

John Millard – The Darkness

1. The Caravan Man

Kids. Hundreds of them, all boys. Shouting, yelling, running right up to the 'van and kicking over his milk bottles. Boys with their hoods and their energy and their quick words and quick looks. Boys who hated him for being old, for living old and alone in a caravan, for not understanding their world. Boys who, like him, knew life was hard and people were harder. But unlike him, still full of defiance, still full of fight, still to learn disappointment. They hadn't shrunk back to a caravan at the bottom of Portsdown Hill, green algae growing on the roof, beige plastic cracking, grey net curtains stuck to the windows with condensation. He watched them fight, run, play - closer and closer to the 'van. He hated their mockery, their threat, but he envied their quickness, their life. They were coming so close he could grab one by the scruff of the neck. A younger one, not so strong, not so quick. One he could teach a thing or two...

2. Mac

In the cramped old city, shadowed by the hill and too many new apartment blocks, Mac dozed on a sticky vinyl sofa. His home for the last six months, since Kathy had thrown him out and installed Barry and his BMW, had been this cramped and misshapen bedsit carved into the innards of a flaky Southsea villa, once a family home for some 19th century naval hero. There was no Pompey game this summer Saturday afternoon, so Mac was finding another way of filling the darkness - the darkness left since he'd been chucked out, separated from three-year-old Kelly and 10-year-old Josh. These days a Pompey game meant the pub, the build-up, the crowd, the noise... the pub. No Pompey game meant some cans and the sofa. And Columbo on the telly. Then the pub. Always the pub, Kathy had said, when he'd come back home to their terrace house on the slopes of the hill that last time. Always the pub.

John Millard – The Darkness

The last can was half empty and suddenly he was talking to Kathy again. Her voice on the phone was shrill, anxious, but not nagging this time. Barry was away all weekend on some work trip. She'd seen Josh's inhaler on the worktop and thought: "Where is he?" He hadn't asked to go out and she couldn't recall him going. He needed the puffer with him all the time - just in case his asthma gripped and he had one of his terrifying attacks, desperate for air and clutching at her for help. Only she - or sometimes Mac - could calm him and bring him out of such a crisis.

Josh needed to be home because it was nearly teatime. Because he had asthma and he was only 10. Because life round here was hard and the kids he played with were older. And harder.

"He's got his phone but it's not ringing," she said. "I made him charge it this morning so maybe he's forgotten to switch it on. And I've looked everywhere. I left Kelly with Mrs Rose next door and I walked right down to the playground, the back of the shops, his mates' houses. They're all home. They said they'd been playing with him down the hill, by the bottom of the chalk cliff, but I couldn't get much sense out of them. I don't know where he is and I'm worried."

She paused and he could tell she really was panicky. She had to be, to bother calling him. "He needs his puffer," she added helplessly.

Mac thought about buses, about the 45-minute journey from Southsea up to the hill, a fruitless quest for Josh, who would be back at home by the time his dad was halfway there. Then he thought about seeing his son, however briefly, and glimpsing Kelly, and maybe talking to Kathy. He put the last can down and scooped some change off the top of the telly and went out.

John Millard – The Darkness

3. The hill

There were many secrets in the darkness of the hill. And most of them were hidden in the old underground excavations beneath the huge forts that squatted on the hilltop.

Some had never been used. Others had hidden the planners who conceived the audacity of D-Day. Others, so they said, had housed Cold War spies or UFO trackers.

Local legend had it that the old military bases were connected by tunnels. One, according to one persistent myth, ran for miles - down to the heart of the city, to the naval dockyard.

After most of the military buildings became redundant, the underground secrets of the hill had changed. They had become private and human - fumbings and furtiveness, boozing and drug-taking, and the mysterious games of children in the dark. And then the tunnels had been blocked up by the authorities - their entrances sealed and soon overgrown, their secrets forgotten.

4. Mac

Mac sat on the bus. The nearer it crawled to the hill, the more his phone went off - Kathy demanding to know where he was, how long he'd be. Why didn't he have a car - and a job to pay for one? Then her tone would change and he could hear the fear in her voice.

Mac's own state of mind had moved from relaxed anticipation - looking forward to some imminent playtime with his son - to real worry. Josh wouldn't normally want to miss pizza in front of The Simpsons. On the other hand, he was 10-year-old on a summer Saturday evening and was more than likely kicking a ball around in some park somewhere, just like Mac used to. And yet... he would need his puffer. And he had never gone missing like this before.

