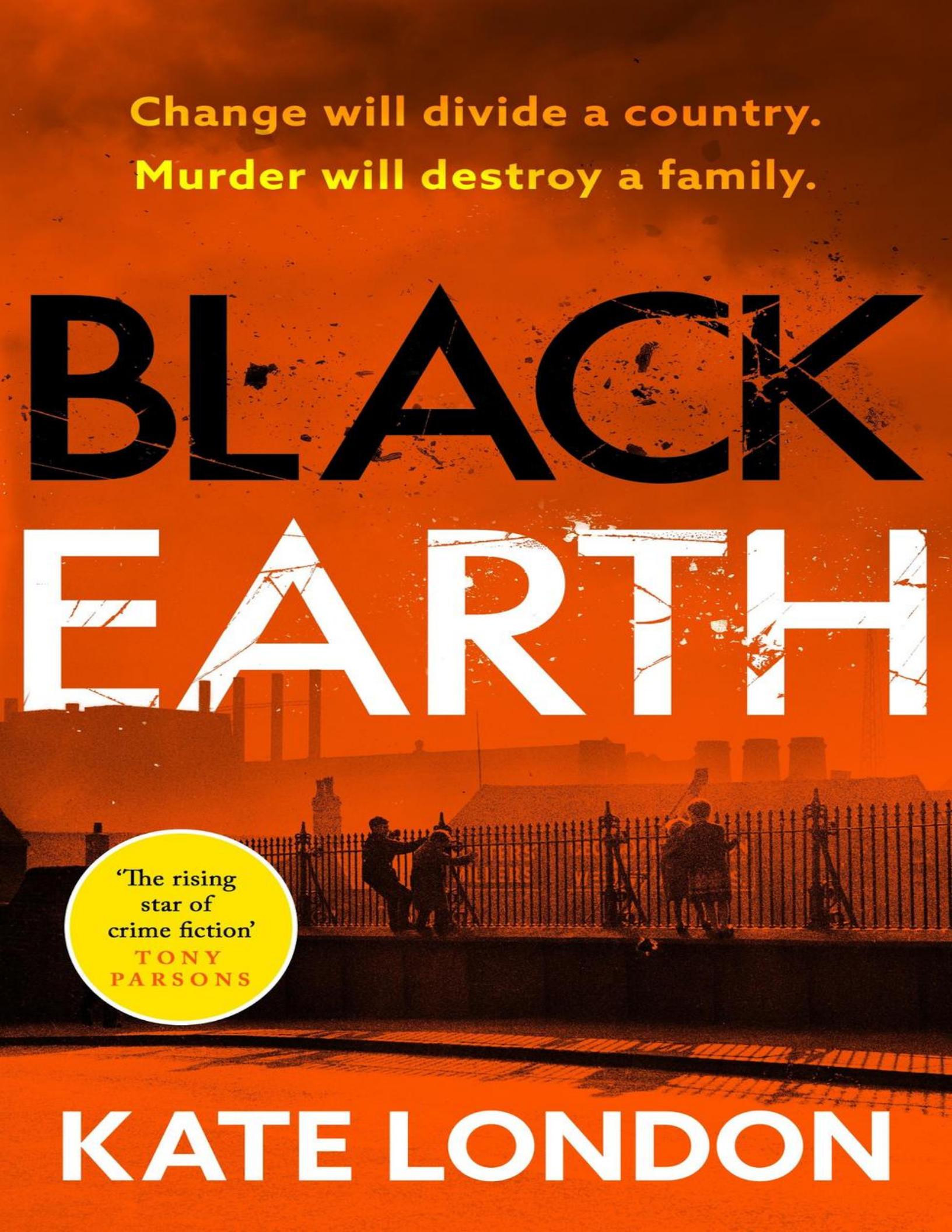
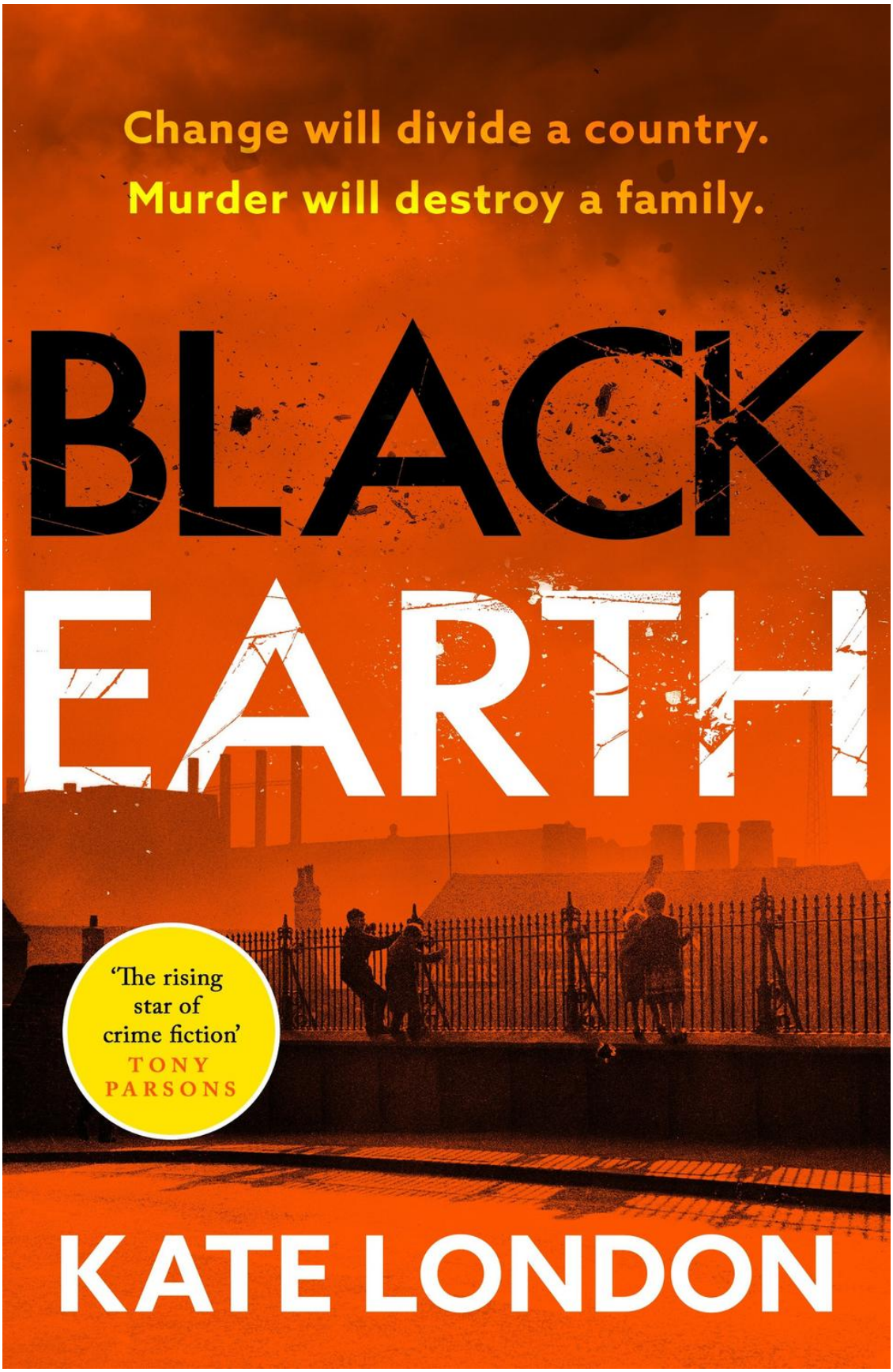
Change will divide a country.
Murder will destroy a family.

BLACK EARTH



'The rising star of crime fiction'
TONY PARSONS

KATE LONDON


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BLACK EARTH

KATE LONDON



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For Richard

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We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind
But such a day tomorrow as today,
And to be boy eternal.

The Winter's Tale, Shakespeare

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Thursday, 29th November 1984

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1

Who knew being a criminal was such hard work? When he agreed to go into business with Liam, Zammo never dreamt it would involve so much driving. Normally he enjoys being at the wheel of Liam's Capri. If you put your foot down, it goes like a bomb. Pull into your parking spot and feel the girls' heads turn. But the M6 up to Liverpool through sheets of rain is a different matter. The world is narrowed into a dark circle of concentration: mist, spray, wet black tarmac, the red flare of brake lights. The artics throw up waterfalls that drench the car. The wipers struggle to clear the windscreen. The Capri's steering feels loose and the brakes are unconvincing. Zammo can just imagine the back end sliding round into a skid and one of the artics driving straight over the top of him. No one can stop on this damn road.

At last motorway gives way to dual carriageway, the blank suburbs of Liverpool and then Victorian streets. Pick Liam up and back to Stoke. Job done. Liam's birthday tomorrow, as Liam keeps telling him. And Zammo's got to get up early in the morning. As he turns into the street, it takes a moment for him to realise that whatever it is that has happened here has anything to do with him.

Fire engines stand in the road, blocking the way. Their blue lights flash in the darkness. The front of Liam's building is blackened and the top front window is broken.

Zammo feels disembodied. He takes a left and pulls over. He has to sit for a moment before he moves. Then he is quick. He takes a backpack from the back seat and slips it on. He reaches into the glove compartment and pulls on a pair of leather gloves. A few paces down the street, he takes an alleyway that runs down the back of the terrace. A few houses down, a rotten wooden gate leads through to a backyard.

The yard's concrete is patched with moss and black marks. A saggy orange spacehopper lies on its side. The sash window is loose and all he has to do is jiggle it a bit to dislodge the lock and slide the frame up.

It’s a leg up onto the sill and then through the kitchen window, crouching low to fit the small backpack underneath. The sink is full of dirty dishes but he can fit one foot onto the draining board and then pivot the other leg round onto the floor. He steps into a flood of water. Liam’s Belstaff leather jacket is on the back of a chair. Zammo moves quickly out of the kitchen and up the stairs that are running with water as if there is a small waterfall within the house.

The bedroom is scorched rather than burnt out, the walls soaking, the curtain hanging like kelp out of the broken window. A trail of blood runs from the rug to the window, where Liam lies on his front. His body and clothes are blackened. A pile of charcoal and ash around the body. Only the left foot is unburnt. The top left corner of Liam’s head is missing. The remnants of a stab wound on Liam’s arm has been transformed into blackened dressing and burnt flesh. Liam’s extravagant swearing as he jumped back into the van with a bag of cash and a couple of packets of crisps is irrelevant now. He is gone.

Even though it is past midnight, there is a hell of a noise from the street. People talking. A baby crying. It is like a festival down there. But up here the sound of chatting is sliced by an intense silence that is shock.

For a second Zammo thinks of playing bottle-top football in the playground. Liam, always the tallest, muscling past. He thinks of him jumping into the van a few weeks ago, smearing blood onto the seats and yelling, ‘Drive, drive, drive!’ and ‘Fucking postie’ and then, when he had calmed down, saying, ‘Well do you want smoky bacon or salt and vinegar then?’ They laughed afterwards about the Stokie postie with his box cutter. They were rubbish robbers but it didn’t matter because they only needed to do it once to get up and running with the drugs.

‘Just a flesh wound,’ Zammo said, channelling Monty Python.

‘Beats working for a living,’ Liam said.

Now look.

After a moment in which he cannot move, Zammo rolls back the heavy, soaked rug and lifts the loose floorboard. Instead of the drugs, a gun is there, packed tightly in a plastic bag and wrapped round with Sellotape. Next to it is a Christmas tin of Quality Street. He puts the gun and the tin in his backpack and pulls the rug back into place. He stands back from the window and glances down into the street. Only now does he feel the fear taking hold. They’ll be coming after him too.

When Liam's murder comes over the radio, Harry is in the Dog and Duck. The guys love that he's got a police radio with him. It's so in character. They're all buzzing from the warrant earlier and Harry makes them feel like they're in *Hill Street Blues*. He's just bought a round and is about to make good on his open mike slot. The band have told him they can play 'The Power of Love'. If that's a hit – which it will be – he'll follow up with 'I Want to Know What Love Is'.

But the call changes everything. Harry leaves twenty quid on the bar. No one even spots him leaving. He doesn't want company.

Even though a crowd is milling, spilling into the road, Harry roars down Liam's street, the nipple on top of the car flashing bright and the siren blaring. Nearly midnight and there's even a woman with a pram. Harry pulls over and looks up. The front window on the first floor is burnt out. The brickwork is blackened with soot. A fire engine with a ladder is parked diagonally across the road. Two other engines are parked along the kerb.

A group of boys are riding around on Raleigh Choppers. Harry undoes his seat belt and slides the seat back. He steps into the road and lights a cigarette. One of the scallies rides up and stops, feet either side of the crossbar. 'Give us a fag, mister.' He must be all of fourteen. Harry looks across at the boy's mates, who are in a little cluster up the far end of the street, watching. It's clearly a dare.

Harry flashes his warrant card. 'How about you piss off?'

The boy purses his lips and says, 'Oh matron!' but then something in Harry's face makes him think better of it and he cycles away.

One fireman sits on the kerb, his hand covering his face. Others are coiling their hoses. They point Harry towards the duty officer.

Harry offers his hand. 'Detective Sergeant Harrison, but everyone calls me Harry. Harry the dog.'

'I don't envy you this one, Harry.'

'Which ones is it you do envy then?'

The duty officer looks at him evenly. 'The body's badly burnt. I'll leave you to it.'

Zammo stands in the shadow of the soaking curtain, watching a man in flared jeans and a dark suede Afghan coat standing talking to a fireman.

He moves fast, out of the room and down the stairs. In the kitchen he takes Liam's Belstaff jacket and throws it on. Always liked that jacket. When he hears the front door opening, he is already half way out of the window. In the yard the spacehopper lolls on its side, teeth bared. Zammo moves quickly, through the gate into the alleyway, and begins to run.

A woman walks towards him. Peroxide hair, short skirt. Her gaze is downwards, but at the last minute she can't stop herself looking at him. It is a moment of blue kohl and false eyelashes.

'I never saw you,' she says.

'Thanks, love.'

Harry steps into the hallway. A breeze blows through. The floor is an inch deep in water and the back door is open.

He moves out into the yard, pushes open the gate and looks down the alleyway. He barely notices the woman with bleached blonde hair who passes by him because behind her, at the end of the alleyway, a figure in a black leather jacket is taking a left. Harry runs. He exits the alleyway just in time to see a red Ford Capri pulling away. He steps into the road and waves his arms but whoever is driving the car doesn't stop.

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Friday, 30th November 1984

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2

The edges of the curtains are in darkness but the phone rings and rings and, after it rings out, it starts again. Ian glances at his alarm clock: five a.m. It's Detective Superintendent Paul Roberts; of course it is. That man is never going to leave him alone. Although he pulls the covers over his head and burrows deep, Ian has lost the warmth and comfort of his bed.

A couple of months ago he made a huge mistake: he got a commendation by accident. Responded to an abandoned call from a farm. When he got there, it was dark. The farm door was open. A sheepdog in the yard. Instead of barking, it ran towards him, its ears flat against its skull. Ian patted it. 'Don't worry, old boy.' He went inside the farmhouse and was faced with a loaded shotgun.

'You don't want to do that,' he said, stepping forward and grabbing the barrel.

He told his sergeant he didn't want a commendation but he got one anyway.

There was a ceremony for all the keenies and he couldn't get out of it. It was held in Stoke, in a room with rectangular metal-framed windows. The Staffordshire constabulary flag, a Union Jack, a picture of Her Majesty in full lacy dress and crown.

'Very brave,' Detective Chief Superintendent Roberts said, shaking his hand while the local paper took a picture.

'Stupid,' Ian said.

'Stupid too,' Roberts conceded. 'But I'm always looking for officers with a bit of gumption.'

Roberts was skin, sinew and bone, and small for a police officer. Ian could just see him, rising a bit in his shoes to pass the height test. He wore a checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up and he was based in Stoke where, he said, the best of the crime was.

'He *wanted* me to take the gun off him. That's why he called police. Wanted someone to stop him. I was never in any danger.' Ian scratched

the back of his neck and met Roberts's gaze. 'Told my skipper that too: I never wanted a commendation.'

There was tea and sandwiches. Most of the other officers were there with their wives. Ian grabbed a tray of tuna mayonnaise and cucumber and stood alone with it in the corner, his back against the wall. If he'd had a paper bag, he'd have stuffed the squidgy little things into it and left, but he didn't have a bag and he was hungry. The drive was long and it would save him sorting something when he got home. He could get a whole sandwich in his mouth in one go and he hoped that doing this was creating the right impression.

A youngster with blindingly polished shoes and sore-looking acne on his neck approached. Probably didn't know anyone and didn't want to be seen to not have any mates. But no, it turned out he was offering Ian a helping hand.

'Listen, if you want to be a detective, just tell Roberts it's the only thing you've ever wanted to do.'

'Thanks for the tip.'

But what Ian *wanted* was to continue checking the sheep-dip was being done properly. He *wanted* to sit in Mrs Worrell's front room and take a statement about her missing chicken. He could identify hazel trees now, beeches, alders and elms, but there were still loads of trees that he didn't recognise. He also hadn't known before that there are two types of sparrow – tree and house – and that the little brown dunnock isn't a sparrow at all.

The boy offered his hand. 'Pete.'

Over Pete's shoulder Ian saw his old boss, Detective Chief Superintendent Oakley, stepping into the room. In Liverpool, the whole nick knew Oakley as Desperate, as in Dan, and if Desperate Dan had ever worn a suit, he'd have chosen the one Oakley was wearing right now: one with huge chalk stripes and a massive jacket. Oakley's chin seemed to take up half his face.

Ian pressed the tray of sandwiches into Pete's outstretched hand. 'Sorry, Pete. I've got to go—'

But, too late: Oakley had spotted him and was making his way over. 'Ian!'

Poor shiny Pete, flushed red with the excitement of it all.

‘Piss off would you, young man,’ Oakley said. ‘I need to catch up with an old friend.’

Old friend – that’s the last way Ian would describe Desperate Dan Oakley. But Pete was gone, quick as the otter Ian had glimpsed on the banks of the Trent. And then Roberts was there too, standing a bit too close to Desperate in an unlikely fellowship.

Chalk stripes and pin checks, Ian thought. Paul and Dan: the Little and Large of serious crime investigation.

‘Well, here’s a turn up,’ Roberts said enthusiastically. ‘You two know each other.’

‘Ian worked for me in the CID in Merseyside.’

‘Is that right?’ Roberts said. ‘We’re running a joint op, Dan and me. We’ve got drugs coming down from Liverpool.’ He glanced at Oakley. ‘Is Ian the kind of man I want working for me, Dan?’

Oakley shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Are you, Ian?’

‘I’m not really, am I, boss? I resigned, sir, you see. It wasn’t really *me*, the CID. I’m better in uniform. I’m trying to deliver a good service to our small villages. That’s where I can be the most help to people—’

And here was salvation in the shape of a young man in a Moss Bros suit with pointy shoes, beetling over with a superior air. In case anyone didn’t know he was a hotshot detective, he also had gel in his wavy blond hair and brought with him a strong whiff of Old Spice.

‘Sorry to interrupt, sir.’

‘That’s all right.’ Roberts turned to Oakley and Ian. ‘This is Kirk Baker. One of my DCs.’

Oakley offered his hand. ‘Pleased to meet you, lad.’

Roberts turned back to Kirk. ‘Something bad bringing you here or were you wanting a tuna sandwich?’

‘Post office robbery, I’m afraid, sir. Armed.’

And to Ian’s horror Roberts actually smiled and turned to him with beady eyes. ‘How about it, son? Want to stay in Stoke and get stuck in?’

‘Really sorry, sir, I’ve already stayed too long. Got to get a shifty on. Promised the youth club I’d pop by this evening. A few lads who need a bit of guidance. But if you’re looking for new blood, that young man over there seems keen.’

And Shiny Pete, sensing all eyes on him, turned to them, positively glowing with the attention.

Dusk was settling as Ian wound back through the lanes. A cloud of starlings rose over the ploughed fields. Ian pulled over to watch the shifting patterns against the failing light.

He thought with regret of Shiny Pete. How keen the lad was. It felt like an act of subterranean malice to point him out to Roberts.

He told himself he would take the whole event as a warning. The next time he was called to a deserted farmhouse, he'd wait for backup. He wasn't frightened of being shot. He was frightened of another commendation.

But it was already too late for that resolution. The damage was done. Roberts hasn't left him alone since. Tried to second him to Stoke. When Ian refused, it was drive to Stafford to help out in the first stages of a murder. Go to Lichfield for an armed robbery. On it goes.

The phone rings and rings.

Ian checks his watch. Five-fifteen. Wouldn't put it past Roberts to send someone to get him out of bed. He pulls on a jumper and pads down the stairs in his socked feet. The house is bloody freezing. He picks up the phone. There's been a murder in Liverpool but the victim lived in Stoke. Ian's got to tell the victim's wife.

'Can't it be uniform?'

'No. It's got to be a detective and we're short-handed.'

'But I'm not a detective—'

'This murder, it's an execution. Makes sense it's someone moving drugs down from Liverpool to Stoke who's pissed off one of the big dogs. I need you for that. You, Ian.'

'But doesn't it need to be done quickly, sir? Because if so, I might not be best placed. It's a long drive, and I haven't had me breakfast—'

'You're not working the Viccy Hall tonight, Ian?'

'No. My brother, Stephen—'

'Yes, I know about your brother. Bloody troublemaker. Breaching his injunction in Nottingham as we speak.'

'How do you know where he is?'

'Never mind that. That's none of your business, as you should know. Have you seen the news?'

'No.'

‘Switch your TV on and see what’s happened on the Heads of the Valleys Road this morning. You do have a TV out there? Electricity? Running water?’

‘I’ve got a TV. I power it up by riding my bicycle.’

‘Well, power it up. There are no hiding places right now. If you’re not policing Scargill and Kinnock tonight, then you’re helping me with this. That missing bloody chicken will just have to wait.’

‘How did you know about the chicken?’

‘Very funny.’

Ian switches the telly on and quickly turns it back off again. What on earth were they thinking? What did they think would happen, throwing a concrete block off a bridge? The utter horror of it. The violent stupidity. The Viccy Hall will be fun tonight. The leader of the Labour Party on the same stage as the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers and no love lost between them. His brother, Stephen, will be there no doubt, getting all worked up and righteous. That is if he hasn’t been nicked in Nottingham for doing whatever it is he’s doing.

Yes, maybe better this job than policing that.

But then he thinks of what Roberts has told him to do. Can he report sick? Crash the car? He remembers Liam coming round to visit his grandparents. He was in the village at the weekends, sleeping over in the summer holidays, darting over the fields with the gang of them and sitting on the wall behind the garages, sharing out his grandad’s stolen fags. Ian hasn’t seen him in years, and now he’s dead.

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3

It’s barely dawn. They’ve only just arrived in Nottingham and the bizzies are already chasing them in a souped-up Ford Granada, lights flashing, siren blaring. Since the Battle of Orgreave, there are fewer pickets in Nottingham and the police are picking them off, one by one.

‘This Transit moves like the clappers,’ Tweety says. His name’s Eddie but everyone calls him Tweety.

‘You ain’t seen nothing yet.’

Stephen puts his foot down and the van’s exhaust backfires like a bazooka. Although they are being chased, he’s enjoying himself. The weight in his life has lifted, and, for an instant, he is a boy again. He’s managed to leave his annoying little brother Ian at home and is out free, running the Grand National with his twin, George, and his brother’s mate, Jamie, over the hedges that separate the posh houses’ gardens. The owners come out and shake their fists at the boys tearing away. They laugh all the way down the back lane home. Those people might have new cars in their driveways and space between their houses but who’d be them?

The police car pulls into the overtaking lane and draws effortlessly alongside the van.

‘Come on, Seabiscuit,’ Stephen says, tapping the dashboard.

‘Problem is they’re on bloody Red Rum,’ Jamie says.

The van has got nothing more to give. Stephen glances to his left. There are four of them, all in peaked caps and shirt sleeves with no ties. Thatcher’s army, up from London, and loving the overtime.

‘Think they’re the bloody Sweeney,’ Tweety says.

The one in the passenger seat, whose wagging finger is telling Stephen to pull over, has a seventies moustache.

‘Bee Gees, more like,’ Stephen says. He winds down the window and sticks his head out, singing falsetto. ‘*How deep is your love? ’*

Tweety and Jamie join in, falsetto.

The guy in the passenger seat winds down his window in turn and shouts at them, the wind gusting his words away. ‘All right, Trotsky, you’ve had your fun. Now pull over.’

Stephen can imagine how it is for these boys up from London: breaking the strike in the day and drinking and shagging in the evening. No downsides. Nowt but fun. There is another police car behind and the car alongside surges ahead to block them off. Stephen gives Burt Reynolds in the cop’s passenger seat the V-sign and throws the van round a 290-degree curve, up a no entry feed into the dual carriageway. Momentarily the van is on two wheels.

‘Bloody hell,’ Jamie says. ‘It’s not a motorbike.’

The wheels hit the tarmac and the van shakes.

‘What’s that smell?’ Tweety says. ‘Oh no. I think Jamie musta shat hi’self.’

The police cars have missed the turn that isn’t a turn. Stephen takes a right. The streets are residential. Red-brick box houses. Small clipped lawns. Stunted trees with plastic-looking leaves, bred never to grow big, just like the dreams of the people who live here. Cul-de-sacs. God, how he hates small-minded, obedient, little Nottingham.

‘Slow down,’ Jamie says. ‘Kids playing.’

They weave through. Stephen hears the sirens, but they are distant. He considers waiting it out in one of the side streets, but those wide boys won’t like how they’ve taken the mick. They will search him out. And then what? Since Orgreave, they’ve got an injunction against him going into Nottinghamshire. It’s all fun and games until you’re in the back of a meat van. So he continues through the streets, following his nose. Up ahead there is another feed back onto another dual carriageway. He puts his foot down and heads towards it.

They are back on the ring road.

‘What do we want, the A453?’ Jamie says.

‘They’ll be looking for us there. Got to take back roads. We want signs for Wollaton or the university.’

But at the far side of the roundabout ahead, a jam butty Granada is parked up, waiting for them.

‘Shit, it’s the Comanches,’ Tweety says. ‘I did say, Stephen, I need to get back.’

‘We’re the bloody Comanches, idiot,’ Stephen replies, turning the steering wheel. The van mounts the pavement and swerves towards a pedestrian underpass.

‘Permission to speak, sir—’ Tweety says. But there is no going back. They hit the entrance with a bang, and that isn’t the worst of it because it turns out the underpass is steps, not a ramp.

‘Don’t brake,’ Jamie says.

‘I’m not an idiot.’

The van is banging its way down the steps.

‘Moot point,’ says Tweety.

Jamie’s hands brace on the dashboard. The van hits the bottom and they are thrown forward, then jerked back hard by their seat belts. The deafening bang is followed by an almost magical stillness. The windscreen blurs and then, in a fresh instant, shatters into hundreds of tiny fragments of glass that lie in their laps like scattered sweets.

‘I meant to do that,’ Stephen says.

‘Now your suspension really is shot,’ Jamie says.

They are out the van and running through, breathing in the smell of the underpass: damp, wet tobacco, urine. Stagnant water pools. A woman approaching with a toddler and a pram, pulls the child into the wall. ‘What’s going on—’

‘Clunk click every trip,’ Stephen says, running past.

They are up and out into the morning. The air is cold, the sky over the city silver and the streets slippery with fallen leaves. Police sirens rise up like an alien invasion. They run up a Victorian terrace that ends with a wooden fence: beyond that, allotments.

‘Bugger it,’ Stephen says.

‘We can climb it,’ Tweety says.

‘And wait for them to bring the dogs in for us,’ Stephen says. ‘You ever been bitten on the arse?’

‘Not married, am I? Jamie, you ever been bitten—’

But Jamie has turned and is walking swiftly back along the street. He starts knocking hard on the door of one of the houses. Stephen runs after him and, seeing the poster in the window, understands.

The man who opens the door wears a blue dressing gown and a dangly plastic earring in the shape of a cocktail drink. He looks about

twelve, has thin, almost hairless legs. On his feet are a pair of thick woollen socks.

'We saw your poster,' Jamie says.

The man looks at it – *Coal not dole* – as if a bit surprised to see it there himself. He has a soft face and soft hands. Never done a day's labour in his life. And he's not quick on the uptake when it matters neither: obviously not got much experience running from the law.

'Yes?' he says.

'Only we're in a spot of bother,' Jamie says, and in spite of everything, everyone laughs.

Matthew asks them to give him a moment to get dressed. He is a lecturer at the University of Nottingham and is proud to give shelter to three striking miners. Because they haven't been invited to sit down, Stephen, Jamie and Tweety stand in his front room, looking at the walls.

There is a framed CND poster. Also one of those Russian pictures: smiling people, a bicycle, rosy-cheeked women in headscarves. Shelves full of books. *The Making of the English Working Class*; Karl Marx's *Theory of History*; *Languages of Class*; *Hegemony and Revolution*.

Tweety pulls one of the books down.

Footsteps are lightly descending the stairs and Jamie clears his throat to warn Tweety but he's too busy showing off to notice. He displays the book's spine – *Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle* – and says, 'This looks like fun.'

Matthew steps into the room. 'Yes,' he says. 'But less fun than it looks.'

'Still,' Tweety says, not missing a beat, 'bloody sight more fun than picketing I bet.'

'Oh, I dunno,' Jamie says. 'Look at the fun we have.'

Matthew has changed into worn Levi jeans, and a T-shirt featuring Mickey Mouse holding a gun to his own head. The earring is still in.

'Looks like we've really dropped on,' Jamie says, and Stephen has to look away so as not to laugh.

