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## 1. Franklyn's Dog

## 2. Trauma fiction: Enforcement, healing and the role of the perpetrator

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to explore current and emerging trends within trauma fiction and the criticism surrounding it. The thesis consists of a novel, *Franklyn's Dog*, that focuses on the protagonist, Jon, and his attempts to overcome and move beyond the traumatic experiences of his childhood, and a critical component that interrogates three key aspects of trauma fiction and how they are represented in my own novel. The novel incorporates many elements of trauma fiction that were prevalent in the literature reviewed in the critical component and features an atypical structure designed to disrupt narrative flow and unsettle the reader. The critical component is split into three chapters each concerned with a different topic and each reviewing different literary texts.

The first chapter evaluates two core theories of trauma fiction in light of recent research and with a consideration of the current literary canon. The first of these theories is Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma being cyclical with the second being Anne Whitehead's notion that trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next. The interplay between these two theories is considered here as well as a consideration of the way in which research has started to shift away from these deterministic viewpoints. To aid in the exploration of these themes, this article examines the ways in which they can be applied to two pieces of contemporary literature: Karl Ove Knuasgaard's *A Death in the Family* and Zoje Stage's *Bad Apple*. The ways in which these literary works can be seen to feature both the cyclical nature of trauma and its transgenerational transmissibility are highlighted in this article. This article finds that, although Caruth and Whitehead's theories may not be applicable to real world survivors of trauma, their theories still serve to understand the ways in which trauma is represented within contemporary fiction.

The second chapter examines the ways in which a survivor of trauma may find a path to healing. By reviewing the current research into the area, it is apparent that testifying to one's traumatic experience seems to be correlated with an ability to move beyond these experiences. Yet memory repression and a hostile social environment can often prohibit these private experiences being made public. Two examples of literary texts that demonstrate this tension Edward St. Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels and Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* are discussed here as both works show the complicated relationship between trauma, testimony, and healing. This article ultimately concludes that a nuanced approach must be taken when considering how to assist a survivor on their journey towards healing, and in representations of such. An over simplified solution such as focusing too much on the act of testimony is unlikely to be beneficial to all survivors and such suggestions ignore a complicated web of interrelated factors that are often components of the long term impact of trauma.

The third chapter consolidates some of the recent theories concerning perpetrator trauma and aims to answer the question of whether studying perpetrator trauma is a worthwhile endeavour despite the ethical quandaries involved. Perpetrator trauma is viewed here as both the way in which trauma fuels the actions of perpetrators and the way in which perpetrators are traumatised by their own actions. By using Caroline Kepnes's *You* and Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle* as examples of effectively written perpetrator trauma, it is possible to observe the ways in which contemporary authors are exploring the challenging issue of representing a character who causes great harm to another. The balance between understanding and accountability is discussed here along with a consideration of remorse that seems to be necessary for a perpetrator to feel traumatised by their own actions. This article concludes that, as writers are seeking to explore perpetrator trauma and readers are keen to read about it, it is wise to understand these representations from a critical perspective and not shy away from this responsibility even if it involves some uncomfortable discussions.



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# FRANKLYN'S DOG

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Simon J Cassam



The father spoke. The son looked to his father, a bald man in glasses whose face was lined with innumerable creases and wrinkles. The son could not tell what his father was thinking as nothing showed on his face, which remained as passive as ever. The only movements that troubled the entirely bald head of the father were the shifting shadows thrown across it by the streetlights outside the car. Neither father nor son had said a word until that moment, and, with the radio switched off, the steady rush of tyres on the damp tarmac did a decent job of drowning out the sounds from the boot: the clanking, scraping, thumping of a pair of shovels.

‘How’s school going?’ the father asked.

The noise of another human talking felt so alien in the car that it took the son longer than normal to process the words. It reminded him of those French exams where they had to listen to a recording of someone babbling away and then take a stab at translating the gush of words into English. Once the words had been translated, the son had to try to answer, and that meant pushing through all of the images of the evening’s events that clouded his mind.

‘My studies are fine,’ he snapped, finding himself irritated even after everything.

It was unclear if this had been the answer the father had been hoping for, as it only succeeded in preserving the silence for another few minutes. Then, as inevitably as the tide sweeping its way up an empty beach, another question came from the father’s mouth.

‘What will you be doing tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know. Haven’t thought about it really.’

‘It’ll be good if you do whatever you normally do,’ the father said. ‘In situations like these, keeping up appearances is the best thing you can do.’

‘I suppose.’

More silence followed this exchange. The son’s fingers instinctively reached inside the pocket of his jeans, seeking his phone. When his fingers found nothing but lint, he realised the phone wasn’t there. He had left it in the house. The thought of going back inside

that place was intolerable. Even remembering its existence was enough to conjure up another flurry of images that had to be beaten back into the recesses of his mind. The son longed for another inane comment from his father to keep such thoughts at bay. In line with the trend of a lifetime, the father disappointed him.

The thoughts and memories were coming in stronger and stronger waves, as the son realised they were nearly back home. When the car pulled up at the side of the road in front of the house, and the engine was switched off, the son found himself entirely unable to move. His gaze remained fixed on the house he had lived in since birth. The driveway still housed his mother's car. There was a light on in the master bedroom and it shone around the edges of the curtains. He must have missed that light when he had turned the rest off. His mother would have hated that. The father looked at him, the light from the streetlamp reflecting off his glasses and partially obscuring his eyes. He had unlocked the car door and was waiting for the son to get out. When it was clear this was not going to happen, the father restarted the car and drove away.

'It would be irresponsible of me to let you stay there by yourself, 'specially with everything that's been going on. You're welcome to stay at mine for as long as you like. I'll pop back here tomorrow, after work, to get whatever things you need. I've washed your bedding from last week and I'm pretty sure you left your toothbrush and stuff. Is there anything else you need, or have you got enough for tonight?'

No usable words presented themselves, so the son simply nodded. He was unsure if his father had noticed the gesture, but it didn't seem to matter. The father tapped his fingers on the steering wheel for a few seconds, the beat of a song he was half remembering, before he spoke again.



‘We’ll have to find your brother,’ he declared. ‘Christ knows where he ended up in all of this. Can hardly blame him for doing a runner, but he has to know that it’s over now. It’s safe now. She can’t hurt anyone anymore.’

His words were punctuated by a timely jostle of the shovels in the boot.

‘It’s all been taken care of,’ the father added, almost to himself.

# Franklyn's Dog

V. 1.4.6

New Game

**Continue**

Settings

Quit

File One:

Play Time: 154,848:27

Start

Copy

Erase

File Two:

NG+

Play Time: 163,344:13

Start

Copy

Erase

File Three:

Play Time: 274,968:52

Start

Copy

Erase

## File Two Successfully Loaded

Every time Dan made this climb, he was unsure if he was going to come back down. He was prepared for that. He checked his room was tidied and everything was in order, just in case. He had written no note, for there was no one to write a note to. That was precisely the problem. There was no one.

Dan had first made the climb following Freshers Week. Despite the promises made by every speaker who had visited his high school and extolled the virtues of Freshers Week, it had not been a life-changing experience. There was no grand rediscovery of himself. There were no new friends for life. Life was largely unchanged. He had hung around loud parties, completely sober, and then retreated back to his room to stare up at the flaking paint on the ceiling. University wasn't the new beginning he had hoped it would be. While wandering the campus looking for something meaningful, Dan had found a section of university accommodation that had been abandoned mid-construction. One block had been built all the way up to the fifth floor before something had happened to shut the project down. Wooden boards and warning signs were attached to every available surface on the ground floor to deter trespassers. It didn't work for Dan.

It had taken some effort, but Dan was able to move one of the wooden boards enough to squeeze through. He was a slim eighteen-year-old and was grateful for this fact as he worked his way into the derelict building. The inside was barren, damp concrete and rotten wood, but there was a relatively sturdy looking staircase. Dan made his way up as far as he could and was surprised to discover the stairs led to the top of the building. The fifth floor looked like it belonged in a news report about war. Walls of varying shapes and sizes did a feeble job at holding back the elements. Water pooled in vast puddles and a chill wind blew through the place.

Dan went to the edge. He looked down and had to steady himself on a nearby bit of wall to stop himself toppling straight over.

‘That will do,’ he said to himself. ‘That’ll get the job done.’

Saying it out loud made it real, but it also made Dan hesitate. He wasn’t ready.

‘Fine,’ he said, enjoying the way the wind carried his voice away, so even he could barely hear it. ‘I’m in no rush.’

Dan’s visits to the spot became more and more regular. He even started taking a cup of coffee up there. Eventually, one thought crystallised in his mind. He would keep going until 21<sup>st</sup> December, one year since everything happened, and then, if things were no better, he would cast himself off the building and finally be free. No longer would he have to carry it all with him. No more would he hear that thudding ring through his head all day every day. It would be over. At last.

On Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> December, three days after Dan had made his resolution, he found someone else sitting in his spot. The presence of another human being unsettled Dan for, up here, he had taken to pretending he was in a different world, detached from the rest of reality. It was off-putting to see someone else invade this space. Dan sipped his coffee while

considering the best way to make his presence known without startling this person and potentially causing them to fall over the edge.

Dan attempted to figure out the situation by making deductions about his mystery companion. Deducing anything proved challenging, as the person appeared to be little more than a bundle of clothes. This wasn't too bizarre, given it was December, and the air was cold even without the wind. But not a scrap of skin was on display, and the person's gender, assuming they identified as having one, was also lost in the anonymity afforded by the fabric.

Tentatively, Dan advanced. The person moved their head and, Dan noticed a slither of brown skin peeking out from the folds of fabric. He also noticed the white fur that lined the hood of the coat. He didn't want to make assumptions but that, to him, suggested it was probably a woman's coat.

He realised the person didn't have their hood up. Dan was confused for a moment, as the covering didn't appear to be a hat; it enveloped the head too well to be a hat. He considered the situation for a few seconds and wondered if it was one of those headscarves people of certain faiths wore. Any religious practice, aside from varying shades of Christianity, was alien to Dan. He had heard about other faiths in his small-town, Midlands school, during RE, where they had been spoken of with such a detached fascination an outsider may have thought the lessons were on mythical creatures. There had been reports of a Jewish student sparking the need for other options for school lunches, after they went hungry on a day when only sausages had been served. A Sikh man had come into school to talk of his faith, but had succeeded only in making the children want to have a go with his ceremonial sword. There were even stories of a Muslim student who had attended the school, and, during Ramadan, their friends did not eat lunch either, in solidarity. The gender of the Jewish and Muslim students changed with each telling, and the tales gradually became as

unbelievable as a local drunk's insistence they had met President Obama on the UFO which had abducted them the previous night.

Dan knew Muslim women covered their hair, more from the TV and from the racist comments of politicians than from any RE lesson. And this woman certainly seemed to be doing that. Her brown skin also seemed to be indicating that she was a Muslim, because the only other option would have been for her to be a Sikh and it was the men who covered their hair in that faith, wasn't it? In fact, Dan had an inkling that Sikh women never cut their hair and let it proudly flow down their backs as though they were all paying deep, spiritual homage to Rapunzel. Not being able to think of any other Asian faiths off the top of his head, Dan was quietly confident that he was dealing with a Muslim woman.

He took another step forward. He faltered when he realised he probably had nothing in common with the other person. He considered leaving her alone but there was something about the slight movement of the woman's shoulders that prevented Dan from leaving. The woman was crying. He couldn't see the tears from where he was standing, and the wind made it hard to hear if she was making any sounds, but Dan was certain. He knew he had to approach but didn't know how to without scaring her. Wishing he had brought another coffee, Dan gingerly sat down next to her.

Dan cleared his throat as a means of announcing himself, but the woman did not respond. He could now see her face, framed as it was by the navy blue of the headscarf. She looked cold, and the streaks on her cheeks from falling tears confirmed Dan's suspicions. Her mouth was moving, forming words that Dan couldn't hear. Unsure of how else to get the woman's attention, Dan reached out a hand towards her shoulder. He stopped short of touching her, desperately trying to remember what he had learnt of Islam in school. Was it some form of sin or crime for him to make physical contact with her? Would she be forced to marry him? Would she spontaneously combust? His schooling had offered no answers to

these questions, but he dimly remembered watching a video of some men in white robes throwing stones at a rock as a way of banishing the devil or something.

The woman yelped when Dan touched her, and she shuffled away from his outstretched hand. He wasn't sure whether to reach out again to stop her from falling off the building, but kept his hand pulled into his chest as he saw the hostile look in the woman's eyes. Mercifully, she adjusted her position so she was no longer in danger of toppling off the side. She reached into the folds of fabric around her head and pulled forth two white cables. Stowing the headphones in the pocket of her coat, the woman wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and glared suspiciously at Dan.

'What do you want?' the woman snapped, her voice only just audible over the wind.

Dan was surprised by the sound of the woman's voice. He knew it was ridiculous, possibly even slightly racist, but he had been assuming she would have an accent denoting her as having originated from some far-off place. As it happened, her accent was remarkably similar to his own, meaning her origins were likely disappointingly local.

'What do you want?' the woman repeated, louder, clearly concerned that Dan had not heard her.

'Coffee?' Dan offered, extending his cup towards her.

She looked from the cup to the face of the man offering it to her, the edges of her mouth flickering between confusion and revulsion.

'Have you been drinking from that?'

'Yes.'

'Why would I want to drink your coffee?'

'It might warm you up a bit.'

'Is it warm?'



Dan took another sip from the cup before realising what he was doing. When the cup was to his lips, he realised, but knew that backing out of the gesture would somehow make the situation worse.

‘Not really.’

‘You’re offering me a cold coffee that you’ve already been drinking? Why would I want that? You could have all sorts of diseases.’

Dan shrugged and drank another sip of the coffee for want of something to do. He looked away from the woman for a moment, conscious that he didn’t wish to be caught staring at her for too long. Below, students scuttled across campus in all manner of directions, like ants desperately searching for the best picnic to ruin.

‘Why are you here?’ the woman asked.

‘I go here.’ Dan replied. ‘I’m wasting three years of my life to get an English degree that will, at best, let me work for some tiny local tabloid rag and will, more likely, allow me to slump into a secondary school where I can live out the rest of my days as a teacher, in a haze of coffee-fuelled misery.’

The woman shook her head slightly.

‘I meant, why are you up here? I didn’t think anyone else would come up here.’

‘The feeling’s mutual on that one,’ Dan replied. ‘I’ve been coming up here ever since semester started and have never seen another living soul. It’s a good place to sit and get away from it all. Gives me time to think.’

‘You need a lot of time for that?’

‘You’d be surprised.’

Dan leaned back and rested his head on the concrete wall behind him.

‘How about you?’ Dan asked. ‘Why are you up here?’

The woman didn't reply. In fact, she didn't make any acknowledgement that she had heard Dan speak. Were it not for noticing her face tense slightly in response to his words, he could have been convinced that his words had been lost to the wind. He considered pressing the matter for a minute before deciding against it.

'So long as you weren't thinking of jumping off or anything, then we're all right,' Dan said lightly.

When there was still no reply, Dan's smile died on his lips. He suddenly felt out of his depth and an odd, floating sensation spread through his body. Dan rested both his hands on the floor, desperately feeling for the cold, rough surface. In the background of his mind, he could hear that awful, dull thudding, louder now, drowning out the rest of his thoughts, arrhythmic, sickening, endless, carrying him off to a place he dared not go. He was safe from it though. It was only in his mind. Wasn't it? Could it be making its way through the noise of the wind? Could the woman hear it too? She didn't seem to be able to, so Dan resolved to try not think about it, not then, not ever. He kept his focus on the concrete beneath his fingers. When he next spoke, he tried to maintain some levity in his voice and, despite it wobbling slightly, he thought he did well, given the circumstances.

'We wouldn't want that now, would we?' Dan said. 'You're the only friend I've made around here.'

These words were enough finally to elicit a response from the woman. She turned her head, viewing Dan through warm, brown eyes, which narrowed with a cold suspicion.

'We've been talking for five minutes and suddenly we're friends?' she questioned. 'You know nothing about me.'

'I know that you never say no to free coffee,' Dan replied, tilting the empty coffee cup towards her as though she may still benefit from drinking it in some way.

The woman laughed and the tension dissipated from the air. The dull thud receded into the back of Dan's mind, and his heartrate and breathing became steady once more.

'And I know your social skills are impeccable,' Dan continued, 'considering that you haven't even asked my name yet.'

'You haven't asked mine either.'

'Looks like we're both as bad as each other then. I'm...' he paused for a second before confidently stating, 'my name is Daniel.'

'Sakinah,' replied Sakinah.

'Some people call me Dan,' Dan added. 'I mean, Dan is right there as an option. People take that option. And they are both names. And are both my name. Either one works.'

'Everyone calls me Sakinah,' Sakinah said. 'I suppose no one's ever thought to try abbreviating it.'

'I could give it a go if you like,' Dan suggested. 'I'm good at names.'

'I think I'll pass.'

'Well, I reckon that makes us friends now,' Dan said simply. 'You have to come and get a coffee with me. Otherwise, I will be inconsolable.'

Sakinah considered this. Her eyes remained fixed on the edge for longer than Dan would have liked, but she was eventually able to pry her gaze away and look again at Dan.

'I'll go with you on one condition,' she said.

'What's that then?'

'We don't share a cup.'

It took less than five minutes to make it to the nearest coffee shop. Dan held open the door so Sakinah could enter. She squeezed through in such a way that she would make no contact with Dan, as though he were radioactive.

The coffee shop was warm and welcoming.

‘You grab a table,’ Dan suggested. ‘I’ll get the drinks. What are you having?’

Sakinah gave her order but made no move towards any of the tables. Dan went to the counter and placed the order. He looked over to Sakinah who stood to the side of the counter. The fingers of her right hand were tapping her thigh with a steady rhythm. The barista made Sakinah’s drink first. As soon as the drink was placed before her, Sakinah grabbed it and hurried out of the door. Dan watched her go. He went to follow, but the barista called out to him. Dan reluctantly stepped away from the door and grabbed his own drink. He thanked the barista and left the café. He looked around but Sakinah was nowhere to be seen. The café was at the heart of campus and there were at least half a dozen ways she could have gone. Giving chase would be impossible, so Dan didn’t bother. Instead, he took his coffee back to his room, regret ringing through his mind: he should have left the drink and followed Sakinah.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File One Successfully Loaded

A wave of confusion rolled in to replace the sleep that was gradually dissipating as Jon opened his eyes. He wasn't in his usual bedroom, and it took a short while for his brain to put all of the pieces together to figure out his location. The most helpful clue was the garish bedding that covered his form and denoted the gurning faces of the *Butt Ugly Martians*, a long-forgotten children's programme of the early 2000s. Seeing Ben in the bed opposite also confirmed he was at his father's house.

It had been an odd experience when Jon and Ben had begun visiting their father again, after the six long years of not seeing him. While the main areas of the house showed signs of change, their bedroom had been perfectly preserved as though it were a museum exhibit. It had struck Jon as an odd thing to do, for there had been no guarantee that he and Ben would ever return. Despite its oddity, there had been something about the gesture that showed a commendably unyielding optimism. Jon had been seven when he lost contact with his father, thirteen when they had reconnected and now, almost eighteen, Jon was still struck by the sentimentality of his father whenever he awoke at his house.

'It's about time you got up,' Ben said, glancing over an old PlayStation magazine at Jon. 'I was reading an insightful interview defending the awful save system in *Resident Evil*

where you use limited items to save. It makes you want to scream at them to let people save whenever and wherever they want. At least that's industry standard now.'

'Except it might all be slipping backwards,' Jon noted. '*Skyward Sword* has fixed save points despite the series allowing you to save freely for decades.'

'That's a weird game in general though. I'm sure it won't be a permanent thing.'

'What's weird is how long it took the game industry to get to the current standard. And it's weirder that the concept still seems open for discussion.'

'What's weird is how long it takes you to get out of bed in the morning,' Ben said with a smirk. 'Almost as long as it takes you to answer quiz questions.'

Jon elected to ignore the comment and instead focus on getting dressed.

Over breakfast, Golden Nuggets, no milk, just like Jon had eaten as a child, Anthony made conversation with his two children. They rattled through the standard topics of school, college and work before turning the focus to the quiz in which they had all participated the night before.

Anthony was a keen pub quizzier and attended at least two a week. Every month, he invited his two sons to join him for a quiz run by the dad of one of his friends. Jon and Ben had little to contribute, as the majority of the questions related to general knowledge and trivia concerning the time when the quizmaster was an active member of society, some ten years before Jon was born. It was the questions thrown in to try and trip up the regulars that provided Ben and Jon their small victories and one such question, answered by Ben, had been the one to win the night. Jon felt disappointed to have missed the opportunity to prove himself over Ben.

It was an all too familiar feeling. Since reconnecting with Anthony, as he and Ben had taken to calling their dad after the divorce, Jon had found himself in a continual battle for his approval. Every car journey they ever went on was transformed into a homebrew University

Challenge, with Anthony asking questions from old quizzes and seeing which son would answer first. Whenever they spent time at Anthony's house, Jon and Ben were always tasked with completing the intermission-round questions from the previous three quizzes Anthony had managed to attend in the interim, alongside watching at least two quiz programmes on the TV with every visit.

'I suppose that kind of quick thinking will serve you well, Ben, when you head off to university next year,' Anthony said after complimenting Ben on his performance. 'Have you had any thoughts on going through clearing?'

At this, Ben's eager smile, fixed to his face since the previous night, became thin and strained.

'What's the point? No university has accepted me in the last two years. Why bother a third time?'

'They don't know what you're capable of yet. You're still slaving away at school, trying to make the best of it.'

'College,' Ben corrected.

Despite Ben being at college and Jon being in the sixth form, Anthony still applied the catchall term of 'school' to describe their state of education. Jon expected him to refer to university as school in the same baffling way Americans referred to it as college.

'It's a crap college course,' Ben continued. 'Classroom assistant. To help primary school kids learn how to count without lobotomising themselves with pencils. The kids are the ones in school, not me. Unless you think I'm one of those dumb, snotty little brats? Do you need to hold my hand when I cross the road or wipe my arse after I use the toilet?'

'College then,' Anthony said, ignoring Ben's rant. 'You're going to college now to get even more qualified. When they see your results, they'll know they made a mistake.'

'If I pass.'



‘You’ll pass. Besides, your brother’s heading off to university as well. It’ll be good if you can both go together.’

Ben didn’t argue back at this. He snorted and shoved a spoonful of Frosties into his mouth with such force that a stream of milk ran down his chin. The gesture was enough to silence Anthony. He looked uncomfortably at his Weetabix as though hoping to divine the future in the browning milk. Jon knew better than to perk up at the mention of himself, particularly regarding the sensitive subject of university admissions.

‘Whatever you end up doing,’ Anthony added, hoping to save the situation. ‘I’ll be proud of you. You’re a good kid and I want to make sure you’re getting the most out of life.’

‘Kid? I’m twenty,’ Ben replied before adding with a sigh, ‘If all else fails, I can come to you for lessons on being a motivational speaker.’

‘How are you finding the new mattresses?’ Anthony asked, desperate to change the subject. ‘They’re not too firm are they? The guy at the shop said they were the best for teenagers and young adults.’

‘Fine.’ Ben muttered.

‘Very comfortable, Dad,’ Jon added. ‘Thanks for the upgrade.’

The mattresses were not the only things Anthony had replaced since reconnecting with his sons. Jon had made a comment about the kettle when, on his third visit, he had attempted to make himself a hot chocolate. The next time he went over, a brand-new kettle stood in its place. Since then, whenever either Jon or Ben noticed anything amiss in Anthony’s home, it was quickly replaced. The chipped plates, the cracked mugs, even the clock that ticked slightly too loudly, according to a rude comment from Ben, had all been dealt with in a ruthlessly efficient manner. A recent observation about a protruding spring in Ben’s mattress had resulted in both their mattresses being replaced the very next day.

Anthony had offered to change the bedding too, but those gurning blue faces held too much nostalgia for Jon, and even Ben seemed to have an attachment to them.

‘I expect you’ll be wanting to make tracks soon,’ Anthony said. ‘Obviously, you’re welcome to stay for as long as you like, but you don’t want to keep your mum waiting.’

‘It’s fine, Dad,’ Jon said. ‘I’ve got some homework to do back home anyway.’

This seemed to reassure Anthony, though he still eyed Ben from behind his thick glasses. He rubbed a hand over the bumps that were visible on his entirely bald head and gave a little sigh.

‘Give your mum my regards, won’t you?’ he said, as he always did.

Neither Jon nor Ben had ever followed that instruction, and Jon was certain Anthony didn’t care. It was a formality, a way to play the game, and no one would begrudge Jon or Ben’s failure to do their part.

With the completion of breakfast, Ben headed upstairs to get ready to leave. Jon lingered in the kitchen, as his father washed the breakfast dishes. His hands submerged in the soapy water, Anthony let out a sigh and looked out of the window at the back garden.

‘I reckon you’re getting through to him,’ Jon said. ‘It’s a work in progress but I think he actually doesn’t hate coming here anymore.’

‘You’re too kind,’ Anthony replied. ‘But I appreciate it. I wish things were as good between your brother and me as they are between us.’

‘He smiled slightly at your chihuahua joke last night,’ Jon pointed out. ‘You should go on a road trip or something with him.’

‘A road trip?’

‘It might do you good to be locked in a car with each other. Give you a chance to talk.’

Anthony laughed and shook his head. He placed the final glass on the dishrack and wiped his hands on a towel.

‘I’ve driven you both to the Lake District twice, to Wales twice, and neither of those journeys helped much.’

‘You guys need some quality one-on-one time to really bond. I can get out of your hair for a bit and let it all play out.’

At the mention of hair, Anthony patted his bald head and Jon reflexively winced.

‘Wouldn’t you feel left out?’ Anthony asked.

‘If it stops these awkward breakfasts, I’m down for it.’

‘Your brother remembers how things used to be. He doesn’t accept things are different now. I don’t know if he ever will.’

‘Then make him.’

‘When did you get to be so wise?’ Anthony asked, his proud smile making Jon’s entire day.

‘He doesn’t have a Franklyn’s dog in his life, that’s the problem,’ Jon elaborated, in the hope of maintaining his father’s pride for a bit longer.

‘Franklyn’s dog?’

‘You know my friend Franklyn? He had this dog, a bulldog. It was really docile and kind. When it died, they replaced him with a dog that looked exactly the same but was completely different, personality-wise. He’s on his fourth dog now and they pull the same trick every time. I reckon everyone has the potential to be Franklyn’s dog if they set their minds to it.’

‘And how do they do that?’

‘Dying worked for the dog, but probably not such a good idea for humans to try,’ Jon mused.

‘It’s a different dog though,’ Anthony pointed out. ‘It’s not one creature undergoing a change. It’s an entirely separate thing. It’d be like saying you and Ben are the same person because you happen to look similar.’

‘The dogs didn’t look similar, they looked exactly the same,’ Jon protested, already knowing that Anthony wasn’t going to understand him. ‘I think it’s an exciting thing to keep in mind. That someone can change everything about themselves if they really need to.’

‘If you’re ever on the run from the police, you’ll have a suitable role model,’ Anthony smirked. ‘A dog. Did they give it the same name as well, then?’

‘No the name was different.’

‘Because it’s a different dog.’

‘People change their name all the time,’ Jon pointed out, knowing this wasn’t true. ‘Anyway, just worth considering that Ben might not be a lost cause.’

Within the hour, Jon and Ben were in the carpark outside their father’s home. Anthony’s house was situated on the outskirts of the town of Oxbow, the same town in which the brothers lived with their mother. Anthony’s house was a run-down, 1950s semi-detached property that, along with its conjoined twin, had been dropped next to the train tracks and forgotten about.

‘You want a lift back?’ Ben asked, swinging his car keys on his right index finger, mirroring the action of someone in a film the two of them had watched the week before.

‘It’s a nice enough day,’ Jon muttered, looking up at the sky. ‘I reckon I’ll walk back.’

‘It’s December,’ Ben pointed out.

‘Still a nice day though,’ Jon said, pointing at the clear sky.

‘Suit yourself.’ Ben shrugged and got into the car without another word.

Jon waited for Ben to drive away, keeping a respectful distance, fearing that his feet may be run over if he lingered too close to the car. Left alone in the weak winter sunlight, Jon

considered his options. He knew he would have to return home, the only question was how long he could delay the inevitable. If he headed straight home, it would take him around twenty minutes. This didn't seem like quite enough time to mentally prepare himself to contend with whatever mood his mother happened to be in.

Tired of waiting for his brain to make any meaningful decision, Jon's feet began to carry him away from his father's house. The initial part of the journey would be the same regardless of where he ended up going, as there was only one way in and out of Anthony's little corner of the world. The place existed as an afterthought, a vestigial part of the town, which most of the inhabitants would never even know existed.

The winding residential street soon spilled out onto the main road, which cut through the centre of Oxbow like the central nervous system in a body. That road was all most people saw of the town and, even then, only when the motorway closed, and scores of disgruntled travellers were forced to take a more scenic route.

The town centre was home to six of the town's ten pubs, four of the seven hairdressers, one of the two charity shops, and a dozen corner shops. Jon supposed he could stop by any one of the pubs to get himself something to eat, or even keep it casual and go to the fish and chip shop. Eating out risked evoking his mother's fury if he was found to have no appetite for whatever food she produced. Besides, he'd only just had breakfast, and evoking such wrath should be reserved for when he was actually hungry and would appreciate the food.

Jon knew there was nothing to do except return home, and dragging it out wasn't making it any less inevitable. He made his way through the town centre, past those who were going to the town's biweekly market, like pilgrims towards a holy site, and found himself back in a residential area. Electing to prolong his journey home by just a bit longer, Jon followed a branching road that led away from the clusters of houses, past the first school he

ever went to, St Michael's, and down onto the canal towpath. Ice hugged the narrowboats lining the water's edge. The boats themselves were powerless to do anything against the cold except emit small clouds of smoke from metal chimneys and lace the air with the pleasant smell of burning wood. Jon followed the towpath down to the next bridge, knowing that he would have to double back on himself when he wanted to go home.

As he approached the bridge, he noticed someone standing on it, looking down over the edge. Upon recognising the person, Jon fought the urge to hide in a nearby hedgerow. He knew the person standing there, even at this distance. They had been in the same classes since St Michael's, and Jon recognised the way her hair dropped across her shoulders and how she slightly favoured putting her weight on her right foot. He also recognised the warmth that spread in his stomach whenever he saw her, and the catch he felt in his chest as though someone were lightly pinching his trachea. There was a part of Jon that wanted to dart over to her, throw his arms wide and let out all of the emotion that he had been bottling up for so long. An equally compelling part of him wanted to turn around and run as fast as he could in the opposite direction. He was still never sure if she had forgiven him for that whole business in Year 2 when, after throwing an apple at his head, she hadn't spoken to him for years. Just because they were back on speaking terms now, didn't mean all was forgiven. He had been terrible.

Jon made to turn around and head home, but the arrival of another figure on the bridge caused him to freeze in place. The warm feeling in his stomach also froze and became a solid ball of intense dislike. Andrew bounded up to Roxanne, his ginger ponytail bouncing against his back as it slithered out from under that ridiculous hat he always wore; a ushanka as he so often informed people. While the sight of Roxanne had made Jon want to hide in the hedgerow, the sight of Andrew made Jon want to cast himself into the frozen canal. A better option would have been to cast Andrew into the canal, but that would have been impossible

at this range. Jon lingered long enough to see Andrew pull Roxanne into an embrace, leaving before the inevitable meeting of their lips.

Jon no longer felt the need to delay arriving home. Whatever happened with his mother was unlikely to put him in a worse mood. He walked home, trying in vain to forget what he had seen by the canal. He knew about Andrew and Roxanne's relationship, but didn't need the reminder of it.

Home appeared before Jon, and almost took him by surprise. He let himself in, relieved that his mother seemed to be occupied with some chores upstairs, and got himself settled with his laptop. So long as he was pretending to do homework, he could relax without his mother interfering too much.

Taking advantage of his mother not being around, Jon tried to get Ben's advice on the Roxanne situation. As the words were leaving his mouth, Jon found himself wondering why he was confiding in Ben of all people. He supposed it was out of necessity, for Ben was uniquely positioned to hear his problems without being able to interact with anyone else involved. Jon wondered if a part of him was seeking the closeness they had had sometimes as children. Yet as Ben rolled his eyes at Jon's woes, Jon realised his mistake. The rows of his mother's china dolls, which lined every bookcase in the living room, all seemed to disapprove of Jon's foolishness. When Ben had heard enough, he gave his advice, and it was as unhelpful as it was expected.

'You could always bury Andrew in the woods,' was the suggestion. 'Make sure that you do it away from where people walk their dogs. You wouldn't want anyone to find him afterwards.'

Ben was no longer looking at Jon, his gaze fixed instead on a newspaper he was reading. Despite being only twenty, Ben had adopted the practice that Jon would have associated with someone in their sixties. Every article in that paper was available for free

online and yet Ben insisted on walking to the nearest corner shop every morning to purchase a physical copy. He must have stopped off on the drive back from Anthony's house to buy the paper.

'While murder might be your go-to solution, I'm going to have to think of something better,' Jon replied.

'Does that something better involve you not wasting my time talking about your boyfriend troubles?' Ben enquired.

'Boyfriend? We're talking about a girl.'

Ben shrugged and pretended to become fascinated by something in the newspaper.

'If you say so. I remember, about a year ago, you complaining that this Andrew guy was muscling in on your relationship with Franklyn.'

'Friendship,' Jon corrected. 'And I can't help it if this guy seems determined to take over every aspect of my life. He swoops in with his own private Minecraft server and more modding experience than anyone our age should have, and everyone treats him like he's some great guy who deserves the popularity given to him for any reason other than the fact that he has a fake ID and lax parents. That's probably the only reason why Roxanne is with him anyway.'

'I must not have made myself clear when you first cried to me about this. I don't care about your dramas. I didn't care when you were talking about your little bum buddies leaving you out of their virtual treehouse gang, and I don't care now that your beard is being snatched off you.'

'Jesus, dude,' Jon said, shaking his head. 'Why are you so into the idea of me and apparently everyone I know being secretly gay? Methinks the boy doth protest too much.'



Ben flapped his newspaper in a way that was clearly supposed to make a satisfying noise but instead only let out a soft rustle. He tried again but refrained from trying a third time when the result was just as underwhelming.

‘It’s the vibes you guys give out,’ he said. ‘You spend all your time talking to each other online, playing Minecraft and things. When was the last time you talked to a girl online?’

‘When was the last time you did?’

‘It’s not about me,’ Ben sniffed. ‘We’re talking about how tragic you are.’

There was a pause in which Jon was clearly supposed to respond. Jon, however, had grown tired of the conversation and was desperately waiting for it to end.

‘Fine,’ Ben sighed. ‘Just don’t be surprised when you find all your little friends sucking each other off in the bathroom or whatever.’

‘I still don’t get what this has to do with my chances of dating Roxanne,’ Jon said. ‘Unless you’re saying I’m definitely in with a shot.’

‘Maybe you could find some other poor girl to harass,’ Ben suggested. ‘Or die alone like we all know is your inevitable future anyway.’

‘I don’t even know why I bother talking to you about this,’ Jon sighed, the conversation far beyond the point of salvaging. ‘You’ve never had a girlfriend.’

‘I have had plenty of conversations with women. It’s just they all prefer to date losers, instead of a nice guy like me. Eventually, they’ll grow up and realise they want someone mature.’

Ben punctuated this thought by turning the page of the newspaper in such a way as to maximise the rustling of paper. Something seemed to pop into his head, and he felt the need to add onto the conversation in his best Phil Mitchell impression. It was, like most Phil

Mitchell impressions, mediocre, but seemed as necessary to a young man's life as an impression of Batman and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

'In the meantime,' Ben said, in his mock London drawl, 'They'll keep going for muppets like you, you toilet.'

Jon gave up on the conversation as he heard the soft padding of his mother's footsteps on the stairs. She stood in the doorway to the living room and surveyed the room. Jon checked his laptop screen to ensure it was dutifully presenting a façade of work. He had a Word document open that contained an analysis of Macbeth from two years ago and a Wikipedia article on the Crimea War open in Google Chrome. These were to mask the social media sites he had open in a separate window and the paused game of Minecraft that lurked underneath it all. Their mother seemed to be waiting for the conversation to resume but when it didn't, she took her seat on the sofa beside Ben. Jon knew he had been strategic in sitting in the armchair. With his mother no longer able to see the screen, he minimised the unnecessary windows and went back to scrolling through the endless drivel that people thought the world needed to see.

'You're not planning on wasting time chasing after some girl, are you?' his mother said, apparently having heard something of the conversation.

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?' his mother questioned, her voice mimicking Jon's. 'You need to be a lot more like your brother and not waste any time on nonsense. He works hard and is well on his way to getting a proper job. Not only do you want to spend three years of your life reading books at some overpriced university, but now you want to go chasing after girls as well. Who'd want to date someone like you anyway? Is she disabled or something?'

'If she does go for him, she must at least be blind,' Ben chipped in.

Jon knew better than to provide a reaction. He stared intently at Memebase's latest Rage Comics as though they were the most interesting things in the world. As the seconds passed, he knew he would have to say something to stave off another wave of taunts.

'I'm working hard enough,' he said at last. 'What I do in my own time is up to me.'

When the words had left his mouth, Jon realised he had made a mistake. His mother's eyes widened.

'While you live in my house, you follow my rules. You are on my time. I am letting you live here without asking for a single penny off of you. Do you know how lucky you are? Most parents make their kids work, but I'm allowing you to focus on your schoolwork. I could charge you, you know. I'd be well within my rights. If you think you have time to waste, then maybe we'll have to see about getting you a job. You can pay for all of the electricity you use, sitting on that computer all day.'

Jon quelled his mother with the usual blend of silence and mumbled apologies. She had been getting increasingly agitated ever since he had applied for university. That agitation worsened with each conditional offer he received. Her main issue seemed to be one of cost. She bemoaned the inevitable drain on her bank account Jon's departure would entail, despite him continually informing her about the various loans and grants that ensured his living expenses were fully covered. The imminent arrival of Jon's eighteenth birthday was also signalling a change to Anthony's child support payments. Anthony had made it clear that he would continue the payments but would be doing so directly into a bank account he had set up for Jon; a change he would enact sooner if he was legally able to. Jon's mother believed she was still owed this money even when Jon would no longer be living with her.

'There's the fuel it takes to drive you there,' she insisted. 'And I expect you'll be wanting me to do your shopping and your laundry, as though I'm some maid you can boss around.'

Nothing Jon could say would calm his mother's anxieties or ease her feelings of injustice in much the same way as nothing she could say would stop him going. University was as magical a place as Hogwarts, and he would have dug his way out of the house with a rusty spoon if that's what it took to get to that glorious realm of freedom.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File Two Successfully Loaded

Dan felt a bit like Harry Potter when he woke up on the first day of the Christmas holidays. Like the titular wizard, he had no relatives with whom he would want to spend the holidays and so spent his time exploring the mostly empty campus. The cold weather had started to yield some snowfall that dusted the poorly gritted paths with a scattering of white. It had been twelve days since Dan had met Sakinah, and five days were left until his planned exit from the world, which seemed like enough time to find Sakinah and understand what had transpired between the two of them. He had stalked the campus every day since they met, only pausing the search to go to lectures and to sleep at night. He visited all three of the coffee shops, the two restaurants and even the four bars, though he doubted she would be in those places. He had checked the derelict accommodation block and had drifted through every building on campus to which a student had ready access.

Dan knew he should have asked Sakinah what she was studying, so that he could have tracked her down to a specific part of the campus. During the first month of university, everyone, including himself, had seemed to introduce themselves in the exact same way. They would state their name, the subject they were studying and their hometowns. The scripted introductions had fallen out of fashion as people started to get more comfortable in

their new environment, but Dan lamented the loss as he realised that Sakinah could have been ensconced in any of the campus's seemingly endless array of buildings.

The arrival of the Christmas holidays brought with it the distinct possibility that Sakinah would not be on campus at all. If she had gone home, Dan feared he would never see her again. His one meaningful interaction with another human being in a long time had slipped through his fingers. He would never again connect with anyone. Too much had happened. He was too far gone. Still, there were five days left. Five days to turn things around. The best way to see if life was going to be worth living would be with a good cup of coffee, so Dan headed to the café where he had last seen Sakinah.

As Dan approached the glass door to the cafe, he noted that aside from the lone barista staring at their phone, there were three other people inside. The presence of such an enormous crowd nearly made Dan turn away and look for somewhere else, but laziness overrode the instinct, and he pushed open the door.

Dan placed his regular order and took a step back to let anyone else get to the counter. It was a force of habit, he didn't expect anyone else to be ordering coffee, but it proved a necessary measure when, a moment later, the glass door opened and admitted a new customer. Dan paid them no attention. When they didn't approach the counter, Dan looked over. He recognised the coat with the fur-lined hood and the face that peeked out from the hijab that encircled it; Dan had made a point of researching Islam on the internet to, at the very least, learn the correct words for things. Sakinah stood there, clearly debating whether to go through with her coffee purchase or to turn around and run away. Dan helped her make at least part of the decision by getting the barista's attention and ordering the same coffee Sakinah had ordered last time: medium latte with shaved chocolate on the top. He paid for the drink and collected both coffees once they were done. After loading both cups with sugar, Dan looked at Sakinah, then at one of the many free tables and the door. She understood his

message clearly enough and reluctantly nodded her head towards the door. Dan handed her the coffee and they left the café.

Dan had been thinking a lot about what he would say to Sakinah if he ever were to encounter her again. There were many interesting ways to start a conversation with her. He had played out several scenarios in his head. Of all the things he could have said, Dan had no idea why he went with the thing he ultimately did say.

‘That’s a hijab,’ he said, pointing at her scarf.

‘Yes, it is,’ she replied.

A few tense seconds passed. Dan knew he was already making a mess of things and thought of the next best thing to say; a comment he also immediately regretted.

‘I’d have thought you’d have gone home for Christmas,’ he said. ‘Spend the holidays with your family.’

‘I don’t celebrate Christmas,’ she pointed out.

‘But still, it’s a holiday and a good opportunity to be with family,’ Dan said. ‘Even better if you don’t celebrate Christmas.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because you get to enjoy the time off from school, or uni, and not have to worry about being ferried around to various relatives’ houses, relatives you never normally see, just to have some dry turkey and watch all of the adults slowly get drunk while you sit and contemplate life.’

‘You make it sound so exciting. How come you’re not home for the holidays then?’

Dan nearly stopped walking as his brain tried to produce an answer to that question, which would avoid going down the rabbit hole of further explanations. The inevitable returning of the question was why he had regretted asking Sakinah the moment it had left his lips. He tapped a finger on the lid of his coffee cup and looked at the gently falling snow.



‘Might be a white Christmas this year,’ Sakinah said, also watching the snow.

‘They say that every year. I bet Christmas day will be about twenty-four degrees, bright sunshine, barbecue weather.’

Sakinah laughed before taking a rapid sip of coffee.

The pair walked aimlessly around the campus, keeping conversation to unchallenging small talk for a while. Anytime they passed another living soul, there was an opportunity to wonder among themselves why that particular person was also still on campus. After a while, Dan remembered one of his biggest regrets from the first encounter and asked her what she studied.

‘Maths,’ she replied. ‘I’m hoping to be an accountant one day.’

‘Who hopes to become an accountant?’ Dan asked.

‘Me. Why? What’s wrong with being an accountant?’

‘It’s fine if you’re called something like Desmond and you have a comb-over, but for everyone else it’s a bit mundane, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ Sakinah replied. ‘And remind me. What incredible career will you be getting with your English degree?’

Dan grasped his chest and pretended to be injured.

‘You got me there,’ he smiled. ‘It’s good that you’ve got an idea of where you want to go. I kind of fell into this degree because I wanted to go to uni and it seemed like the best option at the time.’

‘Is it worth it?’ Sakinah asked. ‘Being here even though you have no idea why?’

Dan stopped. Having walked up and down the various arterial paths that ran throughout the campus, Dan and Sakinah had arrived back at the centre. Layers of snow had been steadily thickening to the point where the soft crunching of footsteps had provided a steady rhythm to their conversation. The blank grey sky, the softly falling snow, and the

bizarre arrangement of old and modern buildings made the place feel as though it were part of an eccentric Christmas card, or a movie whose budget kept fluctuating during production, resulting in a mismatched quality for the props. Something about Sakinah made Dan want to say the right thing. There was a glint in those rich brown eyes of hers, a brightness in her smile, and a melody in her laugh all of which encouraged him to keep on talking to her. Yet, among these radiant aspects of her, there was something more. There was a slight hunch to her shoulders, which slowly went, as her smile became more frequent, and returned when it faded. There was a way that she looked sometimes, as though she were in another place entirely and only her body was next to him. Like Dan, she had revealed little about her home life. He thought about the deadline he had given himself to find a reason to live.

Seeing Sakinah, framed by the falling snow, there was only one possible answer to her question.

‘Definitely worth it,’ he said. ‘At least, I think it will be.’

Some part of the answer was wrong. Sakinah’s smile froze and then vanished entirely. She finished her coffee and hurried over to a nearby bin to throw away the cup. Dan followed but saw that Sakinah had no intention of returning to him. He tossed the rest of his coffee in the bin so that it wouldn’t spill on him as he strode after Sakinah.

‘What happened?’ Dan asked as he drew level with Sakinah. ‘What did I say?’

‘You didn’t say anything,’ she replied, quickening her pace.

‘We were getting along so well,’ Dan protested. ‘I don’t understand what went wrong. Did I say something? Did I do something?’

Sakinah stopped with such abruptness that it took a second for Dan to register she was no longer charging forward. He turned to face her.

‘We can’t do this,’ Sakinah said. ‘I’m sorry. You should go.’

‘Do what?’

‘Hang out together. It’s not right. I shouldn’t have come with you today. I shouldn’t have spoken to you before. I’m sorry. Please go.’

‘We’re doing nothing wrong. We’re just talking. Getting to know each other.’

‘You don’t know me.’

‘I’d like to.’

‘No,’ Sakinah said firmly. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘Can’t I be the judge of that?’

Sakinah said nothing. Instead, she turned and walked off. Desperate not to lose her again, Dan jogged slightly until he was once again level with her.

‘If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll call the police,’ Sakinah warned.

‘Just tell me what’s going on,’ Dan insisted. ‘Why is it wrong for us to talk?’

‘Because I’m married,’ Sakinah snapped. ‘Sort of.’

Then she started walking again. Dan hesitated. As Sakinah neared the corner of the library building, Dan decided he had to go after her.

‘What do you mean you’re sort of married?’ Dan said, stupidly. Then, ‘You’re not old enough to be married.’

‘How old do you think I am?’ Sakinah asked.

Dan was caught off guard by this question.

‘Eighteen?’ he said, uncertainly. ‘Like me.’

‘I’m twenty-two.’

‘Twenty-two?’ Dan spluttered. ‘Are you sure?’

‘There are quite a lot of things in the world that I don’t really understand,’ Sakinah admitted. ‘But my own birthday doesn’t tend to be one of them.’

‘So, you’re old,’ Dan said before seeing Sakinah’s expression change. ‘Older than I thought,’ he corrected. ‘But that doesn’t answer the whole marriage question.’

‘Do you need me to explain to you how two people get married?’ Sakinah asked.

‘And will your next question be about where babies come from? Because I don’t think I can help you if you’re that lost.’

Dan felt the conversation, and Sakinah, slipping away from him. He knew his next words would have to be chosen carefully to avoid upsetting her further.

‘I understand all that,’ Dan assured her, as a particularly fat snowflake landed on top of Sakinah’s head. ‘I was curious about your marriage and why that means we can’t talk or be friends.’

‘You’ve answered your own question.’

‘Have I?’

‘It’s my marriage,’ she said. ‘Therefore, none of your business.’

There was no point pressing the matter further. Dan remembered what his life had been before he left for university. He knew better than to get into a situation that was ultimately doomed from the outset.

‘I understand,’ Dan said, raising his hands in a placatory gesture. ‘If you don’t feel comfortable being around me, then I’m not going to push it any further. I was worried about you because of what you said the last time we met. I thought we could have been friends. Hope the whole accounting thing goes well.’

With that, Dan turned and walked away. He knew he would likely never see Sakinah again. There was nothing left to do but carry on and forget the whole thing.

‘We can be friends,’ Sakinah called from behind him.

Dan stopped walking.

‘It’s a very complicated situation,’ she explained. ‘It’s not appropriate to be talking to you, or anyone, about it.’

Seeing the pained look on Sakinah's face and the way her hands were tugging at each other made Dan soften. He thought of his own parents and the mess they had made of their lives trying to make things work, when anyone watching them could have told them they were better off apart. He thought of the way that his own infatuations had blinded him to the truth in the past. Then other thoughts started to sneak in, and he knew that he needed to say something, if only to distract himself away from all of that.

'Relationships are messy and complicated,' Dan agreed. 'If you do want to talk about anything, then I'm here. But I really don't want to pressure you into anything. I want you to be comfortable.'

'I think I'd like that. I'd like to talk about things,' Sakinah nodded before looking around warily. 'But not here. Somewhere more private.'

Dan looked around at the thoroughly deserted campus. They were completely alone. Dan was about to point out this fact when he heard a laugh from the distance. Two people ran past throwing snowballs at each other. It was as though Sakinah had willed them into existence just to prove her point.

'Understandable,' Dan conceded. 'You can come back to my room if you want?'

Sakinah laughed.

'I'm sure that line has worked on quite a few girls, but I'm going to have to pass on the offer. I still don't really know anything about you. Why would I trust you enough to go back to your room?'

'How about we start with that then?' Dan suggested. 'We could get to know each other. If you feel you want to share the heavy stuff as part of that, then that's cool, but if you want to wait, then that's also good. It'll probably be less weird to tell a friend what you're going through than a complete stranger.'

After considering this for a moment, Sakinah nodded.

‘Meet me at the sports field tonight at nine and we can hang out for a bit. How does that sound?’

‘It’s a date,’ Dan smiled.

When Sakinah did not return the smile, Dan apologised and clarified that it was not, of course, a date and was a chance for two people to platonically get to know each other with the only motivation being one of friendship. Sakinah let Dan ramble on for a few minutes before she cut him off with a smile.

‘I was only teasing you,’ she clarified. ‘See you tonight. It’ll be good to talk properly.’

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File One Successfully Loaded

The promise of a new week hung in the cold December air as Jon made his way to school. Granted, the Mayans were predicting the world would end that Friday, 21.12.12, but that was no reason to feel bad. There had been other apocalypse predictions in the past and he had lived through all of those just fine. He'd lived through Y2K and the time those Swedish scientists could have made a black hole with the Large Hadron Collider. Some ancient calendar wasn't going to frighten him. School was ending for the Christmas holidays on the 21<sup>st</sup>, which was something that could be believed. If he wanted a shot at impressing Roxanne, he would have to act quickly while the Stockholm-Syndrome-inducing effects of the school year were still in full effect.

Despite his best efforts, Jon was unable to see Roxanne until lunchtime. Even then, she was sitting with Andrew, chatting away. Jon considered how to approach the situation and determined he would need some assistance. Locating Franklyn was easy: he was debating whether to buy a panini. The mere mention of Andrew caused Franklyn to join Jon and hurriedly buy the toasted sandwich. As Jon approached the table, he felt as though Franklyn were his bodyguard. He braced himself for the accusatory comments from Andrew that would forever destroy him in the eyes of Roxanne.



‘Do you reckon Gangnam Style will hit one billion views before or after the world ends?’ Andrew asked.

‘It has to be before,’ Roxanne said thoughtfully. ‘Because everyone will be dead when the world ends, so it can’t really be after.’

‘I’ve had it playing on loop every night,’ Franklyn said. ‘We’re making history here and I want to be a part of it.’

‘You like it that much?’ asked Andrew.

‘God no, I have it muted.’

‘Smart man,’ said Andrew, thoughtfully drinking a Capri-sun. ‘How about you, Jon? Get up to anything much over the weekend?’

‘Finally got myself some more diamonds,’ Jon said proudly, referring to the session of Minecraft he had snuck in past his mother’s watchful eye. ‘I’m now ready to go on and raid the Nether.’

‘Fuck yes,’ Andrew cheered, accidentally squirting a bit of Capri-sun onto the table. ‘Franklyn, my man, tell me you’re good to go as well?’

‘Full armour set and sword,’ he replied.

‘Enchanted?’

‘Obviously.’

‘Fuck yes,’ Andrew repeated, slapping Franklyn on the shoulder. ‘This Saturday. High noon. If either of you are late, I will ban you from the server. Well, first I’ll go into Creative Mode, pour lava on all your shit, then ban you from the server. Probably record it as well for YouTube. I’ll be the next *Yogscast*.’

‘How old are you guys?’ Roxanne asked. ‘Isn’t that game for children?’

Andrew let out a theatrical gasp and clutched his chest as though his heart would explode from the scandal of the words. He feigned horror so much that he nearly toppled from his chair. Catching the edge of the table in time, he righted himself.

‘Why would you say that?’ he asked.

‘Probably because of how it’s true,’ Roxanne said. ‘The shops are full of lunchboxes and shit aimed at kids. I think you’re all playing a kids’ game.’

‘But we’re running a modded version on a server,’ Franklyn explained. ‘A server that Andrew set up and runs for us. You can make your own factions and countries and stuff. It adds a whole level of geopolitical complexity that would go straight over the heads of children.’

‘You’re all huge nerds,’ Roxanne said, in a tone of mock realisation. ‘That is definitely better than being babies.’

‘Chicks dig a Minecraft player,’ Jon laughed.

His heart fluttered as the laugh was picked up by Roxanne, who smiled good naturedly at the three boys with whom she shared a table.

‘True,’ she muttered. ‘I’m having a hard time focusing on this pasta while surrounded by so many studs. Tell me again how ‘modded’ your baby game is.’

‘I did try showing it you,’ Andrew pointed out. ‘But you had other things in mind.’

Roxanne blushed, and Jon looked down. He focused intently on the packet of Monster Munch that was too close to the end to fill up much more of his time.

‘That reminds me, babe,’ Andrew said. ‘I need a new prescription for my inhaler.’

‘Why are you telling me?’ Roxanne asked. ‘I’m not your mother.’

‘You make me get through my inhaler, you help me remember to pick up a new one,’ Andrew smirked. ‘It’s only fair.’

Roxanne rolled her eyes. The conversation shifted to something else but Jon barely paid attention. He inputted whenever he felt it was necessary, but mostly just sat quietly. By the time the bell rang for the end of lunchtime, he may as well have not been there at all.

At the end of the school day, Jon met Roxanne, Franklyn and Andrew near Franklyn's locker. Jon was the last to arrive and was in time to hear the conclusion of Franklyn's daily rant about the new dog he had recently got. Jon saw Andrew's arm snake around Roxanne's shoulder and all thoughts of dogs drifted from his mind. Everyone finished their preparations for heading home. Coats were done up, woolly hats and scarves were put on, and bags were slung onto shoulders. Andrew seemed to find himself capable of releasing Roxanne for long enough to slip his ushanka over his ponytail.

The four left the sixth-form centre. Jon lived closest to the school, but never wanted to take the quickest path home in the evening. To do so would mean missing out on the walk home from school with friends: all the perks of a planned social event with none of the planning required. Jon's longer route ensured he would stay with the group and that Andrew would be the first to leave. Those last few minutes were his prime, quality time with Roxanne, sans Andrew, and not even the presence of Franklyn could spoil that.