John Millard – The Darkness

By the time Mac had got off the bus, walked past the shops and the patch of green where he had played at Josh's age, things had moved on. Kathy yanked open the door almost as soon as he touched the bell. Her eyes were puffy but Mac still saw the brightness he had treasured before the kids, before things got hard. Before the pub.

She nodded to the right, to next door. "Mrs Rose has been asking people to look out for him," she said. "One of the dads got it out of his boy that they'd been messing about down at the old caravan site. At the bottom of the hill."

Her voice went quiet. "Mac, Mrs Rose says there's some bloke up there in a caravan. He wouldn't move out with all the others. Some weird bloke."

Mac felt his stomach lurch as he took this in. The cans were wearing off and he was more alert now. His shirt was wet on his back and his heart was accelerating.

"OK. Is Kelly all right?" A small shape in pink, with food smudged around her mouth and a cuddly toy giraffe in her hand, answered the question for him.

"I'll go up there and see what's happening. He's just out playing somewhere. That woman and her mouth..." he nodded in the Roses' direction. "If she's got you worried over nothing, I'll..." He knew he wasn't saying the right thing. But what could he say? "Kids disappear for a bit all the time. They turn up," he concluded, lamely.

She pressed the puffer into his hand. "Just bloody go, Mac, will you?"

He went. There was no trace of the cans now. He broke into a jog as he turned out of the street and down the main road to the bottom of the hill.

5. Mac and the caravan man

John Millard – The Darkness

There were only three or four caravans left on the old site now. The land had been earmarked for new houses and only one was lived in. It sat there giving no clue to whatever secret life was inside.

He sprinted to the only caravan with curtains and with milk bottles outside. His heart was thumping as he mounted the low, slippery steps, toppling a bottle, and pounded on the flimsy door. "I could just knock it down," he thought. "I hope Josh is all right. I hope my Joshie's all right..."

The door didn't open. He couldn't see through the frosted glass but could hear a radio - some BBC types talking. So the bloke wasn't coming out. He shouted and pounded again, then kicked the door near the lock. A crunch, two steps, and he was in the caravan and looking at an old man, unshaven, in tracksuit bottoms, standing with one hand on a small hob to steady himself. A kettle was steaming. The radio carried on. Newspapers were scattered about and washing hung around. The air was thick and pungent. The bloke just stared.

"My son," said Mac. He'd just smashed this guy's door in and normal rules of conversation did not seem to apply. "My son. This big." He put out his hand, flat, just below shoulder height. "I'm looking for him. I don't want any trouble. They say... they think you might know..."

The bloke said: "My door. And you smashed a bottle. Leave me alone."

"But my son..." said Mac. Was he going to have to hit this guy? Call the police? For various reasons, some of them connected with the time Kathy threw him out, he wasn't keen on police involvement.

"They smashed bottles too," said the bloke. "Those boys. Bloody kids. Threw stones at the 'van. Why can't they leave me alone? I told them to get lost - told them I had a Rottweiler. That got rid of 'em. But one of them couldn't run, he kept panting. I said: 'I'm getting the dog out!' but he couldn't seem to run. I was going to give him a piece of my mind for throwing stones. But he went in there - I bet he's still hiding in there, little sod."

John Millard – The Darkness

"In where?" Mac asked, hope rising that this craziness would soon be over.

"In there," the old man repeated, brushing past and examining the smashed plastic around his door. "In the old tunnel."

6. The map

Mac pushed past the old bloke and the mangled door and ran up to the end of the road, where the rough verge gave way to a chalk cliff face. It looked like any of the old quarries in the area. But surrounded by bushes was a brick structure - a low wall. It was a bricked-up tunnel entrance and at the top of the wall, though obscured by ivy and roots hanging from the chalk, was a gap. The chalk had crumbled and slipped to make this gap, and enough had tumbled down to form a slope to scramble up. It would not have taken a fleeing child much effort to slip into the tunnel.

Mac got a foothold and heaved himself up enough to peer inside. Nothing but blackness. He yelled his son's name. Nothing but silence. He yelled again, and was about to squeeze himself into the entrance when he paused and tried to think about what he was doing. He needed a torch, he realised, and went back to the caravan.

The door hung limply from its frame, and the old bloke was trying to tie it up with twine. He looked up, but did not look keen to start lending his possessions. Mac had no way of knowing if he was telling the truth about Josh, or how much he was to blame for him going into the tunnel. He let some anger, born of fear, seep into his tone.

"My son's missing," he said. "I need a torch." The old man got the message and soon produced a big, heavy duty torch. He flinched as Mac moved nearer to take it, and the younger man softened.

