

The Others

Stories of Hope & Transformation and what they mean for
Humanity

By

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Sample chapters

Lock 'em Up & Throw Away the Key

Angel

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Everybody has the capacity to be remarkable.
~**Lord Michael Young**

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that we're sitting outside a café, on a bustling street in Camden, London on a blazing hot sunny day. The small rickety tables and chairs are crammed so close together we can smell the coffee on the breath of our neighbours and eavesdrop on their intimate conversations.

Our straw hats shade the glare of the sun. Our skin glistens with sweat. Our eyes behind sunglasses, watch the people on the busy street with its bohemian clothes shops, vintage jewellers, and eateries. The heat from the pavement scorches the paws of dogs as they lap at the warm water placed out for them in metal bowls.

The beautiful weather has filled the street with London's diversity: old and young, pink and brown, students and professionals. People browse and workers skive. They eat multicoloured ice creams that drip from corn cones. They stand close to each other and gaze into shop windows. They walk down the street, and the chatter and laughter sound above the noise of horns and traffic.

The people on this street wear summer clothes: short dresses and white shirts, linen jackets thrown over shoulders, bangles jangle from wrists.

Some of the people have been victims of crime.

Some of them have been perpetrators of crime.

From where we sit, we can't tell the victims from the perpetrators.

There are no signs above their heads. We only see people. And we see them through the shades of our judgements and filters. We wonder what that man is up to, the one with the gold front tooth and long dreadlocks. We notice the nervous tick and grey pallor of the woman who just sat down. We smile at the cute waiter in the blue cotton apron. The stories we create about them all, are immediate and sticky and yet are born from perception.

Have you ever driven when drunk?

Have you ever taken a towel from a hotel room?

Have you ever acted out of anger?

Have you ever found a wallet and kept it?

Have you ever felt like you wanted to kill somebody?

February 1990: *Dear Diary, I'm a bad mother. I knew I would be. What chance did I have? I was dragged up. I did it for a reason though. I did it for my baby boy, my little Darren. I did it for love. It snowed so bad I couldn't see the end of the street. I've never seen snow like it. Well maybe once when Darren's Dad was still here, but I don't want to think about that. My eye is still swollen from the last attack. I thought about leaving Darren home alone. But he cried out. The guilt pierced my heart with its shard of iced fear.*

So, I took him with me. Darren was almost invisible with every inch of skin wrapped up, a little pair of sunglasses to protect his eyes. I pulled him backwards in his pushchair through the knee-high snow. I trudged to the corner shop. We'd run out of baby food and without anyone to help what else could I do? I thought about Mum when I was walking. I wondered if the snow was as bad in Leicester, all those miles away. Snow blinded me, in front and around and behind us. Cars lost in a white icy blanket; crystals of white covered shapes that used to be trees in white cloaks.

When I got to the shop, I took my time to thaw out for a moment and to give Darren a cuddle. I shopped for the essentials that I could carry back home but I picked up more than I meant to. I placed the large tin of baby milk formula in the basket of the pushchair. While I paid all I could think about was the horrendous walk home.

I didn't mean to steal the baby food. I just forgot it was in the basket of the pushchair. I'd been so focused on getting Darren home again. I stood at my kitchen counter staring at it for a long time. My tea went cold in its abandoned cup. My heart sank as I thought about having to go back out and pay. I told myself I'd do it another day, but I knew I wouldn't. I'm not just a bad mother, I'm a bad person. But you already know that.

I never did pay for the baby food. I'm a shoplifter.

I've driven while I've been drunk. I'm grateful I never killed anyone.

I've found money in the street and kept it. It's called Theft by Finding.

I've had a parking ticket I tried to get away with. The legal term is Morally Bankrupt.

Am I a criminal? Should you lock me up and throw away the key?

I've been burgled.

I've been mugged.

I've been violently attacked.

I've been sexually abused.

Am I a victim? Should you pity me and lock my attackers up and throw away the key?

Why am I telling you this? Because I'm offering you an invitation to join me on a journey. My journey. And the journeys of the people in prison that I have worked with over the last five years. I will lay out stories from my life and from my experience as a woman, an entrepreneur, a human who has made mistakes. I will share stories of people in prison. People just like me and maybe like you. People who have made mistakes. People who have been lost. People who have hurt others and people who have been hurt.