Tweety's been going on all morning about how he can't be back late. Matthew calls British Rail. There's a direct train to Stoke in just over an hour. Matthew will drive them to the station. Stephen calls Big Mick to ask him to report the van stolen. Mick and him go back to all that kids'

stuff. Lying in the concrete drains for the new estate and racing them down the hill. Walking together through the train tunnel. Brave as a lion! Sick as a dog! Yes, Mick's rock solid. He'll call from Stephen's house just in case police trace the call. Only thing Stephen can think of that might not land him in a cell. Police will know it's bollocks but they won't be able to prove it. Soon there is a pot of tea, toast and scrambled eggs. Stephen watches the police through the lace curtains as they run up the street in their tunics and boots. Usually it would make him laugh to see them so thwarted, but the news Matthew has just given him has stripped the day of laughter.

'Happened early this morning,' their host says.

It is on BBC *Breakfast Time*. They watch it on Matthew's little black-and-white TV. It isn't the scab miner who was killed but the man who was driving him to work in his taxi. The striking miners dropped a concrete block off a bridge on the Heads of the Valleys Road. Two men were seen running away. The Chief Constable said it was bound to happen, sooner or later. There have been a few incidents like this – miners throwing concrete off the bridges. The taxi driver's fiance is pregnant and Stephen remembers Janet, the sweet swell of her belly pregnant with Christopher.

Thatcher is shown at some meeting or other in Paris. 'It isn't British,' she says.

'British,' Matthew says, shaking his head.

Stephen stares at the image on the screen: the car up on the bank on the side of the road, a jagged hole where its windscreen should be.

'We were lucky we didn't hit someone with the van,' Jamie says.

Tweety catches Stephen's gaze and rolls his eyes, but Stephen looks away. He isn't going to get into it. It feels like only five minutes ago they were all singing the Bee Gees.

'People are desperate,' Matthew says.

'If he didn't want a concrete block falling on his head, he shouldn't have driven a scab down the Heads of the Valleys Road,' Tweety says. 'He only had to look out the window at the police cars escorting him to know how popular that was making him.'

Jamie says, 'He had two young children. Did you even hear that?'

'Listen up, everyone. St Jamie is speaking,' Tweety says.

Matthew clears his throat.

Luckily a young woman appears in the doorway. She wears nothing but a long collarless cotton shirt and a glimpse of white cotton pants. She runs a hand through her tangled hair and smiles at them with curiosity.

Tweety says, ‘Well hello, ducky-egg.’

Even her amused smile is posh. ‘Hello?’

Matthew says, ‘This is Camilla. Camilla, these are some striking miners who are having a bit of breakfast with us. I’ll make another pot of tea.’

Matthew and Camilla drop them at Nottingham station. Matthew insists on paying for the tickets. He’s also given Stephen an old tweed jacket and Jamie an argyle jumper so that they won’t match any description given by police. They carry their real clothes in a plastic bag. Tweety refused to change his leather jacket but it doesn’t matter because they’ll be hunted as a three. They shake hands before the ticket barrier and Camilla gives Stephen a lively smile that seems to suggest the morning has been full of amusement. Stephen thanks Matthew and Matthew says he’s been pleased to help. He adds something about keeping in touch and Stephen says, yes, that would be great. Hoping never to clap eyes on Matthew again, he writes his number with one digit wrong on a piece of paper. From the way she keeps smiling at him, he doesn’t think Camilla will be stopping around long either.

‘Matthew was all right, wasn’t he?’ Tweety says, as they take their seats. ‘Hey, before Camilla turned up, I thought he was a poofter! What do you make of him being able to pull her then?’

‘Nice enough lad,’ Stephen says.

‘Course he was. Nowt wrong if he was a poofter neither. Just saying I was a bit surprised to see the quality of his bird. Some miners are having a bit of breakfast!’ He laughs. ‘Brilliant! Do you know what? Instead of all this driving round the country, we should cut the belt at Murton, like we said we would. You two look like right prats in his clothing by the way. Remington Steele and his mate, Ronnie Corbett.’ He laughs at his own joke.

Stephen says, ‘Very good,’ and looks out towards the flat green Nottinghamshire fields that spread out beyond the tracks. Perhaps it is good to be hard-hearted like Tweety. He’s already forgotten that taxi with its smashed windscreen.

Stephen glances at Jamie in Matthew’s argyle jumper. He is staring out of the window opposite, silent, separate, as if he just happens to be sharing a table with them. Stephen first met Tweety when they were both sixteen but he can’t remember a time when he didn’t know Jamie. Stephen is supposed to love him, to be closer to him than anyone in the world, but sometimes he just gives in and hates him.

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4

Ian has taken the A51. Slower than the motorway, the road delays his departure from ploughed fields and hedgerows. Luckily the cassette player in the Astra still works. Just about the only thing he misses about being in a city is the gigs. With students off their faces all around him, he watched Ian Curtis sing ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ and in the crowded room, he felt the man was speaking to him alone.

He thinks back to his decision to leave Liverpool.

He had asked for a chat with the boss and Desperate Dan Oakley called him up to his office. He seemed to be pretending the setting was Victorian rather than 1980s. The oak desk was fake vintage with a leather top and brass-handled drawers. Desperate himself sat in a wingback chair, shoes off, huge socked feet up on a low coffee table. He gestured for Ian to sit.

‘What’s this about then, lad?’

‘The death of Jacob Levene.’

Desperate’s hands were resting on his lap and his face was unreadable. It was impossible to know how much Harry had told him.

‘Is that the lad that was swept up on the coast a couple of weeks ago?’ Desperate patted his stomach reassuringly. ‘Go on, son.’

‘Jacob was our grass. Me and Harry’s.’

‘Detective Sergeant Harrison, that is?’

‘Yes.’

‘And this Jacob Levene – you’re suggesting his death was something to do with him grassing?’

‘I’m certain. He was murdered.’

‘OK.’ Desperate patted his stomach again. ‘Well. We had it down as a drowning, as I remember, but I’ll get it looked into. I’ll ask Harry what he knows. If we need to open it as a murder, then so be it. The lad had a lot of drugs in his system so I don’t know how far we’ll get with it. What evidence do you have the lad was killed?’

‘Harry’s not told you what happened?’

There was a long silence before Desperate spoke. ‘Look, I’m sorry, Ian, but it does happen. Informants give themselves away somehow and the criminals come after them. It’s always impossible to prove anything. But then the informants are criminals too. That’s how come they can grass in the first place. I hope you’re not blaming Harry.’

‘We didn’t look after him.’

‘He knew the game he was in.’

‘He was nineteen.’

Oakley smiled slowly. ‘It’s hard, son. Harry’s tough. He’s prepared to do what’s necessary. But you? I’m wondering.’

Ian wondered too. A few days later he put his papers in.

Rather than just signing them off, Desperate Dan Oakley called him back to his office. This time he didn’t ask Ian to sit and Ian stood looking down on Oakley’s huge outstretched legs and his big socked feet resting on the coffee table.

‘Staffordshire?’ Oakley said. ‘Don’t they light up a carrot, instead of a blue lamp?’

Ian smiled as he knew he must, but he felt the edge to Oakley’s joke. The Superintendent didn’t want to listen to Ian’s stories about what had gone wrong but he was also angry with him for leaving.

‘I was hoping you were going to go away and think about it. Come back stronger. Harry says you’re a good detective.’

‘You were right, sir, when we talked. I’m not tough enough.’

‘And is Merseyside going to hear anything more about this Jacob Levene?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Well that’s good to hear because if you’re right about what happened then it’s sad, but I know that Harry was doing his best to target the organised crime that plagues this city.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘There’s nothing I can do to persuade you to stay?’

‘Very sorry, there isn’t. I just want to go home.’

This wasn’t exactly true. Ian didn’t want to go home. His brother, his father, his uncles, his grandfather – every man in his family, and every man in his village practically – had been a miner in the northern end of the constabulary, but Ian requested the rural, southern end of the force. It

was the back of beyond he had in mind, somewhere he knew no one and nothing much happened. Oakley signed off his papers there and then in his office and three months ago Ian moved out of Liverpool, out of the CID, back into uniform, and into one of the two-up two-down police houses in rural South Staffordshire.

The second morning after his arrival, he looked out of the window to see a man in a flat cap, an old waxed jacket and dirty wellies walking up the drive, holding a dead rabbit by its feet in one hand and a sack in the other. When Ian opened the door, the sack was on the ground and the rabbit held out to him. The man's nose was red and bulbous. His fingernails lined with soil.

'Ay up,' he said, as if they'd known each other years.

Ian didn't know what to do with the rabbit but he took it because that was obviously what was required. It made him sad, holding the poor thing and acting like this was normal.

The man took off his flat cap and scratched his head. He didn't seem in any particular hurry and Ian realised that he didn't need to be in any particular hurry either. He looked around and imagined himself adjusting to this new rhythm. Maybe this was Xanadu at last. A flock of starlings in the field opposite lifted into the air.

'Only Mr Malibu wants to know do you want one or two?'

'One or two what?'

The man looked towards the sack as though its contents were self-evident. 'Bags of spuds.'

This is Ian's workload. In late August he directed traffic at the county show. Last week there was a theft to investigate. A woman had a bottle of milk stolen from her step. There have been domestics too. They get him down a bit, because what can he do about them? A day later and the woman doesn't want to know.

The rivalries here are for the most part funny, not malevolent. Everybody who works at Lichfield knows that everyone at Cannock is useless. And it's common knowledge that at Burton all they do is drink. Ian's police house is a long way from busy Stoke.

Sometimes people die, but not often. One last week – peacefully in her bed – had Ian jump-starting the Astra on a silvery morning. An early hoar frost lay on the ground and he scraped feathers of ice from his

windscreen before driving over, nearly all the way in second gear. The fields were white, the trees etched as if on glass.

Patty has visited him just once in his new police house, a few weeks after he moved in. They slept in the sitting room because she said the bedroom was too cold. He pulled the mattress downstairs and the covers and pillows. They lay in front of a big fire that burnt all night and found each other in the glow and darkness. A hand against his face. A chain of vertebrae he ran his fingers down. In the morning the coals still glowed. He made her breakfast and they ate it in front of the fire, drinking big mugs of coffee, she wearing one of his jumpers and his woollen socks. He did not draw the curtains, because he would not allow the day to call on them.

‘I’m transferring to the Met,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you give it some thought?’ She spoke quietly, he noted, as if confessing to an affair. ‘I mean this has been really fun for a couple of days, but it’s not really us, is it? I mean not as a life together, it isn’t.’

When he didn’t reply, she said, ‘I still want it.’

‘What is it you still want?’

Patty’s gaze was turned away but she seemed determined to continue. ‘The excitement.’

Ian had allowed himself to nurture a hope inside and he could feel it disintegrating. He got up and drew the curtains and let the pale light into the room. The flat brown fields were shrouded in low cloud. The house would be empty again. He would drag the mattress back upstairs.

He carried her mustard overnight bag out to her little red Mini Cooper. She was so sexy in her brown leather jacket, short hair and short skirt.

Later he found her new telephone number on a torn piece of lined paper tucked into his wallet. It had a London code. He hasn’t thrown it away, but it is getting tattier, the edges rolled and the paper yellowing.

Ian finds himself often alone, or with people who don’t rush to fill the silence. This suits him. There was a time, when he was a child, when he stopped speaking altogether and he thinks he might be returning to that. In early October he drove out to the farms and stood by the ditch and supervised the sheep-dipping. The farmers were very scrupulous. They stepped on the sheep’s head to make sure it went fully under the water and Ian stood by for as long as it took. He looked over the fields towards

the hedgerows. The leaves were turning and a hawk hovered. After that he bought himself *The Observer's Book of Trees* and *The Observer's Book of Birds*. It's become an interest for him. He's got quite a lot of bird books now.

People here probably think of him as solid, dependable, but that's because they do not know him.

He doesn't think about Patty much. It's been nearly three months since he saw her.

Broad country lanes give way to Stoke's outliers: red brick 1980s new-builds. The too-familiar city tightens itself around him. 1930s semis. Then little early nineteenth-century terraces, low and flat, practically no distance between their front doors and the road.

'It's got to be drugs related,' Roberts said on the phone, believing perhaps that would spark Ian's enthusiasm. On Roberts went, not noticing or perhaps choosing not to notice the silence on the other end of the line. 'Liam Holdcroft's going to have been involved in bringing drugs down from Liverpool … '

Ian's lost touch with Liam, but how on earth could that soft boy who buried a blackbird in a shoe box with him once become someone who moves drugs?

'Your old boss Oakley and I have been trying to break this open and you can help us. Tell us everything you know … '

Well, he was certainly not going to tell Roberts, who seemed determined to get under his skin, about knowing Liam.

Then Roberts brought up Harry. 'I talked to your old sergeant. He was first on scene for the murder. Sends his regards and asks what the hell you are doing living in a police house in Brereton. Harry? Ring a bell at all?'

'But he isn't really Harry,' Ian said, forgetting his intention not to rise to the bait. 'He's Carl. Carl Harrison. Made that nickname up for himself to sound cool: Harry the dog. Harry the dog, my arse, he is.'

'All right, Ian. Tone it down.'

It's unavoidable. The mention of Harry has brought to mind young Jacob Levene, washed up like sea-drift on the shore of West Kirby.

Ian's heard there are tribes in the Amazon that have never been contacted by so-called civilisation. Perhaps he could ask if they would let him join them.

His pocket book lies open on the passenger seat with the details neatly written. Counting down the house numbers, he drives the length of the treeless street that snakes the rise of the hill. It must be hundreds of years since this place saw soil or grass.

Long before he arrives at one hundred and seventy-one, Ian knows which house it is. Identical terraces of soot-blackened brick face each other across a narrow band of tarmac, but one stands out because it has what looks like brand-new yellow cladding of oversized stones. It shouts: poor people suddenly flush with a bit of cash. That nonsense must have been paid for by whatever racket Liam was involved in. It's not like Liam was from a bad family. His dad was a fireman, a hero even. Didn't he teach Liam owt?

Ian pulls over and parks. The cladding is some sort of stab at a Cotswolds cottage here in the middle of smoke-darkened Stoke. Imagine risking so much for something so ridiculous. The longing that forking out for such an ugly thing suggests: the sheer wrong-headedness of the misplaced effort. Worse still are the party balloons tied to the door. He picks up his pocket book and confirms his worst suspicions. It's Liam's damn birthday.

In front of the door, he stands inside the before and after of the news that he is about to deliver, the information inside him like a bomb on a timer. Liam's wife, Stephanie, is maybe in the kitchen. Perhaps she is sneaking a quick fag out in the backyard. He looks up towards the upper windows, knocks and steps back.

Then, suddenly, he wakes up. Actually, he *doesn't have to do this*. It's a shame to have to leave his little house with its view over fields but Roberts is never going to leave him alone. If he has to get involved in this kind of thing, his refuge is ruined anyway. He will put his papers in and do something else. He can become a farm labourer. He can probably dip the sheep himself by now. It doesn't look that difficult, and it doesn't seem such a terrible life. It's amazing how little you need to get by. He turns and walks quickly towards the car. He will tell the superintendent that Stephanie wasn't in. The delay will be too long for him to send him all that way over again.

But behind Ian, the front door opens. His back is turned and he knows immediately that the shame of being caught walking away from this little house with its yellow cladding is something permanent, another little

stain to add to the bigger ones. An engine inside struggles to propel him quickly enough towards his car to avoid facing Liam's wife but she calls out, 'Hiya!' God, that Stoke accent: so friendly. It is the voice of home. There is no disaster in her voice, none at all.

He turns back. Who would have thought Liam would marry such a pretty girl? He was such a spotty youngster, NHS glasses and tall, like his dad. Anyhow, it's years since he's seen Liam. Who knows how he turned out. He mustn't think of him as a real person. He needs to get through this. But Stephanie is bright as a sunny day. She wears no makeup and her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She looks fantastic. Over her blue dress is a pink apron with white polka dots. Young, still. He's about to put an end to that. He shows his warrant card. Behind her, in the hallway, a child, a little girl. Maybe four years old, also in a dress and an apron. Ian feels a kind of giddiness. The woman smiles – what is he doing here? The wrong door, surely?

Early morning and the fog lying over fields: he'll never get a job so good again. But he'll renounce it. He's got good at that. He could move abroad. Is there work in Patagonia?

Stephanie isn't grieving yet. She is impatient. 'Can I help you?'

He is wrong footed by his decision to walk away. He wants to say, *no, not here, not in the street.* His family owes this family and somewhere – a place so tiny, tiny, but utterly hateful – he wants to say, *please don't tell anyone I walked away.* Perhaps there's a lighthouse some-where needs a keeper. The little girl is holding onto her mother's skirt.

Stephanie's hands are on her hips and her voice is way too loud. 'It's Liam, isn't it? Has he been arrested?'

'Can I come in?'

He sees the realisation dawning on her, a horror in her face. The little girl must feel it too, because she says, 'Mum.'

Then, before he can get any words out, Stephanie collapses. It is a scene from a melodrama, but real. Her hair smells of chemicals – pine shampoo. He helps her inside into the front room. There's a yellow velvet sofa that's too large for the small room and a reproduction oil painting over the chimney breast. Ian thinks of the stone cladding and the coffee table and the wallpaper. Has Liam died to pay for all this crap?

Ian wants so badly to say, *there's an unpaid parking fine that's gone to the county court*. But the truth is unavoidable now, and with Liam's

daughter there too. He says, ‘Is there someone I can call?’ and Stephanie says, ‘Just tell me what’s happened.’

He makes himself do the right thing and say it. ‘I’m sorry. Liam’s dead.’

In a flash he remembers go-karting with Liam when he was back in the street visiting his grandparents. His dad had gone to live somewhere out in Smallthorne, but Liam would always be one of them, even if he didn’t live in the village. Ian’s mum brought all the kids a lolly out from the freezer. He understood perfectly that stiffness in his mother’s face; Liam brought painful memories. Still, there she was in the street with the brightly coloured lollies and a hand to tousle his hair.

Liam’s wife is questioning him, saying is it true, and he makes himself say it over again. ‘Yes, I’m sure. Yes, Liam’s dead. He’s dead.’

They reach the end of it. Ian gives Stephanie the telephone number of the unit dealing with the murder investigation. The rest of it – trying to find out more about what Liam was up to in Liverpool – will have to be done by someone else. There’s a neighbour, Stephanie says, Julie. Ian knocks on her door. It’s a house full of kids. When he tells her what it’s about she puts her hands to her cheeks and looks for all the world like Munch’s *The Scream*. But then she gets herself together. She plonks her four kids in front of the television and tells them that she’s just popping next door and if they don’t behave there will be hell to pay.

The front door shuts behind Julie and Stephanie, and Ian stands alone in the street. Now that he is free to go, he finds it hard to leave.

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Jamie, looking out of the train window, does not see the landscape but rather that car again with its smashed windscreen. He gets up and walks to the standing area between the carriages. He pulls the window down and stands. The wind is cold on his face, thank God. After a couple of minutes, he walks to the buffet car and returns with a tray of teas.

Stephen leans forward and takes his tea. ‘How do you think those coppers knew we was pickets?’

Tweety lights another cigarette and speaks with the smoke held in his lungs. ‘Three lads in a white Transit wearing donkey jackets? Hmm, I wonder.’

‘They called us Trotsky. Seemed pretty sure of themselves. That’s not just stopping three lads in a white Transit.’

‘Maybe they know your registration,’ Jamie says.

‘Know his registration?’ Tweety says, opening his hands in exasperation. ‘Hey, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you!’

‘Come on,’ Stephen says. ‘It’s not just us. They’re putting in road closures in advance. They’re always one step ahead of us. Other people have noticed it. How do they know where we’re going to be? People must be grassing.’

Jamie looks out of the window.

Tweety says, ‘Like I keep saying, we should cut the belt. They’re not going to know about that.’

‘Yeah,’ Jamie says, turning back. ‘Good idea. That’ll be another way to kill someone. Maybe ourselves.’

Tweety says, ‘Is being so cheerful what keeps you so young looking?’

‘Us fighting is exactly what Thatcher wants.’ Stephen says. He takes a breath, runs his hands through his hair. ‘You both coming to the Viccy Hall tonight?’

Tweety stretches his legs out. ‘I’m knackered to be honest.’

‘How about you, Jamie?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it that thing? Out on the Heads of the Valleys? Is that the problem?’

Jamie shrugs. Tweety drums the table impatiently. Stephen shoots him a look and he stops.

Stephen says, ‘Coz if so, I feel bad too.’

‘Course you do. I didn’t say you didn’t.’

‘Do you think those men meant to kill someone? Of course they didn’t. They were desperate.’

‘I know that.’

‘Listen to me, OK. They’ve worn us down. Divided us. Starved us. Beaten us. Chased us on horses. Killed us even – you forgotten Davy Jones already? Those lads today—’

‘They dropped a concrete block—’

‘I know. I know. But this is all part of it, don’t you see? They’ve made men desperate. They need us broken. Those men plotting against us behind closed doors, they’ll be rejoicing at what’s happened, right? They won’t care about that poor man’s family. Far as they’re concerned, it’s another thing to break us with, another thing to divide us.’

‘I just keep thinking about his kids.’

‘Me too. Me too. It’s terrible. A terrible thing. They should never have done that. But it doesn’t mean we should give up. It’s not about us. It’s not about how we feel right now. We lose this strike, there’s going to be a whole load more desperation. This is exactly when we have to dig deep, be as tough as the enemy. If we stand together, we can still win.’

Tweety says, ‘Like the Comanches, right?’

And Jamie says, ‘Oh for fuck’s sake, Tweety, give over.’

There are sidings, a flash of canal, a brick-built warehouse. Jamie stands up, zips his jacket. Stephen stands too.

‘So, will I see you both tonight? We need to be there, now of all times, show solidarity with each other. Show Kinnock that we’re watching him.’

Tweety stays sitting. ‘Sorry, mate. Once I’m home, I’m gonna put me feet up.’

Stephen shrugs. ‘What about you, Jamie?’

‘I might need to help Lucy with the kids. I’ll see how I’m doing.’

The train is pulling into the station, the intervals between the cast-iron pillars slowing and the Victorian brickwork coming into focus. Jamie walks quickly away from them down the aisle towards the doors.

Tweety ostentatiously stretches out his legs in a pantomime of relaxation. He cocks his head towards Jamie and smiles. ‘Well, doesn’t that look like domestic bliss, eh, Stephen? Hurrying home to the missus. I’ll bet you miss that like a hole in the head.’

‘Don’t knock what you don’t know, Tweety. Jamie’s a lucky man.’

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6

Ian’s television set takes an age to warm up: first sound – disembodied voices – then, a circle of light opening. Ian sits, still in his coat, staring at the small screen. Some Scottish soap. Lairds and cable jumpers and views of a loch. It was still afternoon when he arrived home but twilight falls early in November and the room is already darkening.

Ten years ago, Ian thought he was escaping. It felt at the time that his instinct was right because he liked policing. He liked arresting people and putting the cuffs on. The vibration of violence in the air was satisfying in a way that he didn’t want to give too much thought to. He had too what they called a copper’s nose. He didn’t have to slog away with the grunts, the guys who stopped people indiscriminately and never found anything. He could just tune those guys out because he didn’t need their approval. He was a natural: a thief taker. But more than that, he, who for months as a child had found it impossible to speak at all, turned out to have the gift of the gab. Maybe it was his Stoke accent? Perhaps people didn’t believe he could possibly be duplicitous when he spoke like that: so warm, so straightforward, perhaps a bit simple. Or maybe it was because Ian felt so disconnected that he could say almost anything. Whatever it was, people told him stuff they shouldn’t, useful stuff. Soon Ian got the tap on the shoulder. He was out of uniform.

Ian’s new skipper’s name was Carl but his surname was Harrison and everyone called him Harry. Harry the dog. Play hard, party hard, Harry said. Harry was an exile, like Ian, but Leeds, not Stoke.

‘Can’t catch the Ripper, can’t beat Stoke City,’ Ian said.

‘Is this love at first sight?’ Harry said, fluttering his eyelashes.

Ian was learning the dark arts. It was dirty work, but funny too. He had escaped from seriousness. Harry and he seemed to share this same something inside, as if they needed to ride a rollercoaster for the rest of their lives.

After a good series of arrests, the squad would all go on a bender somewhere sleepy where there would be no eyes on them. Harry handing out the drugs with a wink in the bedroom of a country house hotel. Think of it as a bonus. And Ian agreed. Where was the harm? Where else was it gonna go? He had stepped out at last from underneath all the shoulds and ought-tos. It was possible to enjoy life. And then, later, Patty and Ian together in a hotel room keeping each other up all night. He and Patty were both whippet thin and a bit of whizz and weed only helped them to blend in.

They followed a target to London and Harry said, 'Make a weekend of it. Enjoy yourselves.' In the Roundhouse they pogoed to Madness and exited into a Camden night that reeked of weed. Guys with Mohicans; girls in bovver boots and laddered tights; Patty with her leather jacket, short skirt and dark kohl-lined eyes, looking like a punk Bridget Bardot. All the guys eyed her up but her hand was in his as they queued at Marine Ices. London was even better than Liverpool. Maybe we should transfer, Patty said. The two of them were both Ian's favourite thing: outsiders. They would make a life of that.

Ian pressed his face into the fine hairs on the back of Patty's neck and whispered, '*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree.*'

She said, 'What?'

And he said, 'English degree.'

'Get a bloody move on. There's a queue!'

'Two cones, pistachio, please.'

They were making big drug seizures and the boss left them to get on with it. 'But still,' Harry said, 'we don't know what's really going on, who's behind it all.'

It turned out that Harry wasn't exactly like Ian. He got his kicks in a different way. Ian liked going to gigs, taking drugs and sleeping with Patty. Ian liked putting the cuffs on, sure, but not like Harry did. For Ian the arresting was more of a sideline. But Harry was mainlining taking the big boys down. Nothing gave him a kick like the word guilty. He was hungry for the real guys, the ones who nobbled juries, paid others to take the rap and disappeared witnesses. They were violent, they always got away with it and Harry was crazy for them.

Jacob Levene was only nineteen when Ian targeted him: blue-eyed, curly-haired. Very low ranking as criminals go, but rumoured to be linked

to a much bigger fish: Emmet O'Connell, AKA Lester, local community leader and drug dealer to the stars.

Lester put it about that his nickname was because he rode horses as a youngster. But Ian, like just about everyone who worked Merseyside, knew the real connection between Lester's street name and its origins – the stabbing of a rival drug dealer called John Piggott who happened to share his surname with the Queen's favourite jockey. Merseyside police knew a lot about Lester. They were just finding it hard to prove anything.

Jacob was a soft lad. Desperate to be liked and with everything to prove. It was so easy to be the person Jacob was seeking. All it took was a good leather jacket and jeans that were tight in all the right places. Looks exchanged, a meet up in the alleyway behind the Monkey Puzzle club, followed by the brutal flash of Ian's warrant card.

Jacob's family were small town Greenbank Liverpool via Łódź, lighting candles on a Friday night and never buying German, so it was enough just to suggest a prosecution for procuring. How could Jacob possibly tell his law-abiding observant family that he was up in front of the beak for that?

The first meeting was just to let Jacob crap himself and then show him how easy the way out was. To slip out of it, all he had to do was provide a tiny bit of information. Not a big deal. All Ian wanted to know was the location of the lock-up. They wouldn't be raiding it. He just wanted to know where it was.

Once Jacob had given up the lock-up, Harry owned him. Lester wasn't known as a forgiving man. But Harry balanced up the fear by making Jacob feel special. Even took him out on the piss with them. Christ, he was reckless.

Ian began to develop a spidery feeling that he had to struggle to ignore. Liverpool was like Stoke. It was very easy to draw attention and even though he was born in Liverpool, Jacob didn't really fit. He was never any more than a wannabe. He'd never hurt anyone, never held a gun. A bone-thin street cat hung around the street café where they met and Jacob always kept something for it. A bit of meat wrapped in a paper napkin. It broke Ian's heart every time.

Soon the main thing about Jacob was that he needed to get out. His conversation had started to disintegrate into extending digressions. His

hands were shaking. He was taking too much of the white stuff. He was frightened, and fear would give him away.

Harry said, ‘OK, I get it. We’ll cut him loose. He’ll wear a wire. Send Lester down. Then it’ll be over.’

On the day of the sting, Jacob was excited. Keen to get it done. He was wearing an ironed blue shirt and a shiny leather jacket. For fuck’s sake. Ian took off his own T-shirt and Converse. ‘Wear these, and if you think you’re going to lose us, don’t move. Don’t let them take you anywhere that isn’t crowded.’

They taped the wire to him.

Harry patted him on the shoulder. ‘Just this one thing, and it’s over.’

They could just about hear him over the radio, moving through the crowd, eating peanuts.

Ian had a good tail on him. When Jacob went into Lime Street Station, he hung back, smoking. Jacob was queuing at one of the ticket windows in his borrowed Converse, sort of wedged between the two Johnson brothers. This was not good. The brothers had been handpicked by Lester for their special talents. They weren’t clever. They were psychotic. The little party moved towards the platforms and still Ian couldn’t see Patty or Harry. Where was the pick-up for the follow? Ian followed Jacob and the Johnsons onto the train and walked quickly down the carriages. Time to bump into Jacob by accident, fuck the whole thing up. But it’s less than two minutes between Lime Street and Liverpool Central and he wasn’t quick enough. As the train pulled away towards Hunts Cross, Ian saw Jacob through the window: walking with the two brothers along the platform, letting them take him wherever they wanted. Jacob turned his head and saw him too. Wide-eyed with fear.

Over the next couple of days Ian tried not to think about that expression. Harry and him drove around. Checked the obvious places. Squeezed their informants. All the time there was a raging in Ian’s head and a physical tightness that made him want to clench his fists. He could have prevented this. Harry put in calls to hospitals, mortuaries. Then he got a call. The RNLI had reported a young male washed up at West Kirby.

‘You maybe want to get here before we take him to the morgue.’

Harry and Ian drove over together. It took ages, crossing the wide Mersey.

