

**Forbidden**

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# Chapter 1

## Forbidden

### 1.1 Forbidden -1- (Public Domain)

F o r b i d d e n

Short Fiction By Andrew J Campbell

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Introduction

DreamBomb	1500 words
They'll Benefit	2500 words
Poltergiest Dialer	3000 words
Shuttle 39	2100 words
The Groon	3200 words
DoppleGanger	1400 words
Bleeding	4300 words
Writers Burn	1500 words
Barbed Wire	1600 words
Second Flight	1300 words

### 1.2 Introduction

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Welcome to my first ever non-coded, Amiga collection of short stories - presented (no kidding) with AmigaGuide. As usual I feel it necessary to warn sensitive readers that my stuff isn't your average bedtime storybook material - if in doubt, do not read: some of the work here is about as optimistic as the Amiga scene at the moment. :)

Everything here is unpublished and unseenbefore, except (1) DreamBomb - which is going to appear in a magazine called Implosion, shortly - and (2) Second Flight - seen here for the first time in its new, soon-to-be-published-in-a-paper-magazine format (slang chopped out and all).

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Obviously this file isn't going to be as well received as my "full disks" - Magnetic Fiction, Dark Portal, etc - in terms of presentation, but the stories themselves, I believe, are a hell of a lot more professional, more disturbing, and without any glossy graphics, atmospheric music, or additional files (except this one) they should come across more as a proper collection of short stories rather than "a PD disk".

/Means/ italics, by the way, and you'll notice that some of the stories here contain no capital letters or accurate grammar. This is intentional. Stuff the rules of writing, that's what I say. :)

If you enjoy the work here, please email or write to me, I would like comments, good or bad. Thanks. Enjoy the collection.

Andy

### 1.3 DreamBomb

D r e a m B o m b

On the night I crossed the border my dream was of a golden cloud outside my apartment window, mushroom shaped and rising into the sky beyond the hill. Amanda was standing beside me, her face squashed and tormented by the blinding whiteness of the blast; a silver cross on her chest giving off blue wisps of smoke.

Without moving her grey lips, she told me not to look at it, not to avert my stare from her illuminating flesh. I asked her why... /why was she allowed stare into the flames and not I?/

And then we were going to be destroyed; we flew back into the room, screaming like rats with nowhere to run, burning like the sun, our vision melting, the windows cracking, spitting glass; light bulbs, furniture, picture flames exploding-

....

I awoke to face the empty livingroom room.

I saw Amanda four weeks before I ever laid eyes on her. She was there within my dreams and here within the flesh. Somewhere. Waiting. Possibly unable to answer.

Our eyes clashed perchance in a cafe, across ten tables and many more alien faces. She was alone, like me. A lost dreamer looking for a bearable reality.

I carried my coffee over, sat down and did nothing with myself. Stared at the spoon, the sugar bags, the plate.

"Excuse me, but... I had a dream about you last night." I told my steaming drink.

"I know." the girl opposite replied.

One of her hands came into view, sliding across the table, small and snow-white with silver rings on every finger.

"Am I dreaming now?" I whispered as her skin touched mine, warm and

gentle. I remember then daring to meet her eyes. "Amanda!" I hissed her name desperately. "Am I /dreaming/?"

She smiled and shook her head.

To a family failure this was happening, around a social reject these events were weaving, in front of tired eyes a new awakening. Yes, this was a dream. A dream come true.

"I must know why, I must." My endless pestering in the love-soaked months that followed drove Amanda into a sex-fuelled submission. "Whisper to me until I fall asleep and then keep whispering, I have to experience this, I have to know what happens when one crosses the border."

"What border?" Amanda, naked and sprawled out on the rug. She rolled onto her back and looked up at me, hair pouring down her face like the leaves of a golden spiderplant. "What do mean, Joe?"

"The border of sleep. The dreamzone. /Something/ must happen when we cross it. Don't you see?" I leaned over the edge of the sofa, tickled her stomach with my fingertips. She curled up like a hedgehog, laughing childishly. "We never remember," I went on. "Snap - asleep. Snap - awake. Dreams inbetween if we're lucky."

"But Joe, I don't understand," she giggled. I tutted loudly and fell on top of her. "No-o! Oww!"

The same night I awoke to the gentle sound of tapping on the living-room window.

Amanda's body lay mock-dead on the sofa beneath me, one of her buttocks showing and blushing, warm from where my head must have been. I smiled and leaned over and kissed and nibbled. Amanda stirred. The tapping on the window grew louder.

I glanced at the orange lamp beside the door... Across - past the untidy drinks cabinet, over the portable TV - and then further, until I found what I assumed to be the void of the curtains.

Tap tap. Tap. As if a treebranch was blowing against the glass. But we were thirteen floors up. It had to be the weather - the wind... a bird maybe? I fumbled under the sofa for my watch, found it, squeezed both sides until the display lit up. 03:46am.

Tap. Tap tap tap. At this ridiculous hour - and in my current state of mind - it sounded like the fingernails of a vampire. My thoughts wandered from here to Amanda's exposed bottom... to how it might taste if I were to take a huge bite. I shivered and shook my head and kissed her again, as if in apology for conjuring up such an appalling vision.

Tap tap. Tap. I slid off the sofa, naked and shivering, and crawled across the carpet to the gas fire. I stopped, still on all fours, my right hand about to bang the ignition switch until I got heat...

"Jo-oe?" a distant, ghostly voice.

I fell back onto my heels, shuffled around. "Amanda?" I whispered.

"Joe, let me in. Please Joe, let me in."

It took nothing more than three more icy clicks on the window to drain my nerves; I scrambled over to Amanda's angelic face and touched it, blew on it, "Amy, wake up, please, I can hear something." Her eyes opened. She grinned and pulled me nearer.

"S'wrong Joe? S'wro-"

She vanished. There - gone. Popped out of the air like a bubble.

Everything started to go foggy.

I stood up against the wall and banged my head on it, repeatedly. I

curled up on the rug, tried to think of oblivion. I called out for Amanda and plugged up my ears and cried when all I got in return was the tapping and chanting beyond the curtains.

I had crossed the border; /this was what happened when you tried to remember the junction/. Nightmares solidified. Reality melted away. Disappeared. I was trapped between worlds.

Right in front of my eyes, objects moved around on their own, the carpet creased in the shape of footprints, and sometimes I could make out the hazy shape of a human - Amanda - cutting through my dreamscape like razors in the wind.

"Amanda," I wept. "Amanda don't do this!"

But she wasn't doing anything. /I/ was the one in the wrong place, the wrong dimension. Could she /see me/ on the awake side? Or was I a phantom to her now, like she was to me?

Tap tap. Tap. Amanda had blipped out of existence, and now that endless, eerie tapping was the sanest, most comfortable noise I had ever heard.

I staggered over to the curtains. It was getting light out there, I could see the dividing tone of the horizon beyond the autumn-brown material... And shadows, morphing and twisting and bubbling like an alien, eager to come on stage.

I ripped the curtains apart. Amanda's face screamed into mine "Let me in! Oh God Joe let me in!". My mouth hung open, spit ran down my chin; she was clinging to the frame of the window, skirt and legs blowing out into the morning wind like a flag. Below her the city: a rusty, yellow-orange graveyard of some once thriving cyberworld.

"Open the window!" Amanda cried. "Please!"

I fumbled with the latch, yanked it up, pushed it out. The window shot away from me, bounced off the wall, came back.

"Here," I shouted, holding both arms out. "Come on!"

And then I was dragging her inside.

"It's going to happen," she told me later.

"Amanda please, what the hell's going on? Who was that asleep on the couch? Was it you? Who was it?"

"Hide, Joe," she ignored me. "Hide. It's going to happen soon. Perhaps in a few minutes."

I moved up beside her and stared across the antique city. From peak to shining peak, tiny black bird-dots weaved and spun; yellow-white smoke poured up the hillside horizon like oozing toothpaste; the sound of traffic was rare but not unheard; and somewhere, perhaps beyond the unseen river, somebody's screams were echoing. /'Deton... tiiiiime... naaaasha... iiiime'/.

"Look away." Amanda said.

"Why?" I stepped closer. "God /please/, what's /happening/?"

The universe wobbled. Air ripples fired across the city as if the fabric of time had been shattered by an immortal sledgehammer. There was a moment of no sense or sound... Existence itself threatened to implode, to dissolve away, to cease to be.

And then the light, and the visual destruction: a golden cloud outside my apartment window, mushroom shaped and rising into the sky beyond the hill.

I turned to Amanda. Her face was squashed and tormented by the blinding whiteness of the blast; a silver cross on her chest giving off blue wisps of smoke.

Without moving her grey lips, she told me not to look at it, not to avert my stare from her illuminating flesh. I asked her why...

/why was she allowed stare into the flames and not I?/

And then we were going to be destroyed; we flew back into the room, screaming like rats with nowhere to run, burning like the sun, our vision melting, the windows cracking, spitting glass; light bulbs, furniture, picture flames exploding-

....

And I awoke to face the empty livingroom room.

## 1.4 They'll Benefit

T h e y ' l l B e n e f i t

i remember the moment he knocked on my door one year five months since school. i was knelt beside the bedroom bin scraping shit off my shoes with a survival knife. i slid the blade under my pillow and carried my shoes downstairs expecting to find bailey behind the door, cinema tickets in hand - "new one out, finch, you comin down?" - but the colour of the coat behind the distorted glass this time was an alien bright blue. i opened up wearing a worried frown. "hey hey, finchie boy, fuckin hell, been donkeys or what? ya look completely different, man." at first i hadn't a clue who this guy was, couldn't fit the face, and then it clicked and i grinned and stepped out in to the drive. "jeez! hardin! christ, what the fuck're /you/ doin here?" i hadn't used the f-word for months, just came out, no control. "juss passin by, thought'd drop in and see howya doin." "i'm alright, still livin here like, but... hey, hang on, stay there, i'll just get my coat."

the sky was a duller shade than the snow that was scattered around the fields like spilt icecream. brown-stained icewater, deep in some areas deeper still in others, green-grass skids, gritty footprints, yellow patches with last few drips heading north as the dog or the child ran away, scared, scared of what? of the all-consuming white dome over head or the relentless approach of two ex-schoolboys, trampling without wellies over a landscape they once ruled like Gods.

"s'fuckin cold man, you alright in that jacket?"

"me?" harding gave me a solid stare. "am fine. am alright."

"so... tell us somethin then."

"whatjoo wanna know?"

"i dunno. what've bin doin since ya left?"

"alsorts," he kicked a dead branch. "odd jobs. i got in at jacksons design, you know, usin macintoshes n stuff. z'alright i suppose. i got kicked out, though."

"for what?"

"bein late all'time"

i smiled. harding used to be late every day back at school. he'd arrive mid-way through registration, mid-assembly, sometimes even at break time. "i slept in miss." he used the same excuse so many times they didn't bother asking him after a while.

"hey that reminds me," i decided it was time i spewed out the question i had been eager to throw up since i'd laid eyes on him.

"joo know what happened to debbie?"

"certainly do." he replied almost instantaneously.

in true western movie tradition we'd only had one girl in the gang. bailey, parker and jackson had always seemed to accept her as another



guy - one of the lads - and to a certain extent so had we. but between harding and i there had always been an invisible, tug-o-war competition over debbie. i remember once, drugged up to our back teeth, we'd mutually admitted we'd do /anything/ for her.

whether we were growing up faster than the rest of the tribe or just happened to have the same taste in girls, our shared feelings didn't make things easy. i'm still not sure to this day if debbie was aware of our interest. she was impressed by very little, seemed to have her eye on nobody.

harding's knowledge of debbie's whereabouts brought back a sting of bitter jealousy that i hadn't experienced for about a year and a half. i felt so sick i wanted to cry.

"so... where is she then?" i said, trying to sound as unconcerned as possible.

"close," harding told me and winked and offered a minute smile. i tried to get him to explain but irrelevancies got in the way of conversation as they often do. eventually, the matter was forgotten.

we'd come all the way down the right hand side of the football fields and had even clambered over the barbed wire fence at the bottom - just like old times. we were heading towards the path that led to the local library: in harding's presence, the library was yet another compendium of childhood memories. if he'd have suggested we go there, i'd have told him no, not now. perhaps not /ever/.

"and started up doin table tennis but i gave up cos it was borin. you still paintin pictures n stuff?"

"not really. i write sometimes."

"yeah? write what?"

"stories n stuff, you know."

"nah, man, you wanna start writin scripts," he looked up into the sky, squinting. "where'djoo think all't unemployed people are? sat at home, aren't they, scribblin away, hopin to be't next tarantino."

"i don't like scripts."

"fuckin don't like scripts," he laughed and looked down again, hands in pockets. "whatjoo write about then?"