The media feeds us a single story about prisoners. That they have different wiring; rotten apples; evil; bad to the core. So, we feel scared and treat them as if they were 'other' than us. We want to feel safe. However, this is one angle of a very complex view. The result is that, as a nation, we tend to have two responses to prison and to the people in it:

- 1) we have a vague idea of how horrible and scary prison must be, and therefore, so are the people who must go there.
- 2) we don't think about it at all.

As a victim of crime or wrongdoing, we want retribution. We lash out in anger and in pain. Me too. However, for this time we are together, I'll ask you to consider the other stories just for a moment. We may get a different insight into the lives and the hearts of the people behind those thick walls and steel bars. The stories that demonstrate the humanity, and the tears and the fears of those people. The stories that open our eyes to hope and potential and love. I share stories of the men and women I work with. I don't say that they shouldn't be in prison or what they've done should be forgiven.

Can we forgive the murder of a child? Fats did.

Spring 2017 *Dear Diary, Fats was in group today. He's like a strip of wind, as me mum used to say. He's got a wild afro haircut and his clothes hang off his undernourished body. He talked about how his life of crime was due to anger over the murder of his daughter. He couldn't bear it. He told us how he lost the plot when she died. Turned to drugs to help him blank out his pain. Turned to crime to feed his habit. Turned to us for help. Blamed his mum, his environment, himself.*

Fats' daughter was run down by a drunk driver. Fats wanted to kill him. I've only ever seen him sad, until today, in group, when he told us a funny story about chips. About how angry he got when there were no chips left at lunchtime, and the tantrum he threw. He wanted to find someone to blame, and caught himself, and burst out laughing at his own created misery about CHIPS! We laughed so hard at the way he told it. There were nine of us laughing at Fat's funny story.

As he finished his story about chips, with tears and snot and his head in his hands, he said, "Ting is, if I got that wrong, then maybe I got other stuff wrong." He told us that made him think about how he saw the events of his baby's accident. And that he no longer blames his mum, himself, his daughter, the driver or God. He saw that he used all those things to hold onto the girl he had lost, to somehow honour her memory. He saw that it was not disrespectful to her to let go of the anger. And as soon as he let go of that blame, he started to have happy memories of his time with her. Memories that had been blocked by a wall of pain were now available to him. He forgives the driver. He forgives himself.

He hopes others can forgive him too.

I share these stories because I've found that there are more similarities than differences between us and the people in prison. I've come to realise that 'there go I but for the grace of God'. One mistake too many, one wrong decision, one sliding door moment and it could've been me in prison. I don't want to be judged for my mistakes. Who does? I want to let the world know that there is always more than one view, that our accidental stigma is created from the narrative we've heard and never questioned.

When I look beneath what makes us different, I see a wealth of what makes us the same. I share these stories because it makes me a better person when I challenge my own invisible judgments and find out for myself what my neighbour is like.

Summer 2018 *Dear Diary, we've been working with Fats for a year. Today he told his story again about how he forgave the man who killed his baby girl, to a group we were running in the prison chapel. We had forty guys in the room and every one of them was spellbound. This scrappy little guy was there, Jimmy, he's a lifer; he's already spent nineteen years in prison for killing someone. He could have got parole ten years ago, but he's been fighting everything. His prison life consists of spending as much time as possible in the 'block'¹ for beating up staff and for flat packing² his cell. With no contact with his family (unwilling to let them visit as he'd have to have closed³ visits), and a drug addiction that kept him numb*

¹ The Care and Support Unit - it is a place where prisoners are isolated for infractions such as violence. More commonly known as The Block or Seg (segregation).

² Prisoners, who act out by smashing up their cells, will remove sinks and fixed items for the wall and use these to barricade themselves in. Referred to as flat packing by the guys in prison.

³ The family is only allowed to see the prisoner behind a screen and speak through a communication system such as a telephone. High risk prisoners or those likely to smuggle drugs into the prison, must have closed visits.

coupled with an attitude of 'I'll die in here', Jimmy had given up. He told me that we couldn't teach him anything. He'd seen it all before. He ain't interested in our new bullshit. I asked him if he could just sit for the day and see what he thought at the end. He agreed but said he couldn't promise to come back each of the three days. When Fats started speaking today all of that changed. Fats' story landed on Jimmy like a thunder bolt. "If he can forgive the man that killed his daughter, maybe I can be forgiven too." He said. His eyes misted up, his shoulders slumped, his face grew soft. For the first time in nineteen years, he felt a spark of hope.