Jacob had been so pretty. Here he was scavenged, bruised and bloated. Cigarette burns on his torso.

‘You think it’s a drowning then?’ Harry said, and the uniformed skipper looked at him coldly, but said, ‘Hard to tell – the Mersey will do that to a body.’

Everybody, including Ian, looked away when Harry grabbed the wire. Miracle it’s still there, he thought, before thinking that Lester had meant for it to be found.

When they drove back over the Mersey, Harry stopped the car and threw the wire into the river.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ Harry said. ‘But it’s not our fault. We didn’t kill him.’

But Ian didn’t answer. He couldn’t utter a word for days. He had to go sick. He tried to catch Jacob’s street cat so that it could be looked after, but it wouldn’t come to him.

Now, three months later, Liam’s dead too. And Harry was first on scene. That’s not a coincidence Ian wants to investigate.

The game show *Bullseye* is playing now. Still Ian sits. Jim Bowen – big chin, big forehead, big glasses – leads the female contestant up to the dartboard. She has short hair and wears slacks. ‘*This will be new to you*,’ Bowen says: ‘*carpet and electric*.’

Just as the woman steps up to the board, the phone begins to ring. It’s taken Roberts a while to realise that Ian has fucked off. He must have been too busy to notice.

Bowen says, ‘*Keep out of the black and in the red. Nothing in this game for two in a bed.*’

Ian leans forward and increases the volume.

The woman throws the dart and wins the garden furniture and Ian almost laughs out loud. The man’s throw wins him a Teasmade. That’ll be good in the morning when he has to get up at the crack of dawn and scrape the ice off his windscreen to drive into the factory. The phone rings on. The woman steps up again and wins a set of golf clubs. The phone finally rings out just as the contestants are marshalled to stand side by side in order to make today’s big decision. The man wears thick square-framed glasses, a short-sleeved yellow polyester shirt and a wide brown tie that goes down past his belt. Jim Bowen, with his threadbare

phrases, like an undertaker trying to persuade the family to buy the more expensive coffin. '*If you don't win, all you'll get is your BFH. Your bus fare home*.'

The phone begins to ring again and Ian imagines Roberts at his desk, desperate to have a shout at him. He walks over to the wall and removes the phone cord from its socket. While his back is turned the contestants decide to gamble it all on the star prize. Ian takes a drink of water from the tap and butters a slice of bread. He has been sitting for so long that the cold has settled into his bones. He will go out and walk, but, as he passes by the television, he pauses for the finale. Evidently the contestants have gambled and lost. '*Shame about the garden furniture*,' Bowen says, taking hold of both them by the arms as if they are his prisoners and leading them swiftly over to where the prize stands hidden behind the curtain. What's it going to be, then? The family sized car? Bowen speaks. '*Sorry, I've got to show you – I hate to do it because you've been delightful. Come and have a look …*' And here it comes, the catchphrase, not the prize, that is *Bullseye*'s truest consummation.

'*Have a look at what you could have won …*'

And into Ian's thoughts pops the yellow stone cladding on that terraced house in Stoke. Such a small dream to die for. On the television screen, the curtain goes up and a fibre glass speed-boat is wheeled forward by three men in nylon shirts. There's a sigh of regret from the audience.

'*I'm sorry. It would have been lovely. It's got skis – it's got the lifejackets and everything. Here's what you could have won.*'

Ian turns the set off. His front door opens onto a darkening blue sky and a chill in the air.

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7

Stephen’s son, Christopher, opens his bedroom window to a cold breeze. Darkness is falling quickly. He has had a bath and he lies in his boxers on the mattress. It will be hot in the bar later and he is storing up cold for the evening. This is his childhood bedroom and it is full of traces of him. An unfired clay pot on the table by the wall. Some of his own paintings from school on the wall: a monochrome of men walking home from the colliery.

But the boy of this bedroom is becoming a stranger to him. The transformation is not an entirely comfortable sensation. It is as if something inside him is dissolving and reforming into something else.

All his life he’s watched from the outside. Frightened of drawing attention to himself, he learnt to slip through any room unnoticed. But this has changed. Men’s gazes turn to him as if they are a shoal of fish swerving in unconscious unanimity. Christopher is trying to work this out.

Well maybe he’s not been on the outside all his life. There was a time when he was at the centre of a small world, before his dad left this house. He has gilded these memories. Roses picked from the garden give off a heavy scent of tea leaves and hot tarmac. They drop their yellow petals onto a dark polished table. Dad comes home from work, the coal still under his fingernails, and kisses his mother. Christopher places himself in the middle of Stephen and Janet: his hands are his father’s, his skin his mother’s.

His mum took him on the train to London and he stood on shiny stone floors in grey shorts. There were all sorts of messages. First the pressure of the day out with his mother. It was meant to be a treat but her anxiety seeped through him. Then, the lady who queued behind them in the café. She wore a blue suit, neat like one of those plastic dolls with all the outfits. When she looked at him, her face had a certain special waxen rigidity that moved into a smile that managed to be simultaneously overly

bright and glacial. He felt himself solidify under her gaze as if she had turned him into wax. And then that painting: a picture of a white woman with red hair, pulling a green scarf back from her face. Her skin glowing like pearl as if the painter was suggesting that paleness itself was divine. Around her, other darker women held long-stemmed orange flowers and looked from strange angles at the viewer, suspicious and perhaps even hostile. And beneath that central figure, looking straight at him, Christopher saw himself. A black boy dressed completely differently to everyone else in the picture: bare chested with a hoop earring and a necklace, holding a brass vase of luminous yellow roses. The boy looked uncomfortable. Was he angry? Sad? Was he a prisoner? What was he doing there, wearing those strange clothes with those strange women? Christopher would have liked to rescue him from the painting. Come on, let's leave together, he would have said. Come back to my house. The boy stared at Christopher, and Christopher stared back.

But not a boy, his art teacher told him later. A girl.

On the way to Euston, the tube train rattled and Christopher held onto his knees as if they would fall off. There was nowhere he could get away that was dark and silent. He didn't know how to deal with the sensations, the colours and smells and sounds that twisted visibly in the air around him. All the way to Stoke, he sat with his eyes closed and his hands over his ears. He came back to this same bedroom and lay on the bed with the curtains drawn.

Now, Christopher stands, puts on his green cotton shirt and his faded jeans. At the top of the stairs, he stops for a moment and considers the man who gazes back at him from the landing mirror.

Only Dave is in the bar. Christopher wipes the tables. Puts the chairs tidy. He likes the emptiness of the place, the on-the-brink feel. Dave unlocks the doors and a few early birds come in. Most are regulars but when Christopher takes his place by the beer taps, he flushes with excitement, because Felix himself has stepped in. Felix seems old to Christopher: possibly already in his thirties, but he is also a kind of mirror – mixed-race, like Christopher.

He spots Christopher and walks over. Felix, too cool to smile, puts ten pounds on the bar. 'Have one for yourself.'

Christopher tries to ignore the disappointment that spreads through him like ink in water. Is he nothing to Felix? Is this a payment? That would break his heart.

‘I’m all right thanks.’

Felix slides the ten-pound note towards Christopher. His Liverpudlian accent is stronger now, like he’s turned up the volume as an aggression. ‘Well, buy yourself one later on then.’

Christopher is worried. Has he come across as rude, refusing the offer of the drink? Has he misread the gesture? He doesn’t know. Like a paper kite snatching the wind and paying out the thin nylon line so fast it slices skin, he flies away from his feeling of failure and uncertainty. But then there’s a tug on the line. He doesn’t want to fly away. He wants to be with Felix. He hauls himself back down to the bar.

‘I’m so pleased to see you.’

And he is. He considers Felix’s beautiful face. His snub nose. The faint dusting of freckles. Felix has a small birthmark by his belly button: a bigger circle and a littler one. The two wheels of a tiny hidden tractor, he always imagines. He could draw Felix maybe. It is a dream, this imagining of Felix sitting for him while his charcoal smudges the paper.

And Felix must like the gaze because he offers a sheepish smile. ‘Take the money, Chris. I’m flush right now.’ The Liverpool accent has changed again, become sing-song and dreamy. The tapped tongue suggests all kinds of pleasures.

Christopher smiles back and draws the note across the bar. ‘Thanks then. Will I see you later?’

‘Yeah. There’s something I got to do for my Uncle Lester first. But then it’s just you and me, babes.’

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Jamie finishes the washing up while Lucy puts the boys to bed. He hangs the tea towel over the handle of the oven, goes into the front room, lights a fire and draws the curtains against the night.

Against a cream background are blue leaves, green flowers and long-tailed birds standing on the branches of winding trees. Lucy made the curtains – she is good with her hands and, in another time, she might perhaps have worked in a pot bank like his own mother did. They both want to keep the room special: like an old-fashioned front room, they have agreed. It was one of the things they shared when they got together, this desire to create a beautiful shelter. The small framed photo of his childhood friend, George, stands next to Lucy's mother's. There is Jamie's mother's china too. Plates she painted and the miniature cottage: two windows at the front, a rowing boat at the side and steps up to the high green door.

Lucy steps in and takes her place, close to the fire. Jamie takes the chair next to her. Over her tweed skirt and polo neck, Lucy wears her housecoat with its brown and red flowers that she has embroidered herself. She rubs her shins, pulling the heat into her body. She is tiny and delicate and, no matter how warm Jamie makes the room, she always seems to be cold. Jamie doesn't underestimate her though: that slight body conceals strengths. Her frame is surely tempered steel.

'The Heads of the Valley,' Jamie says finally. 'Did you hear?'

'Terrible.'

Jamie sympathises completely with his wife's choice of a one-word answer: neither of them want to talk about the death of the taxi driver. They are exhausted by yet another disaster, and afraid perhaps that they have reached some other limit. Jamie does not know what this will mean. The possibility is like living with a cliff edge inside himself.

'You off out?' Lucy says.

'I thought I might. Go and see what they have to say. Do you mind?'

‘Not at all, love. I’ll turn in early. Try not to wake me when you get home.’

Jamie hesitates in the hallway, then climbs the steep stairs. One of the treads creaks and he hears a hurried movement from his boys’ room. Opening their door, he pauses, inhales the smell of clean children: soap suds and the scorched ironed cotton of the bed linen. The boys are in their pyjamas. Michael, the younger, plump and dimpled, has fallen asleep on top of the covers. His right hand still grips his little plastic warrior, Prince Adam. Jamie leaning over his boy, catches the warm movement of his breath. With one hand he lifts Michael, while with the other he frees the covers. The child wriggles and moans in protest, then, deposited back on the bed, he snuggles back into the mattress. Jamie pulls the covers over him and places Prince Adam on the pillow beside him. He bends and kisses him on the cheek.

George is under his blankets, eyes closed but his face tense with the effort of pretending. In just a moment his boyhood will be gone. His face is already narrower, the fat gone from his arms and legs. Soon there will be an Adam’s apple, and maybe spots.

Jamie leans over and blows gently into his George’s face. George smiles in spite of himself. Jamie pokes him in the ribs and he giggles.

‘Ger off, Dad.’

‘All right but how about you give me the comic and the torch?’ Jamie says.

‘Five more minutes.’

‘I’m going out. I don’t want you bothering your mother.’

‘I wunna.’

‘Five minutes then. No more.’

On the street, Jamie pauses and looks back. In the cold darkness, his neat little house – a glow of light escaping from around the curtains’ edges – seems suddenly strange to him. How did this become his life? A rush of anxiety follows, as if he has sent his own children out at night in a boat that is unseaworthy.

The streets outside the Viccy Hall are packed. Men walk slowly. Jamie spots Mick Stein, who’s called the police for Stephen about his van. There is a patience between Jamie and Mick that comes from a lifetime

of knowing each other and of working together underground. They fall into step as easily as when they queue side by side to enter the cage.

‘Ay up, Mick.’

‘Ay up, Jamie.’

Mick’s three kids are all under six. He’s turned his hand to a few things since the strike started – labouring, fruit picking, sheep shearing. Who’d have thought I could shear a sheep, he says. Come Christmas, he says, he’s hoping to put on a red coat and a white beard. Glad of the money, and I can nick some of the pressies for me own kids. Ho, ho, ho.

‘What’s going on then?’ Jamie says.

‘Bomb threat, I heard. They’re searching everyone.’

‘They gonna bomb Kinnock *and* Scargill?’

‘I know right. You’d think it would be one or t’other.’

Jamie shrugs. ‘Don’t ask me. I don’t know owt anymore.’

Stephen is at one of the doors and Jamie, slowly walking up with Mick, hears him arguing loudly.

‘Ah give over. Me brother’s one of yous. Ian Weldon.’

‘Doesn’t matter who your effing brother is.’

‘Ger on with it then. I don’t want to miss Arthur.’

Stephen is fuming as they make their way up the stairs to the circle.

‘Can I have a lift back when we’re done?’ asks Mick.

‘Me van’s been stolen, hasn’t it?’ Stephen says and winks.

Men stand in the aisles. There are police standing at the back.

‘Looking for the troublemakers, are yous?’ Stephen says and one of them with stripes on his shoulder says, ‘Not difficult to spot though really, are you?’

One of their friends has saved them places and the three of them shuffle through the tipping seats, awkward with all the big knees and thighs. Everyone knows them and they have to say hello and ‘ow do to practically everyone.

‘They won’t let in more than two hundred and fifty miners,’ Stephen says, sitting. ‘Kinnock’s a bloody coward not to face us.’

The hall is packed. The red velvet seats in the Gods are high and distant from the small stage.

Kinnock, the Labour Party leader, stands and moves towards the microphone. Scargill, the miners’ president, sits on the other side, biding

his time. From the circle, Kinnock is so small you could hide him with your outstretched hand.

‘We meet tonight in the shadow of an outrage,’ he begins.

‘Bloody Welsh windbag,’ Mick mutters.

‘Trying to have it both ways,’ Stephen replies. ‘Wants to look like a miner but play to the Tories.’

‘Traitor!’ someone shouts from the rows behind.

Others join in. ‘Scab!’

Kinnock leans into the mike. ‘There’s people here living like parasites off the struggle of the miners.’ With his red hair and Welsh tones, he is still powerful. He’s from a mining family himself. Never stops going on about it.

The heckling begins in earnest. Scab! Traitor! It is dark and ugly but the hecklers are outnumbered by the Labour Party members who have packed the rest of the hall.

Kinnock presses on. ‘Violence is frightening, and it is futile.’

Stephen stands and shouts, ‘What have you done for the striking miners?’

Kinnock catches the words and turns his face up towards the balcony. ‘Well, I was not telling them lies.’

Jamie stands and puts his hand on Stephen’s arm. ‘I’ve got to go.’

Stephen turns to him with a scowl. ‘Why’ve you got to go? We’ve only just started—’

‘I told Lucy I wouldn’t be late back.’

Outside the hall, the officers stand around. Some are smoking. Their breath frosts the air and they stamp their feet. Jamie recognises their accents and the knot on their badges. They are Staffordshire Constabulary, not Merseyside or the bloody Met.

He nods at them as he passes. ‘Orate?’ he says.

They nod back. ‘Bit parky.’

‘Had enough?’ one of them says.

Stephen would have heard a taunt in that, but Jamie thinks the copper is just a young lad clumsily trying to make conversation. He didn’t mean anything by it. Well, he thinks. Have I had enough? Have I?

The distance – all the way from Hanley on foot – is a comfort. Jamie’s breath frosts the air. His hands are in his pockets. He has time to enjoy the fantasy that he is going to go in, cushioned by the certainty that when

he does arrive, he won't. He is just allowing himself to play with the idea. He will get really close and then he will carry on past, as far as the roundabout, then turn left and make his way home.

Jamie has stopped walking. He moves his fingers over his cheeks. A muffled sound of music penetrates the pub's brick walls. A fat man stands at the door. He has a bald head and an apron tied over his gut. Jamie has always wondered about this place.

It is ridiculous, the heaviness that fills him. Now that he is here, it is harder to stick to his resolution and walk on past, but it is also not easy to go in. He has a good life, a very good life. Lucy and he have a lot in common, only the one thing that they don't. How important can that one thing be? He has it under control. And his sons, Michael and George! He's just playing with the idea.

He walks over to the doorman.

The fat man smiles and offers his hand. 'If you want something to make you fizz, there's a coloured lad sitting by the bar who'll sort you out.'

'What? Oh, no. I'm all right.'

Jamie steps inside. Just for a moment. The place is thick with smoke. There's a disco, with flashing lights. What a song to be playing: 'It's Raining Men'! One of the guys on the dance floor catches his eye and beckons him and grins. The room seems to be full of half smiles and approval.

Jamie's used to hearing all that mealy-mouthed stuff. *What they do behind closed doors is their business.* He could laugh out loud at the meanness of it. Sometimes he could also punch a wall. But here that *behind closed doors* thing is in the process of being tested to breakage.

The disco lights trip blue and pink on the tiny dance floor. The songs are full of imperatives and calls to action. 'Pull Up To The Bumper!' 'Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go!' 'Relax!' The lights are out of time with the music and through their cracked pulse, you can see the ramshackle nature of the place. But there's a determination here. The doors are shut on Stoke-on-Trent. As if the Brewery is a launch vehicle and they are all working together to achieve sufficient speed to escape the town's gravitational pull and hurl themselves free into outer space.

Standing, watching the dancing, the milling, Jamie loves these men. And he wants to protect them too. Their absurd vanity fills him with

tenderness. The tight jeans. The open shirts. And the men who aren't so good at it – he loves them especially. Their awkward dancing. The anxious brave way they reach out. 'I Feel Love' is playing now. Jamie's seen blond tiny Jimmy Somerville on *Top of the Pops*, cheeky, but so brave, dancing on his pretend surfboard. Somerville's going to headline a Pits and Perverts concert to support the miners apparently. But Jamie, watching, thinks he's had enough of the pits to last him a lifetime. He just wants the perverts. He longs for them, but he cannot have them.

He turns to get a beer and then he sees Stephen's boy serving at the bar. The shock of it stills him. Opposite Christopher sits his mirror, another beautiful man in a leather jacket. This must be the lad selling the stuff to make you fizz. Christopher has a green shirt on, unbuttoned. Jamie takes in the flat bone of his sternum, the crest of his collarbone. Christopher is the adorable boy everyone wants to be with and Jamie wants to die with the shock and shame of it. The lad sitting opposite him is his match. Jamie is the old married guy in a donkey jacket leching after his friend's son. He is everyone who has ever been unmasked. He is the emperor naked in the street with his ugly body on full show and the child pointing at him. No clothes! No clothes!

He walks quickly away from the Brewery into the cold night. The moon is full in the sky.

But a voice from behind calls out to him, 'Uncle Jamie! Uncle Jamie!'

Jamie stops. The man who stood and stared at the dance floor is not the man who turns to face Stephen's son. This is Christopher's dad's friend from way back. He wears one of those yellow badges: *Coal not dole*. This is Uncle Jamie.

'Ay up, Christopher. Haven't seen you in a while. I didn't know you were working in a pub.'

'Oh, yes, for a while now.'

'How's your mum?'

'She's good, yeah.'

'Send her my regards.'

There's an awkward pause. Christopher says, 'Uncle Jamie, I don't want you to think I'd ever say owt—'

'What do you mean?'

'About you being in the Brewery. I mean I hardly ever even see me dad. And me mum wouldn't care anyway.'

‘Kind of you to say that, Christopher, but the pub’s on me way home. I just walked back from the Viccy Hall. Scargill was talking there, with Kinnock. Half the pit’s there. I thought I’d stop off and have a pint. Didn’t realise what kind of pub it was. Not that that’s a problem – just not my thing is all. But definitely not something you need to worry about keeping a secret.’ He stretches his hand out in that man-to-man style. ‘Good luck to you, son.’

In spite of the setback, perhaps indeed because of it, Jamie cannot go home. He has to banish the feeling that he is only living half of his life. He has to show himself to the moon rather than forever hiding from it. Cruising is not only sex. There is a fellowship in the woods that he craves. He will go to Trentham and be with his own kind.

But as the bus draws nearer, Jamie is snagged by his usual worries. He imagines that everyone is watching him. The simple action of pinging the bell and moving towards the door feels performed. The bus slows and draws to a stop. He steps down onto the pavement and the bus pulls away and disappears up the road on its customary route. He wishes, for a moment, he could call it back, although if it were to turn round, he would not want to get back on. His skin tingles; his heart thumps. Each footstep on the tarmac feels weighted with consequence. The heel strikes. The foot bends. It is another long walk before he steps off the pavement and onto the path that turns into a wood.

The light from the street is soon extinguished by the trees. The moon appears momentarily through gaps in the branches overhead and Jamie can’t help himself. He grins. Nobody knows he’s a werewolf! He moves along the path, through the dark clumps of rhododendrons that are spreading out from the formal gardens. Every nerve jangles. A hard swallow in his throat. But a great excitement too, because if you are in the woods, you want to do what you have come to do. Fear and anticipation have become indistinguishable.

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9

Felix has parked his brand-new car under a street light just outside the Brewery. It's a red two-seater with hidden headlights. To Christopher, nestling under that cone of orange light, it looks like an Edward Hopper painting: urban and desperately glamorous, full of unfulfilled longing. But Felix doesn't seem to have this sense of melancholy. He walks towards the car with a swagger, can't resist stroking his hand over the badged bonnet as he moves round to the driver's door. The action seems to beg for praise and Christopher says, 'Nice car,' even though the words make him blush in the dark.

'High performance. The engine's centre of gravity is just in front of the rear axle. You'll feel it, trust me, when I put my foot down, just behind the seat.'

Felix doesn't seem embarrassed by this kind of speech. 'Can't wait,' Christopher says.

'Twin cam,' Felix says.

Sitting inside the car is tingly. Just the two seats: no room for anybody else. Christopher imagines being Felix's boyfriend for real, jumping in the car together and going away on a love escape. Maybe to a windswept sea town with a fish and chip shop overlooking the waves. They will walk along the beach and stay in a clifftop hotel.

Sitting back in the seats, they are low to the ground like American cowboys. The steering wheel, the handbrake and the gear shift are all leather. Felix turns on the engine, flicks a lever on the dashboard and the headlights pop up, like two wary eyes looking out into the dark. Felix leans across Christopher and opens the glove compartment. Christopher feels almost paralysed by the weight of his body. He can see nothing but Felix's back and the nape of his lovely neck. The glove compartment is shut. Felix moves back and hands Christopher a joint and the cigarette lighter from the centre console. Felix opens the windows and they sit back and smoke. The cannabis takes hold and Christopher puts his hand

on Felix's thigh. He is stoned and swimming in desire. Felix adjusts himself in the seat and Christopher leans over him. But Felix pushes him away, suddenly impatient and bad-tempered.

'Got to do something first.'

Feeling painfully conspicuous, Christopher moves back to his seat and pulls on his seat belt. He wants to blend in, which is curious because it is only him and Felix. But Felix, with his frown and tense jaw, is a stranger again to him. The car pulls away from the kerb and Christopher does indeed feel the revs of the engine in the back of the seat.

Felix sounds irritable. 'Cars and big tips – they don't pay for themselves you know.'

'OK. So, what are we doing?'

'Meeting a guy at Trentham for the boss.' Felix chucks the joint out the window and puts his foot down. 'Don't worry about it. We'll do this thing, then we'll be free.'

They drive with 'Purple Rain' blasting out and Felix smoking Marlborough Red. He pulls over on the Stone Road, mounts the kerb and parks on the verge. He reaches past Christopher into the glove compartment again. Christopher is expecting another joint but instead he sees a grey metal handgun in Felix's hands. Felix racks the slide and looks inside the chamber.

Christopher has to swallow. 'Why've you got that then?'

Felix raises his left arm and tucks the gun away. He even has a holster. 'Don't worry. I'm not going to use it.'

'I dunno, Felix.'

'It's just to scare the guy.'

'You promise?'

'Oh, sweetheart.' Felix slides the chair back and grins. 'Don't be such a pussy.'

They enter the gardens by the old ballroom. This is where Christopher's dad took his mum on their first date. After the demolition of the grand house, this was a 1930s offering of glamour for the inhabitants of Stoke. Since then the ballroom has moved from being the home to ragtime bands to hosting a ragbag collection of concerts: prog rock, glam rock, punk rock, any kind of rock that sells a ticket. Christopher finds himself

pitying the sleeping building. It seems to him like a silent-film star who dreams in the darkness of making her return. The long arcade of windows is black, the domed hall silent.

The two young men move through woodland down towards the lake. The darkness is thick, punctuated by the glow from Felix's cigarette. The black surface of the water shines like obsidian. A smell of dampness rises.

'Where we going?'

'The lido.'

'Why?'

'Because there's no one there, stupid.'

Brambles have crept over the steps up to the ticket office. Just once, in the long hot summer of 1975, nine-year-old Christopher swam here. The water was slick with sun tan oil and dead flies gathered under the diving board. But still he recognised the glamour to the sweeping white steps, the concrete arches that sheltered the changing rooms and the high diving platform where the boys gathered in the sun. As night drew in, lights glowed beneath the water's surface.

In November's darkness, the pool has become squalid. Subsidence from the colliery has cracked the pool and it is puddled with dank water. The fountain is still there. Stained and filled with leaves, it seems smaller and ridiculous.

'Swam here with my mum,' Christopher says.

'Would have liked to see you in your trunks. What were they like?'

'Stripy.'

'Stripy, mmm.'

Felix puts his hand on Christopher's bum but Christopher thinks of the ghost boys parading on the top diving board and of the gun under Felix's shoulder that frightens him.

'It's sad here. I want to leave.'

'In a minute.'

Felix starts climbing the V-shaped steps to the ruined café where Christopher queued in those stripy trunks and towel to buy ice cream. He follows, thinking of his mother in her short-skirted, bright-green and turquoise costume. He doesn't want her around so much these days but he kind of wishes she were here now because she would know what to do.

The mosaic clock that hung over the doorway with its fish-shaped hands has gone, but inside the spaceship lights still hang, askew and dirty. The glassless, metal-framed windows with their chequered pattern stare out over the derelict pool.

‘What are we doing?’

‘Stop mithering me.’

Christopher stands in the corner of the room. The feeling is like being back in school on detention, but much worse.

‘Can’t we knock this on the head, Felix?’

‘No.’ Felix paces across the room. ‘The guy will be here in a minute. Go down and meet him. Tell him you’ve got the drugs up here.’

‘Why can’t you meet him yourself?’

‘There’s five hundred quid in it for you.’

‘I don’t want five hundred quid.’

‘Do it for free then.’

‘You’re not going to use the gun?’

‘I already said. I’m just going to scare him.’

‘Why are you hiding then?’

‘Fuck, Christopher. I got to do this for my Uncle Lester. You going to help?’

Felix sounds suddenly vulnerable. There’s an air of compulsion to whatever is happening that Christopher hadn’t sensed before and that makes him more anxious. He hears movement. Hoping it’s a fox, he steps forward to the glassless window and sees a man standing on the pool’s stained surface. Felix takes a pace back into the darkness.

Christopher whispers. ‘I can’t, Felix.’

‘Just fucking do it.’

Christopher leaves the shell of the café, tripping down the left flight of steps. The man has moved over to the far side and stands by the metal skeleton of the old diving boards.

Christopher starts to run. It’s all he can think to do. He runs round the back of the building and up the bank to the ticket office, out away from the ballroom, along the far side of the lake and up through the woods. He could run forever and he wants to run forever because when he stops, he will have to think. Behind him he hears the unmistakable crack of a gunshot. Still he runs, crying now. The ground rises and falls and his

breath comes in greedy gasps. He runs out past a huge-trunked tree that reaches up into the sky and straight into a man. He steps back, winded.

‘Sorry.’

The presence of another human is an utter shock. The man raises his arm. He holds a truncheon in his right hand.

Jamie has been moving through the woods for what feels like ages. He is far in, perhaps even getting close to the lake. Excitement and danger have given way to absurdity. The darkness, usually rich with footfalls, with men passing and looks exchanged, is empty of anything but the nightlife of the wood. It was ridiculous to put himself through this, to have to turn and get the bus back home. A fox emerges from a culvert and looks at him before moving on.

Over towards the old lido, Jamie hears a car back firing. He must have missed the path and be closer to the main road than he thought. It’s a weary thought. That exit to the gardens is too public and a walk right around the lake to get to it, so he turns back on himself and quickens his pace.

Then, behind him, someone running. Perhaps there are police in the woods. Once he would have run himself but now, he knows better. He stands in the shadow of a tree, listening, waiting for the woods to empty of them. The running is getting closer. Then it stops abruptly. Was that a thump his straining ears heard? A young man’s voice close by. ‘Sorry.’ Then other sounds. Blows. A kind of sob. Jamie moves slightly forward out of the shadow of the tree. A huge man is standing alone in the darkness. He has a truncheon in his hand. The man steps forward and strikes Jamie across his jaw. He staggers backwards, holding his face.

The man moves back into the shadows. ‘Count yourself lucky.’

Jamie runs. So much for being a werewolf. All he wants is not to be arrested. But then he stops because the sounds he has heard worry him. That voice. ‘Sorry.’ The blows. He turns back, moving quietly through the woods.

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The train is delayed and Janet worries she won't be home before her son, Christopher.

Staffordshire stands outside the window, a land so easily imagined by her that she needs no light to see it. The spectacularly green fields of Barlaston and Blythe Bridge have clay soil that bogs in winter and cracks in summer. Underneath lie vast drifts of coal.

She smiles at the memory of little Christopher's wellingtoned feet as he reached down to find the ancient pipes of the farm labourers: scorched white bowls and thin stalks as fragile as the legs of small birds. From their own waterlogged back garden, his tiny hands scooped out sodden clay and formed it into solid little bowls that still sit on her shelves.

The interview was a waste of time. As soon as she entered the room – steel-framed windows, plastic seats – the information popped into her head: wrong clothes!

