THE NO.1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Ann Cleeves

STRANDED



Stranded

By

Ann Cleeves

Hilbre's my guilty secret, yeah? Nobody knows that I go there. How could I explain the attraction of the place to my mates or my screwed up family? Three lumps of sandstone in the middle of the Dee Estuary and you can only reach them at low tide by paddling across the sand and the mud, looking like some sort of twat. And once you've walked round Little Eye and over Middle Eye and you're on the main island, what is there to do? You can watch the seals hauled out on a long sandbank towards Wales or the huge flocks of birds that swoop and dive like a swarm of locusts, and that's it. But it's peaceful and in our house and in my life there's not much peace.

I don't always have the place to myself. Sometimes the Keeper's there with his wife. They live in a low white house and I think it must be the best job in the world. Until there's the first sunny Sunday of the spring and hoards of trippers march across the sand like an invading army, with their sarnies and their sun cream and their screaming kids. I never go to the island on days like that. And sometimes the loud-mouthed sailing types turn up. They hang out in a wooden hut, called the Canoe Club, which is nearly a hundred years old. The date is painted over the door. Occasionally they take out the canoes. They're all curves, wide in the beam like modern sculptures, much too interesting for the loud men who push them into the water. But mostly the canoe club members have the sort of parties you see in films set before the war, with cocktails and fat men smoking cigars and sometimes they dance on the grass to music from a wind-up gramophone. I first saw Vicky at one of those parties.

My name's Anthony Murphy and I live in Birkenhead and I'm not from a background where I'm supposed to like wildlife or walking across the shore early in the morning to get to

Hilbre Island before the tide comes in. It's 1978 and my mates are all punks. We hate the crap that's prog rock and our parents. I got a scholarship to the posh school, where the teachers wear gowns and think it's good for poor boys to be humiliated. We wear blazers and learn Latin and the lads on the estate take the piss every time they see me.

So here I am, Anthony Murphy, caught between two worlds. Bright charity case born of a docker and a cleaner, one of five brothers and desperate for peace. A Tranmere Rovers supporter in a household of LFC fans. Perhaps that's why I like Hilbre so much, because it's caught between two worlds too. Halfway between England and Wales and stranded like a sandstone whale between the land and the sea. I'm fifteen years old and I don't feel like a lad or a man.

When I first see Vicky it's a weekend at the end of May. I leave the house early and get the first train to West Kirby. My mam thinks I go fishing with my mates. I never lied to her but she saw the tide table in my room and jumped to that conclusion. She thinks I'm with lads from school and she loves that. 'Our Anthony's settled in ever so well there,' she tells her friends.

I arrive at the island at the same time as the Canoe Club party but it would be too dangerous to go back now because the tide's on its way in. They're piled into two Land Rovers, which take the recognized route across the estuary, coming ashore just before Middle Hilbre and following the track onto the main island, bouncing too fast over the rocks. They're shouting and laughing as if they're already drunk although it's not yet nine in the morning.

I'm reading *The Great Gatsby* for my exams and I take the book to the north of the island. Sometimes you find birdwatchers there, sitting in the wooden hide that's built on stilts over the slipway, but they like stormy weather, north westerly gales. Today it's still and sunny with the hint of a mist over the mainland. The tide slides in like oil. I can hear the

noise from the Canoe Club, even from where I'm sitting and I'm drawn to it, half-fascinated and half-disgusted. They've set up the gramophone and some of them are dancing an old-fashioned waltz on the grass. Again I'm trapped between two worlds, between the Long Island parties of Gatsby and this strange gathering on the Wirral. Then a group of men start talking about Margaret Thatcher and what a wonderful woman she is and I come back to earth and hate them.

Peering over the wall I catch the eye of a girl of about my age. She's wearing white trousers that are tight around her bum and her legs and reach halfway between her knee and her ankle and a red and white striped shirt. Not trendy but she looks good. She walks through a gap in the wall to meet me.

'Come in,' she says. 'We don't bite.' From the way she speaks those words I can tell that she goes to the girls' equivalent of my school, or somewhere even posher. A classy accent and the confidence that comes with money and education.

