



OF RELATIVE VALUE

by

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Synopsis

All Patrick ever wanted was to be loved and to belong somewhere. Born illegitimately to an Irish Catholic student, he has spent most of his short life moving from one foster home to the next. Deprived of a stable home, Patrick has difficulty trusting people or situations. Each time a foster placement breaks down, Patrick returns to the children's home where he has made friends with Benjie, an older boy with problems of his own. After his friend runs away, Patrick plans to find his only ally and heads for London, with almost disastrous consequences.

Christine, in her forties, has lived all her life with her parents, both of whom demand every minute of her time. Work is her only escape from her invalid mother and a father whose passive needs are made worse by his wife's demands. Unable to strike out on her own and with low self-esteem, she is resigned to a life at home. After her father dies and her mother is admitted to a nursing home, Christine is faced with learning about herself. She slowly realises she is free, but does not know what to do with her new found independence. After a couple of failed relationships, it seems the hands of fate are about to turn her life around. By a series of coincidences Christine and Patrick meet. Their friendship, strengthened through adversity, develops into a relationship of mutual dependency and eventually they are able to face the future together.

A contemporary heart-warming story of love lost and gained.

Chapter One

It was confusing. He sensed the change through colour and sound and later in life knew it as his earliest memory. There was pain and unhappiness, but he did not know the reason why. He reached out for help but when it came it did not last. There was no way of coping with the confusion that seemed to be in every direction – all around – threatening him. He instinctively hid inside himself, like a small animal resting dormant through a harsh winter. He chose to stay that way, waiting for the harshness of winter to change into the warmth of spring.

The colours which lay half submerged in his memory were drab. Grey tweed arms, rough against his bare legs, lifting him out of the cot then again high, out of the car seat and carrying him up a dimly lit path. Dark green leaves wet from the rain, brushing against his

face as he stared apprehensively ahead from the safety of those encircling arms. The man's raised hand, knocking, demanding an answer. Moving through a dark doorway into a shadowy hall filled with people and questioning voices. The man speaking and the deep timbre of his voice vibrating against his own small body. "This is Patrick." Looking up at the familiar name, his name. "He's not been properly cared for, so I've brought him to you. Perhaps not for long... just to tide things over." Clinging to the safe grey arms, other hands grasping at him, prising him from the grey man's chest like a small, sticky, surplus burr.

A second memory of a big sunlit room. Bars casting shadowy stripes across a blue blanket. Staring out at children in nearby cots. Searching for someone who was not there. Opening his mouth to call for her. Shouting and bawling in anguish, then when she did not come, desolation all around. Someone lowering the side of his cot and a woman's bare arms lifting him close to her. Sitting on her knee, in the sunlight, on a chair that creaked with her movements. Fingering a silvery watch pinned to her apron. Listening to the rhythmic tick. Smelling the soap in her clothes. Staring across at the children, in their cots, looking out at him. Feeling safe and warm although she was not the one he'd called. Staying quiet, waiting for it to be all right.

It never did come right for Patrick. The comforting warmth of spring did not arrive. He grew used to his new home and came to accept the people who cared for him. They were kind but very busy, too busy to give him what he needed which was time for himself. The staff at the nursery worked in shifts. They were mostly caring, middle aged women with a few young girls in training who helped with the more menial tasks. The system was efficient but did not allow for a child to be mothered by one particular person. The children were very demanding and the staff were busy, often stretched beyond their limits by crisis admissions such as Patrick's. The man who had brought Patrick to the nursery did not come again.

Patrick had started school before he discovered that the man with the safe grey arms was an N.S.P.C.C. Inspector. He had been the duty officer the night that Patrick's private foster home had broken down.

Mr Bulstrode's neighbours had been alarmed by the noises coming from the other side of the dividing wall. It sounded as if he was throwing himself or pieces of furniture about and then there was the sound of a child crying, on and on. They had knocked on the wall, offering help, knowing that the man's wife had left him with the baby. He had not answered and there had been more loud crashes followed by silence. Then the toddler's dreary crying had started up again. Unable to get an answer, wary of breaking in but fearful for the small child, they rang the N.S.P.C.C.