The group split in two. Jon was surprised to discover that he was walking alongside Roxanne, while Franklyn and Andrew walked in front. The pair were excitedly discussing the latest anime they had been watching. Jon had tried to get into it but couldn't get past the mismanaged pacing of the show. The show was a boring boardroom drama that would, at random intervals, involve the men spontaneously removing their shirts and punching each other on the rooves of skyscrapers. The way the camera focused on the chiselled abs and glistening sweat of the men, as they made suggestive noises at each other, made the whole thing challenging to explain if his mother caught him watching it. It had been bad enough when *Yu-Gi-Oh GX* had featured multiple scenes of a male teacher and a male transfer

student taking their tops off and punching each other between rounds of semi-lethal card games, and Jon was not prepared to endure that kind of nonsense for a whole show.

Roxanne was unimpressed by the way things had separated on the walk. She kept glaring at the two ahead whenever they laughed loudly. Jon felt the need to console her but wanted to avoid coming across as too desperate. He tried talking about neutral topics, like how much homework they had, but he gave up when she clearly wasn't interested.

'Have you heard about the party he's throwing?' Roxanne asked, as Franklyn and Andrew drifted further away.

'Whose party?' Jon asked cluelessly.

'Andrew. He's having it on Friday night. In that hotel on the edge of town. It's a big end-of-the-world thing. Kind of like those millennium parties everyone had in 1999. I asked him not to, but he's gone and invited Franklyn.'

Roxanne had slowed her walking speed. This meant that Andrew and Franklyn were beyond the range of hearing such a quiet conversation. Andrew was too absorbed in his conversation with Franklyn to notice that Roxanne was no longer right behind him, the two of them joking around and talking animatedly.

'Is that a problem?' Jon asked.

The look that Roxanne gave him was all the answer he needed. For further answer, she gestured towards the two in front as though she were a museum tour guide helping a particularly dense tourist find the toilet.

'It's going to be like this all night,' Roxanne sighed. 'Look, I'm not one of those girls who stops a guy from having friends or hobbies or anything, but this is an obsession. Do you know how long he spends on that stupid Minecraft server? Not even playing the game, just tinkering around with files and settings. Sometimes, I'm over there and we barely talk the

whole time. And not in the fun way. I think he wants a girlfriend but has no idea what to do with one when he has one. Who gets side-lined by a kids' game?'

Jon wasn't sure how to play the situation. Andrew and Roxanne were obvious enough in their PDAs but had never taken the plunge in going Facebook-official, so it was unclear how serious their relationship was. Jon also feared giving himself away, for the response to her comment in his head was an emphatic encouragement to break up with Andrew and be with him instead.

'If he's invited you to the party, then it means he won't be distracted by the server,' Jon noted.

Roxanne repeated her gesture towards Andrew with all the frustration of that same tour guide, who has now had to watch the dense tourist urinate on the Mona Lisa, despite being shown where the toilet was five minutes prior.

'I see your point,' Jon conceded.

'I reckon you should come to the party,' Roxanne said, seeming to decide in that moment that it would be a brilliant idea. 'I mean, he hates—'

She cut herself off before finishing, but the unsaid word hung in the air. The grin that had spread on her face at the inception of her masterplan vanished.

'He hates me?' Jon questioned.

'I never said that,' Roxanne replied.

'You basically did though.'

'But I never actually did.'

'Why does he hate me?' Jon asked. 'I thought we were friends.'

This time, Jon received an inquisitive eyebrow for his troubles. He sighed and nodded in response.

‘Obviously we’re not friends, but I think hate is a bit of a strong term. I’ve helped him loads in Minecraft. I let him borrow my diamond pickaxe.’

‘And while I’m sure the best man at your wedding to him will tell that story with all the emotional weight it deserves, you’re delusional if you think he does anything more than just tolerate you for the sake of Franklyn.’

‘Does Franklyn know he hates me?’

‘I don’t even think Franklyn knows what day of the week it is half of the time.’

‘He does,’ Jon replied, still processing this new information. ‘It’s printed on his socks.’

Jon was hurt by the revelation of Andrew’s hatred, despite knowing such hurt made no sense; the feeling was mutual, as Jon only tolerated Andrew due to Franklyn. He realised that, from an outside perspective, it may have seemed as though Franklyn was a shining beacon of charisma, the social glue holding everyone together. However, it was not Franklyn’s charisma that had spawned the friendship group, it was his ability to keep openly expressing an interest in things that the rest of the student body had dismissed as either being for babies or for nerds. Franklyn’s unashamed love of Pokémon, Minecraft and Yu-Gi-Oh had served as a flame to which all other nerd moths were drawn. Jon had known Franklyn longer than anyone but had raised no argument when Franklyn had steadily accumulated a gathering of other lost souls. Like the ball from *Katamari Damacy*, the social group had grown to the point where most other people had started leaving them alone. Since making the transition from main school to sixth form, a huge chunk of that ball had flaked off, resulting in the awkward alliance between Jon and Andrew, for the people who used to buffer them had gone off, after Year 11, to colleges, jobs, or their parents’ sofas.

Andrew had made himself an irreplaceable part of the group ever since the third week of Year 12. He had walked into the Sixth-Form Centre, slapped down his laptop on the table,

and beat the final boss of *Portal* to a crowd of eleven awestruck teenagers. The tenseness of the boss fight had been heightened by the school's ban on personal electronics, and the skill Andrew displayed in the game was undeniably impressive. Franklyn had gushed about that display for weeks and would still remember it with a smile, if it ever came up. Even Jon had to admire the audacious act and the talent involved. Thus, Jon had come to tolerate Andrew and he had thought that tolerance was reciprocated.

Any hurt experienced by Jon was a matter of pride and ego. It clouded the fact that he definitely did not care about what anyone thought of him. If being hated seemed like an incredibly unfair, unnecessary way to feel about someone who had never actually done anything wrong, then that's because it was. It was unfair. Jon had not even one time told Andrew to go and choke on that stupid ponytail of his which, in itself, was such an act of charity that Andrew should have been eternally indebted to Jon and not gone around claiming to hate him.

'But what have I ever done to make Andrew hate me?' Jon asked.

'I wouldn't know anything about Andrew hating you or not hating you,' Roxanne shrugged with all the grace of an allegation-denying politician. 'But he may have mentioned how you act like you know everything. And he thinks you have a crush on me, which I told him is ridiculous. But that's something we're going to use.'

'Going to use in what way?'

A squirrel rustled a nearby tree, and Jon noticed they were now heading off the pavement and onto the towpath of the canal. He had walked the route so many times it barely registered for him where he was at any given moment, if the conversation was engaging enough or if a cloud happened to be in an interesting shape.

'You're coming to the party on Friday now, right?' Roxanne said as though the matter had already been sorted. 'Andrew will know it's because I invited you and he won't like it

much. He'll be jealous. That might be enough to get him away from his loverboy for a few minutes but, if not, I can openly flirt with you and that will definitely get him going.'

Not knowing how to respond, Jon nodded along, as though what he was hearing made some form of sense and was not, in fact, the most ridiculous idea he had ever heard. The smell of wood fires coming from the chimneys of the moored narrowboats calmed him slightly, but the thought of having to get his mother's permission to go to a party caused his pulse to quicken. How would he answer her if she asked him who had invited him? Should he mention Roxanne at all, or would that be a definite no? The whole thing would require some precision and maybe a few gentle nudges from Ben, if he could be persuaded to drop his neutral stance for a bit. The cost would be high, he'd likely have to promise Ben any Cadbury's selection boxes that came Jon's way for Christmas, but it may be a price worth paying if it kept Roxanne happy.

'There will be plenty of booze and the place it's being held is notoriously lax on the whole ID thing,' Roxanne added as further incentive. 'For you babies who haven't turned eighteen yet, it should mean you'll still be able to get at least a little shitfaced so long as you don't make a scene or anything.'

'I'll have to consult my busy schedule, check in with my receptionist and reorganise a few major business meetings, but I should be able to come.'

'Brilliant,' Roxanne smiled.

They both looked over to where Franklyn and Andrew were now standing still. The towpath was right next to the carpark of a pub, where Andrew's dad was waiting to pick him up. Andrew could have been collected from the school itself, but he had elected to elongate the walk by talking his dad into meeting him at the pub. Andrew lived in one of the neighbouring villages that clustered around the town of Oxbow, home of Jon, Roxanne, Franklyn, and the school.



‘One more thing,’ Roxanne whispered as they approached. ‘Andrew may get tetchy, even a little bit violent after he’s had a few. If things start getting too heated, then we’ll call the whole thing off.’

Seeing the look on Jon’s face, she smiled at him and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘I’ve only seen him actually punch someone twice. You’ll be fine.’

With a wink, she skipped onto the tarmac of the carpark and into the waiting arms of Andrew. Jon lingered on the towpath. While he embraced Roxanne, Andrew shot Jon a warning look.

‘I’ll message you tonight, babe,’ Andrew said before kissing Roxanne.

While Andrew and Roxanne said their goodbyes, Jon joined Franklyn in the carpark. They both moved away from Andrew’s dad’s car and leaned against a metal railing. When it became clear that Andrew was in no rush to go home, Franklyn cleared his throat.

‘I’ve been thinking about dyeing my armour set ahead of this weekend,’ Franklyn said. ‘I’ve been trying to think of a good colour though. We should all have something distinctive.’

‘Can you even dye diamond armour?’ Jon asked.

‘Think so. I’ll check the wiki later. If you can, what colour are you going to go for.’

‘I haven’t bothered gathering materials for dyes.’

‘I’ve got loads. We all have to be looking sharp for our big adventure.’

Even when Roxanne had finished with Andrew and had regrouped with Jon and Franklyn, Franklyn’s enthusiasm didn’t die down at all. The rest of the walk was short and the three parted ways at the same time. Their respective homes were equidistant from the canal bridge that looked across at the playground of St Michael’s First School. It was at this

point they parted ways every evening, and Jon noticed the look of relief on Roxanne's face when she knew she was finally free of Franklyn.

On his own again, Jon was left to consider how to approach the situation. It was the first time he had been invited to this type of party. Upon reflection, it had been quite a few years since he had partied with anyone other than Franklyn. Apart from there no longer being jelly and ice cream, Jon had no idea what to expect.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File Two Successfully Loaded

A combination of the snow and the darkness lent the sports fields an unknowability that made it both exciting and unsettling. Were those great mounds of shadow a pile of sporting equipment or something more mysterious, like a collection of alien relics or dinosaur bones? Dan allowed himself to imagine how he would have responded to this environment as a child. He would have loved the snow, he knew that much, and would have fearlessly uncovered every mystery until the commanding voice of one of his parents called him back to reality.

Sakinah seemed fine with the silence. Dan couldn't see her face in the darkness and wasn't sure if she was as mesmerised by the scenery as he was. He wasn't sure of a lot of things as far as she was concerned. He knew he should be saying something witty and insightful to get the conversation off to a good start. Yet, for the past few minutes, he had been unable to think of anything interesting to say. As the pressure of conversation pressed down upon him, Dan blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

'Once, when I was about six, a snowball hit me in the back of the head and the snow ran down under my coat, and I got so cold I cried,' he said, before immediately resolving never to speak again.

‘Good job we can’t see the snow anymore, then,’ Sakinah laughed. ‘It might cause you to have a nervous breakdown.’

They walked along a thin path that cut through some trees before it opened out into another playing field.

‘Who threw it?’ Sakinah asked. ‘The snowball that made you cry?’

‘It was my...’ Dan started before thinking more carefully about his answer. ‘It was a friend of mine. Not even a friend, really, just some neighbourhood kid. They didn’t even throw the snowball. They ran up to me and slapped it on the back of my neck.’

‘Brutal.’

‘A lot can happen in a small town like the one I grew up in,’ Dan said, lightly. ‘You’d be surprised.’

Sakinah moved closer to him. Her shoulder brushed against his. The coats they both wore were too thick to permit their body heat to escape, but even so, Dan could have sworn he felt the warmth of her, even if it was just for a second.

‘Tell me about it,’ Sakinah said. ‘This ‘small town’ of yours? What was life like for baby Daniel?’

‘Nothing all that interesting,’ Dan shrugged. ‘The usual stuff that happens to people growing up. Nothing special.’

Sakinah turned her head to look fully at Dan. Dan looked at her as best he could in the dark and found that his eyes had adjusted to the gloom. The snow had offset a lot of the usual darkness and allowed him to see the outline of her features. A steady puff of white was escaping from her mouth into the cold night air.

‘It was your idea to chat and get to know each other,’ she pointed out. ‘Unless you’re some kind of serial killer and you’ve lured me out here to my doom, then you’ve got to start

talking. Otherwise, I'm going to go back to my room and I'm going to binge something on Netflix.'

'A spring baby, I was always an inquisitive sort,' Dan began in a grandiose manner. 'My keen senses got me into as many problems as they got me out of, but I was, mostly affectionately, referred to as a baby genius, for I would solve many baby crimes before I turned one.'

'I'm going home,' Sakinah said.

She had stopped walking and was turning to leave when Dan placed a hand on her arm. They stood for a moment, as though Sakinah were a balloon that would float away if he let go. Then she looked at Dan's hand and back at his face, and even in the gloom he could tell what she was indicating. He pulled his hand back and apologised.

'Sorry, I have no idea where to begin,' Dan said, while thinking how to proceed. 'Maybe it'd be easier if you asked me questions. Ask me any question and I will try my best to answer honestly.'

Sakinah pondered this new power for a moment, before asking her first question.

'We'll start with the basics,' she decided. 'Tell me about your family.'

'What about them?'

'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'Who are they? What do they do?'

'I'm pretty much all out of family by this point,' Dan replied.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Sakinah replied. 'Can I ask what happened?'

They were walking again, side by side, following the natural curve of a running track.

'It was about a year ago,' Dan said. 'I went to a party and...'

He trailed off, the flood of memory threatening to overwhelm him. He found the words forming without him putting in a conscious effort to shape them, and it felt as though he were describing the events of someone else's life. He supposed, in a way, he was.

‘Some bad stuff happened, that night, and I didn’t get home until really late,’ he found himself continuing. ‘When I did get back, my mother, she...’

Again, there was the question of how exactly to put it into words, and again, the decision was made for him by some impulse within his brain that robbed him of the chance to tell the story in the way he wanted to tell it.

‘She died that night,’ came the conclusion. ‘Fell down the stairs and hit her head.’

A silence as thick and uninterrupted as the snow around them settled upon the conversation. Dan wished Sakinah would ask more, that she would be compelled to plumb the depths of his experiences and extract every fibre of information possible from him. He wanted to talk, to scream, to shout out everything that was left unsaid, everything he could hear thudding around him so thickly that he could swear that she’d be able to hear it too. He knew the words he wanted to say would make her leave, make her hate him, yet he wanted, needed, to say them anyway.

‘Probably should have just stuck with the whole ‘uneventful life’ thing. Sorry,’ Dan said, robbing himself of the potential for greater discussion without fully knowing why.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sakinah echoed. ‘Do you have a dad?’

‘Not really,’ Dan said, the truth of that statement remaining unpacked in the mountain of unsaid words piling up around him.

‘What did you do when your mum died?’

‘I went to stay with my grandparents for a bit, but they were not super keen on having me as a long-term guest,’ Dan said. ‘My nan told me she’d raised five kids, and had done more than her share of child raising, and needed to be left alone to retire in peace. My grandad didn’t say anything, but I think I’ve heard him say about seven words in my entire life. That’s why I’m spending my Christmas holidays boring you to death in the freezing cold.’

Nothing was said for ages after that. They walked around the track like two clockwork figures making their way around a fixed circuit, unable to change anything about their journey.

‘Can I give you a hug?’ Sakinah asked. ‘I’m sorry if that’s weird, or super inappropriate or anything, but what you told me all sounded really heavy and I kind of want to give you a hug.’

‘I’d like that,’ Dan said, before adding, ‘Also in a way that is not weird or super inappropriate.’

Sakinah laughed as she wrapped her arms around him. It was only when her body was against his that Dan realised how much shorter she was than him. His head could have rested comfortably on top of hers. He caught a whiff of her perfume, a sweet aroma, more like a bag of jellybeans than any plant. It was a short hug and Sakinah took an exaggerated step back once she had let go of Dan. She smiled at him, and he smiled at her.

‘Now that I’ve dumped my heavy stuff on you and totally killed the vibe of this whole evening, do you want to hang out and chat some more or go back to your room and pretend we never even met each other?’

Sakinah faked looking at a watch as though the time would determine her answer.

‘Well, Daniel, I’m still free to hang out if you are,’ she replied. ‘Besides, you haven’t asked me any questions yet.’

‘What’s your family situation, mysterious husband aside, of course.’

‘I have a mum and a dad and a sister.’

‘Older or younger.’

‘My parents are older than me, but my sister is younger.’

‘That’s a good way round to be.’

‘I find it works.’



‘What do they all do?’

‘My mum is a lawyer,’ Sakinah replied. ‘My dad is an engineer. And Aaliyah, that’s my sister, is in Year 11 now.’

The conversation found a steadier groove with the pair exchanging snippets of information about their lives. Eventually, Sakinah checked her phone to discover what the time was and was surprised to discover that two hours had elapsed.

‘We must have walked around this track at least fifty times,’ Dan commented. ‘If we do this again, we’ll be Olympic ready in no time.’

‘Olympic walking?’ Sakinah questioned.

‘It’s a real thing.’

‘It’s not a real thing.’

Dan looked at her with enough confidence that she started tapping away at her phone. She paused for a few seconds before slowly shaking her head.

‘How is it a real thing?’ she whispered.

They parted ways once back within the lit boundaries of the main campus, but agreed to do it again.

And do it again they did. The next night, and the night after that. And the night after that. Conversation flowed more freely between the pair the more they talked. Sakinah spoke about her faith. She was so confident in her beliefs and spoke with such eloquence that it was hard to not want to believe in something. Dan reflected on his own fragmented spiritual life. How long had it been since he had set foot in a church? Would any god forgive him for that streak of atheism he had as a teenager? Why had it meant so much to him to argue with anyone who expressed the slightest hint of faith?

‘It was actually a physics teacher, in Year 10, who snapped me out of being an atheist,’ Dan told Sakinah, to her great fascination. ‘There was one Christian kid in the class

who was properly into it. She went to church every Sunday. She wore a crucifix. She even gave up something actually meaningful for Lent and not ‘homework’ or ‘eating vegetables’. Well, she asked what existed before the Big Bang, and the teacher said there was nothing. When asked how everything could have come from nothing, he didn’t have an answer. Which is kind of dumb, because a fundamental law of physics is that matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed. I realised that, by the laws of science, there must have been something before the Big Bang, otherwise our very existence would be impossible. I don’t know if science has an answer and it was that one teacher who was an idiot, but it was enough to make me believe in a higher power.’

‘So that made you religious?’ Sakinah asked.

‘Not religious, as such. I’d consider myself agnostic, at the moment. I know there’s something out there, I just don’t know what. I did used to be Catholic, when I was a kid.’

‘How did you know Catholicism wasn’t the path for you?’

‘I was only ever really one because of my dad. I drifted away from the faith years ago and have never seen a reason to drift back. So now my soul is open to whichever deity wants to make a play for it first.’

‘We all have our own ways of finding God,’ Sakinah said. ‘For me, I see the proof of His existence all around. Every flake of snow, every blade of grass. When you look at how much stuff there is in the world and how beautiful it all is, I can’t believe it all happened by chance. It all fits together and works perfectly, it doesn’t make sense that there’s no guiding hand behind it all. Mathematically, the chances of so much happening randomly are incredibly low.’

‘Not impossible though,’ Dan pointed out.

‘Not impossible, but then neither is it impossible for a satellite to fall from orbit and crush you in the next five seconds, but you’re going to carry on living your life as though

that's not going to happen. When the odds of something occurring are so small, it may as well be impossible.'

Over the next week, the snow melted away and was replaced by rain, during which Dan and Sakinah still walked and talked, an umbrella shielding them from the elements. Dan barely noticed the passing of the day when he had planned to take his own life. He could not imagine going back into that abandoned building either, not when there was so much more he wanted to talk about with Sakinah. He wanted to know everything about her, let her know everything about him. Life had meaning again.

At the end of the second week, Sakinah slipped her arm through Dan's and walked with her head resting on his shoulder. By the end of the following week, they had spent more time walking in silence, simply existing in each other's company, than they had spent talking.

The night before lectures were due to resume, there was a shift in the dynamic between them. Rain had been falling nonstop for the past three days, turning any unpaved ground into a barely navigable sludge. Dan and Sakinah had pressed on with their walks, but they had been getting shorter, for half of the time was spent avoiding large puddles and patches of mud. Dan dutifully carried the umbrella and Sakinah linked arms with him after five minutes of walking.

A steady rhythm of rain drummed down on the umbrella as they made their way along the usual route. While helping Sakinah find her way around a puddle, Dan lost his footing and found the world slipping out from under him. Had his life been a romantic comedy, he would have pulled Sakinah down on top of him. Instead, he landed wetly in the mud, his umbrella falling to one side. Dan floundered for a second before Sakinah extended a hand to help him. He pulled himself to his feet, his hand still holding hers. Movies had always portrayed rain as being somehow intimate, but Dan found that, without the umbrella, he was getting very wet and very cold and very uncomfortable. Still, he did not want to stop holding

onto Sakinah. He did not want to stop looking into those deep brown eyes of hers. And, as she moved closer to him, he did not ever want to pull away. The second before their lips touched, Sakinah turned her head slightly and stepped back.

‘We’re getting drenched,’ she said.

Dan scooped up the umbrella and restored it to its rightful position. He looked at her, unsure of what would happen next. She looked down, and let out a long sigh.

‘I guess I should probably tell you about my husband.’

As far as romantic pickup lines went, Dan had certainly heard better ones. Yet he knew what it meant, and the original point of the walks had been to make Sakinah comfortable enough to be able to offload her pain onto him. They agreed such a conversation would be ill-suited to an environment where they had to keep stopping every two minutes to avoid falling over.

Sakinah led the way to a deserted bus stop, and they sat on the bench. The rain drummed on the plastic bus shelter, while an electronic sign displayed the fact that there were no more buses scheduled that evening. Dan sat awkwardly, partly because he was anxious about the conversation that was to come but mostly because of his wet clothes. Sakinah was grasping her knees as though she were on a roller coaster ride and was desperate for the experience to be over.

‘I should probably say that I’m not actually married anymore,’ Sakinah started. ‘I am divorced, which is a pretty dire state to be in when you’re my age.’

‘How come you said you were married?’ Dan asked after an audible sigh of relief.

‘I only said I was sort of married. It was easier than explaining everything,’ Sakinah replied. ‘I didn’t want you to get too close, because it wouldn’t be a good idea.’

‘I think it’s a bit late for that.’

Sakinah smiled, a sadness in her eyes.

‘That’s why we’re having this conversation. You have to know some things before we take things any further. You have to know why it’s a terrible idea.’

‘Lay it on me, chief,’ Dan said.

Sakinah looked at him but thought better of questioning his comment.

‘The guy I married seemed like a really good guy. He treated me well at first and he was from a good family. It wasn’t some arranged marriage kind of thing. Our families barely knew each other. It was a guy I’d gone to school with. I’d known him for years and he always seemed like he was a nice guy, you know? Always trying to make other people feel happy and included. He never bullied anyone, never even said a bad word to anyone. I married him when I was nineteen, straight after finishing my A-Levels. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew I wanted him to be a part of it. Everything else, university, a career, that could all wait. We were together for a while, we even planned on having children together. There were issues though. Things between us started to break down. He became increasingly frustrated. He never took it out on me, but he became colder and more distant. He wasn’t the man I thought he was.’

Sakinah paused and gathered the strength to continue with the rest of the story.

‘Things got really messy,’ she said quietly. ‘My sister came to me and told me that they had been... that my husband had... that he’d... I didn’t believe her. I shouted at her and told her that she was trying to ruin my life and that she was jealous of my happiness. A week after that, I found her in the bathroom. She’d taken too many tablets and we had to rush her to hospital. She survived but the baby that she had been carrying didn’t. My parents insisted they did a DNA test on the baby and it matched my husband’s. He was nowhere to be found for ages, but a cousin of his eventually informed the police about where he was, and they arrested him.’

‘Arrested him?’

‘It had been going on for years,’ Sakinah whispered. ‘Like I said before, my sister is still doing her GCSEs; she turns sixteen next month. He had been preying on her since we got married. Aaliyah was only twelve when it started. All that time, it was happening right under my nose. I brought him into our family, into our home, and he used that position to get at her. I was the first person my sister told, after all that time, and I threw it back in her face. My parents blamed me for what happened to her. Not about what he did to her, but about her suicide attempt. They said I should have shown her some compassion. They were right. I let her down.’

‘When did this all happen?’ Dan asked.

‘A few months back. My parents decided it would be good for me to reset, to start on a new life path. So they packed me off to uni. There are worse fates, I suppose, but I know it’s because they want my sister to have time to heal. Without me being around. I ruined her life, and they’ll never forgive me for that. I’ll never forgive myself.’

‘When you love someone, you try your best to overlook their issues and their flaws. You do it because you love them and sometimes you do it without even realising. It’s normal.’

‘There had to have been signs,’ Sakinah protested. ‘I should have known something was going on.’

‘If you thought he was capable of a thing like that, you would never have married him.’

‘I’m Aaliyah’s sister. I should have protected her.’

‘Has anyone asked how all of this affected you?’ Dan asked. ‘Because it seems to me like you’re a victim in all of this as well.’

‘It doesn’t matter about me.’

‘Of course it does,’ Dan said. ‘You were betrayed on the deepest possible level by a man who seems like an absolute scumbag. It’s understandable that you wouldn’t have wanted to think badly of him if you were going to have kids and stuff. Maybe you could have done more for your sister, I can’t say. No one can. But I get why you would want to trust your husband.’

‘I made such a mess of everything,’ Sakinah said, tears forming in her eyes. ‘I wanted to be happy. Now, I don’t deserve that kind of happiness.’

Dan shook his head. He watched the steady downpour of rain outside the bus stop.

‘You deserve happiness. That creep shouldn’t be allowed to ruin anything else for you or your family. You deserve good things, Sakinah.’

A group of very drunk students stumbled into view on the pavement opposite. The leading boy had no shirt on and was periodically howling at the sky, while his slightly more reserved friends shouted obscenities at a passing squirrel.

‘You have a good heart,’ Dan said, watching the students go by as though he were on safari, and they were a herd of gazelle. ‘Your family will remember that eventually. It’s good for your sister to have time to heal, and I really hope she can. But it’s good for you to have some healing time too. Everyone needs time to reset, while that bastard rots in jail.’

Dan added an apology for swearing, which Sakinah waved away with her hand.

‘He deserves to be called that and a lot more,’ Sakinah said. ‘Do you know, he didn’t even agree to the divorce. I had to get someone official to annul the marriage, which meant rehashing everything all over again. One last power play on his part, I guess. At least we weren’t legally married.’

‘What do you mean? Was he always a criminal?’

Sakinah looked puzzled for a second before explaining.

‘We had a religious marriage, a Nikkah, which meant we were married in the eyes of Allah and according to His law. However, that doesn’t mean anything in British law, so most Muslims get married twice. Once in a religious sense and once in a legal sense. We never got round to that second part. Some Muslims never bother at all, some take a few years to get around to it. We never did, so divorcing each other was a lot easier than it could have been.’

An out-of-service bus trundled past. The rain died down to a light drizzle. Water still dripped steadily from the rim of the bus stop and into a puddle, which was slowly expanding towards the bench where Dan and Sakinah sat.

‘Do you think I’m a bad person?’ Sakinah asked, clearly terrified of the answer.

‘No,’ Dan said resolutely. ‘I think you were in an impossible situation, and I don’t know if anyone would have known what to do if they were you.’

‘You’re just being kind.’

‘You deserve some kindness.’

The rain stopped. Dan and Sakinah continued to sit together in the still of the night. As distant shouts of partying students came and went, a solitary fox slipped out from the undergrowth that bordered the opposite pavement. It sniffed around, glanced at Dan and Sakinah, and darted back into the safety of the woods.

‘What happens now?’ Sakinah asked. ‘You and I can’t ever date. My family would never trust you.’

‘That’s understandable,’ Dan nodded. ‘But they wouldn’t need to. I’d never put them in a situation that made them uncomfortable. I’ll follow any rule or boundary they want to set for me.’

‘I don’t know how they’ll ever trust that you won’t hurt me or my sister,’ Sakinah said, before adding, in a slightly quieter voice. ‘I don’t know how I’ll be able to trust you fully.’



‘In time, I hope you will. I know there probably isn’t much I can say or do now to make those fears go away, but I will work every day to make you trust me. Because you can trust me. I won’t ever hurt you. I promise.’

‘There’s no way anything good could ever come of this,’ Sakinah lamented.

‘Maybe,’ Dan nodded again. ‘But for now, we don’t need to worry about that. For now, let’s just be here, in the moment, together.’

Sakinah rested her head on his shoulder. He looked at her and she looked at him. She moved her head and they kissed, lightly, briefly, before her head rested back on his shoulder.

‘I’d like that,’ she said.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File One Successfully Loaded

During one of their Wednesday free periods, Jon and Andrew found themselves in the school library, reorganising the shelves. Their form teacher had decided it was the duty of the Sixth Form to give back to the wider school community. How she had arrived at this conclusion was something of a mystery, though she had justified the idea by claiming that philanthropy would look good to universities. Jon had yet to find the section of the UCAS form that had asked about inane busywork, but he was sure the entire thing was an elaborate scam to get hapless Sixth Formers to do for free what someone should probably be paid to do.

Jon was unsure what had happened in the library prior to their arrival, but he estimated something between a small hurricane and an atomic bomb must have swept through the place. Books had been scattered everywhere, and scraps of paper, on which were scrawled poorly spelt obscenities, were sprinkled around the room like confetti at a particularly extravagant wedding. The task was so great that it would have taken them the entire free period to put the room back into a useable state. Upon seeing the situation, they had tacitly taken to working on opposite sides of the room. This was a good system, and one Jon hoped would be enforced for their entire shift. His hopes were shattered when Andrew

sidled over to him, a book in hand. He showed Jon the cover: *Orpheus Descending and other Classic Plays*.

‘You think anyone here would ever actually read something like this?’ he asked. ‘Or do you reckon they keep it around so the rough kids have something to beat each other to death with?’

‘Maybe the better question would be if anyone here can actually read,’ Jon said in response.

Andrew nodded at the sage-like insight of this comment. He shifted the book in his hands, feeling the weight of it, and then mimed the action of hitting someone on the head with it.

‘It’d certainly do the job,’ he continued. ‘Could do some real damage. Useful for getting rid of someone who doesn’t know how to keep their nose out of other’s people’s business.’

Jon had been moving away but stopped when Andrew spoke and watched as he hit another imaginary person. Not wanting to be drawn into more of a conversation, Jon continued returning books to the shelves. He didn’t find anything quite as interesting as the book of classic plays, just four copies of every book in the *Twilight* series.

‘Look at you, for instance,’ Andrew began again, still holding onto the great tome. ‘You know Roxanne is taken and yet you still hang around her like a sad little puppy hoping to get a doggie treat. What do you think is going to happen? She’ll feel so sorry for you that she’ll shag you out of pity? She doesn’t even like you. Why don’t you do everyone a favour and fuck off?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Jon replied. ‘I’ve known her for years, far longer than you. We’re friends. I’m not after anything.’

‘You follow her around like a little lap dog,’ Andrew whispered. ‘You think that, just because she invited you to my party, she actually likes you? You’re wrong. She doesn’t like you, never has. We’re all waiting for you to get the message and stop hanging around all the time.’

‘It’s clear you’re talking bollocks,’ Jon concluded, turning away again.

‘Leave her alone or I’ll burn all your shit on the server,’ Andrew threatened.

This gave Jon pause. He knew it was a game and he shouldn’t care too much about it, but he had spent a long time building up supplies and those hours spent were very real. This had always been the problem with playing on Andrew’s server. He held the keys to the kingdom, was effectively the god of the world, and whatever he decided would be implemented without question. There was no way to overcome this. Jon didn’t possess the technical knowhow to create his own server, and the offline version of Minecraft had never held his attention for long. It had always seemed pointless to spend hours slaving away at building a castle only for no one to see it.

‘We’re friends. I can’t stop talking to her,’ Jon said, thinking of the best way to handle the situation as he spoke. ‘But, if you promise to leave my things alone, I can promise that I’ll not go after Roxanne in any sort of romantic way. Do we have a deal?’

As though he were saying goodbye to a dear loved one, Andrew placed the book back on the shelf. He turned to Jon and stuck out his hand for him to shake. They shook hands even though Jon felt ridiculous.

‘We have a deal then,’ Andrew smiled. ‘But I want you to know I wasn’t worried about her actually going for you or anything. I didn’t want you to embarrass yourself when you’re at my party on Friday. What do you drink? The staff there are really good at not checking for ID, so long as no one makes an ass of themselves.’

Jon was slightly stunned by the sudden change in Andrew. The smile on his face seemed genuine, as did the interest he was showing in Jon's choice of beverage. Despite still feeling resentful towards Andrew, Jon felt embarrassed at his inability to provide a clear answer to the question.

'I've never been to one of these things before,' he admitted. 'And my mother doesn't let me drink, because I'm underage, so I actually don't know what I like.'

There was something cartoonish about the pose Andrew adopted in response. He crossed his arms, rested one hand on his chin, and nodded thoughtfully.

'I hear you, friend,' he said. 'We need to get as much into you as we can, while we figure out your drink of choice. That way, even if you hate all of them, you'll be too shitfaced to notice.'

As Jon and Andrew returned to the task at hand, Jon felt like he had entered some strange contract with a person he did not trust.

'Does Roxanne really hate me?' Jon asked.

Andrew shrugged.

'I don't know, bud. But she knows you're thirsting after her, so you probably want to tone down the creepy stalker vibes. It's not as hot as you think it is.'

'I'm not like that,' Jon said, now convinced Andrew was lying.

This elicited only another shrug as Andrew went back to the other side of the room.

To avoid stoking tensions any further, Jon avoided the usual group walk home from school. Instead of spending over half an hour walking around the town, Jon made it home within seven minutes of leaving school.

He noticed from the cars parked on the drive that both his mother and Ben were at home. He let himself in using his key; his mother insisted on keeping the front door locked at all times, ever since a bag of clothes had mysteriously vanished from inside the porch. From

the kitchen came the sound of Ben and his mother. They seemed to be disagreeing about something.

Jon inched into the hallway after softly locking the front door. He coaxed his backpack to the floor, desperate to make no sound. The ruffle of his winter coat may as well have been a chorus of football fans for how loud it seemed to his ears. The voices continued unabated. Peering round the door, Jon caught sight of his mother and Ben having an animated discussion while opening and closing kitchen cupboards.

‘You’d love for me to drop dead, wouldn’t you?’ his mother snapped at Ben. ‘You think you’re so grown up. You’d love to get this house off me. Be a big man in your own home. You only care about yourself. You don’t care how much effort I’ve put into raising you and your brother. You’re lucky I’ve been such a good mum to you both. But it’s not enough, is it? You’re just like your father. Nothing was ever enough for him either.’

There was a crash and Jon ducked back into the safety of the hall. He considered slipping back out of the front door and returning when it had all passed. Ben’s words kept him listening though.

‘After everything I’ve done for you?’ he was saying, anger bubbling away in his words. ‘Do you honestly think things would have worked out as well for you, if not for me? I played my part perfectly, and now you dare to accuse me of being like that nothing of a man? Do you want me to go and tell him everything you told me to do when I was a kid? If we’re so alike, maybe it would be good for us to bond. We could have a good chat, couldn’t we?’

Jon risked peering around the door again. All movement in the kitchen had stopped. His mother had her head down as though she were in prayer. Ben was standing above the broken remains of the bowl from which he had eaten cereal that morning.

‘Clean this up,’ Ben said after a lengthy moment of silence. ‘Jon will be home soon. And buy me the laptop for fuck’s sake, then we wouldn’t have to keep having chats like this.’

As Ben headed for the living room, Jon darted back to the porch. He opened the door as quickly as he could, fumbling with the keys as he went. With the door open, he ruffled his coat as loudly as he could and picked up his bag before slamming it down into the floor. Then he banged the front door shut for good measure and dropped his keys to increase the noise he was making. He took extra time to lock the door to ensure that Ben and his mother had enough time to regain their normal composure before he made an appearance.

Acting like he had only just got home, Jon casually strolled into the living room. Ben was reading the newspaper and his mother was still hovering in the kitchen.

‘You’re home early,’ his mother said, a hidden accusation framing her words.

‘I was hungry,’ Jon said. ‘And I have a lot of homework tonight.’

‘I’ll put some dinner on then,’ his mother said, vanishing from sight.

Jon settled himself nervously on the sofa, before remembering he was supposed to act normally and so relaxed into the seat. He stared at the cuckoo clock on the wall as the wooden bird emerged from its house and gave four stuttering chirps.

‘I’m getting a new laptop,’ Ben announced. ‘My one’s a bit shit and doesn’t run anything. You can have it if you want.’

‘You make it sound really appealing,’ Jon replied.

Ben’s eyes had not left the newspaper, but he did flick a look at Jon before emphatically turning a page.

‘Suit yourself,’ Ben shrugged. ‘I’m too kind for my own good, that’s always been my problem.’

After waiting ten minutes to see if either Ben or his mother were going to try engaging him in conversation, Jon headed upstairs to get changed. He saw a message on his phone from Roxanne, asking why he had gone straight home. He mulled things over before replying.



‘Andrew’s on to us.’

He figured that the message sounded suitably ominous so that, if Andrew saw it, it would stir things quite nicely. It had the desired effect for, seconds later, a message flashed up from Roxanne, highlighting the need to talk after school the next day. Jon smiled and lay back on his bed.

When the bell rang for the end of school the next day, Jon could barely contain his excitement as he crammed his pencil case into his rucksack and headed to the lockers. As was becoming a daily routine, Franklyn was bemoaning the latest problems his dog was causing. Andrew patted him on the shoulder as Franklyn lamented the latest pair of headphones to be consumed by the beast’s monstrous appetite.

‘You’ll have to ask Santa for some new ones,’ Andrew suggested

‘Not likely,’ Franklyn scoffed. ‘If Santa came to our house, he’d be mauled to death. I think he’ll be giving us a miss this year.’

As had occurred the day before, Franklyn and Andrew spent the walk home in animated conversation while Jon and Roxanne lingered behind.

‘What do you mean he’s on to us?’ Roxanne whispered.

‘He said you thought I was some kind of creepy stalker and that you secretly hated me,’ Jon revealed.

‘How does that mean he’s on to us in the slightest?’ Roxanne questioned.

‘Because he knows there’s something we’re keeping secret.’

Roxanne looked at him and shook her head. She was wrapped up against the cold air and, with her hands in her coat pockets, only her face was visible. Her nose had gone red with the cold.

‘He’s trying to spook you,’ Roxanne decided.

‘You don’t think I’m a creepy stalker?’

‘Have you ever stalked anyone?’

‘Of course not,’ Jon said. ‘Why? Did my fifty restraining orders give you the wrong idea?’

Roxanne laughed. The sound died as she looked at the back of her boyfriend’s head.

‘After we’ve all parted ways, wait around the corner for five minutes and then we’ll talk more,’ Roxanne said. ‘We can go over strategies for tomorrow.’

Before Jon could reply, Roxanne bounded forward and tried to insert herself into the conversation that Andrew and Franklyn were having. The canal towpath was narrow, and it was hard for her to be noticed, but Franklyn did eventually lean into the hedgerow enough that Roxanne could walk beside Andrew. Jon was left alone at the back, for only Jesus could have walked alongside the group by striding along the canal itself.

When the usual goodbyes were said, Jon dutifully waited around the corner. He stood in the small, rundown carpark that neighboured the pleasant street on which Franklyn lived. Roxanne appeared once more from the little side road, down which she had walked exactly five minutes ago. Jon was impressed by the precision of it. He gave her a little wave when he saw her approaching, and immediately regretted the gesture once he realised how silly it looked.

‘We should walk,’ Roxanne said urgently. ‘Partly so that Franklyn doesn’t see us, but mostly because I am freezing my tits off here.’

Jon could not argue with this and followed Roxanne as she walked. It was exciting being alone with Roxanne. Jon felt as though the rest of the world no longer mattered; there was only the two of them. He looked at her as they walked, at the way a stray bit of hair had escaped from under her hat and was framing her face. Her eyes were a deep green, and brought to mind the word ‘verdant’, for they reminded Jon of the lush green fields that spread

away from Oxbow in every direction. Walking beside Roxanne, Jon was sure she was his soulmate.

‘Do we really know each other?’ Roxanne said, shaking Jon from his lovestruck daze.

‘I’ve seen you pretty much every day since we were five,’ Jon replied. ‘I reckon I know you fairly well.’

‘Right then,’ Roxanne smiled. ‘Cats or dogs?’

‘Neither, thanks, I had a big lunch.’

Roxanne punched Jon playfully on the arm.

‘I meant which do I like more. Am I a cat person or a dog person?’

Jon considered this. He got a sense of where Roxanne was going with this and hoped to distract her. He looked at her face, her perfectly sculpted face, and blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

‘Dogs.’

With a nod, Roxanne folded her arms.

‘Lucky guess.’

‘I couldn’t see any whiskers,’ Jon explained.

‘Whiskers?’

‘You don’t look much like a cat person. You don’t have any whiskers.’

Roxanne stopped walking.

‘Are you saying I look like a dog?’

Jon stopped as well. His mind raced with a way to avoid causing offense. He remembered the last time he had upset Roxanne and sincerely hoped she didn’t have any apples to hand.

‘The important thing to remember is that I was right,’ Jon said, hoping his faux confidence would be enough. ‘I have proven that I know you.’

‘Favourite colour?’ Roxanne asked, her original point returning.

Jon looked at her again, hoping to glean some clue from her attire. Unfortunately, her coat was black and her clothes underneath were the uniform for Kingsfield High School.

‘You don’t have one because picking a favourite colour is racist,’ Jon replied.

‘Sorry, wrong answer,’ Roxanne said. ‘It’s purple. What can I say? Guess I’m a racist who looks like a dog.’

‘It happens,’ Jon shrugged. ‘You’ve got to watch out because, before you know it, there’ll be dogs popping Hitler salutes and goosestepping all over the place. Or dogstepping, I guess.’

Roxanne laughed. The sound cleared away all the cold that was seeping into Jon’s bones and replaced it with a new feeling of peace.

‘I think it’s weird,’ Roxanne said. ‘I came to you for help with my relationship and I don’t even know why. Like, I just trusted you. Why do I trust you?’

‘My award-winning looks and personality?’ Jon replied. Then, realising that his jokes were likely wearing thin, he carried on talking. ‘I think it’s to do with those sessions we used to have at St Michael’s. The ones with Mrs Bumble. Do you remember? It was an unusual thing we experienced together, and I think that’s kind of affected how we feel about each other.’

All was quiet for a moment as both Jon and Roxanne remembered their interactions as children. There was a part of Jon that wanted to go back and do it all again. What would his life have been like if he could have done things differently? He wouldn’t have upset his mother as much, that he knew. If he hadn’t upset her, then maybe she wouldn’t have tried to get rid of him. He would never have been alone that night. He would never have met Uncle Pete. The Christmas lights past which he and Roxanne walked were a reminder of that night. Jon hated Christmas. What good had Christmas done for him?

‘Is something wrong?’ Roxanne asked. ‘You’ve got this kind of scowly look on your face. I didn’t mean to upset you by talking about trust. It seemed weird to me that I trust you. We’ve not really hung out all that much, just the two of us. And now, here we are.’

‘Here we are,’ Jon said, forcing all those thoughts out of his mind. ‘Plotting ways to get back at your boyfriend.’

‘Who would have thought?’ Roxanne smiled. ‘Did you know, the other night, he tried to explain the plot of *Kingdom Hearts* to me.’

Jon winced.

‘That constitutes domestic abuse,’ he said. ‘Andrew’s a lucky guy if you’re still trying to make things work after that.’

Roxanne checked her phone as though the mention of Andrew’s name would cause the phone to dial him. She returned it to her pocket and sighed.

‘I like him,’ she said simply. ‘I just want things to be the way I know they can be. But I’m tired. I’m tired of fighting for his attention. I’m tired of Minecraft or Franklyn or anything getting in the way.’

‘Maybe it won’t be so bad once our A-levels are done,’ Jon said. ‘We’ll all have a lot of free time then.’

‘Until September. We might not end up at the same unis. He’s got his heart set on Nottingham, but I really like Cardiff. If I can’t get our relationship sorted out now, while we’re still in the same area, there’s no way we’ll survive the long distance. We’ve both applied to Sheffield. I guess we could both go there.’

Jon shook his head. When he spoke, he was surprised by his confidence in what he was saying.

‘Don’t put your dreams on hold for anyone. If there’s somewhere you really want to go, you should go there. What if you go to Sheffield and then things don’t work out anyway?’

You'll have double missed out. If things are going to work out, they'll work out. You have to have faith.'

Jon's advice was not motivated by a desire to break Roxanne and Andrew up. He had not applied to Cardiff either and would gain no advantage if Roxanne went there. But looking at her, in the slowly fading light of a winter's afternoon, he knew that he wanted what was best for her. If that meant no Andrew, or even no Jon, then that was the way things had to be.

'Have faith?' Roxanne smirked. 'You're the guy who made Lucy Brown cry because you wouldn't stop giving her a hard time about Jesus.'

'It was a different era.'

'It was four years ago.'

'Four years in teenager time is like twenty in adult time,' Jon said. 'I'm basically a different person.'

'You are, aren't you?' Roxanne said, thoughtfully.

'I'm like Franklyn's dog,' Jon said.

Roxanne groaned and hid her face in her hands.

'Don't talk to me about Franklyn or his stupid dog,' she cried. 'I wish that thing would get hit by a bus or something. Or, better yet, Franklyn could get hit by a bus. That would solve so many of my problems.'

'It just so happens I'm an assassin in training,' Jon smiled. 'If you need someone taken care of, I'm your guy.'

'You're hired.'

'My rate is fifty thousand pounds an hour.'

'What a deal! You've got the job.'

They both laughed. Roxanne looked at her phone again and sighed.

‘I should be getting home,’ she said. ‘But thanks for this. It’s been really good to talk to someone. We should do it more often.’

‘You know where to find me,’ Jon said.

‘Huddled in front of a computer screen?’

‘Typically, yes.’

‘How are you still single?’ Roxanne teased.

‘My award-winning personality and good looks?’ Jon repeated. ‘They’re too off-putting for most girls.’

‘You keep telling yourself that,’ Roxanne winked.

They said their goodbyes and parted ways. Jon’s mother was, mercifully, working a long shift and would not be home until much later. Ben was sitting on the sofa when Jon got home, new laptop on his lap.

‘What time do you call this?’ Ben asked, looking up at the cuckoo clock.

‘I thought it was the kids you taught who needed help telling the time.’

This comment was enough for Ben to put on one of his accents. It was terrible and Jon had no idea what accent it was supposed to be.

‘You come home stinking of booze, stinking of fags, stinking of girls,’ Ben said, loudly.

‘How do you stink of girls?’ Jon asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Ben replied, his voice normal again. ‘Perfume probably.’

Instead of replying, Jon went upstairs to his bedroom and thought about his conversation with Roxanne. No longer did he feel in conflict with Andrew. Roxanne’s relationship with Andrew was a frail thing that paled in comparison to the deep connection she had with Jon. The party was the next day, and it would be the perfect opportunity to

expose this difference to Roxanne. All Jon wanted was for her to be happy, and he knew that he could give her that. Andrew needed to be taken care of first.



*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

## File Two Successfully Loaded

The scrape of cutlery on ceramic was deafening for Dan. He winced at every sound, sure he would be ejected from the room at the slightest mistake. The way Sakinah and her family were eating was equal parts fascinating and horrifying. The way they collected the biryani onto their fingers and then scooped it into their mouths displayed some clear finesse. As someone who could still remember wanting to wash his hands if even the slightest speck of mashed potato touched his flesh, Dan would never be comfortable touching food in that manner.

He and Sakinah had been dating for months, and though she had told her family of his existence relatively early into their relationship, it had taken until the summer after their first year of university before he was able to meet them. Given the fragility of the situation, no one seemed to want to make any hasty decisions, particularly if the relationship wasn't destined to go anywhere significant. As time had gone on, a meeting with the family was inevitable and Dan eventually found himself sitting in the comfortable home in which Sakinah had lived for the last decade.

'So, Daniel,' Sakinah's father asked. 'What is it you hope to do with your life once you finish university?'

Sakinah's father was a formidable man who, despite being shorter than Dan, seemed to dominate whatever space he was in. He was so different to Dan's own father, primarily due to his thick black hair and bushy beard. They were seated in an open-plan kitchen-diner, and the harsh spotlights above gave the meal an air of interrogation.

'I'm not very fussy, I'll do whatever I can,' Dan replied.

He sensed this was not the right answer and tried to add to it.

'I'll work hard, obviously, but I'll take any job, really. I'm not fussy in that way. Is what I meant. Work is work, right?'

Sakinah's father looked at Dan. Dan looked down at the food.

'You'll need to get a good job though, if you plan to support a family,' Sakinah's father said.

'Dad,' Sakinah scolded quietly.

With a shrug, Sakinah's father let the conversation drop. Dan flashed Sakinah a smile of thanks. In doing so, he noticed the glare Aaliyah was giving him. She was barely eating any of her food, though her hand was poised over her plate. Dan attempted to smile at her as well, but the expression was met with a frown and the forceful shoving of a handful of biryani into Aaliyah's mouth. Dan glanced over at Sakinah's mother who was watching his every move. She was a sharp-looking woman with inquisitive eyes peeking out from the headscarf that ringed her face.

'Do you have much family, Daniel?' Sakinah's mother asked.

Sakinah let out an audible sigh.

'I told you not to ask about that,' Sakinah whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

'I'm effectively an orphan,' Dan said, the word still sounding strange to him. 'I've been living with my grandparents on and off since losing my parents.'

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Sakinah’s mother replied, in a way that seemed sincere to Dan. ‘Is that where you’re staying now? With your grandparents?’

Dan thought back to the phone call he’d had to make as the summer holidays crept closer and closer. He could hear his nan’s voice in his head, as loud and clear as though she were in Sakinah’s house explaining everything to Sakinah’s parents.

‘Your grandad and I have tried to be as supportive as possible since the... passing of your mum,’ she had said. ‘Especially with all that nastiness with your dad, we’ve tried to look out for you. But we’re old. We didn’t just raise your mum. We had five kids and we’ve done more than our fair share of looking after them all, and all of their kids, your cousins, and we’re tired now. Have you thought about asking your brother if you can move in with him? I’m sure Ben will look out for you.’

Explaining the complexities of his family life wasn’t something Dan was prepared to do. He hadn’t even told Sakinah of the existence of his sibling. His brother wanted nothing to do with him, neither did any of his other relatives, and the feeling was mutual. Dan was on his own.

‘The university let me stay in campus accommodation over the holiday for a discounted fee. God bless student loans, right?’

Dan would come to understand the uncomfortable look this elicited later, when Sakinah told him of the haram nature of interest on finances, and thus the Islamic aversion to loans.

‘At least you have a roof over your head,’ came Sakinah’s mother’s reply.

‘We all have our trials in life,’ Sakinah’s father added. ‘It is all about how you deal with your trials that define you as a person.’

At this, Aaliyah pushed her chair back with a horrendous scrape. She swept out of the room and stormed upstairs.

‘She’s not good with new people,’ Sakinah’s mother explained, after a door upstairs slammed shut.

After dinner, Sakinah’s mother put the kettle on, while her father ushered the young couple into the living room; a comfortable room that was dominated by two large sofas which faced a wall-mounted television. Dan noticed wall-mounted speakers in each corner of the room and had to fight his natural instinct to want to try out the technology. Gone were those simple childhood days of going to a friend’s house and watching a movie or playing a video game on whatever setup they had. Dan was entering the adult realm of hot drinks and thoughtful discussions; he reckoned he preferred the old ways.

At his request, a cup of coffee was placed in front of him. Sakinah and Dan sat on one of the sofas while her parents took the other one. Given the way the room was arranged, it was challenging to look at them and still be comfortable.

‘We have some concerns about your relationship with our daughter,’ Sakinah’s father began. ‘We need you to understand that we do not approve nor condone casual relationships and need to be sure that you are serious about your commitment to her.’

‘I understand,’ Dan replied, still unsure how much information to give away. ‘If there is anything I can do beyond give you my word that I am serious about this, then let me know.’

‘We need you to understand the values we have as a family, but also the values by which we live our lives. To this end, would you be willing to learn about Islam?’

‘Sakinah has already been teaching me a few things here and there,’ Dan said. ‘It sounds quite interesting.’

‘Though we would never want to force anyone’s hand on anything,’ Sakinah’s mother added, in a way that made Dan suspect the pair had rehearsed this at some point. ‘For your

relationship to be acceptable in our eyes, and in the eyes of God, you will need to get married. To do that, you would need to be a Muslim.'

'But converting simply for the sake of marriage is not right,' Sakinah's father continued. 'We want you to decide if it is the right path for you on your own terms. All we ask is that, if you decide the faith is not for you, you respect us enough to let Sakinah go and be with a man who can complete her faith.'

Dan sipped his coffee thoughtfully and explained his current religious beliefs. The fact he was no longer an atheist seemed to calm Sakinah's parents slightly, though the fact he had been one at all was something Dan felt he should have avoided mentioning. He neglected to tell them the part about how, in the throes of atheist fervour, he had tried to convince the Christian kids at his school that God did not exist; some things were better left unsaid. They did seem to take some comfort in the notion that Dan had once been a Christian.

'Christianity has a lot in common with Islam,' Sakinah's mother explained. 'But we believe that it has been changed by people throughout the years. King James was not the first to re-write the bible to suit his own worldview. The Quran has remained unchanged since its revelation.'

Sakinah's parents offered to have him come to their house once a fortnight to teach him more about the faith. It would mean spending an hour on the train each way, but he would have Sakinah for company. Dan agreed to learn more about the faith.

The next time Dan was invited to Sakinah's home, Aaliyah was nowhere to be seen. In fact, Dan spent very little time in the family home. Instead, Sakinah's father took him to the local mosque, which involved a short but tense car ride.

'What do you like to eat normally?' Sakinah's father asked.

The question came out of nowhere and existed to fill the silence.

‘Give me a good gammon steak and I’m a happy guy,’ Dan replied, before realising what he had said. ‘But there are definitely other foods I like. Like marshmallows. They are divine.’

There was a pause. Dan allowed his brain to catch up with his mouth again.

‘Which is also a bad choice, right?’ he said.

Sakinah’s father chuckled.

‘No one is expecting you to already be abstaining from pork, or alcohol, or be praying five times a day. You are only at the start of what I sincerely hope will be a long and beautiful journey of faith.’

‘I don’t drink,’ Dan clarified. ‘I mean I have, in the past, but I didn’t have a great time with it. I haven’t drunk since then.’

‘One step closer then.’

Dan was expecting the mosque to be a grand building with spires and minarets, all domed ceilings with intricate Arabic writing etched into ancient stonework. Instead, the mosque to which he was driven had the appearance of a community centre and was a thoroughly unprepossessing building, which he could have walked past countless times without noticing. Sakinah’s father parked, and they walked to the door together. Doors, in fact, for there was one for men and one for women, denoted by a pair of signs stuck on the glass.

‘One day, we hope to raise enough money to have it done up a bit,’ Sakinah’s father explained, in a way that made Dan question whether his disappointment was obvious. ‘We’ll have proper entrances for both men and women. We’re going to do up the wudu facilities as well because, well, you’ll see.’

Sakinah's father was quite a popular man. Either that, or the Muslim population were friendly. Five different men shook Dan's hand and greeted him as they removed their shoes in the entrance hall.

'This is Daniel,' Sakinah's father explained. 'He is interested in the faith.'

With their shoes removed, Sakinah's father led the way to what he referred to as the wudu facilities. The majority of the room was given to great troughs dotted with taps. Seats made of the same tiles as the rest of the room were opposite the taps to allow people to sit while washing themselves. The room was populated by a dozen men all splashing water on various parts of their bodies from the taps. Fortunately for Dan, Sakinah's father was on hand to explain.

