

*The  
Last  
House  
on  
Needless  
Street*

CATRIONA WARD



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# *Ted Bannerman*



Today is the anniversary of Little Girl With Popsicle. It happened by the lake, eleven years ago – she was there, and then she wasn't. So it's already a bad day when I discover that there is a Murderer among us.

Olivia lands heavily on my stomach first thing, making high-pitched sounds like clockwork. If there's anything better than a cat on the bed, I don't know about it. I fuss over her because when Lauren arrives later she will vanish. My daughter and my cat won't be in the same room.

'I'm up!' I say. 'It's your turn to make breakfast.' She looks at me with those yellow-green eyes then pads away. She finds a disc of sun, flings herself down and blinks in my direction. Cats don't get jokes.

I fetch the newspaper from the front step. I like the local because it has a rare bird alert – you can write in if you see something special, like a northern flicker or a Siberian accentor. Even this early, the dim air is as warm as soup. The street feels even quieter than usual. Hushed, like it's remembering.

When I see the front page my stomach goes into curls and knots. There she is. I forgot it was today. I'm not so good with time.

They always use the same picture. Her eyes are big in the shadow of her hat brim, the fingers clenched on the stick as if she thinks someone might take it away from her. Her hair lies wet and sheeny on her skull, short as a boy's. She has been swimming, but no one is wrapping her in a fluffy towel to dry her. I don't like that. She might catch cold. They don't print the other picture, the one of me. They got in big trouble for that. Though not big enough if you ask me.

She was six. Everyone was upset. We have a problem with that around here, especially by the lake, so things happened fast. The police searched the houses of everyone in the county who might hurt children.

I wasn't allowed to wait inside while they did it, so I stood out on the steps. It was summer, bright and hot as the surface of a star. My skin burned slowly as the afternoon wore on. I listened as they pushed back the ugly blue rug in the living room, tore up the floorboards and knocked a hole in the wall in the back of my closet because they thought it sounded hollow. Dogs went all over my yard, my bedroom, everything. I knew what kind of dogs they were. They had the white trees of death in their eyes. A thin man with a camera came and took pictures as I stood there. I didn't think to stop him.

'No picture, no story,' he said to me as he left. I didn't know what that meant but he waved goodbye in a cheerful way so I waved back.

'What is it, Mr Bannerman?' The woman detective looked like a possum. Very tired, as I know possums often are.

'Nothing,' I said. I was shaking. *Got to be quiet, Little Teddy.* My teeth made little clicks like I was cold, but I was so hot.

'You were yelling my name. And the word "green", I believe.'

'I must have been thinking about this story I made up when I

was a kid, about the lost boys who turned into green things, at the lake.' I held tight to the trunk of the little oak in the front yard. The tree lent me its strength. Was there something to tell? If so it hovered just over the edge of my thoughts.

'Mr Bannerman, is this your only residence? No other property around here? No hunting cabin, nothing like that?' She wiped sweat off her top lip. Care pressed down on her, like an anvil on her back.

'No,' I said. 'No, no, no.' She wouldn't understand about the weekend place.

The police went away in the end. They had to, because I was at the 7-Eleven all afternoon and everyone says so. The security tape says so. What I used to do there was: I sat outside on the sidewalk by the sliding doors. When they parted with a whoosh and released people in a blast of cold air, I asked for candy. Sometimes if they had it they gave it to me, and sometimes they even bought it for me. Mommy would have been ashamed if she knew but I loved candy so much. I never went near the lake or Little Girl With Popsicle.

When they finally finished and let me back in the house, I could smell them all over. Traces of cologne, of sweat, squeaky rubber and chemicals. I was upset that they'd seen my precious things, like the picture of Mommy and Daddy. The photograph was fading even then, their features growing pale. They were leaving me, vanishing into white. Then there was the broken music box on the mantel – Mommy brought it from her cold home. The music box didn't play. I broke it the same day I smashed the Russian dolls, the day of the thing with the mouse. The little ballerina was snapped from her stem, felled and dead. Maybe I felt worst about her. (I call her Eloise. I don't know why; she just looks like an Eloise.) I heard Mommy's beautiful voice in my ear. *You take everything from me, Theodore. Take, take, take.*

Those people had looked at all my stuff with their eyes and thoughts and the house didn't feel like mine any more.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply to calm myself. When I opened them again the Russian doll smiled fatly back. Beside her sat the music box. Eloise the ballerina stood proud and upright, arms perfect and poised above her head. Mommy and Daddy smiled down from the photograph. My beautiful orange rug was like soft pills underfoot.

