

THE MISSING STUDENT

By Mike Hopper

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

Christmas 1966

The party was fairly typical; a teenagers' shindig at a house in Heaton, Bradford. There was plenty of booze with cigarette smoke everywhere, but no drugs. Most youngsters knew little about such things and were content to drink their fill and hope they might fall lucky and engage in some armchair slap and tickle.

If any lad managed to caress a female bosom, it was cue for a conversation with his mates at the next pub gathering. Such were cheap thrills, 1960s' style!

In this instance, the house comprised two separate living rooms, one with a traditional three-piece suite, the other with a large dining room and chairs. Smooching couples occupied all the comfy seats while the dining room was essentially standing space. A couple of chairs might be drawn together so two people could chat, but without a tablecloth the dining room table was going to suffer badly from glass stains and spilt beer.

Were the parents on holiday or returning later in the evening? Very few of the guests were interested.

Occasionally one or two couples might sneak off to a bedroom and engage in some heavy petting while it wasn't totally unknown for some to go the full hog. However, in the main, it seemed fair to say that parties of this type were relatively civilised.

Not that the parents might agree should they return the same night and see all the half-empty glasses and bottles lying on every conceivable shelf and window-sill; beer and other drinks slopped all over the fitted carpets.

Most of this particular group in Heaton were 6th formers from St. Basil's Boys' Grammar School and its sister equivalent, St Jessica's College, but there were a few older youngsters there as well.

Ben Priestley had left St. Basil's the previous summer and had already started his teacher-training at Green Lane Christian College in Childwall, Liverpool. He'd arrived at the party with three former school pals, Ollie, Stan and Brendan and their presence was greeted positively. They were well known and indeed liked on this particular party circuit.

There was the usual initial conviviality before Ben noticed one particular girl chatting with a couple of others in the kitchen. For some reason, that part of the house always seemed to be a magnet for the lads. Perhaps it was because that's where all the booze was.

With a glass of beer in his hand, Ben sidled across towards the girl. "Don't I know you?" he asked. It sounded like a chat-up line, but in fact it was a genuine inquiry.

"Aren't you at Green Lane College?" he continued.

The girl was a tad surprised at the question: "Yes," she confirmed. "But how do you know that?"

Ben followed up: "I'm a student there too and I've seen you on one or two occasions. You're in the year ahead of me, but I suppose you've been out in digs this year, so you're not around that much."

"Yes, that's right. I'm with a friend and we're staying with a landlady just around the corner from Childwall Fiveways," she said.

"I'm Ben Priestley," he added as an afterthought.

"Christine Jones," she said. "I live in Ravenscliffe. Whereabouts do you come from?"

"Wow, I only live just up the road in Undercliffe — in one of those large terraced houses just off Harrogate Road, near the top."

Ben noticed how quietly spoken Christine was. Above the noise of the party it wasn't easy to pick up her every word and he stood a bit closer. The friends she'd been chatting with had wandered away, so the two of them were left alone.

Straight away, Ben took a liking to Christine. She was petite and compact, very pretty in a simple sort of way, with mousey-coloured hair which just about touched her shoulders.

"So, did you go to St. Jessica's?" he asked.

"Yes, it was okay, but the nuns were very strict," she replied. "I thought they'd be a lot more relaxed at Green Lane, but I'm not sure if they aren't worse there."

The two laughed and they stood chatting easily for some time. They felt easy in each other's company.

"The lads call them penguins in those outfits they have on," jested Ben.

He poured them both another drink and then wandered with Christine into the dining room, where nearly everyone was standing. However, it didn't matter because they had much to chat about and so many stories to exchange, mostly about Liverpool.

It wasn't easy to talk above the record-player and somebody had a liking for two songs in particular — 'Green Green Grass of Home' by Tom Jones and 'Reach Out I'll Be There' by the Four Tops — both of which were being played repeatedly.

"Those records will be worn out if they're not careful," laughed Ben.

Normally at these parties, Ben and his pals would stay until the early hours — that is, unless the parents came back early. However, when Christine indicated she'd have to catch the last bus into town around half-ten, Ben asked if he could come with her since they lived in the same vicinity.

He didn't tell her that his mate Ollie had a car!

The two sat together downstairs on the double-decker bus and Ben gallantly paid her fare. They got off at the final stop in Petersgate and walked round together to the Ritz cinema, where their bus-stops were.

The centre of Bradford had undergone a complete makeover and much of the work was still going on. The people of the city appeared to react favourably to the destruction of the old black mills and their cleaner-looking, replacement concrete blocks. It was seen as post-war progress and a sign of a go-ahead place.