One of the men – Professor Goodwin, call me Tim – wore jeans and an open-neck shirt. His hair looked as though it had been cut with dressmaking scissors. The other man – Dr Cooke, call me Steve – was in a suit that could only have been intended to be ridiculous. There could be no other explanation for the wide lapels, the flares and the purple. The woman, Dr Atkinson – skinny and tall, long-haired, with a horsey face that was strangely familiar, and who offered no first name – was in a flowy tie-dye dress, low cut.

How shaming it felt to be over-dressed! And this information was a revelation in itself, a blast of light into another kind of life.

She should have gone as herself. But she had bought her outfit (outfit!) at Laura Ashley. The skirt, stiff and gathered. The cuffs on the blouse, too long. The interviewers smiled and the heat of their imagined sympathy travelled up Janet's neck like a power surge. She wasn't the cool black woman of their dreams; she was instead the conservative, church-going black woman. Neither was true.

She tried to recover from the long cuffs, but she couldn’t, and now she is cross with herself. She sat holding onto her wrists, trying to cover up their length. Meanwhile the interview passed in a horrible fugue, as if she was driving on unfamiliar roads and continually missing her turning. It was only towards the end that, unasked, her brain suddenly placed Dr Atkinson. Of course: on a TV show, asking men in flat caps what they thought of nakedness. They answered with uneasy laughter, seeming to intuit that the joke was on them but bound by their northern politeness to reply. Janet thought of the solemn answers she had given to Dr Atkinson’s questions and blushed anew. Seriousness, it transpired, was also cringeworthy. She should have been flippant and worn jeans.

The interviewers pushed their chairs back. Dr Patterson offered his hand and smiled again: way too much smiling. Toe-curling, like Charles and Di showing awkward goodwill to the Māori people.

The train stops and starts, pausing as if for breath. Beyond the tracks and the sidings, the world is made of brick. Terraces, tall narrowing chimneys, Methodist chapels, bottle kilns. A small humped bridge, a flash of canal. In this night, it is possible that men in woollen jackets and hobnail boots still hurry to a work that is as inexhaustible as grass. Women with flowery cotton pinafores tied over dresses sit eternally in silent workshops, touching the paintbrush to the naked pink slipware, as soft as skin.

After fancy London with its airs, she feels a sudden burst of love for this strange district, for the pride of every Stoke-born man and woman who, away from home, turns a cup and saucer upside down to see the maker’s mark that tells them who they are and where they come from. The words are part of her too, both ancient – fang, nesh, damp, bank – and tender. Our kidda. There you go ducky, as the lady hands you your change.

The train gathers a last burst of speed and glides into the station. The red iron pillars sweep past. The brakes hiss. And Janet, standing ready, her arm already out of the window to reach down to the handle, remembers arriving at this cold station from the heat of Africa. *Returning home* her mother called it, but they stood, Janet’s newly mittened hand held tightly in her mother’s, as the taxis flashed past them in the rain, failing to stop for this white mother and her brown child, throwing up water that stained their coats.

Things are worse now. The steel works have closed: mighty Shelton Bar has become 400 acres of dereliction. Nearly all the kilns have gone cold. Janet fears the illness is terminal and kindness slipping as the flesh falls away from the bone. There's the threat of a different Stoke: a wounded creature in a sixpence-a-view sideshow, backed against a wall and ready to turn nasty. Cycling to the train this morning, she saw *Keep Britain White* painted on Victorian bricks.

She thinks of her son with a pang – him running into the sea on the camping holidays they took years ago on the Welsh coast when they were still a family of three. His skinny body too graceful, too expressive. It's not just his colour; there has always been something different about her child.

She hurries under the tunnel to her bike, fiddles with the lock, trying to shut out the grand forecourt and the hotel opposite that breaks her heart with its longing to be an Elizabethan manor house rather than the down-at-heel white elephant it has become. She hears voices and turns to see a small crowd milling. She remembers now; there's been a big meeting tonight at the Viccy Hall. Arthur Scargill himself, the miners' passionate leader with the comb-over, stands on the steps with a group of men around him. Then she spots her ex-husband, Stephen, part of the group, offering his hand to his hero. It will make him happy to be part of that little gathering. She turns away quickly before he spots her and keeps within the shadows of the station's curtilage.

Staffordshire's drizzle falls and soaks quickly through the arms and shoulders of her coat. Her face mists.

Freewheeling down the steep hill at Penkhull – on either side, Victorian villas that fancy themselves a cut above Fenton and Longton's terraces – she sees Newcastle's lights and the fields beyond draped in dark blue and shafts of grey as the rain moves across the Staffordshire plain. The land rises towards Clayton. She stands on the pedals and works hard. Even before she slides her key into the lock, she knows that her son isn't home yet. The house has that distinctive emptiness, that silence. It expands inside her. But it's early still. Christopher is an adult. She shouldn't always be worrying about him.

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Jamie moves carefully through the trees, searching. But there is no one. How long can he look when he isn't sure? And the man had a truncheon. The police might hurt you but they don't kill. The side of his head is throbbing from the blow. Just in case, he moves back towards Whitmore village, where he knows there is a phone box. He dials 999 and describes the location into the hollow little mouthpiece that smells of metal filings. No, he doesn't want to identify himself.

On the way back to the bus stop, a police car screams past him towards Trentham Gardens, blue lights flashing. Jamie wants to run, but he makes himself walk and then stand at the bus stop as if waiting here at this time of night is the most normal thing in the world. The bus draws up. The doors open with a hydraulic sigh. He steps up to the driver, puts the coins in the well.

'Orate?'

He is doing everything he can to be forgettable but his face is throbbing where the blow has landed. He sits at the front on the top deck. His hands are clenched and he forces himself to open them. He takes deep breaths. The darkness of the woods and the old brick wall is on his right as the bus ploughs along the Stone Road. In Newcastle, with people returning from the Viccy Hall, he risks bumping into someone he knows, so he gets off one stop early and follows the course of the Lyme Brooke. It's an old watercourse. Most of the stream is culverted but the ground is muddy and there is trampled litter. It's dark and lonely, but he chooses not to step out of the shadows onto lit streets.

Into his mind comes the statues of wolves and bears and foxes, all perfectly still and without any colour in the cold moonlight of the Queen's courtyard, because in Narnia, the White Queen turns her enemies to stone. His mother read him the story. He curled up in his bed with her while his father was out. Edmund sits in the Queen's sledge, scoffing Turkish Delight and talking with his mouth full. The shame and

fear of Edmund have endured the years, mingled with the shame and fear of his father coming home. Because you shouldn't fear your father and any suggestion that you might makes him angry. And stone wolves and bears and foxes are all somehow the consequence of people wanting the wrong things. And the problem with Turkish Delight is that once you've tasted it, you want more and more. You are greedy, and you stuff your face without shame or dignity and look where it all ends.

He steps up from the brook and walks along Church Road. Further on is the spire of St Luke's and beyond that, the colliery mainframe. Jamie turns left and the road climbs. Light seeps around the edges of the curtains of his front room.

He walks softly around the back of the house and opens the door with careful pressure. He takes off his shoes and leaves them on the mat. He carries his slippers in his left hand, moving in his socked feet towards the stairs.

But there's a stirring in the front room. 'Is that you, love?'

He puts the slippers on quickly. 'Yes duck – you still awake then?'

In the front room, embers glow in the fireplace. The room is close with its penetrating heat. Lucy has been snoozing in the chair and, waking, she rubs her hand across her forehead.

'What time is it?'

'Late. I hope you haven't been waiting up for me.'

'I couldn't go to bed, not before knowing you were back safe from the meeting.'

'I'm sorry. I've been out walking, thinking.'

'Has something happened?'

'No, dear.'

'But your jaw looks bruised.'

He puts his hand there. 'It's nothing.' Then, 'There was a bit of a scuffle, outside the hall, but nothing to worry about.'

'What was it? The police?'

'I don't want to talk about it.' He leans and kisses her forehead. 'I've made my mind up. I can't follow Scargill any longer. I'm going back.'

It's what she wants, but she says, 'What's changed your mind then?'

He puts his hand to his jaw. 'This.'

'Was it Stephen?'

'God no. Why would you think it was Stephen?'

‘Why would I think it was Stephen?’

‘I was walking back, on my own – there was some lads. I don’t know them.’

‘How could you not know them?’

‘I think they’d travelled down, from Yorkshire. To hear Arthur.’

‘OK.’

‘They were waiting for the bus, shouting their mouths of. I said what I thought—’

‘That’s not like you, love.’ She takes his hands, looks into his eyes and for a moment, he thinks she will ask him what really happened.

He says, ‘Couldn’t help meself. After what happened today. That poor taxi driver. He was a dad.’

She leans into him and the intimacy is uncomfortable. She says, ‘They’ve been like that from the start. Wouldn’t even let you have a vote —’

‘That’s not exactly how it was.’

‘You’re still defending them, even after this?’ She puts a hand softly to his bruised face. ‘We should call the police.’

‘No, no, no.’

Her face tightens. Was that a quick hard flash of suspicion?

He takes her hand. ‘It’s going to be bad enough crossing the line tomorrow, love.’

‘OK.’

And with that, she seems to shrug away further conversation. She walks over to the fire and puts the guard round the hearth, then moves towards the door.

While Lucy brushes her teeth in her nightie, Jamie waits on the landing. He thinks of Christopher, promising not to say anything. She dries her hands on the towel and turns to him.

‘Is there anything you need to tell me about what happened tonight? Something you haven’t said?’

‘No, love. There’s nothing.’

‘We’re a team, you and me, with the kids. So, I’d rather know – if there is something, that is.’

He bends and kisses her forehead. ‘Don’t be daft, ducky-egg. Let’s go to bed.’

Janet’s sleep is disturbed by a drifting awareness that she has not heard the anticipated sound of the back door opening and the creak of the stairs as her son walks quietly to the bathroom.

She is troubled by a memory: searching for Christopher in Debenhams when he was four. Running through the dresses and fabric and soft furnishings, shouting his name. And there he was, standing silently among the rails of winter coats, as if he had just returned from Narnia through the wardrobe. She hugged him closely, part relief, part fury.

She turns on the bedside light. Gets up and goes to his room. The walls are covered with a hotchpotch of things. A French film poster: Jean Seberg kisses Jean-Paul Belmondo. A picture torn from a newspaper of a naked man coloured red and etched with squiggles. A black-and-white contact sheet of photos of bottle kilns. One of Christopher’s paintings on cardboard: men walking home from the colliery.

It’s not like him to be so late.

She considers calling the police. But how on earth will they respond to her telling them that a single adult man who works in a gay bar isn’t in his childhood bedroom?

She goes downstairs, makes herself tea and anticipates with a smile telling Christopher about that purple suit. She will ask him if he wants one. He might want one! He’d look good in a purple suit. She smiles with love at the thought.

Perhaps she could call the police after all. Just check there have been no car accidents, nothing like that. But Christopher would be so cross with her. More than anyone she has ever met, he doesn’t like a fuss. It’s a pathology for him, never to be the centre of attention. She has learnt to tiptoe around the things that disturb him. Although she doesn’t really understand his level of distress, she accepts that it is acute.

She fills two hot water bottles and puts one in Christopher’s bed.

She lies in her own bed. Every cell in her body strains to hear what she hopes for: Christopher’s key in the lock and the door opening.

When Ian set out, a hedgehog was tripping steadily along the lane. Later, on the top field, a barn owl flew over, beating its huge tapestried wings.

He stood and paused, sensing this other world: separate, ancient, uncontaminated.

Since then, walking over the fields and down through the coppiced valley, he has lost all sense of time. He sits for a long while by the pool before he takes off his clothes and steps in. The mud rises between his toes. The strong smell of pond, of damp earth and rotting autumn leaves fills him like a death wish. He swims out, lies on his back, a tiny spec in a cold, black surface. The moon is huge and brilliant above him. A flat sort of peace spreads out across the water. He has no desire to leave but, at the far edge of the pond, the white shadow of a swan, no doubt disturbed by his ill-mannered appearance, glides across the darkness. It billows its wings and wags its tail. Feeling suddenly the ridiculousness of the situation and not wanting a fight with a huge bird, Ian swims softly back to shore, dries himself with his shirt.

He shivers violently and walks briskly back with the wet shirt hung round the shoulders of his coat. The climb plunges him into a deeper cold. He will get under the covers and fall into a dreamless sleep. Even a swan will not be able to disturb this.

But, as he takes the last bend back towards his police house, he sees a car parked by his fence. The engine is running. Steam from the exhaust plumes into the night. Superintendent Roberts, just like that swan, is already out of the driver's door and bustling over furiously towards him.

'Did you even go inside her house?'

Ian steps back because Roberts looks like he might be about to hit him and it would be a bit awkward to punch a detective superintendent, much as he'd like to. The calm is gone, the hope of a dreamless sleep. He stumbles via police deference into the scratchy normality he had escaped.

'Sir. It's late—'

'I'm aware of that. And I've been on duty since five this morning. I didn't particularly fancy an hour's drive over here but you weren't picking up your phone. Did you go inside her house?'

'I did go inside.'

'What the hell are you wearing over your shoulders? Is that your bloody shirt?'

'It is sir, yes.' And then, with some pleasure, because surely this at last will see Roberts off, 'I've been swimming naked in a pond.'

Roberts determinedly ignores this. 'That DS, Harry—'

‘Carl.’

‘Harry, Carl, whatever his bloody name is, he says you were once a proper officer. Your old superintendent, Dan Oakley, too. There’s a proper joint investigation underway right now into serious violent crime starting in Liverpool and coming down here to Stoke. I want to see you part of that, as you should be, doing serious work.’

The only possible response is to wind Roberts up. ‘You don’t consider looking after this community serious work?’

‘Look at you. Too bloody clever by half.’

Roberts wraps his arms around himself and stamps his feet. It’s a cold night and he’s not wearing a coat or gloves. All that anger must have kept him warm enough on the drive over.

‘Did you find anything? Anything at all that might give us a clue? A lead to follow?’

‘The house had yellow stone cladding. Looked a bit pricey for someone on benefits.’

‘A little girl has lost her dad. Those Liverpool gangsters are bringing their violence into homes in Stoke. And you’re telling me the house had yellow stone cladding.’

Ian feels a sudden wash of shame. ‘Right.’

‘Right? Right?’

‘I was just saying that you’re right.’

‘What is the bloody matter with you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And I don’t care. I only care about that little girl.’

‘I’m in the wrong job. That’s for sure.’

‘Harry said you were a good officer.’

‘Like I said, his name’s not Harry. It’s Carl.’

‘What on earth are you talking about? Why does that even matter?’

‘I’m warning you not to believe everything that DS Carl Harrison says.’

‘For God’s sake. There’s a strike on. An armed robbery at a post office that I haven’t had the resources to investigate properly. A bomb threat at the Viccy Hall this evening. All you had to do was talk to the wife and find out more about what Liam Holdcroft was up to. I don’t want whatever is happening in Liverpool coming here—’

‘I’ll have my resignation in to you first thing in the morning.’

‘No, you bloody won’t. I am not here for your resignation. I’m here to save you from being a useless twat. I’ve heard that in a different life, you were just the sort of officer we need right now. You’ve got experience of organised crime. How will you be able to look yourself in the face if you carry on like this?’

‘Sir—’

‘Tomorrow morning you will not be attending the local youth club and diverting the labourers’ sons from driving the farmer’s Landy. You will not be finding out what has happened to Mrs Jones’s cat. You will be in my office by eight hundred hours. You will be part of my team, making sure that whatever happened in Liverpool does not happen here. You are seconded. Even if you put your papers in tomorrow, I’ll still have a month’s proper detective work out of you, so help me God. Yellow bloody stone cladding. You should be ashamed.’

Ian stands in the lane, waiting for the last sound and scent of the car to fade. The moon is falling towards the horizon. It takes a while for the silence and the smell of earth to return. He closes his eyes and thinks of the cold glassy water. He goes inside and sits with pen and ink at his wooden table, writing his resignation by candlelight, the curtains open onto the sky, with its front row view of the Milky Way.

Jamie loves his two boys asleep in their pyjamas. He loves his wife and the front room they have made together, his mother’s china on the shelves and the photograph of his friend on the shelf. He imagines the little china cottage by the river with the happy family living there and the boat safely tied up. It’s so fragile. He’s always been afraid it will get knocked off the shelf. Broken. He remembers his mother wrapping it so carefully in tissue paper when they moved. He thinks of the dark night out there, bitterly cold, and another dark, cold night that will never leave him.

Has he missed something that happened in the wood? He hears that voice again. ‘Sorry.’ He thought the man who struck him was a policeman and it wouldn’t be the first time that a cruising spot he’d been to had been raided. But a policeman on his own? It doesn’t feel right.

He reassures himself. He looked properly. He called the police.

He wants to turn in the bed, to make a sound, to go back and search again, but that thought is ridiculous. There won’t even be any buses this

time of night. He senses that Lucy is awake too, lying in the dark, and he doesn’t want his own movement to spark conversation.

He plays with it for a moment: telling her. Blurting it out in the dark. But once said, it could never be unsaid and he cannot do it. He has too terrible a sense of his own power to destroy things. That long-ago football is back, waiting for him by the back door. He can never really get rid of it. He still blames it for what happened that autumn, and for what followed later. He remembers finding it, afterwards, tucked into the hedge a few feet from his house, just where George had left it. It wasn’t even his birthday when his dad gave it him. He said, ‘There you are, son,’ and placed it on the kitchen table. Why did his father have to give him the ball in the first place? He knows the answer to that: his father gave him the ball because he had to have things his way.

And although he lies in his own home, with his sons sleeping just a few steps along the landing, Jamie is back there: twenty-five years ago, two streets away from this house: sprinting out of that other house with Stephen, a stitch blooming in his side, both desperate to get to the reservoir.

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Sunday, 13th November 1960

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Sunday morning. The new ball waits by the back door. It’s nothing like the heavy waterlogged leather bags that Jamie and his mates are used to wellying across muddy fields. Nothing like those misshapen tired old footballs, loose at the seams, that struggle to be airborne. Perfectly round and bone dry, the sense of it expands, as if it has lodged inside Jamie’s ribcage, constricting his breathing.

The house is empty except for Jamie and his mum. Outdoors the cold snap is biting, but in the front room the coal glows hot in the hearth. The wallpaper with the tiny blue roses hangs behind Jamie’s mum. She is wearing her flowery pinafore and her cheerful face. Her figure is neat; her hair shines. The joins between the strips of wallpaper are perfect. No air bubbles mar its surface. She kept him off school for two days and they did it together. He liked the quiet in the house and working together on a task with its own rhythms. She borrowed a wooden stepladder and he lifted his arms and passed the paper to her and together they smoothed it down. They opened the window wide and the air was cold and fresh but the room still smelt of wallpaper paste. After it was finished, they sat together at the table. She spread the white cloth that she had embroidered with cross stitches and red roses.

‘Special occasion.’

They ate sweet slippery tinned peaches and condensed milk out of the bowls that she keeps for best. White flowers and blackberries are painted against a duck egg blue. She likes nice things, his mum. There’s a little china cottage on the mantelpiece: two windows at the front and steps up to the green door. If you turn it round, there’s a rowing boat at the side and flowers growing up the wall. At the bottom of the steps, there’s a black painted post and his mum says that that’s where you tie the boat and that the high front door is protection against flooding because the cottage is next to water. He imagines the friendly fisherman who lives there with his three-year-old son and his wife in her checked dress with a

flowery apron over the top, everything spick and span. His mum worked for a while in the factory, and she picked up a few things there. Plates mounted on the wall carry her mark. When she got engaged, she had to leave but he's proud of her history. She was a paintress and everyone knows they are the queens of the pot banks. Everything's nice in this room but the wallpaper does make it feel smaller than it is and there are too many breakable things.

Jamie can't remember a time when he hasn't been watching. He's always alert to the danger and so, although he does want to see George, he hesitates.

His da's out. When he's not working a shift, he plays the piano in the club and they pay him with beer. He'll be late back. Jamie can see George and still be back before his dad gets home. Just this year, the Eleven-Plus has sent him and George to different schools and Jamie misses his friend. Misses walking to school with him and sitting next to him in the classroom. Misses the day to day of being together.

It's Sunday and all the Weldon family will be there, crowding round the small table, managing their elbows.

He loves them, and kind of hates them too. There's Stephen, George's twin. He's a pain that you have to bear if you want to play with George. The grandfather he could also do without: a small man who struggles to catch his breath. How many times has Jamie heard from other family members how, during the war, this old man would cut another man's tonnage before starting on his own? 'We lift each other up,' he says, when it's mentioned, as if he's shrugging it off when really, he's boasting. Even the way the man walks on his bent little legs says how much he thinks of hi'self. And George's mother is nothing like his. She's a district nurse. See her in her blue uniform and you'd think the sheriff had arrived. No doubt about it: the family fancies themselves. Education? They're big fans. When he knocks on the door, they always look really surprised and happy to see him – as if he doesn't pass by their house nearly every day. They make a big show of what a surprise it is to see him and how welcome he is. 'Ay up, it's our Jamie! Come on in!' And he feels it as the condescension it surely is.

But George is his friend. Jamie can say hello and be respectful to the grown-ups and soon they'll be free to go outside. Jamie couldn't give a toss for the new football but George likes to play and he'll be happy to

have a good ball for once. If he could get away with it, Jamie would give the ball to George.

Still, he's afraid to leave his mum. The club will be full and the beer flowing. Those are the days when his dad's mood can switch from extravagant to something else.

His mum says, 'Go on, Jamie. You don't have to stay inside with me.'

And Jamie, freed from his conscience, runs towards the back door. He picks up the ball and feels its weight and roundness. It's not something to make his dad happy; it's something to take round to George's house.

Stephen has got a can of petrol hidden in the shed. It's Sunday and Grandad and Nanna are sitting in the best chairs. Stephen wants to get out before Jamie gets here, but it has to be George to ask permission. Less than an hour older, but George is the responsible one, isn't he? George represented the school in the speaking competition. His photo was in the *Sentinel*. George has just started at the grammar school. Stephen goes to the secondary modern with bloody Jamie.

The coal glows in the grate. In spite of the showers at the pithead, coal lingers under his father's nails and in the whorls of his ears. It darkens his hairline. It limes the hand basin with a grey slip. As they take food from the table, all the men's hands are tattooed with the blue staining of cuts made underground.

Boredom has settled into Stephen's legs and is rising like damp.

His two uncles are holding forth one after another in front of the fire. You've got to have a funny story to tell and you've got to know when to give way. The women, sharp-tongued and not impressed, make occasional forays from the sides. Everyone's red-cheeked from the packed heat in the small room. There's ham pie and they're arguing about some speech in parliament. His family loves this kind of talk and, although they are disagreeing, Stephen understands that the conflict is really part of some bigger and deeply felt agreement. He tries to follow. Summat to do with coal stocks and shutting pits.

God, he's bored! He tries to catch his brother George's eye before Jamie gets here but George is playing matching pairs on the carpet with their younger brother Ian because he's a goody two shoes.

Little Ian hesitates, his hand hovering over the cards. George widens his eyes and tips his nose in the direction of a different card. Sure

enough, it's another elephant. What a kid! And what a great older brother! On it goes. Gaitskell blah blah. It's so bloody hot in here!

Stephen gives in and takes his jumper off.

There's a knock at the door. Bloody hell. Damn. That'll be bloody Jamie. He's like a bad penny. You just can't spend him.

And sure enough, here he is. *Ever so sorry to interrupt*, like he always is. He can't be really because he says this *every bloody week*. There's a brand-new football in his hands. Where's he got that then? Grandad gets up from the chair and is making a show of putting more coal on the fire, even though Dad has said, *let me do that*, and as if it isn't already WAY TOO HOT in here. A chair's being pulled out at the table for Jamie and Stephen's mum is shushing up all his if-I'm-not-intrudings, Auntie June. His mum's not Jamie's auntie, and he should call her Mrs Weldon, but Jamie has special privileges.

'Now, Jamie, you know you're always welcome here. You're practically family.'

It's always like this when Jamie comes round. His mum must feel sorry for him.

She's cutting Jamie a too-big slice of pie and congratulating him on the football that he's holding and Jamie's saying it's from his dad.

'Your birthday, is it?' Grandad says from his throne and Jamie says, 'No, just a treat.'

Summat's wrong there. Who gets a brand-new football for a treat? Stephen catches his mum and dad exchanging glances.

Little Ian's found a pair of giraffes. Good on him. And good on George for playing with his younger brother. What a great boy he is. What an example to others.

For Christ's sake, couldn't they just have had one Sunday afternoon out playing?

Uncle Rob looks over to Stephen as if he can read his mind. He says, 'Good result yesterday,' and Stephen, feeling respected, says, 'You're not wrong. That Johnny King knows where the back of the net is.'

Jamie sits with the football on his lap, eating his big slice of pie. Doesn't he sense that his mum feels sorry for him? Stephen would be ashamed to be made so extravagantly welcome.

Jamie catches Stephen's eye and sneaks two fingers. It's a joke, but not a joke. Stephen thinks, don't let our mum catch you doing that.

Stephen sticks his tongue out. They both look at George. Well? Everyone's waiting for him. Only an hour older but still first in line to the throne. King George.

George says, 'Orate, Mum?'

Mostly it's kick-the-can or bottle-top football, but today it'll be the new ball.

Mum says, 'Back before six then.'

Ian says, 'Can I come?'

So they're responsible for Ian with his short, pudgy legs. He takes an age tying his shoelaces at the door but he won't let George do it for him.

Bloody hell. Damn! Bloody hell! Bloody hell damn!

Out they go into the cold street. Duke the dog makes a crazy fifth, barking to all the local kids to join them. Soon they are countless. Stoke City versus Newcastle United for the sons of the Durham miners who came down when they opened the new drift. It's a lunatic pitch that takes in the bend in the road and the steep slope that today favours United. The new ball's flying around. Everyone's happy. The girls stand together, arms folded across their chests as they watch. Their cold legs are mottled like spam. The dads join in, and tall Liam who lives somewhere out Smallthorne way but who's staying with his grandparents. Liam's mum died of cancer a few years back and his dad's a fireman so, when he's working, Liam often stays in the village. No-I-Can't-Me-Mum-Won't-Let-Me Billy is waddling around in his shorts with a red face, fumbling every tackle. And there's blond Mick Stein too, whose dad is German and who everyone says was a prisoner of war and liked it here so stayed. Whether it's true or not, Mick is mining stock, so he's one of them, Kraut or not. He's definitely more one of them than the ponces who go to the school George is going to. George has got a stripy blazer. Looks a right idiot in it when he leaves home in the morning.

The game is an outburst of hilarity, of pushing past and kicking the other team in the legs. Little Ian gets shoved to the ground by accident but he gets up and manages not to cry.

'Crog and score,' Mick shouts and Stephen, frightened he will piss himself with laughter, bends double.

But Alfie Kemble has thrown open his front door; even on a day like this, he's got nothing better to do than be a miserable sod. Every village must have an Alfie, Stephen thinks, just as they must have a Mrs Skerrett,

living on an invalid pension after her husband broke his back in a seam collapse. Walking the three miles along the lanes to clean the posh houses and wearing a hair net outdoors, the Old Biddy card in the village's tarot pack. Behind Alfie wobbles his mongrel, Rex, with his shaky back legs and his dog stink. Alfie's got a knife and he's waving it around. Pissed, as usual.

George is closest and Jamie shouts, 'Grab the ball, for feck's sake, George.'

Jamie's brought shame on himself swearing like that in public and in front of the girls. Why's he done that? Showing off? Trying to be the big man? Every idiot knows the big man doesn't swear except with his mates. Certainly not in front of girls. But that's what Jamie's like. Always gets it a bit wrong. Even if he is best mates with his brother, there's summat not right with him.

It's too late anyway, coz Alfie's got the ball.

George says, 'You're a natural, Mister Kemble, grabbing hold of the ball like that. Why don't you go in goal?'

Look at George. Thinks he's Scott of the Antarctic.

Jamie obviously thinks so too because he declaims in a posh voice, 'Come on, Alfie, play up! Play the game!'

Jamie's redeemed himself with that. Everyone laughs and Alfie smiles too and says, 'Orate.'

But then someone else shouts, 'Hey, Alfie. Why don't you get your wife to play? I hear she's good in goal an' all.'

Stephen turns to see what idiot it was said that. It was Mick. Just couldn't resist being a clever dick, could he? Alfie scowls and stabs the football with his knife. Jamie's first words are obscured by the howl that escapes him, but at the tail end Stephen catches, 'Brand new!'

Alfie's drops the ball and turns back towards his house.

George says, 'Hey, that's not fair. His dad's only just give him that.'

The dog totters after its owner, like they've both been drinking, man and dog. Jamie's completely lost it. He's picked up the ruined ball and he's sobbing. It was a good ball, but still. He's making a right idiot of himself. He's bellowing, 'You're a sad old drunk!'

When Alfie doesn't react – his hand is already on the door – Jamie goes further. 'All of Murton knows your wife's on the game.'

A whistle of disapproval rises from the street. Everybody's moving away. Ian's worried hand grips George's leg tightly. When George scoops him up, the grip has left red marks. The game's well and truly over. And it's not just Alfie who's been shamed. If Mum finds out what Jamie's said then he might not be so welcome after all.

With his free hand, George takes his friend by the shoulder. 'Come away.'

George walks towards the house, Mick and Jamie and Liam tagging along. He sets Ian down on his two feet at the gate. 'Go indoors now.'

The five of them run away together down the hard road. Jamie's still holding the ball. What's the point of that? The bloody ball's bosted.

Mick says, 'Billy's not coming then?'

And they chorus together joyfully, 'No I can't coz me mum won't let me.'

Stephen's flying, like Jack Flash with wings on his ankles.

Ian shouts after them, 'Can I come too, George? Can I?'

And – thank God – George shouts back, 'Not today, our Ian. Go back inside.'

Ian's wail goes up and Stephen turns to see his mum coming out of the front door. She takes a handkerchief from her pinny and wipes Ian's face. Then she takes his little brother by the hand.