I felt better right away. Everything was OK. I was home.

Olivia's head butted my palm. I laughed and picked her up. That made me feel even better. But overhead in the attic, the green boys stirred.

The next day I was in the newspaper. The headline was SUSPECT'S HOUSE SEARCHED. And there I was, standing in front of the house. They searched other houses but the article made it sound like it was just mine and I guess those people were smart enough to cover their faces. *No picture, no story.* They put my photograph right alongside the one of Little Girl With Popsicle, which was a story in itself.

The picture didn't show the name of the street but people must have recognised it, I guess. Rocks and bricks came through the windows. So many. As soon as I replaced a pane, another rock came through. I felt like I was going crazy. It happened so many times that I gave up and nailed plywood over the windows. It slowed them down. Not as much fun throwing rocks when there's nothing to break. I stopped going out during the day. That was a bad time.

I put Little Girl With Popsicle – the newspaper with her picture in it, I mean – in the closet under the stairs. I bend down to put it at the bottom of the pile. It's then that I see it on the shelf, half

hidden behind the tower of newsprint – the tape recorder.

I recognise it immediately. It's Mommy's. I take the machine off the shelf. Touching it makes me feel strange, like someone's whispering nearby, just below the level of my hearing.

There's a tape already in the machine, part used – about half of one side has been recorded. It's old, with a striped yellow-and-black label. Her faded formal handwriting. *Notes.*

I don't listen to the tape. I know what's on it. She always spoke her notes aloud. Her voice had a slight hitch around the consonants; she couldn't quite get rid of it. You could hear the cold sea in her voice. She was born far away, Mommy, under a dark star.

I think, *Just leave it there, forget I've seen it.*

I am eating a pickle and I feel a lot better. After all, that stuff happened a long time ago. The light is growing and it's going to be a beautiful day. The birds will be arriving. Each morning they pour out of the forest and descend on my back yard. Yellowthroats, kinglets, buntings, red crossbills, sparrows, blackbirds, city pigeons. It's crowded and beautiful. I love to watch it. I made the peephole just the right size, in just the right place in the plywood, so that I can see the whole back yard. I make sure the feeders are always full up and that there's water. Birds can suffer in this hot weather.

I am about to look out like I do every day, when my stomach lurches. Sometimes my insides know things before my mind does. This is wrong. The morning is too quiet. I tell myself not to be weird, take a deep breath and put my eye to the hole.

I see the jay first. He lies in the dead centre of the lawn. His bright mess of feathers shine like an oil slick. Twitching. One long wing strokes the air, desperate for flight. They look weird when they're grounded, birds. They're not meant to stay put for long.

My hands shake as I turn the keys on the three big locks on

the back door. *Thunk, thunk, thunk*. Even now I take a moment to lock it behind me. The birds lie all over the yard, scattered on the parched grass. They twitch, caught helpless on what looks like pieces of tan paper. Many are dead, maybe twenty. Some are not. I count seven hearts still beating. They gasp, their narrow black tongues stiff with pain.

My mind runs like ants, everywhere. It takes me three breaths to make sense of what I see. In the night someone went to each feeding place and put glue traps down, wrapped them around the wire cages, attached them to the balls that hang from string. When the birds came to feed in the dawn their feet and beaks stuck to the adhesive.

All I can think is, *Murder, murder, murder ...* Who would do this to the birds? Then I think, *I have to clean up. I can't let Lauren see.*

That stray tabby cat crouches in the ivy by the wire fence, amber eyes intent.

'Go away!' I shout. I throw the nearest thing to hand, which is an empty beer can. The can flies wide and hits the fence post with a noise like *dunggg*. She goes slowly, in her uneven clawless limp, as if it is her own idea.

I collect the living birds. They stick together in my hands, bound into a twitching mass. They look like a monster from my bad dreams, legs and eyes everywhere, beaks drinking the air. When I try to separate them, feathers part from flesh. The birds make no sound. Maybe that's the worst part. Birds aren't like people. Pain makes them quiet.