'Wudu is the act of purifying oneself before prayer. You wash your hands, mouth, nose, face, hair, ears, arms, and feet. It is the way the Prophet, peace be upon him, showed us as the way to ensure our prayers will be heard. Once wudu is completed, you will be in a state of purity until you go to the toilet, pass wind, or go to sleep.'

Dan copied the exact way that Sakinah's father washed himself before following him into the main prayer room. There he also found himself copying the movements of those around him. The things being said were entirely lost to him, for it was all in Arabic, but the movements were easy enough to copy. Once the praying was completed, Sakinah's father patted him on the shoulder.

'You'll learn all the parts of prayer in time,' he said, 'but, for now, all that matters is that your heart is in the right place. If you can believe that there is only one God and that the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, is his messenger, then you will be a Muslim. Faith is in the heart. Our actions are an expression of that.'



The car ride back to Sakinah's home was less tense than the drive to the mosque had been. When the car was on the drive, before either of them got out, Sakinah's father turned to Dan and looked at him sternly.

'Do not break my daughter's heart,' he warned. 'You seem like a good man, and the chance to become Muslim is something special. A wonderful opportunity. If you choose to convert, your life will begin again. Your sins will be wiped clean, and it will be as though you are a new person.'

'Franklyn's dog,' Dan whispered, amazed to hear the concept existing somewhere beyond his own head.

'What was that?'

'I'm grateful that you are so accepting of me,' Dan said quickly.

Sakinah greeted Dan excitedly when he entered her home. It took a great deal of restraint to avoid hugging each other, but the grin she flashed him was enough.

'How was it?' she asked.

'Surreal,' was the only word Dan could come up with, before following it up with 'good though. I think I'd like to go again.'

The more time he spent knowing Sakinah, the quicker time seemed to pass. Dan saw Sakinah's family a couple more times that summer, but for the most part was on his own in university accommodation. He occupied himself with a part-time job in a café, and diligently read an English translation of the Quran that Sakinah's father had given him. There he waited, like a princess locked in a tower, until the start of the new academic year when Sakinah would make her return. He knew he wanted to do something to show her that he was committed to her no matter what happened.

The day before Sakinah was due to return, Dan took a bus to the nearby town. He headed straight for a jeweller and browsed the assortment of rings. Most of Dan's money

went on keeping himself alive, but he still looked at the more elaborate rings on display. Perhaps, in time, he would replace the ring with something more extravagant. For the time being, he settled for a reasonably priced piece of jewellery that still looked sophisticated. He chose a simple silver ring with a sapphire embedded in a golden heart. The colour of the gemstone reminded him of the colour of Sakinah's scarf that she had been wearing when they first met. He hoped it would suffice as far as romantic gestures went.

The romantic gesture was put to the test when Sakinah returned to university a day later. With the ring tucked safely inside his coat pocket, Dan attempted to appear relaxed and calm as the two passed the day together. When night fell, Dan suggested they take a walk like they had done so many times during their first year. Sakinah agreed and they set out together. They discussed many things on the walk, with Dan showing a particular interest in whether Sakinah's family liked him.

'My sister has a lock on her door now and I wouldn't count on seeing too much of her whenever you come around,' Sakinah told him. 'But I think you've been winning my parents over. Aaliyah thinks so too. She is... not particularly happy with them or with me for that matter. She thinks we're all forgetting what happened to her too quickly and being too quick to trust you.'

'These things take time,' Dan said. 'Or they may never happen at all. If locking herself in her room makes her comfortable then I wouldn't want to be the one to try and drag her out. She's got to do what's best for her, and you need to do what's best for you. We'll all get through in the end.'

'Have I ever told you how much I love you?' Sakinah asked.

'You could mention it more,' Dan laughed.

They walked to their usual spot on the sports field. It had been strange watching the campus shift with the seasons, as the snow melted away revealing more of what the place

actually looked like. The strange shapes had vanished after the winter and, as they had never seen them in the daylight, neither Dan nor Sakinah could fully identify what it was they had seen. The mystery would remain forever, but, for Dan, that was part of the charm. Even in the summer, just before the end of the semester, the pair ensured that they never made the journey during daylight, in order to preserve the mystique.

Returning to that spot after the holidays felt like slipping into a warm bath at the end of a long day. Everything felt back to normal, everything was right with the world once more. And so, when they had completed one lap of the running track, Dan knew the time was right. He reached into his coat, slipped out the ring box, and dropped to one knee.

‘I want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter what,’ Dan told her. ‘Will you marry me?’

‘Of course I will,’ Sakinah beamed. ‘We’re practically engaged anyway.’

‘I know. But now it’s official.’

Although the dark was romantic and kept the scenery an elegant mystery, it wasn’t the best environment for appreciating engagement rings. Sakinah had to wait until they were back under the lights of the campus before she could see the ring. Unfortunately, the ring was too big. Dan had simply bought the size that was in the shop, without having any way to know if it would fit Sakinah’s finger. Such small inconveniences hardly seemed to matter though and, as they walked arm in arm, Dan knew he was ready to leave the past behind him and finally be at peace. The future was bright. Nothing could spoil his joy. But there was something that hung around at the back of Dan’s mind. There was something Sakinah needed to know before things went any further.

‘I should probably tell you something,’ he said, as he and Sakinah walked hand in hand.

‘Is it how great a fiancée I am?’ Sakinah asked.

‘Obviously,’ Dan said. ‘But there is something else. Dan’s not actually my name.’

Sakinah stopped walking.

‘Because it’s Daniel, right?’

Dan shook his head.

‘It’s actually Jon. I am Jon Shepherd not Dan Shepherd. Or I was. Before uni, anyway. Since coming to uni, I’ve taken to using Dan.’

‘Why?’

The weight of that question weighed heavily on Dan. There were many layers to any answer. Here was another chance to tell Sakinah everything. He could tell her of his mother, his father, his brother. He could tell her about the party, about his childhood, about everything.

‘It’s my middle name and I fancied a change,’ Dan said, hating himself for taking the easy way out again.

‘Well, you will always be Daniel to me,’ Sakinah replied. ‘Just promise me there’s nothing else I should know.’

In the cool night air, he could almost hear his brother Ben taunting him. But there was no need to talk about any of that. No need to think about it. Life was different, better. He’d only mentioned his name because it would have been too hard to hide it if they planned on getting married. Nothing else from his past could affect them. Nothing else needed mentioning.

‘Nothing important,’ Dan reassured her.

Together, they walked on.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

When I discovered I was going to be a father, I wondered, among other things, what our child's first memory would be. What sequence of events would arrive at just the right moment for the brain to want to store them forever? For me, it all started with a holiday to Anglesey when I was four years old.

Something about my brother's face bounding up to me in the middle of a dinosaur museum started the process of memory in me. He kept pointing to all the signs and attempting to read all the words that were written there. His grasp of reading was what one could expect from a seven-year-old, which is to say, capable of understanding Mr Men books but not quite up to comprehending the scientific facts of dinosaurs. He fumbled over nearly every word, my mother patiently helping him sound them out. Once my mother had interpreted the signs for Ben, he would come over to me and explain what he had read, as though I had not heard the process by which he gained the knowledge. To make matters worse, he would forget half the words and fill the gaps with gibberish.

Those early memories are somewhat hazy, but I remember the dinosaurs, plain Scotch pancakes for breakfast, a butterfly farm, and the beach. The butterfly farm featured the same problem as the dinosaur museum, in that Ben wanted to try his hand at entomology as well as palaeontology. If the facts he learned from the dinosaur museum had been tedious to hear repeated, those from the butterfly farm were worse. Every sign detailed the natural habitat of the butterflies and what they ate. It may come as no great surprise to learn that butterflies all eat the same sort of thing. I recognised none of the countries from which the butterflies originated and thus could not connect the words with anything meaningful. At least the dinosaur facts could help conjure up images of giant creatures roaring and fighting each other. I tried imagining butterflies fighting. It was lame by comparison.

Each day of the holiday was punctuated by an evening trip to the beach, after we'd all watched *Eastenders* on the small, grainy TV in the caravan. I was permitted a nap in the afternoon to prepare myself for the rarest of privileges; the chance to see a summer sunset. My parents set themselves up on deck chairs, silently staring out at the ocean in a manner that let them simultaneously observe me and Ben.

I remember one evening when we set to work building a sandcastle. Ben took great care in filling buckets with sand and placing them on the ground, slowly removing them lest the structure collapse. I wandered around digging little holes, causing our patch of beach to be as pockmarked as the surface of the moon.

I got tired of digging my holes and didn't feel like helping Ben build the castle. I walked over to where the small waves lapped the sand. The cold water licked my feet, causing me to shiver in the cool evening air. A blob of sea goop washed up on the shore beside me. I think it was a jellyfish. I tested the blob with my spade and found that it was soft and gooey. I slashed at it and found that my spade cut into it with a satisfying squelch.

Looking along the coastline, I saw the beach was speckled with the little blobs. I worked my way systematically from one glob to the next, slicing each one into fragments. Not only was my spade the best spade, because it was red, but it was also the perfect tool for unleashing destruction. I imagined the globs were actually alien invaders that would eat the whole of the human race if I didn't stop them. I imagined that, if I cut them all up into tiny pieces, my parents would hail me as a hero. Perhaps they would buy me another spade or a new toy or let me stay up late when we got back home. Looking out across the sea, proud of my heroic deeds, I could feel the excitement of something new coming my way.



It was annoying when I discovered I wasn't alone. At first, I thought my brother had caught up to me, but I looked around and saw two children approaching. I recognised the pair from the caravan park. They were the leaders of the little playground, and no one could play without their permission. It was wrong seeing them on the beach. I didn't want them to claim ownership of my haven. I was about to tell them to go away when they started talking to me.

Judging by the ginger hair that flared up from the top of both their heads, the two were brother and sister. The boy was short with pointy ears that made him look a bit like one of Santa's elves and the girl had an oddly squashed nose. They had thick Welsh accents when they spoke, and the first thing they did was to ask whether I was Welsh. When I admitted I wasn't, they laughed and crossed their arms in a way that looked rehearsed, as though they were copying the action from some T.V. show.

'This is our beach,' the squash-nosed girl declared.

'Yeah,' elf boy added, 'Go back to the queen and have a garden party or something.'

'The campsite's ours too.'

'And so is...' the boy looked around for something to own, 'that spade.'

He must have made some sort of mistake. He was pointing at my spade. I told him he was wrong as it was my spade. I didn't tell him it was the best spade, because I didn't want him to want it any more than he already did.

'Doesn't matter,' said the girl. 'You're in our country, you have to follow our rules.'

'We own everything here.'

The boy spread his arms wide. He was slightly shorter than his sister but made up for it by having twice as many freckles. Not only did they cover his face but also his arms and the bits of his legs I could see poking out from under his shorts.

'We can do what we like,' the girl said, as she flicked my sunhat off my head. 'Why are you even wearing that? The sun's going down.'

'I burn easily,' I muttered, placing a protective hand over the back of my neck.

I went to pick up my hat, but the boy kicked it away. Flecks of wet sand flew up and splattered my face. I didn't mind that too much, but I was a bit upset that some of it had gone on my Pokémon t-shirt. It had Charizard on it and I wore it every chance I got. If it became dirty, it could mean going a few days without being able to wear it. I couldn't think too much about it because I needed to retrieve my hat and protect my spade.

Ben chose this moment to turn up. I looked past him towards my parents. My mother was leaning forward in her chair, her arms flailing in time with whatever she was saying. My father had his hands behind his head, and he was looking straight ahead at the sea. Despite having only travelled a short distance, Ben was out of breath by the time he got to us. I was disappointed to see that he had left behind all of our other beach stuff. He could have offered up an alternative to my spade to appease the Welsh siblings. As it happened, our beach toys remained in the domain of my parents.

'You shouldn't go off like that, Jon,' he said. 'I'm supposed to be looking after you. Mum and Dad told me to get you before you went too far.'

The girl repeated, in a mock posh accent, what Ben had said. The boy found it hysterical, though it didn't sound much like Ben. The impression attracted my brother's attention to the siblings. I don't think he'd noticed them at first. I guessed

that it was because their hair blended in with the setting sun. They were a bit like those lizards I'd seen on TV once, which look like leaves and then they move and you realise they're lizards.

After the girl's impression of Ben had gone down so well, the boy started to make comments about Ben's size. He puffed out his cheeks and began to call Ben a whale. Ben was certainly plump, but my mother had labelled it 'puppy fat' and said that it would burn off as he grew up. She also said he'd grow into it, and it wasn't anything about his food, and so he didn't have to worry about having third helpings of shepherd's pie. I told the boy and girl that. They just laughed.

'You're with the whale?' the girl asked. 'Makes sense. Bring a whale to Wales.'

The boy made a weird noise that I think was supposed to be the sound of whale. I'd never heard a whale before, but I was pretty sure it sounded nothing like that.

'How would you like to become Welsh?' the girl offered. 'It means you get to keep all your stuff and you can use the playground on the campsite.'

I agreed immediately. My brother did too. The boy said the offer didn't apply to him. He looked to his sister for reassurance.

'All you've got to do is hit the whale. In the face. With that spade.'

The spade took on a new weight in my hand. I could feel the ridges on the handle against my palm. The end of the spade was still covered with bits of sand and goop. I wondered if it would stain the skin in the same way that the flecks of sand stained my top. The spade had been up to the job of attacking those jellyfish things, but it had been, perhaps, too efficient at it. What if the blade sliced through my

brother in the same way? If my spade cut him open, there would be no end to the punishment my parents would inflict upon me.

There was no other choice. If I didn't hit him, I would lose my spade. These two kids were the rulers of this place. Getting them to like me would elevate my status in the caravan park. I would be able to go where I wanted, do what I wanted. I remembered the steady build-up of annoyances my brother had inflicted upon me throughout the holiday. He should have shut up and let me enjoy myself. Now, he threatened to take away my future enjoyment of the holiday as well. I couldn't let him do that. If he was nice to me afterwards, I'd be able to share my new status with him and grant him access to the playground. If not, he could stay with our parents at the caravan.

The spade smacked into Ben's cheek. The sound was oddly satisfying. The spade left behind a red mark and a patch of sand. Ben took two steps back, his mouth open. His movement put him out of reach of the spade. I stepped toward him and slapped his belly with it. This made the ginger siblings laugh. Their laughter inspired me, even as Ben started to let out the choked screeching sound that preceded him crying. I took another swing at him, but he was already starting to run away. He ran in the direction of my parents. Sand flew up behind him and it looked like when cartoon characters run and leave a cloud of dust behind them.

Still laughing, the siblings clapped. The girl did some strange movement with her arm that placed it first on my right shoulder then on my left. I would later learn she was mimicking the act of knighting someone.

'Welcome to Wales,' the girl said. 'How long have you got left here?'

'A week.'

'You're lucky,' the boy sighed, 'We go home tomorrow morning.'

I recognised the shout of my mother as soon as it bellowed across the beach. Looking over, I could see Ben leading my parents towards our area of the beach, once again destroying the little world of peace I had constructed for myself. The siblings knew the arrival of parents meant trouble. They promised to say goodbye to me before they left the following day and ran off before my parents could catch them. I never saw them again.

My mother approached, her hair blowing in the wind.

‘Jonathon Daniel Shepherd,’ she shouted. ‘What do you think you’re doing, hitting your brother like that? You’re a very naughty little boy.’

I poked my spade into the sand, suddenly ashamed to be holding it. Perhaps I should have buried it or thrown it in the sea before they arrived; I could have pretended it wasn’t me who hit Ben. My mother snatched the spade from me.

‘You won’t be needing this anymore,’ she said. ‘You’re not allowed to come to the beach for the rest of the holiday.’

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ my father said, the setting sun reflecting off his glasses and his bald head. ‘He was trying to fit in with the other kids. He’s only little. He doesn’t know better.’

‘He doesn’t know better because you won’t teach him better,’ my mother replied. ‘One of us has to be the parent around here.’

‘I think Ben could do with learning to stand up for himself. Toughen up a bit.’

‘He wouldn’t need to toughen up, if parents taught their kids not to be bullies.’

‘Grow up and get in the real world, Joyce,’ my father snapped. ‘A kid without a backbone is asking for trouble.’

My mother grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me after her. We walked back across the beach. My father went on ahead, no longer responding to the verbal

onslaught issuing from my mother. As we walked, I was thankful not to be holding the spade. I'd have probably taken a swing at Ben for starting another argument between our parents and ruining everything.

When we got back to the caravan, my mother arranged for my father and Ben to go to the little shop. She insisted Ben deserved an ice cream for being brave at having to stand up to three bullies. My father had given up trying to talk to her by this point and wordlessly led Ben out of the caravan. My mother watched them go from the door, while I looked out of the window. As their shapes got smaller and smaller, I felt a growing sense of danger creeping up behind me. It was like when the air got heavy before a thunderstorm, and I wanted to call out to Ben and my father. I didn't, partly because I knew they wouldn't hear me, but also because I was tired of being around Ben and couldn't imagine that there could be anything worse than being subjected to him for any additional length of time. I was wrong.

It started with shouting. A torrent of anger poured forth from my mother's mouth. The words stopped making any coherent sense, as far as I could tell; it was more of a wave of emotion. I must not have looked suitably engaged or remorseful, as the tirade grew in volume and intensity.

I did not notice my mother pick up my red spade, the best spade, but I felt its effect. Every one of those sea blobs I had destroyed, every smack I had given to Ben, all of it was paid back on my own body tenfold. I tried to make myself as small as possible, but the more I concealed my body in itself, the harder the hits came.

My crying and endless apologies only made things worse.

I don't know how it ended. It took me a while to register that there was nothing hitting my body. The room had gone silent. I dared not unfurl myself from the huddled position I had adopted between the sofa-bed and the drawer-unit at the end

of the living area. My senses only properly returned when I heard the door open and the familiar clomp of my father's footsteps and the slightly lighter clomp of Ben's. I could hear talking but couldn't make out words. Something touched my shoulder and I recoiled, banging my head slightly on the drawer unit.

'You know Mummy and Daddy have to shout sometimes,' my father said. 'It's to make sure you grow up to be a good person.'

*End of Disc One*

*Please insert Disc Two*



# Franklyn's Dog

V. 1.4.6

New Game

**Continue**

Settings

Quit

File One:

Play Time: 154,992:03

Start

Copy

Erase

File Two:

NG+

Play Time: 170,304:02

Start

Copy

Erase

File Three:

Play Time: 274,968:52

Start

Copy

Erase

WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

While it may not have ended the world as expected, the new millennium did end my parents' marriage. Though I remember little of the time before it, my young mind registered the significance of the events enough to ensure I have never forgotten that New Year's Eve and the following morning, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2000.

I sat with Ben in the living room as the sun sank lower in the sky and the final argument surged and crashed around us. We were playing with the Rescue Heroes we'd been given for Christmas. I was in the process of pretending the firefighter was blasting innocent people with his fire hose, while Ben made the policeman arrest some criminals. He was in the middle of reading them their rights when my firefighter slammed into his hand. He looked at me with the same stupid look he'd had on the beach a few months before.

'You've been blasted,' I told him, pointing the firefighter at him.

'You can't blast policemen because then you get arrested and go to jail forever,' Ben declared.

In response, I wiggled the arm of the firefighter some more.

'You can't keep me in jail because I'll blast my way out.'

This annoyed Ben to the point where he had no choice but to put his toy down. He folded his arms dramatically and let out the same harrumphing sound my father made when pretending to be cross.

'If you're not going to play properly then I don't want to play with you at all.'

'I don't care, because you're a poo-head and you're stupid and you're nothing.'

It was unfortunate for me that my parents happened to be passing through the living room at that moment. The argument stopped abruptly as they both forgot to continue fighting over who was most deserving of the privilege of drinking at the

party that night. Instead, they both stared at me. I laughed at my insults and waited for someone to congratulate me on my wit. Ben, who had not minded the insult too much, noticed the attention of our parents fall on us, and began to cry.

‘Is there anything else you want to teach our son while you’re at it?’ my mother snapped at my father.

‘I haven’t taught him anything,’ my father replied, his voice increasing in both pitch and volume.

‘Finally, something we can agree on,’ my mother said, as she bent down to check on Ben. ‘But he’s got all that from somewhere.’

‘When would I have ever called anyone a “poo-head”?’

‘Maybe not that one but the other two are definitely yours.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘See? You can’t help yourself,’ my mother exclaimed, forgetting about Ben. ‘You’re lucky I put up with you. If we ever do get divorced, then you’d never see any of us again.’

My father laughed the laugh that I didn’t understand as a child; the one that came when there wasn’t anything funny. The anger was gone from his face, replaced with the grin that put all his teeth on display, like the toy shark I played with in the bath.

‘What kind of judge would let someone like you look after children?’ he asked. ‘You’re nothing. You have no job. No life. No trace of maternal instinct anywhere in your body. You’re a terrible wife and, frankly, a horrible person. I don’t even know why I put up with you, I really don’t.’

‘Maybe you won’t have to, after today.’

My father outstretched his arms, inviting my mother to do something. He looked like the scarecrow on my grandad's allotment the way those thin arms of his remained fixed in place.

'Go on then,' he said. 'Do it. Divorce me. How are you going to afford that? Where are you going to live? Because you will certainly not be taking this house from me. You might as well accept the fact that you're a nobody and the sooner you shut up about it, the sooner we can try and get back to having a nice New Years' Eve. I will never understand this compulsion of yours to spoil everything. If anyone is to blame for our children's less than desirable qualities, it is certainly not me.'

Having said all he needed to say, my father retreated to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. Though this normally fell under my mother's list of duties, my father knew better than to ask her during a fight. He had made that mistake once and been met with the threat that any coffee she made, he would end up wearing. It was unclear at the time how serious a threat this was, as he had never put it to the test.

My mother stood there. It was as though someone had swapped her for one of her china dolls. I threw down the firefighter who had caused the argument. This got my mother's attention.

'Get all this cleaned up or it'll end up in a bin bag,' she said.

She went upstairs. My father emerged from the kitchen, mug of coffee in hand, and sat down in his armchair. He watched, wordlessly, as we tidied up our toys. They were spread out across the floor, and I set to gathering up the outliers while Ben put the rest in the toybox next to the wall. My father nudged one of the toys towards me with his foot and winked at me. I was never entirely sure what he meant by that wink, but it managed to make me smile despite everything. It made me feel like he was secretly on my side and that perhaps he'd even stop my toys being

consumed forever by the black bin bag. When everything was away, he instructed us to go upstairs and get changed.

The way the argument had been left meant we knew it was far from over. It meant things were tense when we were getting ready. More accurately, Ben got himself ready while I sat on my bed and waited for one of my parents to realise that a four-year-old isn't dexterous enough to dress without disaster. When Ben was ready, dressed in his smart trousers and a school shirt, he came over to my bed. He looked at the pile of clothes beside me. They were identical to his, just smaller. They were what we wore for church on Sundays. I liked the singing, but I usually fell asleep while Father Tom gave his sermon. Ben offered to help me get dressed and I accepted.

Neither of us were particularly skilled at the task in hand. He wasn't used to assisting anyone else in getting dressed, and I had trouble navigating my limbs through those small holes. We managed to get my shirt on and even my trousers were eventually convinced to make their way up my legs. It was the jumper I had to wear over the top that presented the difficulty. Ben put his jumper on first, as though it would inspire us both to get mine right. It didn't prevent me trying to put my head through one of the sleeves. Trapped in the woolly darkness, I began to struggle against my confines. I got a bit panicked about my situation. Ben started laughing.

'You look like a big silly monster,' he told me.

His laughter calmed me. I began swinging the empty sleeve of my jumper around. This increased the laughter and, when I started making strange noises to accompany the movements, the laughter increased even more. The floorboard next to the door creaked, signalling the arrival of someone else. Our laughter stopped. I stopped moving.

‘You’re going to get your jumper all messed up,’ my mother shouted. ‘Why couldn’t you have waited five minutes? Why do I have to be responsible for everything around here? I don’t suppose your father could have got off his backside and helped.’

The jumper was wrenched over my head. It hurt because one of my arms was still twisted up in the fabric. When my mother saw the state of my shirt underneath, she grew even angrier. I couldn’t understand why until I saw that none of the buttons had been put into the right holes.

‘Why did you let him get dressed by himself?’ my mother snapped at Ben. ‘You should have come and got me. Now all his clothes will be creased, and he’ll look a mess. It’s bad enough that we have to go to this stupid party, and now you’re both making life more difficult for me.’

Roughly, my mother began to unbutton my shirt. She grabbed my hairbrush from my bedside table and roughly ran it through my hair. It was a Spider-Man hairbrush, flat with red-tipped spikes and it had been one of the odder things I’d got for Christmas. Having tamed my hair, my mother then dressed me properly and marched me and Ben out of the room. Once downstairs, we were subjected to an approving look from our father.

‘You both look very smart,’ he said.

‘No thanks to you,’ my mother said.

‘I’m sure we’ll all be on our best behaviour tonight,’ my father said, ignoring my mother completely. ‘They say that, if you’re naughty, a plane will fall out of the sky and land on your head.’

‘You can’t tell them that,’ my mother cried. ‘They won’t sleep.’



'If they're good boys, then they'll have nothing to worry about,' my father pointed out.

The ceasefire, which had naturally arisen after the last bout of arguing, broke down after those comments. Both parents retreated into the kitchen to continue arguing with each other. With our toys packed away, there was nothing for me and Ben to do except sit on the sofa. My mother was criticising my father for encouraging us to get changed so soon when we would not be leaving for another hour. She had also forbidden us to watch the television because we had been silly when getting dressed, which left us with nothing better to do than listen to the raised voices and cupboard doors slamming. Lulled by the familiar sounds, I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke, I was incredibly thirsty. I was alone in the living room. The sun had set, and I had no way of gauging how much time had passed. My father appeared in the room, dressed in similar attire to me and Ben. He sat beside me on the sofa. I nestled against him, smelling the aftershave that he claimed to have worn when he first met my mother. Given how little of it he used at any one time, I wonder if he ever finished that bottle.

'How are you holding up, buddy?' he asked.

'I'm thirsty,' I replied.

He nodded and looked around the room. I didn't know what he was looking for, but he nodded again before getting to his feet. He returned with a plastic cup of juice. I took it in my hands and slowly drank from it.

'We'll be heading out soon,' my father said. 'It's good you've had a little rest now. It's going to be a late one. They say the world might end tonight. I think I'd be fine with that. So long as it was quick. A flash of light and we'd all be gone. If we

didn't notice it, we wouldn't know. We'd finally get an answer to the whole afterlife business.'

I was struggling to keep up with what he was saying. The fogginess of sleep still clouded my thoughts. My eyes were struggling to stay open. Only the sweet tang of the juice was keeping me focused on the present moment. My dad had a look in his eye that I'd never seen before. He looked peaceful. Without either the smile or the frown that often followed it, he looked significantly younger. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The youthful look was gone, rubbed away in the gesture. He looked as tired as I felt.

'Something has to give,' he sighed. 'It can't go on like this.'

Then he put his glasses back on and my father was in the room again. He encouraged me to drink my juice, his smile returning. He left the room and I tried to understand what it was he'd said. I didn't try very hard. It was clearly grownup stuff that I wasn't meant to understand. Only in hindsight do I realise he was talking more to himself than to me.

The only part of what he said that made any sense to me was the idea of the world ending. Ben had come home from school one day, really upset about the idea. My mother had convinced him it was something silly people had started to believe. Ben dropped the matter afterwards. Yet the way in which my father spoke left me uncertain of it. It wasn't that he'd convinced me the world would end, but he had introduced the idea that it would be fine if it did.

It was when I was contemplating these matters that my mother walked in. She looked at me and I could see the anger rise in her face. I tried to follow her gaze to discover the cause of her annoyance. An orange stain spread out on my jumper from when my cup had been held against my chest. I expected my mother to shout, but

she took the cup away. It still had some juice in it and some droplets flew out and spattered the new red carpet. Silently, she grabbed me by the wrist and took me upstairs to find a replacement jumper. She made a comment about how I would no longer match Ben or my father but even that lacked the usual venom she injected into her outbursts.

Once I was dressed, it was time to leave. In the freezing air of the car, my mother began to berate my father for giving me the drink. It was reassuring that the tension had been broken in that manner. They filled the drive with their arguing. The argument itself was essentially white noise in that there were no real specifics on which to focus. My parents kept looping back round to the same unresolvable points. My father accused my mother of being meddling and overbearing with an inability to have even the slightest bit of fun. My mother accused my father of being a controlling monster who cared only about outward appearances and had not done so much as lift a finger to raise either of his children.

Even my parents had enough of a sense of decorum to know they had to stop arguing before arriving at the party. My father saw the opportunity presented by the impending socialisation to make one last point about how he could still be considered a trustworthy parent when it came to road safety. I had no idea what he meant by that comment, but the reaction it elicited from my mother was ferocious. She shouted, and it seemed louder than I had heard in any previous argument. As the car rolled to a stop, she fell silent.

The party was being held in a hotel on the outskirts of town. There were plenty of open fields from which to launch the night's fireworks when it got to that point. Until then, everyone was welcome to party inside. The large dark room was lit only by flashing lights that lined the walls and projected strange patterns onto the

ceiling and dancefloor. A DJ was set up in the corner of the room, hidden behind a great bank of equipment. Circular tables were dotted around the place with people moving between them, carrying food and drinks. A long buffet table ran parallel with the wall nearest the door through which we entered. I looked longingly at the sausage rolls but was told it wasn't time for the food. We settled ourselves at an empty table in the far corner of the room. Our table was submerged entirely in darkness, the roving lights never quite making their way over to us. It was a good place to see all the party goers without being seen.

My father went to the bar, stopping along the way to converse with those he passed, before returning with drinks. Ben and I were permitted to share a small glass of Coke and had even been given a straw each. My father set down a pint of beer in front of him and handed my mother a glass of water.

'I'm going to get a proper drink,' she insisted.

'One of us has to drive back,' my father replied.

'And one drink isn't going to stop that from happening. It might, however, stop me from throttling you.'

My mother returned a short time later with a glass of wine. Both my parents drank their drinks slowly. They had to pay for their own drinks and were not prepared to overindulge too soon. Ben and I lacked an understanding of this and drained the contents of our glass within five minutes. The burst of energy from the sugar and caffeine surged through my system and I took to the dance floor. Ben followed suit and time fell away as we threw ourselves around. Music and rhythm made no difference to our dancing. When the slow songs came on, I made a point of copying something resembling break dancing I had seen on TV.

I was aware of movement at our table. People were coming over, talking to my parents and then leaving again. Occasionally, either my mother or father would leave the table to get drinks or to mingle with the other guests. It was mostly my mother who was getting drinks and mostly my father who was mingling. It made sense to me. The party was being held by some people my father knew from the quizzes he attended twice a week, and a bonus third time on the last week of every month, and these people had very little to do with my mother. It was clear who were the regular quizzers, as most of them had bellies distended from too much beer and pallid skin that rarely saw the sun. They dragged with them tired spouses, mostly wives although, in the case of the rare female quizzer, there would be a man staring aimlessly around the room instead. Some of the couples seemed to feature two happy people, which seemed very strange to me, and I wondered if they still argued at home.

When the sugar wore off and the energy slumped out of my body, I staggered back to the table and plopped down into a chair. I used my straw to drink from the glass of water my mother hadn't touched. Ben helped me to drain the glass even quicker than we had managed with the Coke. Despite lacking the energy to dance, it was fun watching the lights continue the job. By that time, enough of the adults had drunk enough that the dancefloor had a steady population of older people gyrating various parts of their bodies. Most of them possessed the same flair for timing as me.

'This is fucking depressing,' my father muttered, his words possessing a strange wobble. 'Look at everyone out there having a good time. And I'm stuck here with you.'

My mother said he wouldn't have to be stuck with her for very much longer. She claimed that, if the world didn't end, she'd pack her bags and go. It was one of the things she said most often to my father, and it had lost all meaning some time before. I wasn't interested in their argument. It was more fun to watch the lights. I pretended the red light was chasing the green light and that, if the two lights touched, the world would end. The sound of my parents droned on as background noise, but my attention was piqued when my mother mentioned me and Ben. She vowed to take us with her when she left. I looked at my parents and then at Ben, who seemed entirely rapt with the argument unfolding before him. I wondered if we would be going anywhere nice. It would be a shame to leave my father behind, but we could send postcards. I was sure it wouldn't be forever. He didn't seem convinced. His lip curled up and he raised an eyebrow, as though he had learned to emote from watching cartoons and knew no other way to express confusion.

'Oh yes,' my mother said to conclude their discussion. 'Soon, I'll be through with you and then I'll be free to live my life, while you stay behind and rot.'

'How do you plan to do that?' my father asked. 'You're nothing. What would you even do? You can have one of your little tantrums. You can threaten to leave all you want. You're not taking my sons. They stay with me.'

Pride swelled in my stomach. My parents cared about me. They wanted to fight over me. They had fought many times about things I had done or things they had done to me, but I could not seem to recall them fighting over me in this way. It was possible I was forgetting, or the exhaustion of the sugar crash and the dancing was setting in. I was finding it hard to keep my eyes open and focus on what they were saying. There was something about lying. Something about sin. Something about God. My head felt heavy and my eyelids kept finding themselves closed. As I

drifted off to sleep, the pride was replaced by guilt. They were fighting over me. I had to find some way to fix it.

I next awoke to the sound of fireworks. The room was deserted save for my mother and Ben. The flashing disco lights had been switched off and the room was lit only by a scattering of dim lights and the periodic flash of fireworks. My mother was nursing another drink. I had no idea how many drinks she'd had over the course of the evening, but it was enough that the smell of it had seeped into her. She gave me a smile when she saw I was awake. That made me feel better about all the arguing that had happened before. I wanted to ask her about it. I needed to discern my place in it all. Before I got the opportunity, my father appeared back in the room.

'Everyone's asking where you are,' he told my mother. 'They seemed to think I needed to check on you and the boys.'

My mother ran a finger along the rim of her wine glass.

'I couldn't leave them,' she said, gazing into the red liquid.

'You could have. For five minutes. Just for five minutes. They'd have been fine. They have each other.'

'What are a four and seven-year-old supposed to do on their own?' my mother questioned.

'You coddle them too much. You think it'll make up for everything you've done, but it won't. It leads to spoilt kids who don't have any shred of independence. You keep going like this and they'll both be as bad as you are. They're better off with me. You know that. That's why you can't leave. Everyone in the whole goddamn world can tell they're better off with me. You're nothing. A disgrace.'

The fireworks stopped. Cheering could be heard from outside. The cheers were replaced with the singing of a song with nonsense words for lyrics.

'Missed the best bit,' my father mumbled as he walked away. 'Missed it for nothing.'

He stopped at the door and turned back to look at us. He spread his arms wide and grinned the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

'Happy New Year,' he shouted at us. 'Looks like you're still stuck with me.'

He laughed and left the room. My mother got up to follow him, but the movement woke Ben.

'Where are you going, Mummy?' he asked.

'Nowhere,' she said, sitting back down. 'Mummy's never going to leave you.'

I was too tired to remember how we came to leave the party or any of the drive home. When we did make it back home, the atmosphere in the house was strange. My mother made Ben and me go to bed straight away. After falling asleep in a variety of places throughout the evening, it was comforting to finally be in the correct environment for it.

A short time after being put to bed, Ben woke me up. He was shaking me and, when I awoke, he explained there was something weird happening with our parents. We slipped out of the bedroom and sat at the top of the stairs. From there, I could make out the faint murmur of their voices. There was something strange about it. They sounded calm. Ben led the way down the stairs, pointing out to me the parts of the stairs that creaked. Together, we descended. It felt like it took ages to slowly weave our way down the stairs, knowing the slightest wrong movement would get us sent straight back to bed. Tiredness was clawing at my every sense, but I knew I had to press on. There was a feeling of importance to what was happening, even if neither Ben nor I could explain how we knew. The door to the living room was ajar, and Ben and I settled ourselves into position to peer through and observe what was



happening. It was hard to see through such a tiny gap, but I could make out my father pacing the room and my mother sitting in the armchair.

‘Do you honestly think this was what I wanted?’ my father was saying. ‘I wanted this to work. I know you never felt the same. I always knew. I kept kidding myself, hoping something would make you feel about me the way that I feel about you. It was fine, at the beginning. Wasn’t it? Before we got married. Before we moved in together. Before the kids. It was fine. We had some moments. I don’t know what went wrong.’

‘I never wanted to marry you,’ my mother replied. ‘Nanna wanted to see me get married before she went. I had no choice.’

‘How do you think that makes me feel?’

My mother did not reply. Instead, my father filled the silence.

‘Do you have any idea what it’s like to be around someone all the time knowing that, at the slightest chance, they will pack up and leave? Do you know how hard it is to love someone like that, knowing they will never love you in the same way?’

‘Do you think it’s been easy for me?’ my mother asked. ‘Marriage, kids, all of this. I never wanted any of it. You know what I went through as a kid. You know how my parents treated me. Even whoever came up with ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ would have told my parents to go a bit easier on me. That kind of thing stays with you. After all that, I needed to be my own person. But I didn’t want to disappoint Nanna. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. I didn’t want to disappoint you. I have lived this way for so long. I have done everything for you. I don’t even know why I bother. Nanna’s gone. I can’t disappoint her anymore. I don’t think my parents care much, and I’ve done nothing but disappoint you. Why am I still here?’

My father stopped pacing. He stood in the centre of the room, perfectly framed in the gap in the doorway. He seemed to deflate a little bit and the look he gave my mother was almost that of a child being told they can have no more sweets.

'I'll agree to a divorce,' he concluded. 'I'll pack up my things and be out of your hair in the morning. I'll go and stay with my parents for a bit.'

Then my parents both made promises to each other. It was like watching a wedding ceremony from a world where everything is backwards. My father promised he would make the divorce no harder on my mother than it needed to be. My mother promised she would allow him access to me and Ben. Sensing that we had seen more than we should and that the punishment for being caught would be unimaginable, Ben and I retreated to our bedroom. The people at the party had been wrong. When they all laughed and clapped each other on the back and thanked God that the world had not ended, they had spoken too soon. Ben and I witnessed the end of the world in that living room. All we had to keep us going were those promises and the almost tender way in which they had been delivered. Even then, I think we both knew those promises would not hold true. When had our parents ever been able to agree on anything?

The first day of the new millennium brought with it the horrifying sight of my father leaving us. It looked as though my father was packed for a holiday. There were two suitcases sitting beside him and a backpack on his back. He was wearing the clothes from yesterday. His shirt was untucked and there was a stain on his jumper. I remembered the stain on my jumper. We were matching after all. He looked up at me and Ben, who were watching from the top of the stairs, and smiled a genuine smile that gave way to the saddest look I had ever seen.

Then he picked up his two suitcases and walked out. Ben and I ran down after him, calling for him to stop. He didn't hear us or, at least, he pretended not to. My mother held out an arm to stop us going out onto the drive. We watched from the front door as my father loaded his bags into the car boot. When he closed it, he made eye contact with me. I could see the tears in his eyes reflecting my own. Ducking under my mother's arm, I ran outside. The tiny stones of the gravel driveway jabbed into my bare feet. My run took on a hopping motion that would have been funny in different circumstances. Before I reached him, my father had got into the car and closed the door. His eyes were fixed straight ahead as I slapped the side of the car. An arm from my mother swept me off my feet. I screamed and kicked all the way back inside. I could hear the rumble of the car engine. I could hear the tyres crunching over the sharp gravel. I heard the slight bump of the car as it left the drive and settled onto the road. I did not see my father leave.

Once back inside, I was put down and the door was closed. I looked out of the glass to see if I could catch even a fleeting glimpse of his car. I saw nothing. Ben was standing there, crying. I took things further. I shouted at my mother, informed her how much I hated her and then stomped upstairs and threw myself on the bed.

The things I had heard the night before had not translated, in my mind, to a series of events that could unfold. It was a week before I stopped scowling at my mother. During that time, I saw my father twice. Both times, I spent the entire visit crying and screaming in equal measure. I was even grumpier upon returning home. I refused food and went straight to bed on both occasions. I overheard my mother on the phone to my nan talking about the difficulty of those visits. She was thinking of stopping them entirely if I kept on being sulky and silly. I forced myself to be quieter after that.

Things eventually started to feel more normal, though my mother struggled at first. Acquiring a car had been difficult and had relied upon a loan from my grandparents. My mother kept making concerning comments about money and bills.

Ben had said that living separately would help my parents to get along with each other. This almost proved true, at first, when they were able to be civil with each other. However, as the year wore on, they became gradually more aggressive. The arguments that had been such a regular fixture of our daily life were not going to cease simply because they no longer shared an abode. Most nights would feature an angry phone call between my parents that made it very hard to hear the TV. Sometimes, I had to watch the same part of my *Pokémon* tape three times just to hear what was being said.

September came and brought with it the biggest shock of all. My mother had been making me try on school clothes like the ones Ben wore. I had stopped going to nursery after my father left so, when I was being fitted for those clothes, I assumed I'd be going there again. My mother had volunteered at the nursery, when I was there, which had been good, because it meant I didn't have to be away from her. She was very keen to not show favouritism, however, and ensured I would be told off for even the slightest misdeed.

One morning, when Ben and I stood in the hall in our uniforms, I realised I wasn't going to nursery after all. A backpack had been packed for me. It was one I had picked out some time ago. It had Spider-Man on the main part and a cool web pattern on the sides. I looked at the small bag and wondered if I'd be permitted to return for more things. I couldn't imagine all my toys had fitted into such a small space. My father had been allowed to come back for more things. That had resulted in a lot of arguing though, as he insisted everything in the house was his, and my

mother insisted that she needed it all to raise two children. I asked her what I had done wrong that she'd want to get rid of me as well. I don't know if she understood me through my tears, or if my insistence that my bag was too small was confusing matters, but she didn't grasp what it was I was sad about.

'Ben goes there all the time,' my mother pointed out. 'It's only big school. You were excited about big school before.'

The concept of big school had never excited me. I had not registered it as a possibility and had only been half listening whenever my mother had talked of it. Ben had tried to say good things about it, but I had not listened much to him either. It all sounded boring and confusing, and I had better things to think about, like learning all of the lyrics to the Poké Rap.

My mother tried to convince me it would be good. She then tried to bribe me with a special treat if I was a good boy all day. Her next step was to inform me that I had no choice in the matter. When that failed to inspire me, she grabbed my hand tightly and pulled me out of the house.

Mercifully for my mother, we lived just around the corner from St Michael's. Ben and I were deposited with an old lady who smelled of broccoli. Ben seemed to like this woman, but I immediately took a dislike to her. She rested a hand on my shoulder as my mother walked away. I was certain I'd never see my mother again or, if I did, it would be in the same fragmented fashion I saw my father.

'Your big brother will look after you,' the old woman told me. 'That's what big brothers are for.'

The old lady was either lying or a fool. Ben didn't stay with me. He vanished into a room in the building, and I knew I'd never see him again either. I got deposited in a separate room with a group of children I had never seen before.

To my surprise, I got to see Ben at something known as breaktime. He was with three boys I vaguely remembered from a birthday party he'd had once. I wondered if the boys would recognise me. I didn't care much; I was more interested in talking to Ben. Something was clearly wrong and, between the two of us, we'd figure it out and hatch an escape plan.

Ben told me to shoo. I stood there, staring at him. He repeated the command. I lifted up a leg to show him the new shoes I'd been forced to wear. They were tight and uncomfortable and evidently part of the problem, since Ben was drawing so much attention to them.

'Shoe?' I asked, pointing at my foot.

Ben shook his head. One of his friends stepped towards me. His fist found my stomach. Pain exploded through me as my legs gave out from under me. I clutched my stomach and began to cry. Through teary eyes, I saw Ben and his friends head to the other side of the playground. When I next looked up, it was into the face of one of the children with whom I'd been forced to share a room.

'Is your tummy poorly?' he asked.

'Go away,' I snapped.

The boy looked at me. He adjusted his glasses and then stuck out his hand.

'I'm Franklyn,' he said. 'I heard Miss Dawson say your name, but I forgot it.'

'Go away,' I repeated. 'Shoo.'

The boy considered this before acquiescing.

It was a surprise when my mother appeared at the end of the day to retrieve me. I was thankful to be back in my own home, eating her food and not the weird stuff they had given us at school. She laughed when I told her I was glad I'd never have to go back there.

'I think you've got a bit longer to do,' she said.

'How long?' I asked.

'Until you're sixteen.'

My grasp of numbers was weak at that point, but it sounded like I was going to be stuck there for quite some time. This troubled me all evening. What was more troubling was the way in which Ben pretended nothing had happened. He was the person I had always known him to be when we were at home. I didn't recognise what that place turned him into. I didn't mention it to my mother for fear that, whatever madness took hold of Ben, might infect her too.

The next day, I resolved to find out why Ben was acting strange. I had to bide my time until breaktime before I could approach him again. When the bell rang and we were let out into the chill autumn air, I tracked down Ben. He was standing by The Other Wall with his friends. The Other Wall was a strange thing to have on a playground for children for, as its name would suggest, it was a freestanding brick wall someone had built on the concrete. Though it was officially for things like handstands, The Other Wall provided a blind spot in the teachers' patrols that enabled children to have more freedom. It seemed to be a direct rebellion against The Wall, the place to which naughty children were sent, as it offered a haven for children to be naughty in the first place. On that day, I learned how naughty children could be there. The fist of my brother's friend being driven into my stomach showed me. Under the safety of The Other Wall, he was able to kick me twice as well. Ben said nothing as he walked off with his friends. Therein lay the problem. Ben had his friends, and I was all alone. I would need some way to tip things in my favour. At the very least, I needed a reason to be nowhere near Ben when he was in this possessed state.

As before, Franklyn appeared over me as I lay on the ground crying. He extended a hand and introduced himself once more.

'I'm Franklyn,' he said cheerfully.

I looked suspiciously at his hand. My body hurt to move but I allowed myself to slowly uncurl from the foetal position into which I had fallen. Grabbing his hand, I started to get up off the floor. I used his jumper for support and, although I stretched it, Franklyn did not seem to mind.

'I'm Jon,' I told him. 'We're best friends now.'

Franklyn considered this for a moment before nodding. A huge grin spread across his face.



## File Three Successfully Loaded

Sakinah sits beside the frozen lake and watches the few other people who are braving the cold go about their day. A fellow mother is pushing a sleeping child around in a pushchair.

There's a young couple, walking hand in hand. There's a man in Star Wars pyjamas leaning against a bin. Sakinah's own child is sitting on her lap, looking out at the world with those big brown eyes of his. Everything is right with the world. So why can't she relax?

It's been a problem for a while now. And by a while she means eleven months and two days, or, as she worked out while staring at the frozen lake, around eight thousand and sixty-four hours. It had started on New Year's Day, a feeling of intense anxiety, and nothing had shifted it since. There had been something scary about entering the same year that would be her child's birthday. She had hoped the anxiety would go away, certainly once her son was born, but now, at the end of the year, nothing has changed. Even when the birth was done and out the way, she was faced with a whole new heap of anxiety about looking after a little one. She talked about her anxieties with her mum. The conversation had gone as Sakinah expected, with her mum telling her that life is full of challenges, good times and bad times, and that turning to Allah is the best thing to do in any situation. Her mum had expressed how much of a blessing Sakinah and her sister had been and advised her to enjoy every moment with her own child. To round out the conversation, she offered to make dua for Sakinah that her troubles be eased, and her blessings extended.

'Da da da da,' Musa intones from his spot on Sakinah's lap, pulling her back to the present.

Sakinah looks down at her son. He is staring intently at a nearby pigeon. He reaches out his pudgy fingers to get it, but the pigeon remains safely on the other side of the lake.

Musa opens his mouth with shock that he could be outmanoeuvred by a bird.

‘You’ll get it next time, sweetheart,’ Sakinah says to him.

Musa wriggles, a renewed sense of purpose coming over him. The pigeon flies away and Musa stops moving.

‘We probably should get back home as well,’ Sakinah says.

Musa makes a spitting noise, and a trickle of saliva drips from his lips. Sakinah fastens him back in his pushchair and walks away from the lake. She raises the hood of the pushchair to protect him from the cold December wind. Sakinah feels the beginning pangs of a caffeine headache and walks over to the wooden shack that is the only building in the park. A cheerful barista provides her with a coffee, and she sets out back to the flat. A shout from nearby draws her attention. As Sakinah looks over to where the noise came from, she places a hand on Musa’s chest to protect him from harm. The man in the Star Wars pyjamas has become irritated with the bin he was leaning on and has started kicking it. Not caring if she spills coffee, Sakinah walks as fast as she can out of the park and onto the residential streets. She can hear the man blaming the bin for his upcoming divorce and she definitely does not want Musa to learn any of the words coming out of the man’s mouth. She knows better than to rely on the police to arrive, and instead takes control of the situation herself by leaving.

The park has always been one of the highlights of living in the area. This has little to do with the park itself and more to do with how run down everywhere else is. Every wall has flaking paint, a massive crack, or graffiti. Sakinah hurries past the cramped houses, desperate to get home to her husband. In one of the poorly maintained front gardens, a man sits on a frayed armchair, a cigarette in one hand and a beer bottle in the other. He is dressed for the weather with a beanie hat and a stained woolly jumper, and he mechanically and rhythmically

brings first the cigarette to his mouth, then the bottle, then the cigarette again. The man would not look out of place in some postmodern art exhibition, the kind that used to clutter the halls of the university Sakinah attended. When the man catches her looking at him, he puffs out smoke from his nostrils.

The walk back to the flat only takes ten minutes. Waiting to greet her is the side wall of the neighbour's house that has every word for paedophile a person could think of daubed across it. Sakinah looks at the array of words and feels the usual pang of sympathy for the current occupant. She knows the current person living there isn't a paedophile. Well, she certainly hopes they're not. Still, they're not the person for whom the writing was intended, and it seems unlikely that all four families that have lived in the house since Sakinah moved into the area would all be sexual deviants. Although, as her husband pointed out, there is a school just down the road, so it would be prime real estate for the adventurous molester.

Sakinah ducks into the tiny carpark that every visitor to their flat, without fail, misses for at least their first three visits. She passes by the family car, pausing for a few seconds to check for damage.

Once inside the apartment block, Sakinah detaches the seat from the pushchair and leaves the wheels sitting by the store cupboard at the base of the stairs. She is sure someone will try to steal them at some point, but her flat doesn't have the space to store it safely. Sakinah says a quick dua for the safety of her pushchair wheels before heading up the stairs. Carrying a seven-month-old son in his surprisingly heavy car seat up the three flights of stairs that lead to her flat is a good workout and results in Sakinah feeling hot and sweaty despite the outside temperature. The window of the landing area is open from where the neighbour opposite has been smoking and is letting in refreshingly cold air.

Sakinah juggles the car seat and the front-door key to let herself into the flat. The interior is only slightly warmer than the outside. To add to her list of worries and concerns,

the current state of the economy is dire. Money is tight and maternity leave does not pay as well as her usual salary. Her husband is still working, but Sakinah earns more than him, and it is a struggle to get by on his wage. She knows her return to work is imminent, another thing on the list of concerns, but she really can't think about that right now. To survive the winter, they have resorted to heating the living room in the day and the bedroom at night and forgetting about the other rooms. Her husband said it was like they were living in some stately home where entire wings were shut off for the winter. Their loss isn't much, as they avoid using the dining room, but it is fun to imagine rooms and rooms lying in wait for the warmer weather. As the living room is open-plan with the kitchen, it serves as a base of operations for everything they need throughout the day.

Even if his voice were not echoing through the flat, Sakinah knows her husband will be nestled in the living room. She can picture the scene: his work in front of him and something on the television. She smiles at the thought of her husband's quirks before she hears the tone of hostility in his voice.

'The way you say that makes me think you want me to care,' he is saying. 'I need you to understand that I don't care. I will deal with it in my own time. In my own way.'

He stops talking abruptly; the person on the other end must have interrupted. Sakinah places the car seat on the hall floor and slips off her shoes.

'Absolutely not,' comes her husband's voice again. 'You do not, under any circumstance, do that.'

Sakinah unclips Musa and lifts him out of the seat. He makes an appreciative farting sound with his mouth and nestles his head against her shoulder.

'I have already told you and I am not going to tell you again. It doesn't matter what's happening to him. It's not my business anymore.'

With the level of acrobatic skill bestowed upon all new parents, Sakinah shifts Musa's weight so that he is pressed to the left side of her body. Her right hand now entirely free, Sakinah slips the pin out of her hijab and ducks into the bathroom to put it somewhere Musa cannot go. She emerges from the bathroom to hear her husband again, although he is whispering now.

'I have to go,' he says. 'Never call this number again.'

Sakinah is still unwrapping the scarf from around her head as she steps into the living room. Daniel smiles at her as though they don't both know that he has been shouting at someone on the phone. He holds out his arms and Musa copies the gesture until Sakinah lets him go, and father and son are united once more.

'Are you going to tell me what all that shouting was about?' Sakinah asks.

Daniel looks genuinely confused for a few seconds before turning to look at his phone, which is sitting on the arm of the sofa.

'Just some nonsense with a client,' he says. 'You know how it is.'

She does not know how it is, as it has never been like this before. Daniel has been working this same job for the same paper for years and, to Sakinah's knowledge, has never taken a call like that. The casual way in which Daniel tries to dismiss what she has heard unsettles her. It's another layer on the cake of anxiety that some demented baker is creating in her mind. Sakinah goes to sit down but, as expected, Daniel has allowed his work to consume the entire living room sofa; the only bit free of papers is instead occupied by Daniel's laptop. Daniel apologises and uses one arm to create a gap in the papers as though clearing snow from a windscreen. Sakinah sits in the gap as Daniel bobs Musa around the room. On the television, Daniel's game of *Pokémon Scarlet* is waiting for him to input the next command to continue the battle. Sakinah gave the game to him as a gift. It was released two weeks ago. Daniel had been excitedly talking about it for months, and she wants to keep that happiness

going for ever. The cost of a new video game isn't something their tight budget allows, but happiness is more important than that.

Sakinah knows Daniel often plays video games as he works, a habit she first discovered at university. Their study sessions were odd ones, where she would work on her assignments, and he would sit and play games on his laptop. She had been genuinely worried about him until, by some miracle, his work was always completed on time. It wasn't the best work she had ever seen, but he didn't fail anything and, since he claimed playing games helped him focus, she stopped questioning it long ago.

'They often get annoyed with you?' Sakinah asks.

'Sometimes,' Daniel replies, not looking at her. 'It's all about whether they get the spot they want in the paper.'

'I didn't realise it was such a competitive field.'

'It is, especially around Christmas,' Daniel says with more confidence. 'Everyone wants to be as close to the front page as possible, without paying front-page prices of course, or as close to the obituaries as possible.'

'The obituaries?'

'No one reads local newspapers for anything that isn't front-page worthy or that can't be featured in the obituaries. Advertisers know every other page is going to be used by cat owners to surround litter trays.'

'So that was a client?'

'Who somehow got my personal number, yes. A problem that's been happening more, ever since I offered to cover the review section for local theatre productions. No good deed goes unpunished I suppose. Still, it's a role that also does not involve me giving out my personal number. I'll be finding out which idiot at the paper gave it out and then I'll set HR on them. I wouldn't worry about it if I were you.'

Sakinah knows how stupid it is to listen to this; even Daniel doesn't seem convinced by the words coming out of his mouth. But she trusts him. He knows her and she knows him. He wouldn't lie to her. She pushes the worries from her mind and focuses on telling Daniel what happened in the park. As Sakinah talks, Daniel proves himself to be a good husband by putting Musa down and making her an Earl Grey tea; her preferred drink since finding coffee repulsive in the second trimester. He settles with a mug of coffee and listens to her. At the mention of the man in pyjamas, Daniel moves to the floor and wraps an arm around Musa. Musa ignores him and carries on shaking a rattle.