The Inspector found Mr Bulstrode on the floor in the hall, grasping an empty whisky bottle. Upstairs, a three-year-old boy filthy in his own excrement, rocked backwards and forwards in his cot. Worn out from crying for attention and food, he went happily into the arms of the rescuing Inspector. That night Patrick was placed in the care of the Local Authority and was admitted to the nursery.

It was after he had moved to The Sycamores, a Local Authority Group Home for six to eight children, and started at the Marie Road Infants school that Patrick began to notice other children had mums and dads whereas he had aunties and uncles. He began to ask questions. They were discussed at the Sycamores' six monthly review on the seven children in their care, ranging from five to fifteen years. Patrick was the youngest.

The Senior Social Worker chairing the review deplored the lack of information on Patrick's background. "Such a pity we know so little about him but he should at least be told how he came into our care even if he is rather young to understand," she informed the roomful of professionals responsible for Patrick's care. "We only know that his mother disappeared into the blue a year after she placed him with private foster parents, the

Bulstrodes. At least it appears they were unable to contact her after she stopped sending payments."

It was the unanimous decision of the review panel that Patrick's social worker should talk to him, give him the information that was on file and begin the process of finding him a family. This time it would be a foster home registered by Social Services.

Jane Elliot sighed as she checked through Patrick O'Hara's file, opened on the sixth of October 1977 when he was received into care. What could she tell him? She leafed through the folder with the six monthly statutory reviews, his medical record, the assessment from the nursery when he left their care for the Sycamores and a solitary school report following his first term at Marl Road Infants'. None of these referred to the three years before he was received into care through a Place of Safety Order which had been converted to Section 2 of the 1948 Children Act. Patrick was now one of the Department's rights and powers children as he was without known parentage. The birth certificate, N.S.P.C.C.'s report and a dog-eared photograph of a young woman with dark curling hair and serious eyes were the only clues to his identity.

Jane took Patrick to play in the park where they tried the swings, jumped on and off the roundabout and attempted the seesaw, which was not a success as they were unevenly matched. She then suggested tea in the cafe by the bowling green. There was a match in progress and the place was crowded with elderly men in blazers and blue rinsed women in soft felt hats.

Jane carried the tray out onto the grass. "Let's sit over here in the shade of this tree," she proposed to her silent companion. At least he'd found his voice when faced with the choice of food and had selected a mountainous ice cream, a chocolate cake oozing with cream and to drink, a can of coke. She was dry after the physical exertion of keeping up with an energetic five year old and was longing for a cup of tea. Patrick sat cross-legged on the grass and watched Jean sort out the tray, allowing her to spread a paper serviette across his knees. She caught his intent gaze, dark blue eyes large and serious in his freckled face.

She took a sip of tea and felt she must break the silence. "Is the ice cream all right? Don't let the sun make a meal of it before you can."

Patrick nodded, removed the wafer and dug his spoon purposefully into the pink and white pyramid. Jean savoured her tea and looked down at him, a sturdy child with black, curling hair, dark eyes accentuated by a fair skin with an abundance of freckles. His colouring was as Irish as his surname O'Hara, the name his mother had given as hers on the birth certificate.

Jane watching him spoon up the ice cream, moved protectively closer and touched his shoulder, seeking his attention. "Patrick," she began hesitantly, not wanting to handle what she must say badly and hurt him. "You asked about your mum." His spoon did not waver as he steadily ate, eyes fixed on his plate. "Unfortunately we know very little about her except her name, Maureen, and that she was a student somewhere."

Jane spoke automatically in the 'third person' as a representative of the Department. "Your Mum was probably on a course at some college or university." It sounded vague, unsatisfactory even to her ears. "Anyway we know from your birth certificate that you were born in Streatham, in London, south of the river. We think your Mum couldn't have been able to look after you because of her work. She came here, perhaps to be by the sea and to find someone who could care for you. Anyway, it seems she found Mr and Mrs Bulstrode who took you into their home, like a mother and father. It was because she couldn't give you a home herself so she did the next best thing." She tried to sound reassuring. "It happens to quite a lot of children whose mummies are on their own and have to work." Patrick did not respond and Jane paused.