I take them inside and try all the things I can think of to dissolve the glue. But it only takes a few tries with the solvent to see that I'm making it worse. The birds close their eyes and pant in the fumes. I don't know what to do now. This kind of stuck is for ever. The birds can't live but they're not dead. I think about drowning them and then hitting them on the head with a hammer. Each



idea makes me feel weirder. I think about unlocking the laptop cupboard. Maybe the internet has an idea. But I can't figure out where to put the birds down. They stick to everything they touch.

Then I remember the thing I saw on TV. It is worth a try, and we have vinegar. Working with one hand, I cut a length of hose. I fetch a big Tupperware box, baking soda and the white vinegar from under the sink. I put the birds carefully in the box, seal it and pass the length of hose through the hole I pierce in the plastic lid. I mix the baking soda and vinegar in the bag and fasten it to the hose with a rubber band. Now it is a gas chamber. The air in the box begins to change, and the feathered twitching slows. I watch the whole thing, because death deserves a witness. Even a bird should have that. It doesn't take long. They had half given up already, from the heat and the fear. A pigeon is the last to die; the rise and fall of its plump chest grows shallow, and then it falls still.

The Murderer has made me into a murderer too.

I put the corpses in the trash out back. Limp, still-warm bodies, soft to the touch. A lawnmower starts somewhere on the block. The scent of cut grass crawls through the air. People are waking up.

'You OK, Ted?' It is the man with hair the colour of orange juice. He takes his big dog to the woods each day.

I say, 'Oh sure, fine.' The man is looking at my feet. I realise that I am not wearing shoes or socks. My feet are white and hairy. I cover one foot with the other but it doesn't make me feel any better. The dog pants and grins at me. Pets are better than their owners in general. I feel bad for all those dogs and cats and rabbits and mice. They have to live with people but, worse, they have to love them. Now, Olivia is not a pet. She's so much more than that. (I expect everyone feels this about their cat.)

When I think about a Murderer creeping around my house in the cold dark, laying traps in my yard – maybe even peering in,

watching me, Lauren and Olivia with their dead beetle eyes – my heart stutters.

I come back. The Chihuahua lady is standing right up close. Her hand is on my shoulder. That's unusual. People don't like to touch me, as a rule. The dog under her arm trembles, stares about with bulging eyes.

I am standing in front of the Chihuahua lady's house, which is yellow with green trim. I feel I have just forgotten something, or am just about to know it. *Sharpen up*, I tell myself. *Don't be weird*. People notice weird. They remember.

'... your poor foot,' the woman is saying. 'Where are your shoes?' I know the tone. Small women want to take care of big men. It is a mystery. 'You got to look after yourself, Ted,' she says. 'Your mother would be worried sick about you.'

I see that my foot is leaking – a dark red trickle across the concrete. I must have stepped on something. 'I'm chasing that stray,' I say. 'I mean, I was chasing her. I don't want her to get the birds in my yard.' (I don't always get tenses right. Everything always feels like it's happening now and sometimes I forget it actually happened then.)

'It's a real shame, that cat,' she says. Interest lights up her eyes. I have given her something else to feel. 'The thing is a pest. The city should deal with stray cats like they do the other vermin.'

'Oh, I agree,' I say. 'Sure.'

(I don't recall names but I have my ways of judging and remembering people. The first one is: would they be kind to my cat? I would not let this woman near Olivia.)

'Anyway, thanks,' I say. 'I feel better now.'

'You bet,' she says. 'Come and have iced tea tomorrow. I'll make cookies.'

'I can't tomorrow.'

‘Well, any time. We’re neighbours. We have to look out for each other.’

‘That’s what I always say.’ I am polite.

‘You’ve got a nice smile, Ted, you know? You should use it more often.’

I wave and grin and limp away, miming pain I don’t feel, favouring the bleeding foot until I am sure she has rounded the corner.

The Chihuahua lady didn’t notice that I was gone, which is good. I lost time but not too much, I think. The sidewalk is still warm underfoot, not hot. The lawnmower still buzzes somewhere on the block, the scent of cut grass is sticky and green on the air. Maybe a couple of minutes. But it should not have happened in the street. And I should have put shoes on before I left the house. That was a mistake.