I shake my head. The last thing I need is to be patronized by those tossers. She obviously understands what I'm thinking because she nods. 'Just wait there.'
She goes into the wooden building and comes out with a nearly full bottle of wine and two glasses. The adults are all steaming by now and nobody challenges her. We find a sheltered hollow on the west side with a view across the estuary to Wales. It's past high water and Hilbre is a real island. Her name is Vicky Macfarlane and her dad is commodore of the West Kirby Sailing Club. She lives in a big house in Hoylake and she has a younger sister. When I reach out to touch her, her skin is warm. I expect her to push my hand away because that's what usually happens with posh girls, but she doesn't. We kiss and she tastes of white wine. There's a smell of crushed grass and of salt and we feel as if we have the whole place to ourselves.

I must have fallen asleep because when I wake I'm on my own and in the distance I can hear the canoe club packing up. The tide's out and members are climbing into the Land Rovers. Vicky's helping a frail elderly guy into the passenger seat and I wonder if he's her grandfather. I give her a wave and she pats the pockets of her white trousers, which seems to be a kind of sign. For a moment I can't work out what she means, then I feel in the pocket of my jeans and there's a scrap of paper. She must have written a note for me while I was still sleeping. *Next Saturday? See you here?*

I beam. The sort of beam that you'd get from a lighthouse, which would shine out across the Irish Sea between here and Dublin.

The next Saturday, high water is mid-afternoon, but I get there straight after the morning tide. Vicky didn't put a time on the note and there was no phone number. I guess she wouldn't want a scally with my sort of accent calling her at home in case her parents answered. I wonder what her house is like and if there are servants to take phone calls. They'd certainly have a cleaner, someone like our mam. anyway it might not be lucky. The weather's not as good as it was the weekend before. It's a bit damp and murky. Suddenly she's there, walking across the island towards me. She's wearing baggy trousers, rolled up to her knees, so I can tell she's crossed the channel barefoot, and a jersey and an oilskin jacket. She's carrying sandals in one hand and in the other a big brass key, which she dangles from one finger. It will let us into the Canoe Club.

Inside, the hut smells of wood varnish and damp. I've never been in a boat, but that's what it makes me think of. There's a bunk room with blankets neatly folded at the end of each bed and a common room, with squashy old chairs and a long table. Vicky opens cupboard doors until she finds a bottle of whisky. I've never drunk whisky before either.

I ask her about herself. Not to be polite or because that's the way I think I'll get inside her knickers, but because I'm really interested. Her father's a lawyer, not working in

the criminal courts but advising businessmen on contracts and trusts. She goes to Calday Girls Grammar School, which is what I'd guessed, and she's doing O levels like me. Mostly languages. She doesn't mind Latin. Then she grins. 'But I didn't come all this way to talk about fucking Virgil.' It's the first time I've heard a girl swear. This is a day for new experiences.

We pull two mattresses onto the floor of the common room and lie there, the bottle in easy reach. We're still talking but about stupid stuff now, favourite colours and food, favourite books, and we're touching and teasing. I pull her jersey off and see that she's wearing a blouse underneath. I start undoing the buttons. That's when she says she has to get back before the tide. 'So get a move on with those buttons Anthony Murphy.'

I know that we'll have to leave the island before one o'clock to get to the mainland safely and I check my watch. Eleven thirty.

'I'd like to stay here forever,' I say. 'Just you and me.'

Then I forget what I was saying, because I undo another button and see that she's not wearing a bra.

When we go outside later a mist has rolled in and everything's blurred and strange. We can't even see the mainland. The keeper's tractor isn't in the yard so he must be away from the island. Vicky and I are alone here. It occurs to me that we should wait until after the tide when we know it'll be safe to cross. I feel responsible for her. But she says that her parents are expecting her back and that she'll be in deep trouble if she's late so we set out together, hand in hand, like a brother and sister in a kid's fairy story.

The thing about the tide in the Dee is that it's not predictable. It snakes through the gullies filling deep channels that can cut off your progress to the mainland. People have drowned because they don't show the water the proper respect. Just a hundred yards from the island I lose all my sense of direction. I can't see land at all. The fog is dense and seems to

shift like the soft sand under my feet so I imagine that there are shadowy figures on the shore with us. No sound. Nothing solid to hold onto except Vicky's hand and she seems quite confident that she knows the way. I tell myself that she's been crossing the estuary since she was a baby and she's a sailor so she'll know about wind direction and the sun. But there is no wind and there's no sun. I stand still and she stops with me. My feet sink into mud. Nearer to the mainland it's all sand so I realize that we've probably been going in the wrong direction altogether and out towards the open sea. Forty minutes have passed since we left the island and the tide will be well in by now.

