was dead. Not because of what the anonymous caller said, but because all the evidence pointed that way. Lizzie had no boyfriend, she was not at all precocious, she had a low IQ and was rather slow and timid. Three evenings before, she had gone with some friends on the bus to the cinema in Myringham, but at the end of the film the other two girls had left her to come home alone. They had asked her to come clubbing with them but Lizzie had said her mother would be worried—the friends thought Lizzie herself was worried at the idea—and they left her at the bus stop. It was just before eight-thirty and getting dark. She should have been home in Kingsmarkham by nine-fifteen, but she didn't come home at all. At midnight her mother had phoned the police.

If she had been, well, a different sort of girl, Wexford wouldn't have paid so much attention. If she had been more like her friends. He hesitated about the phrase he used even in his own mind, for he liked to keep to his personal brand of political correctness in his thoughts as well as his speech. Not to be absurd about it, not to use ridiculous expressions like *intellectually challenged*, but not to be insensitive either and call a girl such as Lizzie Cromwell mentally handicapped or retarded. Besides, she wasn't either of those things, she could read and write, more or less, she had a certain measure of independence and went about on her own. In daylight, at any rate. But she wasn't fit just the same to be left alone after dark on a lonely road. Come to that, what girl was?

So he thought she was dead. Murdered by someone. What he had seen of Colin Crowne he hadn't much liked, but he had no reason to suspect him of killing his stepdaughter. True, some years before he married Debbie Cromwell, Crowne had been convicted of assault on a man outside a pub, and he had another conviction for taking and driving away—in other words, stealing—a car. But what did all that amount to? Not much. It was more likely that someone had stopped and offered Lizzie a lift.

"Would she accept a lift from a stranger?" Vine had asked Debbie Crowne.

"Sometimes it's hard to make her like understand things," Lizzie's mother had said. "She'll sort of say yes and no and smile—she smiles a lot, she's a happy kid—but you don't know if it's like sunk in. Do you, Col?"

"I've told her never talk to strangers," said Colin Crowne. "I've told her till I'm blue in the face, but what do I get? A smile and a nod and another smile, then she'll just say something else, something loony, like the sun's shining or what's for tea."

"Not loony, Col," said the mother, obviously hurt.

"You know what I mean."

So when she had been gone three nights and it was the morning of the third day, Colin Crowne and the neighbors on either side of the Crownes on the Muriel Campden Estate started searching for Lizzie. Wexford had already talked to her friends and the driver of the bus she should have been on but hadn't been on, and Inspector Burden and Sergeant Vine had talked to dozens of motorists who used that road daily around about that time. When the rain became torrential, which happened at about four in the afternoon, they called off the search for that day, but they were set to begin again at first light. Taking DC Lynn Fancourt with him, Wexford went over to Puck Road for another talk with Colin and Debbie Crowne.

When it was built in the sixties, on an open space that would now be called a "green field area," between the top of York Street and the western side of Glebe Road, the three streets and block of flats on a green in the midst of them, it had been called the York Estate. The then chairman of the housing committee, who had done *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for his school certificate and was proud of the knowledge thus gained, named the streets after characters in that comedy, Oberon, Titania, and Puck. This last had always been a problem to tenants, the police, and the local authority because of the opportunity it gave the local youth of transforming, with a can of spray paint and the minimum effort, an innocent name into an obscenity.

Muriel Campden had been the chair (as she must now be designated) of Kingsmarkham Borough Council longer than

anyone else, and when she died, the York Estate was renamed after her. A move was afoot to erect a statue of her on the green opposite the council offices, a building newly named the Municipal Centre. Half the population was in favor and half was vehemently opposed.

"I'd have thought this place was memorial enough," said Wexford, eyeing the triangle of squat sixties houses in the midst of which reared up a truncated tower, six stories high. Titania, Oberon, and Puck Roads looked as if built out of absorbent breeze blocks that had soaked up the rain of two dozen wet winters and had rendered them the darkest shade of charcoal. "Very appropriate for Muriel Campden. She was a dark, gray, gloomy sort of woman." He pointed to the street sign at the beginning of Puck Road, once more defaced. "Look at that. You'd think they'd get bored with doing it."