I clean my cut foot with disinfectant from a green plastic bottle. I think it was meant for floors or countertops, not for skin. The foot looks much worse after; the skin is red and raw. Looks like it would really hurt if I could feel it. But at least the cut is clean now. I wrap my foot in gauze. I have a lot of gauze and bandages about the place. Accidents happen in our house.

My hands are still sticky after, as if something clings to them, like gum or death. I recall reading something somewhere that birds have lice. Or maybe that’s fish. I clean my hands with the floor stuff too. I am shaky. I take the pill that I should have taken a few hours before.

Eleven years ago today Little Girl With Popsicle vanished. This morning someone killed my birds. Maybe these two things don’t have anything to do with each other. The world is full of stuff that doesn’t make sense. But maybe they are connected. How did the Murderer know that the birds feed in my yard at dawn? Do they know the neighbourhood? These thoughts do not make me feel good.

I make a list. I write at the top: *The Murderer*. It is not a very long list.

*Orange-Juice-Hair Man*  
*Chihuahua Lady*  
*A Stranger*

I suck the end of my pencil. Trouble is, I don't know the neighbours so well. Mommy did. That was her thing, charming people. But they walk in the other direction when they see me coming. I have seen them actually turn around and hurry away. So the Murderer could be out there right now, a couple of houses down, eating pizza or whatever and laughing at me. I add to the list:

*The Otter man or His wife or their Children*  
*Men who live in Blue house together*  
*Lady who Smells like Doughnuts*

That is almost all the people on the street.

I don't really think any of them are the Murderer. Some, like the otter family, are on vacation right now.

Our street has a strange name. Sometimes people stop and take pictures of the dented street sign out front. Then they go away, because there's nothing but the woods beyond.

Slowly I add another name to the list. *Ted Bannerman*. You never know.

I unlock the closet where I keep the art supplies, and I hide the list carefully under an old box of chalk that Lauren never uses.

I judge people two ways – on how they treat animals, and on what they like to eat. If their favourite food is some kind of salad, they are definitely a bad person. Anything with cheese, they are probably OK.

It is not yet 10 a.m. – I can tell by how the sun shines in at the peepholes in the plywood, throwing coins of light across the floor – and it has been a very bad day already. So I decide to make myself an early lunch. It is my favourite lunch, the best in the world. OK, I should get the recording thingy for this.

Because I've been thinking – why shouldn't I use the tape recorder for my recipes? (Mommy wouldn't like it, I know. I have that hot feeling on the back of my neck which tells me I am about to be what she used to call *a nuisance*.)

I unwrap a fresh pack of cassettes. They smell good. I put a new one in the machine. I always wanted to play with it when I was little. The recorder has a big red button like a piano key, which makes a loud click when I press it. Now, I don't know what to do with Mommy's old tape, and that upsets me. I can't throw it away or destroy it – that's out of the question – but I don't want to keep it with my nice new cassettes. So I put it back in the closet under the stairs, slide it in there under the newspapers, under Little Girl With Popsicle. OK, ready!

*Recipe for Cheese and Honey Sandwich, by Ted Bannerman. Heat oil in a frying pan until it smokes. Butter two slices of bread on both sides. Take some cheddar, I prefer the sliced kind, but you should use whatever you like best. It's your lunch. Take some honey and spread it over both pieces of bread on one side. Put the cheddar on top of the honey. Put slices of banana on top of the cheddar. Now close the sandwich and fry it in the pan until it's golden on both sides. When it's ready shake salt, pepper and chilli sauce all over. Cut it in half. Watch the cheese and honey ooze out. It's almost a shame to eat it. Ha, ha – almost.*

My voice is horrible! Like a weird child with a frog in its belly. Well, I'll record the recipes but I definitely won't listen to them again unless I have to.

Recording stuff is the bug man's idea. He told me to keep a 'feelings diary'. Those words make me feel alarmed. He made it sound simple. *Talk about what happens and how it affects you.* Well, that's out of the question. But it's good to do the recipes in case I disappear one day and there is no one left to remember them. I'll do the vinegar and strawberry sandwich tomorrow.

Mommy had certain views on food, but I love it. Once I thought I could be a chef, run a lunch place, maybe. Ted's – just imagine! Or write recipe books. I can't do any of that because of Lauren and Olivia. They can't be left alone.