"Look, I'll bring it back," he said. "And I'll give you something for your door." (Or Barry would, he thought.) "You sure he went into the tunnel?"

John Millard – The Darkness

The old man nodded. It had been a long time since he had felt the tug of family. Now he softened his tone too. "I've got this as well," he said, turning to a pile of newspapers and documents by a gas heater. "It's somewhere here..."

He pulled out a sheaf of photocopied sheets and spread them on top of the hob. Mac could see they were from books about the second world war, about local history and the forts. One sketchy printed diagram had been scribbled on with a ballpoint pen.

"Map of the tunnel," he said. "That's the entrance, here," and he indicated a point circled in red.

Mac took it and made to leave. He hesitated by the broken door, wondering if he should say something more, and turned around to see the old man flipping through more paper - this time a copy of that day's Evening News. A bony finger slid down a column of figures and settled on one line.

"High tide in an hour or so," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"High tide, 7.34 tonight," the old bloke said, and took the map from Mac. "Look, the tunnel goes down, right below sea level, and pops up again at the dockyard. Only now it's damaged and the water can get in. Get a good high tide and it starts filling up." He paused and passed the map back. "Less than an hour. You'd better get a move on."

7. The tunnel

"Josh! Joshie! Josh!"

Mac had been walking, or rather stumbling, for five or 10 minutes now. He pulled up his collar - the temperature had dropped a couple of degrees and water dripped from the roof of the tunnel, more often than not trickling down the back of his neck.

John Millard – The Darkness

The first section of the tunnel had been straightforward. Beer cans, cider bottles and crisp packets showed local kids often used it. But after a while his feet hit only the odd rock or brick, and the blackness became denser, more solid, as he progressed.

"Josh, Joshie, Josh!"

The torch was bright enough - but its narrow beam only served to light up a small section of tunnel. He could tell, more by intuition than by sight, that the ground was sloping downwards more and more. He felt for the puffer in his pocket, and wondered how Josh could have come so far. Was he really in here? Had he been running away - running from the old bloke?

Perhaps he'd better call Kathy. His fingers found his mobile and he pulled it out, settling the torch on the ground first. The glow from the screen was a welcome sight, but it brought bad news. No reception. He turned this way and that, even holding the phone above his head, but no. The ancient chalk surrounding him was blocking any signal.

"Josh, Joshie, Josh!"

The tunnel was narrowing and the descent was now obvious. Mac lifted the torch to eye level and willed the beam to probe down the passageway. He took a step forward and changed the angle of the light... and the ground was no longer there. The torch spun off into the gloom as his hands grabbed at the air for something to hold, then the ground came up from nowhere and slammed into him, hard and wet and slippery, and pain jolted through his body.

He lay in the dark as slimy gobbets of water interrupted their century-long journey through chalk and flint to drip from the ceiling and splash on his bare arms and face. A sharp chalky lump of the hill probed his left kidney, but the worst pain came from his hip and ankle. He was lying on a step cut into the rock - a step he hadn't seen but whose sharp edge had been his landing place.

John Millard – The Darkness

His torch lay somewhere, dark and probably in pieces. There was no source of light whatsoever. As his hip and ankle throbbed he thought of little Josh - how had he coped? How could he have got this far without a torch? Then he remembered his mobile, and the glow from the screen. He switched it back on and marvelled at just how bright it seemed. Joshie's cool new phone (courtesy of Barry) would no doubt be brighter still.

Mac winced as the light from the screen showed him the unnatural angle of his foot. He heaved himself up and gingerly put a little weight on it. It hurt like hell, but he could walk - just. Then he played the pale screen light around until it fell on the torch. The impact had popped the plastic casing open and the batteries had spilled out, but they were not too difficult to find and he could hold it all together. He set off again, this time prepared for more steps.

"Josh, Joshie, Josh! Are you down there? Josh!"

Soon there were lots of steps. Mac remembered them roughly marked on the map. The tunnel was going steeply down now. Where was Josh? This was getting serious. And why had he been stupid enough to come down here on his own? Was he trying to be a hero?

Further on still, much further on, Mac realised his trainers were soaked. Soon the bottoms of his jeans were damp. He crouched down and dipped a finger into the water covering the slippery floor. A taste told him what he'd feared. It was the sea. And the clock on his mobile had more grim news - it was 7.05pm.

Mac steadied himself against the wall as he walked, painfully aware of his ankle and the greasy chalk under his feet. The floor was getting uneven and his feet were sloshing through two or three inches of water. He paused, dipped the torch down to look at the map, and tried to think clearly.