"Little things please little minds, sir," said Lynn just as the door was opened and they were admitted to No. 45 by the occupier of No. 47. This was a neighbor called Sue Ridley, who conducted them into the presence of Debbie and Colin Crowne, sitting side by side on a sofa. They were both smoking cigarettes and both watching, or at any rate looking at, a television quiz show.

Debbie jumped up and screamed when they came in, "They've found her! She's dead!"

"No, no, Mrs. Crowne, we've no news for you. Nothing has happened. May I sit down?"

"Do what you want," said Colin Crowne in customary surly tones.

He lit a cigarette and gave his wife one without asking her. The atmosphere in the small room was already thick with smoke. Rain beat relentlessly on the windows. On the screen a quiz contender, asked if Oasis was a town in Saudi, a pop group, or a West End cinema, was unable to answer. Debbie Crowne called fretfully to her neighbor to make another cup of tea, "Would you, Sue, love?"

Wexford and his team had already asked all the relevant questions, and he was there more to convince Mrs. Crowne that everything was being done that could be done than to elicit more information. But he did press once more for the names of any relatives or even friends living in distant parts

of the country to whom Lizzie might conceivably have gone. Such a man or woman would have to have been marooned on a newspaper-less, radio-less and TV-less island in perhaps the Outer Hebrides not to have known that Lizzie Cromwell had vanished and that the police were hunting for her, but he still asked. For something to say, for the sake of something to distract Debbie Crowne's mind from the horror of her fears.

The doorbell rang at the very moment Sue Ridley brought in their tea, four mugs of it with the teabags still in as well as the milk and no spoons. She deposited the mugs in a bunch on the table and went to answer the door, saying it would be her partner, come back from going out with the search party.

Her loud shout made Wexford jump. "You naughty girl, wherever have you been!"

Everybody stood up, the door opened, and a girl came in, water running from her hair and clothes as if she had just stepped out of a bathful of it. Debbie Crowne screamed and, screaming, threw her arms around her daughter, oblivious of her soaking clothes.

"I'm cold, Mum," said Lizzie, smiling waterily through chattering teeth. "I'm ever so cold."

She was back and safe, and apparently unharmed, and that, at first, was all that mattered. Wexford left, deputing Mike Burden and Lynn Fancourt to talk to Lizzie after she had had a hot bath. He was to question her himself on the following day and several times on subsequent days because her response was far from satisfactory. In other words, she refused—or was unable—to say where she had been.

He said nothing, he knew nothing, of this when he walked into his own house at six, early for him, but he did tell his wife Lizzie Cromwell was found. "Rather, she seems to have come back of her own accord. It'll be on the news at nine."

"Where had she been?" said Dora.

"I don't know. Off with some boy, I dare say. That's usually what it is. The fact that their parents don't know there *is* a boy means nothing."

"I suppose it was the same with us. I suppose Sylvia and Sheila had boyfriends we never knew about, as well as the ones we did. Which reminds me, Sylvia is bringing Robin and

Ben to us for the night. Neil's away somewhere and she's got this new job."

"Ah, The Hide helpline. I didn't know she had to work nights."

"I wish she didn't have to. It's far too much for her, with her day job as well. I don't suppose The Hide pays much."

"If I know anything about it," said Wexford, "The Hide pays nothing at all."

He was on the phone to Burden when his elder daughter arrived with his grandsons. Burden had made the call, incensed at Lizzie Cromwell's refusal to talk.

"You mean she won't say where she's been?"

"I thought she *couldn't* talk. I honestly thought she was dumb. Well, she's not entirely normal, is she?"

"She can talk," said Wexford repressively. "I've heard her."

"Oh, so have I—now."