Ian's crying fit to burst. 'I wanna come, George. Will you let us? George? George!'

A pile of rubbish has been heaped up in the allotment. Grass cuttings. Offcuts from fruit bushes. Pieces of wood. An old chair with a leg missing. Some rotten old hardboard.

'Why didn't you listen? You should have grabbed the ball before Alfie got it,' Jamie says.

'Bloody Alfie Kemble,' George says, now that they're safely away from grown-up ears.

'Never mind him – what am I going to tell me dad?' Jamie says.

Stephen pours some petrol from the can over the heap. There's an oily smell. He says, 'We doing this or what?'

The boys stand, hypnotised by what they are about to do. Liam says, 'Go on then,' and Stephen chucks a match. Fire flares with a whoosh.

The boys step back and laugh: part relief and part disappointment because the fire is quickly gone.

There's a pause. Now what? Stephen pours some more petrol, spreads it out a bit. He strikes another match and throws it. The match goes out before it even lands.

'How much petrol you got?' Mick asks.

Stephen shakes the can. 'Bit more.'

'Throw it all on, mebee?'

George says. 'Dunner do that.'

Jamie says, 'Can I light it this time?'

Stephen chews his lip. He gives the matches to Jamie. Stephen's got the can in his hands. Jamie strikes a match and throws it. It goes out. Jamie steps a bit closer, and throws again. The petrol flares. For a moment there's a flicker on the pile but it looks like it's going to go out again. Stephen goes towards the flame. And just as he begins to pour the petrol, an arc of flame travels from the bonfire to the can. The can is pouring fire out of its spout. He drops it and jumps back. His hand is burnt. 'Bugger it!'

The hardboard has caught and is roaring. Some canes have caught and burn with a bright orange flame. There's an acrid smell The hardboard flares and surprises them with its roar. They step backwards. Jamie laughs. His voice sounds high and disembodied. *Whoom!* The fire has taken over control of what is happening. The wind is gusting and it blazes strong and fast. The heat scorches their faces. The blaze sends out unexpected flares of flame. It's all happening very quickly and in unpredictable ways. The fire jumps. It catches one of the sheds. The boys can't keep up with its antics. A bin roars like a torch. Black smoke billows. Instead of damp soil and grass, the air smells chemical. Stephen remembers something about hedgehogs sleeping in the bottom of bonfires and feels suddenly awful. The outline of a burning lawnmower is silhouetted.

'Sink the Bismarck!' George shouts and they all laugh.

The sparks sail into the sky and catch a tree. Individual twigs are picked out in glowing embers. Mick says, 'We better leg it.'

But flashing lights are coming down the lane and George, perhaps understanding that a group of boys running away will be obviously guilty and easily caught, takes his jacket and starts hitting the ground. Jamie

rushes towards the standpipe. Stephen follows and runs across the ground with a full bucket, acting it out.

Liam takes his jacket off and starts whacking the fire with it.

Mick says, ‘I’m away home.’ He runs towards the far end of the allotments.

But George ignores him. He’s John Wayne in *Flying Leathernecks* and he shouts, ‘Jigsaw Two and Nine, how is your fuel?’

Stephen creases up and shouts back, ‘Two on reserve.’

Liam’s whacking at the fire and George is filling a bucket. It’s the best Sunday ever.

Two fire engines are driving alongside the allotment and behind them is a police car. George says, ‘Oh, we’re in the doo dah now.’

Stephen throws the bucket and the flames flare up as if it’s petrol, not water he’s thrown. He steps back and gasps. The copper’s already out of his car. One of the firemen walks quickly towards Stephen. He’s a big lad, with a body too long for his legs. Oh, it’s Liam’s dad. Liam’s going to get it in the neck. Too tall to be a miner; that’s what everyone says about Shaun Holdcroft. He hisses at Liam, ‘Can’t I leave you for five bloody minutes?’ But the copper’s getting out of his car and Shaun puts his arm round Stephen and says theatrically, ‘Well done, you lads. Better leave it to us now.’

The men unroll the hoses from the engines. It’s over in a couple of minutes. Now that the fire is under control, it feels a shame it didn’t get a chance to roar more. The ground is soaking wet and the rubbish pile is steaming. Briefly it had seemed a monster, but it was easily extinguished.

The boys stand together.

Stephen says, ‘Shame we didn’t put any tatties in.’

George says, ‘How you going to explain your trousers and jumper to Mum?’

The policeman walks over to them. He lives in the police house at the end of the lane. ‘Looks like this was started on purpose. See anyone?’

George looks the bizzie straight in the eye. ‘No, sir.’

He’s good like that. The grown-ups always believe him.

Stephen says, ‘We wunner here when it started. We was out blackberrying and we saw smoke. Come to see what’s going on.’

The policeman nods evenly. ‘Blackberrying in November?’ Then he looks at Jamie. ‘How you doing, Jamie?’

‘Yeah. Good,’ Jamie says and looks at his feet.

Stephen’s looking at Jamie. How did the copper know him?

The copper turns back to George. ‘I don’t know you two boys …’

Here is Shaun Holdcroft again, in the nick of time. He puts his arm round Stephen again. ‘Thanks for your help, lads.’ He turns to the copper. ‘I know them. Good lads, from a good family. Play with me own boy, don’t you, boys? George goes to the grammar. Without them, it might have got out of hand. This is my son, Liam. Putting out fires, runs in the family, don’t it?’ He turns back to the boys. ‘Want a cuppa in the wagon?’

There’s a cough and a shuffle and then the copper backs down and doesn’t insist on their names and taking them back to their parents. They sit in the wagon and the firemen pour cups of sweet hot chocolate from tartan flasks and give them digestives.

Shaun says, ‘I want you home, Liam, after this. I’ll ring your grandad after. Make sure you’re indoors.’

Liam looks at the floor and scuffs his feet. Why’s he the only one got to go home?

‘You boys got girlfriends then?’ one of the other firemen says.

Stephen giggles, but George blushes and Stephen leaps on this with sudden insight. ‘You have, haven’t you? You have! You have!’

‘Give over.’

‘It’s Janet, isn’t it? It’s Janet! I bet it’s Janet.’

The boys nip back home down the lane that runs alongside the deep old reservoir. The light is already seeping out of the day. It’s not like summer when the water was a welcome splash of cold, a sharp intake of breath.

Sometime, back in a time that no one can quite remember, someone’s dad or brother or uncle built a wooden platform out into the pond, and all through hot July and August, all the local lads lay out on it, baking their bodies until the heat became unbearable. Their skin darkened and peeled, revealing endless softer pale layers beneath as if they were onions. George’s face filled with freckles. The girls sunned themselves along the bank, whispering and giggling.

Today the water looks dank and deep. They run past towards home but at the bottom of the village, Alfie Kemble is standing with his dog on a piece of string. He puts his hand up as if to slow them down.

‘Sorry, lads, sorry ’bout the ball.’

George says, ‘It’s orate, Alfie.’

No one else says anything as they run past and before Alfie manages to detain them with his misery, they are away back up the hill to their homes. As their steps slow, George says, ‘Got to feel sorry for his dog.’

Liam slopes off back to his grandparents. Stephen and Jamie wait up the street while George runs upstairs to the bedroom. Stephen doesn’t go in because – like George says – if their mum sees the state of him, he won’t be let out again.

George slips out. He stops and waves to the upstairs window and Jamie looks up and sees Ian. He must be standing on a chair on the landing. They move back along the pavement.

‘Got it?’ Stephen asks.

George pats his chest. There’s something stiff tucked under his jumper.

‘Let us see it then?’

He shakes his head.

‘Ah, come on!’

There’s a threat of a scuffle but George runs, holding his hands up. ‘No point if you tear it.’

Jamie says, ‘How long you had that then?’

George shakes his head but Stephen laughs and says, ‘Valentine’s, isn’t it? You been keeping that since February! You total wazzock.’ Then Stephen starts singing ‘Love Me Tender’, and George says, ‘Give over,’ but then he laughs too at his own foolishness, and they are all laughing back along the lane, past the pool and out across the fields.

Only recently this was farmland but the farmer has disappeared as if into thin, air and water pools in the ruts made by the trucks and diggers that are carving out roads and foundations. Like dinosaur bones, the white concrete drains await their own burial. Soon there will be houses here, but, running over the rough ground, the boys startle a hare that zigzags away from them. Stephen hikes an imaginary rifle to his shoulder. *Pow! Pow!*

Then he looks down at his feet. He’s standing in a bloody pool of water!

He’s going to go home with a muddy jumper and wet shoes and a burnt hand. His mum’s going to be cross and his dad might give him a clip.

‘My shoes are bloody soaking,’ he says.

‘Like Dad says, wet above ground and wet below,’ George says and Stephen thinks of the ancient lake underground at Diglake that burst through and swept the men away.

Jamie says, ‘George, do you reckon I can mend this?’

Stephen looks across at his brother’s friend, who is still holding the football.

George says, ‘But how would you?’

‘Like a tyre.’

Stephen says, ‘Course you can’t bloody mend it. It’s bosted.’

George says, ‘Will your dad be mad at you?’

Jamie scuffs the ground and shrugs.

The lights are already on in some of the new houses that rise in jagged lines out of the furrowed earth. They are out of place, like teeth suspiciously white and straight in an old man’s mouth. Stephen senses how those blank panes of glass and walls and panel fences will mass out and cover the wild lands until they stretch as far as his own village and there is no gap left for the skylarks that rise from the earth when the boys run.

They idle around on the edges of this new encroachment. Their courage ebbs and flows. They use each other’s names.

Stephen.

Jamie.

George.

They push each other in the chest.

You big plonker.

You’re the plonker.

George is holding the envelope. It’s massive and bent in the shape of his chest.

Stephen says, ‘Probably smells now. She won’t like that.’

They laugh again. But now they’re here, they have to go through with it and the laughter dies quickly. The house is shingled and has a low fence and a very small front garden.

Stephen says, ‘Give it here then.’

As he steps towards the front door, his centre of gravity shifts away from George and Jamie towards this foreign land. Before he knocks, his legs itch to run, but he also wants to stay, to be asked inside so he can

look around and figure out this thing that he feels. Perhaps he can pin it down, know Janet's family like he knows his own people. They aren't supposed to feel strange to him, but they do, and perhaps if he stands in their house, that strangeness will go.

Worst thing is, it's Janet's mother not Janet who answers the door. She's a thin woman, and white. That's another mystery, right there.

'Uh, yes, excuse me, Mrs Kimani, is Janet in?'

Her skirt and blouse and cardigan make her look like someone who might tell him off, but her smile is friendly and he is caught between these two impressions and the desire to make a run for it.

'She is. Do you want to come in?'

'Ah, no thank you.'

Stephen's eyes travel over to stupid Jamie and George, who are still standing there smirking. There's something gently mocking in Mrs Kimani's voice too. Everyone's bloody laughing at him.

'What about your friends?'

'They're not my friends.'

'No?'

'One of them's me brother and the other one is *his* friend.'

His right big toe curls up inside his shoe and there's an ache in his calf. He remembers how his shoes are wet and his jumper is burnt. His hand throbs. His face heats up right to his ears and his neck is probably blotchy too, which by itself would be embarrassment enough. Then Janet is there. She's taller than him and he's overwhelmed by the mystery of her. He's a bloody idiot. Mrs Kimani has slipped back inside with such delicacy that he has hardly noticed her leaving.

Janet says, 'Hello, Stephen.'

His mouth has got stuck together. He can't speak. Things couldn't really get any worse. He shoves the envelope at Janet. She takes it but doesn't go inside. Her long slim fingers open the envelope and soon the card is in her hands. He leans so he can see it. A picture of a smiling bee in a heart and, printed in big letters, *Be My Honey.* Inside, his brother's hand: *Guess Who?*

Janet looks over at George and Jamie and then back at Stephen. 'Is it from you?'

He hasn't anticipated this question. His eyes drift over to George. Neither Jamie nor George is giggling now. George looks like his name's

been called in the dentist's waiting room. They've been learning about Guy Fawkes in school but Stephen reckons the rack couldn't be much worse than what he's feeling right now.

'It says "Guess Who?", dunt it?'

Doubt flickers across her face. 'Was it you then?'

Nothing for it. Stephen runs.

Jamie and George run too. For a while all three of them are almost neck and neck. From behind Jamie pants, 'Give over.' Jamie's a crap runner and he can't kick a ball neither. Stephen keeps on running. Behind him Jamie's steps falter and slow. Then George falls back too, coz he would choose to stay with his mate not his brother, wouldn't he? His brother what's delivered his bloody card. Stephen's not even out of breath. George shouts after him, 'Wait for us, our Stephen.' But he's buggered if he's waiting for them. He doesn't want to be with them. He runs over the fields, away from the village. He can still hear George shouting but he and his mate can eff off back home together. He sits on a mound of earth.

He wishes he'd said yes to Janet's mum. He did want to go inside. Giving the Valentine's card made it his right coz his brother would never have been brave enough.

He hates his brother. He hates Jamie.

Jamie drops the bosted ball and stands bent over, hands on his knees. Stephen can run off if he likes. Side by side in the gathering darkness, Jamie and George draw deep breaths. This is heaven enough, their shared breathlessness. What freedom there is in it.

George seems completely unaware of all the jealousy that circles him. That is what it must be like to be James Dean. Talking all normal about ordinary stuff and everyone else around you finding it hard to concentrate. Jamie for one can never dare relax his grip on what he says, just in case the wrong words come out. Sometimes he feels like one of the Flowerpot men! The worst disjointed puppet ever, wobbling about suspended from strings and saying, flubub, flubub instead of words. And the posh woman explaining over the TV – because the puppet clearly cannot speak for himself – that that's the way the flowerpot man says I love you.

Just the thought of it makes him blush to his ears and want to punch something.

But still. How great it is to be here, side by side, both breathless.

Most of the time Jamie feels like he's all tied up with rubber bands. Sometimes he's so nervous around George that he can't even separate his fingers.

How different George is. How easily brave. Writing a Valentine's card. To even know to do that! And then to go right ahead and do it. Buy the card. Write the message. But then, with a sudden pang, Jamie discovers the vulnerability too. George has kept that card since February but never dared to give it. This must be a big love and Jamie himself is unthought of, nothing more than a good friend.

George is standing, hands on his hips, looking down the hill towards the lights of the village. He says, 'Will your dad be very angry about the ball?'

George looks into your heart and sees what you have concealed from every other soul on earth.

'He'll be cross, but it'll be OK.'

That's a lie. The dread of going home asserts itself in Jamie's body. He has already stayed out way too long. He meant to just play out for an hour. He didn't want his dad to come home to his mum and him not there. But for all his good intentions earlier in the day, he's been *not thinking about it* for hours.

'Me mum'll be wanting me back,' says George.

Jamie says, 'Yeah, mine too.'

Flubub, flubub, flubub.

He picks up the ball from the ground. It's an ugly thing that fills him with dread. There's nothing worse than something that was perfect ruined.

George says, 'I wouldn't tek it home if I were you. Mebee it won't be on his mind. Seeing it might make him worse.'

'Yeah, but what if he asks me where it is?'

'Can you say you left it at mine?'

They are walking side by side, back towards the village. Jamie would stay out for hours now if George wasn't with him, but his house is first on the way back. He always imagines himself as his mum's protector but

when it comes down to it, he isn't. Nobody can protect anyone in his house.

The lights are on and he hears his dad's voice, low. He hands the ball to George. 'Keep it for me then, will yer?'

'Yeah, no problem.'

He opens the little wooden gate. He wants to look back at his friend, but he doesn't.

George stands outside his friend's house with the football in his hands. Jamie's dad sounds like nothing he has ever heard before. Repetitive. Very low. That voice puts the fear of God into him. It goes on, insistent, leaving little space for interruptions. And when there are – briefly – other voices, they sound like little birds hiding in trees warning of a cat. Tweet. Tweet, tweet. What the hell was that? Sounded like a wardrobe falling over! Then, almost immediately, a sound he only barely recognises as human. It could be the scream of a rabbit he heard caught by a fox. George's heart has come right out of his ribcage and up into his mouth. He could almost chew it. He hears his friend's dad. 'Shut up, Jamie.' In George's ears, there is a roaring, like a waterfall. His heart seems to be all of him. He pushes the gate open gently and walks silently up the path. He stands by the door, listening. He can hear Jamie's dad, low, growling, but he can't make out the words. Some huge cloud of shame hangs over whatever it is that is happening – Jamie's shame, his own shame for knowing about it and standing silently outside his friend's door.

But Jamie's dad is louder. Something specific now. 'Where's that ball then?'

He raises his arm to knock. Some idea of a preposterous explanation for the lost ball.

But the voice frightens him too much. It's not Mrs Skerret flat on her back in the street with her knickers showing. That was easy. Call an ambulance and stay with her. Everyone's hero. This?

George runs. When he gets to the end of the street, he turns right and squats down. He stuffs the bosted ball in a hedge, then runs the last minute home. He pushes open the back door and goes into the front room. His mother has fallen asleep by the fire but she stirs as he enters and rubs her eyes.

'Where's Dad?'

‘Walking Duke.’ Her eyes flick down to his muddy shoes, which he’s forgotten to take off. ‘What’s wrong, George?’

Stephen has been sitting for so long that a red fox has come to accept him as part of the landscape. He watches it emerge from the undergrowth and trot across the field towards the reservoir. A mile below, men are working. Stephen knows the names of the coal seams: Winpenny, Ragman, Bowling Alley. It’s a whole world down there, a geography that can only be revealed to boys who follow their fathers. *I don’t want my son going underground.* How many times has he heard that? But he hears the pride those words must conceal, because if it were not bitter and fearful, then how would you have the rest? The potters might be proud of themselves, and the steelworkers too, but everyone knows they are nowt to the miners. The silhouette of the pithead sets forth the village and everyone gathers beneath it. George can go off to grammar school, but Stephen is going to be a miner.

He’s cold to his bones. You’d have thought someone would have missed him by now.

He stands and heads home past the reservoir. An owl calls. Alfie Kemble stands on the path with his dog on a string. The moon is rising in the deepening sky. Stephen stuffs his hands in his pockets, clenches his jaw and thinks John Wayne. Alfie is reaching inside his coat. Bloody hell, now what?

‘Orate, Alfie?’

Alfie’s got a pound note and he’s shaking it out towards him as if it’s some sort of hopeless football rattle that makes no sound. The dog is cowering, its skinny rat’s tail trembling between its legs. Walking closer, Stephen sees, in the blue light, that Alfie is crying. Stephen’s cheeks burn with the shame of it.

Alfie shakes the pound note at him again. ‘Fer your marrer, son. Fer the ball.’

They’re close, face to face. They could touch each other. Stephen smells beer.

‘No, honestly. You’re orate, Alfie.’

Alfie shakes the note again. ‘Go on. Tell him ger a new one.’

‘I can’t take that money off you. Me mum’d be cross. I got to go now. Sorry, Mr Kemble. Late for me tea.’

And he walks quickly past. He wants to be home right now. Jamie will have gone and George will be there. Even if his mum's cross, he wants the heat and the light, sitting in the kitchen with his brothers, eating Welsh rarebit while his mum makes his dad's snappin for the night shift.

Stephen pushes open the back door to the kitchen. Unusually, there are no voices.

He kicks off his muddy shoes and slips through to the hallway. He will sneak upstairs without a telling-off. But the door to the front room is open and his mum stands alone with her coat on and a scarf tied over her hair. He meant to try to do something about his jumper before she saw him but the sight of her is so strange that his steps falter, and she turns her head and looks at him as if it takes her a moment to recognise her own son.

'I need you to stay here with Ian.'

No mention of his burnt jumper or his wet socks then.

'What's happening?'

'I'm popping out for a moment. If your dad comes back, send him round to meet me at Jamie's. There's something they need help with.'

'Where's George?'

'He's just this minute gone to find your dad.'

Questions burst inside Stephen's head but his mum has moved past him to the kitchen. She has bent down and is taking her slippers off and placing them neatly by the back door. She pulls on her shoes.

'Go on upstairs to Ian,' she says, her hand already on the door. 'He's in the bath. He'll be needing his jamas. I've left them on the radiator. I won't be long.'

She stands and watches him, waiting for him to move, and he has no choice but to go up the stairs.

Through the bathroom doorway, Stephen sees Ian walking around in the hot water, talking to himself and arranging his toy soldiers around the bath. He's pink all over. Even his little willy, smaller than Stephen's little finger, glows. Stephen goes out to the landing window and watches his mother hurrying down the street.

'Will you play pairs with me?'

Stephen turns. Ian has stepped out onto the landing. He's dripping everywhere.

‘Bloody hell, there’s water all over’t floor, Ian.’

‘Where’s our George?’

‘How do I know?’

Downstairs, the back door opens. Stephen grabs Ian and rubs him with a towel.

‘Go inta the bedroom and put your jamas on. I’ll be downstairs.’

He wipes the wet floor with the towel and runs down the stairs. His dad’s drying Duke’s paws before he takes his own shoes off. Stephen wants all sorts of words to come out of his mouth but he doesn’t know how to shape them into good order. He wants to ask why his mum was standing in the front room with her coat on. He wants to tell about Alfie Kemble and the pound note in his hand and the tears running down his face. He wants to know what is going on.

His dad looks up from the dog.

‘Orate, Stephen?’

Stephen has a powerful intuition that he should not be confused by things. Things are straightforward. His mum and dad know what they’re doing.

We lift each other up, an’ all that.

‘Mum says you’re to go over to Jamie’s. They need help with summat.’

At the door of the club, George hesitates. The room is thick with smoke. The tables are filled with men drinking, but he can’t see his dad anywhere. Men are up at the bar waiting. Others sit talking. As soon as he enters, he’s met with a wall of greeting, as if he’s the entertainment they’ve all been waiting for.

‘Ay up our George, bit young fer a drink, aren’t you?’

‘Mine’s a pint.’

The joke’s not good, but they laugh, because these words are about his place in the village, not about being funny.

‘Good on you, George.’

It takes a while to progress through the room. Got to get it right. He carries the pride of his family with him.

‘How’s the new school? Forgotten how to play football yet?’

‘Think I can still remember. Summat about kicking it instead of running with it, in’t it?’

‘Barth not bath is it nowadays?’

‘It’s still bath. But you paaark a caaar in a gar-aaage.’

‘Good on you, George.’

The old boys laugh and one of them shakes his hand and offers to buy him a pint.

‘No, you’re orate. But thanks.’

All the men round the table laugh. Better to have been polite and made a fool of than rude.

At last, Marilyn at the bar spots him, ‘Hey George.’

He walks over so as not to raise his voice. The towels on the counter are soaked in beer. The smell of yeast and hops rises.

‘Have you seen our dad at all?’

She shakes her head and calls over to the other woman who is working the shift with her. ‘Marj, you seen George’s dad?’

Marj lays two pints on the bar and shakes her head. ‘He was in here with your grandad but they didn’t stay long. Had the dog with him. Everything orate?’

‘Nay bother. Thanks, ladies.’

After the warm fog of the club, the night is cold and the air clear. In spite of the moon, George can faintly see Orion and the North Star. His dad might already be on the way home. Or he might be sitting and having a brew with Grandad. George chews his tongue, trying to decide. Then he runs again, this time in the direction of his grandad’s house. He can take Duke home and his dad can go straight over to Jamie’s.

Stephen glances at the clock on the mantelpiece. He tips his head towards a card on the rug and Ian turns up a second lion. The latch clicks on the back door. Voices. His mum bustles into the front room.

‘What have you done to your jumper?’

Right, suddenly she can see the jumper, Stephen thinks. She doesn’t wait to hear his answer. ‘Go on, upstairs. Run a bath.’

She waves to hurry him out of the room and directly up the stairs.

But Stephen steps into the hallway and glances towards the kitchen to see who is there. Jamie’s mother turns her head just as he does so. A swelling almost closes her left eye. Blue and green are livid across her face. Jamie stands next to her and he gives Stephen a look of seething anger, as if whatever has happened is his fault.

Stephen's mother is sticking with her plan, which, he guesses, is to stop him from knowing anything about the grown-up stuff.

'Take Ian up with you.'

'Where's Dad? I sent him round to Jamie's.'

'Never mind where Dad is. Good thing for you he's not in.'

Ian is putting away the playing cards, his little pudgy hands placing them one by one in a pile.

His mum reaches down and sweeps them all up with uncustomary snappiness. 'It's way past your bedtime.'

Stephen steps back into the room and picks Ian up. He's warm and heavy.

As they all move into the hallway, Ian says, 'Where's our George, Mum?'

Her stillness only lasts a heartbeat. 'Isn't he upstairs?'

There's another little gap before Mrs Thomas says quickly, 'He's probably being naughty. Staying out.'

Stephen's mum catches his eye momentarily and he reads her mind. *George isn't the naughty one*. He sees straight away that she regrets thinking that and she regrets too that he has read her thoughts.

Ian asks again. 'Where's our George?'

Everyone's worried. It catches, like fire.

His mum looks at Jamie. 'Might he have run over to your house, do you think? When he couldn't find his dad?'

Mrs Thomas says, 'Yes, that's probably it. They'll have bumped into each other.'

Stephen says, 'Shall I go look for him, Mum?'

And Stephen can see her thinking because she's no longer bustling him out of the hallway and that's not like her. She's never short of a quick decision. But then she hurries him and Ian so quickly up the stairs that he trips and falls upwards, and suddenly Ian is sobbing.

'Come on now – no need for that. Up the stairs, both of you.'

His mother follows them up the stairs makes Stephen a bed on the floor in Ian's tiny box room. 'Jamie can have your bed tonight. He'll be up in a minute.'

Jamie is George's friend. George should sleep on the floor. But Stephen keeps his mouth shut. It's a new world this, in which he dares not rail at the unfair way he's being treated. Ian's still crying and his

mum keeps shushing him and saying there's nothing to worry about and he should go to sleep.

'Mum—'

'Not now, Stephen. Have a bath and go to bed. School tomorrow.'

He waits a moment and then walks quietly back out to the landing. He stands and tries to catch the words being spoken downstairs.

Grandad takes an age to come to the door.

'He's already gone off home, George.'

'I've not seen him on the way.'

'Sometimes he walks Duke the long way by the reservoir. Likes to stretch his legs. Everything orate?'

'Yes, Grandad.'

George runs.

The path is only half made and mud splashes up his trouser legs. The way curves. The old reservoir comes into view. Wisps of clouds race in front of the moon and are gone in an instant, leaving the sky clear. The huge moon bobs about in the water. On the far bank, the elm's branches reach out. The summer's heat is long gone, as if it never existed, but the rope with the tyre still hangs over the dark water.

There's a knack to the rope swing. A fast run towards the sudden drop where the bank shelves away. The moment the slack in the rope abruptly tightens, you have to commit yourself. The rope burns in your hands and down the inside of your arm and you are carried out beyond the bank, over the water and, as the rope reaches the apex of its arc, launched into the open air, powerless as you plunge into the ice-cold water, deep into the pool. So many shades of green, mysterious shafts of light. And then surfacing to sunlight, a wet face, gasping, splashing back to the jetty. Water right up your nose! The girls sunning themselves along the bank, whispering and giggling.

With aplomb!

Aplomb is one of their favourite words. They had loads of them as they lay on their backs in the heat, smoking cigarettes stolen from grown-ups. Salubrious. Quintessential. The game is to drop them into the conversation without laughing. Sometimes the simplest are the best.

It meks me think of me mother's linoleum.

That was Jamie's. They pissed themselves.

Lying side by side between Stephen and Jamie, each propped on his elbows, looking out towards the pithead's wheel, passing the stolen fag between them. All day and every day, that perfect summer, in and out of the water. And, sometimes, the flash of a kingfisher across the water.

But this place is different in November. A smell of rotting vegetation rises. The pond's black surface is limned with brown and yellow-stained leaves that gather in drifts, leaving some parts clear and others patterned. The cold is palpable.

It is only now, as George stands and looks, that he sees the figure on the far bank. The man wears a thick coat and he has a bundle in his arms.

George shouts, 'Heh, Mr Kemble, what you doing?'

Alfie doesn't move or answer and George squints into the darkness. The rope is stretched out from the elm tree and disappears into Alfie's muffled shape. George shouts the words slowly, 'Someone should have tek that bloody rope down. A child who didn't know better might get hurt.'

Alfie laughs but his voice, carrying across the pond, is uncanny.

The bundle in front of Alfie's body moves and George realises it is the dog. Alfie has started walking up the bank.

George shouts, 'It's right cold in there, Alfie. It's not summer now to be playing games.'

Alfie is at the top of the bank and he pauses like any boy before the run and the jump.

'George, go home.'

'Alfie! What you doing?'

'Go home, lad.'

It is a lopsided run, nothing like the full pelt the boys used to clear the bank and hit the water. Alfie will never make it staggering like that, not with the dog in his arms. But the rope has tightened and Alfie holds on and out he goes. With aplomb! His coated figure in the open air is a bag of washing in free flight. The dog has somehow come free and the animal's silhouette is cartoonish before it hits the water. And here is the surprise. George thought the dog would float but down it goes, like a stone.

George kicks off his shoes and socks, wriggles out of his coat, shouting as he does. 'Dad! Dad!'

The pond’s surface is disturbed, the glass of blackness transformed into ripples and eddies, the moon shattered and then reassembling, but not a sign of Alfie or the dog.

George’s feet sink into the mud at the edge of the bank and the sensation of it takes his focus momentarily. He steadies himself and looks at the water. Is that movement below the overarching branch? He shouts. ‘Mr Kemble!’ Another step and the pool deepens abruptly. He loses his footing. The cold takes his breath and he gasps in water. He’s coughing it out. His feet urgently seek the bottom and cannot find it.