It would be good to talk about these things with someone. (Not the bug man, obviously. It's very important I don't show the bug man who I am.) I'd like to share my recipes with a friend but I don't have any.

I sit on the couch with my sandwich and watch monster trucks. Monster trucks are great. They are loud and they go over things and through things. Nothing stops them. Cheese and trucks. I should be happy. But my mind is full of feathers and beaks. What if I get stuck on a glue trap? What if I just disappear? There is no one to be my witness.

I feel a gentle touch along my side. Olivia pushes her head into my hand, and then steps up onto my lap with her heavy little velvet feet. She turns and turns again, then settles on my knee. She always knows when I'm upset. Her purr shakes the couch.

'Come on, kitten,' I say to her. 'Time to go to your crate. Lauren is coming.' Her eyes close and she purrs. Her body goes limp with relaxation. She almost slips through my hands as I carry her into the kitchen. I lift the top on the old, broken chest freezer. I should have got rid of it years ago but Olivia loves this thing, God knows why. Like always, I check it's unplugged, even though it hasn't worked in twenty years or more. I punched a couple more holes in the lid last week – I worry they don't get enough

air. Killing things is hard, sure, but keeping them safe and alive is much more difficult. Oh boy, do I know about that.

Lauren and I are playing her favourite game. It has a lot of rules and involves riding the pink bicycle through the house at furious speed while shouting the names of capital cities. Lauren rings her bell twice for the right answer, and four times for the wrong one. It's a loud game but it's sort of educational so I go along with it. When the knock comes at the door, I clap my hand over the bicycle bell.

'Quiet while I answer that,' I say. 'I mean silent. Not a peep.' Lauren nods.

It's the Chihuahua lady. The dog's head pokes nervously out of her bag. Its eyes are glossy and wild.

'Sounds like someone's playing hard,' she says. 'Kids should be noisy, that's what I say.'

'My daughter's visiting,' I say. 'This isn't a good time.'

'I heard you had a daughter some years back,' the Chihuahua lady says. 'Who told me? Now, that I can't recall. But I remember hearing you had a daughter. I'd love to meet her. Neighbours should be friendly. I brought you some grapes. They're healthy, but they're sweet so everyone likes them. Even kids like grapes. They're nature's candy.'

'Thanks,' I say. 'But I have to go now. She and I don't get much time together. And you know, the place is a mess.'

'How are you doing, Ted?' she asks. 'Really, how are you?'

'I'm good.'

'How is your mother? I wish she would write.'

'She's good.'

'OK,' she says after about a minute. 'I guess I'll see you.'

'Hey, Dad!' Lauren shouts when the door is safely closed behind her. 'Chile!'

'Santiago!' I bawl.

Lauren screams and rides away, darting and swerving around the furniture. She sings loudly as she pedals, a song she made up about woodlice, and if I were not a parent I would never have believed that a song about a woodlouse could make me feel such joy. But that's what love does, it reaches right into you like a hand.

She stops suddenly, tyres squeaking on the wooden boards.

'Stop following, Ted,' she says.

'But we're playing a game.' My heart sinks. Here we go.

'I don't want to play any more. Go away, you're annoying me.'

'Sorry, kitten,' I say. 'I can't. You might need me.'

'I don't need you,' she says. 'And I want to ride on my own.' Her voice rises. 'I want to live in a house on my own, and eat on my own, and watch TV on my own, and never see anyone ever again. I want to go to Santiago, Chile.'

'I know,' I say. 'But kids can't do that on their own. An adult has to look after them.'

'One day I will,' she says.

'Now, kitten,' I say, as gently as I can. 'You know that can't ever happen.' I try to be as honest with her as possible.

'I hate you, Ted.' The words always feel the same, no matter how many times she says them: like being hit hard, at speed, from behind.

'Dad, not Ted,' I say. 'And you don't mean that.'

'I mean it,' she says, voice thin and quiet as a spider. 'Hate you.'

'Shall we have some ice cream?' I sounds guilty even to me.

'I wish I'd never been born,' she says and pedals away, bell trilling, riding right over the drawing she made earlier, of a black cat with jewel-green eyes. Olivia.