My invitation to you is to view these people in prison from a new perspective. Prison is gritty but it's also full of potential and creativity and possibility. And, I believe, we can find solutions in this gritty place. Solutions to the problems we face as society; solutions to social injustice; solutions that will protect our communities; solutions that will resolve the true underlying cause of crime.

I invite us all to put aside our judgments and beliefs for now. Let's see what we can uncover about the human condition and about life.

ANGEL 1990

"I'm scared." Angel's mum whimpered. She was curled into a ball behind their new brown sofa with the huge soft cushions. He could smell the flowers in her perfume, the leather from the sofa, the sweat from his father, and the piss that had dribbled down his right trouser leg. "Shut up, yer upsetting the lad." His dad spat in a forced whisper and handed Angel a Colt '45. "If anyone comes through that door, shoot 'em in the leg." He said. He used the gritty voice he used for the men in his gang. His dark eyes glinted like steel. His cheek bones were flushed.

Angel felt the cold black metal of the heavy gun in his tiny white hands. His six-year-old face tinged with pleasure at being part of this grown-up game. The mix of fear and excitement churned in his stomach. The fists on the door beat in time with his heart. The sound drowned out all sense. "It's the police, open up or we'll have to break in."

The shiny gun felt good in Angel's hand, although his wrist ached with his attempt to hold it steady. His little pudgy fingers could barely reach the trigger even with two hands wrapped around the butt. He wondered what it would be like to shoot a copper in the leg. Would the blood splatter everywhere like it did in the Zombie films? Would he enjoy the coppers scream? Or would he end up shooting the light bulb? Like the time his sister had made him so mad he'd picked up his dad's gun. He'd been shocked at the power of it as his little arms ricocheted upwards. The bullet was still embedded in the cracked magenta ceiling between the light and a red blood stain. "Good lad." His dad said. Angel's arms shook as he mustered all his strength to be a man. The police didn't break in that day, something to do with a warrant.

The next day Mum made Angel go to school. Her eyes were red and swollen. The large blue bruise on her cheek looked like it was gonna be a corker. Angel fetched the frozen peas as soon as he saw her. "Don't leave Mum." He said as she started to cry again. He'd heard his dad threaten to kill them all if she kept on. She'd screamed that she'd leave and take Angel with her. He'd heard the thump of her head against the wall and knew his dad was holding her by the throat. He liked to do that. Hold them up by the throat. Like chickens. Legs dangling, arms scrabbling, eyes bulging. His Dad once confided to him, he liked to let go just before their eyes pop out. He'd snorted with laughter at the thought that one day he might go too far. It had been Angel's sixth birthday that day. "Go on to school, Pumpkin." His Mum

said and kissed the top of his head. His black hair gelled down like his dad's. "I'll be OK, tell Miss that I've got a bug."

Angel dragged his grey rucksack down the broken paving slabs, all the way to the school on the corner of his road. He knew his teacher didn't approve of him turning up without his mum, by the scowl on her face, but he didn't care, he was a man now, his dad trusted him with a gun. All morning he sat throwing blue Bic pen tops at the other student's heads and day-dreamed about cops and robbers. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The teacher snapped. "Fuck you!" Angel shouted. "Right young man, down to the Head." The teacher fumed, red face matching his red jumper. "Alright Rudolph." Angel said, the other boys laughed. They always did.

The Head Teacher kept him waiting. Sweat dripped down the back of Angel's neck as his confidence slipped. He liked the Head; he'd always been kind to Angel. One time he'd even given him one of the green lollipops from the glass jar on his big desk. Angel picked at the stuffing on the old chair outside the Heads office and fixed a scowl to his little face. "Come." The Head called out.

Angel stood in front of the huge mahogany desk. He felt like he'd shrunk, as he stared up at the large Head Teacher. The room smelled stern. A red bubble gum wrapper lay on the floor by the bin. A loud clock ticked and tocked and measured his time away. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The Head Teacher said with a smile. Angel's mind flashed back to the feeling of the heavy metal gun in his hand, the cold black glint in his dad's eyes and the feeling of excitement as the police pounded the door. "A Gangster." He said.