

*'Paradise Girl' is told through the diary of 17 year-old Kerryll Shaw. The Shaw family live on a farm high above the valley. They think their isolated position will protect them from a deadly virus ravaging the town. They are right, until...*

I was in bed. It was time to get up but I was putting it off. I'm usually pretty good in the mornings but that day was unseasonably cold. Granddad wouldn't run the heating in the summer, and the house was chilly. I made a cocoon with the duvet and hung on until I could stay there no longer.

Lander, my brother, was still in bed. His bedroom door was open and he was on his back with his mouth open, snoring. I stamped down the stairs but I knew Lander wouldn't hear me. A bomb wouldn't wake him before nine o'clock. Then he'd arrive in the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and expecting breakfast.

I took my parka from its peg and opened the door. Rain slapped my face and I shut it again while I pushed my arms into the sleeves and pulled up the hood. Then I went across the yard to the barn. I remember hearing the wind slam the kitchen door behind me and thinking, 'Good, that'll stir you up.'

Once inside the barn I felt better. I always did when I smelt the sweet hay and the animals. Our three cows were waiting patiently. Their muzzles were glossy and their breath steamed. I gathered the bucket and the stool. Only two of them, Bonnie and Dolly, were giving milk. Molly was in calf but still a few weeks away yet.

I remember exactly what happened. I've rerun it time and time again in my head, wandering if I could have done anything differently. The problem is, I didn't see the danger until it was too late. It just never occurred to me. Does that mean I was to blame for what happened? Lander thought so.

Bonnie and Dolly are placid animals and don't need to be tied for milking, so I set the stool beside Bonnie, took a cloth, dipped it in a bowl of disinfectant and wiped her udders. Then I began to knead her teats, squirting the milk into the bucket in warm, frothy spurts. I felt guilty that I'd made such a racket leaving the house. I'd just been in a mardy mood. The milking wasn't bad once you got used to the early start, in fact I quite enjoyed it.

I loosened Bonnie and she ambled away. After I'd done Dolly I drained off the cooler and filled a minichurn to take to the kitchen. Molly didn't want to go out, cows don't like rain, but I shooed her off after the others and stepped out to close the barn door, and that's when I saw him. He was about twenty metres away and standing perfectly still. It looked like he was cradling a bundle of rags, but then I saw it was a child wrapped in a dirty blanket. I thought it must be dead because it's limbs were hanging loose and its head lolled back. The man took two paces towards me and I backed into the doorway.

'Stay there, don't come near me,' I shouted.

'Please, please,' he said, 'please don't go. I need help. Please.'

He had a slight accent, middle European I thought. He took another step towards me and I backed away. His black hair was plastered over his forehead by the rain, his jacket was old and sopping wet, and his jeans were muddy and torn. But I wasn't really concentrating on him. I was looking at the dead child he was holding and listening to the warning beating in my head. DO NOT

ASSOCIATE WITH STRANGERS. DO NOT LET STRANGERS INTO YOUR HOME. That's what the How to keep safe leaflet said. Strangers were a threat, a new sort of stranger danger. I should have slammed the barn door there and then, but I didn't.

'What do you want?' I said. 'You can't come in.' My voice was hard and he seemed to flinch.

'My boy,' he said, 'he is ill. Please help me. Please.'

The child moaned and rolled its head towards me. The face was pale, the eyes bloodshot, and now he was closer I could see he was shivering.

'I mean you no harm,' the man said. 'We need help, somewhere to rest for a short time. That's all I ask, and some water, that's all. It's only a cold, it's not the Infection. Please trust me.'

I didn't believe him, I could see the boy was infected. I shouldn't have listened to him. I should have run back to the house and shouted for Granddad or Lander to go with a shotgun and drive him away. Then we should have reported it. That's what Lander thought, and he was right, but I couldn't. The boy looked to be in pain, and the man seemed so sad. He was desperate, but he wasn't threatening or grovelling, he was dignified. I felt sorry for them. I couldn't not help.

'Follow me,' I said. 'And stay back. Don't come any nearer.'

I led the way towards the house and pointed to a spot in the yard about three metres from the kitchen door. 'Stay there,' I said.

I went inside and shut the door firmly behind me. Granddad was at the table with a mug of tea, watching the morning news. Gran was frying bacon. I wondered if the man was hungry. He must be, he looked starving. His face was so thin and the hands holding his son were long-fingered and boney.

'There's somebody outside. He's got a little lad with him,' I said.

Gran dropped the skillet and our Mam looked horrified. Granddad went to the door and looked out. He didn't say anything but he shut the door again.

'The boy's ill,' I said. 'The chap says he's got a cold.'

Granddad went into the hall and came back with one of his shotguns.

'Where are you going with that?' said Gran.

'I'm going to see him off before they infect us all, that's where I'm going.'

'You're going to see off a sick child? With a shotgun?' Gran blocked the door to the yard and folded her arms.

For a couple of seconds they faced each other, but Gran held her ground and Granddad looked down. 'Anyway, it's not loaded,' he mumbled. He broke the gun and laid it on the table. He looked up at Gran and nodded. She'd won.

'Right,' said Granddad. 'This is what we'll do. Kerry, you put on your bio suit. I'll borrow Lander's. You and me'll go out and look at the boy to see if it really is just a cold he's got, or if it seems more serious.'

When we were suited up and everyone was ready, Granddad eased the door open and led the way out. The man, Bryst, had disappeared. All that was left was the child, lying on the ground in a wet bundle. The man had gone.

Granddad spread some hay in a corner of the barn, our Mam found some old blankets and we made up a sort of bed. Then Granddad lifted the boy and carried him into the barn. I think that's when he put the split in Lander's suit, because it was so tight on him. That's probably what killed him.

We dried the boy and wrapped him up. He had a high fever and the next day the diarrhoea started. Then the cramps came. We tried to help him, easing his limbs to sooth the pain. We tried to get him to eat something but everything we gave him came right back up again. There was nothing we could do. The next day the bleeding began, and then it was all over. It was awful when he died but it was a relief too. His cries had been pitiful.