'He didn't come near you, did he?' Daniel asks.

'We stayed well clear of it,' Sakinah replies.

'You should have let me come with you,' Daniel protests for the thousandth time.

'This is not the nicest area in the world. I don't want anything bad happening to you.'

'I keep telling you, I'm fine. If you came with me, who'd be here to shout at people on the phone? I have my mother-instincts now. I'll rip out someone's throat for looking at my baby wrong.'

Daniel looks at her, concern evident on his face. He stays beside Musa, sheltering him from memories of the encounter, memories he does not have. Only when Musa begins throwing his toys around the room and crawling after them does Daniel return to the sofa. He pats Sakinah reassuringly on the shoulder before getting back to whatever work the newspaper has set him that week and the more important task of finishing the Pokémon battle, after which he saves his game and turns off the Switch. Daniel's job involves tedious, monotonous work for local newspapers and rarely throws up anything exciting, but it allows him to work mostly from home and help her look after Musa. It isn't the kind of job where people typically get angry, and yet the memory of the phone call lingers on.

Following Daniel's reassurances, Sakinah tries to avoid worrying about the phone call anymore. She finds herself able to avoid worrying about it over dinner that evening. She avoids worrying about it when Daniel settles himself in front of his nightly *Eastenders*. She avoids worrying about it even as it stands as a barrier to sleep that night. She even finds herself avoiding worrying about it for the whole of the following week as Daniel's phone receives more texts than usual and plenty of calls that he lets go to voicemail.

She is doing a remarkable job of not worrying about it at all, right up until the moment someone rings the intercom at the base of the apartment block. Daniel answers and Sakinah listens as he adopts the same hushed, angry tone he used during the phone call. His volume rises and it becomes clear that whoever is on the other end of the intercom isn't listening to him. He puts the phone down as the sound of stomping footsteps rings out on the stairwell outside the flat.

'There's probably something I should tell you,' Daniel begins.

His words are cut off by a hammering on the door.

'And you might want to put a scarf on.' He winces.

Sakinah clutches Musa close to her body. She wants to go and hide him in a different room but finds herself unable to move away from the door. She cannot leave her husband to deal with this unknown threat, even as her trust in him wanes. The knocking comes again. Daniel looks at the door as though his eyes have the power to make the person on the other side vanish. It works. The knocking stops. Sakinah stands there in disbelief, but then the voice of whoever was knocking makes the situation worse. It is deep and rough and sounds an awful lot like someone doing an impression of Phil Mitchell.

'I know you're in there,' the voice says. 'I was just speaking to you. I'm going to stand out here, knocking on your door, until you let me in or one of the neighbours complains. It's up to you.'



Sakinah touches Daniel's arm with her free hand, in an attempt to stop him from opening the door and, undoubtedly, making a mess of everything. Musa gives a few questioning babbles.

'Do you want me to start shouting and stomping my feet?' the man asks. 'Because I can. I don't have to live here. I can piss off whoever I like.'

Sakinah takes the opportunity to grab a one-piece headscarf from the coat rack and slip it over her hair. Daniel steps past Sakinah and unlocks the door. He takes a deep breath before opening it. Sakinah has no idea what is waiting on the other side of the door. She wonders, in the second it takes for the door to open, whether Daniel has somehow got involved in organised crime, or if their financial situation is somehow worse than she is aware of. But the face that greets her when the door opens dispels both of those concerns and replaces them with entirely new ones. It looks so much like Daniel's that she has to check to ensure that her husband is standing beside her. The doorframe is a mirror at a carnival funhouse and is projecting a distorted version of her husband for everyone's amusement. Whereas Daniel is tall and thin, this distorted version is squatter and has a pronounced belly. Jowls hang from his face where Daniel's cheekbones form slight recesses in his skin. The man's head is bald except for a ring of thinning hair that runs around the base of his skull. His thick coat is open, showing beneath it a t-shirt for a band that stopped producing music somewhere around the late seventies. His jeans are faded and worn, the state of them worsening as they approach the leather boots that go halfway up his shins. He spreads his arms expectantly, like a stage magician waiting for a round of applause.

'This is my brother,' Daniel mutters, a mixture of anger and hatred adding an edge to his voice Sakinah has never heard before.

'Bloody hell,' says Daniel's brother, her brother-in-law. 'When did you join the Taliban?'

Daniel doesn't speak. Musa is uncharacteristically quiet, confused by the newcomer and his father somehow existing in the same space. Sakinah shares her son's sense of confusion.

'It's called a joke,' Daniel's brother says eventually, adding a loud laugh as though introducing the sound to his hosts. 'I guess you never were all that good at taking a joke.'

'Daniel?' Sakinah says. 'What's going on here?'

'Daniel?' the man laughs. 'You going by Daniel now? I thought when you lot changed your names or whatever, you had to be called Mohammed or something. Is Daniel meant to mean something?'

'I usually go by Dan,' Daniel says, finally. 'Sakinah calls me Daniel, but most other people call me Dan. It's my middle name, you idiot. As you well know.'

'I know,' the man nods, leaning against the doorframe. 'But does she?'

Sakinah feels her anxiety shift into annoyance.

'Of course I do,' she snaps. 'I know he prefers to use his middle name. I am his wife after all.'

'At least he told you something then, sweetheart. Because from the look on your face I don't reckon he's mentioned me, has he?'

There is still enough marital loyalty left over from the arrival of Daniel's brother that Sakinah feels compelled to stand by her husband. That loyalty is ebbing away with every passing second, but she isn't going to say anything that will encourage the loud man who is imposing on her afternoon.

'I'm Ben, by the way,' Ben says, after it becomes clear that Daniel is still not going to introduce him. 'I'm Jon's, I mean Dan's or Daniel's or Mohammed's or whatever he's calling himself's, long-suffering older brother. Now, how about you pop the kettle on, love. We can have a proper catch-up.'

Sakinah dutifully heads in the direction of the kitchen. She stops herself mid-step and changes direction. She instead heads into the bedroom. It's cold in there and she knows she cannot spend too long, but her brief diversion serves its purpose. Daniel and Ben pass by the door and go into the living room. Sakinah waits long enough for them to sit down before emerging. She wonders if Daniel invited Ben inside or if Ben invited himself. When she goes into the living room and sees Ben sitting back on the sofa as though it were his own home, she is inclined to believe the latter. Daniel sits near him, although he is trying to keep as far away from his brother as possible, while also leaving enough space for Sakinah to come and sit down. A sense of relief flutters within her as she sees she does not have to sit next to Ben. There is a strong aroma coming off him, likely from those impressive sweat patches under his arms, now more visible since he has taken off his coat. It's strong enough, even at a distance, and seems like it would be truly unbearable up close.

Sakinah sits awkwardly on the edge of the sofa. It is sweet that Daniel has tried to shield her from his brother, but he has barely left her any space. She is half hanging off and, when Musa threatens to wriggle free of her grip, she gives up on the idea of sitting on the sofa. First, she puts Musa on the floor, a task made challenging by his attempts to stand instead of sit, and then she slides into place beside him. She pulls a box of toys nearer to them and gets Musa's attention with a rattle. Ben looks at her, his eyebrow raised with comic exaggeration.

'I thought they were supposed to be all obedient,' Ben says to Daniel. 'Like good housewives and all that. Can she not understand English or something, or did she get lost on her way to the kettle?'

'If you intend to carry on being a racist, you can leave now,' Daniel snaps.

Something is odd about his voice. When he next speaks, Sakinah realises what's happening. The longer Ben is here, the posher Daniel is sounding. It is as forced and

unnatural as the London accent Ben is using, and she gets the sense that it is a continuation of some weird game from their childhood. All she knows for sure is that, if Ben remains in their home for much longer, it is likely Daniel will sound like a member of the royal family within fifteen minutes.

‘I don’t care why you’re here,’ Daniel continues. ‘You treat my wife with dignity and respect, or you can crawl back under whatever rock had the misfortune to house you all this time.’

‘I know you’ve never been the best at taking a joke, but this is ridiculous,’ Ben laments, his *Eastender*’s accent getting thicker with each utterance. ‘Do they swap out your sense of humour when they give you your Qurans?’

‘I fail to see how racism is funny.’

‘You’ve always failed to see how anything’s funny,’ Ben laughs. ‘That’s your problem. It’s ironic, isn’t it? That’s what I’m doing. Being ironic. All the kids are doing it these days.’

‘Do you have kids of your own?’ Sakinah asks, partly to change the subject and partly to find out if there are any more hidden relatives yet to be discovered.

‘No,’ Ben replies. ‘But I do work with them every day. I’m a classroom assistant in a primary school.’

Sakinah looks at the man in her living room, who would be at home on a safety video warning children not to get into cars with strangers, and laughs.

‘That part’s not a joke,’ Daniel says. ‘Unless they fired him at some point in the last ten years.’

‘Who’d want to fire me?’ Ben says with a grin. ‘Now, is anyone going to make me that cuppa or do I have to start raiding your kitchen myself?’

Daniel gets up. He and Sakinah both know, as a matter of principle, Sakinah shouldn't be the one to move. Because the living room and kitchen are one open-plan space, Sakinah can still see and hear Daniel even as he leans against the kitchen counter. Ben, however, acts as though his brother has vanished from the face of the earth. A change comes over him; his shoulders relax and his gut, which his shirt is already struggling to contain, sticks out even more.

As the kettle begins to boil, the increase in volume presents Ben with the opportunity to say something to Sakinah without his brother hearing. She notices that, as well as whispering, Ben has dropped his accent entirely, sounding now just like Daniel.

'I don't mean any offence,' Ben says. 'I like winding him up. You have a lovely home and a lovely child. All of this is far more than he deserves. I hope he treats you well, because he has absolutely no idea how lucky he is.'

'Thank you,' Sakinah replies automatically.

This different side of Ben is unexpected. It has emerged from nowhere and she is certain it will vanish as quickly as it has come. There must be something more to Ben's personality transplant, some setup for a cruel joke that makes sense only to him. Sakinah is determined to play along as little as possible. Musa has other ideas and is beginning to warm to the stranger. He reaches out his hands towards the man who is, apparently, his uncle. Sakinah's distrust is still strong. She manoeuvres herself so she is between Ben and Musa.

'How do you know where we live?' Sakinah asks.

'I managed to get his number and address from someone at the paper he works for. A mate of mine knows someone who has a cousin that's married to someone there. And, to answer your next question, I know where he works because he's on their website. Jon may be many things but he's no James Bond. He wouldn't know how to hide himself if his life depended on it.'

‘Then why haven’t you tracked him down before now? I’ve known him for nine years, been married to him for seven of those, and I’ve never even heard of you.’

‘I’ll admit, I didn’t know you existed until I showed up,’ Ben says, nervously eyeing the rapidly boiling kettle. ‘I’m not sure I would have come if I’d have known. Or maybe I’d have come sooner. Years ago. There are things you should know, that you need to know, and, if he didn’t tell you about me, he won’t have told you any of it. He’s not the person you think he is. He—’

The click of the kettle switching off silences Ben. Sakinah looks over to where her husband is pouring the boiling water into three of their ugliest mugs, and when she looks back, the quiet Ben is gone, replaced by the gurning figure that stood at her front door. Daniel brings the drinks over.

‘I could murder a plate of biscuits,’ Ben grins, taking his drink. ‘How about you, Jon? Got any strong urges? Anything you could murder right about now?’

‘No,’ Daniel snaps, as he goes back to the kitchen for the other two mugs.

‘Any chance of a biscuit just for me then?’

‘No.’

‘Shame. Guess I’ll starve to death.’

Daniel slams his and Sakinah’s mugs down on coasters in such a way that some of the contents spills out. He glares at Ben before sitting back on the sofa. With a chuckle, Ben takes a sip of his tea. That gesture alone makes his presence more real, for Daniel has not even needed to ask Ben what he wants to drink and still has been able to get it right. They really are brothers. Here is a person who knows her husband, if not better than she does, then in a different, deep way. Sakinah wants to ask Ben more about what he’s been saying but knows she can’t: that Ben is gone and there is no way to bring him back without getting rid of Daniel.

‘It’s December and there isn’t a single decoration in this whole place,’ Ben says, shaking his head. ‘That’s a tragedy, that is. A real tragedy. I feel sorry for the kid.’

‘We are Muslim,’ Daniel replies stiffly. ‘We have enough to celebrate with Eid coming twice a year. We hardly need to throw in Christmas as well.’

‘You used to love Christmas.’

‘I’ve hated it ever since...’ Daniel takes a deep breath. ‘Ever since we were little. As you well know.’

‘Jesus didn’t die for this,’ Ben says, gesturing at the room, which suddenly feels a lot more barren than before.

‘Will you stop?’ Daniel snaps.

A tense moment passes. Ben rolls his eyes and takes a sip of his tea.

‘So, what brings you to our home today? Unannounced and, presumably, uninvited?’ Sakinah asks, before the situation can get any weirder.

‘Is it a crime to pop in and check on my little brother from time to time?’ Ben replies, the Christmas decorations forgotten. ‘It’s been too long,’ He shifts his focus back to Daniel. ‘I wanted to see how you were getting on now you’re a big shot journalist. I wanted to know if you’d covered anything juicy. Bodies buried in the woods. That kind of thing. I didn’t know you were a family man as well though. All this time I’ve been an uncle and never knew it.’

‘All this time? We haven’t spoken for nearly ten years. My son is seven months old,’ Daniel explains coldly. ‘You haven’t been an uncle “all this time”.’

Sakinah can’t help but take note of how long Daniel and Ben haven’t spoken. Did they stop talking before Daniel met her, or was he still in contact at that point?

‘Da da da,’ Musa says, slapping his mum’s leg with enthusiasm.

‘And I’ve been a brother-in-law as well,’ Ben shakes his head. ‘And to a Muslim as well. I could have learnt all about a different culture. Broadened my horizons. Known a life beyond the sheltered confines of Oxbow. She’s probably from somewhere off in India or Dubai or one of them places. Where are you from, love?’

‘Birmingham,’ says Sakinah.

The roar of laughter that erupts from Ben startles the others in the room. Musa matches the sound with a piercing scream of his own. Ben’s laugh is as short as it is loud, but Musa does not seem to be recovering from the shock. Sakinah sweeps him into her arms and hurries him out of the room. She shushes and pats and sings and bobs until Musa quietens. In the comfort of the bedroom, Musa’s smile returns, particularly when Sakinah takes him over to the window to look for squirrels. As Musa calms down, the sounds of conversation drift from the living room. Sakinah walks up to the living room door, but waits outside so she can listen in to the conversation without being spotted.

‘After everything he’s done for you, it’s the least you can do,’ Ben is saying. ‘Spare him an hour of your time. He doesn’t do much. Just lies there. But you’ll want to make it snappy. Doctors reckon he’ll have carked it before the end of the month. Say whatever you want to say to him. Thank him for giving up his life so you could have yours. It could have been you rotting in that cell. It should have been you. But it was him, and now you better go to him and grovel before him and thank him for every second of your life that he gave you.’

‘I never meant for any of this to happen,’ says Daniel, so quietly that it is barely audible.

‘That’s what he always said whenever I went to visit him. I imagine he said the same to you. Oh, wait, you never went to visit him.’

There is a rustle of fabric and Sakinah is sure that one of them has got to their feet.



‘All those years,’ Ben continues. ‘And you couldn’t be arsed to visit him once. Make it right now, while you’ve still got the time. I’ll text you the name of the hospital and his ward info and all that.’

At the sound of footsteps, Sakinah darts back into the bedroom. It is rapidly becoming her safe space, the last haven of normality left in the world. She doesn’t want the brothers to know she has heard their conversation. She is sure there is something she isn’t understanding and tries her best to keep her whirring anxiety at bay. Something is very wrong. Some natural order has been broken. It’s like when the queen died, back in September, and everything felt wrong for a while.

On their way to the front door, Daniel and Ben pause to look into the bedroom. Daniel is clearly trying to hurry Ben out of the flat as quickly as possible, but nothing seems to be able to propel the man any faster than he wants to go. Ben smiles at Sakinah in the more open way he smiled when they were privately talking, before giving her a slight nod.

‘I hope to see you again sometime,’ he says, sans accent.

He lingers for a second longer before heading to the front door. Sakinah waits where she is until she hears the door close. Musa is sitting comfortably on the floor chewing on his toes, and Sakinah glares at Daniel, hoping her eyes might melt through his lies and expose some core of truth.

‘We have a lot to talk about.’ Daniel says, his voice back to normal.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

Christmas had always been such a fun time until the first one without my father. My parents had an annual tradition wherein they took the day off from fighting. It was the only time of year where my mother was fine with going to church. I was in a particularly good mood ahead of the first Christmas of the new Millennium. Santa Claus toured the town on a sleigh that was pulled by a Land Rover. I always assumed he was letting the reindeer rest ahead of the big day. The squadron of regular people who accompanied him with buckets asking for money looked nothing like elves, but I paid them no mind. I was there to see Santa and I was overjoyed when he pulled up across the street from us. Christmas songs blasted from the sleigh on a tinny radio and were audible from a few streets away. When I first heard the songs echoing through the night like a portent of merriment, I could hardly contain myself.

He was finally there, on his radiant sleigh, and I joined the queue of other neighbourhood children to get a chance to talk to him. It was like waiting for the ice cream van, only better, because Phil Whippy lacked the magic powers Santa possessed. When it was finally my turn, I climbed the metal steps onto his sleigh and stood there with my mother behind me. Ben got to talk to Santa first and he asked Santa for some *Pokémon* tapes and a new clock. His had broken the month before when the two of us had been re-enacting *Power Rangers* in our bedroom. Santa chuckled and told Ben to be patient and look forward to Christmas morning.

I told Santa that I wanted my father to come home for Christmas. He didn't reply to this, and I felt he may have been struggling to understand the situation. I started to explain it to him.

'Wouldn't you like a nice toy?' Santa asked. 'Or maybe some tapes like your brother wanted?'

'I have toys and I have tapes, Santa,' I reassured him. 'But my Daddy doesn't live at home now and he hasn't lived at home for ages and ages, and I miss him a lot.'

My mother knelt down beside me and repeated Santa's question about wanting a toy. I shook my head and repeated my request to Santa. At this, my mother apologised and informed Santa that I was only little and didn't understand what was happening.

'I do understand, because I heard you,' I shouted, anger swelling up from within me. 'You didn't like Daddy. You got rid of him and one day you won't like me anymore and you'll get rid of me too.'

'Perhaps you'd like a lollipop?' Santa offered.

He looked at one of his assistants. The assistant thrust a jar full of sweets at me. I wasn't interested. I had the chance to make things right. If I could convince Santa to do his magic, then everything could go back to normal. I didn't understand why my mother was getting in the way.

'I'm not getting rid of you,' my mother said with an edge to her voice. 'Take a lollipop and we'll let the other boys and girls talk to Santa for a bit.'

'You're going to put me in a black bin bag and then I'll be gone,' I shouted.

Tears flowed freely down my face. My breathing had increased to the point where I was struggling to get the words out.

'You keep shouting at Daddy even though he's not here, and if you keep shouting at him, he'll never want to come back. You need to stop shouting at him. You're spoiling everything.'

My mother pulled me into what would, from an outside perspective, look like an embrace. In reality, she used the closeness to whisper into my ear.

'If you don't stop this right now, then I'll tell Santa to bring you nothing for Christmas.'

She released me and I looked at her warily. Not wanting to miss out on anything else, I took one of the lollipops and climbed back down the metal steps. We waited for Santa to drive off again, waving at him from the doorstep. As soon as he was gone, my mother closed the front door and turned on me.

'You think your daddy's amazing? I don't see him offering to look after you. Why don't you go and live with him, if that's what you want? It'd make my life easier. Ben's a good boy. Ben doesn't want to go and live with his father, do you, Ben?'

'No Mummy,' Ben replied, shaking his head. 'I want to live with you, Mummy.'

'That's what I want,' my mother continued. 'I want the three of us to be happy together, but if you'd rather go and live with your father, then go. I can pack your bag now if you'd like?'

I was able to convince her that I wanted to stay with her. It took a lot of crying and a lot of begging, but she eventually stopped offering to pack up my things. At one point in the evening, I offered her the lollipop Santa had given me as a way of making things up to her. She didn't accept it, but she did begin to soften after that. I promised to send a letter to Santa telling him that I didn't want my father to come back. My mother said there was no need. She picked up the phone, pressed a few keys and managed to get through to Santa there and then. She told him I had changed my mind. I wanted to talk to him myself, but my mother told me Santa was very busy and had to go. I went to bed that night thinking about the magic phone that Santa must have if he was able to be called at any time from anywhere in the world.

Any sense of security that I had been able to claw back following that meeting with Santa Claus was swiftly eroded when Christmas Day came. Despite Santa

having been warned against returning my father to me, I was still hoping my father would make an appearance. Santa had left no presents from my father or anyone on his side of the family. It was almost like my father had stopped existing. This feeling was made worse by us not going to church. I had grown used to us not going on a Sunday anymore, but to miss Jesus's birthday felt like a step too far. I asked my mother how Jesus would feel about us missing his birthday.

'I'm sure he'll get over it,' was her response.

I was saddened by the changes, but Ben helpfully reminded me that we would be spending Boxing Day with our father. My brain was bad at retaining information about schedules and plans, and I had genuinely forgotten that this was the case. This revelation helped put me in better spirits. Even better than that was when my father did call, just after lunchtime, to wish me and Ben a merry Christmas.

I waited patiently while Ben got his turn on the phone first. It wasn't a very interesting conversation to listen to, so I played with one of our new *Power Rangers* toys. I was making the Red Ranger do backflips when it was my turn to talk to my father.

'Merry Christmas,' he said. 'I hope Santa brought you lots of presents and not just a bag of cinders.'

I reassured my father that I had received plenty of presents. At his request, I began to list some of the presents I had received. I looked around the room at the various piles of toys and presents. My father revealed that Santa Claus had paid him a visit too. However, Santa had left him with some presents that were labelled for me and Ben. He asked whether we'd be able to take them off his hands. I informed him that it would be no problem. I took that opportunity to tell him how excited I was

about seeing him the following day. He made a strange noise, said something about being excited to see me as well and then asked to speak to my mother.

My mother attempted to be festive. She greeted my father cheerfully and even asked if he was having a good Christmas. I have no idea what he said to her, but the smile dropped off her face.

‘They’re your sons,’ she snapped. ‘How can a football match be more important than spending time with them?’

I enticed Ben into playing with the Power Rangers toys with me. He picked up the blue one and we pretended they were fighting invisible monsters.

‘It doesn’t matter to you, maybe,’ my mother was saying on the phone. ‘But it’s important to them. They were looking forward to tomorrow. Even a day feels like forever when you’re that age. You should at least be man enough to tell them yourself.’

Ben didn’t seem to be into the game. I got tired of trying to engage him and made my Power Ranger climb the Christmas tree. I dropped him when my mother put the phone down. He bounced off a few branches before he hit the carpet. Thankfully, he survived the fall.

‘Daddy says Santa Claus left us presents at his house,’ I told my mother. ‘He must have forgotten to leave them here, but we can get them tomorrow.’

‘Your dad doesn’t want to see you tomorrow,’ my mother said. ‘He’d rather go and watch the football.’

She didn’t hang around to hear what Ben and I had to say about that. Instead, she went to the dining room and helped herself to some of the chocolates there. Ben picked up an errant piece of wrapping paper and pulled it apart with his fingers.



‘Why does he keep upsetting her like this?’ Ben wondered. ‘Why can’t they stop fighting?’

‘Did you know Santa left presents for us with Daddy?’ I asked Ben, excitedly. ‘When we go tomorrow, we get to have a whole other Christmas. We can eat another Christmas dinner and have more presents and there will be crackers and I’ll wear a party hat.’

‘We’re not going tomorrow.’

‘But you said we were.’

‘Well, we’re not.’

‘Then why did you say we were?’

I shouted the question at him. He didn’t answer me. He looked at the shreds of coloured paper in his hand. He let them fall and they fluttered to the carpet like miscoloured snow. I smacked him across the face with the red Power Ranger. It was not like when I’d hit him with the red spade all that time ago. That had been funny. This made me feel angrier. I went to hit him again, but he grabbed the toy from my hand. He threw it across the room. Then he stood up. He was three years older than me and the size difference was quite pronounced. He gave me a shove. I toppled backwards into the Christmas tree. It felt at first like the tree wanted to give me a big hug. The branches folded around my body, the spiny needles poking into any available bit of skin. I tried to free myself from the clutches of the tree. This succeeded only in bringing the tree down on top of me. I lay on the floor, pinned by the tree, and screamed as loudly as I could.

My mother came back into the room just as Ben was trying to lift the tree off me. She had a lot more success and pulled it off in one yank. She put it back in place and looked down on us both. She demanded an explanation. Ben was starting

to say something about how I'd hit him with a toy, but I shouted over him. I screamed at them both. I told them how much I hated them, how they'd ruined Christmas. I shouted about how I wanted to see my father right then and that I didn't want to see either of them anymore. I don't know if it was the tears that were obscuring my vision or if the anger was distorting my view of the world, but my mother acquired a look in her eye I had never seen before. I was expecting her to shout back. A part of me wanted her to. The house was empty without the sounds of arguing and it needed to be filled. She had even stopped shouting at me as often as she had in the past. It was now relegated to when I was really naughty or when my father had made her particularly annoyed. Even when she did shout, she rarely followed it up with the physical punishments of the past. I had almost forgotten what it was like trying to go to sleep while every part of my body ached. I had come to miss checking my body for the bruises that felt like they should be there but weren't. I was feeling lost in this new, fatherless world of ours. My mother looked at me and spoke to me in a completely calm voice.

'Fine,' she said. 'If that's what you want.'

As soon as the words left her lips, I realised my mistake. This had gone too far already. Something was breaking and I needed to get control before it broke forever. My mother went into the kitchen and retrieved a black bin bag from under the kitchen sink. She went around the living room, picking up anything that had been a present of mine and tossed it in.

'These can go to kids who want them,' she explained. 'Or to Ben if he's a good boy.'

'I'll be good,' I pleaded.

I tried clinging to her leg to arrest her progress. She ignored me and continued bagging up the toys. I asked her to stop. Tears flowed in a way that I thought would never end. My crying was so intense that I was scared I wouldn't be able to breathe. My mother had told me of a time, when I was a baby, that I had stopped breathing and gone blue. It felt as though that was happening again.

When she had done whatever she was doing, she tossed the binbag down and went upstairs. I followed her, screaming the whole way. Ben was crying but stopped short of actually talking.

Once upstairs, my mother retrieved a holdall from the cupboard. She opened it and put it on my bed. Grabbing my clothes in great handfuls, she threw them into the bag. I tried to make her stop. I started taking the clothes out of the bag, thinking if I emptied the bag quicker than she could fill it, I would be safe. My mother either didn't notice or didn't care. After throwing in an arbitrary amount of clothes, she took the bag and zipped it up.

'Put your shoes on now,' she instructed. 'Ben, you have to come too. Put your shoes on.'

She marched us down to the hall and stood, bag in hand, in front of the shoe cupboard. I refused to open it. By way of answer, she simply got my shoes and put them on. The laces were tied before I could stop her. Ben quickly put his shoes on. I had never seen him so compliant.

'Ben?' I pleaded. 'Help me. I'm sorry. Help me.'

He looked as though he might say something. A look from my mother kept him silent.

My mother took my bag and carried it to the car. She instructed us to get into the car as well. Ben obliged, settling himself behind the passenger seat. I refused to

move from my place in the hall. My mother scooped me up in her arms and carried me out to the car. When she put me down to open the door, I tried to run away. Her hand remained on my jumper and kept me in place. She bundled me into the car. The child lock prevented me from getting the door open again.

As the car pulled off the drive, I believed I would never see my house again. The fear that had been slowly rising since my father was disposed of the previous year had finally come to fruition. It was my turn to leave. I regretted throwing out so many of my clothes. I could still see them lying on the bedroom floor. Some of my favourite clothes were there. My Charizard top was there. I would never get to wear it again.

We drove through Oxbow. It was nearly dark now, and deserted, save for a family with a puppy and another all with shiny new bicycles. They were smiling and laughing.

The road to my father's house was tucked away but my mother did not miss the turning. I kicked her seat the entire way there and received no word of admonishment for it.

The car crawled to a stop over the pockmarked carpark that served the two houses, as well as the caravan storage yard that neighboured them. Railway tracks ran past the houses, shielded from them by a thin metal fence. I stopped screaming.

The car doors opened. My mother's hands were on me. I was pulled from the car. When she drove away, I should have realised she had the holdall still in the car. I could see the light in my father's living room shining around the edge of the curtains. I was supposed to knock on the door but, in that moment, all I could think about was getting to my mother. I ran after the car as it disappeared back around the

corner. Something moved in a nearby tree and startled me. I froze. The colossal storage shed opposite my father's house was home to every imaginable monster.

I started running again, desperate to find my mother. Or the way home. Or anywhere safe. By the time I realised that I should have tried knocking on my father's door, I didn't know where I was. Some combination of the darkness and my own distress distorted the entire world. Everything looked different. Pubs, which normally sat orderly and empty in the daytime, were brimming with people. Shouts and cheers and chatter rolled forth from these buildings and, to my five-year-old ears, they may as well have been home to packs of wolves.

I stopped running when it became clear that no monsters were going to be chasing me. I even considered the possibility that being eaten by monsters may not have been such a bad thing, after all. I was never going to see Ben or my parents ever again. I thought of school and of Franklyn and some of the other people I had slowly made friends with over the past four months. If I could find any of their houses, there was a chance they could take me in. I would be no trouble at all.

'What are you doing wandering around on your lonesome?' a coarse voice from behind me asked. 'Where's your coat? Have you lost your parents?'

I turned and found myself looking up at a man who was older than my father and younger than my grandad. He had dark hair, streaked throughout with grey, and the beginnings of a beard troubled his chin.

'I know your parents,' he said. 'I can give them a call for you if you like.'

'I don't think they want me around anymore,' I told him.

'Nonsense,' he said with a smile. 'Come with me and we'll get you nice and warm while we wait for your mummy to come and get you.'

It was only when he mentioned the concept of being warm that I realised how cold I truly was. I became desperate to drive the cold from my body, and this man seemed friendly.

'I'm surprised you don't recognise me,' he said as we walked. 'I'm your Uncle Pete.'

Uncle Pete was not a name I remembered from any of the conversations I had heard from my parents. But I was tired and cold and hungry and scared, and he claimed to know my parents, and that was good enough for me.

Uncle Pete led me to his home, which was brightly decorated with Christmas lights. The entire front garden was a sight for sore eyes. Glowing reindeer stood on either side of the front door, twinkling Santa Clauses shimmied their way up and down the walls, and a resplendent snowman stood with his arms outstretched, like Father Tom giving his Sunday sermon.

I followed Uncle Pete inside. It was warm and comfortably decorated with all manner of ornaments and trinkets, which watched me from their positions on various shelves and cabinets. An imitation fireplace was lit in the living room, and Uncle Pete indicated a comfortable sofa on which I could sit.

He brought me a mug of warm milk, which burned my mouth whenever I sipped it, and told me to wait while he phoned my mother. I tried to listen out for what he was saying, but he had vanished upstairs. I watched the flashing lights of the Christmas tree that squatted in the corner of the room. I kept drinking the milk, despite it tasting odd. It burned my throat, even when it had cooled down, and there was a strange, sweet smell to it. It must have come from a different type of cow than the ones we got milk from.

The rest of the night gradually fell away into a haze through which it was impossible to discern dream and reality. Uncle Pete had been kind enough to let me sleep in the same bed as him, it appeared, for that was where I woke in the morning. There was a funny taste in my mouth and a strange pain in my bottom; a different kind of pain to the one I got when my mother hit me. A thick headache obscured my thoughts and I wordlessly followed Uncle Pete's instructions. He did not give me any breakfast, which was fine because my stomach felt weird and unprepared for food anyway. He led me to the front door and pointed down the street.

'Your mum says she's going to pick you up from outside the pub just down the road. Follow the street here, take a left then a right, and another left, and you should be fine.'

The door was closed before I had time to reply. With an aching body, I made my way down the road, trying my best to follow Uncle Pete's instructions. The idea that my mother had changed her mind and did want me after all was enough to keep my feet moving along the icy pavement. I must have taken a wrong turning somewhere, as no pub appeared. Once more, I found myself aimlessly wandering the streets of Oxbow. This time, I found myself heading towards the church in the centre of town. It was the only familiar thing in an unfamiliar landscape.

When I got there, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I had not stepped foot in the church since my father left. Prior to that, I had been in there every Sunday. This didn't mean I could find my way home though, as my sense of direction was still underdeveloped and, in the past, we'd driven there, not walked.

From the forest of gravestones at the side of the church, a figure emerged through the morning mist. I recognised it as Father Tom and, judging by the questioning look on his face, he recognised me as well.

'You're Anthony's boy, aren't you?' he asked.

Words failed me. I moved my mouth in the usual way, but no sound came out. I thought it would be easier to nod than try to figure out what was going on. Father Tom had clearly hoped for something more than a nod. He nodded in reply when it was clear that I would not be answering him verbally.

'And are you out here by yourself?' he asked.

I nodded again.

'Does your mummy or daddy know you're here?'

I shook my head. This elicited another nod from Father Tom.

'I think I still have your daddy's phone number in my address book,' he muttered, mostly to himself. 'I find it helps when organising the Christmas fete to be able to chase people up to make sure no one forgets anything important, like the quiche.'

Father Tom's smile faded, and his face took on a more business-like look. He offered for me to wait inside the church while he made the phone call and lightly touched my shoulder by way of shepherding me inside the building. I jumped backwards and flinched away from him. He removed his hand and looked around nervously.

'I didn't mean to scare you,' he said. 'I want you to know you're safe now.'

I glared at him in response.

'You wait here,' he said, that nervous look still on his face. 'I'll call your parents. You still live in the same house, don't you?'

I gave no answer and he vanished inside.

Moments later, he reappeared. He explained that he had spoken to my mother and muttered to himself something about securing the phone number for my



father's new home. The town of Oxbow was small and it was only a few minutes before my mother's car pulled up on the carpark of the church. She surged out of the car and wrapped her arms around me. I tensed and tried my hardest to pull away from her. I did not want anyone pressing into me at that moment, but her grip was iron and she refused to let go.

'I must ask what happened,' Father Tom said carefully. 'How did he come to be wandering around like this?'

'I forgot to lock the front door and he slipped out while we were asleep,' my mother lied. 'I reckon he was going after his father. They were supposed to see each other today but the football was more important. You know what Anthony's like.'

Father Tom did not reply. He looked disbelievingly at my mother before turning a sceptical eye to me.

'Were you trying to find Daddy?' he asked.

I said nothing, noted the expression my mother's face, and then promptly nodded. This was enough to settle the matter for Father Tom, who allowed my mother to bundle me into the car without another word. It was then that I noticed Ben was in the car as well. I was surprised to see him. I had started to get used to the idea of never seeing him again and was relieved to discover he would still be a part of my life after all.

'What the hell were you doing there?' my mother snapped as the car left the church behind. 'You were supposed to be with your father.'

When I did not reply, my mother repeated the question more aggressively. Still unable to will my tongue into making words, I shrugged. My mother let out a frustrated sigh.

‘You could have cost me everything with a stunt like that. I bet your dad put you up to it.’

She continued grumbling to herself for the entire duration of the short drive home. I was surprised to find myself standing in my home again, but I struggled to feel connected to it. All of the same things were still there but there was an artificiality to them, as though I had entered a museum exhibition dedicated to my early years.

‘You mention any of last night to anyone and your life won’t be worth living,’ my mother warned when we were all inside. ‘Now, sit down and I’ll get you your breakfast.’

## File Three Successfully Loaded

They need to talk. If there is any chance that some sense of normality can be restored, then it is a chance worth taking. But something has unsettled Musa. Sakinah does not know if it's the stress of seeing Ben, or her own stress seeping out of her, but there is something wrong. Musa has been clinging to Sakinah ever since Daniel started to explain the situation, and his clinginess stopped the conversation from getting very far. She finds that she and Daniel are tiptoeing around each other until Musa tires himself out with his toys and can finally be put to sleep. Musa sleeping frees Sakinah up a bit, but she still has to hold him, as his naps only last five minutes if they try to put him in his cot.

The drinks made during Ben's visit have gone cold. Sakinah, by now used to drinking cold tea, insists that there is no problem with the beverages, but Daniel makes fresh ones regardless. He prepares his coffee and her Earl Grey, while she rocks Musa to sleep. After placing her mug on the table beside her, Daniel cradles his own as though it is another child and looks at his wife. Sakinah waits for him to begin explaining everything in a way that will hopefully stop the falling sensation that started the moment Ben left. When Daniel appears reluctant to do even that, she realises she is going to have to prompt him.

‘Well?’ Sakinah says in the hushed tone she instinctively adopts the moment Musa’s eyes close.

Daniel lets out a sigh and waves one of his hands. Sakinah wonders if he’s trying to brush away the memory of Ben that still lingers in the air.

‘Forgive me if I don’t have a whole speech prepared for this,’ he says at last, his voice matching Sakinah’s in volume. ‘I never expected him to show up.’

‘That’s all right then,’ Sakinah hisses. ‘So long as you never expected your secret brother to pop up one day, then that’s fine. Let’s hope no more of your lies get exposed in the same way. I would hate to think you were going to be forced to be honest with me.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Not fair?’ Sakinah repeats, an eyebrow raised. ‘What’s not fair is realising you can no longer trust the person you’ve dedicated your life to. Especially after... you know what I’ve been through. You know what trust means to me. You promised me, when you told me your real name, that there was nothing else you were hiding. Why would you do that?’

Daniel attempts to sip his coffee, but only manages to burn his lip. He makes a series of strange facial expressions as he sets the coffee mug on the table. Normally, Sakinah would smile at that, but this is no normal day. Daniel gets to his feet and goes over to the window. He places his hands on the windowsill and looks down at the carpark below.

‘At least tell me why he came,’ Sakinah implores, sensing her original question is simply too large to be answered.

Turning back to her, Daniel nods. He is chewing his thumbnail but moves his hand away from his mouth so that he can spread out both hands and make an odd waving gesture; the meaning of all of this is entirely lost on Sakinah.

‘My father is dying,’ he says in a such a way that Sakinah knows he is anticipating another round of questions. She does not disappoint.

‘Your dad?’ she asks, struggling to keep her voice at the volume that will not wake her child. ‘Your dad, who I am also discovering is alive after all.’

‘If it helps, he won’t be for much longer.’

This does not help and Sakinah attempts to convey exactly how much it does not help by giving Daniel her most withering stare. Daniel winces.

‘Ben wants me to visit him one last time,’ Daniel explains. ‘My father, that is. He thinks if I have anything left to say to him, I should say it while he’s still alive.’

‘Is there anything you want to say to him?’

The question causes Daniel to move uncertainly back to the sofa and slump onto it. His mug is back in his hand and Sakinah can see his hand is shaking. He sits up and huddles over the mug. Sakinah is unsure how to proceed.

‘I haven’t spoken to him in ten years,’ Daniel whispers. ‘Nearly ten years to the day, actually. I should have gone to see him sooner. I should have told you he was still alive but it’s such a mess. It’s all a mess. He gave up everything for me and the truth is, I don’t even know if I deserve it. I owe him my life.’

‘What could he have done that was so impressive?’ Sakinah asks, the question sounding harsher in the air than it had in her head.

Daniel does not register the question. Very little of the outside world seems to be registering with him by this point. Sakinah is sure a marching band could stream through their living room and Daniel would hardly glance up. The coffee mug moves to his lips and then back again without the liquid inside being disturbed.

‘And what about your brother?’ Sakinah tries, hoping this will somehow get through. ‘Why did you never mention him?’

It works. The question provokes a response from Daniel. He lets out a long sigh and rubs his eyes with one hand.

‘That’s an even more complicated story,’ Daniel admits. ‘But, in short, I wanted him as far away from me as I could have him. And, when I met you, I knew I didn’t want him in my life anymore. I knew I couldn’t have him in my life anymore. I wanted to leave everything behind in the past, where it belongs.’

‘So, what was your plan? If your dad is still alive, you must have known he would die eventually. Were you hoping to never know about it? Were you hoping to read about it in the paper or worse, be the one asked to put his death announcement in your paper? How long did you honestly expect to be able to keep all of this hidden?’

‘You make it sound like I planned it all,’ Daniel mutters. ‘I didn’t plan any of it. I never planned any of it.’

There are tears in his eyes. Whether they are due to the truth being finally revealed, the notion of his dad dying, his fear of her being upset with him, or some other source, Sakinah does not know. In all the years she has known Daniel, she has not known him to cry.

Their marriage has always been built on trust and a shared knowledge of each other, right from those early days. Now she knows the truth, or at least some of it. There is a foundational difference between the two of them that has somehow gone unnoticed. One thought rises through the sea of anxiety: ‘It’s happening again’. She knows she can’t think like that. This is nothing like her first marriage. It has lasted much longer for one thing, and there’s Musa. Plus, Sakinah still feels like Daniel is a good person. She trusts him still, even now, despite everything, although she wonders if trust is blinding her to common sense.

‘Are you going to go and see him?’ she asks.

‘I have to,’ Daniel says decisively. ‘I know I’ll regret it if I don’t.’

‘When will you go?’

‘The sooner the better,’ Daniel says, nibbling the edge of his mug. ‘Ben said my father suffered a massive stroke and has had a few smaller ones since. Every new stroke robs

him of something else. It's only a matter of time before something essential shuts down. I was thinking of going there tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'What choice do I have?'

Then comes the question Sakinah has been dreading.

'Will you come with me?' he asks.

Despite knowing nothing of the situation except for the fact that it is going to disrupt everything she believes about her husband, Sakinah knows there is only one answer.

'Yes,' she replies. 'Of course I will.'

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*



WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

The events that transpired the Christmas of 2000, the first Christmas without my father, changed things. I didn't see him on Boxing Day, the day after, nor the day after that. In fact, it was another week until I saw my father. Even then, I only saw him by looking out of my bedroom window. My mother sent Ben and me upstairs when my father appeared at the front door on New Year's Day. They argued on the doorstep for half an hour before he stormed back to his car and drove off. That was the anniversary of him leaving home.

I had been mute since my encounter with Uncle Pete. There were plenty of thoughts sloshing around in my mind, but the way of processing thought into speech no longer seemed to work. My mother sat with me every evening and tried to figure out what was happening. She pulled me close, held me in her warm embrace. I could feel the beating of her heart.

'You'll talk again soon,' she said. 'We'll get you back. There's nothing to worry about.'

After a month of silence, her compassion turned into bribery. She began to let me pick what we ate for dinner, communicated, of course, through a series of gestures and pointing. When the control over meals didn't yield the hoped-for result, my mother took another approach. In the supermarket, she bent down so her face was level with mine and pointed at the aisle of games and videos.

'If you talk to me, you can have one thing from this aisle,' she promised. 'I will give you anything. All you have to do, is talk to me.'

A passing shopworker looked at the scene and gave a big grin.

'I'm normally bribing my kids to stay quiet,' he laughed. 'Sounds like you've got things easy.'

My mother glared at him and grabbed my wrist. Her fingers dug painfully into my flesh but even that failed to make me speak. Ben followed dutifully behind as we completed the rest of our shopping.

That night, I heard her and Ben talking. My bedtime was, unjustly in my opinion, earlier than Ben's. I often made a habit now of sneaking out of my room and down the stairs to listen into the conversations they were having in the living room. My mother was incapable of being quiet, and I could hear everything.

'It's embarrassing,' I heard her say. 'Complete strangers acting like they know everything. He's always been difficult, obviously, but he's never been this bad before.'

Ben was quieter than my mother and his response was lost to me. I could tell by the length of the gap that he didn't say much. Whatever he did say, was enough to get my mother even more worked up.

'It's probably got something to do with your father,' she declared. 'I bet he's filled your brother's head with all sorts of nonsense. Does he talk to you?'

It was safe to assume that Ben was confirming that my silence was not exclusive to my mother. The snort she gave informed me that something about Ben's answer had upset my mother further.

'He talks when neither of us are around, I bet,' she said. 'I know it. Don't you worry, I'll get him talking.'

I lingered for a moment longer, long enough to hear the conversation shift away from me and towards Ben's imminent bedtime. I scurried back into bed and lay there in the dark. My mouth moved in the way that had once produced words. Nothing came out. I had been scared when I had first found myself unable to speak,

but that fear passed with time. Hearing my mother's words sent a fresh wave of fear through me. I knew I would have to start talking soon, yet I had no idea how to.

School was easier to navigate. The teachers tried to get me to talk, first by asking me questions in front of the class, then by having short conversations with me, away from the other children. When my mother came to collect me at the end of the day, one of my teachers asked her if there were any issues in my home life they should know about.

'He's struggling with the divorce,' was her answer for the first month.

As one month became two, her answer became vaguer as her patience wore thin.

'Nothing new to worry about,' she said.

I didn't know what my teachers were hoping to achieve with these questions. What they managed to do was give my mother a reason to be irritated by my silence at the end of every day. It was Mr Anderson who managed to cause the most harm. He wasn't content with my mother's answer. He stroked his goatee and sighed at her.

'A child with elective mutism and exhibiting these kinds of behaviours is quite worrying. It can be the result of deep-rooted insecurities stemming from a turbulent home life.'

'He's quiet,' my mother said. 'It's a phase. He'll grow out of it.'

'It's not just the silence though, Mrs Shepherd,' Mr Anderson replied.

'Ms,' my mother corrected.

'There is a wider pattern of disruptive behaviour that needs to be addressed.'

My mother looked at me with an expression I had come to recognise. She sensed that someone knew more about her children than she did, and the resulting embarrassment was sitting poorly with her.

'Is there now?' she asked.

I was as surprised as she was. I had not noticed any great change. I was content playing games with Franklyn and listening to him talk about his dog. He had just got a new one, for his old dog had died. It was, by all accounts, an exact replica of the old dog and, within a week of owning it, Franklyn had convinced himself and half the student body that his mother had access to cloning machines that meant anyone she liked would live forever. I stuck by his side, nodding along to his stories and playing whatever games he wanted, so long as there was no requirement to speak. Even as his miracle of a new dog took a lot of his attention, I was still dependably, quietly at his side. Things seemed to be falling into a steady rhythm, even if I was anxious that some of the other children were being too friendly with Franklyn and threatening our friendship.

However, Mr Anderson claimed that there were two incidents recently that were a cause for concern. The first incident was when I hit a boy in the face for trying to be friendly to Franklyn. The games I played with Franklyn were strictly for two people. If every random nobody from the playground decided they wanted to come and join in, then the games would be spoiled, and no one would have any fun. In a way, I was saving that boy when I hit him. He should have been thanking me. Instead, he went straight to the teacher and cried about it. The teacher then interrupted the game where Franklyn and I pretended to outrun a tidal wave that was surging down the drain at the side of the playground. I was sent to stand facing The

Wall and think about my actions. I thought about my actions. I thought about them until the anger I felt crystallised into a solid ball of hatred that sat heavily in my gut.

The worst part of that day was seeing Franklyn play with the boy I hit. It felt like the teachers had taken his side and deliberately undermined me. As I turned back to stare at the brick, the cold air snuck into my body through my clothes. Normally, I'd run around to keep warm. This wasn't currently an option. The cold was the real punishment. I couldn't help but wonder what my mother would do when she discovered I was a criminal. I doubted my residence in her home would continue, and that would leave me out in the wilderness again. I'd likely freeze to death on a pavement somewhere and that would be the end of it. But the teachers had not told my mother; a blessing that was being swiftly reversed by Mr Anderson.

The second incident came a fortnight after the first and was the same day that Mr Anderson decided to share everything with my mother. The school's playground was lined on one side with a tall wire fence, which blocked us from having access to the canal beyond. There were a number of trees and bushes, which obscured our view of the canal, but one part of the fence was entirely free from foliage. It was common for children to gravitate towards this spot for a glimpse of the outside world. There was the occasional passer-by to whom some children attempted to talk. Very few people replied with anything more than a simple greeting, but occasionally one or two might be quite talkative. The more talkative people tended to vanish quickly when teachers approached.

On the day in question, a dog was lying on the towpath, right next to the fence. It had settled itself on the ground and was content to let its tongue hang out slightly, while it observed the gentle movement of the canal water. It ignored the small group of children who were observing it through the fence. There was no way

of knowing if the dog belonged to one of the people on the boats, or if it had escaped from someone's home.

Jack Richards, the boy I had punched, was among the group of children observing the dog. The children were arguing about what kind of dog it was. Jack seemed to believe it was a Labrador. Franklyn took a good look at it, his arms folded. He stroked his chin for a few seconds before giving a decisive nod.

'My dog is a bulldog,' Franklyn said. 'And this dog is bigger than a bulldog. I think you're right, Jack. I think it is a Labrador.'

Reassured, Jack copied Franklyn's stance and smiled. The smile wavered when the dog continued to do nothing. No amount of shouting or rattling the fence was getting the dog's attention. Some of the children poked their fingers through the holes in the fence to lightly stroke the dog. I was reluctant to do that, in case the animal had fleas.

I was considering leaving the situation entirely, when Ben and his friends made their way over. As time went on, more and more children found themselves attracted to the spot as though pulled by some great force. Some stayed when they saw the dog, others wandered off, bored.

'I want to look at its face,' Jack decided.

He considered how to do this for a minute and was encouraged by some of the other children, who also wanted to see the dog's face. One of them claimed they'd get the dog to lick them, though how the dog's tongue was supposed to reach through the fence remained a mystery. Jack reached up to one of the low-hanging branches of a drooping tree. He was able to snap a good-sized stick from the tree. He waved it around as though it were a sword and he needed to check the weight of

it. The stick tapered down to a narrow point that, we all immediately saw, would fit through the holes in the fence. Jack grinned and jabbed the dog with the stick.

Letting out a little whimper, the dog still refused to move. Jack poked at it again and, once more, the dog only whimpered. I wondered if it had been injured and if it was lying on the ground waiting for help. When the dog was poked a third time, it let out a longer whimper, which made all the sadness I had ever felt seem more real.

‘This dog is boring,’ Jack said. ‘Do something, you big dumb dog.’

He went to poke it for a fourth time. I grabbed the stick before it could go through the fence. Jack had a tighter grip than I had expected. He also had the benefit of holding the thick end of the stick. My thin end bit into my hand as I tried to pull it away from Jack.

‘It’s mine, you wouldn’t even know what to do with it,’ Jack snapped. ‘Let go of it. You’re as stupid as that stupid dog.’

Despite his protest, Jack almost immediately let go. I couldn’t believe how my luck had changed. I had done something good in the world. The dog was safe from torment by my actions.

‘What is going on here?’ Mr Anderson demanded to know.

I had not heard him approach, but recognised the voice when it boomed from behind me. It suddenly made sense why Jack had abandoned the stick. After that, things stopped making sense. Jack pointed at me.

‘He was poking the dog with the stick,’ he claimed. ‘I told him to stop, but he called me names and kept poking it.’

It was at times like those that I really missed the ability to talk. I stomped my foot and pointed at Jack. Mr Anderson stared at me, waiting for an explanation, before letting out a sigh and looking to the other children for an explanation of what



had happened. I looked at them all, desperate for one of them to say something. Ben was looking right into my eyes. He said nothing. The only kid to speak was a girl who everyone said had a crush on Jack. Her name was Nancy Green, and she lied to Mr Anderson and supported Jack's story.

'Jon, go to The Wall and think about what you've done. How could you harm such an innocent creature and expect to get away with it when there are so many witnesses? I will be telling your parents of this.'

Once again, I found myself at The Wall. The pluralisation of parent struck me as a little strange. It was the first indication I had that my father was still being kept in the loop as to my life. That made me feel angrier and more ashamed than anything. If all he ever heard of me was bad things, then he would surely hate me. When the day came that my mother tired of me once more, then I truly would be alone as my father would have come to detest me.

Of course, when Mr Anderson recounted these tales to my mother, he left out all the parts where I was right. He kept it short and simple and even I could understand why my mother's cheeks were reddening with each word. He was telling it all wrong and the boy in his stories really did sound like a bad person.

'Violence towards other students, while completely forbidden, is understandable given the age of children we have here,' Mr Anderson summarised. 'However, violence towards animals is another matter entirely. Such behaviours are deeply concerning and can be red flags for very worrying issues. They may be symptomatic of a mood disorder or some other mental health issue.'

'Thank you for your concern,' my mother said, her anger barely contained. 'But I think I've had quite enough of standing around listening to you call my son mental. Some of us have homes to get to.'

As if summoned by the heat of my mother's anger, Ben appeared at her side. All eyes turned to him, for he could be the one to settle the matter for good.

'Ben,' my mother said, 'this teacher has been telling me that Jon has been very naughty. Have you seen him be naughty?'

I wasn't sure how to feel. Ben had already kept quiet about the dog incident once, and I wasn't sure if anything had changed since then. Still, it was one thing to keep quiet and it was another thing actively to get me into trouble.

'He hit a dog,' Ben said. 'He hit it with a stick. Hard. Like when he hit me with his spade.'

No!

Mr Anderson smiled and shrugged.

'I never meant to suggest your child had any form of mental disability,' he clarified. 'Yet, it would be remiss to ignore behaviour that is clearly impacting other students.'

'You don't have to worry,' my mother declared. 'I will deal with this myself.'

And deal with it she did. There was an uneasy calm as we walked home from school. Ben made a few attempts to talk about his day, but soon gave up when he received nothing from my mother. She stared straight ahead for the whole walk home. When we arrived at the house, she opened the front door and told me to go upstairs to get changed; Ben was permitted to watch television.

I stood in my bedroom, listening for my mother's footsteps on the stairs. When I heard no sound, I assumed nothing was going to happen, and I removed my school uniform. It was when I was standing there in my underwear that I heard the sound. A thumping, dull and steady, as my mother approached. I looked to the door and saw my mother. Her face was distorted with rage, her lips pulled back to reveal all of her

teeth. I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. I looked around my room but there was nothing, nowhere to go. I remembered the caravan and all the punishments since then. Tears already streaming down my face, I crouched down on the floor to make myself as small as possible. I covered my head with my arms and waited.

My mother's fingers dug painfully into my wrists. She pulled my hands away and continued pulling until I was forced to stand up. She held her face close to mine so that her snarl filled my view.

'Do you think this is some kind of game?' she shouted. 'Do you think I like being talked down to by a bunch of know-it-all teachers?'

When I didn't answer, she slapped me across the face.

'Answer me,' she screamed. 'Stop this pathetic little game of yours and start talking.'

I tried. I really tried. My mouth moved and I tried everything I could to get words to come out, but nothing happened. My mother slapped me again. Over and over again. Then she pushed me to the floor. My head banged against the side of my bed. I shuffled away. My body was pressed against my bedside drawers. The bright plastic felt reassuringly firm when pressed against my naked back. My mother towered above me. Her hands were in her hair. She was shouting and swearing, but I couldn't make out what exactly she was saying. Then she stopped, frozen in place, looking, again, like one of her china dolls. She stared at me. She smiled.

'I know how to make you behave,' she said. 'I've no choice. I need to go back to the old punishments. The classics. They never did me any harm. Made me who I am today. They'll help you too. It's for the best. You'll see.'

She reached over my head and took my hairbrush from my bedside table. She knelt down beside me, grabbed me by my shoulder, and pushed me down onto

the floor. The carpet covered my mouth and nose. I could barely breath and had to squirm with my head so that I could still get some air. My mother removed my underwear. I was completely naked. When she hit me with my Spider-Man hairbrush, it hurt. It hurt nearly as much as my red spade had, despite being much smaller. I wanted to tell her to stop, to say I was sorry and I would be good, but still no words came. She must have thought I was really bad, because the next punishment was somehow worse than all the hitting and the screaming. She did something with the hairbrush, and I felt a pain and a pressure like I hadn't felt before. Except, as it went on and on, I realised I had felt it before. All I could think about was the weight of Uncle Pete's body, the smell of his aftershave, and the words he whispered in my ear. I stopped crying and waited for it to be over.