I wasn't lying earlier; the place really is a mess. Lauren spilled some jelly in the kitchen then rode right through, leaving a sticky track through the house. There are broken crayons all over the couch and dirty dishes everywhere. One of Lauren's favourite games is to take each plate out of the cupboard one by one and



lick it. Then she yells, ‘Dad, all the plates are dirty.’ Now she rolls off the bike onto the floor and starts pretending to be a tractor, growling and crawling. ‘As long as she’s happy,’ I mutter to myself. Parenting.

I’m taking my noon pill with a drink of water when Lauren bumps into me. The water slops out of the glass onto the blue rug and the pill falls from my fingers, bounces, a tiny yellow airborne dot, and is gone. I kneel and peer under the couch. I can’t see it anywhere. I’m running low, too.

‘Damn it,’ I say, without thinking. ‘God damn.’

Lauren begins to scream. Her voice becomes a siren, rising until my head is ready to explode. ‘You’re *swearing*,’ she weeps. ‘You big, fat horrible man, don’t swear!’

And I just snap. I don’t mean to, but I do. I’d like to say that it isn’t the *big, fat* part that set me off, but I can’t. ‘That’s it,’ I shout. ‘Time out, right now.’

‘No.’ She claws at my face, her sharp fingers seek my eyes.

‘You can’t play in here if you can’t behave.’ I manage to hold her back and eventually she stops fighting.

‘I think you need some sleep, kitten,’ I say. I put her down and start the record. The whisper of the turntable is soothing. The woman’s pretty voice filters through the air. It’s a winter night and no one has an extra bed, no one has any candy . . . I can’t recall the singer’s name right now. Her eyes are full of compassion. She is like a mother, but one you don’t have to be afraid of.

I pick up the crayons and felt tip pens and count them. They are all there, good.

I sleep-trained Lauren with this music. She was a fussy child and she is growing into a difficult adolescent. What do they call it? A tween. Some days, like today, she seems very young and all she wants to do is ride her pink bicycle. I worry about what happened today. There is a lot to worry about.

First, and this is the big one: I've been going away more often. It happens when I'm stressed. What if I go away one day and I don't come back? Lauren and Olivia would be alone. I need stronger pills. I'll speak to the bug man. The beer is cold in my palm and hisses like a snake as I pull the tab. I take three dill pickles from the jar, slice them in half and top them with peanut butter. Crunchy. It's the best snack and it goes really well with the beer, but I can't enjoy it.

Second worry: noise. Our house is by the dead end; beyond, there's only forest. And the house on the left has been empty since for ever; the newspaper taped to the inside of the windows is yellow and curled. So I have relaxed my guard over the years. I let Lauren shout and sing. That needs thinking on. The Chihuahua lady heard her.

There is a black scatter of droppings under the kitchen table. That mouse is back. Lauren is still crying faintly but she's getting quieter, which is good. The music is doing its work. Hopefully she'll sleep for a while and then I can get her up for supper. I will make her favourite, hot dogs with spaghetti.

Third worry: how long will she like hot dogs and spaghetti? How long can I protect her? She needs watching all the time. Children are like a chain around your heart or neck, and they pull you in every direction. She's growing up too fast; I know every parent says this, but it's true.

*Calm down*, I tell myself. After all, Olivia learned to be happy with the situation in the end. When she was a kitten she would run for the door whenever I opened it. She could never survive out there, but still she ran. Now she knows better. What we want isn't always what's best for us. If the cat can learn that, Lauren can, too. I hope.

The day draws to a close and after supper it's time for Lauren to go.

'Bye, kitten,' I say.

'Bye, Dad,' she says.

'See you next week.'

'Yup.' She plays with the strap of her backpack. She doesn't seem to care but I always hate this part. I have made it a rule not to show how upset I am. I put on the record again. The woman's voice winds through the hot dusk.

When I have a bad day, *now* and *then* get slippery. I catch Mommy and Daddy's voices in certain places around the house. Sometimes they're arguing over who goes to the store. Sometimes it's the ding and the whir of the old rotary phone in the hall, and then Mommy talking to the school, telling them I'm sick again. Sometimes I wake to her calling me for breakfast. It's clear as a bell. Then silence falls and I remember that they are both gone. Only the gods know where.

The gods are closer than you would think. They live among the trees, behind a skin so thin you could scratch it open with a fingernail.