She thought how impossible it was to explain such a beginning to a five year old. She drew a deep breath and continued. "That all happened when you were a tiny baby, before you came to the nursery. You wouldn't remember, but it was probably okay for you at the Bulstrodes until something happened. They couldn't go on looking after you and couldn't find your Mum to tell her," Jane finished with relief. "And that's when the N.S.P.C.C. man brought you to the Nursery."

Patrick nodded as if in agreement and Jane asked herself, yet again, why should Maureen O'Hara have stopped paying for her baby's fostering when she had been so regular for the first two years? The Bulstrodes, parents by proxy and for financial gain, had continued to care for Patrick without being paid, supposedly because they were fond of the toddler and maybe hoped his mother or some relative would eventually turn up. It was highly irregular but legislation then had been looser with little safeguard for the masses of privately fostered children who were often unknown by the Department until there was a breakdown in the arrangements. Just as well the new legislation gave more protection. She wondered if Patrick might still have been with the Bulstrodes if Mrs B. hadn't succumbed to the insurance man's charms and left her husband to cope, which he hadn't been able to do.

Patrick interrupted her thoughts. "Can I have seconds?"

Jane left the past for the present, which was tea on the grass with a small boy who had been abandoned by his natural mother and then deserted by the foster mother. She smiled at him and nodded, feeling that at least she could satisfy his present hunger for food. "We'll get some more when you've finished your cake. If you've still got room." She rummaged in her bag, found the photograph and laid it on the grass beside Patrick. "I think this is a picture of your Mum. Careful not to get chocolate on it," she warned.

Patrick wiped his hands on the worn knees of his jeans, the paper serviette seemed to have disappeared. He looked down at the postcard-sized picture of the girl, noticing the cloud of dark hair, curly as his own, her large serious eyes and her small nose without freckles. His own face was blank and Jane could not guess what he was thinking. He did not touch the photograph and turned towards Jane, pointing at his empty plate. "I've finished now so can I have some more?"

They went back into the cafe for a repeat of ice cream and a second cup of tea for herself. Most of the players had moved out onto the green and there were tables to spare. "Shall we sit inside this time?" Jane suggested as he trailed after her. "It might be more comfortable and your ice cream won't be so likely to melt." The chairs were low for a child, so she bunched up her cardigan to raise him nearer to the tabletop.

She tried again. It was important for him to grasp what she now had to say, essential for his future. "We don't know anything about your Dad, Patrick, and not much about your Mum. However, what we do know is that they're not around to look after you." She looked for a reaction but he ate steadily with his eyes on his plate, watching the diminishing ice cream. "So how would you like to have another mum and dad, of your own? Be in a family like the children at your school."

He looked up at that with great round eyes, and she was struck by his resemblance to the girl in the photograph. She felt she had his attention at last and injected enthusiasm into her voice. "We might be able to find you a new mummy and daddy. People who want a little boy like you. Would you like that?"

He put his spoon down on the empty plate and looked as if he was considering her proposal. She waited with interest for his reply.

"I'd like a dog with spots ... like John's." He nodded to himself and a half smile lit up his eyes making them luminous and mysterious. He leaned conversationally towards her, across the table. "I sees his dog standing with his Mum at the gate when she meets him

every day out of school." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and nodded again. "That'd be alright that would."

Jane hoped he was thinking of the mother, but realistically felt it was more likely to be the dog that was the attraction. She looked at her watch. She ought to go back to the office and write up the pile of reports, as she was way behind. At least she'd talked to him, telling him about his mother and touching on his future. She hoped he'd enjoyed the outing. He hadn't said much but he'd eaten a lot.

She stood up. "Time I got you back to the Sycamores or Auntie Doris will wonder where we've got to."

He followed her slowly across the floor of the dimly lit cafe, out into the bright sunlight. They passed the elderly players grouped on the velvet lawn intent on their game. Jane waited for him to catch up and took his small, sticky hand in hers. They ran over the grass, across the park and towards the Sycamores. He climbed on the gate, waiting for her to swing it wide and give him a ride. He laughed up at her when the hinges groaned under his weight and she was struck by the transformation when his mouth curved upwards and the smile touched his eyes. He was an attractive child when he lost his habitual closed secret look. Surely there would be a family for him, even though most people wanted babies.