"i dunno. allsorts."

"allsorts. whatjoo write about that nobody's ever written about before, s'warra mean. the local area? your excitin life? how old are ya finch?"

"seventeen." i was answering him mechanically. he was making me feel bad. depressed. i didn't care, didn't want to listen.

"yeah, seventeen, what the fuck kind of age is that to start writin? fuckin no age, that's what, you've got jack all to say. you should be out there, man, havin a laugh." he wiped his nose. "fuck it, come down't skull n cross wi'me on friday, eh? wadjoo say?"

"i go down town with bailey on fridays." i told him, which was true. for one night a week i became a stupid, careless bastard like the rest of the population (not that i was any better the rest of the time, i suppose).

"yeah?" harding looked up in the sky again. "woopie for you. bailey, aye, sea do withim self these days, then?"

i thought (perhaps hoped is a better word) that he'd pester me about getting a girlfriend, but he didn't. a shame, because i had one back then: lynette mills, twenty years old, incredibly pretty. when i thought of lyn, debbie seemed a million lightyears away... the last stitch in a healing wound. i smiled at the snow-coated landscape and took a big breath.

"s'up with you? you listenin to me or what?"

"no," i turned to face him, still happy. "no, am not listenin to you, hardin."

i carried on walking. so did he.

"you've fuckin changed man. fuckin hell you've changed."

"yeah," i nearly slipped. laughed at myself. glanced at harding. "you haven't."

we heard the kids then, somewhere up ahead beyond the trees, shouting and screaming. a horrible feeling swept over me. i decreased my walking speed, attempted to block out the memories of this place. the arguments. the fights. the brick wars. the broken bones. it wasn't right... us, being down here on the battlefield. not enough water had passed under the bridge. the horror was unforgotten.

unforgiven.

"we shouldn't have been able to get away with what we did, finch." said harding, now by my side as we stared through a jigsaw of bare branches. from here we could see the source of the yelling: a gang of youngsters, taking it in turns to go skiing down a self-created slide.

"what do you mean?" i said softly, although i knew. i knew too well. my eyes wouldn't leave those children.

"scott and the rest," said harding. "still see em down town, you know, fuckin around. s'like they don't remember. s'fadin away for them, finch. it was just a fuckin game. s'nothin, man, not a fuckin thing compared to life, now, is it?"

"s'just... sometimes i wish it would fade away. hide itself, like it never happened. you know?"

i sighed. "put a zip on it, hardin, fuck's sake."

he didn't answer... continued walking. i didn't want to go anywhere near that noisy cluster - and that was exactly where he was heading. "oi, hardin, s'gote other way, man," i yelled. "come on, fuck that direction..." but he didn't take any notice. i wiped my nose on my coat sleeve whilst his back was turned, then jogged to catch up.

"fuckin wait, man."

"you daren't go past em dare ya?" he grinned. "fuckin memories are /that/ shit, aren't they? you remember what scott did to tony, don'tcha? s'what you see everytime you look at a kid, isn't it?"

"is it bollocks," but he was right. oh god he was so /right/.

"s'bollocks, finch. s'what i see, too. s'what we all see. we're gonna abuse our own kids, you know. s'how it starts."

"/what?/"

"us. all of us. bailey, parker, chip, jackson. fuckin string of child-abussss-" he slipped, landed on his arse and did nothing for a few seconds but hold his hands in the air and breathe clouds.

"y'alright?" i stood over him and offered a glove.

the loud-mouthed gang of kids stopped arsing around and turned and stared and laughed at us. i guess it's what we would have done at their age - considered the fall of another human being the most hilarious gag of all time. "ha-haha!" "have a nice trip!" "diiiick-heaaaaaad."

i looked at them, stunned. in so many ways we /were/ those kids. they were /us/. recreated to torment.

"cheers," said harding, taking up my offer. he brushed himself down. "ah well. s'my old coat anyway, who gives a shit."

"diiiick heeeeeaaaaaad."

"waaaank-eeeeer."

we both stood still and squinted.

"s'gote other way, come on," i took harding's sleeve. he shook me off.

"fuck it, finch, why should we?"

"look, just let's, alright? hardin- orr, come on-"

he hadn't changed. he went his own way, determined to face the music, to walk into the flames. and like a soldier secretly covering his comrade's back, i splashed through the snow after him.

the amused gathering had one girl, too, cherry-faced, pig-tailed and cocky like debbie. she stepped away from the rest, a sharpened tree-branch held tight in both hands.

"claire, watchit, his comin."

"claire, oi. get back here ya tart."

i felt blood gushing through my veins as harding came to a halt and looked down at the girl. she said something i didn't quite catch and then without delay made her attack: a low, slow-motion sweep with the stick, which whapped softly against harding's damp trousers.

harding stared at her - right /into/ her - as her mates shuffled up behind, brandishing laughably sized penknives, stones, snowballs.

"claire, come here."

"touch her and ya dead, pal, alright? come here claire."

the girl's weapon slid away, making claw-marks through the icy ground. her face was as white as the weather, her eyes glimmered with uncertainty. harding hadn't moved out of the way: she'd /hit/ him. she'd actually /hit/ him.

"s'that it?" harding sniffed up. "can i walk past you now?"

"hardin come on," i butted in. "sod em, come on, let's go."

"shurrup finch. s'that it? you done, lassie?"

the girl - who now looked as though she'd been hypnotised - nodded weakly and muttered some empty, boyish threats. harding took a quick breath, glanced around, crouched, took hold of the girl's stick (which slipped out of her hands as if it were oiled).

he stood up, held the weapon over his shoulder, arced it down with speed. the girl hit the ground as if she'd been shot, uttering the kind of moan your mum makes when she gets two numbers on the lottery. her friends started screaming: two dropped their brick-bombs and ran; the rest advanced, all guns blazing.

he bled them all as i watched, harding. warrior. he got one up against a tree, pounded until an eerie screech of pain sent black birds fluttering across the jigsaw. most were ground into the soil, some picked up by their privates and ploughed into the hill. the last, harding threw down the slide. blood trail. an echoing wail. and i had to fight hard to resist mutiny.

"you fuckin idiot!" i shouted and covered my face with both hands. when i opened up i saw that my were gloves wet with tears. "/why?/" i begged. "why? fuckin why why /WHY?/"

"just shurrup finch," he dabbed his bottom lip with his wrist.

"they'll benefit. s'what we never got," he kicked snow. "s'what we /shoulda/ fuckin got, don'tcha see?"

my teeth fell together. "you're a DICKHEAD." my voice shattered into pieces like frozen pond.

"you've got one guess," harding pointed at me. he was panting, tired after the battle, bits of blood on his cheeks. "one guess, finch, who-joo think she's fuckin, eh?"

"what?" i could barely concentrate. birds were shooting across the sky and the kids were bleeding and moaning. "whatchoo on about?"

"/debbie!/" he roared and grabbed me by the collars. i slipped, toppled over, crunched into the grass; harding came with me, snow on his face now turning pink. "debbie, who else you stupid bastard, who's she fuckin? go on, one guess. shoot."

"i dunno," grassblades were tickling my forehead. "hardin i can't breath, gerroff-"

"/who's the biggest? who's the killer? who's the overlord?/" he spat. "/who? who put us all in hospital over the fuckin summer?/"

"scott," I swallowed. "scott, alright, get the fuck off me."

"/yes!/" harding leapt backwards, spun around on one foot. "yes," he shouted. "debbie's bin sat on scott's dick for the past eight months, finchie boy. how's that for a fuckin headache. s'gorrit all, scott has. fuckin life-ruining demon bully bastard. and he's gorrit /all/."

he began to walk away. i staggered up, wiped my freezing cold face and did the same.

by three o'clock we were in the middle of town, where we said our goodbyes and divided.

harding went straight into the nearest pub - i know, because i followed him, made sure he wasn't going to do anything stupid.

i hated him. but i understood him.

me? i eventually ended up at the railway station, contemplating leaping onto the track in front of a train for the sake of old times.

i remember the moment i recalled this memory, walking with new friends along a muddy country road, brown white green ground letting off fumes of the past, of faint recollection. grass blades scrolled and dog shit rolled and then a kid's face with bleeding lips who wouldn't be told silently drifted before my cold-stung eyes. "joo always stare at the ground, alex?" an educated innocent older man, black wellies, feet splashing, clean socks, neat hairstyle. some girl like debbie sat spinning on his dick. "yeah," i replied, looking up at him. looking /into/ him. "why? s'that it? you finished?"

## 1.5 Poltergiest Dialer

P o l t e r g i e s t   D i a l e r

lo my name's chrissy, miss robinson said-"  
click.  
dialing tone.

crying.

"please don't put the phone down I need to talk to you ple-"

"look, sod off, I can't help you."

"but she said-"

click.

dialing tone.

he'd been awake for ten minutes before he noticed the other breathing, quicker, lighter than his own. he stored air in his cheeks and kept still, kept quiet; half-asleep or half-awake, it was there.

"bella?" he sat up. "bella, is that you? where are ya?"

thumping, bumping... breathing, wheezing.

"bella," he leaned over the bed, a hand came up, grabbed the quilt, powered into view a girl of eight - hair on end, pyjamas torn.

"whatchoo doin under there? christ, you made me jump."

"sorry willee," her face wrinkled. "am sorry, I was scared."

"s'okay," he said and shuffled around until he was knelt up, bare feet between pillows. "come here, come on."

they settled down, warm and cosy and watched the roof spin round as the sky faded brighter and the morning crawled round the edges of the curtains blue and white spotted grey and some churchbells echoed the dawn of another schoolday.

"damnit bella, you're wet."

"sorry willee."

"wash your bottoms in the sink before we go. okay?"

"okay. sorry willee."

nibbling on a cream cracker, sister in the bathroom, mother still asleep, willy walked into the hallway reading a number on his palm.

"four-nine-three six-five-one."

"hi can I speak to wayne please?"

"er... yeh, hang on... who's calling please?"

"tell him it's willy."

"hang on he's here... waaaaayne... s'for you."

crackling.

"no I don't wannany kackin toast, /hello?/"

"wayne? it's willy, how you doin?"

"alright willy," then faintly: "/will you kack off I said I don't wanany!/. ... soz, willy, go on."

"any progress on the dialer? what happened last night? did you go see that woman you were on about?"

"I got one, man."

"you got one!"

"well... I know where to get one."

"you just said-"

"you'll have it by hometime today, man. get this: darren bailey, right, his grandad used to tinker about in all that kack and ya know that fit english teacher whit red hair?"

"yeah I know her," willy grinned. "miss robinson, she's got this thing about me. she likes me stories. half'at lower school thinks am shaggin her."

"kin hell, man. zit true?"

"no-o, bistupid."

"well anyway, shiz darren's cousin or sumthin, an he's told her to bring one in, she thinks that like- he just wants to show it off to all his mates n stuff, but darren sez you can /have/ it, he sez he'll actually /give/ it you."

"how much duzzie wanfrit?"

"I dunno man, I don't think he wants anythin, but bring about two quid anyway, just in case, an bring that poster of sindy crawford as well, you still gorrit?"

"aye, s'up on me wall. thought he liked mishelle fyefer?"

"he does. /I/ want the poster. anyway, time you settin off?"

"about quart to seven."

"I'll meet you down by't stables, then."

"alright. cheers wayne, good job man. see ya."

"see ya willy..." crackling. "mu-um I said I didn't want-"

he was tying bella's shoelaces when mother came down the stairs, flesh white and glowing, nightie barely clinging, hair loose and raggy and black shades over her eyes. and he heard the bottles clashing and the liquid splashing in her stomach now bloated and smeared with sick.

"get that little bitch outta my sight," she gagged, staggering and

pointing. "stupid little tart wouldn't shurra mouth last night, wouldja? hey? gerrah out of here, william."

willy tied off a double knot, wiped bella's eyes, said don't worry, took her hand, moved to the door.

"I won't be home tonight," mother yelled. "if you two want sum tea you'll have to make it your friggin selves. and don't you dare walk in that door with mud on your shoes. if I find any mud there'll be-

walking down the driveway squeezing hands and fighting coldness as the air bushes round them in steaming, snowy boulders.

"she did some funny noises," bella sniffed, wiped her hands on her skirt. she had bruises on her legs and one of her socks had gone missing.

"yeah, well you just ignore those noises next time, okay?"

"okay. sorry willee."

"stop sayin you're sorry, alright, s'not your fault... /okay?/"

"okay. sorry willee."

his pencil leaned to one side, touched paper, the point snapped, his head came down, hit the page, he fell... fell asleep.

oh yes

oh yes

"oh yes, there /is/ such thing, my boy."

"well... what is one then?"