"And she's as normal as you are or as normal as half the people in this place. It's just that she's not a genius." Wexford cleared his throat. "Like you and your ilk," he added nastily, for Burden had just gained membership of Mensa on an IQ rumored to be 152. "Why won't she say where she's been?"

"I don't know. Scared. Obstinate. Doesn't want her mum and Earrings to know, I'd guess."

"Okay, we'll have another go tomorrow."

Wexford's daughter Sylvia was a social worker. She had been a mature student when she studied for her sociology degree, for she had married at eighteen. The two boys who came running out of the kitchen when their grandfather put down the phone were the offspring of that marriage. Wexford said hello to them, admired a new Nintendo and a Game Boy, and asked if their mother was still in the house.

"She's talking to Gran," said Ben in the tone of disgust someone might use when castigating deeply antisocial behavior.

All parents have a favorite among their children, though they may, like Wexford, strive always to conceal that preference. He had failed to hide his bias in favor of his younger daughter and he knew it, so he kept on trying. With Sylvia he

was more effusive, he never missed giving her a kiss each time they met, listened attentively when she spoke to him, and pretended not to be ruffled when she rubbed him the wrong way. For Sylvia lacked her sister's charm and, although pleasant enough to look at, was without Sheila's beauty. Sylvia was an opinionated, didactic, often aggressive feminist, with a talent for saying the wrong thing, a faultfinder, bad at marriage but expert at rearing children. She was also—and Wexford knew it—good as gold, with an oversize social conscience.

He found her sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea in front of her, lecturing her mother on domestic violence. Dora had apparently asked the classic question, the one that, according to Sylvia, betrays ignorance of the whole subject: "But if their husbands beat them, why don't they leave?"

"That question is just so typical," Sylvia was saying, "of the sort of woman who is completely out of touch with the world around her. Leave, you say. Where is she—we'll say she, not they—where is she to go? She's dependent on him, she has nothing of her own. She has children—is she to take her children? Sure, he beats her, he breaks her nose and knocks out her teeth, but afterwards, every time, he says he's sorry, he won't do it again. She wants to keep things normal, she wants to keep the family together—Oh, hi, Dad, how are things?"

Wexford kissed her, said things were fine and how was work on the crisis line.

"The helpline, we call it. I was telling Mother about it. Mind you, it breaks your heart, all of it. And some of the worst is the attitude of the public. It's extraordinary, but a lot of people still think there's something *funny* about a man beating up a woman. It's a joke, it's a seaside-postcard kind of thing. They ought to see some of the injuries we see, some of the *scars*. And as for the police..."

"Now, Sylvia, wait a minute." Wexford's resolutions flew out of the window. "We have a program here in Mid-Sussex for dealing with domestic violence, we emphatically do not treat assaults on women in the home as a routine part of married life." His voice rose. "We're even putting in place a scheme to encourage friends and neighbors to report evidence

of domestic violence. It's called Hurt-Watch, and if you haven't heard about it, you should have."

"All right, all right. But you have to admit all that's very new. It's very recent."

"It sounds like the Stasi or the KGB to me," said Dora. "The nanny state gone mad."

"Mother, suppose it is a nanny state, what's wrong with having a nanny to look after you? I've often wished I could afford one. Some of these women are utterly helpless, no one *cared* about them until the refuges started. And if that isn't evidence enough of the need, there aren't refuge places enough, there aren't *half* enough to meet the need..."

Wexford left the room quietly and went to find his grandsons.

The boys' school was on the outskirts of Myfleet, and next morning Wexford drove them there before going on to work. His route took him through the Brede Valley, under Savesbury Hill and along the edge of Framhurst Great Wood, and he never went that way without thankfulness that the bypass, started the previous year, had been shelved on a change of government. Newbury was completed but Salisbury would never be built, nor would Kingsmarkham (insofar as you could ever say "never" in connection with such things). It was unusual to feel glad about frugality, relieved that something couldn't be afforded, but this was a rare instance of that happening. The yellow caddis would be saved and the map butterfly. You could even say that some kinds of wildlife benefited from the bypass plans, since the badgers retained their old setts and gained man-made new ones, while the butterfly had two nettle plantations to feed on instead of just one.