'Come on!' she yells and she tugs on my hand. It's as if she's high or drunk or she doesn't care what happens to her. It comes to me that she doesn't have the sort perfect home life that I'd imagined for her and that she really doesn't mind if she lives or dies.

That's when I hear it. A dog barking. Very distant and it's coming from behind me. I'm almost faint with relief. Now we have something to head for. 'This way!' I shout it so loud that it echoes around us.

But Vicky doesn't seem to hear. She's pulling me out towards the mouth of the river. It's as if she's flying, like one of the wading birds that swoops over the sandbanks at low tide, leaping the channels and tugging me after her. I let go of her hand. 'No. It's this way.' But she takes no notice and hurries on.

I'm a coward. I'd told her that I wanted to stay with her forever but I don't care enough to put my own life in danger. I turn round and follow the sound of the yapping dog. Occasionally I look back but there's no sign of her. I know that I've probably left her to drown, but she was so mad and so wild out there that perhaps that was what she wanted all along and she saw our meeting as a strange suicide pact. After ten minutes I hear more sounds, car engines and a woman's voice. The shadows in the mist become solid. I stumble ashore at West Kirby. It's mid-afternoon in a suburban town. People are shopping and a

couple of teenage girls are walking along the pavement giggling. Everything is normal. Except me. I'm shaking with cold and the remains of the terror I felt out there in the fog. I find a phone box and dial 999 and tell the coastguard that I think there's a girl on the shore in the fog. I don't give my name or hers. I'm ashamed that I turned back without trying to save her.

In the train on the way back to the chaos of my home I think that Vicky Macfarlane will haunt me for the rest of my life.

'Good day, son?' my mother says when I walk into the house.

'Yeah,' I say and go to my room. Another sort of betrayal and more guilt, but I can't face her questions.

Time moves on. I pass my O levels and my mam has a party for me to celebrate. I'm more settled at school now. The older you get the easier it is to be different. The posh boys try to talk like me, which is laughable really, and I'm considered bright, possible Oxbridge material, so the teachers suck up to me too. I haven't been back to Hilbre since I got lost in the fog with Vicky. I tell myself it's because I've grown up, but really it's because I still have nightmares about that day and I don't want to be reminded that I left a girl to drown. I hope that the nightmares will fade with time, but two years later when I'm approaching A levels they become even more intense. I realize that we're approaching the anniversary of the incident and I decide that I have to face my anxiety. Perhaps Vicky survived and I'm going through all this angst for nothing.

I look up the Macfarlanes in the phone book and there they are, living in one of the big houses in Hoylake, close to the golf course, just as Vicky described. I get the bus there after school and stand in the street looking in. The building isn't as smart as I'd expected. It could do with a coat of paint and the garden is overgrown. I walk up the path and knock at the door, wondering what I'll do if Vicky answers. But the woman who opens it is middle-

aged. She's dressed in a faded print dress that my mother wouldn't be seen dead in and she looks tired and distracted.

'Mrs Macfarlane?' I assume that this is Vicky's mother.

'*Miss* Macfarlane,' she snaps back.

'I wonder if I could speak to Vicky.' I've learned to speak properly and my voice is polite.

She looks horrified as if I've hit her. 'There's nobody of that name here.' Then she seems more curious than angry. 'Who told you about Vicky?'

I'm starting to think that this woman is crazy and I back away from the door. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you. I've obviously made a mistake.'

'No,' she said. 'Come in. I want to tell you the story. Nobody remembers her now but me.'

She steps aside and I follow her in. We sit in a room at the back of the house and there on the wall is a photo of two young women. I recognize one of them as the girl I made love to on Hilbre. 'That's me and Vicky,' Miss Macfarlane says, 'just before she died in1950. She drowned, you know, and our family was never the same again. It seemed so unfair when we survived the war.' And she goes on to tell me the story that's already familiar, of the wild and sparky girl who tried to cross the estuary from Hilbre too close to the tide as a fog was rolling in. 'Her body was never found,' she says. 'I imagine Vicky on the island just as she was that day.'

I imagine it too. A young woman, dead for nearly thirty years. Stranded and lonely. Looking for company. Desperate for me to join her.