But, after a moment of panic, George masters himself. If he wants to find Mr Kemble, he will have to swim. His breath settles and he is just painfully cold. His hands burn with it, as if he’s plunged them into a bath that is scalding hot from the back boiler. He swims out through this coldness towards the tree. The fallen leaves on the surface crackle around him like Rice Krispies. A smell of soil and dampness and mildew. He sees nothing across the water where Alfie and the dog have fallen. No movement disturbs the surface. What can have happened? People don’t just sink. He shudders at how the green silent underwater world of those hot summer days has become so dark and impenetrable. He splashes towards the elm. He is slow. His stroke seems to be unravelling. He is swimming as if he is one of those boys with a calliper on his leg. He should have run round the bank to make it shorter. The pond is much bigger than he has ever realised and he is in the middle.

He pauses and looks about him. His movement as he treads water sends the moon out across the pond in ridges. The water stills and with it, the moon returns, suspended in the water. He dives down, but can see only his own white hands disappearing into blackness. He surfaces, gulping for air. His clothes thrown hastily on the far bank are an impossible distance. He dives again as far down as he can go. He surfaces to the moon and the tree and the empty bank? What will he even do if he does see Alfie and the dog beneath the water? He imagines them lying on the bottom like underwater statues. The water has become beautifully warm and the moon floats far beneath him. His arms feel like he has slept on them and his legs don’t exist anymore. It’s very lonely out here and how can he ever swim back to the bank.

Ian has stopped crying. His breath has become soft and regular. Stephen lies on the floor in the dark and stares at the ceiling. George and his dad still aren't back. His mum's talking to Jamie in the other room, sorting him out for the night, asking him if he'll be all right. Then she goes back downstairs.

Stephen trips quietly back down after her. He sits on the second step and listens to his mum's voice in the front room and Mrs Thomas replying. After a minute Jamie appears on the landing above him. They look at each other and Stephen shakes his head and Jamie turns and goes back into the bedroom.

The back door opens. Stephen sits, hoping to hear his brother getting a scolding. But there is only one person and the footsteps are heavy. Dad. The door to the front room opens.

'Don't you worry, Mrs Thomas – he won't give you any trouble now.'

Then his mother. 'George isn't back. I sent him after looking for you.'

Mrs Thomas. 'I'm sorry about the trouble.'

Dad. 'Please don't worry about that, Mrs Thomas—'

His mother, cutting in, 'What about George? Should we call the police?'

Dad. 'He might have run to Jamie's when he didn't bump into me.'

'It's not like George.'

Stephen's never before heard such an edge to his mother's voice.

'Let's have a look for him before we panic, heh?'

But Stephen is panicking. He gets up from the stairs and steps into the hallway. 'Dad, what's happening?'

'Nowt. You should be in bed but since you're up, we're just trying to work out where George might have got to. Where would he look for me, do you think?'

Mum says, 'I said to go by the club.'

Stephen says, 'Grandad's?'

'Good idea. We can ring Grandad.'

Mum. 'I think we should call the police.'

'Call your father first.'

She's on the phone in an instant. Jamie's come down the stairs too. He's dressed and nobody's telling him to go to bed either. Stephen feels as though a rope is running fast through his fingers. He wants people to answer his worries. To reassure him. Even to be angry with him. But the

grown-ups' worry has made him nothing to them. His dad's putting his coat back on and Stephen runs up the stairs and pulls on his trousers and jumper. He's back down the stairs in an instant.

'Thank you, Dad. Thanks.' His mum puts the phone down. 'Dad says he told George you sometimes walk by the reservoir.'

His dad runs his hand across his mouth. 'Nothing to worry about, I'm sure, but maybe we should just give the police a call.'

Jamie's mum is out of her chair. 'And I'll just pop over to the police house. Maybe.'

Dad nods. 'That would be helpful, Mrs Thomas. Thank you. And I'll pop back to your house, just make sure he's not gone there. June, love, you knock on people's doors. Get people looking, just in case. He'll be back in a minute, you'll see, and then he'll be sorry.' He puts a hand on Stephen's shoulder. 'You want to run over to the reservoir?'

Stephen can't speak. He nods.

Jamie says, 'Can I go too please, Mr Weldon?'

'Yes, that's right. The both of you go. Two of you together. That's better.'

Little Ian is woken by an eerie sense of silence in the house. He steps out of his bedroom. He calls out but no one answers him. He is alone. This never happens.

He drags a chair across the landing and stands on it. The dog comes up the stairs and lies on the floor beside him. He stares into the street until his legs ache. Finally, little Ian sees what looks like the whole village coming along the street towards the house. It's like bonfire night but not. Too quiet. There's Mum and Dad and a copper and Liam's dad, with wet hair, holding Liam's hand. Liam's grandad and nanna are there too. Liam's grandad walking with a stick and his nanna carrying a towel. Mrs Thomas with Jamie, who also has wet hair and is wrapped in a blanket. Mrs McKee holding No-I-Can't Billy's hand. Mick with his mum and dad. Even Mrs Skerret in her curlers with a scarf over the top. Everyone's there. Stephen too, walking on his own. What's happening? Ian gets down from the chair and runs downstairs. His hands reach up to release the latch on the front door and he steps out into the small front garden. Stephen is walking alone up the front path and he looks furious.

'Go inside,' Stephen says.

‘But where’s our George, Stephen? Where’s our George?’

‘George isn’t coming home.’

‘Isn’t coming home – what does that mean? What does that mean, Stephen? What does it mean, George isn’t coming home? George isn’t coming home? What does it mean?’

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Saturday, 1st December 1984

0800 hours

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13

Christopher has not come home.

It’s very unlikely he would go to his dad’s but just in case, Janet rings Stephen. He’ll be out picketing already but if Christopher is there, he’ll pick up. The phone rings out, as she knew in her heart it would.

By eight Janet is in her car. She would have left earlier but is constrained by her son’s imagined embarrassment. She must not be hysterical. She must not exaggerate. She must not draw attention to herself.

Outside the Brewery, the air smells of beer and rising damp. Metal clangs against stone. The men are rolling the barrels and lowering them through the trap into the cellar below.

Dave, the landlord, stands at the door, smoking and watching the delivery. He wears a taupe apron over his sizeable gut. The rain has flattened his hair against his skull. He nods at Janet like he always does – neither friendly, nor unfriendly. She never feels welcome here. Or even seen. It is a different filter to the more familiar one she wears like a cloak. This one assumes that Janet is the one with the prejudices.

‘Can I have a word?’

‘I haven’t seen him if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘If I could just have a minute?’

He waves his hand for her to step inside but it’s not a welcoming gesture.

She takes a step inside. The bar feels exposed as makeshift. The stage at the end is small, just a few black painted boxes to raise it up.

‘What time did you last—’

‘Closing time. Nothing out of the ordinary.’

Outside, the barrels are still clanking into the basement.

‘I’ll have to sign off the delivery in a moment.’

‘Yes. Did Christopher leave with anyone?’

Dave shifts on his fat legs and scratches his head. ‘The thing is I’m not sure Christopher would want me telling his mother what he’s been doing and who he’s been seeing.’

‘I understand that.’

‘Good.’

‘But you see, it’s not like him. We’re close. He would have rung me if he wasn’t coming home.’

Dave puts a hand on her shoulder. He’s being kind, she realises. ‘My guess is that he stayed overnight with someone. It’s not unusual for a young man. Now you’ll have to excuse me.’

Janet waits in the police station for someone to take her report. The chairs are hard and plastic. The counter is shielded by glass. The building feels impenetrable. The front counter is its fortified outpost. She cannot get past it into the areas where people are taken seriously.

She thinks of waiting at the school gates for pick-up. Watching Christopher, walking down the path alone, a little slower than the others to get his coat and bag and with no friend waiting for him so they could walk together. Even at that distance, she could see that one of his shoelaces was undone. Instead of bending to tie it, he walked strangely, flicking his left foot out to stop himself stepping on the lace. The other mothers were already scooping up their children, going off together in noisy bunches of friendship. The air was alive with the roar of children set free.

Here it is back again in this cold room where she sits and waits: the familiar anxiety that is almost instantly replaced with an equally familiar prayer.

Please let him be all right.

A young man in a Moss Bros suit with a too tight jacket and a shirt open at the collar appears at the counter and nods at her. ‘If you’d like to come through.’

Detective Constable Kirk Baker, he says he is as he shuts the door to a side room that gives off the police station’s front office. The room is small and it fills with the smell of Old Spice.

The detective stabs the typewriter keys impatiently with two fingers, giving a keen impression of someone who has more important things to do elsewhere. From the moment she tells him where Christopher works,

his face seems to have filled with a quick explanation that fills her with anxiety. During the phrases of irritable tapping that follow each question and answer, the air around her is filled with voices doubting her account and its gravity.

This young man, she fears, is going to do precisely nothing about Christopher. She fears too that there is no way round it. She is caught in a trap that it is impossible to escape. Determined argument will change his attitude, yes, but not in a way that will make him look for Christopher. She will become a different sort of woman: difficult rather than pathetic. She can almost hear him telling the other officers. *I feel sorry for her, I do, but that doesn't mean we're going to waste precious police time on a wild goose chase.*

There is her colour too, of course. Speaking to Kirk Baker, she feels it as if it is not simply part of her, but rather as if it is a magical cloak that hides her true nature. This young man cannot see through it, cannot see that what she is saying is simply true. It's the most straightforward thing in the world. She knows her son. Something bad has happened.

The detective touches the tips of his fingers together as if testing the tension between his two hands. He looks at her and smiles again. The message is clear: he's taken the report and now it's time for her to leave.

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14

When Ian left his police house, only the faintest suggestion of pale light was rising from somewhere far beneath the horizon. He placed the envelope with his resignation into the glove compartment and drove in silence through the breaking dawn. The sun, now low and red in the sky, shone into the windscreen and brightened the layer of mist that lay over the brown, ploughed fields.

By the time he arrives in Stoke, the day has opened fully over tarmac and brick. The police yard is chocker with coaches. The nick must be full of officers up from London on aid for the strike. A Met officer, shirt sleeves rolled and no tie, signals for him to wind down his window.

‘Park in front of one of the coaches, mate. Leave your keys on the dash. We’ll move it for you.’

‘I’m not your mate, and I wasn’t born yesterday. I’ll park round the front.’

‘Suit yourself.’

‘And if you come round the front to put a sticker on my car, I’ll deck you.’

The officer rounds his lips. ‘Oooh, someone’s left his sense of humour at home this morning.’

‘Shame too, coz you Met officers are all such natural comedians.’

Ian goes in via the station office. He pauses on the curved stone stairs, momentarily clenching his fists in frustration at how quickly he has been unsettled by that officer in the yard. All he wants is to be quiet inside. Maybe there’s a job going on the British Antarctic Station.

Roberts’s door, on the first floor, is plastered with *I’ve met the Met* stickers.

He knocks and enters. Roberts is entirely involved in reading a statement and he looks up impatiently. His desk is covered in paper, his daybook is open in front of him and his fountain pen is in his hand.

‘You’re late.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Ian hands over the envelope and Roberts puts it unopened in his drawer, muttering as he does so.

‘Superintendent Dan Oakley did warn me about your liking for paperwork.’

Ian takes a deep breath. ‘Did he mean my request for a transfer?’

‘I imagine that’s it.’

‘He didn’t mention why I wanted to leave?’

‘No, he didn’t.’ Roberts shrugs. ‘Maybe he guessed correctly that I was way too busy to be interested. But he did mention that you don’t have much of a reputation as a team player. Hmm?’

Momentarily there’s danger that Ian will spill out what he feels about that. But then, just as quickly, he is desperate just to be done with all this. Never mind the house in Cannock. He’ll serve his month and be gone. None of this is Roberts’s fault, he reminds himself.

‘You’re going to have to open that envelope, sir. It’s my resignation.’

‘Yes. I’ll get to it when I’ve a minute, which won’t be soon. Everyone’s working flat out. Merseyside and here. There’s the post office robbery we had about six weeks ago. Serious crime – could well be a link. I need someone to get a bit more out of the postmaster. Your old sergeant, Harry—’

Roberts pauses, anticipating that Ian will correct him, but Ian’s way beyond that.

‘Harry said you were good at that stuff. See how you feel after a few days back working CID, where you belong.’

‘But I don’t belong in the CID.’

Roberts leans forward, his elbows on the desk and his hands clasped. ‘Didn’t belong in Merseyside. Don’t belong back home in Stoke. Don’t belong in the police. Where do you belong, Ian?

Ian shrugs. Now isn’t the time to mention the Antarctic. ‘Don’t forget to open that envelope.’

As Ian exits through the station office, a door to a side room opens. Recognising the woman who steps out, he moves back. The sight of Janet retrieves a moment long gone, of her stood in the graveyard, a distance from his own family, her own mother by her side. So neat in her dark coat with its little velvet collar and her black polished shoes.

A young man comes out of the side room and nods dismissively as he passes Ian to re-enter the main building. Ian recognises him at once from the commendation ceremony. Kirk Baker. Walks around fantasising he's in *The Sweeney* rather than slogging it out in Stoke-on-Trent.

Janet is leaving by the public entrance but she turns as if to get one last look at the station office, and Ian immediately steps forward and smiles as if he had just been on the point of trying to catch her.

'Janet?'

It takes her just a moment to recognise him. Then she says, 'Can I talk to you?'

There is a plainness in her voice and no smile on her face. He is from Stoke and so expects friendliness. Does she think she's above all that? There's always been something a bit haughty about her.

He says, 'Of course,' and strains for a friendly Stokey smile.

'It's Christopher, Ian. He's missing.'

She presses her lips together and he realises in a rush that he has completely misread her. She is on the edge of tears.

It's a reflex: Ian tries to trick himself away from Janet's anxiety that threatens to permeate through his own body.

'You've reported it?'

'The policeman didn't take me seriously.'

Ian can almost read Kirk Baker's thoughts. Why is she wasting his time? The boy is fine, doing whatever they do, *homosexuals*. He'll turn up. Or he won't. But even if he doesn't, that doesn't mean he's come to any harm.

'I'm sure they'll investigate. Try not to worry.'

Janet is staring at him intently. 'If Christopher wasn't coming home, he would have rung me.'

'Maybe he's not near a phone.'

Janet reaches out and holds Ian's arm tightly. 'I know my boy. Something's happened.'

Antarctica, Ian thinks, holding onto the dream, or maybe a lighthouse off the coast of Ireland.

But he can see little Christopher ahead of him, running down the path towards the park, all angles, and he says something completely unintended.

'OK, Janet. I'll look into it.'

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15

It’s early and although the doors are open, the Brewery is closed for business. The place is deserted and Ian stands at the bar to wait. After a while, he calls out hello but no one comes. He is about to leave when the barman enters. He is as Janet described him: a stocky man in a canvas apron. Something about him brings to mind a fictional sea dog. Shark hunter Quint from *Jaws* maybe. Ian smiles and makes that first tiny effort, the first suggestion he might perhaps belong here, but the barman is unimpressed.

‘We’re closed.’

Ian switches tack. He offers his hand. ‘You must be Dave. I’m Ian – Christopher’s uncle.’

‘I already spoke with Christopher’s mother this morning. I told her the truth: I don’t have a clue where he is.’

‘I just wanted to ask you some questions.’

Dave smiles with undisguised hostility.

‘I mean, can you tell me anything about Christopher that might help us to know where to start looking? His habits, the kind of thing he gets up to?’

‘Gets up to? What kind of a question is that?’

God, he’s touchy.

‘Wrong words, OK. Sorry.’

Dave folds his arms across his chest and considers Ian. ‘I’m guessing you know what kind of a bar this is?’

‘Yes. Of course.’ Ian hesitates, feels himself withering under the Dave’s gaze.

‘It’s a gay bar, right, in a town full of gossip. So I’m not going to tell his uncle anything about what Christopher *gets up to* that might get back to his mother. He’s young and beautiful and he gets up to the stuff that young men get up to.’

‘OK, but if he works for you, you must know he’s—’

Ian struggles to find the word and Dave waits as if interested to learn what word Ian will find for Christopher.

‘Vulnerable.’

Still Dave does not relent. There’s a sort of angry twitch in his bottom lip.

With decreasing confidence, Ian persists. ‘He’s very close to his mum. I believe her when she says he would have rung if he was staying out.’

Dave taps his upper arm. ‘Look, I’ll tell you this just so you and his mum stop bothering me. Christopher had a date. It looked to me like the two of them were a bit in love. Christopher left with him when we closed. That’s where he’ll be. Sleeping it off.’

‘And can you tell me anything about this date? Just in case.’

‘No. That’s all you’re getting.’

Sleeping it off, Ian thinks as he drives towards the post office. OK, that’s believable. Christopher is young for his age, but he’s an adult. Sleep-ing it off. Makes perfect sense, doesn’t it? But Christopher’s absence still gnaws at him. His own sense of the lad concurs with what Janet has told him: if he was staying away, he would ring her. But then what does he know? He doesn’t have children. How terrible it must be to be a parent. Those unbreakable ties to wayward people that you cannot protect.

Just one month to go, he reminds himself as he pulls towards the post office. Australia’s not so welcoming nowadays, he vaguely remembers, but maybe it’s still possible. Don’t they have sheep farms, or is that just New Zealand?

There is no legal parking by the post office so he leaves the car on a yellow line. As he steps out a voice calls out, ‘Hey, you!’

He tries to ignore the shout, but a front door opens and a woman beetles over to him. She wears a housecoat and slippers. Through her thin, tightly permed blueish hair, her pink scalp is visible.

‘You can’t park your car there.’

‘I’ll only be a minute—’

‘Not even a minute.’

He shows his warrant card. Mistake. Her eyes latch onto him.

‘I’ve been at you lot for *weeks*.’ She takes a little red and black notebook out of her housecoat pocket. A pencil is slipped into its spiral spine. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Detective Constable Weldon. W-E-L-D-O-N.’

She licks the end of the pencil, writes the surname in capitals and underlined. She waits for him to ask what the problem is and, when he doesn’t, tells him anyway.

‘It’s the cars. They park up for the chippy. Block my drive. Park on the corner. Block the zebra. Someone could get killed. I’ve been on and on at you lot to do something about it.’

In spite of himself, he looks at the notebook. ‘And you keep a note of them? Write down their registration numbers?’

She smiles a tight little smile. ‘All of them.’

‘Could I borrow the book? I can look into it.’

Old habits die hard, Ian thinks, as he pops the notebook into his pocket.

The post office door triggers the little bell on the taut spring. The postmaster is at the front of the shop, unpacking a delivery of crisps. He is a thin man, no more than five foot five, probably in his mid-sixties, wearing a brown overall. He glances at the warrant card.

‘Salt and vinegar, son, or cheese and onion?’

‘I’m all right, thanks.’

‘Brenda come and say hello, did she?’

‘She did.’

‘Lovely lady, but—’

‘A Rottweiler?’

‘You said that, not me. I guess you’re not getting anywhere with the robbery then? That’s why you’re back?’

‘We haven’t given up. The boss has asked me to go over your account again.’

‘Nowt more to tell. Evening *Sentinel*s had just arrived. I’ve got a little Stanley knife I use to cut the string and I got him with it in the arm. Didn’t do much damage, but he did swear.’

‘You weren’t worried then, that he was going to shoot you?’

‘He give it a proper go, but the gun jammed. Then it did go off and I thought better of it.’ He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded envelope. ‘Found this, sweeping up.’ He tips the contents into his palm: a brass bullet casing.

‘Ah, I’ll have to take that I’m afraid.’

‘Thought you’d say that. Shame. I were going to keep it as a souvenir.’

Ian pops it into an evidence bag. ‘Anything else you can tell me?’

‘Not much. He were in a balaclava so I can’t tell you much about how he looked, ’ept he were proper tall. He took the money. There was another fella waiting outside. Drove off, fast.’

‘Build?’

‘Not thin, not fat.’

‘Clothing?’

‘Jeans, black jacket, gloves, balaclava, like I said.’

‘And the gun?’

‘Little black thing. Looked like one of them James Bond numbers.’

‘A revolver, not a magazine?’

‘That’s rate.’

‘Did you see the car?’

‘It was a Ford Transit. Can you believe it?’

‘Registration?’

‘Didn’t see it. But it was white.’

‘He say anything?’

‘“Your money or your life.”’

‘Funny.’

‘Oh, and after I got him with the Stanley, he said fuck a fair few times. That were funny too.’

‘I bet it was. Any accent at all?’

‘Stokey.’

Ian slips back into the Astra. Brenda is watching him through her front window and she raises a hand in what might be a wave, or is, more likely, a warning to sort out the car parking. Ian smiles as he turns the car. Stoke, heh? What with her and Bill with his Stanley knife, it isn’t a street you want to mess with.

Here is Liam’s sad little wannabe Cotswolds cottage, out of place on its Stoke terrace. It’s a painful reach for Ian to connect that boy who loved to go-kart down the steep bank in Murton with this life. Liam was meant to grow up and be happy. Maybe be a fireman, like his dad. He wasn’t meant to deal drugs and get murdered.

Liam’s wife, Stephanie, answers the door. In the past twenty-four hours, her face has undergone an irrevocable change. He will not tell her he knew her husband. He doesn’t want to unearth all the past they shared.

He takes in the front room more fully this time. It’s one of those kept-for-best places. The yellow velvet sofa is part of a three-piece suite. There’s a sideboard with a telly and a shelf underneath full of records. A coal effect gas fire. A porcelain lady on the mantelpiece, wearing a green dress and holding a yellow flower. The shiny reproduction oil painting above is of some peasant figure and a horse by a watermill.

A cigarette is burning in a glass ashtray on the coffee table, and she offers him one. When he shakes his head, she says, ‘Cup of tea?’

‘That’d be nice.’

He follows her through to the kitchen. This feels more like home. A Calor gas stove. A plastic laundry basket with folded washing in it. A star chart on the wall. *Made my bed.Tidied my room.*

‘Where’s Sandra?’

‘Round at Julie’s. She’s got a friend there.’

‘You own this place?’

‘How do you know that?’

‘The cladding. No landlord would fork out for that.’

She nods. ‘Only just had it done. We’ve been flush with cash. Don’t even know how I’ll pay the mortgage now. We never had any money before Liam went to prison. Now I won’t have any again.’

‘When’d he get out?’

‘About two months ago.’

Ian thinks, roughly two weeks before the post office robbery.

‘Liam were a crap burglar. Got caught every time. But he could talk the hind leg off, so I suppose he made friends inside. Sandra was born when he was away and he was so happy to be home with her. But straight away, he was up to Liverpool. I knew what he was after. Might sound strange, but I never thought it was dangerous. If people want to smoke a bit of cannabis, what’s the harm?’

She puts a cup of tea in front of Ian, sits down. He is plagued by Liam’s foolishness. He wants to go back in time and grab him. Convince him to stop before he starts mixing with proper criminals. He thinks again of those uncontacted tribes in the Amazon. He’s probably got

enough savings to just take a plane out there and see if they will have him.

Stephanie lights another cigarette from the lit end of the first. ‘Sure you don’t want one?’

‘I gave up.’

‘Course you did.’ She inhales with her eyes closed. ‘You got kids?’

‘No.’

The sadness in her face prompts him, as if sharing his solitude will help her in some way.

‘I did have a girlfriend. We were both in Liverpool before, both police.’

‘What happened?’

He is regretting talking about this. It wasn’t for her; it was for him. And he should know better: how can talking possibly help?

‘I went off it. Patty didn’t.’

‘Why was that?’

‘We had a snout, used to give us information. It went wrong.’

‘Patty,’ she says, looking at him steadily. ‘That’s a nice name.’

Ian senses the possibility of sex pass between them. There is something unmistakably wild about her grief and he knows that all he has to do is to reach out. But then he thinks of Liam in his school trousers at George’s funeral and, in another instant, how Stephanie’s insatiable sadness would roar in his own body. He takes out Brenda’s notebook. He thinks of her dressing gown and her pink scalp and her obsession with parking.

‘I’ve got some descriptions of cars and registration numbers written down here. Do you want to tell me if you recognise any of them?’

She leafs through the notebook.

The red Ford Capri was Liam’s, she says. Well, she thinks it was his. Recently he’s been driving a lot of different cars. She doesn’t know whether he actually owned any of them. He loved the Capri but it was a piece of shit. Always breaking down. She turns a page of the notebook. She’s seen a white Ford Transit too but she can’t be sure of the registration, so it might be a different one. It wasn’t Liam’s but she’s seen one parking up outside the house and Liam hurrying out to it.

‘The driver never came in?’

‘Never.’

‘You know his name?’

‘Liam always called him Zammo but I guess that was a joke. He were a childhood friend of Liam’s.’

‘Zammo – why’s that then?’

‘Liam never said but it must have been a joke. You know? Grange Hill?’

Ian shrugs. ‘Don’t know it.’

‘Children’s TV. Zammo – baby drug dealer.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘Dark hair … Boring clothes, you know, like everyone wears. Jeans. Leather jacket. Looked small to me, but then everyone did next to Liam. Probably average height.’

How can he not think of his brother? Stephen’s known Liam forever. And he drives a white Transit. But stupid to think like that. It’s just a coincidence.

Ian runs his hands down his trousers. ‘I’ve got to check in with my boss. Can I use your phone?’

‘Sure.’

It’s a wall-mounted trim phone in the kitchen. Roberts picks up almost immediately. He doesn’t want to hear Ian’s report. A body’s been found in Trentham’s lake.

‘He’s a mixed-race lad, like your nephew. I want you to get over to the mortuary as quickly as you can for a possible identification.’

‘I’m really not sure I’m the right person—’

‘Why not? If it’s your nephew, then you’ve spared your brother and your sister-in-law the uncertainty and the hope. If it isn’t, then you’ve spared them the agony of thinking for even a moment that their child might be dead.’

‘You know what, you’re right,’ Ian says. ‘It’s a win-win.’

He places the receiver back. He feels as though he is hallucinating this kitchen and Liam’s widow.

Stephanie says, ‘You all right, duck?’

‘Yes. I just got to go somewhere fairly quickly.’

‘All right, but just sit down for a second. Have a biscuit. You’re white as a ghost.’

He does as she tells him, sips his tea. She puts a chocolate penguin in front of him.

‘P-P-P-Pick up a Penguin,’ he says.

‘When you feel a p-p-p-peckish,’ she agrees.

Ian bites into the chocolate. It does help. And what’s the rush? Whoever it is in the mortuary will still be dead in thirty minutes’ time.

‘Why did you come today?’ Stephanie asks.

‘I was just following up on my visit.’

‘Another policeman came by and asked me stuff. On Friday, couple of hours after you came.’

‘Ah well,’ Ian says, standing, his car keys in his hand. ‘That will have been a mistake by the office. Sorry about that—’

‘But he wasn’t one of yours. He was Merseyside but he sounded more Yorkshire.’

She takes a jade box from one of the kitchen shelves. Brown colouring mixes in with green and milky swirls. Gilt lines the edges. It is of those things that is meant to be fancy but will always look tatty no matter how much it’s cleaned and polished.

‘He said if any of my husband’s old associates stopped by, I should ask them to get in touch. Said the number was private. No one else would answer. Said to tell them he was completely trustworthy, whatever that means.’

She holds the box close to her body as if she is peeping inside it. She takes out a card, passes it to Ian.

‘He said everyone calls him Harry.’

He glances at the card. In print, the name *DS Carl Harrison.* The Merseyside police number is scored out darkly. Handwritten underneath is the name *Harry* with a different telephone number and, underlined, scrawled in capitals: *YOU CAN TRUST ME.*

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16

The brazier is lit but it doesn't throw much heat and Stephen stomps his feet. He left home early to walk here and he's been standing in the cold since seven. He misses having the van to warm up in. The line is made up of just five men this morning, which is not a bad showing, all things considered. A bus load of foreign bizzies in white shirts stand around in front of the gates, smoking and talking. London Met by their accents. Some stand to the side, just in case. But there is little aggro nowadays. The line is a matter of principle.

'Where's our Jamie then?' Stephen asks.

'Who knows?' Tweety says.

He spits on the ground and rubs his hands together.

Stephen hums. In the early days, they sang a lot. *Oh I 'd rather be a picket than a scab* was a favourite and it is that tune he hums now. It was joyful singing to the super scabs, the few who went to work the first day, who mouthed off and waved banknotes. Victory felt certain. To the tune of 'We are H-A-P-P-Y' they sang, *You're scabs you are, You know you are.* Later there were the head-down-just-keep-walking scabs, and they were sung to too. The tone was different, less joyful, but determined. It was a tug of war that could go either way and they had to take the weight of the rope. Then, about seven months in, the hunger scabs started to return. Men who were desperate. They'd been feeding their kids from the miners' food banks and dressing them in donations of hand-me-downs stuffed in black bin bags in the clubs. The picket line was mostly silent now except for some shouts, some appeals. There isn't much fun to be had from singing at a man who has struck faithfully and is going back to feed his family.

Here are a few of them, coming down the lane. Among them is Billy McKee – fat at infants school, still fat now. Hunger scabs, my arse, Stephen thinks. Fat bastard struck nine months and still he hasn't lost weight.

Billy knocked on his door one night a week ago.

He invited him in but Billy said no, best stay outside. Billy took his cap off. *It's not bloody chapel*, Stephen wanted to say, although in a way, it was. He knew what was coming, but they had to go through it.

'I'm going back, Stephen. I've got to.'

'Is it money? Maybe the strike fund can help you.'

Billy put his cap back on. 'I'm sorry. I am.'

'We can still win. You know we can. But we need to stand together.'

'We're not going to win this one.'

Now, Billy walking towards the line looks over at Stephen and nods. Stephen nods back. Who knows whether they'll speak when this is all over?

The kettle on the brazier whistles. Stephen has a packet of rich tea biscuits in his pocket and he hands them round. One of the lads puts one in his mouth whole. 'But I do prefer a Garibaldi,' Stephen says and the lad splutters and nearly chokes.

Here is Jamie at last, hands in his jacket pockets.

Stephen holds out the biscuits. 'Fancy a rich tea?'

Jamie shakes his head. 'I'm sorry, Stephen. I'm going back.'

Stephen steps forward. It's almost a relief to be certain about something again. 'No. You're not.'

'I've made me mind up.'