Despite classifying me as a problem child, the school did not fulfil their promise of finding some way to help me until the start of the next school year, by which time I was six and a half.

Meanwhile, divorce proceedings were ongoing. In truth, I had no idea what the state of the divorce was. It seemed to be a conflict that was raging in the background of my life, and the notion that it might actually conclude at some point seemed incredibly unlikely. My mother would be on the phone for hours at a time to my nan discussing the various developments and non-developments of the situation. She had taken a part-time job in Summerfield to cover the cost of her solicitor, in addition to her regular job at Tesco. These jobs meant that Ben and I stayed most of the summer at my nan and grandad's, so that my mother could put in lots of overtime at work.

Nan was a lot kinder to me than my mother had been. She never seemed to mind too much that I had given up talking. In fact, she occasionally laughed to herself about it and claimed my grandad barely spoke either, so she was used to having to do most of the talking. It was true, my grandad did seldom speak and, even when there was no way for him to get through a conversation on nods and headshakes alone, he would usually just say 'aye' or 'nah'. His one concession to conversation was issuing the same greeting to us, every time he saw us.

'Are you all right?' he would ask.

I would nod and Ben would cheerfully reply that he was all right. At this my grandad would frown and shake his head.

'I'm not all right,' he would say sombrely.

Then there was a pause. A smile would spread across his face and his eyes would twinkle.

'I'm half left,' he beamed, before walking off to busy himself with the many chores that occupied his time.

Though close to retirement, my grandad spent his days working, and it was left to Nan to look after Ben and me. Life with my nan was simpler than life at home, as she had no PlayStation and rarely switched on the television. Her house was continually filled with music from the radio, tuned to a station playing a mix of new and old hits. The summer was spent playing board games and card games, along with drawing pictures and making up stories with Ben. He did the talking, I did the drawing, and we both did some writing. We created an expansive universe of superheroes, with an ongoing continuity that saw characters get killed off in big story events and revived later on, when we decided we needed them. Ben became skilled

at reading the meaning from my face and my gestures and was a lot kinder when his friends, or our mother, were not around.

According to snippets of conversation I overheard, my father had made several offers to have us stay with him for the summer. My mother was loathe to permit that, and the idea of staying with my father unsettled me after everything that had happened. Yet, the summer was peppered with interactions with my father. I learned that these encounters were on the advice of my mother's solicitor, encouraging her to acquiesce to basic demands to show that she was compliant and would therefore still have credibility when it came to the battle for custody. I gathered from overheard phone conversations between my nan and my mother that there was also the hope that my father would do something to mess up, which could be used against him.

Fortunately for my mother, something did go wrong. After a summer of day trips to my father's house, it was felt that testing the waters with an overnight stay was advisable. His solicitors were apparently putting pressure on my mother to permit such an event. If she had known how it would unfold, she would have allowed it a lot sooner than she did.

Everything had been going fine with the visit. We ate chicken nuggets for dinner. We played on my father's PlayStation with the games he kept at his house for us. Unlike my mother, my father was fine with my silence. He sat me down in his kitchen while Ben played on the PlayStation in the living room to have a chat with me.

'I don't want to be putting any pressure on you,' he said. 'If you don't want to talk, then you really don't have to. I want you to know that you can. You can talk. To me. I'm here for you.'

I think my father expected me to suddenly open up to him. I nodded and went back to the living room. Ben had just finished a level, so I was in time to see Crash Bandicoot do a merry jig before Ben handed me the controller. For single player games, this was how we operated. We could have created different save files on different memory cards, but we enjoyed the teamwork of powering through one save file together. I was grateful my father had not kept me any longer, otherwise Ben would have taken my turn; it was one of the polar bear levels next and they were my favourite.

It was strange to sleep in an unfamiliar bed, but I found myself enjoying it. The *Butt Ugly Martians* bedding made me smile and the grumbling of the trains passing by had only woken me a few times before I got used to the sound.

The problem came in the morning. When it was time to get dressed, my father allowed me to stand on my bed while he helped me with my clothes. The room Ben and I shared was small and there would not have been space in the little gap between the beds for my father and I to stand. Ben had gone downstairs to watch television. My father was talking to me. He was asking me if I was looking forward to going back to school, as though any child, even those who could talk, would ever answer that question with a yes. As I let his questions fill the air, my jumper became stuck on my head. I had missed the head hole and, instead of letting my father help me, I started wriggling around trying to get it back into place. In the darkness of my jumper, the world around me was muffled. I thought back to that day, before the party, when Ben and I had attempted to do this ourselves. This was different, of course. I could feel my father's reassuring hand on my back.

Then the hand was gone. My feet slipped. The bedpost slammed into my eye. I cried for half an hour afterwards, even when a bag of frozen peas was placed upon

my eye. It remained painful and swollen for the rest of the day. In the evening, my father loaded Ben and me into his car, gave us each a Kit-Kat as a parting gift, and dropped us off at my mother's house.

My mother flew into a frenzy when she saw the eye. She grilled my father on the doorstep for nearly an hour before he gave up trying to explain the situation, got into his car, and drove off. Her crusade for the truth not yet ended, my mother swept back into the living room. She was insistent that something of that nature could not have been a simple accident. She asked me, repeatedly, if my father had hit me. Without being able to offer any elaboration on the events, and without Ben as a witness to the event, she concluded that he must have pushed me. She asked repeatedly for verification of this series of events. This too I denied by shaking my head frantically, but I could tell how much she wanted to be right about it.

That was when Ben stepped in. Ben who had not been in the room. Ben who had been downstairs watching cartoons. Ben who had not once asked me if my eye was painful. Ben offered the definitive explanation of the events that happened.

'I saw it, Mummy,' he declared. 'Daddy pushed him, and he hit his eye on the bed. He doesn't want you to know because he's scared that he'll get in trouble. I'm scared too, but the truth is more important.'

My mother pulled Ben into a big hug. She thanked him for his honesty and called him her brave boy. I stood there, on the outside, watching as Ben got praised once more. My mother looked over to me and, for the first time in months, pulled me into an embrace as well. The warmth and comfort and love I felt from that embrace made tears come to my eyes. I blinked them away, hard. I didn't want to ruin the moment. I didn't want to get in trouble for crying.



Eventually, my mother released us and looked at us with a look of great seriousness on her face.

‘I need you both to help me,’ she said. ‘You’ll both help me, won’t you?’

Ben enthusiastically agreed that he would help her, and I gave a firm nod.

‘Mummy’s really sorry for all the times she’s got angry recently. It’s all because of Daddy. Daddy is nasty to Mummy. That makes Mummy sad and she can’t handle it when you are naughty. If Daddy wasn’t around, we could all be happy. We wouldn’t be angry or sad or hurt anymore.’

It all sounded perfect. I imagined a life where we could relax, where all of my punishments would stop. I would no longer feel disgusting. I would no longer be that naughty child who needed constant correction. I could be something more. Me.

‘Ben, I’m going to need you to say your daddy hits you and Jon when he gets angry. And that he gets angry a lot. Jon, I’m going to need you to nod along with him,’ she said, before noticing my expression and adding a quick clarification.

‘Mummy only does what she does when you’re naughty. Everyone already knows about it and it’s fine, but they’ll all be upset, and they will punish you more if you mention it. What you have to do is, agree with Ben when he says your daddy hits you for no reason, just because he’s angry. Can you do that for me? Can you help your mummy?’

Ben and I both agreed to this plan of action and my mother smiled. It was a great big grin, a sign of true joy. The plan was already working.

Though my eye had stopped hurting after the first day, I was left with an extremely noticeable bruise. It lingered for weeks, changing colour almost every day, gradually shifting through shades of green and purple. My mother had to explain the presence of the bruise to my teachers when I was first dropped off at school. After

my mother's explanation, they began to act very oddly around me. Their voices were softer with me than they were with the other children. If I was slow with my work, they were inclined to be more patient. When they gave me homework, they added the caveat that I was to complete it only if I could manage. I began to wonder how long this special treatment would last and if it would come at a cost.

On the Tuesday of the second week of term, the cost presented itself. It was common for my teachers to keep me for a few minutes after class to ask how I was getting on with everything. A blank stare seemed to be enough to get them to nod knowingly, with a look of pity that I never fully understood. On this occasion, the conversation went a little differently. The exact details were lost to me as I was more concerned with getting to lunch. My hopes of getting to have a standard lunch break were dashed though. Apparently, I had been selected for a new programme the school was running to aid the mental health of pupils who were struggling with challenging home circumstances.

Programme was a very optimistic term for what ended up being two pupils sitting in a room together while being watched by a teacher. I didn't recognise the girl with whom I was forced to sit. I was thinking of Franklyn and how much more fun he would be having on the playground. I wondered if anyone had told him I was otherwise engaged. I imagined him standing outside, waiting for me, only for me to never appear.

When it was clear neither I nor the girl with whom I sat were going to make much conversation, the teacher approached the table. Mrs Bumble placed a large pile of blank paper and a bundle of felt tip crayons in the centre of the table.

'When you've finished eating, it would be good if you drew a picture for me,' she said. 'If there is anything on your mind, you might want to draw that. Or if you

want to draw anything else, then that's fine too. Listen to your gut and draw what's in your heart.'

I'd heard the heart was full of blood and it didn't seem like Mrs Bumble would appreciate a page that was entirely red. She wore soft pinks, and the smell of her perfume lingered long after she returned to her seat. I was sure she would appreciate a picture of a flower or something. I wondered if I should draw something like that, but decided it would be boring. Instead, I resolved to use the time to come up with new designs which could be deployed in either the comics Ben and I drew, or for the Pokémon cards we made. I grabbed a piece of paper, spilling some crumbs from the last remnants of my sandwich on it. The girl opposite me took a piece of paper too. She shielded it with her arm as she drew.

I wasn't interested in what she was drawing anyway. I began by drawing a nice simple blob for the monster's body. This monster would need a lot of spikes, and they were simple enough to add. Wings were always cool, so I gave it two pairs. The monster looked a little odd floating in the white void. I drew some houses and people for the monster to attack. I made it breathe fire to roast the gathered masses beneath it. I decided it would be pretty neat if some of the people were impaled on the creature's spikes. I used the same felt tip for fire and blood to really bring the picture to life. I was part way through colouring the picture when Mrs Bumble called over from her seat.

'Now, show each other your pictures and talk to each other about what you've drawn.'

The girl showed me her picture and I showed her mine. For some reason, she had drawn a picture of a group of potatoes all of which wore wigs. It looked a little

strange, but it was a good idea for a Pokémon design. I would have to borrow the idea at some point.

‘What’s that supposed to be?’ the girl asked.

I shrugged and gestured at the picture, the elaborateness of my artwork requiring no spoken words. The girl, however, did seem to want some spoken words to explain the majesty of the drawing and, without those words, was unimpressed by the monster’s ability to wreak havoc on the innocents who were unfortunate enough to be its prey.

‘I’ve drawn a picture of my family,’ the girl explained, before pointing to each potato in turn. ‘That’s me. That’s my mum. That’s my dad. That’s my Uncle Pete. That’s my Auntie Barbara.’

The name Uncle Pete stood out and cut through me. I stared at the drawing as though the relevant potato could claw its way out. Shaking my head, I pushed my chair away from the table. He was here. Somehow, he had found me.

‘Mum doesn’t live with us anymore,’ the girl added. ‘She lives in heaven now.’

I shook my head wildly. I could feel that pressure again, the pressure in my bottom, and my nose filling up with the smell of aftershave. I could taste the burning milk and something else, something I knew I wasn’t supposed to be tasting.

‘No,’ I croaked.

The girl looked slightly confused and Mrs Bumble nearly fell out of her chair.

‘She does,’ the girl insisted. ‘Dad told me.’

‘Not him,’ I said, the words rasping in my throat. ‘Don’t know him.’

Mrs Bumble appeared at the side of the table. She laid a hand on my shoulder in what was probably supposed to be a reassuring gesture. I jerked away, slipped off my chair and fell to the floor.

'It's not him,' I shouted, though my voice was still raspy. 'You don't know him. You've just drawn some stupid potatoes.'

The girl still looked confused, but she seemed to be deciding that whatever was happening was bad. Her lip trembled slightly, and tears were forming in her eyes.

'Don't worry, my dear,' Mrs Bumble said to the girl. 'He's a bit upset because his daddy isn't very nice to him sometimes. Isn't that right, my sweetling?'

Safely hidden under the table, I took a moment to reflect on the situation. It was entirely possible that the potato drawn by the girl was not meant to represent the Uncle Pete I knew. The one I knew lived alone, and this girl was no relative of mine, which she would have to be if we shared the same uncle. I shuffled back onto my chair and looked at my own picture.

'I drew a big monster,' I said, enjoying my regained ability to speak.

'And a very... nice-looking monster it is too,' Mrs Bumble forced herself to say.

'My dad doesn't live with us anymore. Like your mum,' I said, remembering what the girl had said earlier.

'Does your dad live in heaven as well?'

'He lives next to some train tracks,' I explained. 'It's a bit loud but you get used to the noise. It's pretty cool seeing all of the trains go past. I have my own bed there, but I don't think I'm allowed to sleep there anymore. Do you get to see your mum?'

'My dad says I'll get to see her one day, when I go to heaven,' she replied. 'But he says that probably won't be for ages and ages. I really miss her.'

'Don't ask Santa Claus to see her again,' I warned her. 'It's a bad idea.'

At this, the girl laughed. I wasn't sure what had been funny, but I thought it would be a good idea to smile.

'I wonder if Santa can still deliver presents from people who are in heaven,' the girl mused.

Clearly my warnings were going to fall on deaf ears.

'I'm Roxanne,' the girl added, while I was still thinking about Santa. 'What's your name?'

'I'm Jon.'

Having achieved the breakthrough she was after, Mrs Bumble clapped her hands together enthusiastically. She scooped up both of our pictures and said she would be keeping them. That annoyed me as I had been quite proud of my monster design, but it was no great loss; I was sure I would be able to recreate it from memory.

The rest of the school day passed without incident. I didn't get a chance to talk to Franklyn about what had occurred at lunch, or even to show him that I had remembered how to talk. I would have to wait a day before I could explain everything to him. I hoped he wouldn't be too upset or, worse, have forgotten about me and moved on with some other friend.

Though the school day was normal, something was amiss when it came time to be picked up. The parents were buzzing with an energy I had never seen before. They typically stood around looking bored, waiting for their children to peel away from their peers and join them. Today, they seemed desperate to talk to each other. Some were crying. Some were angry. I wondered if one of the year groups had been given school reports and if the children of that year had fared particularly badly. Even

then, this did not explain why so many parents were exhibiting such intense reactions. It tended to be children who got worked up over such things.

My mother was as confused as I was. Some of the other parents tried to talk to her about it. They were talking about something that they found horrible. When it became clear that my mother had no idea what they were talking about, they encouraged her to go home and put on the news. My mother was in no great rush, because she was distracted by the fact that words were coming out of my mouth. It was quiet and strained, but I was able to talk to her. I said I was sorry, and she gave me a hug, so I knew I was doing something right. Ben seemed disturbed by me regaining my voice, but I tried to ignore him as I walked home, holding my mother's hand.

When we got home, we discovered what had caused all the distress on the playground. It looked like a movie I wouldn't be allowed to watch because of it being too violent. Two tall buildings, both with great plumes of smoke pouring out of them. The news presenters were talking excitedly and kept on showing different clips of different footage. The weirdest one was when a plane flew straight into one of the buildings. Planes weren't supposed to do that. They weren't supposed to make mistakes like that. I remembered what people had been saying before that big party, that planes could drop out of the sky. That may not have been true then, but this looked like something similar. I wondered if it meant the same as people had said back then: the end of the world.

My mother flicked through all five channels to discover that all of them were showing the same thing. The only difference between the channels was the appearance of the older male news presenter and the younger female news presenter and the colour of the words 'Breaking News' that lined the bottom of the

screen. I was a little surprised that there were not the usual programmes on. For as long as I could remember, BBC had always shown *The Story of Tracy Beaker* and *Newsround* every day at this time. Now they were showing footage of people falling from the sky.

The great plumes of smoke that poured from those buildings made me think of the monster I had drawn. The destruction that was unfolding looked as though it had been caused by something horrific like that. To think that it had been because of a plane, the likes of which I saw passing overhead almost every day, terrified me.

As the evening went on, the news continued to play various clips of the disaster but seemingly in no particular order. I would watch the buildings crumble down to the ground and then, moments later, the footage with all the smoke would play. People would throw themselves out of the windows only for the footage to change to the moment that the plane hit the tower. Around the time my mother put a tray of fish fingers in the oven, the nature of the news footage changed. They stopped showing people falling and the plane hitting the building and instead kept showing the building with all the smoke coming out of it and the buildings collapsing.

When the fish fingers had finished cooking, we switched off the television and went to eat dinner.



## File Three Successfully Loaded

The smell of stale air and disinfectant that rolls over Sakinah upon stepping foot inside the building takes her back. The last time she was in a hospital, she was too distracted by the intensity of labour pains to pay much attention to her surroundings. For a second, she feels some cramping, and the feeling only passes when she looks down at Musa in his pushchair. This is a different hospital from the one in which she gave birth, but it doesn't matter. All hospitals are the same. The same repeating rooms, wards and endless corridors. Daniel usually comments on those kinds of things, but today he remains silent.

This was the case on the drive to the hospital as well. Daniel gripped the steering wheel so tightly that Sakinah thought it might snap. He glared at every road sign they passed. Only the chirpy voice of the satnav gave a semblance of conversation for the entire journey.

Now that they are inside the hospital, Daniel pulses with a nervous energy and every part of him trembles with each step. His fingers are flexing like a cowboy reaching for a pistol in a showdown, his eyes ferret around as though scoping out the building for predators and he walks with the slight bob of an uncle approaching guests at a wedding to try and marry his son off to any eligible ladies.

After stopping momentarily to become acquainted with the floor plan, Daniel leads the way. Sakinah follows, struggling to keep pace with how quickly he is walking. Musa enjoys the sudden increase in pace and giggles to himself as the pushchair is made to weave through the shambling patients and visitors. After what feels like a ridiculous amount of time walking through identical corridors, Daniel stops walking. Sakinah takes a second to register

that her husband has stopped and bashes his ankles with the pushchair. She doesn't know if he feels the pain of it, given his current state, but she mumbles an apology regardless. Daniel takes the rucksack from his back and rummages through it until he has located his wallet. Despite it always being stored in the same pocket, it takes Daniel three attempts to locate it. Wallet in hand, Daniel takes out his driver's licence and slips the wallet into his pocket. Sakinah looks questioningly at him but assumes he must need the ID to sign himself in; who knows what strange visitor rules this hospital has?

There is a security guard stationed outside one of the side rooms. As Daniel faffs around with the bag and his wallet, Sakinah watches the guard with fascination. He is chatting to anyone who gives him a moment of their time. When no one is around for him to talk to, he takes sips from a thermos flask and bops slightly to some music. The music must be coming from within his own head, as Sakinah is sure he doesn't have any headphones or earbuds.

'That must be the room,' Daniel says.

The sound of her husband's voice surprises Sakinah. She looks around for the room Daniel is talking about, but the only other doors near the guard are obviously storage cupboards. She looks again at the guard and notices how young he is. The sight of someone younger than her doing an important job makes her feel old.

'You mean he's the one with the guard?' she asks, despite already knowing the answer.

'Of course,' Daniel replies. 'He's been in jail for the last decade.'

'Jail?' Sakinah repeats.

She does not believe what Daniel is saying. She has always known his father wasn't around, but for him to have neglected to mention his father's criminal ways feels like a major betrayal.

‘You should have told me,’ Sakinah says, struggling to keep herself from shouting.

‘I know,’ Daniel says.

Sakinah wants nothing more than to grab Daniel, sit him down on one of the nearby plastic chairs and interrogate him until she is sufficiently ‘caught up’. The questions can’t wait for them to be seated though, and Sakinah finds herself talking, even as she makes her way to one of the chairs.

‘Then tell me now,’ she says. ‘Tell me why he was in jail.’

Daniel nods absentmindedly. He walks past the chairs and towards the guard.

‘He was in jail for murder,’ he clarifies in as calm a tone as though he is commenting on the weather.

Sakinah laughs, and then stops, when she notices that Daniel is serious.

‘Murder?’

‘He confessed to the murder of my mother and got sent to jail for it.’

Sakinah stands beside the chair, unsure of how to proceed. Daniel seems to be waiting for her to come with him to the guard, but she doesn’t feel like she can move at the moment. Her grip on the pushchair tightens. It’s the only thing that’s stopping her from spinning off into space.

‘So, we’re here to see your murderer father? Let me get this right. Your father murdered your mother?’

‘I said he confessed. I never said he did it.’

Sakinah can’t help but sit down. She shakes her head, her mouth ready to form more questions. She goes to ask Daniel one of the million questions that are clamouring for attention in her head, but he has approached the security guard. He flashes his driver’s licence at the guard, but the guard doesn’t bother to look at it. Sakinah gets to her feet and hurries after her husband.

‘He’s harmless,’ the guard says, waving them in. ‘I doubt he can do much beyond gargle someone to death.’

There is a pause before the guard coughs and looks down at his shoes.

‘This must be very difficult for you,’ the guard adds. ‘I’m sorry for your loss.’

‘He’s not dead yet,’ Daniel mutters.

Having apparently slipped into some alternate reality where everyone is remarkably casual with the idea of murder, Sakinah follows her husband into the room where his dad lies. Seeing the security guard made her feel old, but the sight of Daniel’s father makes her feel even older. It is like looking into the future, for the man in the hospital bed looks so much like her husband that it is chilling. Even with his face obscured by an oxygen mask, she can still see the familiar shapes of her husband. That same nose, those same eyebrows, the same slightly too large forehead, it’s all here. Sakinah has never met either of Daniel’s parents, but she doubts seeing his mum would have the same effect; clearly Daniel has inherited everything from his dad. She looks down at Musa and sees the same prominent features repeated on his smiling face as well. Just thinking about how, one day, Musa may be old and dying in a hospital bed is enough to make her feel dizzy.

Daniel stands at the side of his dad’s bed and looks intently at the old man’s face.

Sakinah gets as close as she can with the pushchair and looks down at the man as well. Her father-in-law, who she hadn’t even known was still alive, is clearly dying at an alarming rate. The multiple strokes have given his face a droop on the left side as though he is a waxwork figure that has caught too much sun. His skin is grey, and barely any breath troubles his too thin chest. The only thing sustaining him is the bag hanging at his bedside; no solid food has passed those parched lips in a long time.

‘Do you reckon he would hear me if I spoke to him?’ Daniel asks.

In all honesty, there is no chance that Daniel's dad is aware of anything that is being said or done to him. Sakinah knows this, Daniel knows this, even the guard outside knows this. But the glimmer of hope in Daniel's eyes makes Sakinah question the situation more. She wants to give Daniel the answers he needs. Her faith tells her that, upon his death, Daniel's dad's soul will leave his body and visit whomever it wants and learn whatever it needs to learn before the body itself is buried and the soul is put to sleep until Judgement Day. Daniel knows all of this too; she taught him before he converted. Sakinah doesn't think the information will help in the current situation.

'His soul will probably be aware, even if his body isn't,' Sakinah replies, opting to go with the answer that best catches the balance between what she believes and what Daniel needs to hear.

Daniel nods and slowly sinks into the padded, blue armchair next to his dad's bed. It is only when she catches herself mentally referring to the man as 'Daniel's dad' that Sakinah realises she does not know the name of her father-in-law. Fortunately, a whiteboard next to the man's bed displays his name, Anthony Shepherd, the name of his doctor and the letters DNR in a bold red to contrast with the patchy green in which the names are inscribed. In the quiet of the hospital room, Sakinah sees the opportunity to ask Daniel more questions about his ever-changing life story. This moment is snatched from her as Musa tenses and a smell wafts into the air.

Sakinah leaves Daniel to whatever reflecting he needs to do and, with Musa protesting loudly in the pushchair, goes out into the corridor. She asks the guard where the nearest changing room is and finds it easily. On her way back to her father-in-law's room, she sees that the guard has gone over to the nurses' station; he's chatting away to one of the nurses, his arm resting on a pile of paperwork, which looks as though it may topple to the floor at any moment.

When she left the room, Sakinah failed to properly close the door. In the interim, a breeze has further pushed the door open so that, from the corridor, Daniel and Anthony are plainly visible. Daniel has his father's hand clasped in both of his own. He is sitting as close to the bed as possible, his lips moving as though in prayer. Sakinah hesitates before entering the room. Snatches of what Daniel is saying are drifting out and she wants to hear what he is saying.

'You know I could never visit,' Daniel is saying. 'But I was always grateful for what you did for me. I owe my life to you. You gave up everything for me. But I could never visit. I couldn't handle those kinds of questions. I couldn't risk losing everything. Your sacrifice would have been in vain. I would have lost everything. I still might, if Ben doesn't keep his mouth shut. I'm sure he gave you plenty of company over the years. He's the son you deserved. She was right all along; he was always the better kid. But I wanted to thank you, before you go. And tell you that you can go. You can rest now. We'll all be okay.'

There is a pause, then Daniel leans in closer and begins a new train of thought.

'If you hadn't confessed, then—'

An enthusiastic raspberry from Musa alerts Daniel to the presence of his wife and child. He settles back in the chair and smiles at Sakinah. Not wanting her husband to think he is being spied on, Sakinah enters the room quickly and resumes her former position. She is convinced that Daniel knows she was listening in, but the slight guilt she feels at her own transgression is nothing compared to her growing sense of distrust.

'No point hanging around,' Daniel says, getting to his feet. 'He's completely out of it. Might as well be talking to the wall. I'm glad you got to meet him though. Just a shame about the circumstances.'

In contrast to the previous night and all of that day so far, Daniel fills the drive home with conversation. Littered with non-sequiturs, his speech bounces around topics and time

periods, most often consisting of anecdotes about his dad, but also featuring thoughts on the weather, the current geo-political situation, and pondering on what to have for dinner.

Sakinah is glad to hear her husband talk again, but there is a part of her that is wary of the avalanche of noise pouring from his mouth. He is saying a lot, certainly, but not the right things, not the things that explain a decade of lies.

The opportunity to call him out finally presents itself when they are at home that evening. Musa has been put to bed and Daniel is doing the dishes while Sakinah cleans the kitchen surfaces. The weight of unanswered questions is unbearable and Sakinah cuts through the chatter of her husband to finally ask him the question that has been bothering her since the hospital.

‘What do you mean he confessed but didn’t actually do it?’ she asks.

Daniel freezes. His mouth hangs open from where it was describing the time his dad helped him beat the final boss in a video game because a young Daniel found it too scary. His hands are still holding the glass he has been aimlessly rubbing with a cloth, for ages, as though a work-shy genie were moments away from bursting out of the glassware and needed a bit more encouragement.

‘I was being reassuring,’ Daniel explains. ‘Just letting you know that we weren’t about to walk into a room with a murderer.’

‘But how do you know he didn’t do it?’ Sakinah presses. ‘People don’t go around confessing to murders. I understand that he’s your dad and you want to think the best of him, but if he confessed to it, then there’s a good chance he actually did it.’

Daniel hesitates but says nothing.

‘Did the police have any other suspects?’ Sakinah asks.

‘They took an interest in me and Ben, but my father’s confession cleared everything up.’

‘Cleared everything up?’ she repeats. ‘But you think he was lying?’

There is no answer again.

‘You told me she fell down the stairs and hit her head,’ Sakinah challenges, ‘Was that not true?’

‘That was true,’ Daniel says. ‘I wouldn’t lie to you.’

Sakinah raises an eyebrow.

‘So why did the police think it was murder and not an accident?’ she asks.

Daniel looks agitated. He rubs the glass once more before setting it down. He places his hands on either side of the sink and stares into it as though able to divine a way out of the conversation. Sakinah’s natural instinct is to reassure her husband, but his current discomfort may be the only thing that will get her any answers.

‘He buried her in the woods,’ Daniel says eventually.

‘He did what?’

‘He buried her in the woods.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘He found her and thought I had killed her.’

‘Why would he think that?’

‘Because that’s what Ben told him.’

Sakinah doesn’t know how to respond and is thankful that Daniel carries on talking.

‘You know what else happened that night, with the party and Andrew and everything.’

‘That is seemingly one of the few things in your life you have actually told me about.’

‘So, you know how much of a mess it all was. I guess with everything that went on that night, it wasn’t too much of a stretch to think I’d killed her. Maybe my father thought she deserved it. Ben too, possibly. My mother was not well liked. And she... she didn’t always



treat me well. Ben knew enough of what she was like to make certain assumptions, I suppose.'

'Where were you when that was all happening?'

'Not around,' Daniel says, hollowly. 'It was all too much. Afterwards. I couldn't cope. I have no idea how I survived. If I hadn't met you, I wouldn't have survived much longer. I had it all planned, you know? A date, a time, everything. An ending. It was the only way I could find the strength to face each day.'

Sakinah thinks back to the first time they had met. She remembers the desolate building, the perilous drop below. She remembers how it called to her as the answer to all of the pain that she had felt at that time. She has never fully questioned why Daniel was drawn to that place as well, and if he felt the same yearning as she did to seek escape in a lethal fall.

'Couldn't you have cleared things up?' Sakinah asks.

'The innocent don't go burying people in the woods,' Daniel points out. 'I told Dad that I was going to talk to the police, but he didn't want me to. That was the last conversation I ever had with him. It was too painful to see him after that. And to see Ben.'

Daniel lets go of the sink. Sakinah can see the tears in his eyes.

'But now Ben's back,' Daniel says, forcing the words out through the blockade of emotion that is about to overwhelm him. 'And he is going to ruin everything, like he always did.'

'He can't ruin anything now.'

'You don't understand,' Daniel replies. 'Ben is doing this for some kind of twisted reason. He's stayed away all these years and yet now he's suddenly back. He must have heard about you or Musa or something and decided that I've lived a good enough life and now he can come and mess everything up.'

'Maybe he wants to build something with you.'

‘You clearly don’t know him.’

‘No,’ Sakinah says pointedly. ‘I don’t. But what I do know is that Ben can’t do anything unless you let him. Ben isn’t the one who is causing problems for us, Daniel. That’s you. Your lies. Your secrets. Your actions are the ones that are wrong. How you have gone all this time, lying to me, is something I will never understand. After everything we’ve been through together. You supported me when no one else in the world understood what I was going through. You gave me as much time and space as I needed to spend with Aaliyah, so that she wouldn’t be as freaked out by our relationship. You did everything you could to make my pregnancy as easy as it could be. I barely lifted a finger, thanks to you. We’re not one of those couples who fight, or lie, or get petty about things. We trust and we love each other. And the fact that you have been risking all of that is one thing, but to try and blame someone else for your own problems is something else entirely.’

Before he can reply, Daniel’s attention is diverted to his ringing phone. Daniel approaches the phone as though it is rigged to explode. He sighs when he sees who is calling and shows Sakinah the screen. It’s Ben. She tells him to answer it and he does. Their situation can hardly get much worse. A short conversation follows during which Daniel barely says anything. When the conversation is over, Daniel places the phone on the coffee table and looks at Sakinah.

‘My dad died,’ he says.

It feels wrong to press Daniel on the points Sakinah just raised. Instead, she tries to imagine what her life is going to be like from this point on. Ben will be in touch about funeral arrangements. He will continue to be a part of their lives. The chaos is here to stay, and Sakinah wonders if things can ever go back to normal. There is something more that Daniel is yet to tell her; she can feel it with every fibre of her being. He has hidden a brother, a father and a murder conspiracy from her. Things cannot be normal until she knows what he is still

hiding. Of course, depending on what he tells her, things might never have a chance of being normal again.

All Sakinah can do is hug her husband and hope for the best.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

If Year 2 had a defining characteristic, it would be sitting in a room with someone while being observed by a third party. The strange lunches with Roxanne continued after that first interaction had been deemed a success. They were held on a Friday lunchtime, a decision I suspect was mostly to aid the supervising teacher in having an opportunity to clear out marking before the weekend. I was never sure what the teachers expected would happen during those lunchtimes. Aside from that forced, weekly interaction, Roxanne and I avoided each other. Even during those lunches, we would make a small amount of polite conversation, usually about the pictures we were still being made to draw. As time went by, I grew increasingly frustrated with the arrangement. Every time I was forced into the room to sit in that awkward state, there was an opportunity for Franklyn to make a new friend. If he got too close to someone other than me, then it was entirely possible I would be abandoned completely.

Sometimes the sessions were guided regarding what we should draw, while other times we were left to our own devices. Roxanne, for the most part, drew pictures concerning her mother. I came to realise that Roxanne drew these pictures for Mrs Bumble. The one week where she drew a picture of a dog, the teacher had little to say aside from a passing comment on the quality of the picture. Pictures concerning her mother, however, attracted a more in-depth conversation from the teacher, which I believe Roxanne enjoyed. I never worked out what my equivalent picture would be. I supposed they wanted me to draw pictures of my father. My pictures were of creatures and monsters and superheroes.

On Monday evenings, Ben and I had to go to a strangely clinical building to sit in a room with my father and spend time playing with him. There was always someone sitting in the corner while these interactions occurred, a great notebook

spread across their lap. Periodically, the woman in the corner would make notes. I tried to watch her in order to understand what inspired the note-taking but could find no pattern to it.

I had initially been excited at the prospect of seeing my father again. Following that disastrous final visit in the summer, I had not seen him for months. It marked the second Christmas without him. I wanted to avoid a repeat of the previous year's events and would likely have refused to see my father even if it had been an option. It was after my birthday in March that the sessions began. My mother was irritated by the whole ordeal. I never learned how or why the meetings were arranged, but I know my mother's mood darkened significantly once they were set up.

I was practising some spelling when she delivered the news. There was an accusatory edge to her voice, as if she suspected that I had somehow found a way to get the entire thing organised.

'You're going to have to see your father again,' she declared as though the words ushered with them the end of the world itself. 'Every week for an hour. You're going to have supervised visits with him. And guess who has to take you? Like I have nothing better to do than cater to him again.'

It was a protestation my mother made every week. The twenty-minute car journey was filled with nothing save my mother describing all the things she would rather be doing with her time than driving us all the way to see our father. She was keen to point out that the only one who wanted those interactions was him. She suggested that, if asked, Ben and I should be 'honest' and tell the people at the centre that we wanted to stop seeing our father. As my mother pointed out, Ben and

I were old enough to make our own decisions about who we wanted in our lives and, if we voiced those opinions, we would be listened to.

On the rare occasions when the people at the centre spoke to me or Ben, they would ask questions about how much we enjoyed the visits with our father. They insisted that, if we wanted him in our lives, that would be enough for it to happen. According to the workers, Ben and I were both intelligent young men who could make decisions like this without having to worry about the feelings of our parents. Our parents, we were told, would be perfectly fine with whatever we decided.

The bombardment from the adults to make such a decision was draining. If my mother's mood was bad when taking us for those meetings, it was always worse afterwards; something I seemed to feel most sharply when she exploded at any mistake I made for the next few days. Leaving her alone for an hour with nothing save her own thoughts for company was a terrible idea.

My father seemed genuinely pleased to have the meetings. For the first few minutes of the meetings, my father would tell us what was going on in his life; he'd comment on a book he had been reading or a T.V show that he had been watching. After this, we would be prompted to engage in some form of dialogue. My father learned which cartoons Ben and I watched and took it upon himself to record them on VHS to watch when he got home from work. This enabled him to have something to offer us as a point of entry into conversation. Were it not for this, I don't think Ben would have said a word during those meetings.

My father tried to raise the topic of my dishonesty. He would ask vaguely worded, open-ended questions about me being pushed or how much experience I had with adults getting angry. I avoided answering, as the threat of misspeaking and



receiving punishment upon returning home hung over the proceedings in a manner that would forever stifle free discussion. To make things worse, whenever my father dared broach any such topics, the eyes of the observer would burn into his skull. That look had a silencing impact like nothing else. Ben and I resorted to only talking about subjects that would do no harm: cartoons and schoolwork.

Despite being the only one who benefitted from the meetings, it was my father who caused them to break down. After months of wondering about the truth of the situation and trying his best covertly to discover the answer, my father finally stopped being coy about it. I could tell there was something different about that meeting from when it began. My father seemed uncomfortable from the moment we sat down. A light glistening of sweat caused his bald, bumpy head to shine beneath the harsh fluorescent lights. Though the summer sun outside those walls was sending down waves of cloying heat, the room itself was cooled by a juddering fan. The meeting ran like normal until the end, when Ben was asked to leave and I was asked to stay.

As Ben got up to go, I reached out for him. I grabbed the sleeve of his jumper and attempted to hold him in place. He looked at me, trying to work out the best thing to do. I hoped he would insist upon staying.

‘We normally go out together,’ he said, as relief flooded through me. ‘Why does he have to stay behind?’

‘We want a private little chat, is all,’ replied the woman who had been observing the session. ‘You run on ahead to your mother and let her know we’ll be a few minutes longer. We won’t be too long. We know she is busy.’

This was enough to send Ben on his way. I watched him walk out of the door, desperate to go with him. I was scared my mother would think I had elected to stay behind. Did these people not realise the kind of trouble they were causing me?

‘We know your brother is very quiet during these meetings and that’s okay,’ the woman began as she knelt down beside me. ‘We get the sense he doesn’t really want to be here. He’s worried about upsetting your mother and that’s understandable. It’s a very challenging situation. However, we also notice you seem more comfortable here. So, we were wondering if we could explore the possibility of continuing contact with your father in a setting like this or even in his home. Only if you felt comfortable of course.’

‘I want to go now,’ I said.

‘Jon, listen to me,’ my father said hurriedly. ‘You know I would never do anything to hurt you. I don’t know where the idea that I pushed you came from, but you have to know what happened to your eye was an accident. I have never pushed you and I never would. You’re safe with me.’

‘I need to go now,’ I replied.

‘Jon, this is very serious,’ my father insisted. ‘Your mother is trying to make it so I can’t see you ever again. Is that what you want? To never see me again? You are my son. I’d like for you, and for Ben, to spend more time with me, but I can’t do that without your help. I need you to tell everyone that you want to keep on seeing me. If you do that, then they can’t argue against it.’

‘Mr Shepherd,’ the woman warned, giving my father that stern look of hers.

My father sank back into his chair as though he were a child who had been denied dessert.

‘What your father is trying to say,’ the woman corrected, ‘is that it has been noted that you and Ben may be experiencing pressure to say and do certain things because you feel they are the right thing to do. We want to make sure that whatever

decisions you make are your own. You don't need to worry about your mother or your father. They can handle themselves. You need to do whatever is best for you.'

The woman's words were as stupid as they were obvious. I was doing what was best for me and that was getting harder with each passing second. Every second was another ounce of anger that would build inside my mother, anger that would be exacted on me in due course. I needed to get out before I made things too difficult for myself.

'I want to go now.'

My father's face pulled itself in multiple different ways as he tried to express the flood of emotions that my words evoked. Finally, he looked deflated and shrugged at the woman.

'There's always plan b,' he sighed.

After giving my father another of her silencing looks, the woman got up off her knees. She informed me I was at liberty to leave and showed me through the door.

Predictably, my mother was upset when I saw her waiting in the reception area. I was surprised, however, when she lashed out at the woman. Her anger was typically reserved for the car ride home, but the inconvenience of waiting had made her bold.

'What have you been saying to him?' she asked. 'Don't you think it's bad enough that we have to waste our time coming to this place, without you taking up even more of our time? What is it, divide and conquer? You get them on their own and fill their heads with rubbish, so they'll do whatever you want? My solicitor will be hearing about this. If you think for a second that these stupid bloody meetings are going to carry on, then you've got another think coming. One day, I'll stop bringing them, and then where will you be?'

‘We hope to see you again next week,’ the woman smiled thinly before retreating into her office.

This lack of confrontation only worsened my mother’s mood. She took it upon herself to extract as much information from me as possible on the way home. I struggled to provide her with the answers she sought, mostly because I had not understood the interactions to which I had been subjected. I told her they were trying to get me and Ben to make our own decisions.

‘I’ve always said that,’ my mother insisted. ‘All the time. I’m always asking you both what it is you want. Just because I listen to you and know what you want doesn’t make me the bad guy. They think I put ideas in your head, but it’s hardly my fault if you know what a waste of space your father is and want to have nothing to do with him. You’re good kids. Smart. You’ll go far in life. You’ll go further without him dragging you down.’

The next meeting ran the same as usual and I was relieved not to be singled out again. If my father and the observer had been waiting for something to happen in that meeting, then they were disappointed. The disappointment was potent enough that the observer consulted with my mother following the meeting. She was as hostile to their attempts at conversation as ever and the suggestion they made did the impossible. It rendered her speechless.

‘Obviously it is quite a lot to consider,’ the woman concluded by saying. ‘And you should obviously talk it through with your solicitor. But we had hoped to create a safe space in which your children could express their own thoughts and feelings, and this has obviously not happened. What choice is left save to give the children their own solicitor, who can best vocalise their wants and needs?’

‘I’m their mother,’ my mother pointed out. ‘That’s my job.’

'This situation requires a delicate touch and a degree of impartiality neither parent can provide. You have been forced to carry this burden for quite some time. It is time you allowed someone else to help you.'

'Where would they get a solicitor from?'

'We would facilitate that.'

'So, they'd work for you and Anthony?'

It was always odd to hear my parents be referred to by their first names. It seemed wrong on a fundamental level, like turning up to school wearing pyjamas.

'The selection of solicitor would have to be approved by yourself and your solicitor, naturally,' the woman clarified. 'And the children would have to find them palatable. How this normally works is that the children have a meal with the proposed solicitor in a restaurant, with one of our team offering a familiar face. You'd be welcome to remain nearby, but it would be important for the children to feel completely at liberty to discuss whatever they wish in whatever manner they wish.'

'There is no way this ridiculous idea will ever happen,' my mother declared. 'My solicitor isn't going to put up with anymore of this nonsense.'

As it happened, her solicitor was more than happy to put up with that kind of nonsense. Though he agreed it was unusual, he informed my mother that there was no harm in allowing at least the initial meeting to play out. Whatever money my mother was paying that man was not enough. The decision to permit that initial meeting was the beginning of the end for the whole divorce proceedings.

The school term was drawing to a close by the time the prospective solicitor had been acquired. The meeting was arranged in a restaurant to which I had never been before. This made me nervous. I had no qualms interacting with the strange new person, that had become a standard part of life, but I did have reservations

about eating somewhere new. I liked to establish an eating routine at places I went. I would only eat one item from the menu and would always need it tailored. My meal of choice was either a plate full of chicken nuggets, no chips because they were vile, or sausages and mashed potato, no vegetables. My mother had tried many times to convince me to eat chips, claiming they were made from the same substance as mashed potato. I conceded that it may have been the case, but the two foods tasted completely different.

My mother was permitted to stay with us until we were all seated. Ben and I sat opposite the woman from the centre and a man I didn't recognise. I asked if my mother would be able to help order the food, but the man who introduced himself as our solicitor insisted he could manage a simple task like that. My mother smirked at this but retreated to another part of the restaurant when asked.

The solicitor insisted Ben and I refer to him as Bob. That was too informal for an adult. The majority of the adults I knew were teachers and they all had to be referred to by their surname. The other adults I knew were my relatives and their names were all either replaced with familial terms or prefaced with them. My mother didn't have any friends she spent time with outside of work, so it was unusual for me to think of adults having first names and calling them that.

Despite it being a meeting to decide whether Bob would be representing my and Ben's interests in the ongoing custody battle, Bob was talking as though it were a done deal. He was explaining how we would be able to meet like this in a restaurant and be able to voice all our concerns as well as our wants and needs. He called the restaurant 'neutral territory', but it didn't feel neutral to me. The place was dark, despite the sun still shining outside, and the smoke from the smokers' area of the restaurant drifted relentlessly over to where we were sitting.

Bob talked in detail about his own life. I stopped listening around the time he began talking of his own children. The light fixtures were more entertaining. There were dark patches on all of them where they had been burned slightly by the light bulbs within. No two burn marks were the same, and I enjoyed looking for the differences between them all. My favourite was the one that looked like a butterfly. It was after I had picked a favourite burn mark that I realised how incredibly boring the whole evening was. The idea of Bob being a regular fixture in my life was getting less desirable by the second.

‘Enough talk about me,’ Bob finally decided, sometime after the heat death of the universe. ‘Let’s get some food ordered. What are you guys having?’

He offered to read the menu to me, but I declined. I was able to read, and Ben always helped me with the words I didn’t know. I needed to locate the sausage and mash and I would be fine. I was able to do that by the pictures floating next to each item on the menu, so no reading was required. I was tempted to go for the chicken nuggets, but I couldn’t trust them to not put chips on the plate. Sausage and mash was the safer option. I explained to Bob how important it was that there be absolutely nothing else on my plate. I also requested that the sausages should be separate to the mash; if any mash got on the sausages, I’d have to scrape it off or starve. Bob said that he would ‘see what he could do’. He seemed relieved when Ben ordered a simple burger and chips.

Displaying an absolute lack of conversational finesse, Bob shifted the topic of discussion to how Ben and I felt about our father. Ben’s instincts kicked in at this point and he fell silent. Not wanting to be singled out anymore, I decided to focus on colouring the picture of a dinosaur I had been handed on the way in.

'It would really help me to understand what kind of feelings you have about your dad,' Bob said. 'I'm trying to help you guys. I'm a friendly guy.'

Neither me nor Ben responded. Bob stroked his moustache. His next line of enquiry was cut off by the arrival of the food. Rubbing his hands together with glee, Bob thanked the waiter as the plates were set down in front of us. I checked my sausages to ensure they were not making contact with the mashed potato. Fortunately, the sausages seemed fine. The mash, on the other hand, looked weird. There were little specks of orange embedded in the fluffy whiteness. I poked at it with my fork before questioning Bob as to what he had ordered.

'It's good old-fashioned bangers and mash,' he told me. 'Eat it up. You'll love it.'

I decided to test the sausage first. I watched Bob suspiciously as I cut a piece off the sausage and slowly placed it into my mouth. I chewed the sausage, attempting to get a full grasp of its flavour and texture. I had eaten better sausages in my time, and it could have been a bit hotter, but it was edible. The same could not be said for the mash. Something solid crunched as I bit down on the soft potato, flooding my mouth with a bizarre flavour. I was scared that I had broken a tooth or something. I opened my mouth and spat the food back out onto my plate. The offending piece of orange food sat there. I jabbed at it with my fork.

'What's this?' I asked.

'I suppose it's possible those orange bits are carrots,' he noted, adjusting his tie. 'But the mash will cover the flavour of it. You won't even notice it.'

'I don't like carrots,' I said.

'You won't even notice it. Eat it up.'

'I don't like carrots,' I repeated slowly.



Bob was obviously stupid. Of course I could taste the carrots. Otherwise I wouldn't have spat them out. Even if I couldn't taste them, the mixing of foods was wrong. My mother had tried to get me to mix my food on my plate once by suggesting it all gets mixed up in my stomach anyway. That had made me feel so sick that I only ate one type of food at a time, for a month, until I forgot about the whole 'mixed together in the stomach' thing and went back to eating normally. Bob's stupidity reminded me of that time and made me like him even less. I felt sick and frustrated. I looked down at the plate before me. In spitting out the mash, I had managed to contaminate the sausages. I pushed the plate away from me. The whole thing was a mess and it made me want to cry. I didn't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to keep being dragged from home to go to these stupid meetings with people who didn't know what they were doing. I didn't want to have to listen to my mother's constant complaining about facilitating the whole thing. I didn't want to have to constantly worry about what actions of mine would make those complaints escalate into punishments.

'I don't want to see Daddy anymore,' I concluded, saying that part out loud so Bob could hear.

Bob, Ben and the woman stopped eating and looked at me.

'If this is about the food, we can get you something else,' Bob offered.

'I don't want to see him either,' Ben said. 'You're supposed to listen to us and do what we want. We don't want to see him. Ever again.'

'Never ever,' I added.

Bob pulled on his tie as though it were at risk of suffocating him.

'Boys, I want you to understand the severity of what you are saying.'

‘He’s right,’ the woman interjected. ‘This is a very serious decision, and you shouldn’t make it lightly.’

‘I’ve told you a million times already,’ Ben said, his fingers pushing a chip around his plate, smearing tomato ketchup. ‘You never listen. You say you will, and you say you’ll do what’s best for us but, you never listen to us. We want to be with Mummy.’

A strange mixture of emotions rose within me. It was a mixture of anger, sadness, relief and despair. I couldn’t understand it. I pushed my plate off the table and watched the food splatter across the dull carpet. I had hoped the plate would smash, but the carpet was too soft for that. I considered getting up and stomping on the plate to finish the job.

‘I need you to calm down,’ commanded Bob. ‘This is a very serious matter. I will ask you one more time. Do you wish to cut contact with your father and ensure your mother retains full custody?’

‘Yes,’ Ben replied simply.

‘Jon, do you want this as well?’ Bob asked.

‘Yes,’ I shouted, rocking in my chair. ‘Get rid of Daddy.’

Bob and the woman shared a look. A confused waiter came over and looked at the plate on the floor.

‘Would you like me to replace that?’ he asked.

‘No need,’ said Bob, getting to his feet. ‘I think we’re done here.’

He instructed the woman to see us back to our mother before leaving the table. Ben looked sad to be leaving behind his burger and chips as the woman escorted us away. She located the table at which my mother sat. My mother seemed

surprised to see us. She looked up from the plate of food in front of her, but, before she could voice the question on her mind, the woman began to walk away.

‘Thank God I don’t have to deal with this family anymore,’ the woman said as she left.

Ben and I settled onto a frayed seat opposite our mother. I was expecting her to ask us what had happened. Instead, she handed us a dessert menu and claimed we could order whatever we wanted.

Over a bowl of ice cream each, we told her what had happened. When Ben relayed the part of the tale about us insisting on cutting ties with our father, my mother began to cry. I worried that we had done the wrong thing. Her tears turned to laughter, and she took one of my hands and one of Ben’s hands in hers.

‘You brave, clever boys,’ she laughed. ‘You are both incredible. Our lives are about to get much better. Just you wait and see.’

‘I don’t want to come here again,’ I insisted. ‘They put things in the mash.’

‘You don’t have to go anywhere like this ever again.’

My mother’s words gave me something to think about. It signalled an ability to achieve freedom that had previously seemed impossible.

The following day of school was another of those meetings with Roxanne. Freshly imbued with the power I had attained the previous night, I knew I would find some way to bring those meetings to an end. There was no way to act out as dramatically as there had been in the restaurant. I pushed the stack of blank paper onto the floor to see if that would provoke a reaction from the watching teacher. I succeeded only in annoying Roxanne.

‘That’s naughty,’ she said. ‘You should pick them up.’

‘I don’t want to,’ I said, folding my arms.

'We have to draw a picture.'

'All you ever draw is pictures of your mum and they're stupid. They're stupid and lumpy and horrible.'

'She likes them,' Roxanne insisted.

'Mrs Bumble likes everything.'

'Not her,' Roxanne said before dropping into a whisper. 'My mum.'

'How would you know?'

'My dad tells me. He says she looks down from heaven and sees my pictures and they make her smile.'

I considered this for a moment while chewing on my sandwich.

'That sounds nice,' I said. 'I wish my daddy was in heaven. Then he could look down and see me and I wouldn't have to see him anymore. I think it's better if one of your parents is in heaven. Having them both around is too hard.'

'I wish I could see my mum,' Roxanne said, her voice wavering slightly.

'It's better if you don't. She'd tell you your pictures are stupid and ugly and you're stupid and ugly.'

Roxanne shouted that her mother would never say such a thing. She punctuated it by throwing an apple at me. Mercifully, the apple sailed past my head. It landed on the desk of Mrs Bumble, who made her way over to investigate the commotion. Through her tears, Roxanne informed Mrs Bumble of the horrible things I had been saying. I denied any wrongdoing and informed her that these meetings were stupid and I didn't want to do them anymore. When Roxanne seconded the notion, Mrs Bumble said they would be unlikely to continue anyway, due to funding issues.

I did not feel as much relief as I had hoped. I felt the same knot of emotion that had plagued me in the restaurant. I had hoped getting rid of Roxanne would settle that feeling. At a loss as to how to feel better, I tracked down Franklyn and pulled him away from the other boys with whom he was playing.

‘You’re my friend,’ I pointed out. ‘You don’t need any of these other people anymore.’

## File Three Successfully Loaded

Sakinah is used to the speed at which Muslims bury their dead. The awareness that the soul can only be at rest when the final mourner has left the graveside compels most Muslims to have their relatives laid to rest within a day or two of their passing. Her father-in-law died on the 11<sup>th</sup> December but it is only now, on the 21<sup>st</sup> December, that he is being laid to rest. Daniel grew pale when he learned the date of the funeral. He slumped on the sofa, phone clutched in his hands.

‘Ten years to the day since my mother died. He’s doing this deliberately.’

Sakinah still wants to see the bright side, to give Ben the benefit of the doubt, but there is something unnervingly deliberate about the timing of it all. Granted, Ben could not have predicted when his dad would die, but Sakinah finds it hard to imagine Ben as being anything other than thrilled that he could organise the date in such a way as to cause Daniel discomfort. Daniel has been slowly, too slowly for her liking, opening up about bits of his past. Sakinah is starting to get more of a sense of the tension that exists between the two brothers. She finds some relief in the discovery that Daniel stopped talking to Ben before he met her.

More conversations are going to have to happen. Sakinah knows they cannot be rushed, but they need to happen soon, otherwise the anxiety of the situation is going to drive her mad. But for now, on this, the funeral day, Sakinah knows she has to be there for Daniel.

She watches him from her spot at the dressing table. It's weird to see him in a suit. She has only ever seen him in a suit twice in her life. Once was on the day of their graduations and the other time was when he interviewed for his job at the newspaper. On their wedding day, he had worn a traditional Indian outfit that Daniel said made him look like Prince Ali from *Aladdin*. It had suited him, and was designed to match her red dress perfectly. That was how they had been back then. Matched perfectly. Now, that coordination is gone. Sakinah is wearing the darkest clothes she could find, navy blue, and Daniel is wearing a black suit, the jacket and tie for which had come from a local charity shop.

'They do let Muslims in, right?' Sakinah asks. 'You've talked a bit about your hometown, and it's never struck me as being very cosmopolitan.'

'Nigel Farage keeps a picture of Oxbow under his pillow and kisses it every night before he goes to sleep that's how 'cosmopolitan' it is,' Daniel replies. 'You'll be fine. I'm sure they'll hardly notice you.'

Sakinah eyes him suspiciously, but carries on getting ready. When her pin is slipped into her scarf, Sakinah moves her head in every conceivable angle to ensure she will not give her son an impromptu acupuncture session, when she picks him up. Daniel adjusts his tie, seeming to debate the need to have his top button done up. Formality wins out and he leaves it done up.

Out into the weak winter sunlight they go. After the customary check for damage and flat tyres, they get into the car. As well as the usual dua they say, to ask for a safe journey, Sakinah says an extra one in her head. She prays that, after today, she doesn't have to interact with Ben anymore, that her life can get back to normal. Daniel warns her of the long drive

ahead and encourages her to get comfortable. He programmes an address into the satnav. Sakinah wonders what the address could be. Daniel has not had to look it up. It takes her a few seconds, but she realises it is his home address, remembered precisely even after all this time. Daniel catches her eye.

‘We shouldn’t need to go to the actual house,’ he says. ‘I’ll know my way to the church once we’re in the town. Unless someone’s bulldozed the whole place and rebuilt everything since I was last there.’