"the poltergeist dialer is a device often utilised by individuals whose home life has become... shall we say less than satisfying. it allows one to summon spirits who have, for whatever reason, departed from our earthly plane. this, naturally, would inject some excitement into an otherwise dreary day."

"would it... like, bring a family together? cos you get disasters don'tchoo, like... which get rid of all- of everybody's problems cos they... well, they break routine, don't they?"

"well, if you want to put it that way, yes my boy, indeed. but unfortunately such a... a 'fun' device is not without its little quirks and perks. there are some departed souls who become angry or obnoxious when brought back to our plane. the poltergeist dialer cannot influence a spirits attitude. some spirits return and break dishes, stack chairs on tables, leading unknowing souls into the loony bin. think carefully, my boy... this is not a dvice for the faint of heart."

"where can I get one?"

william.

"how much would it cost?"

william.

william!

he woke with a jerk and sat up in his seat.

"thankyou, william, for gracing us with your attention, I repeat, what is the value of x over c?"

"I dunno sir."

"go and stand outside, william."

"sir I'll pay attention from now on."

"william... go and stand outside."

the e-corridor, his footsteps echoing, the roof, damp and peeling, a boy outside a classroom door watching him come, probably thrown out for putting drawing pins on seats.

"alright darren, man, s'appenin? joo get the goods?"

"yeah, I gorrit, but me bitchin cousin took it off me again didn't she? she sez I can't have it till hometime."

"ah shit daz, I'm off home at dinner to cook me sister some beans. I was gonna dollit this aft. miss robinson in there?"

"angela, you mean, shis a right tart."

"she in there though?"

"aye man shiz markin sum work."

"she in a bad mood? what ja do?"

"fell asleep. m'nackered man."

"so-m'eye. s'why am out here."

"whojoo have?"

"foster. maths. 'kin borin as fuck man."

no more echoes when he reached the blue door, peered inside, few girls heads rose, blinked, winked, grinned, and then from behind:

"where ja getcha trainers?"

"jack lees."

"honest? how much?"

"fifty."

"shit hot, man."

the classroom door flung open. "willy edwards what do you want?"

willy turned to face miss robinson, young and pretty and crimson-haired. "can I talk to you miss?"

"you can talk to me at dinner time."

"he fancies you anj," darren grinned. "he wots to have your baby."

miss robinson stepped out, shut the door. "darren jarvis go down to the headmaster's office, right now!" she shouted.

"hang on," darren's face sank. "I was just kiddin."

the teacher sighed and waved willy into the classroom. "go on in, willy. I'll be with you in a minute. darren, you're comin downstairs with me."

"orh angela, come on, that's not fair!"

willy saluted him. "catch you later, daz."

feverish whispering as he approached miss robinson's desk, class now teacherless, rolling towards anarchy.

"willy."

"it's willy!"

"willy you got any fags man?"

"wherejoo getcha trainers, willy?"

"willy."

"oi willy, come ere a minute."

he snatched a metre ruler (propped up beside the blackboard) whacked it across the nearest desk, made three girls jump.

"alright you little faggots stop working and start fightin!"

silence. a few giggles. miss robinson in the doorway, arms folded.

willy laughed, held out the ruler. "soz, miss, didn't see ya there. joo want your ruler back, miss?"

"go into my storeroom willy."

willy looked at the kids, eyebrows up. "whatever you say miss." he shrugged, winking at selected faces.

miss robinson closed the door, darkening the room, muffling the cheer willy wanted to hear, and willy leaned against the dirty shelves and frowned.

"I was wonderin if you'd got that thing... you know-"

"I have what you want, yes," the teacher nodded. "first of all willy I'd like you to understand that things like poltergeist dialers don't

exist, they're just silly little gadgets that've been shrouded in superstitious nonsense. whatever you do with it, you won't bring back the dead, alright?"

"if you say so, miss." said willy.

"second, in exchange for the item, I want a favour."

willy sniffed up. wiped his nose. "yeah. like what?"

"remember chrissy, the girl I passed some of your work on to?"

"yeah,"

"she said she tried to ring you last night but you kept putting the phone down, is this true?"

willy sighed. blinked. flicked the pages of a dusty excersise book.

"she needs help, willy, she can relate to your work, she understands it, why couldn't you just speak a few words?"

"I thought it was a wrong number, miss."

"rubbish, willy. last time you were in here we made an agreement, don'tchoo remember?"

"no miss."

"I've told you, when you're in here you don't call me miss, alright, I'm not your teacher anymore, I'm a friend. and I'm asking you for help. now if you want the dialer, you bloody well pay attention."

"look miss, I got my sister to look after. I can't do with it."

"yes love, I know, but I'm not asking you to look after chrissy... all I'm askin is that you spare her a few words. shiz desperate."

"but the story I wrote was a pile a crap, miss. I was just pissin about."

"no, willy, it's brought comfort to a kid who thought she was entirely on her own. she likes you, she wants to talk to you."

willy wiped his nose again. "but mister worthington giv it a grade E, miss. he said it were shit."

"number one, call me miss again and you'll be down in rondell's office with darren," she pointed at the wall. "number two, mr worthinton is a hobbling old bastard who likes shining, structured stories from Hollywood, not from real life. everbody's like that, willy, they want drama that levitates a good few miles from the truth, not something gritty that reflects how things are. how things are in /this school/ willy, right now, right here."

she wiped her lips, "mister worthinton wants you to lie, willy. he wants you to sit down at your desk and write page after bloody page of lies."

miss robinson moved away from the door, folded her arms again, leaned against the shelving, face-to-face with willy.

"didjoo know," willy whispered. "everyone thinks we have sex when we come in here."

"look, alright willy, I'm not bothered about that, you can walk out of here zipping your fly up if you want, I don't care, but this lunch time, quarter to twelve, I want you in this classroom."

"why?"

"because I want to introduce you-"

"look, I'm busy at dinner time, I've got to go home and make my sister sum beans."

"quarter to twelve."

"no."

"quarter to twelve."

"/no/."

she breathed out. swallowed. "I read some of danny the champion of the world today for the first year kids. most of them loved it. chrissy threw up all over the desk about twenty minutes into it. the



nurse told me she had to go home, only chrissy wouldn't, she said she was frightened of going home. mr rondell was too busy to speak to me, he said. take her home! take her home! he waved me away like I was a fly or something."

miss robinson took hold of willy's shirt collar, pulled his face to hers, kissed him. "she'll come in tomorrow and she'll throw up again. she'll come in the day after, and it'll happen again. and again. and again. answer the phone."

she kissed him once more, passionately, then wiped her lipstick off, straightened his collar and slipped a brown paper bag into one of his trembling hands. "here, have the piece of shit, now go on, go back to your class."

he emerged from the room feeling shaky feeling nervous and the boys gave him shiny eyes and screamed another chorus which echoed down the corridor where he stood for a while and blinked and touched his lips and squeezed his groin and remembered how she'd winked.

"fuck-in-hell!" he started running and jumping and banging the roof with his fist.

down by the stables feet dangling from a wall, wind softly blowing, cold rain starting to fall and prickle as they scived the afternoon because they didn't want the next day to come so soon that they lost /here and now/ like a stolen rubber - a snatched possession from an empty classroom.

"have you looked at it yet?"

"aye, s'weird innit?"

"kackin is, man, never seen owt like it. you gonna use it willy?"

"course I am."

kicking straw, drinking rain.

"when? tonight?"

"dunno. maybe."

"duzya sister know?"

"duz she hellas like. miss robinson said it were all bollocks anyway. said it's all supersishion or summing. shiz probably right. but am just sick of it wayne, I'm sick of it, ya know? me mum comin in pissed all time, bella sleepin under me bed n shit. s'fuckin stupid. s'got to stop."

"you not comin down't pub tonight then?" said wayne, his face wet and bright red, his hair black and curly. "steve'll sneak you in, he sneaks everybody in does steve, heeza kackin cool bloke."

"no... am not goin down't pub. am not goin." willy looked at his trainers.

"wherejoo get /them?/" wayne's eyes had obviously followed.

"sunday market," said willy. he jumped off the wall and hooked his fingers round his belt. "two ninty nine," he smiled faintly, walking backwards. "includin vee-A-tee. see ya wayne, I'm off home."

"hey, dote forget it's pee-ee tomorrow."

"jafta remind me?"

"wouldn't wantcha to miss it."

"see ya."

"see ya man."

"hello?... hello?... who's callin?"

"me."

"who's me?"

"chrissy."

"or, right, look... am busy, call tomorrow, okay?"

"but I need to-"  
"call me tomorrow."  
click.  
dialing tone.

"yeah?"  
"I think I might be dead by tomorrow."  
fast breathing. sniffing.  
"look... have you got a pen and paper?... chrissy?"  
"/what?/"  
"have you got a pen and paper?"  
"why?"  
"am gonna to give you a number to ring."  
"what number?"  
"it's like... a place you can ring when you need help."  
"I've tried that, they never answer."  
"yeah but... I've got loadsa numbers here, you could-"  
a loud cry. "/uh fuck off then!/"  
click.  
dialing tone.  
"chrissy? chris... shhhhhit-"  
dialing tone.

the edge of the bed.

the edge of the bed. fingers. fingers. on the edge of the bed.

"where'joo go lass night willy?"

"furra drink... I think... oh god... am spinnin."

"mum's gonna be cross."

"why? you tellin me she dunt drink?" he blinked. "bella come ere I wanna kiss you."

bella giggled. "you've gone all silly."

"miss robinson kissed me in her storeroom yesterday."

bella gasped and covered her mouth with her pyjama sleeve. she then laughed so hard tears began to run. "you've got your shoes on, willy." she pointed, wiping her cheeks with her free hand.

that was when it clicked and willy leaned up and stared into bella's eyes wanting to throw up because he'd come in late pissed out of his skull and he'd never checked his trainers for mud or bull

"shit," he cursed and threw back the covers and "william!" mother screamed from somewhere downstairs. bella flopped on the floor scrambled under the bed hissing "hide willy hide!" but there was nowhere to head.

he clambered up, using the bedposts for support, found a brown paper bag lying discarded on the floor. kicked it. had he used it? where the hell had it gone? come to think of it where'd he got it from?

bella's head poked out from under the bed. "shiz comin up steps, I can hear her willy."

he snatched his tee-shirt off the cabinet, threw it over his head, the door banged open and he fell against his bed.

"I'll clean it up!" he cried, holding his hands up ready. "juss leave it, alright, I'll clean it up in a minute."

"you filthy bastard," spit flew, the woman advanced, the door whacked shut, she turned, entranced by the quiet that followed the cold gust of wind which carried dust and burning. "what was that?" she demanded.

she glanced at bella, at willy and back. "what's goin /on/?" she

rasped and then behind her back the shelves began to fall and books slid down and toppled and ripped and flew through the air and mother fell down with her hands on her hair and

"stop it!" willy shouted. "stop it for chrissakes!"

silence. wide-eyes. damp skin. breathing. pages wafting, floating, dancing. mother staggered up, her nose and lips bleeding. and willy's flesh prickled when the phone started screaming.

## 1.6 Shuttle 39

S h u t t l e 3 9

"Mark come on, gerrout the bathroom will ya? I'll be late."

"I won't be long."

remember the first time you kissed yourself in the mirror do you remember the first time you wore your mum's clothes do you remember the first time you wanted to kiss your brother do you remember the first time you poked in your nose

it never happened, did it, really, it happened during dream, those nitty-gritty conversations with your beloved on the other side those experimental fantasies with the kid from down the road

somehow when I splash my face and talk forever inwards, I feel the rush of conversation, raw and red like it is and was and I sense the bitter power of those uncut words, those freshly mined realisms, do you remember yours?

forever isn't so long ago when the pulse of a town starts beating and those sweat-drenched nights you thought had passed reinitialise their bleating

splash your face, see yourself, is that light from Hollywood's stars or is it just plain normality with a million emotional scars?

FAILURE 1 AREA 01  
SHUTTLE 39

"Fuck."

"What?"

Tim cleared the memory and re-entered the code. I moved up beside him.

"S'up? Wharris it?"

The machine clicked, then beeped, then spewed out the same error message.

"Fuckin hell."

"What? What is it?"

"Fuckin won't set, will it? Check the doors will you, make sure they're shut properly."

I did, they clicked like mad when I moved in front of the sensors but that was normal. If they hadn't've been switched off correctly they'd've been tugging at each other, trying to glide apart.

Through the dark glass and a blanket of misty fog outside I could see the snow-covered carpark, deep and getting deeper. It was going to be one hell of a walk home for both of us.

"Nah, they're shut, s'gotta be somethin else."

Tim tried the code again. Same negative response.

---

"Shit," he muttered. "Ah well," He took his head out of the control box, weird reflections rolling down his glasses. "Guess it was bound to happen sooner or later. Better ring Jake."