'And I'm telling you not to.'

'I'm making my own decision.'

One of the Met officers takes a step forward. He's a dumpy bloke with a square head and square ears. 'You all right there?'

Stephen says, 'He's fine.'

'Let him answer for himself then.'

Jamie turns. 'I'm fine.' He faces Stephen again. 'I'm going in. Don't make it more difficult.'

'Is it the kids? We can get you more money—'

'It's not the bloody kids!'

'What is it then?'

'I've had enough.'

'We've all had enough.'

'Go back too then.'

Stephen grabs Jamie's arm. 'If we go back, we go back together.'

The copper takes another step forward. ‘You sure you’re OK?’

Jamie turns. ‘I’ve told you, I’m fine.’

Stephen feels the pressure. There’s no time to talk this through. ‘It’s me standing on this picket line.’

‘People are dead, and for what? It’s just pride now, nowt else.’

‘Pride’s not nowt. If you must cross, cross when I’m not on. Go in later.’

‘One more word from you and you’re getting nicked for intimidation.’

They both ignore the constable. Jamie looks Stephen in the eyes. ‘I’ve had enough, Stephen. Nine months not enough loyalty for you?’

‘Go in tomorrow. I’ll stay home.’

‘I can’t live my life waiting for your good opinion.’

‘Do it another time, Jamie.’

Jamie turns and walks towards the gates, hands back in his pockets.

Stephen steps quickly after him. Defeat is one thing, but this is something else. He shouts, ‘Don’t bloody do this!’

The Met officer steps forward. ‘One more word and you’re nicked.’

Two of his copper mates move to his side, ready if they’re needed, and up for a fight.

Stephen gets the words out through a throat that is practically throttling him. ‘That scab was the best man at my wedding.’

The officer stretches out a hand, perhaps to put it on Stephen’s shoulder.

‘Yeah, all right,’ Stephen says. ‘Fuck off, why don’t you? Fuck off, you fucking mercenary. Fuck off back to your newly tarmacked drive and your fucking extension. Should be ashamed. Selling your soul for so little.’

The copper shakes his head. ‘I feel sorry for you, mate.’

Stephen steps back inside the picket line.

Tweety says, ‘We’ll put a brick through his window tonight if you fancy.’

Stephen looks at him. Billy McKee and Jamie, both strike-breakers. Who would think Tweety would turn out to be the most solid. Used to be he was called Eddie but it’s years since anyone’s called him that.

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Friday, 4th June 1965

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17

The inside of Stephen’s sixteen-year-old head is a pinball machine that he cannot switch off. He still has an hour before he has to kick off the warm covers, drag himself from his bed and out of the back door, but two silver metal balls zoom around and bounce off the bony inside of his skull. Ping. Ping. The first ball is the knowledge that he is being rushed. Way too fast, his life is being channelled, pinged off the bumpers, flicked off the flippers. The second ball, which rockets from the plunger and threatens to knock the first ball straight down the gobble hole, is the certainty that he shouldn’t let anyone know about how he feels because it is too humiliating. He was the boy who dreamt of working underground.

He opens his eyes to escape the ricochets of those silver balls: the pings and dings and the ratcheting of the bumpers. A pale strip of light slips between the curtains that, for as long as he can remember, have always been a little bit too narrow to close properly.

He shuts his eyes and the pinball resumes. Ping. Ping. Ding. Ding. Off the bumpers go the thoughts and back around the circuit. There is a third silver ball, just slipped into the shooter lane and deadlier even than the first two. His mind pulls the plunger and out goes the thought and hits the bumper. Back and forth it ratchets, sparking the lights and the information.

You are only sixteen and already your life is over.

He kicks off the covers. His legs are as white and luminous as birch. He gets up and walks the five steps out of his room and across the landing. In the bathroom, he cups his hands and drinks from the cold tap.

He meant to do better at school. He knew he should. Yet his eyes wandered constantly away from the desk towards the window, then out over the chain-link fence and into the fields. His teachers warned him, his mum too, but he didn’t listen. His mum tried kindness and praise and sadness and worry. His dad shut him in his room and made threats and

took away his bike. None of it worked. Last summer, aged fifteen, along with Jamie and Mick and No-I-Can't-Billy, he left school for the pit.

Along the landing and behind a closed door, a bed creaks. One of his parents is shifting in their sleep. He imagines them lying side by side: his mum in her nightie, his dad in his pyjamas. Slippers wait for them either side of the bed. The old dog now lies at the foot of their bed instead of downstairs in the kitchen. Stephen feels his failure as large as his young body, a disturbance to their pursuit of peace.

He slips back into bed but he'll never sleep now. Life is to be seized. He wants to take hold of it. His stripy shirt is hanging in the wardrobe, all ironed, ready for tonight. If it was a fairy story, he would be Cinderella. But Cinderella is not a fairy story meant for boys. He needs to climb the beanstalk and kill the giant. He's willing to do it. But who is the giant and how can he kill him?

The apprentices stand either side of the conveyor belt. To Stephen's left is No-I-Can't Billy, Tom McKee's son. Famous for whining in short trousers that showed his fat knees. No, I can't. I've got to get home for me tea. No, I can't, me mum wouldn't like it. Jamie is further down the line, next to Big Mick Stein, bashful as Snow White's dwarf. Then, next to Mick, there's Eddie, the only apprentice who's not from the village. Eddie only joined a week ago. He says he was going to do his O levels but he couldn't be arsed. Wanted to get on with life.Mick and Billy seem a bit impressed by Eddie and his big mouth.

The machine riddles the wet coal and drops it in front of them. The room shakes with noise and the air thickens with dust. This is the screening – picking waste from the coal travelling along the belts and down into the wagons. The boys who are waiting to go underground begin here, next to the older men who will never go down again. Tommy with his strange bucket walk. Dave Foxley, who pauses for breath after climbing only two treads on the metal stairway. The most broken of the pit ponies work the screens. Stephen's hand reaches out and picks up a rock. He throws it into the hopper. A mountain of spoil stands beside the pithead. He and the others are slowly building it.

They are so small here, tiny servants to the black stuff. Even though his dad came home with coal in his hair and his nails, Stephen had not realised what that meant: that the warm air would be filled with a black

oily dust that coats everything. That even his snot would run black. He picks the rocks in a daze of loss, then, when the belt stops moving, is shaken by the sudden silence. The machines have broken down.

The men gather: the younger lads together and the older men in their own groups. Jack sits and rolls a cigarette one-handed. Stephen offers his packet round: Marlboro in a red pack. Five other lads and they all take one, except Jamie, who instead takes an apple from his jacket.

‘Don’t smoke?’ Eddie says and Jamie shakes his head.

‘Asthma?’ Eddie says.

‘I don’t want to get cancer.’

‘You don’t believe that, do yer?’

Jamie bites his apple. Stephen has his Swan Vestas out and Eddie leans into the match’s flame. He inhales and speaks with the smoke in his lungs. ‘Live fast, die young,’ he says. He shifts his weight and leans back. ‘I’ve got five notches carved on me bed,’ he says. He turns to Jamie, ‘You done it yet?’

Jamie shakes his head again.

Eddie grins. ‘Bet you have.’

‘I haven’t.’

Eddie’s eyes sweep around the other boys. ‘I can’t be the only one ’ere who’s lost his cherry.’ His gaze settles on Stephen. ‘What about you?’

Stephen shrugs, suggesting – he hopes – that yes, he has done it but he’s way too cool to talk about it.

‘Who with then?’ Eddie says, and grins.

Stephen glances at Jamie, who eats his apple steadily.

‘Come on. We’re all friends here,’ says Eddie.

‘Mind your own then.’

‘Don’t be like that,’ Eddie says and turns to the others.

‘Go on, tell us,’ says Billy.

Poor soft idiot: he’s properly curious. It’s bloody obvious *he’s* never done it. Probably his mum won’t let him!

‘A girl on holiday.’ Stephen pauses and then says more, because for some reason he feels he has to. ‘Blackpool.’

‘Blackpool?’ says Eddie.

‘Yeah.’

‘That her name, was it?’

Billy and Mick laugh. Billy practically chokes with it.

‘Don’t be daft,’ Stephen says.

Eddie puffs out a smoke ring. It hangs in the air, curling out of shape.

‘Julie.’

Billy and Mick try to swallow their laughter. It comes down their noses. He could laugh too. What an idiot he’s made of ’imself.

The engines rumble back into life and the boys resume their places in front of the conveyor. The air never really clears in here but the dust thickens with the chuntering of the machinery and the fall of the coal. Eddie carries on smoking, holding the cigarette in his mouth as he works. Stephen takes a last drag and drops his fag beside him, even though it’s not allowed. He crushes it with his foot, reaches out and takes a piece of stone, throws it into the hopper. Stephen is glad of his blackened face because he can feel himself burning with the shame of that stupid name he’s made up and the girl he’s never been with.

The evening’s adventure seems doomed to failure. More than that, it feels imaginary. How can both feelings exist about the same event? The striped shirt hanging in his wardrobe shames him with its hope.

Last Saturday afternoon; his first week’s wages in his back pocket. He thumbs through the shirts in the indoor market. Janet’s face appears between the rails of shirts.

‘Boo!’

She’s in a mini dress, with a huge circular print, long socks and flat patent leather shoes. The blood rushes up his neck, just like when he was eleven years old with wet shoes and a dirty jumper.

‘Janet.’

He tries to smile but something’s happened to his facial muscles. Might be tetanus. If the earth would open up and swallow him whole, that would be great.

There aren’t many black people in the town and in a way Janet’s a bit famous. She’s hard to categorise. She speaks nice – almost posh but not quite. There’s enough of Staffordshire to feel like home. Where does she fit in this town?

Stephen thinks of Janet as a statue perhaps, something carved from stone. The boys might mutter about what they’d like to do to her but he remembers Janet aged eleven, standing at a distance in the graveyard in her long coat, hands cupped one in the other as if she was holding water.

And later, in the club – the tables piled with sandwiches and cold pie, the beer flowing as freely as anyone could have wanted and his father drunk like Stephen had never seen him: holding onto people to stay upright, and those same people exchanging glances with each other and shaking their heads at the pity of it – he, Stephen, sitting alone, back against the wall, eating a packet of crisps that tasted of dirt and fury, watched Janet walk over to his mother and sit next to her and take her hand. His own hands were smeared with the oil from the crisps, the salt was stinging the corners of his mouth; he'd felt ashamed.

He's lost touch with her and in the meantime, something has confusingly slipped. Nowadays, she wears short skirts and he's glimpsed her once before in town with another girl, smoking behind the bus stop. After all those mornings belting out 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' in the primary school hall, after the winter games of British Bulldog in the rain-darkened playground and the late-summer sack races on the playing fields, the Eleven-Plus caught up with them. Janet went to the grammar three miles away in town. She and George would have been close, the boys' grammar just a short walk along the street and up the road. They would have taken the bus together maybe.

'What you up to?' Janet says.

'I'm working now.' He strives to throw this away as if it has no particular meaning and begs no further questions.

'The colliery, is it? Like your dad.'

'Just started.'

He can't think of anything more to say but he has a strong urge to hold onto her, feels – ridiculously – as if his life depends on it. So, after a moment's hesitation, he takes a step out into thin air: a leap from the high diving board in the town's tiled Victorian baths and everyone watching.

'D'you fancying going to a caf? Only I've just been paid.'

Speaking this sentence out loud is probably the bravest thing he's ever done. But she says yes and the water, which had swallowed him, spits him back not only uninjured but triumphant.

He suggests the brand-new Wimpy by the bus stop. It's got huge windows and red Formica tables. You can get a strawberry milkshake in a glass tumbler and crinkly chips. The buses swing by, enormous in the windows. But she prefers the greasy spoon off the high street. He's never

been in and never wanted to. He imagines it's dirty and full of men in overalls and that if there are women, they will wear hair nets.

But Antonio's – dark and full of smoke – surprises him with its dirty glamour. There's a couple of steps down and the windows are higher than his eyeline. As his irises widen, he sees the walls are nicotine-stained yellow. There are high-sided booth seats fixed into the floor, with cracked brown leatherette covers. He thinks of the box pews in the Methodist chapel, where everyone is together and apart at the same time. A holy place feels right to sit with Janet. At the counter stands a cream enamel machine that hisses and has valves and pistons like a miniature steam engine. As Stephen stands waiting with his back to the counter, two lads enter, tall and loose limbed. One wears a dog-tooth jacket and a trilby. The other, a zip-up jacket with a tartan lining. They have unlit cigarettes in their mouths. Turns out Antonio's is where the grammar school kids come. He'd like to punch them in the face.

Janet orders a Horlicks and he has a cup of coffee. As they move towards a vacant set of seats, he imagines everyone's eyes on them, but as soon as they sit, they are shielded by the high benches. He produces his cigarettes and she offers a dented brass zippo that smells of lighter fuel. Her nails are shaped and have large, white moon cuticles. She rests her chin on her left hand and spreads her long fingers across her cheek and gazes at him. Her hair is combed out in a big wide arc around her head. She is a picture from a magazine, not a girl from Stoke-on-Trent.

He says, 'You a mod now then?'

She laughs and he burns with embarrassment; what a bloody stupid thing to say.

'You like The Who though, right?'

'They're OK.'

'Only I heard they are playing Trentham Gardens.'

The shaker breaks down again. Left-handed Jack says it might be a while before it's up and running. He'll take the boys for a run on the shaft. 'You've all turned sixteen now? That's right?' They nod eagerly. They've not been down the pit before and everyone's excited and nervous.

It's a short walk from the coal prep plant, along the gantry and then outside to the lamp room. Stephen, Mick and Billy are all well known

here and they carry themselves carefully, aware of the reputations they will make. At the pithead, they're issued with self-rescuers.

'Carry them for now, lads,' Jack says. 'It's just regulations every time you go underground. You won't need them.'

They queue for their lamps and their checks and join the queue for the cage.

'Don't be frightened, boys,' Jack says quietly.

'I'm not frightened,' Eddie says.

'Well good, but it can feel a bit scary the first time. So, just to reassure you, it's all maintained by the shaftsmen. Perfectly safe. Do you know what it's for, the shaft?'

'Taking the men down,' Billy says, the good boy at school, if not the brightest.

'That's right. And the other stuff we need in the pit. Then there's a huge water tank too, at the very bottom, beneath the cage. All the waste water's pumped in there and then pumped up the shaft to be drained off. Gallons of the stuff. It's like a little lake.'

The cage has two levels and the apprentices shuffle forward into the bottom one. The cage is made of riveted steel with large holes for ventilation. They're crammed in together, maybe twenty men on the deck, hunched up because it's not tall enough to stand fully upright. As they descend, the cold air rushes past but although he has a sense of the speed of the fall the cage takes longer than any lift Stephen can ever imagine. Apart from the lamps, they're in darkness but he can look through the gaps and sees dimly the blackened rough brick walls. Sometimes there are bulges and once there's a jolt where the cage hits something. Beneath their feet is only darkness. It's taking an eternity and Stephen senses the chasm beneath him. He thinks of that lake and his persistent fear of water.

At last a light is approaching, flooding weekly up the walls. 'That's nearly the bottom now,' Jack says. 'We'll have to wait while the men get off.'

The cage stops and the men start to press forward, ready to move out into the pit. But the gates do not open. Instead, the cage starts to move down again. Stephen looks at Mick. What's happening? Mick's eyes are wide. Somebody on the deck above shouts. He's dropping us in the sump! There's a terrible silence. Then all around them, men start

screaming. It’s a terrible sound. Stephen turns his lamp down to the floor to see if the dark water is already rising. Jamie’s face has fallen into a terrible seriousness. Stephen’s hand goes to his self-rescuer. Will it be any help? And then the cage stops. All the men start laughing. There’s a pause and the cage lifts again.

One of the men puts a hand on Stephen’s shoulder. ‘Sorry, son, we do it to all the new lads.’

Some of the men are wiping tears from their eyes. They disembark. The boys step back into the now empty cage. Stephen wants to throw up. Jack’s eyes travel round the group of coal-stained boys standing silently in the cage.

‘That were just for fun. But it does happen. Men die down here. Are you sure it’s for you?’

Eddie says, ‘Can’t wait.’

Jack shakes his head as if to say, nothing to be done with that one and the cage starts to rumble back up towards the surface.

‘How’d you lose your hand then?’ Eddie says.

Jack looks at Eddie evenly, throwing his face into light from his lamp. ‘A shark had it.’

‘No way!’

Jack smiles. Eddie throws the light from his headlamp round the group, just as Jamie catches Stephen’s eye and grins. Stephen is grateful for the contact; it pulls him right back from the dark water of the sump. But Eddie has seen the look pass between them, and there’s a twitch of hostility at the side of his mouth.

He says, ‘No, really. How’d you lose it?’

‘The cutting machine.’

‘What happened?’ says Stephen. The words have escaped him and he blushes. Everyone knows Jack lost his hand to a cutting machine, and everyone knows you don’t ask him about it, but he’s always wanted to know the details.

Jack doesn’t seem offended. He turns the beam of his cap lamp on Stephen. ‘Happened so fast. They was turning to go back on the second pass. Into the gob it went.’

‘The gob?’ says Eddie.

‘The hole the cutter makes. We throw all the rubbish in there and that’s where the machine threw me hand. They looked for it, they said,

but they couldn’t find it.’ He looks at Eddie. ‘Still want to go underground, do you?’

Eddie tips his head back. He’s already answered the question and he’s not going to repeat himself.

‘Was you right-handed?’

Jack’s chest swells, as though he’s holding his breath at the boy’s lack of respect.

‘Well, was you?’

‘I was, yes.’

Eddie grins at the other boys as if he’s won something good on the tombola but Stephen thinks of Jack’s right hand still down there in that darkness, somewhere buried deep in the gob and he imagines how a moment’s inattention could lead to him spending his life working with a hand that is less nimble, condemned to stand at the screens and sort coal.

The cage rumbles slowly up to the light. At the top, Jack says they can knock it on the head for the day. ‘Foxley will stamp your cards. Don’t tell anyone, mind.’

Stephen’s pleased to be let off early. That might have been a joke but it weren’t funny. They step out of the lamp room into the day-light. He breathes the cold air with relief.

As they cross towards the baths, Eddie says. ‘Eh, you reckon Jack’s any good with the left?’

He looks down to his own hand and makes the gesture perfectly and Stephen can practically see Eddie’s fat little todger clasped tightly in his hungry little hand.

Mick says, ‘Yeah, right.’ His cheeks flame.

Stephen blushes too. He feels for a moment the vigorous workings of his own private relief, already so expert but not something he would ever brag about, as if he were proud of himself for doing it. How can Eddie be such a loudmouth? He looks at him with his red hair and pale skin and into his mind it leaps: Tweety Pie. That aggressive little yellow cartoon chick that’s always winding up the cat. Eddie doesn’t seem to be able to say a single thing without trying to get one over on someone.

‘Oh Julie,’ Eddie croons in the shower. Mick shows a surprising talent for the harmony while No-I-Can’t Billy is back choking to death with laughter.

That evening Stephen washes again. He scrubs and scrubs to get the coal from under his nails. Remembering his dad's ears, he takes extra care, running his fingers round their whorls and in the crease between his ears and his skull. He cannot get that stupid song out of his head.

Oh Julie. Oh Julie.

His dad hammers on the bathroom door. 'How long you going to be in there?'

'Not long.'

Stephen's cut himself shaving. Last thing he wants is to leave the house with bog roll stuck to his cheek. He licks his finger and rubs it off. He splashes his face with water. Then with his dad's English Leather aftershave. Then, when the smell is too strong, water again.

'Stephen?'

'Orate, Dad.'

The knack is to look good without giving away how much effort you've put in. At the same time – thinking how Janet dresses – he can't just wear jeans and a jumper. He's gone for the brown, blue and white striped shirt with the grey trousers. He tried a pair of loafers but as soon as he looked at his feet in the shop, they shouted so loud that everyone could hear. You look a right eejyut! So his shoes are black lace-ups and actually they're more than satisfactory. He examines himself in the mirror as if hoping it will give him a thumbs up. If only he had the right jacket. He puts his cigarettes in the top pocket of his shirt and his wallet in his trouser's back pocket. He puts a cigarette in his mouth, tilts his head back and takes one last look.

He tries to slip unnoticed through the kitchen to the back door but his mum is in there with his brother. 'Take a look at our Stephen,' Ian says. Ian's supposed to be doing his homework, and his mum taps the page of his exercise book.

'Concentrate.' She gets up and pulls at Stephen's collar. He knows she is afraid for him to leave and he feels the usual desire not to worry her. She kisses him on the forehead and releases him. 'You look great, love.'

'Lovely like a great big eejyut,' Ian says.

'Why did you ever start talking again, dickhead,' Stephen mutters, but only when he's safely out of the door.

The estate has grown over the wide fields, and whatever land remains has been shaped, landscaped, tidied. Where once he scattered a hare,

there is a children's playground. Tarmac paths. A figure of eight concrete paddling pool that has already been drained in case someone drowns. Swings, a slide, a see-saw, a roundabout.

He can still feel his wet shoes and his burnt jumper. He can see Jamie clasping the bosted ball and asking if it can be mended. And his brother, perpetually here aged eleven, holding his card out among the sedge and purple clover.

Janet comes to the door wearing a mac with a belt. She has bare legs and flat shoes. In spite of the short skirt and coat, something modest lingers, as though she's the sexy girl in chapel. Her mum stands behind her.

'Hello, Mrs Kimani.'

'Angela,' she says.

She has her car keys in her hand. He has to sit up front and Angela – as he must now call her – asks after his family and what he's up to nowadays. The drive is about three thousand miles and takes about three hundred thousand years but finally they are pulling up and he can see the rest of his generation in all its variety pouring along the roads towards Trentham Gardens.

He steps out and says, 'Thank you, Angela.'

It's half past seven but still bright. Swifts dart overhead. Trentham's a ruined place, the last stones of a country house in a huge overgrown garden, a country lane packed with people his age as night begins to gather in.

There's a long queue and a nip in the breeze. He wishes he was warmer but Janet has said yes to him and he was right not to ruin it by wearing – the very thought of it makes him blush – his donkey jacket.

Bugger it, here's loudmouth Eddie, walking the length of the queue. Stephen puts his arm around Janet's waist, steps back and pulls her into the shadows. She smiles as if to say, look at you, and he says, by way of explanation for his boldness, 'It's someone I don't want to bump into.' But here's Eddie anyway. He's wearing loafers, Stephen notes. Obviously didn't hear them shouting at him in the shop.

'Hello, matey,' Eddie says as if Stephen's a pirate. He scans Janet up and down. Puffing his left cheek out, he makes a clicking noise. 'This Julie then?'

Janet says, 'I am here you know. You can speak to me.'

One of the guys behind them says, ‘Do you mind? There’s a queue.’

Normally Stephen would stick up for Eddie against the grammar school boys – I mean, what kind of prat says, ‘Do you mind’? – but he’s not going to ruin the evening by spending it with Eddie. There’s an awkward pause, and then Eddie says, ‘Got to find me mates. See you later.’

Janet puts her hand on her hip and says, ‘Who’s Julie then?’

And Stephen smiles and says the truth that he kind of hopes sounds like a lie. ‘No one.’

On the stage are four young men. The singer wears a tweed jacket that belongs by right to the kind of old country bloke you see out Keele way with a shotgun under one arm, swinging a couple of dead rabbits by their feet. But on the singer’s lean chest, the jacket somehow manages to look like the most rebellious piece of clothing Stephen’s ever seen. How’s he managed that? Probably never seen a rabbit in his life. They seem to be promising a new world and they sing as if they are passionate and at the same time couldn’t give a damn. How did they get so free? What is the knack of it? It’s like a call to arms. But what arms and who are they fighting? He’d like to join in, but he knows they will just disappear into the night, back to where they’ve come from. Mars, perhaps.

Janet dances and the other boys stare at her. She belongs here, and he doesn’t. He’s a tree with deep roots; he doesn’t know how to move from the earth he was planted in. Something magical has surely happened, for him to be with her. ‘Anywhere, Anyhow, Anywhere’, the boys on stage sing. Janet dances in her short skirt and he is in a bubble with her and that huge room with the machines that shake his bones is less real than this dilapidated ballroom.

The gig spills out into the cold dark night. There’s nowhere to go and the crowd swirls like a shoal of fish. After the heat of the ball-room the cold air is delicious. Janet sticks close to him. They have to find the bus. He recognises some people in the night. There’s Mick’s older brother with a group of friends. And some girls from school. But who’d have thought this town held so many strangers?

They sort themselves into the bus queue. The cold is settling and Stephen longs for the heat of the top deck. A bus swings in ahead and he watches it filling, a group of girls and boys at the front all smoking, lit up like film stars.

But here's Eddie again, with an unlit cigarette in his mouth, swaying up, past the people waiting. There are shouts: 'Oy, get to the back.'

Eddie's eyes light on Stephen and he veers towards them. 'Got a light?'

He's too close and his breath smells of beer but his drunkenness feels contrived. Stephen puts a hand on Eddie's shoulder and pushes him back.

'Met her in Blackpool, did you?' Eddie says, looking Janet up and down.

'Bugger off,' Stephen says quietly.

'Don't be like that,' Eddie says. 'We're all mates here.'

'I only just met you.'

Eddie takes a step forward. He stretches out a swaying arm and holds his cigarette into Janet's face. 'Got a light or not?'

Janet offers her Zippo silently.

Eddie leans too close into the flame. 'Sorry ducky, it's my last one,' he says, as if being rude to her is dead cool. He falls towards her accidentally on purpose.

Stephen puts his hand on his shoulder and pushes him back. 'Leave it now.'

Eddie laughs right in Stephen's face. 'Blackpool my arse!'

A movement travels down the queue, a shifting as people sense the nasty turn this is taking.

Janet says, 'We could walk home.'

And then Jamie's there, out of the blue. He says, 'Eddie,' and nods at Janet. There's a definite sense of reinforcements arriving.

Janet says, 'Jamie. I didn't see you here—'

She's clambering to a safer shore.

Eddie stands back and gapes at Jamie, who ignores him.

'You want to share a taxi?' Jamie says.

A taxi, Stephen thinks, who takes taxis? Then Stephen realises that Jamie has walked over to protect Janet. That's bad. It's his job to look after Janet, not Jamie's.

'Any room for your mate?' Eddie says.

There it is again. Eddie's not their mate. They hardly know him.

Jamie says, 'You can get the bus.'

Eddie seems to think about this for a moment. He takes a drag on his cigarette. 'Have you fucked her then?'

Jamie says, ‘Shut up, dickhead.’

Stephen has missed his moment again.

Eddie leans back on his left leg. ‘Ooh, stop messing about,’ he says, with the nasal whine of Kenneth Williams.

Jamie says, ‘You’re a knob.’

Stephen glances at him. He’s never heard Jamie talk like that.

Janet takes Stephen’s arm. ‘Come on – it’s not too far to walk.’

Eddie’s voice has an edge of irritation. ‘I just want to know have you fucked her. That’s all.’

Stephen says, ‘Last chance, Eddie.’

Eddie looms towards him. ‘Only I didn’t have you down as someone …’ He jabs his finger into Stephen’s chest with each word. ‘Who – Likes – Dark – Meat.’

Stephen punches Eddie. One minute, Eddie’s there. The next, he’s down. No one’s more surprised than Stephen.

Eddie’s lying on his back, then clambering up to standing, blood from his nose smearing his face. Jamie’s got his hand on Stephen’s shoulder to hold him back, but it’s not necessary. It’s a knockout. Stephen puts his knuckles to his mouth. He feels fantastic. He’d do it again in a heartbeat. The rest of the queue are getting involved. A girl rushes up, as if she’s a doctor. It’s ridiculous and Stephen grins. She’s got a handkerchief in her outstretched hand.

Eddie takes it and holds it to his face. He says, ‘You’re a right prick, Stephen.’

The girl says, ‘Do you need an ambulance?’

‘Of course I don’t need a bloody ambulance.’

The girl stands back. ‘Well, charming. I was only trying to help.’

That makes Stephen grin again.

Here’s the bus and everyone seems to agree that the best thing is for Eddie to get on it. He’s allowed to skip to the front of the queue. Stephen, Jamie and Janet watch the conversation with the bus driver, who takes a while even to open the doors.

Jamie says, ‘No idea you could punch like that.’

‘Me neither.’

The bus pulls past them. Eddie is lit up in one of the bottom deck windows. He’s still holding the girl’s hankie to his face. Stephen feels a little sorry for him. He hasn’t got any mates. Of course he hasn’t. That’s

why he's such a loudmouth. Jamie and him and Mick and even little No-I-Can't Billy McKee: they're all kind of brothers. Eddie's simply not important.

'I taut I taw a puddy-tat,' Stephen says.

Jamie takes a moment to work it out and then he nods and says, 'Oh yes. Tweety Pie. That's going to stick.'

Jamie says he'll wait for the next bus. Stephen, emboldened by hitting Eddie, offers to walk Janet home. It is a long way and every step is precious. This land is only a few miles from his village and yet so different. The golf club. The woods of Hanchurch. Big houses with black-and-white gables. There's a mystery in the landscape – lives that are strange to him – and a mystery too in walking at night with Janet in her flat shoes and belted mac. He could step out of his life and find a new one. It's that easy. Plus, he's still feeling really great about punching Eddie, or Tweety as he now pleasingly is.

Janet talks about her stupid school art teacher who gave her a detention for not wearing the school summer boater that doesn't fit well over her hair and which makes her feel stupid. The details of her life fill him with interest. When she asks him about the colliery, he speaks carefully, trying to make it sound better than it is. The moon drifts along with them. She talks about her father. She hasn't seen him in more than twelve years and she wouldn't recognise him if she passed him in the street – not that that's likely because he lives back in Kenya. Kenya! She might as well have said Venus. She seems to have the freedom of those boys on the stage and he wants it too. She can speak and name things and say stuff out loud. The home stretch comes into view, a bend in the road and a broad sweep. To his right, the park that was marshland. Ahead and to the left, the houses he's seen built have begun to settle into the landscape. They are standing at Janet's gate. The curtains are drawn and the house is in darkness.