The drive may be long, but it is a simple one. After the motorway, the route to Oxbow is quiet. Fields line the road on either side, sweeping away into vast swathes of countryside. Sakinah wonders what they look like in the summer. She imagines endless masses of flowers or corn as, even in the winter, there is something beautiful about the scale of it all. One of the fields features a lone tree, its branches barren in the cold, but aside from that there is little to break up the scenery. This changes as they drive past farm buildings, confirming Sakinah’s suspicions that the fields are likely used to grow food. A herd of cows chews grass in a small field, oblivious to the passing car. Sakinah wants to draw Musa’s attention to the cows, but he is fast asleep in his car seat. They drive through a hamlet, and it is at this point Daniel finally speaks.

‘Did you know that Oxbow was once the capital of England?’ he says.

Despite the tension between them, Sakinah can’t help but laugh at this comment.

‘How big is Oxbow then?’ she asks.

‘Tiny,’ Daniel replies. ‘But, apparently, Queen Elizabeth the First stayed there once and, by the laws of the time, that made it the capital of the country.’

‘So there’s like a castle in Oxbow?’

‘No.’

‘A manor house?’



‘No.’

Sakinah shakes her head.

‘So where could she have stayed then?’

Daniel taps the steering wheel while he ponders this.

‘There’s a house with those white walls and black wooden beams next to the Old Gaol,’ Daniel muses. ‘I suppose she could have stayed there. Those buildings are Tudor, aren’t they?’

Sakinah shrugs. Daniel laughs and glances at her. She smiles back at him. This is good, there is still hope here after all. She tries to keep her mind off the reason why they are in the car in the first place. She ignores the suit and focuses on trying to extract more conversation from her husband before the trials of the day fully impose themselves.

‘Where did you hear this whole capital city thing?’

‘The most reliable of sources. School.’

‘From a teacher?’

‘From my friend, Franklyn. He knew a lot about the world. He was the one who I played that game with, where we pretended all planes were German bombers coming to finish us off.’

‘German?’

‘We were being vigilant,’ Daniel says. ‘The rest of the country may have become complacent, because World War Two had been over for sixty years, but we were ready. If the Nazis came back, we’d be there to stop them.’

Sakinah thinks of videos she’s seen of people waving swastika flags in the last few years in Britain and America.

‘How’s that worked out for you lately?’

‘We took our eye off the ball,’ Daniel laments light-heartedly. ‘For neglecting our sacred duty, the people of Oxbow can only apologise.’

‘All it takes for Trump to win is for Oxbow to do nothing.’

The car drives past fields littered with metal framework on which something must have been grown at some point. Daniel remarks that it used to be where they grew strawberries. He wonders whether Brexit is responsible for there being no more strawberries. Sakinah thinks he may have a point. These fields are in a state of disrepair that signals a long-term neglect. Beyond the strawberry fields, the town of Oxbow reveals itself. Daniel observes that the housing estate now greeting them is new. If that is the case, the sign welcoming people to the town has been moved to encompass the new houses. According to the sign, the town of Oxbow is twinned with some equally obscure French town.

‘My father used to live up there,’ Daniel remarks, pointing out of his window.

Sakinah follows the finger, past the petrol station which must have once served as the gateway to the town. Daniel could mean any one of the unremarkable houses that stand in an orderly line with neatly trimmed front lawns.

‘Just past those houses,’ he elaborates. ‘His road’s tucked out of the way. It’s by the train tracks. I have no idea what happened to his house when he went to jail. It was a rental.’

There is little time to dwell on this, as Daniel flows straight into pointing out the next thing of interest. He is Sakinah’s tour guide, and she tries her best to absorb all the information coming her way. Daniel’s past is laid out in front of her for what would be the first and last time in their lives. She has to seize the opportunity.

She listens to his description of the bi-weekly market, which attracted people from all of the neighbouring villages. She lets him talk about the river that flows through the town, not to be confused with the canal that also bisects the town. She chuckles good naturedly to Daniel’s accounts of the multitude of pubs, barbers, and corner shops. Her disappointment

grows, as it becomes obvious that Daniel has retreated to his comfort zone of inane information and is leaving any personal stories out of his descriptions of the town.

The car pulls into a carpark next to one of the barber shops. Across the road, a grand church looms over the town. Some trick of the architecture allows the building to present the appearance of a disapproving face, scowling at the sinful ways of the people below. Daniel falls silent as he switches off the engine. Musa continues to sleep in the back. Sakinah waits for Daniel to make the first move. He's staring at the church as though seriously considering whether the building will admit him after all this time. For a second, Sakinah thinks he is going to give up on the funeral and take them all home. But Daniel takes the key from the ignition and opens the door.

Knowing there is nothing to do except follow her husband, Sakinah gets out of the car. It is a strange sensation to stand in the place of Daniel's childhood. She looks up the main road they have just driven down and sees the centre of town and its collection of shops. How many times had a young Daniel visited these places? A young Jon, she realises he would have been then. A different name for a different person. Sakinah gets Musa out of the car while Daniel sets up the pushchair wheels. Musa stirs but doesn't wake up.

'You know what we should do?' Daniel says with a sudden excitement. 'We should go and visit the chippy. It's next door to this barber's. I used to come here all the time as a teenager. I hated chips when I was a kid. I loved mashed potato but hated chips. Then, as a teenager, my eyes were opened to the greatness of chips. This place got me over the line on the whole chip front. You'll love it. Come on. We've got time.'

Sakinah does not feel as though she will love it. She would have loved to have stayed at home but, failing that, getting the day over with as soon as possible will be the best thing that can happen. Unable to stop him, Sakinah walks beside Daniel as he makes his way to the fish and chip shop. He opens the glass door excitedly and heads inside, leaving Sakinah to

wrangle the pushchair. The pungent aroma of vinegar fills the air and makes the place feel dirty despite the clean white tiles that give the chip shop a clinical air. One wall is dominated by a counter in which various meats and fish are illuminated under a harsh yellow light. On the wall to the side of the door is an old television playing a music channel. The TV is muted though, and the music that fills the room comes from an unseen radio. This ensures that the man on the TV is furiously breakdancing to Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On*. Daniel asks Sakinah what she wants. She's not hungry and tells him as much. He shrugs before ordering a large bag of chips.

Once back outside, Daniel offers her the chips.

'You have to try these,' Daniel says. 'They're the best chips you can get.'

They are not the best chips. Not by any sane person's definition of the concept. But Sakinah dutifully chews the food and smiles along. After a few chips, Daniel sighs and looks down at his food.

'They tasted better when I was younger. They must have changed the recipe.'

'They're chips,' Sakinah says, unable to help herself. 'What recipe is there to change?'

'Maybe there's too much vinegar on them,' Daniel muses. 'Or not enough. They can sit for a while. Maybe they'll taste better after they've marinated a bit.'

Daniel folds the wrapping so that the chips are covered, before stowing them in the netting at the bottom of the pushchair. He dusts his hands off and turns to Sakinah with a smile.

'We should probably get moving,' he says.

Showing an extreme amount of patience, which should win her some form of award, Sakinah does not point out that it is Daniel who has been needlessly delaying proceedings. Instead, she follows him once again, this time across the road and into the church grounds. A

small, overcrowded graveyard encircles the church. Sakinah cannot imagine her father-in-law will be interred here, for there is simply no room. There hasn't been room for a hundred years or more, judging by the dates on the gravestones Sakinah can see.

Passing through the grand wooden doors of the church, Sakinah feels self-conscious. Her scarf clings tightly to her head and her every footstep reverberates with a booming echo. She feels all eyes on her as she slips quietly into a pew towards the back, pushchair shielding her from the world. Daniel looks at her for a second, clearly expecting to sit nearer the front, but he settles in next to her without complaint.

For all his faults, Ben has done a good job organising the funeral. A picture of Anthony in his youth adorns each of the programmes, tucked next to hymn books, in a slot in the back of the pew in front. Anthony looks even more like Daniel in this picture, and Sakinah believes for a second Ben has photoshopped a picture of her husband as some form of prank. The picture is unflattering. Granted, Anthony is smiling, but the moustache does not suit him and looks more like a fat, hairy slug has curled up and died underneath the poor man's nose.

The funeral ceremony passes uneventfully until the time comes for the eulogies. The elderly priest offers a number of pontifications on death and leads the congregation in their mumbled, tuneless singing of the scheduled hymns. Then Ben makes his way up to the front of the church. He looks out at the congregation, members of whom Sakinah is only just realising she is related to, and musters his most solemn expression: a grimace, the kind that usually denotes some trapped gas. Sakinah expects him to talk with his Phil Mitchell impression, but Ben reveals himself to have more class than that.

'Thank you all for being here today,' Ben says, his hands gripping the pulpit. 'I know my father has a very complicated legacy. Many of you will have heard that he has spent much of the last decade in prison. It was a terrible scandal when he confessed to the murder of his

late wife, my poor, dear mother. But I don't want his confession to cloud your judgment of him. Anthony Shepherd was a good man, who would do anything for his family and for his children in particular. He...'

Ben pauses. He puts a hand to his mouth and closes his eyes. It's a needlessly theatrical performance, but the meaning of it is clear. He is becoming too emotional to talk about his deceased father.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'It's strange to think of him as being gone. I'm an orphan now, and that's going to take some getting used to.'

'He's thirty,' Daniel hisses under his breath. 'That's too old to be an orphan.'

Sakinah realises she is older than her brother-in-law. She does not know why, but she assumed he was older than her. This realisation makes his immaturity make more sense to her.

'On this most difficult of days,' Ben continues, punctuating his words with a sniff, 'I am grateful for the love and support of my brother. Though we have not always seen eye to eye, our shared grief has united us in a way that would otherwise be impossible. So moved by our father's passing is Jon, that he insisted on doing his own eulogy. He's a writer by trade and I'm sure he'll do a much better job in honouring our father than I ever could.'

Ben moves to the side of the altar and holds his hand out. He is looking directly at where Daniel and Sakinah are sitting. This means that he will have seen the look of hatred on Daniel's face, though he is too far away to hear the mumbled curses as Daniel gets to his feet. He puts on a good-natured smile as he makes his way to the front of the church. Jesus looks sorrowfully down on him and Daniel nods at the wooden statue for reasons entirely unknown to Sakinah.

'Thank you, Ben,' Daniel says, his anger working its way back down to its usual repressed state. 'I am sure that your eulogy would have been the tribute our father deserved.'

My eulogy may have been overhyped by my dear brother, but I will endeavour to commemorate my father's passing nonetheless.'

Daniel pauses and clears his throat. He adjusts his tie and taps his finger on the altar.

'What can you say about Anthony?' Daniel says. 'We all knew Anthony. Good old Anthony. He lived a good life. He died in relative peace and... and that is something that we all want in the end. A good life and a peaceful death. It's what he deserved. He was my father and he was also Ben's father and, to the rest of you, he was a beloved friend and, in some cases, a beloved relative.'

Daniel takes a few seconds to think of something more meaningful to say. There is a change in his expression and, when he next speaks, it is with more confidence than before.

'When I think about my father, my clearest memories of him are from my childhood.'

The mention of Daniel's childhood causes Sakinah to lean forward in her pew.

'I remember a man who was loyal, dependable, and always tried to put other people first. He was in church every Sunday. He was here at Christmas and Easter and, any time he needed guidance, he would come and talk to Father Tom. He taught me a lot about who I am and who I want to be. I'm a father myself now, and I reflect on how he was when I was a child. As highlighted by Ben, he and my mother did not have the best of marriages. They struggled for a long time to find happiness, but their struggle was in vain. When my parents divorced, I went many years without seeing my father. In that time, he reinvented himself to become a better person, a better father, prepared to make immense sacrifices.

'The passing of my father makes me think about something else. When I was young, I knew a guy called Franklyn and he had this dog. A bulldog, it was, and it was this incredible little thing. So calm and sociable, he loved everyone and used everyone's laps as a pillow. Used to slobber all over everyone. When that dog died, Franklyn's family got a new one. It was basically the same dog, born again. Then, when that one died, they did the same trick. It

looked exactly the same. The same jowls, the same white belly hair, the same droopy ears. But it was different on the inside. That third dog was more anxious and withdrawn than the first two. Then, when that one died, his family did the same trick yet again. Another identical dog. This one was a bit of a menace, in all honesty. It would rip into things for no reason, and it hated everyone outside of Franklyn's family. Those dogs have stuck with me. They have shown me that, in the face of adversity, you can make something of yourself. You can change. My father showed me a human example of that. He took something bad and used it to make himself better. I have strived to do that for my entire life, and, like my father before me, I would never let myself be dragged back into past mistakes.'

Daniel looks at Ben. Ben looks at Daniel.

'I am a new person now,' Daniel says. 'And I have my father to thank for that.'

Without another word, Daniel leaves his spot at the altar and heads back to Sakinah. She places a hand on his shoulder as he settles back beside her. Ben looks over, a scowl troubling his face, before also returning to his seat.

The rest of the service continues without Ben pulling any more stunts. Soon, the mourners file out of the church and are led to a much larger graveyard, tucked behind the church. The coffin is lowered into the ground. Ben, Daniel and a few of the others toss handfuls of earth onto the coffin before stepping back. Another difference between this funeral and the ones Sakinah has been to before is the lack of proper burial. Muslim mourners fully bury their dead, they don't leave it for other people to do. In doing this, they know exactly when the soul leaves the earth. As the mourners leave Anthony's graveside, Sakinah feels bad for him. He has to wait for the gravediggers to amble over and finish sending him on his way.

There is a wake being held in a community centre nearby. Much to Sakinah's relief, Daniel expresses his desire to skip it entirely. Before heading home, Daniel takes her over to



where the priest is standing at the side of the graveyard. He shakes the priest's hand before gesturing to Sakinah.

'Father Tom, I would like you to meet my wife, Sakinah,' Daniel says.

'It is good to see you, Jon,' Father Tom smiles, his wrinkles emphasising the gesture. 'I have missed your father and it is a true tragedy that I will not get a chance to speak with him again. Although, it is good to see you speaking again. You were mute when I last saw you.'

'Mute?' Sakinah asks.

'It was when I was young,' Daniel says dismissively.

'It's stuck with me all these years,' Father Tom says. 'I remember how scared you looked when you turned up here. I've always wondered what had happened to you to make you look like that.'

'I was upset,' Daniel says quickly. 'There was stuff going on with my father. Divorce stuff. I was a kid. I didn't understand what was going on. I didn't understand what happened to me. I mean, no one did. No one knows anything about anything. And it was ages ago. Best not to dwell on these things. Life's great mysteries, you know?'

Sakinah and Father Tom both look at Daniel. They exchange a look of mutual concern, and Sakinah shrugs as subtly as possible. Father Tom raises a hand as though to place it on Daniel's shoulder before thinking better of it.

'It was good to see you again, Jon,' Father Tom smiles sadly. 'I am truly sorry for your loss.'

The old man shuffles off, back into the confines of the church. Sakinah looks at Daniel, who is furiously chewing his thumbnail.

'Do you want to tell me why you just lost it at a priest?' Sakinah asks.

‘I didn’t lose it,’ Daniel snaps before composing himself. ‘It’s a stressful enough day without everyone bringing up the past all the time. I didn’t need Ben to pull that nonsense back in the church, and I didn’t need Father Tom, of all people, sticking his nose into my business, and I don’t need you asking me a whole load of questions right now.’

‘Do you want to do this here?’ Sakinah asks. ‘I have been nothing but patient with you, but I am not going to let you talk to me like that. I get that this is a stressful time for you, but it’s pretty stressful for me too, because of everything you’ve been keeping from me.’

‘I was protecting you. Tell me, honestly, after spending even the briefest amount of time with Ben, that you are not grateful for what I have done for you? For our family?’

‘I could have at least known he existed.’

‘Why? Why would it have mattered?’

‘Because you lied to me,’ Sakinah shouts, her voice only dropping in volume when she feels people looking over at her. ‘You lied to me. I trusted you.’

‘Sakinah,’ Daniel begins.

Sakinah raises a hand to stop him. She shakes her head, takes the pushchair, and walks away. She doesn’t want to cause a scene in a graveyard of all places. Daniel doesn’t follow, which is for the best because Sakinah needs a break. She considers going to the wake and immersing herself in the crowd, but the thought of having to interact with any of Daniel’s relatives feels exhausting. Instead, she sits down on a bench and grabs the bag of chips from the bottom of the pushchair. Musa is awake and restless. She has to rock the pushchair with one of her hands while the other feeds herself a steady flow of chips. They still taste bad, worse now they’re cold, but Sakinah finds that eating helps take her mind off everything.

Under different circumstances, this would actually be a peaceful place to sit. Unlike the cramped graveyard at the front of the church, this graveyard is so wide open that it could easily be mistaken for a regular park were it not for the huddle of gravestones in one corner.

The church must be on a hill because the graveyard has a view of fields sweeping out for miles. Sakinah can see the motorway in one direction and a railway in the other. Her gaze drifts back to where they held the service for Anthony. The gravediggers are shovelling the earth in and, very soon, Anthony's soul will be gone for the rest of time.

'Lovely weather for it,' Ben says plonking himself down on the bench beside her.

Sakinah rolls her eyes as Ben helps himself to a chip.

'You shouldn't have done what you did,' Sakinah says, not looking at Ben.

'Someone has to keep him on his toes,' Ben replies. 'Besides, everyone's currently saying what a lovely eulogy he gave. Has he told you everything yet?'

After a few seconds of silence, Ben laughs. It isn't the booming sound from when he was in her flat, but a harsher sound, without humour.

'Jesus, you really don't know what you've got yourself involved in,' Ben mutters, shaking his head.

'Then enlighten me. Drop all the cryptic nonsense and tell me what your deal is?'

Ben takes another chip and chews on it. He taps his fingers on the armrest of the bench in the same way she has seen Daniel do countless times.

'Has he told you much about our mum?' Ben asks.

'He said that things were strained,' Sakinah replies. 'He told me that she struggled after the divorce.'

'He tell you how she died?'

'She fell down the stairs and hit her head.'

'Fell?'

'Yes, fell,' Sakinah replies, feeling the need to defend her husband. 'And then you and your dad got the wrong idea and buried her in the woods.'

Helping himself to another handful of chips, Ben shakes his head.

‘It wasn’t a case of getting the wrong idea,’ Ben says, through a mouthful of chip. ‘I saw it all. I heard it all. You should have been there. Jon comes home, completely off his face, and Mum’s waiting for him. He’d been out for hours and hours. It was something like four in the morning. Anyway, she’s waiting there because she’s worried about him, and he goes for her. Properly shouting at her. Giving her a hard time. Says someone’s died, and that’s why he was out so late. Then he starts with all this stuff about the past and how our mum made his life difficult.’

‘That’s not true and you know it,’ Daniel says from behind the bench. ‘That’s not how it happened.’

Sakinah looks round. He is glaring at Ben with more hatred than she ever knew him to possess. Ben turns and flashes him a grin.

‘We’re not living in your fantasy land anymore, Jon,’ Ben smirks. ‘It’s about time your lovely wife knew what kind of person you are.’

‘She knows who I am,’ Daniel says, his voice low. ‘I will tell her my story in my own time. You need to shut up and go to the wake.’

Ben gets to his feet, taking another chip on the way. Sakinah too gets to her feet to rock the pushchair with more vigour as the rising tension is unsettling Musa.

‘Your story?’ Ben laughs. ‘It’s not *your* story, Jon. It’s *our* story. Mine and yours. You see, you can spin whatever bullshit you want about your childhood, but I was there. I saw it. And I need to know that you aren’t going to go around badmouthing our mother when all she ever did was try and give you a good life.’

‘A good life?’ Daniel cries. ‘You think every time she hit me, she was trying to give me a good life? Every time she made me feel worthless, that was supposed to help me? Every time she...’

Daniel stops talking and clenches his fists. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and opens them again.

‘I am asking you, Ben, if you have any respect left for me, to leave me alone. Go and live your life and I will do the same.’

‘Live my life?’ Ben scoffs. ‘What life do I have to live? I have no life, thanks to you. You’ve made me an orphan.’

‘You’re too old to think of yourself as an orphan, for God’s sake,’ Daniel replies.

‘You think I’m only an orphan now? You took our parents from us. Dad went to jail for you. You think he was a good source of support when he was behind bars? And as for Mum... you never could stand how close I was with her, and you had to go and take her from me.’

‘I didn’t take her from you.’

‘You pushed her down the stairs,’ Ben shouts. ‘You killed her. You killed her and you got Dad to take the blame for it.’

Both men fall silent, leaving Sakinah to process what she is hearing. More worrying than Ben’s accusations is the way that Daniel does nothing to defend himself. The man standing in her husband’s place is someone Sakinah barely recognises. It is less of a person, more of a thing radiating anger and hatred. He takes a step towards Ben and, despite them being practically the same height, somehow towers over him.

‘I told you to stop talking,’ Daniel whispers.

‘Or what?’ Ben says, leaning in close to Daniel so that their faces nearly touch. ‘What are you going to do, big man?’

Daniel raises a fist. It’s not much, but it’s enough to get Ben to flinch back. Sakinah may not know their relationship, but she can understand the power dynamics at play. Ben has conceded some ground that will be difficult to regain.

‘You were always all talk,’ Daniel sneers. ‘It’s why you never made anything of your life.’

‘I never made anything of my life because of what you did,’ Ben protests in a way that sounds a lot like a child who has been refused a second helping of ice cream. ‘You killed our mum, framed our dad, took your half of the inheritance and left me to rot in that money pit of a house. I have spent years trying to stay afloat with all these bills and repairs and everything. I never got to go and live a life like you. You don’t even deserve it. You’re the messed up one. You always have been.’

Daniel looks at his brother for a few seconds longer before shaking his head and walking away.

‘We’re leaving,’ he says to Sakinah.

‘Daniel?’ Sakinah says uncertainly. ‘Is it true?’

Daniel stops walking.

‘Don’t let him ruin everything,’ Daniel says, his voice hollow. ‘I am going to tell you everything. You don’t need to listen to hi—’

‘Is it true?’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Is it true?’

Daniel looks at her and says nothing.

‘See?’ Ben says. ‘I told you he’s not the man you thought he was. It’s not fair that he gets everything, while I get stuck with nothing.’

‘You are nothing,’ Daniel says coldly. ‘You always have been. You deserve nothing more.’

He walks away again, this time without any hesitation. Sakinah is panicked by everything she’s witnessed.

‘You need to leave us alone,’ Sakinah snaps at Ben. ‘We were fine before you came along.’

‘Don’t worry, love,’ Ben says bitterly. ‘I’m taking my share of Dad’s inheritance, selling the house and moving as far away from this shithole as possible. I’d better do it quick because, from the look on his face, Jon will have me down the stairs next.’

Sakinah does not attempt to defend Daniel. She knows nothing will convince Ben of her husband’s innocence. In fact, she is barely convinced of it herself. But she loves Daniel, and she wants him to explain. He can settle things; she is sure of it.

They don’t talk on the way home. They don’t talk that evening as they have dinner. They don’t talk while they put Musa to bed. Only then, in the dark, cold flat, with no other distractions, does Sakinah finally sit down with her husband and ask the thing that has been burning inside her since the graveyard.

‘Tell me everything,’ she demands for the thousandth time. ‘If there is more to this, then I want to know.’

‘You won’t like it,’ Daniel warns. ‘If you knew the real me, you’d leave.’

‘Knowing that I’m married to a murderer is putting me in that position already,’ Sakinah admits. ‘Save our marriage. Fix this. Be honest with me. Let me decide knowing everything there is to know about you. You owe me this, at least.’

Daniel nods. He takes a few minutes to gather his thoughts, then he begins.

‘When I discovered I was going to be a father, I wondered, among other things, what our child’s first memory would be...’

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*



WARNING

CRITICAL ERROR

SAVE DATA FOR FILE ONE CANNOT BE LOCATED

A NEW FILE MAY BE CREATED

THE GAME CANNOT BE SAVED

It was six years before I saw my father again. The tangled knot of emotion in my stomach settled into a dull ache that I learned to live with. My father sent me a letter every month, but there was no obligation to see him anymore. The shadow of what had happened during the divorce proceedings hung over us all, our happiness ready to end at a moment's notice. And we were happy. For the first time in my life, I felt as though I could begin to relax. My mother actually kept to her word and did tone down her anger to the point where her punishments became few and far between. I passed the rest of my time in First School without much issue and found my way through a fairly uneventful Middle School.

It was during those years that I was able to be closer to Franklyn and gradually learned to tolerate the presence of other people in our friendship group. I also became fascinated by his dog. Or rather dogs. And thus by the notion of metamorphosis.

When my father did make an appearance, six years later, I had high hopes for him in terms of metamorphosis, and I wasn't altogether disappointed. My mother, on the other hand, reacted to my father's reappearance as though Satan himself had emerged and manifested at her front door. She ordered Ben and me to wait in the living room while she handled the situation. Ben was in high school by then, and I was nearing the end of my time in middle school. I felt that we were both in a relatively good position to handle whatever new issues were being thrown our way. Ben had grown to be the height of our father, which certainly made our father less intimidating. I had already grown taller than my mother and, seeing my father, I realised I was nearly the same height as him as well. In all of my memories, he had been a tall, imposing figure. On that day, he looked old and small.

I had an idea why he had arrived. Unlike Ben who dutifully deposited his letters, unopened, in the recycling bin, I was curious enough about my father's life to give my letters a read. They were repetitive but comforting. He always wrote a brief description of how his job in an insurance firm was going, before making references to cartoons that he guessed I was watching. The more interesting parts of the letters were details about the lives of my grandparents. He wrote at length about how he was helping them out in their bungalow, cutting wood for their fire, cleaning the caravan for their holidays, and trimming the hedges for them. He had also begun detailing the steady decline in my grandfather's health, following a diagnosis of cancer. That had been part of the narrative for the last year and, although he was careful to not be too pessimistic, it was clear from the way my father wrote that my grandfather's time was running out.

Ben and I strategically positioned ourselves in the living room so we could hear what was being said at the front door. We equipped ourselves with random books from the shelves that we could pretend to read if we were caught. Sure enough, my father informed my mother about the death of his father. The funeral was scheduled for the following week and my father was wondering if Ben and I could attend. My mother said she would have to check with us, which led to my father offering to ask us himself. I stepped into the hallway, a copy of the first Harry Potter book still in hand, and declared that I would be happy to go.

'Hello, son,' said my father, in a way that made it seem as though he could hardly believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. 'You've grown so much.'

'They have school,' my mother protested.

'I can miss one day,' I replied.

'It wouldn't even have to be a full day,' my father interjected. 'It's in the afternoon. They could still make the morning classes.'

Ben elected to saunter out of the living room at this moment. It was there, standing between our parents once more, that we could decide which way our futures were going to go. I could already feel the knot in my stomach begin to unravel, as hope blossomed in my father's eyes. The glare of my mother did not seem as intimidating since I had become taller than her. She had not enacted her harshest punishments in years, relegated slaps to only special occasions, and had even been limiting the frequency with which she used her words as weapons. I felt freer than I had before.

'I didn't really know him well,' Ben said. 'I reckon I'll pass.'

My mother flashed him a little smile before staring at me.

'What day is it?' I asked.

'Wednesday.'

'It's only PE in the afternoon on a Wednesday,' I said. 'I'm sure I'll be fine missing PE. It's nothing important.'

'I can't stop you from going,' my mother said in the same tone as she had always claimed powerlessness regarding the situation with my father. 'It's your decision.'

That last addition was a warning. I did not heed the warning. My father gave me the information I needed, promised to pick me up from school, and then went on his way. My mother slapped me across the face the moment his car had disappeared from view. The ring she always wore cut my cheek and I could feel the sting of the air on the open wound.

‘You spoilt, ungrateful brat,’ she snapped. ‘After everything I’ve done for you. Every sacrifice I’ve made. You’re going to let him walk back into our lives like nothing has happened? You should consider yourself damn lucky I don’t kick you out of this house right now. If you love him so much, maybe you should go and live with him.’

It was as though she had been holding back for years. Abuse poured out of her mouth. It did not stop for hours and managed to bleed into the next day. When she wasn’t shouting, she was glaring at me with enough intensity to bore through my flesh and see into my soul. Ben started sulking around the house, questioning why I had to go and ruin everything. It was a question I had started to ask myself. I was prepared to not go to the funeral out of a desire to keep some shred of the new life I had found for myself.

When the day came, however, and my father arrived at the school, I got into his car without question. There were some awkward moments during the day, but, by the end of it, I was sure enough of my father’s good intentions to accept his invitation to visit him at his home.

To no small amount of grief from my mother, I began to visit my father regularly. I also made a point of visiting my grandmother at least once a month as well. The visits to my father’s home became a regular occurrence on a Friday evening, with him even taking me to his pub quiz once a month when it happened to be on a Friday. The first time I ever won a small amount of money from a quiz was the first time that Ben showed any interest in seeing our father. I suspect my mother only approved on the condition that Ben act as a spy. Still, Ben tagging along meant that my mother no longer ignored me for the rest of the Friday evening when I came back from my father’s house.

It didn't take long for what was once impossible to become routine. The weeks turned to months, which turned to years. Our summer holidays featured a week where we would accompany my father on holiday in the caravan that was the same age as me. My father was keen to share his newfound love of hiking with us. Ben usually sulked around the caravan park, whereas I eagerly joined my father on his walks. Across the years, we walked the mountains of the Lake District, the Peak District and Snowdonia. My father was a different man on those hikes. He relaxed and seemed to finally find peace within himself. I asked him about it on the last holiday we went on together in the summer of 2012. We were atop Scafell Pike in the Lake District, beautiful vistas sweeping out around us. Ben was still some ways below, struggling his way up the inclines, giving my father and me a chance to talk while we waited for him. My father gestured to the world in which we found ourselves and smiled at me.

'I found God,' he said. 'I mean, I know I always went to church, but this is a whole other level. When I lost you guys, I had a lot of time alone with my own thoughts. There were days when that was awful, but there were days when it was really helpful. I got into hiking as a way to keep fit and pass the time, but I found something more. I found the beauty of God's creation. The world is a tapestry that shows how much everything has changed over time. Some of these mountains and valleys were forged by glaciers in a long-ago time. Some of them were forged from slate mines. Either way, they are all beautiful. The way the sunlight shines down across the landscape, blocked in places by clouds and radiant in others, the way some mountain tops are visible and some shrouded in fog, that's all kind of like life. If we could see our lives like that, we wouldn't despair at the darkness because we would know that the clouds will eventually pass, and we'll be standing in the sun.'

He placed one hand on my shoulder, the other still firmly holding his two hiking sticks. I tensed when he did this. Since reconnecting with him, we had not had much physical contact and I was still adjusting to his presence in my life. I thought about telling him how little faith I had had since the divorce, but the sincerity of his words stopped me; I did not want to disappoint him.

'I am glad the clouds moved on from my life so that you could be here with me now,' he said. 'I'd do anything for you, son. Now we're together again, there is nothing I wouldn't do for you. If you ever need to tell me anything, you can.'

That conversation was why, months later, when I saw my mother lying at the bottom of the stairs, all I could think to do was call him. I should have stayed and stopped him ruining his life, but by the time he got to the house, I was already gone. The next time I properly spoke to him was just before his sentencing. He told me what he had done and how Ben had helped him do it. He said that neither of them wanted me to lose out anymore thanks to my mother and that I was free to live the rest of my life. I knew that was his reasoning for it, but I would never understand what had compelled Ben to help him.

I wanted to shout at the police and tell them everything that had happened, everything that I knew, but it was too late. He had already confessed and he had disposed of a body. He was already a criminal and incriminating myself would serve no purpose.

I couldn't handle it. The memories of what had happened. The guilt of letting him go down for it. The smug way Ben held himself as he inherited the house. None of it. I stayed with my grandparents while they would have me and then I left for university, which is where I met you.

And I thought, I honestly thought, that I would never have to look back. That I could forget about it all. That I could start again, a new name, a new life. But Ben made sure that wouldn't happen. I know that what he said to you is a lot, but you need to understand what really happened. I need to tell you about that night. The night the world really ended. The night my mother died.



## File One Successfully Loaded

Jon realised it may not have been the wisest choice to have only mentioned the party to his mother the night before he was due to go, but the ideal time to have mentioned it to her would have been never. He sat in the armchair, she and Ben sat on the sofa opposite, and he pitched the idea to her in the best way he could think of.

‘It’s a good opportunity for me to interact with my peers in one big evening, so I’m not distracted in the build-up to the exams,’ Jon said, hoping his flimsy excuse would make sense.

‘Are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes?’ Jon’s mother asked.

‘I knew people who did the same,’ Ben interjected. ‘They would see everyone in one go and then live like hermits after that. My mate Keith did that.’

‘Keith?’

‘The one that got into Oxford.’

‘And you’re sure you’re not going to try and skive off your work after this?’ she asked, her fingernails tapping her mug of tea.

‘I will leave this house only for school and whatever chores or errands would make your life easier, Mother.’

‘Don’t get cheeky,’ Jon’s mother snapped. ‘You’re not too old for a slap.’

Jon looked down. He did not want to meet her gaze, for fear of provoking her. She was like one of the Endermen in Minecraft, hostile if looked at directly. A tense moment passed, punctuated only by the ticking of the cuckoo clock on the wall. As Jon stared at the

faded red carpet, he thought of Roxanne's smile, and that gave him the strength to endure the wait while his mother deliberated his fate.

'You can go,' she decided. 'But you are to be home no later than midnight and I don't want to catch wind of you drinking any alcohol, do you understand?'

Jon thanked his mother out loud, and internally thanked Ben.

It was hard to concentrate in school the next day. Thankfully, there was nothing of academic value going on. It would have been kind of the school to alert the pupils to that fact, so they would have known not to bother turning up. It only dawned on Jon that there was nothing of note happening when the whole of double English was devoted to a Christmas themed quiz. As the hours crawled by, Jon did not know which outcome would be worse: either the world would end or he would have to go to a party and try to impress the girl he loved enough to break up a relationship. Around lunchtime, Jon was hoping the Mayans were onto something.

Roxanne was friendly enough with Jon, but he had been hoping that the previous evening might have changed something. Andrew's arm still snaked around her at every opportunity, even when he was leaving her out of the conversation. Towards the end of lunch, when she had grown tired of hearing about the upcoming release of *Bioshock: Infinite* Roxanne wrestled the conversation towards a discussion of that night's party.

'I'm going to be wearing my finest clothes,' Andrew declared, with a wave of his arms. 'You will all have the honour of basking in my presence.'

'I don't think I have anything that'll look as good as your clothes,' Franklyn mumbled, rubbing a spot on the table. 'I've got one pair of jeans that Bernie hasn't eaten yet. I'll probably just wear them.'

'And I'm sure you'll look very handsome in them,' Andrew laughed, putting his arm around Franklyn.

‘What are you, his mother?’ Jon asked. ‘Is he your beautiful little boy?’

‘He is my dear son,’ Andrew said with mock solemnity. ‘And he has grown into a fine young man.’

When the school day was eventually over, Jon headed home as quickly as possible. He knew he would be seeing his friends again at the party, and wanted to give himself as much time to get ready as he could. Besides, there was always a chance that his mother would be trying to sabotage the evening by giving him an endless list of chores. The earlier he was home, the sooner he could clear the evening of any potential problems. He was right, and his mother expected him to Hoover the house, put on a load of laundry, and do the ironing, all so he could prove himself responsible enough to be trusted to go to a party. If she had expected these tasks to take a long time, she was mistaken. The nervous energy that pulsed through Jon allowed him to make quick work of the chores, freeing up the rest of the evening.

Jon dressed in his best shirt and second-best jeans, freshly ironed by himself, and allowed himself to get excited. It was his first real party, a taste of the adult world. He had been hearing tales of Freshers Week from every person who came in to talk about university, and that night’s party seemed like a sample of the buffet that awaited him the following autumn. His mood was brightening to the point where even his mother’s look of revulsion could not dampen his spirits.

‘How much deodorant have you got on?’ she asked when Jon came downstairs. ‘One can or two?’

Jon gave his armpit a sniff. It was a bit strong, but he was terrified of smelling of sweat.

‘Just one spray,’ Jon replied, now worried the deodorant was a worse option than the original risk of body odour.

‘Make sure you wear a coat, otherwise you’ll catch your death out there,’ Jon’s mother instructed. ‘And don’t stay out all night. I know what you’re like. Think you’re too good for this place. You always have. Always looking for a better offer.’

Jon thought of Christmas lights and burning milk.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘When you were young, you were always complaining about not living with your father,’ his mother said. ‘Never appreciated what I did for you. Then you got these big ideas about university. Now you’re wasting time with parties. You’re the type of person to waste every kind of chance that life gives you. You’ve never suffered, that’s why. I’ve sheltered you too much from the realities of the world. But I’m telling you, it’s a tough world out there. One day, you’ll understand.’

Jon’s pulse calmed. He had not realised how quickly his heart had been beating. That night had been on his mind ever since he had made serious plans to go to university. There was nothing to it though, nothing bad had happened. His mother was right, wasn’t she? As a precaution, he had never slept anywhere besides one of his parent’s houses or his nan’s house after that night. But nothing had happened. It didn’t make sense for him to be tense. He had not even stayed out late since he was a child. He had lived like Cinderella for so long, that he was sure he was letting the excitement of staying out to midnight get the better of him.

Straightening a bit of tinsel that looped around the Christmas tree, Jon tried to keep his mind focused on the positives. He was going to a party. Roxanne would be there. He would help her with whatever she needed. Everything would be fine.

‘Are you going to stand there cluttering my living room all night?’ Jon’s mother asked. ‘It’s nearly time for *Eastenders*.’

A part of Jon was sad to miss that evening's *Eastenders* but he knew some things were more important than the daily goings-on of Phil Mitchell and the gang. Besides, iPlayer existed, and he would be sure to watch it later.

'Hope you have a lovely evening, Mother,' Jon said, without really knowing why.

The oddity of his comment was further highlighted by the questioning look Jon's mother gave him as he headed out the door. Wrapped up against the cold, Jon walked along the streets of Oxbow. The hotel where the party was being held was the same one, on the outskirts of town, as where that millennium party had been held, when Jon was four. Oxbow was a small place and the difference between the outskirts and the main body of the town wasn't enormous.

As he walked, Jon tried to appreciate the Christmas lights he passed. Granted, they were tacky, gaudy displays of capitalist avarice, but Christmas was supposed to have something deeper. There was a warmth he could remember, very dimly, from those Christmases they had celebrated as a family. He remembered Father Tom talking about Jesus while none of the children in the congregation listened; all of them desperate to get home to unwrap their presents. Then there had been the Christmas after his father had left. Jon had never truly forgiven Santa Claus for what happened, and the parade of Christmas lights only threatened to draw him back to that time.

The walk only took twenty minutes. Jon was a fast walker and the need to keep himself warm added additional speed to his movement. As with much of Oxbow, the way to the hotel was tucked away behind residential streets. Jon had studied the route on Google Maps like a general planning an ambitious skirmish before printing out a step-by-step guide to ensure he would not get lost. On every new street, Jon ducked under a streetlight and consulted his directions.

There was a single road that wove its way through the hotel's grounds, past a frozen lake, and to the main hotel building, which was larger and grander than Jon remembered it.

Once there, Jon was overwhelmed by how out of place he felt. The hotel was full of people, none of whom he knew. He felt incredibly young in the crowded foyer of middle-aged guests. None of them paid him any attention and continued chatting among themselves. There was a coat check with an attendant who mindlessly took Jon's winter gear and handed him a raffle ticket.

'What are the prizes?' he asked.

The attendant rolled his eyes as he attached a corresponding ticket to the lapel of Jon's coat. Jon nodded good naturedly at the attendant, but the attendant had already moved onto the next patron. Shoving the ticket into his pocket alongside his phone, Jon made his way into one of the function rooms of the hotel. Jon had never seen so many ginger people in his life. There was no doubt that the room was populated by Andrew's relatives and it had the same air to it as a Weasley family reunion. Nestled in the sea of older faces was Roxanne who was sitting alone at a table. After a quick glance to check that it wasn't some sort of elaborate trap, he approached the table. Roxanne brightened when she saw Jon. She looked radiant, an oasis of beauty in the desert of unfamiliarity. Roxanne wore an emerald dress that went to below her knees. It was a beautiful dress.

Jon sat down beside her. He sat close, partly to be next to her, but mostly so that he would be able to hear her talk over the loud chatter of adults and the even louder music that swelled through the room. She was sipping from a drink that looked appealing to Jon. It was a dark brown colour and it seemed to be carbonated in some way. There was a sweetness in the air, which could have been the drink, or could have been Roxanne's perfume.

'Looks good,' Jon said, pointing at the drink. 'What do they call it?'

'Coke,' Roxanne replied. 'I want to pace myself a bit.'

‘Smart idea,’ Jon said, idly playing with a coaster.

Roxanne took another sip of her drink. She looked around in the same way Jon had when he had approached the table. Satisfied, Roxanne leaned closer to Jon.

‘The plan is off,’ she said as quietly as she could.

A surge of guilt rushed through Jon. His mind raced with thoughts of how he had got things wrong and how he must have upset Roxanne in some way. He thought back to their conversation the previous night and tried to remember every word he had said to see if he could identify the offending phrase.

‘Don’t worry,’ Roxanne said, placing a hand on his arm. ‘You haven’t done anything wrong. Our chat last night got me thinking. I shouldn’t be letting anyone hold me back in any way. Andrew isn’t acting how he should, and I need to talk to him about it. Sneaking around and trying to make him feel bad isn’t going to help anything. So, I’m going to talk to him whenever I happen to get him alone for a moment and see if I can’t fix things with him.’

‘I helped push you in the right direction?’ Jon asked, still not believing he had done nothing wrong.

‘You sure did,’ Roxanne beamed. ‘But I am still going to need your help. I’m going to need you to distract Franklyn long enough for me to have a chat with Andrew.’

‘I can run interference, for sure.’

‘You can do what now?’

‘Run interference.’

Roxanne put her face in her hands and let out a long sigh.

‘Jesus, how did I get stuck with you nerds?’ she sighed. ‘I must have been really bad in a past life, and this is my karmic punishment.’

She put her hands back on the table, took a swig of Coke, and looked at Jon.

‘It would be great if you could ‘run interference’ on Franklyn,’ she said in a way that sounded like her vocal chords were rebelling against the words.

‘Ten-four,’ Jon said, doing a mock salute.

Roxanne looked at him and shook her head.

‘You’re some kind of military nerd as well?’ she asked.

‘It’s what they do on TV,’ Jon explained. ‘And in games and things. Soldiers “run interference” and they go “ten-four”, and they get shit done.’

‘I sometimes forget you’re as bad as Franklyn,’ Roxanne said before letting out an exasperated breath. ‘What even is my life?’

Andrew laughed as he appeared out of thin air behind Roxanne.

‘Improved by my presence, I hope,’ he grinned.

Roxanne jumped at Andrew’s sudden appearance. She moved away from Jon in a way that would have suited the original plan perfectly. It caught Andrew’s attention and he tilted his head slightly.

‘What are you guys talking about?’

‘Pokémon,’ Jon blurted out.

‘Cartoons,’ Roxanne said at the same time.

‘Pokémon cartoons,’ Jon said, consolidating the answers. ‘Did you know that Roxanne used to be an avid watcher of the Pokémon anime?’

Franklyn appeared with a sigh, somehow pulling the same trick as Andrew.

‘Weren’t we all?’ he said, shaking his head with a grave seriousness. ‘Where did you lose interest? For me, it was in *Pokémon Advance* when they spent all that time in the Petalburg Woods.’

‘It’s only like four episodes, dude,’ Andrew said.

‘But it felt like twenty,’ Franklyn protested. ‘And that is the problem.’



The secret conversation forgotten, Franklyn and Andrew took their seat. They both had drinks that Jon suspected were stronger than Coke, but he didn't want to risk embarrassment by asking what they were. Jon feared his ruse may have worked too well, for the debate over the quality of the various seasons of Pokémon anime continued raging. Roxanne steadily drank her Coke, feebly smiling whenever Andrew remembered her existence. Jon looked at her and tried to offer a reassuring smile. This too was noticed by Andrew, who looked at Jon's lack of beverage with horror.

'We need to get some booze into you, my guy,' Andrew said decisively. 'What do you want to start with?'

'I have no idea,' Jon said. 'I don't know the first thing about alcohol. You can be my guide.'

A wide grin spread across Andrew's face.

'I will not disappoint you, my brother,' he beamed. 'You are in safe hands.'

Andrew thought for a second, then triumphantly drummed on the table. With a grin, he got up and headed to the bar. Seeing her opportunity, Roxanne followed, leaving Jon and Franklyn alone.

'How long has it been since the two of us have hung out together?' Jon asked.

'Too long,' Franklyn said, after pondering the question for a bit. 'Have you got the new Pokémon games yet?'

'Black and White Two? Not yet. My mother likes to wait for Christmas with these things. You got them already?'

'You know it,' Franklyn smiled. 'Already beat Black Two and I'm thinking about doing a Nuzlocke of White Two.'

'That's that weird challenge thing, right?'

'It's fun,' Franklyn shrugged. 'Or it will be, once I've planned out all my encounters.'

Jon blew out a breath and leaned back in his chair.

‘I’d never have the time or the patience for anything like that,’ he said. ‘Let me know how it goes.’

Jon looked over to the bar. Roxanne was saying something to Andrew, and Jon wondered if it was the fated conversation. Andrew was smiling. Jon reckoned it must have been going well, although Andrew was often smiling, regardless of what was going on in his head; it could have meant anything.

‘Here’s a picture of my dog,’ Franklyn said, holding up his phone. ‘It looks like a demon. Look how its eyes are glowing. I didn’t know the flash was on.’

A quick look at Franklyn’s phone confirmed the dog did indeed look demonic. Franklyn withdrew his phone and stared at it intently. He sipped his drink and kept looking nervously at Jon.

‘You good there, chief?’ Jon asked.

Franklyn sighed and put his phone on the table.

‘You know how we’ve known each other forever?’ Franklyn said.

‘I dimly recall something about that, yes,’ Jon said.

‘You’d have my back, wouldn’t you? If... if I needed help. You’d have my back, right?’

‘Of course,’ Jon said, in what he hoped was his most reassuring tone. ‘Are you in some kind of trouble?’

Once more demonstrating his ability to manifest at the worst possible moments, Andrew returned to the table. He slammed down a glass in front of Jon and pointed at it as though the gesture could have been missed.

‘Get that down you,’ Andrew said, slapping Jon on the back.

When Andrew returned to his seat, Jon caught a whiff of the aftershave Andrew was wearing. There was something familiar about the scent.

He has his hands on my shoulders to stop me from falling over. My head is spinning, and my eyes keep drooping and all I can smell is his aftershave and the lingering smell of that milk.

Andrew sat down and offered a toast. Jon blinked and raised his glass. He hadn't caught the words of the toast but assumed it was something generic enough that he could drink to it without much trouble. He wanted to ask Roxanne about how her conversation had gone and he wanted to follow up on Franklyn's strange comments, but Jon found no opportunity to do either. Andrew was dominating the conversation and everyone else had to go along with it. When Jon had finished his drink, Andrew sprang up to get him another one. This time, it was Franklyn who followed.

'This is going to cost me a fortune,' Jon lamented, looking at his empty glass.

'Open bar,' Roxanne explained. 'Andrew's family are, in case you hadn't noticed, kind of loaded.'

'That's something I can drink to,' Jon said, raising his empty glass.

Roxanne clinked her empty glass with his and smiled.

'How did it go?' Jon asked.

'We're going to have a talk later,' Roxanne said. 'Which gives me time to get a bit of liquid courage going.'

'Isn't this the kind of conversation you guys should have sober?'

'I'll make sure we're not completely out of it when we chat,' Roxanne said.

Jon looked around the room. With each passing minute, more of the partygoers were entering a state where they thought taking to the dancefloor was a good idea. Jon remembered

the millennium party he had gone to as a kid. He and Ben had torn up the dancefloor, dodging around the geriatric dancers and often receiving a stray elbow for their trouble.

The queue at the bar was shorter, and Andrew returned in much better time. Thus began an hour of talking and drinking in preparation for heading to the dancefloor. With a good amount of alcohol in his system, Jon found he was able to get that same carefree feeling he'd had as a child. Roxanne looked so alive on the dancefloor, her dark hair bouncing with her movement. Losing himself to the music, Jon was surprised when Andrew tapped him on the shoulder.

'We're sitting back down, mate,' he said. 'Absolutely exhausted.'

It was only when he was back at the table that Jon realised he was tired as well. His body ached, as muscles that had never been used in his sedentary lifestyle found themselves rudely awakened.

Andrew plied Jon with more drinks. He did tell Jon the names of each drink, but Jon paid little attention and forgot the names after a few sips of each beverage. It had been a mixed bag, with one of them being delightfully fruity, a few of them tasting like paint and another being weirdly bland. This latest drink was something different. It had a burning texture that lingered in the mouth and throat after each swallow.

He brings me a mug of warm milk, which burns my throat whenever I dare sip it, and tells me to wait while he phones my mother. I try to listen out for what he is saying, but he has vanished upstairs, and it isn't possible to hear his voice. I watch the flashing lights of the monster Christmas tree, which squats in the corner of the room and steadily drink my milk. I hear his feet on the stairs and Uncle Pete appears back in the room.

'Have you finished already?' he asks. 'You must have really liked it. I can get you more, if you want?'

I nod. Uncle Pete approaches me. He takes my hands for a few seconds before leaving with the empty mug. He returns with another mug of milk. This time, it smells stronger than before, and the burning is all I can taste. Tears spring up in my eyes as I force the liquid down my throat. Uncle Pete sits beside me on the sofa. His eyes are fixed on me. His lips move slightly as though they are constantly about to form words. His hand is on my thigh.

‘You really love that, don’t you,’ Andrew said.

Jon looked at the empty glass in his hand and at the other one on the table.

‘I think we’ve found your drink of choice,’ Andrew laughed.

Jon looked around. Everything seemed out of focus. The music was too loud and there were too many people. Someone dropped a glass and it shattered somewhere in the distance. He pushed himself to his feet and fought his way through the crowds. Everyone was looking at him. Everyone in the whole world could see him. Everyone knew what he was, what he had done. They could see it. There was no hiding it anymore.

‘You like it, don’t you?’ Uncle Pete says, his breathing getting faster and faster. ‘You’re a good boy and you like this.’

Jon stumbled out of the room and into the cold night air. He collapsed onto a bench and waited for the world to stop spinning. Only when he had vomited over his own shoes did it begin to right itself. His heart was beating so hard that he feared it may rupture. It was cold. He was hot. He shook and sweated. Nothing stopped the feeling that crawled up from within. He felt it, more acutely than normal, the taint at the core of his being. He started to scratch at his skin, desperate to get at the dirt that clung to his bones.

‘Had a few too many?’ Roxanne asked.

Her voice cut through the noise. Jon looked up at her, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and noticed the vomit at his feet. Roxanne stepped around it and sat beside him.

‘You did knock those last two back quite quickly,’ Roxanne said. ‘You’ve got to learn to pace yourself.’

Jon wanted to tell her everything that he was thinking, everything that he was feeling. Not just about Uncle Pete, but about her, and his mother and everything that had happened in his life. He would have told her everything if his voice box could be convinced to work. As stubbornly as it had been when he was a child, Jon’s voice box was on strike. Roxanne waited for him to reply, before putting her hand on his shoulder. Jon flinched away and Roxanne withdrew her hand.

‘That’s what I remember most about when we were kids,’ Roxanne said, softly. ‘I remember how quiet you were. All the boys in our class were loud all the time. They were always shouting and joking and making all sorts of noises. And then there was you. This little island of quiet in the middle of it all. I don’t think I’d ever heard you talk until that day in Mrs Bumble’s room.’

Roxanne laughed with the memory of it.

‘You fell out of your chair. Literally fell right out of your chair. It was like something out of *Chucklevision*. That always stuck with me.’

Jon looked at Roxanne. He could see her as she was in front of him but also as that wide-eyed little girl whose terrible pictures had helped him find his voice.

‘Did you get to talk to Andrew yet?’ Jon croaked, his throat sore for some reason.

‘Not yet. I was worried about you.’

‘I didn’t know you cared,’ Jon said.

Roxanne took his hand and he did not flinch away.

‘Of course, I care,’ she smiled.

She rummaged through the little handbag slung across her shoulder and produced a packet of Polos.

‘It’ll help you with the vomit taste,’ she explained, offering Jon a mint. ‘And the smell.’

He took the mint and popped it into his mouth. The presence of something solid helped give the world back some of its regular definition. Jon realised that, if he was shivering in the cold, Roxanne must have been at risk of catching pneumonia. He wished he had a jacket to offer her.

‘Sorry about your shoes,’ Roxanne sighed, looking down at the puddle of vomit. ‘Those things are goners.’

‘Shit,’ Jon said. ‘My mother is going to kill me.’

‘You might still be able to save them if you splash a bit of water on them,’ Roxanne suggested. ‘Or you could pretend you stepped in someone else’s vomit. She can’t tell you off for someone else’s actions, right?’

Jon thought about highlighting how little Roxanne knew about his mother, but decided against it. He chewed on the mint and looked down at his shoes. She was probably right. Maybe they could still be saved.

‘Thank you for sitting here with me,’ Jon smiled. ‘I’ve never really had anyone look out for me before.’

‘You’ve been a huge help to me. I wanted to pay back the favour. Everyone deserves a bit of kindness from time to time.’

‘You going to talk to Andrew?’

‘I am,’ Roxanne sighed. ‘That is, if you’re feeling better?’

‘You know me,’ Jon smiled weakly. ‘I’m feeling great.’

Roxanne gave Jon’s hand a squeeze before letting go. He watched her walk back towards the hotel until she was consumed by the light and noise of the building. Jon waited

on the bench for a minute longer. He wanted to make sure the whole world wasn't going to start spinning around again. He wanted to make sure that Uncle Pete was firmly in the past.

Shakily, Jon got to his feet. He stumbled, nearly falling onto the damp grass, but used the bench to steady himself. After a few shuddering breaths, Jon made his way back inside. The wall of heat that hit him when he entered the building made him feel nauseous again. Jon paused next to a helpfully placed pot plant and worked out whether he was going to be able to make it to the bathroom before emptying the contents of his stomach once again.

Weaving through the mingling partygoers, Jon managed to find his way to the bathroom. He stepped into the harsh bright lights and winced. The smell of aftershave filled the room and assailed Jon's senses. It was the same aftershave Andrew had been wearing, but the bathroom appeared empty. Jon considered the best way to clean his shoes. He grabbed a handful of toilet paper and ran it under the sink. Despite the classiness of the hotel, the toilet paper was cheap and started to dissolve as soon as it got wet. Fragments of paper sticking to his fingers, Jon made his way into one of the cubicles and began to wipe his shoes. It was a feat of acrobatics to lean against the cubicle wall and wipe his shoes with enough vigour that they would get clean.

The result was mediocre but at least some of the vomit had been removed. Jon left the cubicle and washed his hands. He looked at his shoes and considered giving it another go. A bang from one of the other cubicles caught Jon's attention. He had thought the bathroom was deserted. Jon's head was still fuzzy, and it took him a moment to realise he could hear the sound of heavy breathing coming from the cubicle. Jon wondered if someone was having a panic attack, but there was something disturbingly familiar about the sound.

His breathing gets heavier and heavier as my eyelids get heavier and heavier. There's a pressure in my bottom and a hand at the back of my neck, keeping my face pressed down into the bedsheets. The smell of him. Everything in this house



smells of him. That aftershave. The bottle is sitting on his bedside table. It catches the light of the lamp and sparkles in the orange glow.

Jon approached the cubicle door and considered knocking. He thought it might have been weird if someone was simply having a very difficult bowel movement. He crouched down to peek under the door. There were two pairs of feet attached to four legs visible underneath the door. There was another bang from within the cubicle. Jon didn't understand what was compelling him to keep moving, but he entered the cubicle next to the occupied one. He closed the toilet seat softly and stood upon it. From there he looked over the wall.