Ben was one such person. It never occurred to him how later generations would regard the demolition of such architecturally superb buildings as wanton vandalism.

A few decades on, all the symmetrical blocks made of featureless concrete would get Bradford the nickname of 'East Berlin' because of its facelessness.

Christine's bus to Ravenscliffe Avenue was the 68. Ben could have caught any one of three services to Undercliffe, but waited for the one that Christine required. It would be the last 68 of the night and he wanted to make sure she was on it. He wasn't normally that chivalrous!

The double-decker motor-bus with its noisy Leyland engine, roared away as it made the constant climb up Otley Road, past Peel Park and the cemetery, before arriving at the Undercliffe crossroads, soon after which Ben had to get off.

He liked Christine's unpretentious, shy manner and cosied up to her in the double seat. Well before it was time to get off, which was about a mile ahead of her stop, he asked if he could see her again.

"Yes, okay, that would be nice," came the reply.

He was thrilled to bits. Such a lovely girl; different from his usual type. They arranged to meet in town two evenings later.

And so began a steady relationship. When it was the time to return to Liverpool, they'd been out half a dozen times. Ben was usually a typical slap-dash 18 year-old when it came to dating girls, but this time, he was prepared to let everything happen slowly.

Christine was so quiet and polite and he was desperate not to do or say anything which might unsettle her. By the time they travelled together on the train to Liverpool, their relationship had progressed to warm embraces and soft lingering kisses. They held hands for practically the whole of the two-hour journey.

They laughed at the thought of them arriving back at college as an item. Their friends would be taken by surprise.

Chapter 2

Spring 1967

Because Christine was in lodgings, the opportunities for being together were somewhat limited, but if her friend Pauline wasn't around, Ben would walk Christine to her house. Outside, they'd kiss goodnight, but she wasn't keen to ask him in, in case her landlady frowned on it.

She was an Art student and seemed to be carrying her large work portfolio wherever she went. Ben studied English and History.

They'd reached the stage where she trusted him to be warm and affectionate without being overly passionate. Ben almost regarded her as a precious object, but when he did become more amorous, Christine did not resist.

He found the whole situation strange. He was nearly nineteen — she was a year older — but what little experience he'd had with girls had been slipshod compared with this. He was immersed in his feelings for Christine, though for all her extra year, it did seem as if she was, all the time, relying on him to take the lead.

His sense of responsibility towards her was overwhelming. After just a few months, he was sure he was in love with the girl, even though convention seemed to say he was far too young for such serious feelings.

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Christine spent four weeks of the term on teaching practice and found the whole experience exhausting. She wasn't alone in that.

Her placement was in the infant department of a Primary school in the area of Old Swan. She enjoyed it and felt at ease amongst the little ones. Her quiet and calm manner suited the role well, while her artistic prowess came in very handy.

At Easter-time, the two were back in Bradford and rarely a day went by without them meeting up. Money was always an issue, so on many occasions they might simply stroll through a local park or walk around town. One of their favourite places was down by the River Aire at Apperley Bridge; another was strolling along the old tow-path next to the Leeds-Liverpool Canal.

Pushing the boat out usually involved a drink in a coffee bar, often in Morley Street in the city centre. If they felt really well-off, that might stretch to playing a record on the juke-box, usually 'Green Green Grass of Home'.

A couple of times, Ben invited her into his house, where she met his mum and dad, Vera and Eric. Conversely though, Christine would never ask Ben to come into her home.

Once or twice, when he called, Christine's mum would open the door, but he was left standing on the step. Her appearance surprised Ben, because she certainly looked quite old and somewhat withered, to

the point where he might have mistaken her for a grandparent. There was no sign of dad.

Ben wondered about Christine's relationship with her parents, but never felt it was his place to raise the subject. She'd no doubt tell him what she wanted.

One sunny day during the summer, they went deep into Fagley Woods which started at the very end of the Ravenscliffe Council Estate. Being a weekday, it was almost deserted.

They lay down together on a secluded area and became extremely passionate in their hour of solitude. It was probably the first occasion that they'd become fully aware of each other physically.

When things got particularly steamy, Christine seemed every bit as responsive as Ben was persuasive. She didn't reject his overtures though they didn't engage in full sex.

Significantly, Ben was now seeing very little of his former school friends. He didn't apologise when one of them rang, admitting in as many words that he was smitten. At first his pal expressed surprise, but as time went on, the calls ceased.

Tragedy struck that same summer as Christine's mother passed away suddenly. Ben said very little, though he admitted to himself that he was not altogether surprised.