Apart from his own panting breaths, he could hear another noise. Not a trickle - something stronger and more relentless. The hiss of gradually

John Millard – The Darkness

advancing water, lapping at walls and clutching at loose stones, propelled by the tide and fed by the cold muddy depths of the Solent.

Then there was yet another sound. Feet splashing along the tunnel, steadily approaching. From behind.

Mac listened, his skin prickling with cold and apprehension. It couldn't be Josh if the steps were behind him. Who the hell...? Up to now he had been frightened for his son. Now he was scared for himself, too, a mile or more into a pitch-black tunnel filling up with water and some unknown nutter for company.

Then the footsteps stopped. This was worse - what was going on? He cocked his head, stupidly, trying to locate them again. Nothing. He peered down the tunnel, hoping to locate a light, some visual clue. Still nothing. He turned and started walking again. But then came a splash from behind and before he could turn, a grunt, and then an awful impact. Mac surrendered to pain, to numbness, and an even deeper darkness...

8. The water

He was very, very cold. He could hear running water. There was pain in his hip, his ankle, and his head. He was lying in the water. There was a warm salty taste in his mouth. Not water, blood. His hair was sticky with it.

Mac sat up in the darkness. He was conscious of light, and grimaced in pain as he turned his head to locate the source. He focused on the old man's torch, and was then aware of a familiar sound - the voice of a small boy struggling to talk as he gasped for air.

"Dad," said the voice. "Dad, Dad. I didn't know it was you. I thought you were that bloke so I snuck round and headbutted you. Then I saw it was you. I thought I'd knocked you out. Dad, I think we've got to get out of here. I can't get reception on my phone and I've been in here for ages and I haven't got my puffer. I'm really scared."

John Millard – The Darkness

"Oh Josh," said Mac. "Oh Joshie. It's all right, mate." He reached out to hold his son's damp hand. Then he felt in his pocket for the inhaler.

Once Josh had sucked in a few puffs, he told his story. Yes, he'd run from the angry old man and the dog, and had scrambled into the tunnel thinking it would lead to an escape route above ground. Unmarked on the map were passageways at right angles to the main tunnel, leading to another excavation parallel to the main one. Mac had walked past one passageway entrance without realising it. Josh had heard someone shouting his name but feared it was the old man or someone angry at him for going into the tunnel. He had hidden in a side passageway for a while, and had then gone back along the parallel tunnel, emerging from another side passageway just behind Mac. Then he had quietly crept forwards again before running into him as hard he could, catching him off-balance and knocking him to the ground. Nice work, thought Mac. The kid might be asthmatic, but he's stocky. And brave.

He shone the torch on Josh's face. A tear-streaked, frightened, 10-year-old's face. Josh looked down at the water, now nearly up to his knees. It was 7.12pm. On the wall - something else Mac hadn't noticed - was a green slimy line that showed how far the water regularly rose. It was above Josh's head.

Time to turn back, he thought.

They stumbled back along the tunnel, supporting each other. Mac was rehearsing some comforting, hopeful phrases in his head when he noticed a breeze, and a salty tang with it. Josh's mobile said 7.29pm.

Then there was a rush and a roar and water swept in, almost knocking him off his feet. He thrashed against the flow, trying to stay upright while grabbing his son, and somehow, wading and running and half-swimming in their panic, they managed to make it into a side passage. It sloped up, and was now their only route to safety. The tunnel was no longer merely damp and treacherous. It was now a certain death trap.

John Millard – The Darkness

Mac had dropped the torch. They waved their mobiles about, the feeble glow revealing steps up ahead. The water was shallow, and getting shallower. They climbed more and more, for hundreds of metres, by the wavering screen-light of the phones. And slowly the area around them began to open up, more and more.

The space was cavernous, Mac realised. After the tunnel it felt like a cathedral. The noise of the water was gone, the air smelt fresher, and somehow it was lighter - the darkness was no longer total. Josh spoke for the first time since the tunnel: "Look up, Dad - what's that?"

As far as Mac could tell, it was the light of a summer evening. Light filtered through plants and trickling wanly down some kind of ventilation shaft bored into the rock, but light nonetheless. And the light revealed what this place was - a man-made cavern carved into the chalk, still bearing on its walls the rusty remains of metal frames. Frames for bunk beds, thought Mac. This is the old air-raid shelter.

For now at least, they were safe. And Josh had even better news. Waving his phone up near his head, he announced wheezily: "Dad, I've got a signal!"