Uncle Pete guides me into the bedroom and points to a sheep-skin rug that is spread across the floor. The rug runs right up to the side of the king-sized bed and has a pair of beige slippers on it. Uncle Pete gives me instructions and it's a lot of effort to follow them. My eyes are unfocused, and my head feels heavy. The sheepskin rug is soft on my knees. I hear things more than I see them. The zip of Uncle Pete's trousers. The strange breathing he does as my mouth is filled with something that tastes disgusting. I want to move away but his fingers are locked in my hair.

Jon saw Andrew's face tilting up at him and the shock of it nearly caused him to fall off his toilet seat. Andrew's eyes were closed though, and he did not see Jon. Jon took another look and saw Franklyn kneeling before Andrew. His head was moving rhythmically and Andrew's fingers were in his hair.

His fingers are in my hair. They twist tighter as my eyelids droop more and more. Everything is black for a second and then the rug is gone and my face is on the bed. The smell of the aftershave fills my nose as my vision is filled with the floral bedding. There's that pressure and the breathing is getting faster and faster. All the while, Uncle Pete whispers words that I can barely hear.

'You're a good boy for doing this. This is what you want.'

Jon did not know what to do. He could not believe what he was seeing. Andrew was with Roxanne and Franklyn was supposed to be their friend. Why would Andrew betray Roxanne like that? Jon would never betray her in that way. It confirmed she should have been dating him the whole time. As much as Jon wanted to avoid hurting Roxanne, he knew she had to know the truth. Would she even believe him though?

'No one will believe you,' Uncle Pete says as he goes to open the front door. 'So be a good boy and don't say anything.'

Jon slipped out his phone and held it over his friends. He pressed to take a photo. The phone did not respond for a second and then it illuminated the cubicle with a blinding flash. All movement stopped in the cubicle as Jon quickly pulled his phone back. He looked at the screen but couldn't figure out which symbol denoted whether the flash was on. There was a rustle of fabric in the cubicle that alerted Jon to the fact that Andrew had seen the flash. Jon went for the bathroom door just as the cubicle door opened. He looked back to see Andrew appear. Andrew locked eyes with him.

Then Jon was out of the bathroom and back into the main bustle of the hotel. He looked behind him again to see Andrew walking quickly towards him. Both were having to dodge out of the way of merry adults, but Andrew was definitely gaining on Jon. Jon broke into a run that succeeded only in causing him to clatter into a member of staff who was carrying a tray of glasses. Jon tumbled to the ground and went to shout an apology. His voice failed him again. He silently cursed and scrambled back to his feet.

Hoping to avoid any more collisions, Jon sprinted out of the hotel doors. He did not know where to go. All he knew was that he had to alert Roxanne to what was going on. She deserved more than the treatment Andrew was giving her. Jon needed to find Roxanne but, when he'd last seen her, she'd gone to find Andrew. Clearly, she had not succeeded for

Andrew had been ensconced in the bathroom. Jon was wondering where to look for Roxanne when something hit him in the back. He was taken off his feet and crashed to the ground again. Something was on top of him, hands were on his clothes.

I only notice my underwear is off when I see it fly past my head and land on the bedside table next to me: the grinning face of Buzz Lightyear keeps me company, as Uncle Pete breathes and whispers and moans.

‘Where is it?’ Andrew snapped. ‘Give me your phone, you fucking pervert.’

Jon lashed out and caught him on the chin with a fist. Andrew rolled off and Jon tucked his arms and legs into his chest. Andrew had something in his hands. Jon recognised his phone even in the darkness.

‘You think anyone’s going to believe you without this?’ Andrew asked. ‘Let’s delete the picture and forget this whole thing ever happened. That sound good, chief?’

Jon looked at Andrew. He wanted to tell him that Roxanne was owed an explanation, but no sound came from his mouth. All he could do was extend a hand for the phone.

‘You going to delete it for me?’ Andrew asked.

For a second, it looked like Andrew was going to give him the phone. Then Andrew shook his head and held the device tightly to his chest. He got to his feet and Jon did the same.

‘Tell me your password and I’ll delete it,’ Andrew said, his voice shaking. ‘You can change it to something else afterwards. Or don’t. Why would I care about getting into your phone?’

Jon held out a hand and beckoned for Andrew to give him the device. He took a step forward and Andrew flinched back. Seeing an opportunity, Jon rushed forwards. Andrew reacted quicker than Jon was expecting. He danced backwards, keeping the phone out of

Jon's reach. Jon lunged again and received a fist to the stomach for his troubles. He doubled over and Andrew leaned in close.

'No one would believe you anyway,' Uncle Pete says, his hand on the door handle. 'Everyone would think you were such a nasty little boy for making something like that up. They'll know the truth about you. They'll know that you're dirty. Only dirty little boys do things like that. Best keep quiet, right?'

'Right?' Andrew repeated. 'Unlock the phone and all our troubles go away.'

Jon felt the world spinning again. Nothing seemed to be in focus. Jon looked up at Andrew who was jabbing at the phone with quick, angry movements. His mind clearing slightly, Jon made another attempt to grab the phone. Andrew skipped backwards. He moved past the reeds that lined the edge of the frozen lake and skidded along the ice. Jon went to follow him, but an unsettling creaking sound stopped him. Seeing Jon's hesitation, Andrew smiled. He held the phone out towards Jon.

'I will smash this straight through the fucking ice if you don't give me your fucking password,' Andrew shouted. 'You can stop being a pussy and get it, if you want, or you can give me your fucking password and we can forget the whole thing. We've got the raid of the Nether tomorrow and, if you don't give me your password, I'll burn all of your shit. All of that hard work will be gone. You'll be banned from the server and —'

Andrew was gone. Jon blinked and rubbed his eyes. He looked around to see if he could explain the vanishing act that Andrew had just pulled. He looked down at the frozen lake and saw the ice was cracked. Jon looked around. There was no one else nearby. He could see a few smokers near the hotel itself, but they would not have been able to see anything. He tried to call out to them. His mouth made no sound.

Jon's body crashed through the ice and into the freezing water beneath. All warmth was robbed from him as he fought to stop his body from going into shock. Jon steeled himself

against the cold before tearing through the water, pushing ice out of the way. He realised there was now no way to know exactly where Andrew had fallen in. He looked around desperately. It was possible that Andrew had surfaced and got out of the lake and Jon was risking his life for nothing. Something grabbed his leg and Jon was pulled under the water.

His lungs filled with water and for one blissful moment, Jon considered opening his mouth fully and letting the cold darkness take him. Then he noticed Andrew's hands clawing at his chest. Something was holding Andrew's foot in place on the bed of the lake. Jon pushed Andrew away and surfaced long enough to get a proper lungful of air before diving back down. He ignored Andrew's grabbing hands. Jon felt around in the darkness and his fingers grazed something metal. He pulled it and Andrew, discovering his freedom, surged up to the surface. Jon followed and gasped in air as soon as it hit his face.

Andrew thrashed around. He was at risk of pulling them both under again. Grabbing Andrew by the lapels of the suit jacket he had worn for some reason, Jon pulled them both through the water. He accidentally kicked Andrew a couple of times, but he didn't care. His own clothes were heavy enough and the added weight of Andrew was making swimming nearly impossible. As soon as they were close enough to the edge, Andrew pushed Jon away and scrambled out of the lake. Jon followed, crawling across the dirt, grateful for every gasp of air. Andrew lay on his back. He was gasping for air. He was alive though. Jon had done it.

'Inhaler,' Andrew gasped. 'Need my inhaler.'

Jon looked again at Andrew. His face was getting paler by the second, his breathing more laboured. Jon patted Andrew as though they were roleplaying airport security. In Andrew's left pocket was a mobile phone. Jon looked at it, it was Andrew's, and then continued searching. No inhaler.

'Jon,' Andrew wheezed. 'Please.'

Jon tried to turn on the phone. It wasn't responding. Too much water must have got in it. Jon looked over to the smokers at the hotel. There was little movement. They did not know anything was wrong. Jon went to get to his feet, but Andrew clutched his arm.

'Don't go. Don't leave me.'

I don't say anything as Uncle Pete clutches the back of my neck tighter. I don't want to upset him. When my mother gets angry, when she starts hitting, the more noise I make, the more she hits. I don't want this to hurt any more than it already does. If I'm quiet, I can ignore it. I'm tired enough. I close my eyes on the bedding. It's not real. It's a dream. It's just a dream. It's just a bad dream. It's not real. It's just a dream.

As if trapped in a bad dream, Jon opened his mouth to call out and no sound emerged. He understood his mother's frustrations with him. He wanted to hit himself again and again until he could convince his vocal cords to start working. Andrew had stopped talking. His grip on Jon loosened and this provided Jon with the opportunity to leave him where he was. He ran towards the hotel, waving his arms as he went. As he approached the hotel, Roxanne appeared through the door. She smiled when she saw Jon but the look changed to one of confusion when she saw the wetness of his clothes and the panic in his eyes.

'Jon? What's wrong?'

'Andrew,' Jon croaked, surprising himself. 'Get help.'

Roxanne rushed to the nearest group of smokers and got their attention. Jon led the way back to where he had left Andrew. When he had left, Andrew had been wheezing. Upon Jon's return, Andrew was motionless. Roxanne screamed and rushed to Andrew's side. One of the smokers, a large man who looked to be in his fifties, knelt beside Andrew and put his ear to Andrew's mouth.

'Call an ambulance,' the man shouted, before beginning CPR.

Roxanne cried and Jon stood and watched. As the minutes passed, more people emerged from the hotel. Someone brought Jon's coat, someone else put a blanket around Jon's shoulders, but he did not know who did it or when they did so.

'What happened?' Roxanne asked him, through tears. 'What happened?'

'Fell in,' Jon whispered. 'I pulled him out.'

The man kept doing CPR, even when Andrew's parents appeared. The noise and the chaos grew, and Jon felt himself detach from it all. It was happening to someone else. He was in another realm entirely. He saw paramedics arrive. He saw Andrew be placed on a stretcher. Saw the sheet cover his face.

A policeman asked him questions. Then another one asked more questions. Then another. Or it might have been the same one. Jon didn't know. Roxanne kept asking questions, but he didn't have any more answers. He was in the back of an ambulance, the doors wide open. He was back outside. He was to go to the police station the following afternoon. He would have to miss the raid of the Nether. He would have to tell Andrew that he wouldn't be able to make it.

Through it all, he saw Franklyn standing in the crowd. He did not speak to Franklyn and Franklyn did not speak to him. Roxanne was hysterical and Franklyn placed an arm around her shoulder in the way that Andrew had done so many times before. She cried into his chest and Jon watched.

Then he was pulling up the collar of his coat and he was walking. He assumed he was going home. Everything must have been sorted out at the hotel. He hoped Andrew would be feeling better soon. That Roxanne would be feeling better soon. There was something he needed to tell her. He couldn't think what it was, but it didn't seem to matter.

There was his front door. There were the keys in his hand. Jon was inside his home. He felt tired and sore and cold and he just wanted to sleep. It wasn't real. It was all a bad dream.

'What time do you call this?' Jon's mother demanded to know from her place at the top of the stairs.

Jon looked at her and went into the living room. He looked at the cuckoo clock on the wall but his eyes refused to focus on it enough to read the numbers. Something touched Jon's shoulder. I turn. Jon's mother was there even though he could have sworn she was not in the room.

'I said, what time do you call this?' Jon's mother repeated. 'Have you gone deaf or something?'

'Have you gone deaf or something?' she asks as the words refuse to come out of my mouth.

'And look at the state of you,' Jon's mother snapped. 'You've ruined that whole outfit. This stuff doesn't grow on trees you know.'

'And you absolutely stink,' she says.

Jon's mother advanced on him. He took a step back, but the sofa was blocking his retreat. He had not realised it was behind him. He wanted to sink down into its leathery embrace, but knew his mother would have some choice words about him ruining her furniture.

'Don't start with this silly game, again. You didn't fool anyone when you pretended to not talk before, you're not fooling anyone now.'

'You're not fooling anyone now. You're not a baby. You know how to talk.'

'Bed,' was all Jon could say.



Jon's mother shook her head. She looked older in the harsh light of the living room. When had she got so grey and when had so many creases forged their way onto her skin? Once, she had looked like one of her china dolls. Now, she was as creased as the dust covers that shielded them. Jon was tired. He was sure it would all make sense in the morning. He walked around his mother and made his way to the staircase. His mother grabbed him by the wrist and dug her fingers into his flesh.

She takes me by the wrist and leads me upstairs. These kinds of punishments are only ever done in the bedroom. I don't know if Ben ever gets punished like this. Maybe he doesn't deserve it like I do. When she leads me to her bedroom, I take off my trousers and underwear so that it can be over quicker. Last time, I even handed her the hairbrush but that made her do it all harder on account of me being cheeky and too used to it. She tells me how lucky I am and how when she was young, she had to stand in the garage with no clothes on while her siblings watched her get punished. She is protecting me, sparing me, making sure I'm a better person.

'You have no idea how lucky you are,' she says, as I try my hardest to keep quiet.

'You have no idea how lucky you are,' she said, her fingers still gripping Jon's wrist. 'I let you go out to a party and you don't even show me the respect to let me know that you're going to be late.'

'My phone broke,' Jon croaked, thankful that he was able to make words at all.

Jon's mother let go of his wrist and clapped her hands together. She laughed. That smile she used to have when punishing Jon is fixed firmly on her face.

'If you think I am going to let you go off to university when you have been so careless as to break your phone on top of everything else, then you've got another think coming. You are going to be staying here, with me, and I am going to make sure this rebellious streak of

yours is dealt with. You've always been a bad kid, and I have always been too soft with you. You can bet that I'm not going to be a soft touch anymore. You've done it now.'

'I'm going to bed.'

Jon walked up the stairs. His mother followed behind. I follow behind her as she leads the way upstairs. She doesn't even need to hold my wrist anymore. We both know what has to happen. I deserve this. I ready myself for her to do what she needs to do to my body. Her mood is always better afterwards. This is important. It's necessary.

'I bet you were out with some girl thinking you could find someone who would care about you,' Jon's mother said, standing at the top of the stairs once more. 'You think there's going to be someone out there who cares about you?'

'You think anyone out there cares about you?' Uncle Pete asks. 'No one cares. Don't say anything.'

'No one would care. Don't say anything,' my mother says. 'It's how children are punished. Nothing wrong with it.'

'No one cares,' Jon's mother said. 'You can forget about university. You can forget about your little girlfriend. You can forget about everything. Except me.'

I want to shout and tell them they are wrong, but I know they're right. No one does care. If anyone did, this wouldn't be happening. It wouldn't be happening again. It's happening again.

There was a thudding. Arrhythmic, sickening, endless. Even when Jon's mother had stopped moving, the thudding continued. Jon looked down at her. She was at the bottom of the stairs. Her body was twisted. It didn't look right.

'What did you do?' Ben asked.

Jon turned and saw him standing in the doorway to his bedroom. Ben had heard everything. Had he not always heard everything? Jon looked back to his mother. He went down the stairs and stepped over her body. He went into the living room and picked up the receiver for the white landline phone, which sat on a small table in the corner. He pressed some keys and waited. The groggy voice of his father sounded through the phone.

‘Hello, Dad,’ Jon said.

‘Jon? Do you know what time it is?’

‘Mum’s dead.’

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘I think I might have killed her.’

‘What are you saying?’ Anthony’s voice was getting louder as he shook the sleep from himself. ‘Are you all right? Is Ben there? Can I talk to your mother?’

‘I think I need to go,’ Jon realised.

‘Stay where you are,’ Anthony urged. ‘I’m coming over.’

‘Goodbye.’

Jon hung up the phone. He put his coat and damp shoes back on and headed out into the night.

*Would you like to save your adventure?*

*WARNING! There is already save data present. Would you like to overwrite  
save data?*

*Now saving, do not turn off the POWER...*

*Game saved successfully*

*New Game Plus Unlocked*

He finished speaking.

She let the silence wash over them both, his story still hanging in the air. She would need to respond, and soon, before he became anxious, but she could not think of a single word that would address the situation. When considered as a whole, everything that he had been through, that she had been through, that they had both been through, defined them as people, as parents, who needed to find a way to move forward. She looked to the cuckoo clock on the wall. As the hour hand edged towards four, she knew they had to find a way to face each new passing day. She knew all of this and yet still remained quiet.

Eventually, she would have to respond.

Eventually, they would figure out a way forward.

Eventually, life would continue.

But in that moment, they were two people in a room with all the time in the world, with all their futures laid before them, futures that hinged on the next word.

And there they sat until eventually, inevitably, the silence was broken.

## Trauma fiction: Enforcement, healing and the role of the perpetrator

### Overall Introduction

Trauma fiction is a multifaceted field of work. One hesitates to label it a genre in itself due to the range of different works that can be, on some level, considered trauma fiction. At its core though, trauma fiction does have the defining quality of being concerned with representing and addressing the trauma of an individual, group, or society as a core part of the narrative and not simply a coincidental component of it. Yet within this field of representation, there are many forms that these works can take. Postcolonial trauma fiction seeks to examine and discuss the impact of colonisation on indigenous groups<sup>1</sup>, war fiction frames conflict as a root of societal suffering and not as some valiant spectacle of bravery and heroics<sup>2</sup>, Holocaust fiction seeks to contextualise and process an unthinkable time of horror, and domestic fiction seeks to explore the impact of trauma such as abuse and illness. Domestic trauma fiction is not as well represented as other forms of trauma fiction particularly the much-discussed genre of Holocaust fiction.<sup>3</sup> Trauma fiction has become so entrenched in popular culture that it has spread beyond the confines of literary fiction and has found strong representation in genre fiction. Many theorists have examined the ways in which science fiction and fantasy have grappled with concepts of trauma, even those texts aimed at teenagers.<sup>4</sup> Like charity, trauma often begins at home, and it is therefore worth delving deeper into the realm of domestic trauma fiction to understand its many nuances and to transplant some ideas from other areas of trauma fiction criticism to the sphere of domesticity.

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<sup>1</sup> Theorists in this field include Ciocia, Collins, Dalley, Hout, Murray, Novak, Schwab, Visser, and Yusin.

<sup>2</sup> Theorists in this field include Hendershot, Hout, Jensen, and Lahti.

<sup>3</sup> Caruth's initial theories were created in response to Holocaust fiction and this exploration has been further developed by critics such as Tal, Gavin, and Sevillano.

<sup>4</sup> This is something of an emergent field but the theorists breaking ground here include Bechtel, Cahill, Carrick, Coulombe, Drout, Feldt, Hoeverler, Ingalls, Laszkiewicz, Selling, and Zanger. There is even research performed by Smethurst and Craps on the ways in which video games are starting to play home to trauma fiction.

Before engaging with a discussion on trauma theory, it is imperative to define trauma. This can be something of a contentious issue given the highly subjective, deeply personal nature of trauma. Great care must be taken to avoid trivialising the subject of trauma while also ensuring that those who have endured it are given the freedom to have their voices heard. Anne Whitehead, a notable theorist in the area, does raise the concern ‘trauma theory can seem to imply that everyone is a victim’ (Whitehead 2004 p.14). The question becomes one of engaging with the topic without it applying to everyone and therefore losing all meaning. For the purposes of this thesis, for an event to constitute trauma, it must satisfy three key aspects all of which are observable within both theoretical and literary writing on the topic. These three components are a disruption of memory, a loss of identity, and an uncontrolled persistence. Therefore, for an event to qualify as a traumatic experience, it must disrupt the memory in a way that does not occur with regular events, it must cause one to change how they perceive themselves and the world as a whole, and it must continue to affect the survivor long after the event itself is over. These facets are defined by the irreversibility and their resistance to healing which forms the crux of a great amount of theoretical debate surrounding trauma. Thus, it is with these three components in mind that we can separate a person’s bad day, where they may have dropped an ice cream, and a traumatic event, wherein they may have suffered abuse at the hands of a loved one. By enforcing this distinction, it is possible to circumvent Whitehead’s fears and ensure that trauma is discussed with the gravitas it deserves.

As part of this PhD, I have created two pieces of writing that are both explorations of trauma. One is a novel, and one is the critical component of which this introduction is a part. This critical component will seek to evaluate the way in which my novel has embraced and explored the concepts discovered in selected works of trauma fiction I have read and the criticism surrounding them. As for the critical component, there will be three chapters each

examining a core aspect of domestic trauma fiction. At the end of each of these chapters, I will discuss the ways in which the reading I have conducted informed my creative piece.

The first chapter of the critical component is concerned with the cyclical nature of trauma and the way in which it is transmitted through transgenerational means. The literary texts considered here will be Zoje Stage's *Bad Apple* and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family*. The main theorists discussed in this chapter will be Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead with supporting ideas from Hamish Dalley, Sonya Andemahr, Nick Bentley, Martha Billips, Kali Tal, Amanda Wicks, Meg Jenson, and Deyan Gao. Overall, this chapter will serve to interrogate and explore the notion of trauma as cyclical and explore the criticisms of the theory in light of the literary texts' representations of trauma. This chapter argues that, despite the flaws in the theory of trauma being cyclical, many literary texts still follow the idea of trauma being cyclical even if this is not accurate to real life.

The second chapter will be an exploration of a person's ability to heal from trauma when their private trauma is made public in some way. The literary texts considered here will be Hanya Yanighara's *A Little Life* and Edward St. Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels. The main theorist discussed here will be Laurie Vickroy with supporting ideas from Benjamin Lefebvre, Dominic LaCapra, Amir Khadem, Amy Novak, Jessica Murray, Michelle Balaev, Catherine Belling, Joshua Pederson, Jo Collins, Jonas Kellermann, Cyndy Hendershot, Timothy Melley, Rachel E. Goldsmith and Michelle Satterlee, and Irene Visser. This chapter tackles the relatively new idea of trauma fiction aiding in the healing of the survivor or, at the very least, being a good representation of the journey towards healing. This chapter discusses the ways in which private trauma being revealed to someone else can be helpful but can also be damaging if expressed to an unsupportive witness. This chapter argues that, though it is possible to heal from trauma by testifying to one's experience, it is not quite so simple as that



due to the nuance that is present in remembering and testifying to one's traumatic experiences.

The third chapter will be a discussion of the controversial topic of perpetrator trauma. The literary texts considered here will be Caroline Kepnes's *You* and Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle*. The main theorist discussed here will be Saira Mohammed with supporting ideas from Fernando Canet, Bilyana Vanyova Kostova, Raya Morag, Marinda Quist, Laura Roldán Sevillano, and Paula Romo-Mayor. This chapter examines the ways in which perpetrators are formed due to their own traumatic pasts as well as the ways in which a person can be traumatised by inflicting pain on others. This chapter argues that it is necessary to understand the reasons why one may become a perpetrator of trauma despite the ethical quandaries it may present.

## Chapter One: The Transgenerational Enforcement of Cyclical Trauma

### Introduction

Domestic trauma fiction is nuanced due to the way in which it grapples with the origins of trauma as well as the impact it has on survivors. The more intimate setting wherein survivors are often related to, or at least very close to, those perpetrating their trauma, makes for a complicated dynamic that is not always present in other forms of trauma fiction. Here, the way in which trauma impacts an individual and propagates itself is demonstrable in a shorter space of time than the centuries spanning impact of something like colonial trauma. It is within the domestic sphere that the cyclical nature of trauma is heightened through its transgenerational transmission. The ideas of trauma being cyclical and being spread through the generations are notions that have been established by Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead respectively. It is worth noting though that they both draw heavily upon the work of Sigmund Freud particularly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text that Caruth references throughout her own work. Freud's ideas of events etching themselves into a person's subconscious only to be repeated throughout a person's life is directly echoed by Caruth. For Caruth, trauma is seen to 'appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control' (Caruth 1996 p.2). Caruth's research suggests that, once a person is traumatised, that trauma will continue to affect and plague them for the rest of their lives. The lack of control that a survivor has over this haunting is something on which Caruth focuses a considerable amount of thought. Yet the question of the impact of this unresolvable state of being is one that is the concern of Anne Whitehead. Whitehead observes that 'the notions of belatedness and transgenerational haunting have been utilised by a range of contemporary novelists as a powerful and effective means of explaining, and representing, the lasting and ongoing effects of traumatic events' (Whitehead 2004 p.29). In terms of belatedness, Whitehead refers to

Caruth's supposition that the effects of trauma may not be fully known or felt by a survivor until a significant time after the event. It is the interplay between the 'belatedness and transgenerational haunting' that is worth considering and is well represented in domestic trauma fiction.

The interplay between perpetrators and survivors is a complicated dynamic particularly when a perpetrator can themselves be considered a survivor. Whitehead asserts that "individual trauma is always tied up with the trauma of another" which, if followed to its logical conclusion, suggests that trauma will spread through society like a devastating plague and can only be resolved if one is able to find a way to prevent any individual from experiencing trauma. Whitehead has clearly derived her view on the interconnected nature of trauma from Caruth as her words are almost verbatim of Caruth's earlier assertion that 'one's trauma is tied up with the trauma of another' (Caruth 1996 p.8). Caruth is less extreme in her expression and seems to be noting more of a correlative rather than causal relationship, but this notion of trauma serving as a binding force between individuals is present in both theories. This is unsurprising given both critics' belief in the immutable nature of trauma, that it will continue to spill forth into the present and future if the past wound is left unaddressed.

To explore the concepts of cyclical trauma and the transgenerational way in which it impacts people, one can turn to the contemporary trauma novel. Trauma fiction serves many purposes with some viewing it as a medium by which survivors can be heard and can heal, while others view it as a means of exploring the realm of trauma either in a manner fuelled by curiosity or one fuelled by voyeurism. Regardless of one's motivations behind reading and studying trauma fiction, it is hard to deny that it achieves something of great value; the exploration of a topic that would likely, if explored wholly in the real world, present some significant ethical dilemmas. As Ruth Lahti asserts, 'because the nature of traumatic experience as understood in trauma theory renders ideas of "truth" or "fact" problematic,

survivors find fiction, with its more flexible, expressive links to the real, more appropriate than other traditional nonfiction forms of writing' (Lahti 2012 p.3). This notion of exploring trauma through the lens of fiction is particularly relevant when considering one of the two novels that will be explored in this chapter. Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* is, notably, an autobiographical work and concerns the ways in which the trauma of living with an emotionally unavailable parent can resonate throughout a person's life. The second novel considered here will be Zoje Stage's *Bad Apple* which explores similar topics albeit in a less autobiographical fashion.

### **Part One: Transgenerational Trauma**

Given the unique way in which transgenerational trauma manifests and the impact that this has on the cyclical nature of trauma, it is wise to begin with an exploration of this concept and its representation in the literature. Whitehead's belief in 'transgenerational haunting' being a catalyst for the 'lasting and ongoing effects of traumatic events' (Whitehead 2004 p.29) is a notion that particularly resonates within Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family*. Though it is difficult to pinpoint an exact moment of trauma in which Knausgaard's father was egregious in his violation of the protective role a parent is supposed to play, the long-term impact of being raised by a volatile, emotionally unavailable parent constitutes a clear trauma for Knausgaard who feels that 'it was dad who set the tone at home; there was nothing anyone could do' (Knausgaard 2019 p.73). Knausgaard's sense of helplessness and of resignation at the inevitability of repeat victimisation mirrors the recurring nature of trauma expressed by many survivors. In fact, it is Caruth who notes that 'the child inherits... the traumatic lapse, or absence, of the father' (Caruth, 1996 p.110), a notion that comfortably defines Knausgaard's experience as a form of trauma. Knausgaard feels the absence of his father's affection and can only rely upon hostility and criticism. Similarly, Suzette, the

protagonist of Zoje Stage's *Bad Apple*, feels a similar 'traumatic lapse' as Knausgaard albeit with the genders of both parties inverted. Suzette is conscious of the way in which she is at risk of inheriting her own mother's poor parenting and is alarmed when she feels herself 'getting selfish and resentful' as this sparks the realisation that 'this is how it started, how my mother came to hate the responsibilities of motherhood' (Stage 2018 p.47). The dread of seeing a person's trauma manifest in their actions, the metamorphosis of one from survivor to perpetrator, is one of the daunting impacts of the cyclical nature of trauma. This is heightened by the way in which, culturally and societally, people are primed to look to their parents and guardians for guidance on how to live a successful life and so, when a parent or guardian is abusive or neglectful, these traumas are transmitted through a system that is ostensibly designed to transmit cultural norms, moral beliefs and societal values.

The notion of transgenerational trauma is a more complicated one than most other forms of trauma due to the complex relationship between survivor and perpetrator. This is particularly relevant when the relationship in question is the parent-child relationship as the traumatic components will often nestle uncomfortably beside the role of caretaker and provider that a parent may also be playing. Suzette perceives her mother as attempting to connect with her in a meaningful way through the use of material objects to compensate for a lack of emotional connection. For Suzette, the complex emotions she feels regarding her mother can be justified and explained and she attempts to do this when she reflects how 'her mother, in spite of other deficits, was big on gift giving... Suzette understood this had been her sole means of expressing love' (Stage 2018 p.81). The potentially performative generosity expressed by Suzette's mother makes it difficult for her to regard her as a perpetrator of trauma for any such feelings must also sit alongside the gratitude felt by a child receiving bountiful gifts. That physical gifts cannot truly compensate for a lack of emotional support is not something a child can fully understand nor something that a traumatised adult

is likely to find easy to accept. In fact, for the traumatised adult, such expressions of affection, regardless of how token or hollow they may be, become deeply significant ways to recontextualise the parent as the loving figure that they were supposed to have been. For Knausgaard, no such rationalisation is possible for his father's dominating personality is not offset by any shows of kindness or generosity that Knausgaard shares with the reader. Knausgaard does not recall kindness but instead recalls a parent to whom he 'couldn't say anything... nothing beyond purely practical things such as where I was going and when I was coming home' (Knausgaard 2019 p.52). While Suzette can contrast her mother's coldness with her generosity, Knausgaard finds contrast between his parents as he recalls how his 'father filled rooms with disquiet, my mother filled them with gentleness, patience, melancholy, and on occasion, if she came home from work and was tired, also with a faint yet noticeable undercurrent of irritability' (Knausgaard 2019 p.113). The contrast between his mother's ability to keep her negative emotions to an undercurrent and his father's habit of loudly broadcasting them leaves Knausgaard to think fondly of his mother and feel insecure about his father. Yet it is his father that he emulates, intentionally or not, due to the transgenerational transmission of gender roles and societal expectations becoming contaminated by the traumatic exposure to one as unpleasant as Knausgaard's father.

Caruth notes the way in which trauma forms a palimpsest within a family and within society as a whole. She observes that 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas' (Caruth, 1996 p.24). Knausgaard is implicated in the erratic moods of his father for, due to him being so conservative with his displays of affection, any display of this is greatly heightened. When his father shows even a slight interest in the life of Knausgaard, the son responds with 'a rush of happiness because he actually cares', but even this is tinged with a feeling of being 'offended that he can underestimate me' (Knausgaard 2019 p.9). This is similar to the way in

which Suzette latches onto her mother's gift-giving but the young Knausgaard already observes it as a complicated issue as he is aware that there is still some tinge of negativity to his father's response. In much the same way that Knausgaard struggles to come to terms with the kind of father he had, Suzette doubts her own capacity as a mother questioning 'why had that ever seemed like a good idea?' (Stage 2018 p.5). Both Suzette and Knausgaard are implicated in the traumas of their past and risk carrying it forward into the future.

As Hamish Dalley notes, 'perpetrators and victims are entangled by trauma' (Dalley 2015 p.386) and this entanglement can prove difficult to sever. If the entanglement is not severed, then Whitehead foresees a challenging future in which 'the protagonist seems bound to replay the past and to repeat the downfall of another' (Whitehead 2004 p.85). In the case of transgenerational trauma, the survivor may find themselves becoming the very parents who traumatised them in the first place. This is most notable in *A Death in the Family* as Knausgaard recounts the difficulties of parenting in a way that makes it clear to a reader that his parenting techniques are problematic and that his children do not seem to be benefiting emotionally from having Knausgaard as a father. In much the same way that Knausgaard's father spoke harshly and set an unpleasant tone in the house, Knausgaard reflects on his own parenting observing that 'it is not uncommon for my irritation to mutate into anger, and when then I speak harshly to her, and her tears flow, and she bows her head and slinks off with slumped shoulders, I feel it serves her right' (Knausgaard 2019 p.34). The speed at which Knausgaard seems to become angry at small children is alarming as is his tendency to victim blame, describing two instances wherein he is physically abusive to his child, both of which are framed as being her fault. Knausgaard comments on how his daughter 'is already practised in the ways of the world and can be so cheeky that I completely lose my head and sometimes shout at her or shake her until she starts crying' (Knausgaard 2019 p.30). He then tries to justify his behaviour by claiming that it is necessary due to his daughter's discovery

of ‘exactly what... could make me totally lose control, jump up and rush over to the poor girl, who was then shouted at or shaken until the screams turned to tears and her body went limp and she could at last be comforted’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.36). Told in his usual style that demonstrates an intense lack of self-awareness, Knausgaard reveals the ways in which he mirrors the traumatic behaviour of his father, and causing his own trauma to be transmitted to the next generation. A less extreme example can be found in *Bad Apple* wherein Hana, Suzette’s daughter, observes the ways in which Suzette manifests her own trauma. She is keenly aware that ‘Mommy wasn't full of love. She was full of fear’ (Stage 2018 p.170) suggesting that Suzette is already as emotionally unavailable as her own mother was as her daughter cannot detect affection within her. Unlike in Knausgaard’s work, there is an explicit connection made between the way in which the child is treated and the recurrence of trauma for a new generation. Suzette’s lack of maternal instinct elicits a hostile response from Hana who creates ‘a kind of game that wasn't fun, but deadly serious. Like a war. She thought Mommy even understood’ (Stage 2018 p.170). The question of whether Suzette understands what is happening has a dual meaning as Hana is mute and struggles to communicate with her parents, so Suzette is never fully clear what Hana is feeling at any moment, but it also relates to the deeper way in which Suzette does understand the more hostile dynamic having lived it herself in Hana’s position.

Although an individual who received their trauma through transgenerational means is likely to continue spreading it to future generations, this is not the only way in which their trauma can manifest. Like most survivors of trauma, those who have experienced transgenerational trauma are at risk of the more standard cyclical haunting from which escape is very challenging and which can affect and dominate many aspects of a person’s life.

## **Part Two: The Cyclical Nature of Trauma**



In the same way that Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead stress the importance of understanding the way in which the transgenerational nature of trauma brings with it its own complex issues, they agree that trauma manifests in a cyclical fashion from which one may struggle to escape. Caruth observes the way in which ‘trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will’ (Caruth 1996 p.2) and this can be seen as a result of, what Whitehead thinks of as, the ‘lasting and seemingly irresolvable nature’ (Whitehead 2004 p.17) of trauma. If one is to believe that trauma does continually manifest for those who have endured it, it is necessary to interrogate how and why such a haunting occurs. Many critics point to an indescribability that lies at the heart of traumatic experience as the reason why trauma becomes repetitive and cyclical; if one cannot adequately describe the experience, then one cannot adequately appraise or resolve it. Caruth believes that ‘it is only by recognising traumatic experiences as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognise the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience’ (Caruth 1996 p.58).

This inability to articulate, and therefore comprehend one’s experiences, is explored in both *Bad Apple* and *A Death in the Family*. In *Bad Apple*, Suzette struggles to explain the erratic behaviour of her child when such behaviour is detected by professionals. Though both Suzette and the professional agree that Hana is demonstrating signs of trauma, Suzette rejects the notion that her husband could be traumatising her but finds herself unable to articulate her own thoughts on how and why her child is manifesting troubling behaviour: ‘I can’t explain it, I know it doesn’t make any sense’ (Stage 2018 p.182). Both the reader and Suzette can trace Hana’s behaviour to Suzette’s own trauma, her inability to connect with her child and show her the love and support she needs. For Suzette, Hana is a physical manifestation of her own trauma, given form and the ability to make her life more difficult. Knausgaard shows a similar awareness to the way in which trauma can manifest from one’s past into one’s

present. Unlike Suzette who seemingly cannot articulate her issues, Knausgaard seems to suggest that he has no issues that need articulating. He asserts that ‘as your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.12) and he believes that the isolated person he has become is a result of conscious actions and not a manifestation of past trauma: ‘I do not want anyone to get close to me, I do not want anyone to see me, and this is the way things have developed: no one gets close and no one sees me’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.28).

It is understandable that Knausgaard may struggle to understand his experiences and outlook on life as being resultant of trauma. Whitehead argues that ‘traumatic recollection is characterised by the striking paradox that while its re-enactments are disturbingly literal and precise, they nevertheless remain largely unavailable to conscious recall and control’ (Whitehead 2004 p.140) and this lack of control over one’s thoughts and memories can be quite challenging for a survivor. It is demonstrable in the text that Knausgaard struggles to keep his past in the past and finds that he is plagued by events that he yearns to forget. As in *Bad Apple*, this is literalised to a degree when Knausgaard discovers that people in his new school view him as they did in his old school despite there being ‘no contact between the two places I had lived.’ He laments that ‘the old judgements of me trickled back. I could feel them close at hand, heard the reverberations...’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.83) and while Knausgaard struggles to understand how such things occur, the reader is more certain. Without any sense of self-awareness, Knausgaard recalls how he lost his girlfriend due to a bizarre game he was playing with a friend. He describes how ‘the relationship with Susanne came to an end two weeks later. Long ago I had made a deal with Lars, my best friend in Tromoya, to swap pictures of the most beautiful girls... Don’t ask me why. I had forgotten’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.91). The way in which Knausgaard keeps his word to an old friend despite there being no benefit to him to do so is bizarre and it is made odder by the way in

which Knausgaard does not remember why the deal had been struck in the first place. While it would be fallacious to label every instance of forgetting as an example of post-traumatic repression, it is worth observing the ways in which Knausgaard remains incapable of understanding his actions. This inability to prioritise those in his life who should be meaningful to him could be indicative of the ways in which the old perceptions of Knausgaard are able to manifest persistently throughout his life. This selfish nature can be traced back to the tumultuous and traumatic upbringing at the hands of his emotionally unavailable father.

This inability to be helped and to change from the past is mirrored in *Bad Apple*. Suzette's parenting struggles begin with the pregnancy being, not the 'spiritual awakening' for which she hoped, but a 'medical ordeal' (Stage 2018 p.47). Suzette's medical history is a complicated, traumatic one and for the journey to motherhood to be plagued by medical woes is harrowing for Suzette who finds herself haunted by 'flashbacks' that persist no matter how much her husband, Alex, tries to 'comfort her' (Stage 2018 p.47). The way in which the pregnancy serves as a recurrence of Suzette's past trauma ties her to her past in way that she seems helpless to overcome. This aligns with Meg Jensen's notion that 'traumatic events are pre-meaning and trapped as unprocessed sensory perception – stuck in one time and place that can re-emerge whole and undiminished in sensory power at any time and place' (Jensen 2014 p.706). This notion of the trauma repeatedly manifesting, or manifesting at seemingly random intervals, is partly why critics such as Caruth believe trauma to be so cyclical, so inescapable. Kalí Tal expands on this notion when she asserts that 'survivors never "get used to" losing their sense of meaning; they are forever changed by it' (Tal 1996 p.15). Here, the inability to process the traumatic event is noted as a loss of meaning which, as other critics

have noted<sup>5</sup>, makes it impossible to move beyond for one cannot move beyond what one does not understand. The lack of security and confidence Suzette feels as a result of her trauma carries forward into her life as she is unable to do what she feels is best for her child. Hana resents Suzette for taking her to therapy as a way to get her to talk little knowing that ‘Suzette had resisted bringing her in... but relented to Alex's pragmatic insistence that something might yet be physically impeding her verbal progress.’ This divide between Hana’s parents is summarised by Suzette who laments that Alex ‘didn't see what she did’ (Stage 2018 p.5). The inability to see what Suzette does, while potentially referring to the greater amount of time Suzette spends with Hana than Alex does, may also refer to the way in which Suzette’s perceptions are changed by her trauma, in the terms that Tal highlights. By not being able to explain the situation to either Hana or Alex, Suzette finds herself victimised once again with her daughter blaming her for being forced into therapy and her husband asserting dominance and challenging her authority as a parent.

One of the ways in which trauma maintains a grip on those who have experienced it is through its manifestation in the unconscious mind. Amanda Wicks observes that such manifestations are ‘predominantly experienced as repetitions, flashbacks, and nightmares’ as ‘traumatic memory arises through the realm of the unconscious’ (Wicks 2014 p.332). Deyan Guo further explores this notion by suggesting that ‘The dream is a substitute for something unconscious, particularly something one manages to endure. Through the dreams what is unconscious surfaces to the conscious’ (Guo 2012 p.2510). This notion of the unconscious mind seeking to work out issues through the use of dreams is relevant to a discussion of *A Death in the Family* in which Knausgaard experiences a series of dreams that help him to find peace with the life and death of his father.<sup>6</sup> Knausgaard finds the process of dreaming equal

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<sup>5</sup> Critics who explore the notion of understanding being the key to moving beyond trauma include Andermahr, Pederson, Whitehead, and Murray.

<sup>6</sup> Freud’s theories on dreams and the subconscious, as represented in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, has formed the basis for many literary critics in many fields but is especially present in trauma fiction criticism.

parts enlightening and disturbing as he notes that ‘in my dreams he was sometimes dead, sometimes alive, sometimes in the present, sometimes in the past. It was as if he had completely taken me over, as if he controlled everything inside me, and when at last I awoke, at around eight o'clock, my first thought was it had been a nocturnal visitation, the second that I had to see him again’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.489). The call to action inspired by Knausgaard’s dream, to look upon his father’s body one more time, shows the way in which dreams can inform the waking person. Knausgaard becomes aware of a way to aid himself in his quest to ease the burden of his trauma and needs to act upon this before the opportunity passes. The way in which the dream is described as being all consuming speaks of the power of the unconscious mind and the way in which it processes trauma. Martha Billips reflects on this phenomenon and observes a ‘fragmentation of consciousness’ and a ‘recurrent, unsettling, and often traumatic [recollection of] memories of the early event’ (Billips 2012 p.137) that often occurs in the wake of trauma. This repetition of Knausgaard’s trauma seems to offer him a way to lessen its cyclical nature by inspiring him to act. This raises the question of how entrenched cyclical trauma is and whether the cycle can in any way be broken.

The notion that trauma is a cycle in which one becomes forever trapped, is not an idea that sits comfortably for all critics. There is a growing field of research examining narratives that focus on recovery or healing from trauma with many questioning whether the cycle can be broken. Nick Bentley has commented on this change by noting how ‘Caruth's theoretical model represents a permanent debilitating cycle of repetition without final understanding and, consequently, recovery’ and how such works present ‘trauma as an essentialist psychological struggle between death and survival resulting in a self-perpetuating closed circle for the trauma sufferer’ (Bentley 2018 p.143). These criticisms raise the question of how one views the texts in which a survivor does appear to be trapped. Here, Knausgaard appears aware of

his own entrapment and his ability to break through but seemingly elects to do nothing to change his situation. He questions ‘why should the fact that I am a writer exclude me from that world?’ before realising that he ‘can change all this’ before concluding that ‘that is not what I want’ (Knausgaard 2019 p.39). One can question whether the lack of recognition of the ability to break free of trauma is an inherent problem with Caruth’s theories or a symptom of trauma fiction as a whole. Sonya Andermahr claims that ‘trauma fictions typically exhibit... a resistance to closure’ (Andermahr 2013 p.3) that is designed to mirror the writer’s perspective on the way trauma manifests in society. Such a resistance to closure has been noted in *A Death in the Family* but is also visible in *Bad Apple* wherein the narrative does not have a resolution. Despite Suzette and Alex working to assist their daughter in overcoming her issues, the issues which can be seen as a manifestation of Suzette’s trauma, they succeed only in isolating her further and giving her time to ruminate on the best way to incur further harm. Hana knows she cannot ‘unleash her new plan all at once or it wouldn’t seem convincing’ and instead opts to become ‘the best girl ever’ (Stage 2018 p.419) to trick her parents into thinking that the situation has been resolved. As the book ends with this line, the reader is left uncertain of how this ultimately pans out and we cannot know if the trauma that plagues this family is ever effectively excised. In this way, Caruth’s belief in the inescapable nature of trauma is reflected in the work of trauma fiction and therefore may still be a valid criticism of the field of literature even if it is lacking an awareness of the way trauma works in the real world.

### **Part Three: Creative Piece Reflections**

Through my research, I found a considerable overlap between the notion of trauma being cyclical and it being something that can be transmitted through transgenerational means. This

overlap has been discussed in the analysis of the existing field of work, but I also wanted to make it the main focus of my novel.

The protagonist in *Franklyn's Dog*, Jon, is a character who has to try to come to terms with their traumatic past. While it may initially appear that the main trauma in Jon's life originates from his abuse at the hands of Uncle Pete, it is clear that the greater trauma is from the sustained abuse at the hands of his mother, Joyce. Joyce not only replicates the sexual assault that Jon endured multiple times, but also consistently emotionally and physically abuses her son. The origins for this abuse are from Joyce's own troubled childhood in which she regularly endured the same kinds of abuse from her own parents. In this regard, Joyce is passing on her trauma to her child. I had originally planned to focus more on Jon's struggles with parenting but elected instead to make the focus of the present day storyline more of a struggle with the cyclical nature of trauma.

The notion of a survivor being forced to relive their experiences on loop for years after the initial trauma is something that greatly fascinated me. To that end, I used the moment of Joyce falling down the stairs as a motif that echoes throughout the text. Dan, the name by which Jon goes after his mother dies, hears the thudding of his mother falling down the stairs incessantly in the back of his mind. This sound grows louder when he is triggered and fades away if he finds peace.

However, the temporally disruptive nature of trauma is best represented in the conclusion of the novel when the past and the present collide.<sup>7</sup> The past is presented in first-person present tense to contrast with the present which is presented in third-person past tense. This was done to mirror the way in which traumatic memory manifests in a uniquely displacing experience wherein the survivor can feel as though they are placed back at the moment of trauma. In this novel, it also serves to connect to the sections of the novel that

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<sup>7</sup> Temporal disruption being a key feature of traumatic memory as noted by Collado-Rodriguez.

address Jon's childhood. For both Jon and the reader, the traumatic components of Jon's childhood are given an immediacy that would not be as impactful if presented in a different fashion.

Jon's traumatic past reasserting itself into his present life is literalised by the reappearance of Ben. Jon has avoided sharing his past with his wife, Sakinah, but the appearance of Ben forces Jon to disclose his full past to her. The challenges of testifying to this trauma will be discussed in a later chapter, but this revelation of dishonesty carries a lot of weight for Sakinah. Sakinah has experienced her own trauma as a result of her deceptive ex-husband, and Jon's dishonesty is a manifestation of this trauma repeating itself. This adds an additional complication to Jon's attempt to overcome his traumatic past as he and Sakinah have their own, personal issues that need to be addressed before they can properly assist each other.

I opted to embrace a unique way of structuring the novel by adopting the language and form of video games. The goal of this was to create a layer of unreality to the novel which serves a number of purposes that I will explore in each of the chapters. Its relevance to the cyclical nature of trauma comes from the scripted nature of video games. When one is playing a game, no matter how much control the player ostensible has, their actions are limited by the game's developers. The constraints of a game can be fought against and manipulated by skilled players, but there are limits to the freedom one has within a game. In much the same way, survivors of trauma can often feel as though they are restrained and confined by their traumatic pasts. The loss of meaning and the repetitive nature of the trauma can define the reality in which they live. The representation of different parts of Jon's life as different save files speaks to the notion of how, in video games, one plays in a variety of different ways and yet are still fundamentally controlling the same character, albeit a character that may act in very different ways. The inspiration for this structure came from



several researchers who explored the way in which genre fiction and other mediums handled trauma fiction and I felt that it would be of benefit to adopt these styles and structures within the realms of literary fiction.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with Jon's interests in video games, a core part of his personality, and succeeds in unsettling the ready in a way that is designed to mirror the unsettling nature of traumatic memory.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside the exploration of genre conventions, I drew a great deal of inspiration from Buchanan's *Harmless Like You* which presents the reader with two different points in time, happening concurrently within the narrative, to illustrate the origins and effects of transgenerational trauma. I adopted a similar structure in my own work, with earlier versions featuring a greater blend of time periods presented at the same time. The final version streamlined this somewhat, but retains the use of parallel temporal spaces as a means of capturing the complex relationship between the origin of trauma and its long term impact.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the way in which trauma is regarded in fiction and how it is represented in trauma fiction is no simple task. It is useful to start with this foundational approach that considers the origins and manifestations of trauma so that one can better understand the field into which one is conducting research. It is also worth remembering that trauma fiction may not perfectly mirror or represent all real-world experiences of trauma. While it might be tempting to disregard some of the critical voices due to myopic or deterministic readings of trauma, if these views are still being represented in trauma fiction, regardless of their

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<sup>8</sup> Researchers of note in this area include Baishya, Bechtel, Cahill, Carrick, Coulombe, Drout, Feldt, Hoeverler, Ingalls, Joyce, Łaskiewicz, Morris, Selling, Smethurst and Craps, Wicks, and Zanger all of whom seek to expand the scope of trauma fiction research to include Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Gothic literature. Cahill, for instance, highlights the useful way in which the allegorical nature of fantasy writing can explore trauma in a more inventive way than realist fiction. The thoughtful, academic way in which these critics bridge the gap between literary study and genre fiction, inspired me to do the same in my own writing.

<sup>9</sup> This mirrors the notion raised by Valkeakari who highlights the prevalence of supernatural elements in trauma fiction. While my work is distinctly free of such overt features, this structure adds that same, unsettling effect.

accuracy to real-world experience, then they are worth considering. Trauma fiction, and the criticism surrounding it, is an ever-changing landscape with a plurality of texts and the ideas have evolved since Cathy Caruth's work set the tone for the topic. Likewise, transgenerational trauma is a relatively narrow field of consideration, but one that has not lost value as time has gone on. However, as trauma narratives become more ubiquitous, there has been a notable shift in how trauma is considered and written. Researchers and writers have expanded their interest in trauma to include considerations of healing narratives as well as narratives centring on perpetrators. Given the way in which Caruth, and to an extent Whitehead, set the critical precedent for trauma fiction, one can observe the ways in which these other areas of interest tacitly or implicitly answer and debate the belief in the unbreakable cycle of trauma that will haunt a family ceaselessly for generations. In short, the pessimistic points raised here are falling out of favour, being replaced by notes of optimism the exploration of which will form the next chapter.

## **Chapter Two: The Role of the Tensions Between the Public and Private in Healing from Trauma**

### **Introduction**

Throughout this examination of trauma theory, it has been necessary to discuss the origins of trauma and the way in which trauma manifests. Critics in this area have suggested a number of ways in which trauma fiction best relays the experiences of real-world survivors, but for critics like Dominic LaCapra, this is not enough. LaCapra expresses frustration that it is well established that ‘literature... can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory’ but laments the fact that ‘it is not clear... precisely how it does so’ (LaCapra 2014 p.183). Laurie Vickroy offers an different perspective on trauma that may help to resolve LaCapra’s issue and further cement the importance of trauma fiction. She posits that ‘trauma leads us to examine the human consequences of socio-historical phenomena and the interconnections between public and private, the political and the psychological’ (Vickroy 2002 p.221). This consideration of the ‘public and private’ is of particular importance here when considering how trauma fiction can assist in healing from trauma. Amir Khadem further elaborates on this notion with his suggestion that, in reality, ‘what is called trauma, then, is the result of both the original event and the anxiety of keeping its emotional and cognitive responses repressed in the unconscious’ (Khadem 2014 p.181). If we believe this notion to be true, and the representations of trauma in literature discussed here and in the other chapters seem to suggest it is, then the core problem of the traumatic experience is the act of repression.

The reality of the traumatic experience, and the life of the survivor, ensures that it is seldom a simple task to overcome trauma. Amy Novak emphasises this notion when she asserts that ‘the focus of trauma theory on confronting and working through the past is not necessarily first in the minds of trauma survivors preoccupied with the importance of feeding families, finding a home, and returning to work’ (Novak 2008 p.49). Also, while a survivor

may not wish to speak about their experiences due to the potential for disruption that it may cause, there is also the greater problem of traumatic memory evading recollection. Both Catherine Belling and Jessica Murray consider this idea of the challenges that are faced by those wanting to speak about their trauma. Belling notes that, as a result of trauma, ‘the subject retreats from the chaotic world (which includes his or her body) into a differently embodied private chaos that is very hard to describe’ (Belling 2009 p.61) while Murray succinctly states that ‘trauma resists and challenges representation in language’ (Murray 2008 p.6). Obviously, if one is not able to find the language necessary to describe an event then that event becomes impossible to convey. If healing and processing is only possible through narrativizing an event, what is one supposed to do when an event cannot be narrativized? Michelle Balaev tackles this issue surrounding the narrativizing of trauma by claiming ‘the “unspeakability” of trauma claimed by so many literary critics today can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies’ (Balaev 2008 p.157). The role of society in the repression of trauma (the ‘public’ in the previously mentioned public versus private) is worth considering. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the role society plays in permitting, accepting, or rejecting the testimony of survivors is a significant factor in any potential healing process. As such, it is necessary to keep the restrictive nature of society in mind when considering why traumatic memory is so difficult to access and narrativize. However, not all contemporary trauma theory seeks to answer the question of why traumatic memory is so difficult to access. Joshua Pederson attacks this foundational belief of trauma theory by discrediting the notion of repression entirely. Pederson believes that ‘while victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot’ (Pederson 2014 p.334). This bizarre claim not only works in opposition to trauma literature and trauma theory but also psychological

principles that have been validated in a clinical setting.<sup>10</sup> Due to the inaccuracy of Pederson's claims, his inclusion here is only for the sake of taking a holistic view on the current state of trauma theory.

A consideration of whether one can heal from trauma has been explored effectively in Edward St. Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels and *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara with both texts demonstrating the mechanisms by which one could heal from trauma as well as the challenges that so very often prevent this healing; challenges that are often a product of societal and environmental factors that work explicitly and implicitly to silence survivors.

### **Part One: Witnessing**

In its simplest form, witnessing trauma is the act of recounting the traumatic event, and the impact of it, to another person whether this be a friend, relative, colleague, or someone from an organisation who has the explicit goal of aiding others through the experiences of trauma. Jo Collins considers the necessity of testifying and witnessing in relation to healing from trauma when she notes that 'trauma calls for acknowledgement, and carries with it an apparently ethical obligation for others to bear witness to it, to aid in its reconstruction' (Collins 2011 p.6). Though Collins's words seem to be reluctant to admit that this witnessing is often a necessary part of recovering from trauma, the fundamental idea of an 'ethical obligation' to 'bear witness' is worth exploring further.