He attended the funeral at St. Brendan's Catholic Church and saw her dad for the first time, but was taken aback slightly when they were

not introduced. He went back home without Christine even speaking to him, but then, how would he feel if he were to lose his mum?

It was another few days before they met up again. Christine phoned and called at his house. Thereafter, they were together regularly, but Ben was again surprised at how little she mentioned her home background.

She wasn't at all keen to discuss her father. Indeed, the only thing he knew was that she had no brothers or sisters.

Back at college in September, they were once more inseparable, even to the point where they'd become quite reclusive. They each had their own friends but they hardly socialised with them. In fact, they'd become so clingy that they were rarely invited to join groups at the pub.

If they went for a drink, their favourite area was in Wavertree High Street near to the Picton Clock. There were no fewer than twenty pubs in as little as 300 yards and one they liked to visit was the Thatched House.

From college, it was a steady walk of about a mile to the clock, but, in any case, the 78 bus ran from door to door.

Their real favourite, however, was the Coffee House, directly opposite the Abbey Cinema. In there, at least one night a week, there was music played by the Blue Magnolia Jazz Band. It was nearly always a packed house, though not often with students from Green Lane.

Mixed visiting had not been permitted in college since it opened in 1964, but the climate was changing, albeit slowly, and there was a sense that, in the near future, the governing body would feel compelled to relent on the matter.

As things remained however, the opportunity for complete privacy was non-existent.

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It was after the October half-term break that everything seemed to change. They arrived back at college, but Christine was somewhat distant and for sure, she appeared reluctant to make any bodily contact.

She was happy enough to be with Ben, but something had changed in her demeanour as she consistently refused to become passionate. Intuition was telling him the relationship was fading, but, whatever the reason, it was a mystery to him.

His inclination was to try and ride the storm, though, without doubt, the term was turning into a long one. What's more, it was the turn of his year group to be in lodgings and that meant the pair didn't see each other as much as he would have liked.

Nor were his digs especially comfortable. Furthermore, they were not too near to college and the journey required a bus ride there and back.

Chapter 3

Christmas 1968

As usual at Christmas, family came first and, after arriving home, Ben and Christine were not together until three days after the big day itself. They saw a film at the Gaumont in town and went for walks, even if the wintry weather was sometimes a downer.

When it was time to go back to Liverpool, they agreed to meet at Bradford Exchange Station in the same spot as they'd done at the end of each previous holiday period.

Ben went onto the platform and waited for Christine on the usual bench. As soon as she arrived they would get on the train together.

As he was sitting there, suitcase by his feet, he reflected on the past two or three months and the way Christine seemed to have cooled. He tried to come up with possible reasons.

He put it all down to the loss of her mother.

Across the platforms opposite him, there was another train preparing to leave and he watched quite a few passengers boarding. The station announcer called its imminent departure with only two stopping places before London-Kings Cross.

It struck him as strange that there were only three carriages being pulled by a bland and dirty-green diesel engine. Then he realised the train would be picking up the Leeds carriages at Wakefield, before

heading on to Peterborough and London as stated repeatedly by the announcer.

A very fast train, he concluded, but the miserable old ugly diesel he was looking at couldn't hold a candle to the sheer thrill and excitement of even an old black tank-engine. It would have hissed noisily and blown out steam everywhere, but, sadly, the era of steam was over.

He was reminded of the geography special-study he was engaged in about railway transport around Bradford and he quickly unearthed his Kodak Brownie camera to take a few photos of the train. The pictures could be used as evidence of the way London expresses to and from Leeds and Bradford were separated or joined at Wakefield.

There were some latecomers, which was a touch annoying as they would spoil the photo. The Brownie was a basic camera with a slow shutter-speed, so any swift movement would tend to come out blurred.

The guard was standing ready. A gentleman in a hat and carrying a briefcase was scurrying along ahead of two parents, who quickly ushered their three young children through the carriage door.

Even then, they weren't the last. A woman in a headscarf, lugging a heavy suitcase, was looking flustered as if she thought she was about to miss the train. The guard helped her on board, before blowing his whistle and waving his green flag.

Ben managed three photos and felt pleased at his initiative. Then the driver of the diesel hooted its dreadful-sounding horn and the train

pulled out, amidst a bellow of engine noise; under the girders of the Bridge Street span it roared and up the steady incline away from the station.

Suddenly all went quiet.

"Steam trains are much more romantic, despite the smoke and the soot," Ben concluded.

Still no sign of Christine and his train to Liverpool was due to leave in ten minutes. She'd never been late before. Indeed, she was usually there ahead of him, waiting on the bench.