Patrick ran up the drive without a backward look and Jane turned away, her mind already on the task waiting her attention at the office. Then he was back beside her, pulling at her cardigan. "Thanks for taking me out." He stopped and then added in a rush, "Can I have the picture of my Mam?"

It was only later that she remembered he'd referred to his mother as Mam and wondered where he'd heard that name. She shrugged off the small puzzle and had the photograph copied for the file so that he could keep the original. It arrived by post enclosed with a greetings card of a Beefeater splendid in regalia at the entrance to the Tower of London.

Auntie Doris read the card to him as it was in what Patrick called 'runny writing'. "She sends her best wishes but says she's moving to another team, so someone else will be coming to see you." Doris MacPherson clicked her tongue in disapproval. "They're always changing the social workers ... such a pity as she seemed a nice girl." She ruffled his hair consolingly. "A shame when you were just getting acquainted, but maybe the next will give you more time. She was always in such a hurry."

Doris gave Patrick the card and photograph, thinking: 'If that's his mother, she's pretty enough but no doubt feckless, expecting other folk to be responsible for her bairn.' She kept her thoughts to herself and offered instead, "shall I find you a frame for your Mum's picture? Otherwise it could get dusty."

The framed photograph and Beefeater card joined Patrick's prized stone with a hole, his fighting conker knotted on a piece of frayed string and the broken pocket knife he'd found in the school playground. He kept his treasures rolled up in the red spotted scarf Benjie had given him the first time he had left the Sycamores. Benjie's placement with a foster family had not been a success and after a few weeks he was back. The scarf made Patrick think of his friend who was a robust streetwise seven year old. He was Patrick's first 'macho' role model and the attraction was Benjie's rebellious outbursts, which gained him much needed attention. Patrick remembered his parting message which was a personalised version of an overheard staff conversation.

"This 'one's for damaged kids that no one else will 'ave." He'd winked at Patrick. "So I'll be back young 'un. You'll see. Keep it warm while I'm away."

Patrick found defiance of authority difficult to maintain without Benjie's lead. Auntie Doris was experienced and motherly. She understood her surrogate family and had a way of exacting obedience without causing conflict so that he slipped into doing what he was told. When he eventually realised however, it was too late to change. He made up for his

compliance at home by deviance at school. He did not mind getting into trouble as long as Uncle Dennis wasn't told. He was in awe of Mr MacPherson, a burly man of few words, who worked for the Council in the transport department. He was there to help his wife Doris, at weekends when teenagers Paul and Mike, jockeyed for his attention. Patrick was occasionally included in their activities like when they went fishing off the end of the Pier.

It was not long after Jane Elliot had sent his mother's photograph and Benjie had departed to the second lot of foster parents, that Patrick noticed Mike putting the rods together. He switched his attention from teasing Mog, the ginger tomcat with battle-scarred ears, who was batting at him from under the hall cupboard.

Patrick pulled at Mike's jersey. "Can I come too?"

"Watch it young 'un. Don't touch the hooks, they go in easier than they come out," Mike cautioned. He looked down at the eager face at his elbow. "Ask Uncle then if you want."

Dennis MacPherson packed them into his shabby Ford with the fishing tackle stowed safely in the boot. The three of them sat on the back seat with Patrick squeezed in the middle. He felt on a par with the big boys and gave Mandy and Tracey, the ten-year-old twins playing hopscotch at the entrance to the garage, a look of triumph. Tracey stuck her tongue out but Mandy kept hopping and did not notice.

The fishermen set themselves up at the end of the pier on a landing stage, halfway down the openwork iron steps. Patrick liked looking down through the holes and watching the water wash and gurgle against the structure of the pier. Green slime hung from the barnacled girders and the air smelt salty. The movement of the waves had a hypnotic effect, although every now and again he was roused by a larger wave that looked as if it might reach up and wet his sandals.