The role that a sympathetic other can play in the recovery from trauma is evidenced in the Patrick Melrose novels. Patrick is traumatised by his father's sexual abuse, the impact of which never fully leaves him throughout all five novels, novels that span decades of Patrick's life, but it is with his own son that he finds some much-needed support. Though it is never

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<sup>10</sup> The DSM-V lists dissociative amnesia as being not only a thing that exists but also as something directly linked to the experience of trauma.

made clear whether Patrick discloses the full nature of his trauma to his children, he does share with them some examples of the tyrannical behaviour of his father. Upon hearing one of these tales, Robert, Patrick's eldest son, offers an unfamiliar show of support by empathising with Patrick and being critical of Patrick's father, David's, actions. The act of bearing witness in a compassionate fashion causes a shift in perspective for Patrick. He finds that 'Robert's empathy overwhelmed [him] with the reality of what he had taken to be a relatively innocuous anecdote' (St Aubyn 2011 p.171). What transpires here is a shift within Patrick concerning his own trauma. The witnessing allows him to see the reality of the situation and thus claim the victimhood he deserves. This mirrors an instance in Patrick's own childhood when he becomes a witness to his own trauma and forces his father to bear witness to his own actions. This occurs in *Some Hope*, the third book in the series, when Patrick reflects on a moment of defiance. Here it is stated that 'Patrick's transformation from a toy into a person shattered his father, who realised that Patrick must have known what was being done to him' (St Aubyn 1994 p.107). The significance of this moment comes mostly from the fact that it marks a change from the Patrick who disassociated from the trauma to cope. During the initial assault in *Never Mind* 'Patrick felt he was up there watching with detachment the punishment inflicted by a strange man on a small boy' (St Aubyn 1992 p.101). The acknowledgement that Patrick has gained a sense of true awareness of his trauma surprises the reader almost as much as it surprises David. Unlike David, the reader feels less isolated for, prior to the events of *Some Hope*, the reader had been acting as a sole witness to Patrick's trauma, possessing a memory and understanding of the event that was inaccessible to even Patrick himself. His freedom from abuse, and the potential for recovery, is explicitly linked to the ability to bear witness to the trauma.

The desire to seek external witnesses to a traumatic experience is one of the core tensions within Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. Explored mostly through the character of Jude,

Yanagihara presents a character whose neuroses, disability, and poor health all seem to stem from a traumatic past. This past is revealed to the reader, and a select few characters, gradually through the text and details a string of physical, emotional, and sexual abuses suffered at the hands of adults in power beginning when Jude is a child and only lessening when he becomes an adult. Jude struggles to overcome the challenges of testimony needed to make a witness to his traumatic experiences. He initially succeeds with Ana, a social worker, but her untimely death renders him alone once more. He later reveals his history to his friend, and later boyfriend, Willem, but he too is killed prematurely thus reinstating Jude's isolation. Aside from his physician, Andy, the only other character that Jude may be able to make a witness is his adoptive father, Harold. Jude wishes to be able to make Harold a witness and he admits as much following Willem's death. This is presented in a reflective fashion in the narrative in the concluding section narrated by Harold himself. The two discuss Jude's recent therapy sessions with Jude finally admitting that there are 'things about what I am... who I am' (Yanagihara 2015 p.713) that he would like to one day share with Harold. However, Jude never fully manages to make Harold a witness in his lifetime though he does so through a letter that Harold reads following Jude's suicide. The most notable part about this is that the letter was written and hidden on the day of Jude's adoption by Harold many years before Jude's death, indicating that Jude longed to make Harold a witness but feared the negative repercussions of making the private public.

This is not the only example of Jude using the written form to express his trauma. Jude has to write a report for the police about his abuse and, when he does so, he writes 'as plainly as possible, and had imagined while writing it that he was in fact writing about someone else, someone he had known once but had never had to talk to again' (Yanagihara 2015 p.103). This detachment allows Jude to express his experiences in a way that is less challenging than a verbal disclosure would be. The contrast between the letter writing and

Jude's verbal account to Willem is stark for the latter has a profound effect on both men. Willem nearly removes himself from the role of witness upon realising that 'if Jude was beginning with the easier stories, he now knew enough to know that those stories,' the stories of greater trauma, 'would be horrific. He almost didn't want to know' (Yanagihara 2015 p.434). He does find that strength to continue acting as a witness to help Jude process his trauma which shows a clear difference with his younger self who did not seek to answer the mystery surrounding Jude and instead 'chose to believe the theory that made his life less complicated' (Yanagihara 2015 p.518). Despite finally making Willem a witness, Jude ultimately ends up isolated following Willem's death. This mirrors the death of his previous witness, Ana, and his only other witness, Andy, retires from his role as Jude's physician; Harold only becomes a true witness to Jude's trauma after Jude's suicide. The conclusion of the narrative, Jude's second, successful suicide attempt, relates back to a part earlier in the narrative when, during a period of isolation, he makes his first suicide attempt. Kellermann reflects on the presence of these two moments in the narrative when he notes that 'as the most radical responses to his trauma, the representations of Jude's two suicide attempts thus suggest that the affective essence of trauma may indeed evade narrative expressibility and can only be gestured toward through indirect mediation' (Kellermann 2020 p.337). To say that Jude's trauma 'evades narrative expressibility' may not be entirely accurate for his trauma is narrativized multiple times to Ana, to Andy, to Willem, and posthumously to Harold. The real crux of Jude's struggles with narrativizing trauma and establishing a witness is the damage that occurs when the witness is no longer around to continue that role.

As in the case of Jude, there are many ways in which expressing trauma can go wrong. It is possible that the witness may exit a person's life, it is possible that the witness may not be supportive, and it is also possible that no witness can be sought due to the inability to provide the required testimony. For some trauma theorists, such as Cyndy



Hendershot, the inaccessibility of trauma is part of its very definition. Hendershot defines trauma as ‘that which is painfully experienced but which cannot be adequately translated into language or even translated at all’ (Hendershot 1999 p.74). This notion of the disconnect between the experience of trauma and the recollection of the event is in line with Whitehead’s comment that there is often ‘simultaneously too little and too much memory of the event’ (Whitehead 2004 p.140) that can make narrativizing it difficult. This also links to Caruth’s notion that trauma is ‘experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known’ (Caruth, 1996 p.4) leading to Jessica Murray highlighting the issue that ‘whenever one testifies about a traumatic event, the problem of articulating an inexperienced experience will be there’ (Murray 2008 p.4).

The fear of facing an unsupportive environment prevents Jude from speaking out in *A Little Life* but the full impact of such an environment is best represented in the Patrick Melrose novels. The novels are clear on the type of society into which Patrick is born and from which he struggles to break free fully. Described as ‘hard dull people who seemed quite sophisticated but were in fact as ignorant as swans,’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.166) the people of Patrick’s childhood are typified by their inability to register the evil that lurks within their society. *Some Hope* features a dinner party in which the social irresponsibility of Patrick’s environment is fully demonstrated. Despite being people who ‘miss [Patrick’s] father’ and believe ‘he was a brilliant man’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.136), they are convinced that the ‘NSPCC were [not] talking about [their] world’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.166) when speaking out against abuse and paedophilia even going so far as to claim that ‘children probably didn’t realise they were being abused until they had to watch it on television every night’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.119). Even Patrick is forced to try to come to terms with the idea that there may be more to his father than he realises. Patrick creates a mock eulogy for his dead father in which he notes how ‘some of us remember David Melrose as a paedophile, an alcoholic, a liar, a rapist, a

sadist, and a “thoroughly nasty piece of work”... but that's not the whole story, is it?’ (St Aubyn 1992 p.114). In an attempt to overlook the selfishness of those who hold power over his situation, Patrick begins to question whether there is more to his father. The text never offers an explanation as to what this something more may be despite featuring characters who inform Patrick that ‘you can say what you like... but your father probably saved my life’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.169). There is an inherent selfishness to the way in which the social order implicitly condones David’s behaviour; so long as he is not malicious to them, they will overlook his general maliciousness. Barry Shiels detects this within the Patrick Melrose novels and highlights how ‘Englishness is both an exclusive set of historical co-ordinates and a damaging, narcissistic pathology’ (Shiels 2016 p.5). This pathology, that is present in most of the people Patrick is surrounded by, is the key reason why his trauma remains unspoken for so long.

Jude also has his fears of being in a wholly unsupportive environment realised in the form of his friend, JB, who’s own struggles in life result in an intense hostility towards Jude. During an argument JB makes the sweeping sweeping declaration that ‘we're all fucking sick of you’ (Yanagihara 2015 p.279) by which he means to exclude Jude from the friendship group. Jude believes this to be a confirmation of the reality he suspected existed all along. For a large section of the novel after this argument, Jude is unable to forgive JB and the two go their separate ways because, ‘when he sees JB, he sees him doing his imitation of him, sees him confirming in that moment everything he has feared and thought he looks like, everything he has feared and thought other people think about him’ (Yanagihara 2015 p.289). Here, one could argue that the private is made public in a thoroughly damaging way, a manner that echoes the sentiment of Goldsmith and Satterlee in that this exposure to such a toxic environment seems to ‘cause... more distress than the trauma itself’ (Goldsmith and Satterlee 2004 p.40). Jude immediately internalises JB’s words, and a hurtful impersonation

that accompanied them, and, like Patrick, is unable to determine that these words do not correlate to reality. The incident does, as Timothy Melley would say, ‘infect and distort’ (Melley 2003 p.112) Jude’s perceptions. Jude is stuck in a perilous situation in which he fears rejection if he discloses his trauma yet is risking rejection simply by living with the effect of it. Vickroy notes that this struggle is often what prevents people from testifying to their experiences when they note that ‘survivors can risk or provoke rejection if they make others uncomfortable by voicing or showing their suffering’ (Vickroy 2002 p.15). It is important then to consider the environment that can promote healing instead of denying the survivors the opportunities that might aid their lives.

## **Part Two: Healing**

Having discussed the challenges surrounding the act of testifying to trauma and questioning the impact of positive and negative witnessing, it is important to reflect and address the question at the very heart of trauma theory; is it possible to heal from trauma in some way? As mentioned in the introduction, the answer, societally speaking at least, is yes otherwise there would not be legions of counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, support groups and the like waiting to aid people through their trauma. However, it has already been noted that society may not always be acting in a survivor’s best interest, so it is just as likely that the existence of these services is part of the framework to cover up trauma and keep it repressed. To discover a core aspect of the situation, it is necessary to explore to what extent healing can be said to occur within the texts that have been examined.

As with the discussion on witnessing trauma, it is worth noting that survivors do not exist in a vacuum. If healing is only possible through translating the private into the public, then the survivor is going to have to contend with that public sphere; the same sphere that provided the circumstances for the original trauma. This challenge is most notable in the

struggle of finding a witness, but it extends to the healing process in general. It is important to keep in mind that, as Vickroy notes, 'the social environment...forms the circumstances out of which trauma is created, but it can also provide, or decline, needed supports for healing' (Vickroy 2002 p.13). It is possible to see the ways in which the 'supports for healing' present themselves within *A Little Life* and the way in which they do originate from similar sources to that of the original trauma, or at least as reminders of that trauma. Though at the time of coming to this realisation Willem is too afraid to act upon it, he learns early in his relationship with Jude that the way to help his friend would be to encourage him to open up about his trauma. He considers the questions he could ask that would help Jude accomplish this and recognises that 'any of those would have led to a larger conversation that would have been reparative, or at the very least preventative' (Yanagihara 2015 p.75). These conversations, though difficult, are shown to be healing as Jude does finally find some comfort in the support he gains as a result of these conversations. By being able to talk to Willem, he is able to grow closer to Harold and finally feel comfortable in his role as adopted son. The impact of this support, particularly as it occurs after Willem's death and during a time when Jude's behaviour is particularly aggressive, leads to Jude breaking down during which 'he cries and cries, cries for everything he has been, for everything he might have been, for every old hurt, for every old happiness, cries for the shame and joy of finally getting to be a child' (Yanagihara 2015 p.699). This realisation that he can be loved in spite of, or perhaps because of, his trauma, or the person he has become due to his trauma, is a truly healing moment for Jude. His social worker Ana is fairly accurate when, shortly before her death, she warns Jude that he will 'have to talk about these things while they're fresh' before warning him that he will 'never talk about them' unless he does so soon. She offers to 'teach [him] how to talk about them' explaining to Jude that 'it's going to get harder and harder the longer you wait, and it's going to fester inside you, and you're always going to think you're

to blame. You'll be wrong, of course, but you'll always think it' (Yanagihara 2015 p.105). This inability to talk about the trauma and thus access the healing potential of doing so has been discussed previously, but it is worth remembering that Jude reaches a point where he admits to Willem 'I've never really discussed it before, and I need to figure out how to say the words' (Yanagihara 2015 p.416). Herein lies the previously discussed problem of testifying to an experience that one cannot adequately represent in language.

If trauma is not resolved or addressed in a healthy fashion, then it will attempt to resolve itself in other ways. Vickroy notes the way in which 'traumatic memories are often frozen in time and remain overwhelming experiences' (Vickroy 2002 p.12). This sense of being overwhelmed by the traumatic experience does not seem to dissipate fully over time to the point where even a testimony of trauma, let alone the event itself, can be overwhelming. The examples in *A Little Life* of trauma's overwhelming nature have been evidence thus far, but it is also worth noting that there are also significant examples in the Patrick Melrose novels. Patrick struggles to comprehend the suffering that he has endured and is unable to process adequately the trauma that he has experienced. In an attempt to come to terms with what has happened, Patrick inflicts harm on himself in a more public fashion as a way of exacting the private pain that he has suffered. Following his assault, Patrick finds himself at the staircase of his house at which point he 'threw himself forward as hard as he could, but tripped as he landed, letting the rest of the glass fly from his hand and shatter against the wall. He lay splayed and shocked on the floor' (St Aubyn 1992 p.141). This pain is easier to witness and therefore an easier pain to be healed and is Patrick's attempt to access the deeper pain of his trauma.

The sentiment of accessing pain through repetition is evidenced in *Some Hope* when Patrick arrives at a similar staircase and feels the urge once more to re-enact this traumatic displacement. As Patrick stands there, 'he felt an overwhelming urge to cast himself forward

onto the stone floor, but stopped instead and held onto the banister, intrigued by this strange impulse, which he could not immediately explain' (St Aubyn 1994 p.187). Here though, the memory of the re-enactment from *Never Mind* does not appear to be present in Patrick's conscious thoughts at this point for he does not make the connection as to why he finds himself compelled to take this action.

The placement of this occurrence within the text is significant for it follows a section in which Patrick finds himself beginning to heal from his trauma by metaphorically revisiting his past and serving as his own witness. Patrick attends a dinner party in which he comes to believe that, in a warped way, 'his father had wanted... to love him, and that he had wanted to be able to love his father,' and 'the thought that he would have wanted him to succeed made Patrick want to cry' (St Aubyn 1994 p.179). Patrick comes to terms with his trauma and is rewarded by discovering that 'he was in a part of the house he had never seen before' (St Aubyn 1994 p.180). This part of the house seems to represent a way forward, a way into healing from Patrick's trauma, and it is not something that he has discovered before. Patrick begins to appraise his trauma differently and is able to do so due to him testifying to Johnny. This healing continues to manifest when Patrick, wandering through the house of his friend, discovers her daughter, Belinda, alone and somewhat neglected. Belinda announces her presence by warning Patrick that he's 'going the wrong way' at which point 'Patrick looked to his right and saw a girl in a white nightie sitting on a short flight of stairs' (St Aubyn 1994 p.181). This directly mirrors the occurrence in *Never Mind* when Patrick is alone at a dinner party and needs the assistance of an adult. For Patrick, the aid does not adequately arrive. He receives temporary aid from Yvette when 'Yvette picked him up... and kissed him on the cheek' causing him to go 'on crying, but less desperately' (St Aubyn 1992 p.141) but when Yvette promises to get more help for Patrick, Patrick is adamant that 'she's lying' and that 'she won't come back' (St Aubyn 1992 p.173). When he encounters Belinda, Patrick is

presented with the opportunity to provide her with the help that he never had. This is represented by Belinda highlighting that Patrick has almost gone ‘the wrong way’ for the way he almost went would have prevented this encounter from happening. Instead, he is able to converse with Belinda in a manner that no adult did for him as a child. He is discovered by Belinda’s mother shortly after this exchange at which point Patrick attempts to justify his presence there by claiming that he ‘was trying to find [his] way back to the party and [he] ran into Belinda’ but this explanation is not sufficient for Bridget who asks, ‘but what were you doing here in the first place?’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.182).

Patrick’s working through of his trauma is not recognisable to those around him without the context afforded by being a witness. Though this passage does indicate that Patrick is on the cusp of healing, it is followed by the previously mentioned desire that Patrick feels to ‘cast himself forward onto the stone floor’ (St Aubyn 1994 p.187). This desire is the earliest indication that the healing Patrick is experiencing here is not an absolute fix for all of his problems and that there is still trauma through which he needs to work. Timothy Melley would note that this constitutes an example of the way in which a ‘traumatic past can infect and distort the memory’ (Melley 2003 p.112).

In the Patrick Melrose novels, this traumatic past takes on two main forms, with the first three novels tackling the trauma of David Melrose and the latter two tackling Eleanor. Patrick is so overwhelmed by the trauma through which his father put him that he fails to recognise the need to deal with Eleanor’s neglect and this is why he does not attain full healing in *Some Hope* but does get closer to this goal in the final novel in the series, *At Last*. Ultimately though, it is by accepting that his trauma will always be within him that Patrick is able to be at peace with his situation. He knows that ‘they could take away the place but they couldn't take away the images in his mind,’ (St Aubyn 2011 p.179) a lesson Patrick discovers when he is faced with losing his childhood home. Patrick discovers that trauma goes beyond

physical space and is more connected with the psychic realm; he learns to focus on resolving and working through the private even if that means letting go of the public.

Of course, all of this is to overlook an unattainable fantasy that likely exists within most survivors. It would be a challenge to find a survivor who would not be happier if their trauma had never occurred and by that extension, many yearn to erase it from their minds and lives. This manifests in the silence and reluctance to testify that has been examined here, for many believe that if they ignore the issue, it will go away. While this is observably false, it is an understandable position. This desire manifests itself strongly in *A Little Life* where Jude believes that an eradication of his past is the way to achieve healing. He longs for surgery that will remove the scars from his body; the scars that are the constant reminder, and physical representation, of the trauma he has endured. Jude considers the surgery and has 'visions of it - his back made as smooth as the floors themselves, the thick, unbudgeable worm trail of scars vaporized in seconds, and with it, all the evidence of his time in the home and in Philadelphia, the documentation of those years erased from his body' (Yanagihara 2015 p.252). Though he does not get this surgery, a physical component of his trauma is eventually removed. However, his legs provide a persistent source of illness throughout the novel culminating in the need for them to be amputated. Jude feels an uneasy sense of relief as he 'remembers then that it is not the problem that is being eradicated; it is the source of the problem that is being eradicated. One is not the same as the other, but he supposes he has to be grateful, finally, for eradication, however it is delivered' (Yanagihara 2015 p.603). This desire for eradication is not as simple as Jude hoped it would be for his amputated legs still cause issues for him, just in a different manner. Yet it is not unreasonable for Jude to seek this removal of his traumatic past, to have it purged from his body, for societally, this erasing has already occurred. Jude comes to the realisation that 'his past had been erased so completely that it was as if it had never existed. The people who knew the most about it, who



had witnessed and made it - Brother Luke; Dr. Traylor; even Ana - were dead, and the dead can speak to no one' (Yanagihara 2015 p.580). Jude is in control of his past; none may testify on his behalf for all of his witnesses are dead. Even Willem perishes after he becomes a witness and Andy retires from a position of importance after serving a similar role for many years. Jude dies before Harold truly witnesses his past so, in a public sense, Jude's trauma has no trace and no record; it is an entirely private affair. Yearning for eradication rather than seeking a way to heal from the trauma prevents Jude from ever fully addressing it, with him realising too late that 'his past is a cancer, one he should have treated long ago but instead ignored' (Yanagihara 2015 p.693). This is worth considering alongside Visser's idea that trauma is 'not beyond healing' despite it being 'dormant for nearly a lifetime' (Visser 2012 p.316) for one has to question the impact of leaving trauma dormant for such a long time. If trauma is akin to a physical wound, then seeking healing for it sooner rather than later may be the only way to prevent it festering and potentially reaching a point where it is beyond healing. Yet this early treatment is often blocked by the difficulties of testimony and thus comes with its own set of challenges. If a lack of narrativization prevents healing in the immediate aftermath and a festering prevents later healing, then can trauma ever be fully healed from or is the fatalism of Caruth more accurate than some trauma theorists would like to believe? Perhaps the problem is a desire for a full healing, a yearning to achieve a prelapsarian state that focuses more on eradication than on healing and a survivor must be content with whatever small amounts of healing permit them to continue to live their lives.

### **Part Three: Creative Piece Reflections**

The way in which traumatic memory is recounted and explored is a key component in the healing process. It was with that in mind that I approached the representation of testimony within my novel. The question of how and when and to whom one should relay their

traumatic past is one of the central conflicts of the narrative. Jon withholds the majority of his experiences from Sakinah for much of their relationship until the appearance of Jon's brother Ben forces him to disclose his past to her.

Sakinah feels betrayed by Jon for two main reasons. The first is that she has succeeded in narrativizing her own trauma to him at an early stage of their relationship, something that brought her immense pain and shame to do. This was done so that their relationship could be built on mutual trust and respect. That Jon did not reciprocate the gesture is something that is deeply upsetting for Sakinah. Secondly, she feels betrayed due to the perceived duplicity behind Jon's actions, something that mirrors Sakinah's past experiences. What Sakinah fails to understand fully, and what my novel seeks to explore, is the struggles of speaking about trauma when one has not fully understood or processed what has happened to them. In my novel, Jon's inability to speak about his trauma is literalised in that, immediately after being traumatised, he loses the ability to speak entirely. This is symbolic of Jon not being in an environment in which his testimony would be met with sympathetic ears. Even when Jon regains the ability to speak, his trauma remains locked away in his mind. When it surfaces towards the end of the novel, Jon once more succumbs to selective mutism. For Jon, it is not possible for him to speak of his trauma as he cannot remember the trauma and talk at the same time.

This inability to testify changes when Jon finds himself in the supportive environment of life with Sakinah. Sakinah takes an active interest in Jon's past and attempts to learn more about him. When they are getting to know each other, Jon attempts to tell Sakinah about his past, before she has even told him hers, but fails to do so given that such a testimony is beyond him at that point. It is only after they have been married for many years and have a child of their own that Jon feels able to talk to Sakinah about his past.

However, I wanted to disrupt the way in which this occurs to continue unsettling the reader. The majority of Jon's testimony is told through first-person narration that the reader ultimately learns is part of a conversation with Sakinah. The night of Jon's mother's death is relayed not in the first-person, but as the third-person narration that characterised Jon's storyline in the first half of the novel. The reason for presenting this part of the narrative in this fashion is twofold. Firstly, I wanted to leave the question of what exactly happened that night hanging over the events of the novel. Secondly, I wanted to keep Jon's testimony hidden from the reader. Without knowing how Jon presented the events of that night, the reader cannot be sure of Sakinah's reaction; something that is also left ambiguous. Jon's memory of the event is potentially distorted by his own guilt and remorse over the years but also by the way in which Ben speaks of the events. Ben blames Jon for killing their mother, and it is suggested that Jon agrees with Ben's conclusion even if he disagrees with Ben's exact version of events. In this sense, Jon still lacks the power to testify to his own trauma as the traumatic experience he undergoes is instead narrated by the more detached and limited third person narrator.

The question as to what extent can one heal from trauma is left open in my novel to reflect the way in which the critical field is also undecided on how much healing is achievable. Both Jon and Sakinah appear to have moved past the trauma that was affecting them both so much that they were both considering suicide. However, the events of the narrative seek to demonstrate the ways in which the healing journey is not a linear one. Though a survivor may feel that they have moved beyond their trauma, intense reminders of the past can disrupt this healing and present new challenges for the survivor. It is that nuance and complexity that is fairly unique to the realm of post-traumatic suffering that is often overlooked in discussions. Recovering from trauma does not operate in the same fashion as recovering from a physical wound and it may not always be possible to follow the same

forward momentum at all times. In my novel, the appearance of Ben sets Jon and Sakinah back a significant amount on their healing journeys and forces them to confront aspects of the past that they have overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to consider the relatively new body of trauma theory that believes in the possibility of healing from, and overcoming, trauma. Here, it has been possible to note the necessity of finding supportive, reliable witnesses who will be able to handle a survivor's testimony so that they can facilitate recovery. There has been a general shift towards accepting testimony within society though this has unsettled some trauma theorists and led to the notion of universal victimhood.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Anne Whitehead notes this as a potential problem with trauma theory when she suggests that 'trauma theory can seem to imply that everyone is a victim' (Whitehead 2004 p.14). This has been observable within the texts examined here where characters who bear witness to trauma are presented as being traumatised by that experience. If this is the case, then it is possible to note that even a single trauma could spread through the population like a contagion, transforming everyone in a society into a victim.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, this is not what occurs and it is not helpful to compare the difficult, and potentially traumatic, experience of bearing witness to the intense trauma of the original experience. Irene Visser seeks to maintain the necessary definitions of who counts as a survivor of trauma when she asserts that 'trauma, whether experienced by actual people or by characters in literature, would gain significance if reserved for those directly affected, rather than for any vicarious experiences of bystanders, readers, viewers and so forth' (Visser 2011 p.275). She further elaborates by insisting that 'a more precise conceptualization of

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<sup>11</sup> Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* helped establish the notion of 'Trauma Culture' that he claims exists within society.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Tew highlights the societal trauma of 9/11 and the way in which a society can suffer in the same way that individuals can suffer.

trauma, which would differentiate between directly vs indirectly incurred traumatic experiences, is necessary to counter the movement to a trivialization of trauma (where it can denote any form of distress)' (Visser 2011 p.280). It would certainly be unhelpful if the term trauma lost its potency in such a way that testimony is overlooked due to it seeming more commonplace and not as profound an experience. On the other hand, this erosion of trauma's potency is likely to be a side effect of the growing acceptability with which testimony is received. It is perhaps a necessary evil that people adopt the term trauma more liberally if it provides an environment in which survivors can achieve healing through testimony. The true challenge is ensuring that the society remains accepting of testimony while not devaluing the experiences of survivors to a point where testimony becomes lost among a sea of trivial experiences.

Ultimately, it is difficult to say precisely to what extent one can heal from trauma and what impact addressing the schism between the public and the private will have on any individual. Each person is different, and the exact circumstances of a person's trauma is unique and thus it is not possible to create a universal guide on how to handle trauma. The one constant seems to be a supportive environment and so it is towards this goal that the field of trauma research should strive. Dominick LaCapra appreciates the difficulties of finding some universal approach to trauma when he notes that 'trauma presents an acute instance of such a cross-disciplinary problem, for it falls within the compass of no single genre or discipline, and how one should approach it in a given genre or discipline is an essentially contested question' (LaCapra 2014 p.205). With multiple disciplines approaching the subject from multiple angles, it is not likely that a convenient answer will ever be found but that makes it more important to continue researching the area to better equip those from all disciplines who wish to tackle trauma. Only through a multidisciplinary approach can such a multifaceted subject find a satisfactory conclusion and one element of this should include

literary works and their critical reception, alongside works and research from other disciplines.

## Chapter Three: Perpetrator Trauma

### Introduction

Trauma fiction is an exploration of the ways in which a traumatic event shapes the lives of an individual. Its representation within the literary world has been seen as a way to provide a voice to those who may be voiceless and to provide catharsis for those who need it. Trauma fiction, by default, focuses on telling the stories of the victims of trauma. This can be a powerful thing for these victims are often disenfranchised by the perpetrator, by society, and by their own repression of memory. Due to its ability to connect with so many people, trauma fiction has become popular. Whether this popularity is a good thing is debatable. Critics such as Bilyana Vanyova Kostova take a cynical view of the field when they note that ‘Trauma has become narrativized, commodified and “sold” on the big screen and in thick novels bringing other people’s pain to an assorted audience that soaks it up either through voyeurism, sympathy or curiosity’ (Kostova 2013 p.48). These views do not foreground the potentially helpful nature of trauma fiction and seem to consider the field as being almost a perverse spectacle for those with comfortable lives to derive pleasure from those less fortunate.

While it is true that not every reader of trauma fiction is a survivor of trauma, it is always worth noting the unique relationship a survivor of trauma may have with trauma fiction. However, one element of the trauma process that is often overlooked, certainly in the field of academic writing, is the study of perpetrator trauma. Perpetrator trauma is the direct result of an individual’s actions that results in them becoming traumatised. Raya Morag notes the problematic nature of this strand of trauma fiction, and she notes that ‘the concept of perpetrator trauma is to a large extent repressed in trauma research’ (Morag 2012 p.97). This ‘repression’ stems from the way in which trauma fiction is generally considered. If one views trauma fiction as a way to aid survivors by being heard and helping them elicit the sympathy and understanding required to heal from their experiences, then it may seem reflexively

wrong to offer this level of empathy to those who do harm to others by their actions. This debate is further complicated by the notion that perpetrators of trauma may themselves be the survivors of an earlier trauma.<sup>13</sup> How does one even define this group of people? Are they more survivor or perpetrator? And what of those who feel remorse or are haunted by their actions? If these hauntings manifest in the same fashion as the trauma responses experienced by more traditional survivors, then are these perpetrators not also victims? Further complication would arise if one were to consider those who commit atrocities under duress or at the orders of another.

For the purposes of this discussion, this chapter will examine how perpetrator trauma is explored in two contemporary novels, Caroline Kepnes's *You* and Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle* which provide representative examples of this nuanced topic. Both texts have been adapted to other mediums, a Netflix series and a movie respectively, thus demonstrating the ways in which these texts resonate with multiple audiences, though it is the novels that are being examined here.

### **Part One: Perpetrator Trauma**

Before considering the reasons why an individual may become a perpetrator, it is worth exploring the effects of the perpetrator's own actions and the impact this may have on them. Saira Mohamed is one critic who seeks to expand the study of trauma fiction to encompass the realm of perpetrator trauma. Writing on the subject, Mohamed notes that 'the person who chooses to kill—brutally and even gleefully—may also be haunted by his acts, and that the world must—like it or not—also reckon with the meaning of that trauma' (Mohamed 2015 p.1163). Here, the inherent dichotomy of perpetrator is laid bare; if one revelled in their

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<sup>13</sup> As well as offering a cynical view on trauma fiction, Kostova also considers the way in which the line between perpetrator and survivor can become blurred.



actions at the time, then how can they be haunted by them later? This is a challenging concept with which to grapple, although, when considered logically, there is no reason why this should not be the case. The possibility for change exists within all people and what once brought pleasure can, with time, instead elicit revulsion, embarrassment, and guilt. Mohamed is critical of the way in which trauma fiction is viewed by the academic world.<sup>14</sup> She highlights how there is an inherent problem with framing perpetrator trauma in that:

even if we accept in theory that the person suffers on account of the crime he has committed, the configuration of trauma as an experience of victims prompts us to think that even if that is possible, or even if it is true, there is no good reason to talk about it. The traumatic suffering of the murderer is of no concern. (Mohamed 2015 p.1177)

This lack of concern not only further isolates those who are traumatised by their own actions but may be causing greater damage to society. By exploring perpetrator trauma, and its representation in fiction, one can, as Mohamed claims, gain a new understanding of ‘the nature of trauma itself and opens up space for a new cultural understanding of trauma as a condition that can befall anyone—victims and perpetrators, objects and subjects, those who are acted upon and those who act upon others’ (Mohamed 2015 p.1206).

As Mohamed discusses, much work on perpetrator trauma involves coming to terms with the idea that the perpetrator suffers as a result of their actions. This can be challenging particularly when, as Mohamed also notes, the perpetrator may seem callous as they perpetrate their actions. Joe Goldberg, the protagonist and perpetrator of trauma in Kepnes’s

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<sup>14</sup> She specifically takes aim at Ruth Leys and Amy Novak due to their, in Mohamed’s eyes, unfounded criticism of Caruth’s use of the story of Tancred as an example of trauma wherein they ignore the inherent perpetrator trauma and try to reframe it as solely concerning the victim.

*You*, seeks to justify his actions by, in essence, victim blaming. This most often takes the form of sweeping attacks on society as Joe claims that ‘the trouble with society is that... most people would say I'm the fuckup’ (Kepnes 2014 p.11) but he also specifies his misogynistic mindset by clarifying that ‘that's the problem with the world, with women’ (Kepnes 2014 p.36). Both of these comments are used to justify the stalking of an innocent woman by a man who clearly feels no shame or guilt. This dominant, unchanging perpetrator mindset can also be clearly seen in Susan Hill’s *I’m the King of the Castle* when Kingshaw laments Hooper’s role of perpetrator. Having moved into the same house as Hooper, Kingshaw and Hooper are forced to act as brothers to each other despite them having no connection and sharing only bitter resentment. To address this, Hooper embarks on a campaign of bullying that ultimately results in Kingshaw taking his own life. Early in the text, Kingshaw realises that he is ‘a loser’ and any attempt to reclaim the power from his perpetrator is ‘always short-lived’ (Hill 1970 p.98). Remorselessness is present in both pieces despite the difference in framing with both perpetrators being aware of perceived power imbalances against which they rebel. Joe wants to dominate women in the face of a society he believes favours them, and Hooper wants to ensure that Kingshaw will never usurp him from his comfortable position in the house. Hooper’s attempts to defend his position also feature outward gaslighting that match the gaslighting that Joe performs internally as Hooper labels the bullied Kingshaw ‘a bully’ (Hill 1970 p.98). In this, one can see how a perpetrator is attempting to, as Fernando Canet claims, ‘excuse themselves and sidestep the question of their own individual agency.’ That Canet claims this is ‘not surprising’ (Canet 2020 p.165) makes it difficult to note how far a perpetrator can be remorseful of their actions if they do not take ownership of them in the first place.

Yet Laura Roldán Sevillano makes a direct connection between a perpetrator’s sense of remorse and the extent to which they are traumatised. She asserts that there exists a

‘traumatic syndrome that specifically affects perpetrators that are haunted by their remorse’ (Sevillano 2021 p.134). Sevillano frames the topic in a way that does not seem to be suggesting that the event itself is the trauma for the perpetrator, but the later remorse. It is possible to conclude, based on this notion, that a remorseless perpetrator can commit heinous acts and not feel the ill effects of trauma. The notion that remorse is the catalyst for perpetrator trauma is explored in *You* and *I’m the King of the Castle*. Joe is remorseless for the majority of the text, justifying his every action as being somehow in service of the woman he is stalking, Beck. He can justify said stalking as an attempt to protect Beck from a ‘weirdo’ that would be attracted to her due to her tendency to ‘parade too much’ (Kepnes 2014 p.15), and he can justify assaulting Beck’s best friend, Peach, when he discovers that Peach is also unhealthily infatuated with Beck by labelling her a ‘dangerous fucking pervert’ (Kepnes 2014 p.187). He even justifies the murder of Beck’s boyfriend, Benji, as an act that ‘spared him years of pain’ (Kepnes 2014 p.156). However, Joe struggles to justify and account for his own murder of Beck. His attempts to label Beck a ‘monster’ who is ‘deathly, solipsistic to the bone’ (Kepnes 2014 p.410) are countered by waves of remorse. Joe feels robbed of the time they could have spent together lamenting how he ‘never made you pancakes’ which results in him questioning his actions: ‘how could I have done this? ...What the fuck is wrong with me?’ (Kepnes 2014 p.413). Given the structure of the text, there does seem to be some element of sympathy for Joe here in the sense that he has been overpowered by his darker instincts and has now thrown away that which he longs for most.<sup>15</sup> This is observable in the way that any justification for this act is hollow and short lived with Joe falling back into guilt the more he reflects on his actions. The remorse he feels for this crime, though as selfish as the justifications that proceeded it, does show a fundamental shift in how

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<sup>15</sup> This sympathy for Joe is greater in the Netflix adaptation as more is done to build sympathy to Joe and his sexual deviance is toned down to make him more palatable to the audience.

Joe approaches his situation. He laments how he ‘will probably die alone, under an insignificant moon and you won't be there to mourn’ (Kepnes 2014 p.416) suggesting that the loss of Beck, his greatest crime, will haunt him until he too is in the grave. One can note this haunting already takes place within the text. Joe murdered his former girlfriend, Candace, and struggles with the remorse and the guilt at having successfully covered up the crime. Her famous brother serves as a reminder of his perpetrator trauma resulting in Joe’s desire to ‘smash the screen and tell him that his sister did not drown while body surfing’ whenever he sees ‘Candace's musical fucking brother on TV’ (Kepnes 2014 p.213). No such lamentation occurs regarding Joe’s other crimes; there is no remorse and therefore there is no haunting. Ultimately though, Joe retreats into the safety of deferring responsibility by once more claiming his murders as acts of kindness. He claims to have made the ‘decision to spare you the pain of life’ and that murder was a way to ‘let you go’ and ‘forgive you’ (Kepnes 2014 p.420). This raises the question of whether a perpetrator will always feel the effects of their trauma or if they can bury the trauma by ceasing to feel remorse for their actions. How transient is perpetrator trauma?

The answers to these questions do not lie in *I'm the King of the Castle*, but Hill’s novel does show a strong example of a perpetrator who does not feel true remorse for their actions and therefore does not experience any sense of haunting. It would be a stretch to say that Hooper ever feels truly bad for the torment he inflicts upon Kingshaw, even though this torment results in Kingshaw taking his own life. The closest Hooper gets to remorse is a sense of hesitation that Kingshaw may not be the easy prey he initially believes him to be. During an altercation early in the pair’s relationship, Kingshaw fights back against Hooper successfully punching him in the face. This leaves Hooper with ‘a bruise... on his left cheekbone... where Kingshaw's fist had struck him’ (Hill 1970 p.23). Although this is a fairly minor injury, it does result in an initial wariness in Hooper to pursue his planned

torment of Kingshaw. As Hooper considers retaliation, he instead finds himself 'paused' by 'the recollection of Kingshaw's fist on his cheekbone' that is still 'vivid' (Hill 1970 p.33). However, unlike Joe Goldberg, Hooper never discovers any action that instils in him a sense of remorse. He is able to overcome his initial reservations that Kingshaw may not be defenceless and continues his torment in earnest, ensuring that Kingshaw feels more and more displaced. Hooper, like Joe, succeeds in murdering the person he is traumatising but, unlike Joe, even this is not enough to evoke remorse. Little is noted in the text about Hooper's reaction to Kingshaw's death, but the small detail offered to the reader is chilling. It is noted that 'when he saw Kingshaw's body, upside down in the water, Hooper thought suddenly, it was because of me, I did that, it was because of me, and a spurt of triumph went through him' (Hill 1970 p.223). The callous way in which Hooper claims victory over Kingshaw here demonstrates the reason why some feel uncomfortable exploring perpetrator trauma. A character who can drive a child to death with their actions does not seem to be one for whom a reader can have sympathy, particularly when the only ill effects, the only trauma, suffered from his own actions is a 'bruise' (Hill 1970 p.23) and a failed plan of torment leaving the perpetrator 'stiff with cold' (Hill 1970 p.38). Indeed, this difference between perpetrators is why critics such as Canet call for 'a distinction between perpetrators who voluntarily took part in the system of oppression, accepted it and continue to defend it in the present, from those who were forced to do so and suffered its consequences in the past and still do it in the present' (Canet 2020 p.167). Once more, remorse and guilt are the key components in the understanding of perpetrator trauma, but they are not the only factors at play. To understand why someone as remorseless as Hooper may still be worth viewing in light of a nuanced view of perpetrator trauma, it is important to understand the motivations behind the perpetrator's actions.

## **Part Two: The Traumatized Perpetrator**

As just discussed, understanding perpetrator trauma is no easy task for it means grappling with the despicable, monstrous actions of those who may relish in their crimes or, at the very least, feel little to no remorse for them. However, Canet offers a way to continue to explore this topic without placing oneself in an ethically untenable position. Canet specifies that ‘dealing with perpetrators does not mean condoning, forgetting or even justifying their acts, but merely attempting a better understanding of the reasons why the atrocity was perpetrated,’ (Canet 2020 p.160) a very useful distinction when considering this topic. Both *You and I’m the King of the Castle* seek to explain the actions of the perpetrator protagonists so that a reader can gain that required level of understanding. Joe’s misogynistic distrust of society becomes more understandable when the reader discovers his own past experiences with sexual assault. His perpetrator was a girl and, due to the perceived gender roles in society, despite Joe’s perpetrator claiming ‘she was going to steal [his] virginity,’ Joe is the one who ‘got sent to the fucking psychologist, to the dean's office, to the "counsellor" with the fucking show-me-who-touched-you-where doll’ (Kepnes 2014 p.262). Similarly, towards the end of the novel, it is apparent to Kingshaw that ‘it was Hooper who was angry, Hooper who minded about it’ (Hill 1970 p.206). Hooper projects his own feeling of inadequacy and insecurity onto Kingshaw, then seeks to crush them once they are attributed to this external object. Joe suffered sexual trauma at a young age and then was punished for his victimhood resulting in him perpetuating the same actions that were done to him. However, these understandings that the reader gains are themselves complicated. As Laura Roldán Sevillano explains, ‘writers run the risk of being disrespectful to the victims as their works may lead readers to empathize, or even identify with the perpetrators represented in their works, and so, to exculpate them’ (Sevillano 2016 p.139). If being empathic towards perpetrators is so inherently problematic, then the question becomes should one attempt to portray any

understanding for perpetrators within literature? Sevillano develops the point by claiming that ‘to recognize perpetrators’ stories together with the difficult circumstances that lead them to inflict pain to others, and to understand that, just as victims do, they need to work through their trauma, is a necessary ethical exercise’ (Sevillano 2016 p.154). This ‘ethical exercise’ is of great importance for gaining a better understanding of perpetrators and may help to prevent more violent actions from arising in the future. If trauma fiction has succeeded in helping survivors of trauma find some degree of peace with their experiences, then it is also worth interrogating whether, by alerting a wider readership to the warning signs, trauma fiction could work to prevent future incidents that cause trauma from occurring or, at the very least, help rehabilitate those perpetrators who seek to change.

Both Kepnes and Hill lay some of the blame for the creation of perpetrators with the parents who failed to raise them well. Kepnes makes a number of references to the neglectful, abusive childhood that Joe endured. Joe himself is dismissive of his experiences claiming that ‘lots of people have shitty parents and roaches in the cabinets and stale, raw Pop-Tarts for dinner and a TV that barely works and a dad who doesn't care when his son doesn't come home during a national disaster’ (Kepnes 2014 p.50). Based on a working knowledge of the way in which survivors repress and re-narrativise their traumatic experiences, it is clear that Joe has not come to terms with the lack of care and attention afforded him by his parents. The absence of emotion in his childhood haunts him to the degree where Joe has learned ‘the power of silence’ on account of him remembering his ‘da saying nothing and I remember his silences more vividly than I remember the things he said’ (Kepnes 2014 p.103). Even after forsaking his neglectful parents, Joe’s attempts to find a surrogate father-figure in the form of Mr Mooney goes awry when Mr Mooney is also abusive. However, Mr Mooney’s abuse affects Joe in a different way and distorts his view of morality. Mr Mooney locks an adolescent Joe in a cage and, having survived the experience, Joe no longer recognises the

level of torment that such an experience inflicts on an individual. When Benji struggles with the same abuse that Joe endured, Joe becomes hostile and derisive, reflecting on how ‘when I was in this cage, I was good. I didn't fuss and shake like a little girl’ (Kepnes 2014 p.104).

This scorn is the apotheosis of the damage Joe’s traumatic experiences have done to his psyche for not only does he fail to have sympathy for those who suffer similar things to him, he frames this lack of sympathy in misogynistic language reflective of his distrust of women.

Hill likewise depicts the parental figures in *I'm the King of the Castle* as being indirectly responsible for the traumatic events of the text. Kingshaw’s mother and Hooper’s father are both depicted as self-absorbed, ignorant people who focus primarily on their own interests and desires with little to no awareness of the events that are unfolding around them. Hill remarks on how the pair ‘talked at length about their children, knowing nothing of the truth’ (Hill 1970 p.57). The superlative ‘nothing’ demonstrates the sheer lack of ignorance on the part of the parents that allows a reader to make inferences about the level of emotional support the parents provide. Notably, both Kingshaw and Hooper are missing a parent and this absence is deeply felt by both within the text. Hooper, the perpetrator of the torment, is haunted by the loss of his mother to the point where he has violent nightmares concerning her. After thrashing around, calling for his lost parent, Hooper is shown to enter deeper levels of distress as Kingshaw observes ‘his voice rose suddenly to a scream, and he sat up, still asleep, drumming his legs’ (Hill 1970 p.117). Neither the reader, nor Kingshaw, are ever made aware of the specifics of Hooper’s dream, but his terror is plain to see. In much the same way that Joe’s loss of innocence to the myriad of abusers in his life corrupts his sense of morality, Hooper’s loss is clearly a deeply traumatic occurrence. Without his mother to ground him, both in the psychological sense and the punitive sense, Hooper’s worst instincts come to the surface, and it is Kingshaw who pays the price.



This notion of another paying the price for the trauma of the perpetrator is one of the ways the study of perpetrator trauma risks becoming problematic. As Paula Romo-Mayor notes the ‘turn to perpetrator trauma is controversial because of the ethical implications entailed in the study of persons who hurt others’ (Romo-Mayor 2019 p.1) In the same fashion as the other critics highlighted here, Romo-Mayor believes this is ultimately a worthwhile endeavour as ‘the possibility of gathering a better understanding of history and humanity is probably the main reason why many contemporary authors have started writing on the wrongdoer rather than on the victim in their representation of traumas’ (Romo-Mayor 2019 p.2). This desire to understand and explain how and why perpetrators come to be is at the core of this area of research and seeks to answer the question that often arises when one is studying the experiences of survivors: how did this happen? For one such as Joe, an envy of those with a better childhood than his results in him perpetrating violence as a way of correcting the balance of life. He is particularly envious of Peach when he observes that ‘everything in the Salinger house is nice and everything in my family's home back in the day was scuzzy and this isn't even the house they live in’ (Kepnes 2014 p.277). Joe cannot move beyond his own trauma and frames his contemporary experiences as an extension of his past suffering. This externalisation of the internal trauma is also manifest in *I'm the King of the Castle*. While the reader never learns the contents of Hooper's nightmares, they are witness to the volume of terror contained within him. Lost in a thunderstorm, Hooper loses the control that he battles so hard to win and he is reduced to little more than a child having a tantrum. Kingshaw is caught off guard when ‘suddenly, Hooper threw himself forwards, and began to beat his fists into the ground, tearing convulsively at the leaves and soil with his nails, and making a hoarse, screaming sound, low down in his throat’ (Hill 1970 p.99). Just as Joe seeks to address and resolve his trauma by punishing the world around him, Hooper seeks to express the pain and anguish left from his mother's absence through any means necessary.

Though this often takes the form of bullying Kingshaw, it is in these moments of intense distress that the reader is invited to see him for what he is, a suffering child, and to view him with the sympathy that deserves.

### **Part Three: Creative Piece Reflections**

When considering what to research for my PhD, the notion of exploring perpetrator trauma was the thing that got me interested in trauma fiction. It was only natural then that I would seek to explore the concept in my own writing given that its presence in existing literature so fascinates me. However, the way in which I incorporated the notion of perpetrator trauma into my own work is in a nuanced fashion.

As the protagonist of the novel, it is Jon who acts as the medium through which I have explored all of the aspects of trauma fiction that have piqued my interest. Jon is not necessarily what one may expect when one considers the notion of a perpetrator. He does not act maliciously nor does he relish in the suffering of others. Importantly though, it is Jon's own actions that haunt him in a manner that is in alignment with critical views on perpetrator trauma. When Jon is haunted by traumatic flashbacks, this haunting takes the form of hearing his mother falling down the stairs. Jon holds himself responsible for this act although the narrative is deliberately vague on whether he actually pushed her or if she fell. Regardless, Jon's mother perished as a result of an argument she was having with Jon and the part that Jon played in her demise haunts him even into adulthood.

Yet an equally compelling aspect of perpetrator trauma is the way in which past trauma can cause one to inflict pain on others. The reason behind Jon's argument with his mother is the history of suffering he has experienced at her hands both directly and indirectly. Jon's mother abandoned him as a child leading to him falling prey of the paedophilic Uncle Pete, before embarking on a campaign of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse against her

child. The long-term suffering Jon endures at the hands of his mother causes intense psychological damage from which Jon struggles to recover. He grows resentful of his mother due to the power she has over him. The narrative is structured in such a way that a reader is encouraged to have sympathy for Jon even if he has committed a murder. This murder leads to further acts of harm as he betrays the trust of Sakinah in an attempt to escape this past. This can also be seen as him further perpetuating trauma as, given Sakinah's own traumatic past, the level to which Jon deceives her is capable of causing lasting damage to their relationship. The extent to which Jon feels remorse for this betrayal is only implied as the narrative does not focus on him when the lies are being revealed, but I did intend it to be clear that Jon feels like a prisoner of his own trauma. He feels as though he will drive away anyone good in his life if he is honest and so he resorts to the potentially very damaging lies to protect the life he is building with Sakinah. Remorse is a key component of perpetrator trauma, and it is apparent throughout the text that Jon feels immense remorse for his actions.

When writing the character of Joyce, the main perpetrator in the narrative, I wanted to avoid making her inhumanly malicious.<sup>16</sup> Though the things she says and does are unforgiveable, there are enough hints in the text to show that she is repeating experiences that she has suffered in her own childhood. This nuance, while not justifying the abuse she inflicts on Jon, serves to help an audience understand why she is capable of such terrible actions which seem to defy the traditional expectations of a caring parental figure. There was a difficulty in finding a balance between showing enough of Joyce's motivations to allow a reader to understand her behaviour, while still keeping things vague enough that Jon would not be able to find any peace with his mother. Most of the indications towards Joyce's past

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<sup>16</sup> Critics such as Parro have highlighted the need for nuanced, feminist readings of trauma fiction. I wanted the character of Joyce to be subversive, given that perpetrators in trauma fiction are typically male, but needed to handle her representation with delicacy.

happen when Jon is too young to process the information, and so it is only the reader who benefits from these insights.

It could be argued that Ben, Jon's brother, is another example of perpetrator trauma.

<sup>17</sup>Ben acts as an antagonistic force when he appears in the 2022 Sakinah narrative. He seemingly seeks to destroy the life that Jon has built for himself and, in doing so, he causes immense distress to Sakinah. Regardless of Ben's issues with Jon, it is presented in the narrative that Sakinah does not deserve this kind of discomfort. However, there are a number of reasons why Ben is not as malicious as he may first appear. The first is that, as Sakinah herself points out, Ben has very little power over the situation. The discomfort caused by the arrival of Ben is an extension of Jon's perpetrator trauma; Ben is disruptive because Jon's life is built on a foundation of lies. Secondly, Ben's childhood, while not as abusive as Jon's, was similarly fraught. Ben had to contend with the erratic emotional and mental state of Joyce in the same fashion as Jon. Being older than Jon, he is more keenly aware of the destructive nature of the hostile divorce proceedings and this likely has a great impact on him. Following Joyce's death, it is Ben who has to help Anthony bury her and it is Ben who is forced to keep the truth hidden from the authorities and from everyone else in his life. He assists Jon indirectly and receives nothing but suffering for this as he is left to tend the family home despite it being beyond his financial capabilities. Any suffering that Ben inflicts upon an adult Jon and Sakinah is a result of him being traumatised by Joyce and Jon's actions in the past.

Ultimately, my work with perpetrator trauma was one that involved striking a clear balance between understanding the motivations and actions of the characters without necessarily justifying them. I believe that the representations in this novel do fall on the right side of the ethical line that must always be considered when addressing perpetrator trauma.

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<sup>17</sup> Representations of siblings being a component in the creation of childhood trauma is discussed by Mitchell.

## **Conclusion**

The study of perpetrator trauma is a controversial topic. There are those who do not feel it necessary to understand the perspectives of perpetrators particularly as they are often aligned with dominant societal forces. Even when one attempts to understand perpetrator trauma as a continuation of the cycle of trauma, these readings are not without fault. Saira Mohamed is sceptical of the way in which perpetrator trauma is framed commenting that ‘reading trauma as entangled both with a right to be heard and with the privilege of witnessing, then, renders perpetrator trauma if not unfathomable, then at least unworthy. Unworthy, that is, unless the perpetrator is also a victim’ (Mohamed 2015 p.1177). This may be a call to change the way in which we view trauma fiction in general. So much of trauma fiction, and the criticism surrounding it, is centred on the way in which it is an essential act of witnessing and testimony. Even when considering perpetrators of trauma, it seems that one of the only ways to make this palatable is to ensure that the perpetrator was a survivor before they became a perpetrator. There is still much work to be done in this field and some of trauma fiction’s critical voices are beginning to discuss it. Canet is reticent to expand the critical understanding to encompass all perpetrators and seems to be the type of critic against whom Mohamed is warning. Canet fears that ‘creators not only highlight situational factors that could partly justify perpetrators’ acts but also attempt to give them back their humanity, conditions that makes the relationship with the perpetrator particularly problematic’ (Canet 2020 p.166). As problematic as this may be, such relationships could be considered necessary to understand the complexities of not only perpetrator trauma but trauma overall lest we think of perpetrators as unthinking, unfeeling originators of trauma in the same manner as one contemplates an earthquake or a terminal illness. Perpetrators are humans, and humans are capable of change, for better or worse. Acknowledging and understanding the capacity for

change is an essential part of the study of trauma fiction as well as one of its core aims, a breaking of the cycle of trauma.

## Overall Conclusion

On the whole, the aim of this thesis has been to re-examine commonly understood views of trauma fiction and to conduct research into the newly emerging avenues of thought in this field. To this end, it has been worth establishing Caruth's views of trauma being a cyclical construct to provide a framework through which the rest of the analysis can take place.

Through this reassessment of the cyclical nature of trauma, I believe it is possible to see continued merit in this idea despite its pessimistic, deterministic viewpoint. As suggested in the chapter examining it, the popularity of the notion that trauma is cyclical has seemingly informed a lot of trauma fiction and so, while critics of trauma fiction may be keen to move away from this point of view, writers of said fiction are not. This carries with it the implication that trauma fiction may not always best reflect a scientifically accurate portrayal of trauma and it may be worth examining trauma fiction's relationship with real world, psychiatrically accurate assessments of trauma.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond that, while it is a more comforting idea for academics to sit and criticise Caruth's pessimism, not every survivor finds their trauma to be surmountable. This has been reflected in the shift towards a consideration of the healing potential of trauma fiction, done so with an eye on the ways in which individuals achieve healing, but the novelty of the research is responsible for an oversimplification of a very complicated topic. There currently appears to be a tendency to focus too much on the innate power of testimony, as though speaking about trauma will free the survivor from, what may have been, years of suffering. Though a refreshing dash of optimism in a field that was previously pessimistic by default, this position on trauma is as restrictive as that of the cyclical nature of trauma. Unlike the cyclical nature of trauma, the ability of testimony to provide a perfect healing is not represented in the fiction, at least not the fiction examined here, and therefore an overreliance

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<sup>18</sup> A continuation of the work conducted by Rachel E. Goldsmith and Michelle Satterlee

on, or an over-glorification of, this approach to healing may be detrimental to the future of trauma fiction. It can be seen as a necessary step, how can one heal from something about which they are unaware, but critics must avoid being reductive in their analyses lest trauma fiction criticism be stuck in a cyclical pattern of myopia.

It is with this view of expanding the field of trauma fiction criticism that a consideration of perpetrator trauma proved necessary. Initially, I did not plan to cover the topic here, thinking instead to separate the cyclical nature of trauma and the transgenerational nature of trauma into separate chapters. However, a study of perpetrator trauma is too fruitful to ignore and marks a distinctly positive step in the direction the research is taking. This is not to say that trauma fiction needs to begin absolving the world's perpetrators of their crimes, more that fiction already employs trauma as a narrative device to earn sympathy for characters who may otherwise be seen as not deserving of any. To ignore this pattern in fiction would be to ignore a broader cultural mindset and would rob one of the chance to question where the line can be drawn; at one point does one commit an act so terrible that no amount of past suffering can afford the sympathy required to overlook it? If trauma fiction criticism is going to keep pace with the evolving nature of texts, the handwringing over the ethics of perpetrators must be overcome. Sympathetic villains and anti-heroes are present throughout pop culture from soap operas to superhero movies, thus an adequate framework through which one can understand the appeal of writing, and reading, such characters must be established. If the work on trauma fiction evolves in no other way, then this must be the priority for the future of research for the genie is already out of the bottle and it is the duty of the critic to understand the impact this has on the world.



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