At the point where the bypass had been due to start and where work on it had begun, earth had been shifted by diggers and excavators. No one, it appeared, had any intention of restoring the terrain to its former level, and grass and wild plants had grown over the new landscape of mounds and declivities, so that in the years to come these hills and valleys would seem a natural phenomenon. Or so Wexford said, commenting on the strange scenery.

"And in hundreds of years, Granddad," said Robin,

"archaeologists may think those hills were the burial ground of an ancient tribe."

"Very likely," said Wexford, "good point."

"Tumuli," Robin said, savoring the word, "that's what they'll call them."

"Are you pleased?" Ben asked.

"What, that they didn't build the bypass? Yes, I am, very pleased. I didn't like them cutting down the trees and tearing up the hedges. I didn't like the road building."

"I did," said Ben. "I liked the diggers. I'm going to drive a JCB when I'm grown up and then I'll dig up the whole world."

It was the loveliest time of the year, unless early May, still a month off, might be more lush and floral, but now in April the trees were misted over with green and pale amber, and the Great Wood, which in May would be carpeted with bluebells, showed celandines and aconites, both bright gold, studding the forest floor. After he had dropped the boys at the school gate and waited a moment or two to see them shepherded into the building, he drove back, musing on children's taste, and on the beauties of nature and when children were first affected by them. Girls sooner than boys, he thought, girls as young as seven, while boys seemed not to notice scenery—rivers and hills, woodland, the distant landscape of downs, and the high skyscape of clouds—until well into their teens. And yet all the great nature poets had been men. Of course, Sylvia might be right and there had been great women poets too, born to be unrecognized and waste their sweetness on the desert air.

Meanwhile, he had a girl to talk to, one who might or might not care about pastoral beauty and badgers and butterflies, but who seemed amiable enough and who smiled timorously when her stepfather scolded her and when she was soaked to the skin. Not a wild teenager, not a rebel.

She was sitting on the sofa in the front room of 45 Puck Road, watching a dinosaur cartoon video, designed for children half her age, called *Jurassic Larks*. Or staring unseeing at it, Wexford thought. Anything rather than have to look at him and Lynn Fancourt.

At a nod from Wexford, Lynn picked up the remote off the table. "I think we'll have this off, Lizzie. It's time to talk."

As the pink brontosaurus faded and the pterodactyl with baby ichthyosaur in its mouth vanished in a flicker, Lizzie made a deprecating sound, a kind of snort of protest. She went on staring at the blank screen.

"You won't get anything out of her," Debbie Crowne said. "She's that obstinate, you might as well talk to a brick wall."

"How old are you, Lizzie?" Wexford asked.

"She's sixteen." Debbie didn't give her daughter a chance to answer. "She was sixteen in January."

"In that case, Mrs. Crowne, perhaps it would be best for us to talk to Lizzie on her own."

"What, not have me here?"

"The law requires a parent or responsible adult to be present only when a child is under sixteen."

Lizzie spoke, though she didn't turn her head. "I'm not a child."

"If you would, please, Mrs. Crowne."

"Oh, all right, if you say so. But she won't say anything." Debbie Crowne put her hand up to her mouth as if she had just recollected something. "If she *does* say something, you'll tell me, won't you? I mean, she could have been anywhere, with anyone. There's no knowing, is there? I mean, she could be *pregnant*."

Lizzie made the same sound she had when her video was turned off. Saying, "It's all very well grunting like that, but I reckon she ought to be examined," Debbie Crowne left the room, shutting the door rather too smartly behind her. The girl didn't move.

"You were away from your home for three days, Lizzie," Wexford said. "You'd never done anything like that before, had you?"