The three figures hunched over their rods, absorbed in a waiting game, were remote from him. He left his study of the sea and amused himself by climbing the steps and jumping down onto the platform. One step up, then two, and then with a deep breath the third, his whole body jarred when he landed as he forgot to bend his knees. The fourth step was halfway up to the level of the pier proper and the platform looked a long way down. He changed the game and became a dog that panted all the way up on all fours, and came up sharp, against the stocking legs of a woman standing at the top.

The woman looked down at him, with amusement. Then noticing the blood on his bare leg, she leaned towards him. "You've scraped your leg. Did you know?"

Patrick squatted on the top step and examined the graze. He bent forward and licked the bright blood. It tasted bitter in his mouth.

The woman surprised him by sitting down at his side. "That's good. Spit's a bit like antiseptic." She looked serious, understanding the reason for his frown. "Blood does taste awful, unless perhaps to a vampire." Her grey eyes twinkled at him. "I suppose you're not one, are you? I've never met a vampire on the pier!" She laughed as if they were in the joke together and Patrick joined in. No one had ever suggested he was a vampire before. The woman looked at him gravely. "I see now you can't be as you haven't got those special teeth only vampires have, the sort that stick out, probably in need of an orthodontist." She looked at his damaged leg. "As it's still bleeding and as you're not a vampire, shall I lend you something to tie round and stop the drips?"

She did not wait for a reply and opened her handbag. Patrick peered inside, he could see a purse, some keys, a small diary but not much else. The woman felt down to the bottom, and out came a folded white handkerchief and a packet of Polo mints, which she handed to him.

"They are there for an emergency, like this one. You could open them while I see if my hanky is large enough to go round your leg."

He opened the tube of mints and watched her fold the opened handkerchief three cornerwise. It looked very white against his sun burnt battered leg and was just long enough to allow her to secure it with a reef knot. "Left over right and under, then right over left and under ... there that'll hold it," she murmured.

Someone called from the pier behind them. "Tina, where are you? I'm getting cold!" The woman jumped up anxiously and smoothed down her skirt. Standing above him, she seemed tall and different.

"I'll have to go, she wants me." She picked up her bag. "Keep the mints and hanky, I hope it stays on." And with quick steps she was gone.

Patrick experimented with the mints, squeezing the tip of his tongue through the hole then scrunching them up with his mouth open to make a good noise. He got bored and wandered back to the fishing party. With a flash of generosity, he offered the nearly empty packet of Polo's around. Uncle Dennis questioned where they'd come from but Patrick's reply was lost in the excitement of a pull on Paul's fishing line.

The handkerchief came off when they returned to the Sycamores and was replaced with a sticking plaster. "It's very fine quality, looks like Irish linen, the kind my grandmother liked to use." Auntie Doris examined the embroidered initials in the corner of the blood stained material. "I wonder what C.B. stands for? Anyway, we can't get it back to her."

"She said I could keep it," Patrick said defensively. He remembered the tall woman's last remark as she hurried off towards the voice.

"You shouldn't really talk to strangers," Auntie Doris cautioned. "Even if she was just being kind over your graze." Patrick chose not to tell about the sweets. She saw his closed expression and softened. "I'll soak the blood off, then you can have it if you really want. Although it's not a boy's ... it's too small and fragile," she added teasingly, "and I seem to remember you prefer your sleeve anyway."

Patrick put the clean handkerchief, still slightly stained, away with his treasures in the spotted scarf. He remained curious about vampires, as although he'd seen a picture of one in Paul's weekly comic, it didn't tie up with a conversation between Birdie who helped with the cleaning and Auntie Doris. They were sitting around the big scrubbed table, in the kitchen, for the mid morning break. Birdie had her arm round him and was turning the pages of the newspaper to show him the pictures. There was a photograph of a boy, rather like Paul.

Auntie Doris looking across the table had said, "Is that the Mountbatten boy?"

Birdie had replied, "There's to be a memorial service... sad he'd to be blown up with his grandpa... so young and n'owt to do with the troubles hi'self. Those I.R.A. are no better than vampires with their thirst for blood." Birdie had then turned to the opposite page. "Look Patrick, there's a picture of Loch Ness. That's a lake in Scotland where there's a monster."

It was confusing for him, and if he saw the pier lady he would ask her if she would tell him more about vampires. He remembered her saying that she did not know they lived on piers but she could know other things.



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