"Jake," I sniggered. "Well he'll be fuckin pleased won't he?"

"Time is it?"

I slid my coat sleeve. "Just turned one."

"One o'clock, fuckin hell," Tim cursed and turned and walked swiftly in the direction of the manager's office. "Sorry about this Mark, I might have known it'd crop up eventually. Am gonna call Jake..." He disappeared through the door, still talking.

"Damn," I told myself, swinging round to face the darkened store. I shivered. The aisles ran into near-total blackness like moorland roads on a cloudless night; the overhead fanheaters became the wind and the gaps between the fixtures mutated before my eyes into hills, cliffsides, sharply realised by electrical wires, now grass and ferns, and could I see something out there, flickering, flashing, could I see-

"Phones are down." Tim shouted, making me jump out of my skin. I stopped fishing for ghost stories and cleared my throat.

"So what's that mean then? What're we supposed to do?"

Tim shrugged. He was in his mid-thirties, tall and slim and golden-haired, probably the most careless character I've ever come into contact with. I liked him, though. He was unshockable. He'd talk about anything.

"Would your parents freak if you stayed over?" he asked me.

"Stayed over where? At your house?"

"No you dick, here. The alarm's knackered, the phones are down, we can't just bugger off and leave everything. Russell said if it comes to it stay here overnight," His eyes sparkled. "We'll get paid for it, you know. Max'll be in at six o'clock-"

"SIX? Fuckin hell Tim, I don't know."

He gave me a persuasive shove. "Come on, it's a doss innit?"

Tim was divorced and living in a council flat with a Jack Russell called Tess, I was home-bred, a big brother, ignored forever by parents who remained indoors picking their nails all day.

"Alright," I said, more to myself than to Tim.

"Cool man, let's go upstairs, grab a coffee."

From the staffroom windows we watched the snow as it blasted down over the world. We could see faint traces of the main road, amber-white and devoid of traffic. Nearby buildings were cold and murky, like ours I suppose, and yet they were somehow hostile below this uncompromising, icy storm.

"Craig's avin a wank." Tim said quietly.

I began to laugh hysterically: Craig was one of the checkout operators, had a terrible skin problem.

"God's combing his hair?" I suggested. Tim smiled, but didn't laugh, which was disappointing because I enjoyed making him laugh.

"Time is it?"

"Ah... Quart to two."

"You tired?"

"No. You?"

He shook his head.

We spent the next half-hour in silence.

Sat upto a desk in the invoice office, two pots of coffee steaming.

"So the next guy comes in, and he goes, 'doctor! doctor! I've been

raped by a giraffe!'"

"Ah, fuckin hell Tim, I've heard it, man." I rubbed my eyes.

"`Show us your arse.`"

"Yeah yeah, fuck's sake, it's crap."

He leaned back in his chair, amused. "Alright then, Jester," his arms flapped. "You thinka one."

I sighed and stretched my arms up. Blew out air. "What's this?" I started to dig the floor with an invisible spade.

Tim laughed and shook his head. "Dunno."

"Fred West getting his kids up for school."

"That isn't funny, it's sick."

But he laughed within the next few seconds.

The training room, more pots of coffee, four feet on a table.

"I mean the pay was shite, but that didn't matter, I was like you back then, I was still livin at home. Anyway, I was in the computer room with these fuck-off systems and... Like, all of a sudden the door slammed, and somebody locked it from t'outside."

"Was it the night watchman?" I asked.

"No, no, shurrupamminute, lemme finish."

"Soz," I folded my arms. "Go on. J'want another coffee?"

"No, you're alright, anyway, listen man. I tugged at the door and knocked on it and shouted out and stuff but nubdie eard me, so I thought shit, maybe I ought to like, ring downstairs, see what's going on. Anyway, one't fuckin teleprinters starts up... Printin like mad, fuckin spillin out all these 666 numbers and sayin 'you're gonna die! you're gonna die!'"

"Fuck off," I laughed. "Bollocks, man."

Tim sucked his tobacco and sat up, "I swear down, spewing it out like nobody's toilet, and then it like- stopped and somebody unlocked the door. I tell you, I was out in the corridor less ner a second later and thi was nubdie there, not a fuckin sausage. I went down-stairs and there was nubdie, man. It was totally fuckin empty, whole fuckin buildin - bare as monkey's arse."

"Crock-a-shit," I stood up. "Bollocks, man."

"I swear, man. Where you goin?"

"Back in't staffroom, do you have to smoke for fuck's sake?"

"Yeah."

Half past two. Snow still falling.

"Alright, you ready?"

"Yeah."

.....

"Elephant."

"Trunk."

"Swimming."

"Eh?" I laughed.

"Swimming." Tim insisted, waving at me. "Go on."

"Ah... Bikini."

"Breasts."

I started giggling. "Muff."

"Cheese."

"What?" I cracked up. "Fuck off, you can't have cheese."

"Muff-cheese," Tim elaborated. "S'like dick-cheese only harder."

Five past three, same place, looking out of the windows again.

"Why didn't you marry her then?"

Tim shrugged. "Ah, fuck knows man. Never really thought much about marriage, mate. I'm a traveller. I surf the country," He smiled. "What about you?"

"I don't travel around anywhere."

"No you fuckin maroon, I mean who's your special lady?"

I shrugged. "Nobody."

Tim sniggered. "So it's a copy of Mayfair and fist is it?"

"Somethin like that." I muttered, then louder, "You know Tim I once saw my sister..."

He looked at me. "You once saw your sister," He laughed. "Why, is she kept locked up or somethin?"

"No, listen," I insisted. "I once saw my sister... Like, doin it... With another girl, you know?"

"So she's gay," Tim coughed and docked his hundredth cigarette. "S'fuckin common enough man, no big deal. I've got an Uncle who's as gay as a yella duster. I think Russell's sister's a bit of a lez-"

"Yeh but Tim, she saw me, man. She saw me spyin on her."

He grinned. "Oooh fuck. What did she do?"

I closed my eyes. Recalled. "Waved me into her room, started sayin, come on, come on Mark, come on."

Silence.

Tim broke it with a whisper. "There was this guy once, called Chris Rogers, and when he was at home he used to lie back on his bed with nothin but a pair of headphones on, and he used to pull his pud, like, to the music, you know?"

"Anyway, one day he woke up, bollock-naked and with his hand round his willy... And there was a cup of coffee on the bedside table. His mum had brought it in whilst he was asleep."

Tim sniffed up, continued watching the snow. Neither of us laughed. I think we wanted to - I know I did, despite everything - but... We just didn't. Couldn't.

"Did you join in?" The question I had dreaded and yet hoped Tim would ask, finally here, floating. Waiting. "Dumatter man, don't worry about it-"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes." I looked at him. "I did."

He smiled.

FAILURE 1 AREA 01

SHUTTLE 39

"Can't be upstairs."

"Bout over by't TV's and stuff?"

"Nah... I don't think so, they wired it up from back to front, man. I think it's area six, that."

"What's shuttle thirty nine? Fuck's that mean?"

"It's one of the sensors or something. Tell you what, let's have a roam around."

I guess if I hadn't have told him about my sister, hadn't have torn a gap through all the joke-talk, we'd have been in there all night... All morning.

Walking down through the near-black store, heading for the warehouse the Arse-End, the Tradesman's Entrance, I could smell fate. Black fate.

"Where's area one?"

"S'where we're goin, I think."

"I'd have thought it'd've been-"

"Hang on, looka that, man."

We stopped beside one of the firedoors. Tim kicked a small silver lump on the floor to the left of an extinguisher, until it twisted round and made contact with another.

"That's it," he laughed and stared at me. "Fuckin unbelievable isn't it, that's fuckin it, that's the fault, s'gotta be."

"That's shuttle 39?"

"Yeah."

"Looks like a silver testicle. What do you think?"

"Yeah. One of Arnie's bollocks."

So much time watching snow fall from the sky and now we were out in it, lingering, shivering, wondering if anything else should be said.

"You gonna be alright walkin, then?"

"Yeah," I zipped my coat up. "Sure, no probs."

"Take it easy man."

"You too."

He nodded, turned, put his head down and began to wade across the carpark. Seconds later he was just a struggling dark blur in the animated mist - laughter, jokes and forbidden secrets forgotten.

I got home alright. Tim didn't. He tripped and fell down an embankment somewhere north of Weathercock Farm, died of hyperthermia.

do you remember those times, those times with friends surrounded when the world you thought was shiny turned out tight and fist-pounded by the inbetween-Hollywoods the endless days and nights when nothing seemed to entertain but drink and drugs and street fights that lasted beyond one episode approaching midnight hour the hour of fluttering fantasies nothing but thick and sour

water splashing up across your face as you look at yourself in the mirror and remember what you thought you'd never want to remember

"Mark, you awake or what? Come on lad, it's half-seven, gerrout the bathroom. Kate wants a pee, she's got school, you know."

"Won't be long."

## 1.7 The Groon

T h e   G r o o n

she flicked channels a few times, found nothing, hit standby. the screen popped, faded, crackled: everything went dark and quiet. forty five seconds later she realised that silence was wrong at this hour and she sat up and scratched her leg and glanced at the door.

"sarah?" she called and her voice bounced back as though it hadn't even left the room. "you alright in there? you're very quiet."

probably on the bed with jenna reading a boy-magazine, she thought and stretched and yawned before deciding to make an investigation. she picked her cup off the floor and carried it into the kitchen, slippers slap-banging on the lino.

"would you and jenna like some supper?" she offered, drying her hands on the tea-towel. she caught sight of herself in the kitchen

mirror and paused to have a look at her teeth. "sarah," she said absently. "whatcha doin."

slap-bang, slap-bang, slap-hushing across the carpet, scratching her front teeth with her fingernails. she leaned against sarah's bedroom door, knocked twice, "sarah answer me when I'm talkin to you, you're not a little kid anymore." she took the handle, pushed it down, opened the door. "sarah?"

jenna was alone in near-darkness, on her knees, on the floor, weird light reflecting diamonds on her cheeks. she broke a stare as hard as iron and sobbed and looked up. "wha?" she murmured.

"oh god are you /alright/? what's wrong? what's happened?"

the girl shivered and wiped snot and shook her head.

"jenna what's going on where's sarah? where is she?" tossing the pillows, lifting the mattress, scanning the room. and then she saw the blouse - torn, buttons gone; feckles of blood, still wet. "jenna for god's sake where's... where's my daughter, where's she gone?" a sudden, simple revelation; she breathed out, hand on her chest. "is she in the bathroom? has she hurt herself?"

jenna's eyes twinkled, her praying body and outstretched arm like an alien silhouette against the wide-open door.

"in there," she wept. "shiz in there."

shuffling. "in /where/? what're you /talkin/ about?"

jenna was pointing at the wardrobe. there was a thin gap between the doors, through which a delicate bluish light was beaming.

and dancing and tickling across jenna's glistening face.

\*

and now that she was on level sixteen with full weaponry and four lives, she was gonna kick some real alien-arse.

"sarah will you turn that thing down and go to sleep! it's monday tomorrow, you've gotta be up for school."

"okay mum," she yelled and snatched the remote. she hit the mute button. tossed the remote away. carried on blasting.

"I can still hear you. switch it /off/. bedtime."

sarah made the main menu pop up and selected /save game/ and sighed and threw the joypad on the floor.

"night /night/," she shouted and ducked under the covers. she could still see the aliens flying about even when she shut her eyes... trapped in the box of the screen like white wasps. she squeezed her fists. "go way," but they wouldn't stop attacking and exploding. the covers came back up. some of the aliens disappeared... but then she looked at the curtains and saw a very big face in them and ducked back under again. "go way go way go way," she hissed. the aliens did, eventually. she wasn't so sure about the face.

game over, cow, game over

cow. /blink/. cow. /blink/.

sarah woke up, sweating. her watch glowed half past two. she moaned silently and rolled onto her back, looked up at the roof.

"pow," she fired at the black smear she could see directly over-head. "pow... pow..." she made her hand into a gun. pointed. aimed.

"bang!" she whispered loudly and the blob fell on her face, she gasped, it was a /spider/, it moved. it tickled, she jerked forward, onto her knees, onto her feet "gerroff gerroff gerroff," she raked her pyjamas frantically, kicked herself out of bed.

and then she watched, shivering, as the tiny menace legged across



the carpet towards the radiator.

sarah breathed. got back into bed. made the quilt go right round her head like a nun. no not a nun, nun's are stupid... a helmet. yeah, a helmet. she closed her eyes. blew a fleet of aliens away. opened them. the wardrobe was there. closed her eyes again... opened. wardrobe. just don't look at it, alright? closed. aliens. open. wardrobe. the wardrobe doors. the wardrobe doors /moving/.