Silence. Lizzie bent her head still farther so that her face was entirely concealed by hanging hair. It was pretty hair, red-gold, long, and wavy. The hands in her lap had bitten nails. "You didn't go alone, did you? Did someone take you away, Lizzie?"

When it was clear she wasn't going to answer that either, Lynn said, "Whatever you did or wherever you went, no one

is going to punish you. Are you afraid of getting into trouble? You won't."

"No one is going to harm you, Lizzie," said Wexford. "We only want to know where you went. If you went away because you wanted to be with someone you like, you've a right to do that. No one can stop you doing that. But, you see, everyone was looking for you, the police and your parents and your friends were all looking for you. So now we have a right too. We've a right to know where you were."

The grunt came again, a straining sound like that made by someone in pain. "I can understand you might not want to tell me," Wexford said. "I can go away. You could be alone with Lynn. You could talk to Lynn. Would you like that?"

She looked up then. Her face, a rather pretty, pudgy face, freckled about the nose and forehead, was blank, her pale blue eyes vacant. She moistened her thin, pink lips. Frown lines appeared as if she was concentrating hard but as if the intellectual effort of whatever it was, was too much for her. Then she nodded. Not as people usually nod, repeating several times the up-and-down motion of the head, but just once and jerkily, almost curtly.

"That's good." Wexford went out of the room into the hall, a narrow passage that contained a bicycle and a crate full of empty bottles. He tapped on a door at the end and was admitted into a kitchen-diner. Colin Crowne was nowhere to be seen. His wife was sitting in the dining area on a high stool up at a counter, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette. "There's a chance your daughter may feel more able to talk to DC Fancourt on her own."

"If you say so, but if she won't talk to her own mother..."

"What would your attitude be if it turns out she's been with a boyfriend?"

"She hasn't," said Debbie Crowne, stubbing out her cigarette in a saucer, "so I couldn't have an *attitude*."

"Let me put it another way. Could she be afraid of what would happen if you found out she had been with a boyfriend?"

"Look, she hasn't got a boyfriend. I'd know. I know where she is every minute of the day, I have to, she's not—well, you know what she is. She's a bit—she's got to be looked after."

"Nevertheless, she was out on her own with friends on Saturday evening, and though she went to Myringham with them, they left her to come home on her own."

"Well, they shouldn't have. I've told them over and over not to leave Lizzie to do things on her own. I've *told* them and her."

"They're sixteen, Mrs. Crowne, and they don't always do as they're told."

She shifted off the subject to one obviously nearer to her heart. "But what about like I said if she's pregnant, she ought to have a medical, she ought to be looked at. Suppose he did something to her, we don't know what he did."

"Are you suggesting she was raped?"

"No, I'm not, of course I'm not, I'd know that all right."

Then if she hasn't a boyfriend and she wasn't raped, how could she possibly be pregnant? He didn't say it aloud but went back to the living room, first knocking on the door. Lynn was there but the girl was gone.

"I couldn't exactly stop her, sir. She wanted to go upstairs to her bedroom and I couldn't stop her."

"No. We'll leave it for now." In the car he asked Lynn what had been the result of the interview, if there had in fact been an interview. "Did she say anything?"

"She told me a lot of lies, sir. I know they were lies. It was as if—well, she'd realized she had to say something to get us to leave her alone. Unfortunately for her, she has rather a limited imagination, but she tried."

"So what tall stories did this limited imagination come up with?"

"She was waiting at the bus stop and it was raining. A lady—that's how she put it—a lady came along in a car and offered her a lift but she refused because Colin had told her never to accept lifts from strangers. The bus didn't come and it was pouring with rain so she went into an empty house with boarded-up windows—the house with the apple tree, she calls it—and sat on the floor waiting for the rain to stop..."

"I don't believe it!"

"I said you wouldn't. I didn't."

"How did she get in?"

"The door wasn't locked. She pushed it open. Then when