He waited as long as he could, before boarding with only a minute to spare. Right up to the guard blowing the whistle, his head was straining out of the window in case Christine appeared. She didn't.

For the whole of the journey, a conspiracy theory was eating away at him. She's gone on her own; she's finishing with me.

However, when he got to college, Christine was nowhere to be seen and by the time the accommodation halls were being locked up for the night, there was still no sign of her.

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Next morning after breakfast, Ben walked up to the college administration offices and asked the Principal's Secretary if there was a message of any kind regarding Christine Jones. Such was their almost-permanent togetherness, even the admin staff knew who they were.

Nobody had heard anything about Christine since the students had returned to college.

Where was she?

As one day passed into the next, there was still no sign of an explanation and there hardly a moment went by when Christine was not on Ben's mind. Much as he tried to pass the time by concentrating on his work, the matter wouldn't go away.

"They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder and it's certainly doing that to me," thought Ben. "I love her so much — I always will!"

Weeks passed and the mystery deepened. Ben had contacted his parents to ask if there had been an alert in the local paper, the *Telegraph & Argus*. They'd not seen any.

"Surely she can't have just disappeared without somebody contacting the police," he reasoned.

Eventually, he approached the Principal and was grateful to be allowed some extra time to check things out at home. It was agreed he should take three days in advance of the February half-term, which would give him a full fourteen days, including weekends.

When he got home he contacted the police, who were surprised at his query. Even when he'd provided them with the full narrative, he could see they had misgivings. Ben sensed they reckoned she'd walked out on him.

He caught the bus home to Undercliffe, but then decided to stay on and pay a visit to Christine's home in Ravenscliffe.

He arrived at the house, deep in the heart of the run-down estate, but was shocked to see it was boarded up. Nevertheless, he knocked on the door — several times in fact — but he knew there was nobody in.

Then he decided to ask next door. He explained who he was to a nice couple, but they seemed reluctant to say much. He recognised them from Mrs Jones's funeral.

The lady seemed to sense his distress and invited him in, introducing herself and her husband as Mary and Jack. She told Jack to put the kettle on and then proceeded to tell Ben all that she knew:

"Frank Jones — that's Christine's dad — is not a nice man; in and out of prison for serious crimes.

"Jessie — Christine's mum — had a terrible time with him and I reckon it finally took its toll last summer. That said, in his own way, I think he still respected his wife, even though it didn't always appear like that.

"His relationship with his daughter was non-existent. She despised him for the way he treated her mother.

"After Jessie died, I still saw Christine pottering about and occasionally going to the shops, but she was quiet at the best of times and, apart from the occasional smile and hello, we rarely talked.

"I can't say that I've seen her for quite some time, certainly not since Christmas, but I just assumed that was because she'd gone back to Liverpool.

"Now you're telling me she never arrived."

Ben told them how he'd been to the police and the negative response he'd received from them. "I gave them my details which they wrote down" he said. "But I wasn't confident they were going to do anything about her disappearance.

"Perhaps you should give them a ring, Jack," Mary said to her husband. "Tell them to come round here double-quick," she said. "They'll listen to us."

Mary turned back to Ben: "Perhaps I should have said that Frank Jones is back in Armley Jail for beating up a barman in the pub. It's not the first occasion, but this time he'd fractured the chap's skull with an iron bar and he's going to be in for a good few years, I think."

She frowned. "The only thing he's not been done for, is murder," she added. "But I reckon it's only a matter of time before that happens — if it hasn't already!"

Those words struck a chord with Ben, even though Mary hadn't intended them the way he took them. He told her and Jack about college and his relationship with Christine.

"I just cannot believe she'd disappear without contacting me," he said. "And she has her final exams this June. It doesn't make any sense at all."

Terrible thoughts about Christine's wellbeing were now flashing through Ben's mind, but just when he considered sharing them, there was a knock on the door.

Jack opened it and invited in a uniformed policeman from the local station. Apparently, he was the one who regularly walked the beat around the estate and he seemed to know Mary and Jack well.

The bobby was a much nicer person than the two desk sergeants Ben had met earlier in town, but he sensed that this chap too was following the line of unrequited love and a girl running away from a relationship.

"What about her father?" exclaimed Ben in frustration. "Could he not have done something terrible to Christine?"

Mary told the policeman who the man was who'd lived next door.

Immediately, there was a reaction. The PC decided he should take a full statement from all three and it was an hour later when he finally stood up to leave, promising to explore the matter in depth at the station.

"If we need to, we'll go to Armley and interview Jones," he said.

That last remark hardly made Ben feel any better. "Had she been murdered?" he wondered.

Right now, that explanation was the only one which made any sense

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