"go way, stop it," she told herself and rolled around, managing, somehow, to keep the helmet intact. she breathed deeply again and studied the patterns on the wallpaper. "pow," she muttered when she saw aliens flying round in the darkest bits. "pow, pow... puh..."

she gave up breathing and listened. something was creaking. her pulse started getting louder, began to pound away in her ears and crackle against the quilt.

the aliens that launched homing missiles and firebombs on level sixteen. the spider, dropping onto her face from the ceiling like a piece of black fluff. and now the creaking. the creaking of the wardrobe door as the groon came out to slide it's withered hands up and over her bed, cold, dusty, sharp-finger-nailed, an egg-shaped, massive-mouthed head coming right on round... right round the edges of-

"no," she said hoarsely. her throat was dry and stinging. she took some quick breaths and ran a few of mr rondell's shorter prayers through her mind. then, she rolled over to face the wardrobe, and saw that one of the doors was wide open.

joojon isp.

saa?

jenna prodded her in the ribs. "sah-rah!"

"what?" she swayed around. opened her eyes. "whatjoo want?"

"joo wanna /crisp/?" jenna was holding a bag of walkers cheese and onion under sarah's nose. sarah sniffed at them and nearly puked.

"no I don't," she glanced across the playground. "has bell gone?"

"not yet, s'only five-past. why are you so tired today?" jenna pushed her glasses up. "have you been masturbation?"

sarah narrowed her eyes. "have I been /what?/"

"masturbationing... or something." jenna shrugged. "I heard rachel berry talkin about it in geography. she said it makes you tired. joo wanta crisp?"

"/no/, gerrem outta me face, they stink."

"so why're you so tired then?"

sarah closed her eyes - they closed so easily - and tried not to remember why she was so tired. she saw aliens, now proper, big white wasps with wings and antennas and lethal stings. she saw spiders on the roof, not just the odd black smudge but a lake of tar. and then there was the wardrobe. and the chair. the rattling chair.

"I haven't slept much. s'cos, you see, last night..." she stopped and looked into jenna's blank, freckled face. what the hell did jenna know? she didn't even any breasts yet. "I spent too long masturbationing." sarah decided, nodding slowly. "you're right, s'why I'm tired."

"oh," was jenna's unenthusiastic response. "joo still fancy julian davey?"

"yeah." said sarah, almost in a whisper. she did. she had dreams about him.

"but he's a fifth year, tho innie? sowow can ya?"

"I just can alright. s'better than fancying james harris."

"harris is cool, he kicks arse."

"harris /is/ an arse," sarah spat. "a complete arse-/head/. least julian doesn't go round punchin people."

jenna shrugged. she screwed her crisp packet up, let go of it, got another one out, opened it.

"joo want one?" she offered.

sarah didn't respond: she was asleep.

that night sarah couldn't even get past level nine so she turned the machine off and sat there in the dark, playing with her fingers. she fell asleep and woke up with a jerk and made sure the chair was still in front of the wardrobe door - which it was, thank christ - and then she fell asleep again and woke up at ten past three.

she was almost out for the third time when the rattling started, soft at first, then harder, louder. she sat up with her helmet still tight round her head and stifled a cry when she saw the wardrobe door banging against the chair, like something was trying to get out.

if she ran into mum's bedroom and woke her up, sarah knew there'd be trouble. the noise would stop, as if it had never even been there, and she'd be yelled at, furiously. /'go back to bed, sarah, stop being so silly, you're not a child anymore.'/

'no?' she thought as the chair nudged its way further and further across the carpet. 'then what the hell am I? grown up?' she let her helmet slip down and her hands join together, "lord in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done-

whack-bang, the chair fell, the wardrobe door sprung open and tottered... stopped. there was something in the middle of the blackness, it looked like sticks of chalk stood up in a row, and there was a gentle wheezing noise.

"what do you want?" sarah uttered the words so quietly she barely heard them. the pieces of chalk started getting bigger. sarah jerked when she saw the sparkle of what she knew were the evil eyes of the groon and her sudden movement cause the monster to react: it slipped into the blackness like a shark's head in an ocean of oil.

she'd hidden a torch and her mum's camera under her bed and now she remembered. she leaned over, slowly, shuddering violently, keeping her head up all the time, found the camera, nudged it, grabbed the torch, snatched herself back up, clicked it on, pointed it at the wardrobe.

there were shoes and clothes and coathangers piled up at the bottom like a scrapheap and some muddy foot-print-shapes at the back. but the groon wasn't there.

she climbed out of bed, taking the quilt with her like a massive cape, and shifted the chair and bent down and peered into the wardrobe. the polo-shaped torch beam ran across a pair of wellingtons, a dirty cardigan, a pair of illuminous gloves, and then across a large, black hole in the wall, big enough for a child to fit through.

the rattling of a crisp packet.

"joo want one sarah?"

"no, tek em away."

out in the yard again. sat down on the edge of the playing fields. julian davey not far off. sarah wishing he was closer.

"it was funny when you fell asleep this morning." jenna sniffed. "I thought it was funny, anyway."

"jenna will you stay over at my house tonight? please?"

munching. "can't. I'm lookin after timmy."

"tomorrow then?"

"okay."

"thanks."

"s'okay. sure you dote wanna crisp?"

"I'm gonna go talk to julian."

jenna gasped and started coughing and choking. "what?" she belched.

"tonight," said sarah dreamily and she thought: 'I can't go to mum about this one. I can't. mum wouldn't understand.'

she'd observed him drinking and laughing with his mates down here many times before. such a dark and wet and horrible hole... why did they all come here? all the big boys and girls. I mean, where's the fun? what do you do? stand there yapping and holding a glass of beer? is that it? is /that/ what you do? she wondered.

bright lights were the only refuge in this hell where people got punched and swore all the time and yelled and screamed and threw up on the pavement. but sarah didn't dare go near those lights.

she was short and pale and, although three boys in her class all wanted to go out with her - out where she had no idea, but she knew what it meant - she didn't think she looked very pretty. kinda plain. ordinary. she was just 'growing up front' as mum called it. nothing else. the boys didn't /really/ like her. they liked /those bits/ of her but... so what? if they didn't like the rest, what was the point?

you have to be really sexy to go down there, she thought, watching short skirts wave and hands slide across arses. and then she spotted julian davey, arguing with someone near a bus shelter.

she whispered some of mr rondells prayers again - longer ones this time - and then staggered out from her hiding place in the bushes and made a run for those bright, evil lights.

this was level sixteen, only for real.

she walked passed the busy, rainbow-flashing pub and started to make her way towards julian. he was still arguing frenziedly with a big, blonde-haired girl and waving his arms around and shouting 'effing this' and 'effing that'. he sounded mean and frightening. sarah hesitated. maybe he was drunk. maybe he'd punch her, or be sick on her, or something. maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

but despite her negative thoughts she soon found herself standing in front of the yelling couple, arms behind her back. it was a cold night and yet she was sweating, terribly.

"-tell you in the first place, you wouldn'ta listened."

"what? /I/ wouldn'tve listened? I can't believe you're sayin that, after everythin I've fuckin told you-"

"-go home and forget it, alright, just forget it."

"-expect me to fuckin forget it, I can't just-"

"whatjoo want?" the blonde-haired girl looked down at sarah. "wotja want? eh?"

"I need to talk to julian." said sarah nervously.

the blonde-girl looked at him. "zat your sister?"

julian rubbed his chin. glanced at sarah. "no, I don't know who she is, just tell her to fuck off."

"look, fuck off, alright, he doesn't /want/ to talk to you."

"but please, it's important," sarah insisted.

julian drank the last of his beer and smashed the glass on the floor. he turned to sarah, head down, hair overhanging. "whatjoo want kid, eh? whatjoo want?"

"I want to speak with you."

"you're speakin with me right now, whatjoo want?"

"privately, I need to talk with you privately."

the blonde-haired girl shouted, "fuck you julian I don't need this, alright, I don't need it." and she clattered away down the street.

julian watched her go and then turned to face sarah again. he offered her a weak smile.

"fuck her, shiz a slut anyway," he decided. "am off for another drink, joo want one?"

sarah shook her head. "I need your help."

"well you can't have it," he said quickly. "what is it? you gettin picked on or summing? go see james harris, he'll sortchoo out. I don't help people, alright? go home, s'past your bedtime."

sarah moved infront of him. "please, I'll do anythin."

"look- gerrout the way. I'm not in the mood for this, alright?"

"I'll pay you, I just need you to help me, there's something in my wardrobe, please--"

"alright, come here ya little pain-in-the-arse," julian picked her up. she didn't struggle: his hand and gone under her skirt, she could feel his fingers against her bum. she pulled her head away from his shoulder and looked up at his face. 'I could reach him from here,' she thought. 'I could lean forward and kiss him.'

but before she had chance to make any kind of decision, she was on the slippery ground again under the shadow of a big wall, possibly the side of the pub. it was dark and there was nobody around. she was glad, until julian pulled up his sleeve.

"see that? see those fuckin cuts? that's what happens when you give a shit, alright. that's what happens. kay?" he buttoned up. "so just go home, lassie, alright? just go home."

"my name's sarah." she croaked, pressing herself against the wall. julian's breath really stunk.

"I don't give a fuck what your name is. just don't hang around down here, alright? joo know what the boys are like? eh? do ya? they wanna rip your clothes off," he raked her blouse open, breaking skin with his fingernails. she looked down at herself and back up again, freezing cold and stinging with pain,

"why didjoo do that?" she sobbed, tears falling down her face.

julian stared at her, mouth open. "oh god," he tried to seal her clothing back together with his fingertips. "oh shhhit, I didn't mean it... I didn't mean to do that, I didn't." he ended up on his knees, kissing her stomach, which was now bare and streaked with bits of blood. "I'm sorry, god I'm sorry." he started to cry as he cuddled her. "I'm so sorry."

sarah shuffled away from him. at first he said, "no, wait, you're not gonna tell anyone are you? oi kid please- /please/" but sarah didn't answer. she untangled herself from his arms, found her way out of the darkness, wiped her eyes and ran.

ran and ran until she felt sick and wanted to drop onto the ground and die.

and when she got home, jenna was there. she hadn't even got past level one, hopless cow.

"hiya sarah, my mum and dad aren't going out after all, thought I'd come over. I'm ungrly, you got any crisps?" she got killed my an alien and threw the joypad down. "S'too hard that game." she stood up. bent down, pulled a sock up. turned. "so where've you b..."

sarah was crouched against the door, crying a bit and holding her blouse together. she had blood on her hands.

"oh god," jenna mouthed, then in a big rush: "jesus what happened

to you where's your mum let's get your mum come on let's get-"  
"shurrup jenna, I don't want my mum."  
jenna hesitated. "sarah let's get your mum, you need your mum-"  
"/I said don't need my fuckin mum, alright?/ just... shurrup!"  
jenna took a few steps back.  
"Am... am sorry for shoutin," sarah continued quietly. "but I don't need my mum, okay?"  
jenna nodded slowly, wide-eyed. "whahappened?" she knelt down on the floor, tears building up. "whahappened to you?"  
"nothin. I went to see julian, that's all."  
"did /he/ make you like that? did /he/ do that?"  
sarah didn't know whether to lie or to tell the truth. instead she ignored the question and crawled over to her bed. she took her blouse off, threw it away, thrust her hands under the mattress.  
"am goin in," she said, shivering violently, sliding her fingers round the torch. "am gonna go kick some alien-arse."  
a few moments later, topless and goose-pimpled, she was climbing inside the wardrobe. and not long after that, she was sliding into the groon's hole.

## 1.8 DoppleGanger

D o p p l e G a n g e r

the ignition dies  
"don't be long."  
"getcha hand off me."  
"just don't be long okay?"  
"okay just get your stupid hand off me."  
a click, a struggle, a gust of cold air, she's leaning against the window, breathing on the glass, cutting shapes in the mist with her red-nailed fingers  
time tick ticks  
the car door opens he's back he's returned he climbs into the driving seat and shuts the door  
"that were quick. how much did you put in?" she doesn't care it's not her money it's his but there's nothing to talk about - the sky's black it's past midnight she doesn't want to go home, too dull, too grey, she wants to make love again in the back seat, see her toes wiggling in the air - drawing dinosaurs on hazy windows  
he inserts his key turns the engine on revs three times  
she sits up. "I wanna get it on again steve," she tells him blonde locks dangling fingers plucking strands "joo want to?"  
"yes," is his answer and although his voice sounds different she smiles to herself and chews hair  
the car begins to roll out of the station full of juice now like her ready to go ready to go on and on and on perhaps forever squeezing the leather in the warm back seat  
"pull in by the woods, there's never anybody there,"  
his hand whips down chucks the gear stick and she sees that his hand is hairy now not smooth like it should be and she laughs to herself because that's impossible, impossible but her stomach rolls when she looks at his face his face his face  
his face isn't right isn't steves and she moans

"don't say anything, don't do anything,"  
she coughs and slithers and hides her trembling fingers. "who are you what're you doing where's steve?"  
but dear god it is steve, she thinks, she thinks, dear god it is steve - but different, she thinks  
"my name's daniel," the imposter tells her those sparkling eyes never leaving the gravel  
she wants to cry now as she stares at those hairs, those long hairs, she wants to cry now as she stares into the void  
the hairy hand flicks the stick again sharp yellow fingernails flecks of white and brown, fine-pointed for tearing off clothes and raking through flesh  
"look you've got the wrong car, I think you've got the wrong-"  
"shut up."  
"where's steve please tell me where steve-"  
"shut up okay just shut up."  
the amber lights flicker and flash like glowing wasps on a conveyor belt - dying vanishing fading away once they'd buzzed and blurred and stolen away  
her dreams in a dreamboat floating away and she feels the imposters eyelids blinking reflecting, glistening in every window and every mirror - bang crack  
a click-snap, a glance down, the wipers wave, rain splashes, rainbow shatters and she's dreaming again -\*- she's dreaming again but this time he's looking at her, right at her, looking, looking, looking looking so hard his head's shaped wrong  
"they used to stroke us nikki," he whispers. "they used to stroke us till we were stiff and put rods down our things."  
his jaws move up and down at least a foot, oh christ a foot, white teeth clash-bash like an animal in a cage and his eyes, they aren't there - just black holes, not there - as if his face has caved in, imploded back, pulling her in  
both hands fast on the wheel he drives on, still facing her, still dragging her, still grinning and death-staring like his neck's been broken  
"said we were creatures of the night nikki creatures of the night," hissed the daniel-steve-misshapen-head-massive-jawed thing. "stay at home they said, look out the window they said, and I saw you everytime nikki, I saw you everytime with that boy that looks like me. Who is me, who is me, who is a better... version of me."  
wasps long gone the night's getting darker and the monsters on the windows are getting longer getting sharper, branches outside tickling metal banging glass, daniel's sockets getting deeper and she asked  
"where are we going please tell me where-"  
"shut up," his neck cracks back. "Into the woods to get rid of your boyfriend, me and you that's where we're going, so just shut up okay, just shut up."  
she remembers last night, woke up, cold sweating, bib of vomit chin-dripping, still running between her breasts  
steve was dead, cut to ribbons brain steaming; could a dream have made the journey right out there, again? from mind to earth and back again?  
screaming in her guts and yet silent outside she rides and recalls with this creature of the night, which is steve it is steve, she thinks, she thinks, real steve real steve - but different she thinks  
"how far?" her own voice now stable and secure  
"not far." the thing replies driving on through thick trees below

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fragments of blue moonlight, shattered plate, glued in the sky and she turns, looks back and wonders why

so little eye contact between boy and girl always down, further down, over breast over groin, slide up kid, up, across legs over muscles, dark tan bright white - isn't that what you want?

none of that understanding gaze, don't want love or emotion to spread its blinding haze over sex over sex when mum and dad aren't looking and sex over sex when the teachers aren't looking

were we adults back then oh steve were we adults because I feel like a child now driving through the woods with this thing this man this flesh-eating killer which was torn and realised from the monsters on the windows which I drew for you

which I drew for you but you never came back

"you ready then or what?"

she lands - slap-bang - in the middle of her nightmare the car's stopped moving, no sign of a highway out the windows which are dancing and running with rain and mist like her eyes - soaked and blurring - and she thinks she's pissed

"perhaps I am." the words trickle when she dares to meet those circles which are filled up again with eyes - steve's eyes - real steve because he's back again he's back, smooth-skinned and sitting up

"where's he gone?" she whispers

"eh? s'matter?" steve's hairstyle shakes. "you wanted to come here. You ready or what?"

eye contact for more than three seconds; he slaps her, hard, and cries: "don't /ever/ look at me like that. /ever/. right?"

"yes."

"you ever look at me like that again and I'll kill you, right?"

"yes."

"you got it?"

"yes, I thought you were somebody else," she whispers mouth open tongue dry

and she turns and looks back and wonders why she's here in the first place with a guy like this in the front seat of a clapped-out car, jeans drenched with piss

cos he'll smack her again when he smells the smell and sees the stains he'll punch her. And he'll break a tooth and cut her cheeks cos girls are just shit.

car door opens

"nikki, oi, where you goin?"

her feet splash onto dry leaves

"come here you bitch, whatchoo doin?"

another door

"get him daniel get him."

something else happens then: there's noise and leaves munching, and an endless growl and the sound of bones crunching but she doesn't turn round to see the thing she's seen before, she turns and sees daniel now wiping his chin and waving

with a body on the floor strange face strange looks, he clammers in the car with the monsters in the mist, reverses out smashing branches blasting blue smoke

and dear god it's steve for a moment she thinks, dear god it is steve - but different she thinks

## 1.9 Bleeding

B l e e d i n g

they hate my guts because i write too much they hate my guts because i don't write enough they hate my guts because i'm inbetween. why don't they put pen to paper and write themselves i wonder

i wonder

perhaps it's because of this:

Jo Jo help me Jo God help me Jo please help me come back don't leave me here with this it can't be happening-

I stopped breathing and listened to the house. Silence. Just my heart-beat, faster than a child's should ever have to go. Thundering through the dark like a breakless express train.

I was sharing the wardrobe with the monsters and ghosts. They were nothing anymore. Nothing compared to...

\*\*\*?

Nodontthinkthat.

NEVERTHINKTHAT.

NEVER.

Just... shhhh, don't... think that. It wasn't \*\*\*, it was drink. Jo said what it did and I nodded, promised I'd stay away, but I never really took her seriously did I?

Oh God.

I shuffled around, tried to get cosy. Couldn't. Too many shoes underneath my bare feet.

What did he do, Carl? What...?

I'd had a bad dream, couldn't remember it now but it was a bad one with Jo screaming and tree men and razorblades and Martians and fuck knows what else. I'd woken abruptly, a shriek of terror behind my lips, sweat pouring down my back. I'd run into the bathroom, \*\*\* had been peeing in the toilet and stopped and caught me, prevented me from screaming and waking up Chris and Mum...

"Shhhh-

"\*\*\*! \*\*\*! The fire! The fire!"

"Shhh Carl, it's okay, just a dream, just a dream..."

"But... Jo..."

"What?"

"Jo... I mean, nothing, doesn't matter..."

"Shhh, now... take it easy..."

I cried a bit in his arms, ridding myself of the imaginary terrors, sniffing at his strange just-been-out-with-Uncle-John's smell... what was that stuff? Beer? Yes, it had to be beer. God it was so strong... and he smelt of smoke too.

He crouched down. I whispered in his ear: "It was so real \*\*\*, so real, like there were aliens in the room and chopping Chris up and I thought... I thought..."

I felt suddenly cold. Moved away. He'd pulled my bottoms down to my ankles. Touching my knees.

"What're you doing?" I murmoured.

"John'ssssss daughter..." He slurred and blinked his eyes slowly, like he was in slow-motion or something. "Legsss, like yours..."

He touched my legs and I made a funny noise, not a cry or a scream but a croaky sound like a frog. I saw Jo's step-father stood in the hallway of her home, recoiling from the actions of his imaginary

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pistols.

/Howya doin' cowboy?/

I laughed unsurely as \*\*\* stroked my legs and babbled on about Uncle John's girl... something about a dress... little lumps, like Mum when she was younger... I couldn't understand what he was on about.

"I don't need to pee." I sniggered and reached down for my pants. He caught my hands before I got there.

"Wait, wait, bet she had like... this-" he grabbed hold of my thing and pushed it right back underneath me so I was flat at the front. I started sobbing and whispering "no" because it reminded me of Joanne, how she'd touched me there and shown me what hers was like, asked me to touch her there too, and she'd giggled and sat on me and made my thing go into hers, so warm it had been, and now I felt sick because that wasn't anything to do with grown-ups, grown-ups didn't know about stuff like that not in this way, NOT-

"I'll-go-back-to-sleep-now," I hissed, shuddering.

\*\*\* stopped doing what he was doing and picked me up in a cuddle. At first I tried to battle him away... but then he was \*\*\* again, not Weird \*\*\*, but \*\*\*, and I said, "Okay," and we headed off for the bedroom, where Mum lay sleeping on her own.

I fell asleep pretty quick.

Dreamt of nothing, as far as I can remember.

Woke up with \*\*\* on me, nearly crushing me-

"\*\*\*! \*\*\*-NO!" but it was a silent cry, because I couldn't speak anymore because he was rubbing himself up and down on me and my pyjamas were stretched all over and I could hear him whispering with his eyes closed how sexy someone was, and he was grabbing the skin on my chest, hard, painfully, and I thought maybe, like, he thought perhaps I was Mum, or John's Daughter-

HOWCOULDHETHINKOFDOINGTHATTO-

-or maybe he was showing me a secret only adults shared but I didn't like it I didn't like it, so I fought and I cried out for Mum to wake up but she didn't hear me, then I fell out of bed backwards and ran into my own bedroom and upto Chris's bunk and I shook him and shook him-

"CHRIS! CHRIS PLEASE WAKE UP!"

-and I kept on shaking him and eventually he did wake up with his eyes closed and his hair all one-sided.

"What do you want, nobber?" he croaked thickly, and I climbed up onto his bed, shivering and crying, and he started pushing me away and calling me names, so I fell back again, fell on the floor, and started crying into the carpet for Joanne to come back and for us to run away like she said.

I saw the wardrobe.

Jumped in it, closed it, cuddled up to myself, sweating.

Sometimes

I think I'm still there.

"-the planets in order. Turn to page eighty six. What's the first planet in the solar system... erm... let's see... who hasn't spoken today... ah yes, Lisa."

"Huh? What miss?"

The class tittered.

"Pay attention young lady. What's the first planet in the solar system?"

"Ummm..." the girl flicked pages hurriedly. "Ummm..."

"Page eighty six for goodness sake! Yes Dianne?"

"Mercury, miss."

"Good, excellent. How many of you think--"

"Miss!"

"What is it Michael?"

"Miss it's Carl Roberts! He's cutting himself with a broken test tube miss!"

I looked up, grinning, and shouted, "MERCURY VENUS EARTH MARS JUPITER SATURN URANUS NEPTUNE PLUTO." then looked down again and carried on making my arm bleed.

Nurse Wood ran her finger over my Personal Record File, stopped about half way down, then picked up the phone on her desk.

"Don't." I said and she looked at me, wide-eyed.

"I'm sorry, lovey? What did you say?"

"It was just an accident." I murmured. "I smashed it by accident."

"Carl," she put the phone down again and turned in her seat. "You were cutting your own skin. Drawing on it. Do you want to tell me why?"

"Don't ring my mum up," I told her, picking my nails. "She'll get ill and have to go to hospital."

"Alright, I wont," the nurse decided after a moments thought. She stood up, scanned my Personal File again, then put it down and walked over to me. She crouched, resting her hands on my knees. I didn't mind, she was okay. Very pretty, too.

(probably a monster though, like everyone else).

"Are you being bullied?" she whispered, blinking slowly. "You can tell me Carl, I'll help you, I promise I'll make it stop."

"No teachers can make it stop," I told her gently, hot, thick tears gliding down my face. "They always come back, they always remember, no matter what teachers do. It's just..."

"What, Carl?" she was almost on my lap now. "What? Tell me?"

I avoided her eyes and sighed deeply. "Nothing."

"You can tell me everything--"

"I can't, you don't understand, you're a girl and you're grown up and you don't have to worry--"

"I have lots of things to worry about. Believe me."

"Not things like mine."

"What are your things Carl?"

I bit my shuddering lips. "I-I-I can't say."

"Why not?"

"Cos it.. hurr... hurrrts." I swallowed flem. "It makes me go sick, cos it hurts like I've been stabbed."

"Jesus," she whispered... and then I was pushing her away and telling her I didn't want her to touch me. She said she was sorry about a million times and I just nodded and kept my mouth firmly closed.

"I know a girl like you," she told me, sat on the floor. The bell rang and we waited about three or four minutes for the noise of the changing of classes to subside. "She used to dress all scruffy and not bother what she looked like. She was pale, like you--"

I shot my head up, breathing quickly. "What was her name? What was her name, what was it, what was--"

"Sandy," said the nurse and my momentarily-repaired heart shattered into pieces again. "Sandy Beckworth."

"Does she still go to this school?"

"Yes, but I think she's left now. She was in the fifth form, but she

might be coming in to say goodbye to the teachers. Do you want me to ask her if she'll talk to you?"

I shook my head briskly: fifth formers were evil, they were all sick bastards and I hated them. "No, no, doesn't matter."

"If you do have her problem..." said the nurse. "You must, /must/ tell somebody, Carl. If you don't, nobody will ever know and it'll just keep going on and on." she sat up, touched my legs again. \*\*\* flashed through my mind, but I forced his image away. "Carl, God you don't have to put up with it-"

"You don't know nothing," I protested, sniffing up. "You don't know what you're on about, nobody does, nobody knows-"

"You're wrong," she shook her head. "Love, you're so wrong."

"I'm /not/ wrong! Just fuck off will you."

She closed her eyes. "Don't swear at me. I'm only trying to help."

"Sorry," I whispered quickly. The eventual realisation that I'd just told a virtual teacher to 'fuck off' made my stomach go funny.

"It's alright, let's forget it."

"You won't give me a detention will you?"

"Course not," she smiled. "I'm not authorized anyway."

"Oh," I looked around the nurse's room curiously. It was small and narrow, painted pale green with charts and posters stuck on the wall, and filing cabinets, and a settee and a chair, and even a sink. I couldn't see any medical stuff, though.

"What do you think of my room then?" breathed the nurse.

"S'okay."

"Would you like a drink of coffee or something?"

"Don't like it."

"Tea?"

"Not thirsty."

"Do you want to have a wash?"

"No." I shook my head: that was a stupid question.

"Would you like to lie down for a bit?"

"I'm not tired."

"How about I take you home?"

Now that sounded interesting. "Can you drive?"

"Yes. I've got a car outside in the carpark. A while Volvo, have you seen it?"

"No."

"Do you want to go home?"

"I... dunno."

"We could always pretend to your mum you accidentally cut yourself. Or we could hide a plaster under your sleeve. I can keep checking it for you. What do you say?"

I nodded. The nurse stood up and slid a bunch of keys off her desk.

"Miss Wood?"

"My name's Cathy," she smiled. She had a nice, big smile.

"I'm- sorry for swearing." I said quietly.

"Hey, fuck it." she sniggered and gave me a pat on the head.

"Stop."

"What?"

"Please stop."

The nurse stopped the car beside the school minibus, pulled up the handbrake and switched off the ignition. There was a brief jangle of keys, then another sigh, then a silence.

"She said don't come looking for me."

"Who did?"

"My... friend." I shrugged. Calling Jo my girlfriend seemed wrong for some reason. Maybe she had been for a short length of time... the time in the woods at nightfall, especially... but it wasn't right, it just wasn't /right/.

"Carl, will you tell me about this friend of yours?"

"Promise you won't say anything to anybody else, not even your bestest friend or your mum or dad or /anybody/?"

"I promise." she crossed her heart with her fingers. Paul James had done that, which meant it was a proper method of promising, and I was happy with it.

And so it all came out in a big mess of hysterical words, yelling whispering, tears, giggles, coughing, choking, the rush almost made me sick. The sheer relief of telling someone, making someone understand how badly it had all fucked me up, it was so good, so deeply renewing.

"-and Paul went and I went back to Jo and Jo said we should just forget about Paul and go on our own but I said I couldn't but she never really believed me, not ever, until the end when we split up by the river, but anyway, we sat on a park bench and she started like, coming closer, looking into my eyes and sayin she'd never seen me before and all this fuckin weird shit... and she touched my face and said allsorts of mad stuff and then we played a game where I had to chase her and when I caught her I had to kiss her cheek or maybe her arm or what ever she said until it got dark when... when..." I started sobbing. "Nothing happened, nothing, it doesn't matter, but she's gone now... she-just she's... like, back home and the trees are stoppin me goin, they did last Sunday when I tried goin on my bike... and... and that's it."

"Cry," Nurse Wood whispered, leaning over onto my seat and brushing my hair lightly with her fingers. "When it hurts, just cry... you're going to be okay, Carl."

"Can we go to your room now?" I sniffled. "I need a drink."

"Just-" she closed her eyes briefly. "Tell me if what was happening to Joanne was... or is... happening to you."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I'm okay."

"Carl-"

"I'm okay, alright!" I unclipped the car door, got out, slammed it. I stood against the car and stared up at the cloudy sky.

"I'm sorry." the nurse apologised, locking up. "But you can talk to me if you want to. Any time. I can give you my phone number if you want so you can ring me, or my address if you want to write letters. Carl? Are you listening?"

"I'm fine." I whispered to myself firmly. "Fine fine fine."

When He came home the next night, and mum was asleep, I got up and went to him, like a slave goes to his master. We stood looking at each other across the tiny hallway, silent, staring.

Not \*\*\*.

Wasn't \*\*\*.

"Shhhhe's called Josephine, can you belieeeeeeeve that?" the Demon swaggered towards me. "S'got your eyes, girl-"

"I'm not a girl," I said loudly, clearly. "My name's Carl. That's not a girl's name. Are you stupid or what?"

"Got lumpsssss.."

"I haven't got lumps." a warm tear shot down my cheek like a bullet.

"Too old, meeee-"

"Yes. You are."

"Shhhh," he blinked in slow motion before landing on his knees beside me. Three seconds later my bottoms were down, and he was putting his fingers on me, pushing my thing back like he'd done the other night.

"No wait nowaitNOWAIT-"

Up against the wall, pants off, not just down.

What happened didn't last long. I don't remember it. I don't want to remember it. What I do remember is looking up at the roof and making faces out of the patterns in the ceiling, and trying to solve the riddle of the talking trees...

Who is the man.

Who ran.

To you.

Did Jo scream?

I didn't.

Was it the same for her.

Different.

She has lumps. She has no thing.

Push me back, push me in.

To the wall.

That's all.

Bed.

Must go to bed.

## 1.10 Writers Burn

W r i t e r s   B u r n

You're a kid, right?

"And you're hangin onto the bannister like crazy, everythin off the ground, even your feet, cos, the carpet's one huge bubblin waterfall of lava. And you're losin your grip, okay? and your mum's callin you for tea, and the dog's sat watchin you with one ear cocked and a face that sez 'what the hell're you /doin/ you daft git' and yet you can't let go, you /can't/, cos if you do you'll fall and you'll get burnt to death by the fire stream below. Your muscles are achin, you feel sick, you're sweatin, you've come three quarters the way up the staircase, I mean jesus, what the hell're you gonna do, eh? Whatchoo gonna do Simon?"

Simon picked up his coffee, took a sip, put it down. Shrugged. Sharon leaned across the table.

"The would-be writer wakes up and drops off the bannister and runs for her tea. The true writer carries on, cos her world is real: if she drops she'll get burnt, Simon. She /will/ get burnt."

Simon didn't give her the big reaction she'd been hoping for. He picked up his third biscuit and started nibbling.

"You don't get it."

"No, no, I get it alright, I just don't have anything to say."

"Fair enough," she decided. "Did you bring any work like we discussed on the phone?"

"No." he replied.

Sharon rolled her eyes, relaxed her arms. "Bloody hell, I told you not to forget. I've brought loadsa stuff."

Simon took another sip of coffee. "I didn't forget. I just changed

my mind. I'll read what you've brought, no worries; I like your work, Sharon, you're good. You never quite manage to capture reality."

Sharon stretched back across the table, eyes glittering. "And you /do/, right?"

"No," Simon resumed. "I like your work as it is. It's not preachin, it's not tryin to be clever. But, you see, because of that, you're a cross-between, like me. A cross between Clive Barker and Michael Crichton, a cross between Dean Koontz and James Herbert. We're wastin our time, we're the authors between the masters, and yet we carry on, not because of some desperate desire to succeed, but because we can't stop. We're hooked. We might as well be takin drugs."

Sharon laced her fingers under her chin, elbows on the table. "And that's why you never send your work to publishers, right? You don't want to be a hybrid of existing authors... you get such a kick out of writing, you're willin to do it for /no money whatsoever/, yeah, right, I believe you. Profit vs art, what bullshit!

"Everybody's different, everyone's got their own voice, it's not a waste of time, don't be stupid." She stared at him for a while. "God," she cursed and leaned back in her chair. "You're so cynical it pisses me off."

Simon smiled. "How much shit do you reckon you put up with, per day?" he asked quietly, adding more sugar.

Sharon rubbed her forehead. "Look, you're straying off the point."

Stirring his coffee: "Am I?"

"Yes, you are," she snapped. "I /don't/ put up with shit, Simon, so stop givin it to me, and /stop/ pissin about with your coffee! /Talk/ to me. Pay me some bloody attention."

Simon tinkled a spoon, slid his cup and saucer across the table, grinned, and put his hands behind his back.

"I'll sit like this, shall I?"

"What..." Sharon broke down into flutters of laughter. "I mean, how did this happen? How did you get so... so weird, so laid back. I'm a /writer/, like you, we're supposed to be excited by each other, we're supposed to be telling tales and swappin notes."

"We're not writers, Sharon, we're time stealers."

"See?" she tittered. "There you go again. Why can't you just... Tell me... I dunno, tell me what you're writing at the moment, what's the main character like, come on."

Simon looked up at the roof. A few nearby heads rose and did the same. "We con our readers into caring for people who don't really exist," he paused to let Sharon moan and pretend to collapse.

"Simon, /please/..."

"And we stand away from society," he continued. "so's we can point and shout 'hey, look, can you see what's happenin?' only nobody really gives a shit. About the subject matter itself, yeah, perhaps. 'S'go down't pub and yap about it.' And about the author, sure, 'what a talented bastard', but they don't give a shit about /what/ the author has actually said. 'Dead realistic,' they'll say to their partners. 'based on truth, too, god, isn't the world an /awful/ place?' and then it's ho-hum, back to vacking up, back to watching Vanessa whilst riding an excersise bike.

"Sharon, writer of fantasy, writer of amazing prose, you are a total genius - you've got it right, you don't /have/ no messages, you're just here to tell a tale."

Sharon uncovered her face. "You finished?"

"Yep."

"Have you got a job?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I work twenty hours a week. In a warehouse. Stock control."

"Sounds exciting," she smiled wryly. "I don't know how you put up with it. I mean, even part-time... I once got a job working in a supermarket, you know, nearly turned me into a zombie. Horrible it was. I quit after about two weeks. Couldn't /stand/ it."

"There we are again, you see," Simon toyed with some crumbs. "S'where we differ."

"What do you mean?"

"See, I'll go along with a warehouse job for the experience. For the people. The job's shit, yeah, but the people make it worthwhile."

"No way," Sharon shook her head. "No way, I'm sorry, no way, I just couldn't handle it. I couldn't."

"I'll tell you something," Simon met her eyes boldly. "I've only met one writer I don't mind being in the presence of. The rest have been a bunch of self-centred, self-important, trumped up shirt n collar piss-heads, who're totally obsessed with the messages they're so desperate to transmit to society. A society which, if these writers would only wake up and realise, doesn't want to hear about any of it in the first place. /One/ writer."

"I /love/ your manners," Sharon breathed out. "Well enlighten me, who?"

"You."

"Sye-mon," she looked away. "What... is that a chat-up line?"

"No."

"Well thank christ for that, I'm gettin married in two weeks."

"Congratulations. Does he write?"

Still no eye contact. "No."

"Is he creative in any way?"

"Not really, but so what, not everybody's creative."

"I know."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I never had a problem. Most people seem to /need/ that balance in relationships. You spend your time in the company of creatives, you need a partner who's down to earth, who won't swamp you like I'm doin with wishy-washy horseshit about literature and its meaning.

"Some others are the opposite way around, you know. Me for instance - I hang out with men and women who sit at home after a seven hour shift and do absolutely /jackshit/. People who get paid peanuts and go out on the town getting pissed every saturday night. I mean, so what, I'm gonna have a tougher time than you findin a mate, big deal." He burst out laughing. "Am just kiddin, s'great you're tyin the knot, honest it is. Invite me along, I'll be the best man, if you want."

Sharon snorted quietly. "I do have one message," she looked up. "To transmit, you know, like you said."

"Oh yeah?" Simon shuffled closer. "What?"

"S'kind of about the worlds we create, as writers, you know?"

"Sure."

"That... they're not always so far away."

"I'll drink to that."

"Well..." she scratched her wrist absently. "Did you ever do the bannister climb? When you were a kid, I mean, did you ever play that game where the floor's lava, and you've gotta move around the house standin on chairs and bits of skirtin board? Didja?"

Simon nodded. "Course I did, yeah. I used to chuck my sister into the flames all the time. s'kinda thing kids do, innit. why?"

Sharon said nothing for a while, just looked down at her hands.

Occasionally at passing people. The odd blink at Simon.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

She got up, moved away from the table, and walked around it until she was standing right beside Simon, where she crouched down and began to roll back her long skirt.

"Whatchoo doin?" he nearly choked on his coffee. "Sharon..."

Her legs came into view. Burns all over them. Skin blistered, red and peeling like the flesh of a corpse.

"When I was eight," she said, looking into his eyes. "I slipped... I slipped and fell in."

## 1.11 Barbed Wire

### B a r b e d W i r e

Mick would stand outside the door whilst i did it, one knock meant danger, two knocks meant a teacher, three knocks meant leap into the storeroom, shut the door and pray. i didn't enjoy what i had to do in fact i didn't even think i was qualified but some of them had nobody else in the world to turn to, it was either me or the razorblade, me or the overdose, me or throw up in the middle of a classroom.

i regarded myself as a tough nut to crack, an ex-bully, used to pick on first years. usual stuff: nick their lunchboxes, shove their heads down toilets and flush em. they'd scream and thrash and cry for their mummies and i'd laugh and spit and disappear into the shadows.

nobody ever got me for anything.

except no matter how much my soul believed and no matter how much the world believed, i was sensitive and full of pain, i was twisting and turning unable to breath and sometimes, you know, believe it or not, i'd run down the fields and lie there in the middle and look up at the clouds and cry. bawl my eyes out a hell of a lot harder than any first year kid's ever done. couldn't blame my parents, they were okay, couldn't blame the school, school was okay, i could only blame myself, i was far from okay, churning, angry, wishing i was far away from this fuckin place that never makes no sense, these feelings this blackness this barbed wire fence, i helped out for too long and got none in return. whether i deserved it or not i got nothing, you know.

the turning point came when i realised i was terrorising the younger brother of a girl i would have given my life for. Fay, she was called, she had years on me, she was at college doing painting and sculpture. i met her by accident when i came in late to a special morning school assembly. allocated a position on the front row she made mistakes when it was time to speak because of the way i looked at her, because of the way my smile wouldn't go away.

sanity at last after fourteen years of nonsense: our eyes clashed first, then fingers, then lips and i could do nothing to stop myself falling into her arms, nothing to resist that mutual silence that carried a million more messages than any whispers on this earth.

Fay was in school on the day that broke my heart and i was unaware, unprepared when she came around the corner and saw me near the bushes kicking a boy into the ground, her boy, her brother.

she didn't scream or cry she just pushed me away and helped the



injured kid to his feet. that didn't hurt so much, i could handle that, but later it became obvious she hadn't said a word to anybody. i rang and i begged and i swore to change, i sent letters and poems and cut myself in rage but the mark had been made, there was no turning round.

days trickled by, new nightmares arrived: a girl i'd punched for answering back was taken away after yelling in class that her uncle had made her touch his thing in the bath. newbies collapsing, victims vomiting, boys failing to show up for months on end. fat kids eating shit, a blind-boy's glasses melting under the heat of a bunsen burner, what does it take to twig? what does it take to change gear? how many minutes of fear must tick by before the horror comes into perspective?

there's a pond down the park near here, you know, where sometimes ducks swim and schoolboys get thrown in and you can hear shouting and yelling from the football fields beyond the trees. i stood there one evening when the land was a golden-yellow and threw up into the water, making islands out of my own mistakes.

and then out of weakness and destruction grew anger and protection and i became the bullier of the bullies throughout the school. you fuck with the newbies and you fuck with me, you steal a possession, i steal your teeth - because this is called physical correction.

instead of running from me the kids ran to me, they crowded me like a popstar in the playground. i needed the attention, this was my way of self-correction, and before long my education was forgotten.

they tried to get me of course, the ex-like-me's, the ones who said i was queer and sissy. and despite an inner-flame of revenge and hate, i closed my eyes and ears and remembered Fay.

there was a girl like me at this time, you know, who solved riddles for those in confusion. Caroline Barker, she was my age but taller with long black hair and dark eyes. they said it was me and her, together forever, the school, even the teachers, despite the fact we'd never really spoken. we smiled and said hello in the corridors sometimes and shared hymn books in assembly and laughed sometimes but she was me and i was her and that wasn't going to work, she'd never come to me and i'd never go to her, not for attention, not with problems, not to help one another we were too similar inside to appreciate each other i think, maybe i'm wrong. i don't know.

Mick, a friend from way back in time, helped me scrape away the corruption around our school. when i turned good he did too, he was with me all the way, he said.

the violence didn't last long, we wiped it out: everybody kept us in mind when they thought about throwing a punch. it was laying down the law, it was playing the police, but it worked and i was happy. i rang Fay's number a few times and tried to apologise and knocked on her door when i was passing. she never let me in and she never said a thing, she just told me to leave so i did.

i held sessions at lunchtimes sometimes, to talk to the kids who were too scared to go nagging at the teachers. i coped for a while and managed to raise the odd smile and give advice to those in the shit. only about once a week i nearly fell asleep - sometimes the kids ran out crying.

it's amazing what happens to the children of today, you know. i've seen cigarette burns on breasts, words carved into arms, heads so fucked up they can't do nothing but scream and they're all in there, you know, in the classroom, sat quiet, or flicking paper balls or trying to cause a riot but it's no surprise after a while when you sit

there and listen - pupil to pupil, you know, two heads together. i reckon they all need it, you know, more than any lesson.

i cried only once, when i heard a story from a kid how her father had raped her sister right there in her own bed with this girl sat up watching and soaking it into her head and this middle-class night-mare's just beginning she said, it's worse than in the uppers and the lowers she said. and she even admitted she was fucked in the head cos of what she'd seen, you know, what can you say? i just said i was sorry and turned her away.

you know you hear that shit when you lay their in bed and you can feel needles of horror spinning webs over your neck down your chest, down your belly, across your arms... weaving you into a matrix where nothing makes sense, where shocks are cheap and there's a barbed wire fence that does hide happiness, but only in your dreams cos nothing out there is ever what it seems - that's how it feels, you know, it feels tight and black. maybe you know what i mean, i don't know for sure but who cares anyway. who cares.

i cracked like an egg and spilt out my guts when i heard that Fay and Mick had started something going.

i thought perhaps Fay and i had been unique, that she'd go for guys her age rather than somebody like me, still trapped in the cage of school but i was wrong, they clashed eyes and it happened again, love and romance and dreams again and i cut my wrists in the shower and punched my knuckles against the tiles until the thoughts my mind went calm and black.

like a void. a dark hole. stitched to its arms, i swam, i screamed. no more dreams.

i bandaged up. and the next day i gave in. i walked into the class-room where Caroline was on her own doing an essay or something, i think, i couldn't focus properly cos my vision had gone pink at the edges and bits of colour were there, you know, kind of dancing and spinning and jumping in mid-air like crystals of dust and i fell down in front of her table and i asked her if she'd talk to me, if she'd please, please talk to me, i hate this, i said, i don't know who i am, i need a voice, i need your voice, yours, i think, please.

(eyes clashed eyes)

please.

## 1.12 Second Flight

### S e c o n d F l i g h t

She sits down in her bedroom, dreary before school, and she remembers the crystal mornings when she held hands with her friends, closed her eyes and took off, left the ground, hit the skies.

She can recall the visions, the daydreams, the sinking houses and plummeting trees. She can see teachers and pupils, glued to the earth, waving and laughing as she soars like a rocket, hands above her head, waiting to grab the clouds and scare the birds. She flies and flies well, but her friends never cut into the dream, and she wonders if they're making the same things run through their minds... Are they elsewhere? Elsewhen? Elsebothered?

Those precious mindmemories, hers to keep - so strong and vivid and easy to recollect - seem plain and fuzzy in this new, unpredicted

sexwave. Why topless men on her wall to this day and not aircraft, not supergirl, not a sunset above the clouds?

Are mindmemories enough, now that dad can't wash her in the bath, now that a bra supports her chest, now that she knows the secrets of conception? Is flying no longer possible in this fresh and expanded world, where thoughts cannot be focused and friends now taunt and tease?

Something is bad about this alteration, something has been stolen without notice, for when she blocks out reality she imagines no skies anymore.

She sees no skies. And she no longer dreams in colour.

and said he dumped Bradshaw cos he still liked me."

"But John's a fourth year isn't he?"

"Too right," Fern giggled. "He took me out on Saturday to the Black Cat, it was so cool. And then we went to his place for a snog - it was ace, I touched his dick and everything."

"Did he shove it up you?" said Amy, casually.

"Fuck off," Fern pushed her. "Think I'm going to tell you that? You can fuck right off, I'm not telling." She sniggered to herself, before softly admitting, "Yeah, he did actually. He shoved it right up. I started bleeding."

Everybody was silent in wonder.

"Has he got hair on it?" Emma wanted to know. She was eating a packet of crisps and spilling them purposely in the road because they were prawn cocktail and she hated that flavour.

"He's fifteen, of course he's got hair on it," Fern revealed and tutted: it was a sexual fact every girl should know.

"I don't like hairy ones," Amy shuddered and kicked a stone. She had her hands in her pockets and, ironically, looked like a boy with her jeans on. The rest of the girls were still in their school uniforms - white blouses, grey skirts, black leggings - and they all felt uncomfortable.

"That's stupid," Fern decided. "Isn't it stupid, Emma. You like hairy ones, don't you?"

"Dunno," said Emma. She sniffed up and glanced around. Everybody was looking at her. She stopped. "What?"

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing... You were all staring at me, that's all."

"God, you're all stupid," Fern shouted into the roadside trees.

"Nobody stays bald, you know," She slowed down and turned to Beth, who hadn't spoken since they'd left school. "Come on Saunders, you're up on all this puberty shit, tell them, go on."

"I dunno," Beth shrugged, then: "Why are you always talking about dicks? Can't we talk about something else, like what was on TV last night, or what we're going to do in summer? What about flying, has everybody forgotten about flying?"

"Just because you've never snogged anyone," said Fern sarcastically. She resumed her position at the front. "Poor Saunders, never even kissed a boy."

"Haven't you?" Emma crunched another crisp, squinting at Beth with undisguised curiosity. "Never ever?"

"I'm thirt-eeen!" Beth protested. "God! All you fucking tarts do is talk about dicks going up you! There's more to life than dicks, you know."

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"Jesus," Emma gasped and threw her crisp packet into the road. "No need to give me a lecture. I was only wondering." She started sucking her fingers.

"Do you want me to ask Paul to show you his?" Amy suggested, looking at Beth quite seriously.

"Do I fuck!" Beth yelled. "I've seen one, alright."

"Bull shit."

"I have."

"Bull shit."

"I fucking have."

"Bull SHIT."

"Oh shut up both of you," Emma interrupted. She then laughed and threw her arms up in the sky and began to sing: "I was walkin down the lane when I felt a sudden pain, die-oh-ree-ah! Die-oh-ree-ah!"

The others joined in. Except Beth, who stopped at the side of the path and let them walk away.

"So I went behind behind a bush and it came out in a rush, die-oh-ree-ah! Die-oh-ree-ah..."

When they'd all disappeared around the bend, Beth sighed and let her rucksack slip down from her shoulder. She looked around. The path was deserted. The woods were gloomy and damp and the leaves were hissing slightly in the wind. She shuffled backwards into the foliage, trying to make sense of her feelings.

Dicks dicks dicks dicks - they wouldn't go away, everywhere she turned she saw dicks and dicks and more dicks, hanging down like elephants trunks from between the legs of boys she sat next to in class. She put one hand on her stomach and squeezed... Slid down... Down and into the hot place, the place that mattered... The patch of wet and stickiness.

And for the first time in her life she didn't care about learning to fly. All she wanted to do was think about dicks. Touching them, licking them, sucking them. That was the key to flight. That was how you grew wings and took off and soared around the neighbourhood screaming abuse and doing summersaults.

And as she touched herself, skirt now up around her waist, eyes tightly closed against the world, she felt her body rise, her toes leave the ground, her skin harden with heat... And she allowed herself to float, to hover, to linger in the air.

She walks into her bedroom, dark and grey and boring after school, and she remembers the boy she sat next to in Science: his smell, his skin, his hair, his construction... And she opens the wardrobe, climbs in and begins to fantasize.

Eyes closed, teeth clenched, she's not flying above the clouds or taunting the earth-glued people, she's half-naked across a school desk with a boy licking her stomach, peeling her open, beaming inside.

And so the child becomes a trickchild and her memories transparent ghosts and she forgets that the dreams weren't just dreams and that she did fly, like an angel, high above the sunshine smeared earth with her friends, who too have left behind their other selves for this... The New Wave, the Natural Movement, the Second Stage.

A last call for passengers echoes through the room as the traveller forces the tip of a shoe between her legs and the furniture wobbles and her mother - reading a newspaper in the front room - wonders what all the banging's about.

Orgasm over, she crashes out of the wardrobe, swollen and sweating like a ready-dressed newborn, and she hears the gentle swoosh of the

second flight, now leaving, launching, moving on without her.

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