Janet speaks quietly. 'There's something I wanted to ask you.'

Is it about make-believe Julie? What will he say? It will be easy. He will say the truth.

'Ask me anything.'

'Was it your Valentine's card?'

They have walked for more than an hour but they haven't talked once about that day. It is the thing that means that they will always know each

other, know that day and the days that followed, the grey overcast sky and the hole in the ground into which they put his brother. He has been wishing the fact of it away steadfastly, pushing it to the darkest edges of his mind. He has willed this to be the very first time he has met Janet. He looks towards the park and conjures an unmade landscape, his brother standing there.

'We was just kids.'

George's shoes and the jumper are on the bank. The leaves lie on the water's surface. And he watches as Jamie without hesitation dives in and plunges beneath the surface over and over until Liam's dad, the fireman, arrives at a run and jumps in and swims him back to land.

Janet takes Stephen's hand in hers as if expecting that will free his words. 'I'm sorry to ask, but it's always felt important to me. After. You know. What happened.'

When he stays silent, she places her free hand on top of his. 'I'm sorry I asked.'

'No problem. It was me give it you.'

It's kind of true. He gave her the card. It just wasn't his.

But he's lied about his brother.

He is filled with regret.

Then he is swept with a rush of anger because it has been such a good night. He bought her ticket, which wasn't cheap, and he punched Eddie, which was surprisingly satisfying, and then he walked her the five or so miles to her door through moonlight. But after all that, she has she taken him right back to that afternoon and made it feel more real than anything that could ever happen here in the present. And here he is, back standing in front of her door in his burnt jacket, holding that stupid card. *Be My Honey*. Here he is, running from the shame of it, not realising he is leaving his brother forever. That he will never see him alive again. He would like to go back to that moment and change it, but as he cannot, he wants to erase it completely. Now he's made it worse, tainted it with a lie and made it even harder to lock it away where it belongs. All he wants is to run away again, back in time to George shouting for him to wait, and this time he will wait and they will walk back together to the village, the three of them, and everything will be different. Maybe George will even help him to stay at school.

Janet must imagine that the emotion that crosses his face is something that it isn’t, because instead of him running away, she reaches out and kisses him.

They are very young and only six weeks later Janet is pregnant with Christopher.

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Ian has to stop on the drive over to the mortuary. He gets out of the car and stands on the pavement, his lips pressed together hard and his hands in the small of his back.

When he arrives, Roberts is waiting in the car park, standing outside his car, practically jumping with impatience.

‘We’ve found casings from two different calibre guns at the scene,’ he says. ‘This has been some kind of gangland shoot-out.’

The mortuary has square tiled windows, each opaque like the bottoms of bottles, through which the shapes of trees move blurrily. A pale light filters and it is on this light that Ian concentrates, avoiding the room’s focus: the central dissecting table on which he can see, from the corner of his eye, the shape of a man. He draws his gaze down. Beneath the windows are three sinks, each with rubber extensions. A raised tilted panel of glass protects the windows from any splashes of human material. Ian turns his head and steps forward.

He makes himself look carefully.

The body is swollen from its immersion in water. The face blue and misshapen, the hands bruised. A tracing of freckles across the man’s cheeks. A round wound to the chest, almost like a cigarette burn, around which the flesh has bloated. And on the stomach, a little birthmark. Two circles, one bigger, the other smaller. The earth and the moon, perhaps.

A noise rushes through Ian’s head like a fast-flowing river. It must be the pulse of the blood that feeds his brain.

‘You need to be sure,’ Roberts says. ‘Take a proper look. He’s not in good shape.’

Ian sits in his little Astra and rests his head on the steering wheel.

Thank fuck. Thank fuck. Thank fuck. Thank fuck.

For a while there is nothing except this incapacitating relief. Then this transforms into something else: a cold sweep of dread, a memory of his

mother stroking her hand down his face. Who'd be a parent, a sea anchor dragged behind your child's unprotectable life.

Nothing has been found to identify the deceased. No wallet. No abandoned vehicle. No one locally, apart from Janet, has reported a young mixed-race man missing. They are going to have to put the dead man's fingerprints out to HQ. But the dead man had a bottle of poppers in his jacket and a blue handkerchief in his right pocket. Ian learnt the signals back in London. The code was so artless, so easily broken. So, not Christopher in the mortuary, but too much like him.

Ian parks in a side street next to the Brewery. There are a few men drinking, sitting together at a far table. Ian walks over to the bar, where Dave is serving a young man. He barely looks at Ian. 'I told you I didn't want to see you here again.'

'I just need to ask you a few more questions about my nephew.'

Dave turns to him. 'Why don't you cut the bullshit?'

'The bullshit?'

'Oh, come on. The moment I set eyes on you I had you down as police.'

'I'm here because my sister-in-law asked me to try and find Christopher. It's got nothing to do with my job.'

'And you didn't tell me you are police because?'

'Because I wanted you to talk to me.'

'And how's that going?'

A cold wash sweeps through Ian. He's never going to Australia. He's not going to be a lighthouse keeper off the coast of Ireland. Those people in the Amazon will never set eyes on him. He is being drawn in to everything he has ever wanted to escape.

'A man's been found dead in the lake at Trentham,' Ian says. He fills with the memory of that young man on the mortuary table and he turns away from it only with an effort of will. 'He wasn't Christopher, thank God, but my hunch is he was gay. You said Christopher left with someone. I'm hoping it wasn't the man who is now in a fridge. That's why I'm here when I would much rather be on my way back to South Staffordshire's fields.'

The barman rests his elbow on the bar. He takes a pack of cigarettes from his top pocket and offers one to Ian, who shakes his head. He lights one for himself, inhales and holds the smoke for a moment. 'The way

you introduced yourself this morning: very charming. You pretty police by any chance? Do you hang around outside toilets trying to catch men like me?'

'I'm ex-CID, organised crime. Now I'm the village bobby. Graffiti on the village hall: *Mr Lowther wears rubber knickers*. That kind of thing. I just want to find my nephew. Are you going to help me?'

The barman rests his elbow on the bar. He takes another pull on his cigarette.

'I *want* to trust you, because after all, someone's dead. And I want to help you find Christopher. But my problem is, one minute you're nice – and you are *nice*, aren't you? Who could resist you? But the next minute you'll be writing down the number plates of people who park outside my club and trying to close us down.'

'I don't want to close you down—'

'You don't understand. Some of the men, they come in here, they stand at the door: they're shaking. They stay for two minutes. They leave. When there are raids, lives are shattered. Ended, even. I've seen that. That's why I don't feel great about talking to you.'

'I understand.'

'Coming in here trying to hide who you are and you're telling me you understand?'

'All I'm interested in is finding Christopher. You don't need to worry about the police. In a month's time I won't even be a copper anymore. I've resigned.'

Dave's face opens into a slow grin. 'You were CID, organised crime, then you were the village bobby, now you've resigned? What's going on?' He laughs. 'I can't help myself,' he says. 'I like you. You're fucked up.'

'Pleased you find me amusing.'

Dave laughs again. 'Now I'm feeling sorry for you?'

'This young man. He was probably in his late twenties. Slim. Mixed-race. Freckles across his face. Leather jacket. Tell me that isn't the man Christopher left with.'

Dave looks down at the bar and Ian dreads what he guesses is coming.

'Yes, he sounds like the man your nephew left with last night.'

Ian takes this in. Tries to shut it in an air-sealed room with an unbreakable lock. 'What do you know about him?'

‘He was a Scouser. Nothing else.’

‘What about drugs?’

‘What about them?’

‘The dead man had poppers in his jacket.’

Dave rubs the bridge of his nose slowly. ‘I don’t know anything about that. I don’t allow drugs in here.’

‘Every bar where there’s young people has drugs.’

‘Says you.’ Dave shrugs. ‘OK, so what happens now? Is this place going to be full of police?’

‘This is the last known sighting of the dead man. I’ll have to tell the Superintendent.’

Dave stubs his cigarette out. He’s weighing something up, and Ian waits.

‘OK, pretty boy. I want to tell you something else without you hurrying to your boss.’

‘Depends what it is.’

‘I want you to promise me some poor closeted guy isn’t getting arrested just because he came into my bar last night.’

‘Be realistic. Someone’s been murdered.’

‘You be realistic. I can tell you or not tell you – it’s up to me. Plenty of men have had their lives destroyed by coppers like you. I’d never even consider telling you if Christopher hadn’t said he knew the guy.’

‘OK.’

‘So I’d never seen him before. This guy seemed really nervous but he steps in and he’s standing on his own. Next thing I know he’s left and Christopher’s running after him. He told me when he came back in the man was his Uncle Jamie, but I think he meant more like a family friend than an actual uncle. He has a wife and two kids apparently. Christopher reassured him he wouldn’t tell a soul but Uncle Jamie said it was just a mistake. He hadn’t realised what kind of a bar it was.’

‘You believe that?’

‘Not in a month of Sundays and closeted is my *Mastermind* specialist subject. I’m just worried that if Uncle Jamie is really hidden – married man, kids, all that – then that might be a reason for him to hurt someone who knew. Perhaps you could check it out without destroying the man’s life.’

Jamie's wife, Lucy, comes to the door. She folds her arms across her chest and doesn't invite Ian in. 'If you've come about the strike then we don't want to hear it.'

'Why would I be here about the strike?'

She looks at him for a moment with suspicious eyes. Then she says, 'Jamie's down at the field with the boys.'

As Ian walks away, he looks over his shoulder. Lucy is standing at the window, watching.

From the path, Ian sees the goalpost jumpers and that Jamie is in goal. Ian stands and watches from a distance. The boys are taking penalties. Michael, the youngest, attempts to dribble the ball towards his dad. Him and the ball: it's a faltering three-legged race kind of a thing. The boy stops, takes an age to aim his kick. The ball wobbles along the heavy grass and Jamie dives the wrong way.

'Ah, Dad!' George, the eldest, shouts. 'Dad! Dad! That's not fair!'

Jamie runs forward and scoops George in the air. He runs in a circle, holding the boy high. 'Georgie Best! Georgie Best!'

George's protests carry reedily on the wind. 'Put me down!'

Michael runs forward and the moment George's feet hit the grass, they both set on their dad. He falls backward as if mortally wounded. There is a pile of legs and arms and hysterical laughter. Jamie rolls over onto all fours and roars. The eldest gets on his back and, after a moment's hesitation, the other boy climbs on too. Jamie rears up, beats his chest like King Kong.

Ian walks towards them, and the boys, spotting him, immediately climb off and put their hands in their pockets.

'Ay up, Uncle Ian.'

'Ay up, boys. Jamie.'

Jamie gets up, brushes down his trousers. 'Ian. Long time.'

'Yes. I wondered if I could have a word?'

'Do I need to walk the boys home?'

'Might be an idea.'

They walk. The youngest keeps up an endless stream of some Tommy Cooper. He holds out one hand and shakes it. 'Seen that?' he says.

The eldest shakes out his own hand and speaks in a growl. 'The other one does the same.'

They're at the gate.

‘Go on in now,’ Jamie says, making fists as if he’s going to punch them. The boys clench theirs too. ‘Two fish in a tank,’ Jamie says.

‘I’ll drive,’ says Michael.

‘And I’ll man the guns,’ says George.

And then all three of them shake their hands and say in unison, ‘Just like that!’

The front door opens. Lucy stands in the threshold. The boys start punching their dad.

‘Bring Uncle Ian in, Dad. Bring him in.’

‘Maybe later. Just going to have a beer first, all right, dear?’

Lucy nods but her face is taut.

They walk in the direction of the club. Even though they both know they’re not going there, they seem to have come to an agreement about the direction. It gives the right impression.

‘Christopher is missing,’ Ian says.

After a pause, Jamie says, ‘Sorry to hear that.’

‘My family and you. We go back—’

‘We do.’

‘So I hope you’ll understand me speaking straight to you—’

Jamie laughs. ‘No need for the cloak and dagger stuff. Did the doorman tell you I was in that pub last night?’

‘He did.’

‘Yes, I just popped in there by mistake after the Viccy Hall. You know? Scargill and Kinnock were talking. Fancied a pint. Didn’t know what kind of club it was.’

‘Did you spend much time there?’

‘Just put my face round the door and left.’

‘And afterwards?’

Jamie stops walking. ‘I went home.’ He turns to face Ian. ‘Why do you want to know what I did afterwards?’

Ian smiles. ‘Can’t help myself. Force of habit, you know.’

Jamie doesn’t smile back.

Ian says, ‘I just want to know if you saw anything. Nothing else.’

‘The boss, was he the fat man at the door? The bald one with the apron?’

‘He was.’

‘Offered me drugs, if that’s got owt to do with it.’

‘Did he have them himself?’

‘No, he pointed out a lad sitting at the bar. Mixed-race, like your Christopher.’ He scratches his eyebrow. ‘Apart from that, I’ve nowt to tell you. I stepped inside, saw what kind of place it was and left. Each to their own, but that kind of carry on is not for me. Christopher got the wrong end of the stick. Came out after me. Wanted to reassure me he wouldn’t tell anyone I’d been in. But like I said—’

‘You didn’t know what kind of place it was.’

‘That’s right.’

There’s a pause.

Ian says, ‘That a bruise on your jaw?’

‘There was a bit of a fight.’

‘OK?’

‘Outside the Viccy Hall. Said what I thought, about the strike. That’s why I crossed the picket line today.’

‘You crossed the line?’

Jamie holds Ian’s gaze. ‘Your brother didn’t tell you?’

This news drops inside Ian like a stone and it takes him a moment before he is able to ignore it.

‘Stephen and me don’t speak much. I’m in Cannock mostly.’

There’s a moment’s silence.

Ian says, ‘You got a leather jacket?’

Jamie exhales heavily. ‘Yes, I’ve got a leather jacket. Who hasn’t? You done now, Colombo?’

Ian rubs his forehead. ‘Yeah. I’m sorry. Just worried about Christopher.’

‘Don’t blame you. He’s a nice lad. I hope he’s all right. You got any other questions, speak to my lawyer, as they say.’

Jamie turns and walks back towards his house and Ian stands alone. The streets around him feel suddenly uncanny, as if the village is a replica, a haunting simulacrum. But Stephen still lives in the old family home, just two streets away, and Ian walks quickly towards the car, hoping to get away before he bumps into him.

Driving is a kind of automatism. Something’s not right about Jamie’s account. He should tell Roberts. But there have always been rules around Jamie. Ian’s mother, excessively courteous, never letting him leave without a slice of cake or a hug. He gave him Top Star football cards.

‘Thank you, Jamie,’ his mother said. ‘That’s very kind. Say thank you, Ian.’ And Ian wrote, *Thank you*, on his notebook and held it up for Jamie to read. And later, when he showed his brother the football cards, Stephen grabbed his upper arm painfully. ‘Don’t you get it?’ he hissed. ‘Don’t you understand why Mum’s so nice to him? If George hadn’t been out trying to stop Jamie’s dad hitting his mum, George would still be alive. So maybe think about why he’s giving you those football cards.’

It’s nonsense; of course it is. It wasn’t Jamie’s fault. And yet there’s always this undercurrent, as if somehow it was.

The guy’s married and maybe that’s what doesn’t feel right about him: he’s hiding part of himself. Definitely gay, Dave said. Should he shake up Jamie’s life, hurt his wife and his children just because he stepped into a bar? A mysterious undercurrent clouds Ian’s thinking – his mother’s desperate kindness, his brother’s rage – and he feels his own silence as physical as someone holding a hand over his mouth.

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The Brewery is busy when Ian steps back inside, the air thick with smoke. The music and the talk are loud. Dave, alert as ever, opens the latch on the bar and walks over. They go and stand outside in the car park. The street lights paint them both orange.

‘Lot of drugs coming in from Liverpool.’

‘Like I said, no drugs here.’

Ian nods. ‘My brother’s friend, Jamie, said you offered him poppers. In fact, you directed him towards the man Christopher left with.’

Dave takes a pack of cigarettes out of his apron pocket and lights one. ‘Coz a closeted guy is definitely telling the truth.’

‘I reckon it’s the truth. How come you start telling me the truth instead of dicking me around. You know a guy called Liam?’

Dave’s expression shifts under the orange light. He shrugs. ‘Not sure.’

‘Liam was murdered in Liverpool two days ago.’

Although it’s only a moment since he’s lit it, Dave takes a last drag of his cigarette, throws it on the floor and grinds it out with his foot.

Ian says, ‘Don’t act like you’re free to go. If you don’t help me, I might discover that I am a cop after all.’

‘And if I help?’

‘I’m not interested in the drugs that come into this bar. All I want is to find Christopher.’

‘OK, but I won’t be repeating this for your boss.’

‘Go on.’

‘Liam’s been supplying my customers for a good few weeks now. Honestly, I wondered what he was up to. He didn’t seem tough enough or clever enough. The lad that Christopher was with used to bring the drugs down, but then he brought Liam in and I stopped seeing the first lad. I reckoned he’d moved up the food chain. Last night was the first time I’d seen him in a while. Told me he was taking back control. I never thought Liam had been killed. That lad, he acts like a gangster—doesn’t tell

anyone his name, flashes the cash. But underneath all that? I would never have thought he was properly violent. And he seemed to have a real thing for Christopher.'

'And Christopher? Was he part of the drug dealing?'

'If he was, I never saw it.'

'You see him high ever? Dealing?'

'High, once or twice, maybe. Dealing, no.'

'Why on earth didn't you tell me this the first time I came in here? Christopher might have been hurt.'

'Because drug dealing's illegal? And because you told me the body was found in Trentham. I thought he'd been killed for being gay. I had no idea it was anything to do with drugs. It's just poppers and grass. Harmless.'

For a moment they are both silent. Then Ian says, 'That's two men murdered, Dave, and another man missing. Do you have anything else?'

'Only thing I can think is that there was another guy dropped off stuff here instead of Liam a couple of times. Came in a van. Said his name was Stephen.'

'Stephen? You sure?'

'Certain.'

'What was the van?'

'A white Ford Transit.'

A payphone stands a few steps down the street. Ian rings headquarters and requests a check on two vehicles from Brenda's notebook. The Capri is registered to Liam Holdcroft. The white Ford Transit is registered to his own brother, Stephen Weldon.

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Ian has left Brenda's notebook in the glovebox of his car, parked in the station yard. His brother's Transit's registration plate is in there, noted down by Brenda at the scene of the post office robbery. Stephanie's seen a white Transit outside Liam's house. Childhood friend of her husband, she said. And a man called Stephen has been dropping drugs off at the Brewery.

But Stephen surely just parked up outside the post office to pick up a paper. And Liam's wife doesn't even know the registration of the Transit. And how many Stephens are there in Stoke? There must be thousands.

Once he's found Christopher, Ian will live in a yurt in Mongolia.

He trips quickly up the wooden-banistered stone stairs in the station, towards a congregation of descending DCs, who raise their eyebrows in greeting as if he is already known to them as someone to take care around. He decides to confirm their worst suspicions and, just before they pass, he gives a shoulder-high wave from the wrist and way too big a smile. But then, too late, he recognises one of them: it's Shiny Pete from the commendation ceremony. Pete smiles back with the innocence of a llama and offers his hand.

'Ian, what luck! I wanted to say thank you—'

'Yeah, no problem, Pete. Sorry. Got to dash.'

Roberts is at his desk, bent over a pile of paper. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up. His jacket is on the back of his chair. There is a cork noticeboard on the wall, but it is empty. Roberts takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

'Working late? I thought you were all about doing the bare minimum?'

'I popped in on the Brewery. I promised my sister-in-law I'd see if I could find her son.'

Roberts takes a cotton handkerchief from his pocket and cleans his glasses. 'And were you off or on duty when you did that?'

‘I was looking for my nephew.’

Roberts rubs his hand across his forehead. ‘And what was stopping you running it past me first?’

Ian doesn’t reply.

‘Issues with authority, is it?’

Ian thinks that yes, he does have issues with authority, big issues, but also that he needs to find Christopher. ‘I apologise.’

‘There now – that wasn’t so hard, was it? Apology accepted. I’ve got something interesting for you. The ballistics are back on the bullet you found in the post office and the bullet in the chest of the dead man in the lake. Same gun. And I’m thinking you’ve come to see me because you found something at the Brewery?’

‘Someone fitting our murder victim’s description was in there last night. Had a Liverpudlian accent. The bartender, Dave, won’t give a statement but he said he worked in the same outfit as Liam, supplying the bar with drugs.’

‘It’s a turf war then? Does your bartender, Dave, know this person’s name?’

‘Says he doesn’t. The thing is, sir, Christopher left with him last night.’

‘Was Christopher selling drugs?’

‘Dave said he didn’t think so, but I don’t know, obviously. Doesn’t seem like the boy I know. The main thing seemed to be that he had a massive crush on the guy.’

‘Our victim in Trentham was killed by a single gunshot. That’s a gang killing. Could your nephew be caught up in something like that?’

‘God no. I told you. He’s just a kid.’

‘And Christopher’s gay?’

‘Seems gay to me, works in a gay bar, so I’d say so, wouldn’t you?’

‘Well, I don’t know him. That’s why I’m asking you. But a young bartender in a gay bar getting chatted up by a guy. It’s hardly suspicious.’

‘Sir. Christopher left with the guy. The guy’s dead. Christopher’s missing.’

‘We don’t even know for sure it’s the same guy in the bar as in the lake—’

‘Well, he matches the description—’

‘Your nephew could be spending a happy weekend in London right now. He could be in Paris! God, I wish I was in Paris. But I currently have two murders, an armed robbery and a strike siphoning off all my officers. Where do you want me to find the resources to investigate someone we have no evidence has come to harm?’

‘You’ve been making a big deal of me being a good detective. And I’m telling you, as a detective, that Christopher’s disappearance is completely out of character. You need to make Christopher a priority.’

‘Says the detective who wants to be left alone to investigate milk theft.’

Ian feels a rush of anger. He nearly says out loud what he is thinking: is it because Christopher is gay that you are so uninterested? But he takes a breath and summons the patience he thought he didn’t have.

‘Sir. If it was a young woman who was missing … who left with a guy who’s been found dead … ’

Roberts rubs his left hand over his mouth. ‘OK. I hear you.’ He rubs the back of his neck, stretches his arms out above his head. ‘But whether your nephew is involved or not, then it’s the same investigation. We have to solve the murders. Let’s identify our dead guy. Fancy a drive up to Liverpool with his prints?’

No-I-Can’t Billy is walking up the lane with his missus and his two children. Ian waits until he’s disappeared over the brow of the hill before he takes the key out of the ignition and grabs hold of the beers. He slips the latch on the gate and walks the short path to the back door. It may be his childhood home, but he still feels obliged to knock, which is irritating. In a moment his brother stands at the door in jeans and jumper. Socked feet. He looks exhausted.

‘Janet rang me. Christopher’s missing.’

‘I know.’

Stephen stares at him, furious with worry. ‘Is that why you’re here, then? You got something to tell me?’

‘God no. Stephen. I’ve got to drive to Liverpool tomorrow. Doesn’t make sense to go back to Cannock. I wanted to stay the night.’

‘I’ve been down that bar where he works. Had to walk coz I’ve lost me van.’

‘You’ve lost your van?’

‘That doesn’t matter right now. I don’t know where else to look, Ian. That’s what I’m saying. Christopher and me, we don’t speak much. I’m sick with it. You heard anything?’

‘No,’ Ian lies. What else should he do? Tell his brother that his son left the bar last night with a man who has been found murdered? Stephen’s just standing there in his socked feet.

‘I’m just hoping he’s being a dirty stop out. That’s what the barman seemed to think.’

‘Can I come in, Stephen, or are we going to carry on standing here?’

Stephen moves aside and Ian steps into the kitchen. ‘I brought some beers,’ he says, lifting them with his right hand.

‘Come through. Fire’s lit.’

Stephen sits in the old chair. Grandad’s more than twenty years dead, but it still feels like a usurpation to see his brother in that chair. Ian leans forward and offers a can, then tugs the ring pull on his own.

‘We lift each other up, heh?’ Ian says.

Stephen stretches his legs out towards the coals. ‘You can laugh if you want to, but yes, we have to.’

Ian pulls their mother’s chair in front of the fire.

Stephen says, ‘What teks you to Liverpool then?’

‘Murder inquiry.’

‘Look at you. All grown up.’

‘Here’s to the working class.’

Stephen raises his can. ‘Yeah, workers of the world unite.’ He takes a long drink. ‘Jamie crossed the picket this morning. I was on the line. Not that that matters either. All I want right now is to see Christopher.’

But this is a detail Jamie hadn’t told him: that Stephen was there when Jamie crossed the line.

‘You’re joking.’

‘I am not joking. I told him to wait, at least do it on a day I wasn’t there.’

‘Why’d he not wait?’ Ian says.

‘Haven’t got an earthly’s. He organised the whip-round at my wedding.’

‘Oh yes, the washing machine.’

‘Don’t forget the lawnmower. With the leftover money. Put a big pink bow on it. Wheeled it out with a big ta da.’

‘Haven’t even got a lawn yet, you said.’

Stephen laughs. His can is already finished and he leans down and picks up a fresh one. He hands another to his brother. ‘Come on, keep up.’ He pulls the ring on his own. ‘Perhaps that’s why he crossed today. No sense of humour.’ He takes a swig of beer. ‘Anyhow, fuck him.’

Ian remembers that moment well: Jamie given pride of place – best man no less – but Stephen giving him that little slap, just in case, in the heat of the moment, he forgot his place. And Ian himself, sitting with his familiar anxiety at the top table, wearing his dad’s tie and his school shoes.

He has this imaginary scenario that he can never quite give up on where he and his brother actually talk about stuff. But it’s impossible. In some prehistoric epoch he let his brother down: that seems to be the decision. He stood on that chair staring out into the street until his legs ached and, when he saw Stephen returning, he ran down in a big hurry for everything to be restored, far too young to comprehend the possibility of bad news that could be permanent.

‘Where’s our George, Stephen?’

What happened after that is an explosion of blackness, an impenetrable void inside his head. It must feel like that when someone shoots you. When he woke, it was to a world in which Stephen seemed forever angry with him.

In the front room, they steadily add coal to the fire and open the beers while Stephen offers up monologues. The police: Thatcher’s bloody army.

‘It’s being so cheerful keeps you going,’ Ian says.

Stephen raises his can. ‘Cheers.’

Stephen has moved on to Stoke City’s unbroken season of defeat: position of maximum opportunity, my arse. Ian isn’t really listening. It’s too hot. The cans are emptying out, one after the other, and the room smells of beer. He thinks of Christopher. Where is he? How can he find him? It doesn’t help that it seems his own brother is somehow connected to whatever happened. Ian lifts the last two cans and hands one to Stephen. He pulls the tag on his own and takes a drink.

‘You ever lend your van?’ he says.

Stephen sits forward. He and the distinguished old chair have become ridiculous, as if chair and man are doing battle with each other. They are,

all three of them, drunk, Ian realises. The two brothers and their grandfather's old chair. No way to be together, except pissed.

'My van's in Nottingham. We nearly got caught picketing. I had to leave it. Reported it stolen, didn't I? Why d'you ask?' Stephen says.

Ian takes a deep breath of air. 'I dunno. I'm drunk, Stephen. I need a slash.'

'Don't change the subject. Why do you ask about the van like that, out of the blue? Who's grassing on me?'

'Grassing on you? No one's grassing on you. Why would anyone be grassing on you?'

'They always know where we are. Every time we go out—'

Ian has heard rumours of a special unit run by the Met that's looking to recruit informants. But surely Stephen isn't important enough to warrant that level of attention. He's a miner from a small village in Stoke, not Kim Philby. Still, something stirs in the back of Ian's mind. He looks for it, but he's too drunk to pin it down. He waves his hand impatiently.

'They don't need a grass, you being the loudmouth you are.'

'I'm standing up for what's right.'

'I'm not the enemy, Stephen.'

Stephen sits back in his chair and drinks. 'Course you're not.'

'Yeah, all right. Mrs Thatcher has targeted you in particular and with all the resources of the state because you're so bloody effective.'

'You're my brother, Ian, but you're full of shit. You knew my Christopher was missing but you didn't come round.'

Ian stands up. The room is too hot and the floor moves beneath his feet. 'I'm going for that slash.'

The stairs are steeper and the treads shorter than Ian remembers. It feels almost possible to lean his body against them and sleep there. But his brother needs to come past and so he makes it up the stairs to the toilet and then into his old room. The bed feels less like a bed, more like an ironing board.

Anxiety and repeating thoughts keep Ian awake. The ceiling won't stay still. Light seeps around the edges of the curtains. He stares into the corner of the room to steady it until, like a sudden wave, a restless sleep sweeps over him.

When he wakes, it feels like he's swapped his mouth for somebody else's: someone a lot older with bad teeth. He stands at the window. The

moon has long since set and stars are visible. He has a sense of this intermediate moment just before the earth tips convincingly towards the sun. It's not quite night but not dawn either: too early to get up but not enough time to get back to sleep. With his index finger, he cleans his teeth in the bathroom. Runs himself a bath. The water is still hot from the back boiler and it brings to mind the heat of his childhood, how the coal would burn on through the night and wake him in his bed. He walks along the landing and watches his brother sleeping, mouth open, one arm flung out.

They are trapped in a maze, the two of them, endlessly treading the same worn pathways. Ian wants to do things differently, but he can't see how. When he walked up the path to his parents' house, he was an adult, a detective constable, someone people might think of as having authority and experience. The moment he stepped across the threshold of this house, he was five years old again, tagging behind and alternating between trying to pacify his brother and winding him up.

'You should leave this house,' he says out loud to his sleeping brother. 'What the hell are you doing still here?'

Stephen stirs but does not wake. Ian tiptoes down the stairs. He sees a leather jacket hanging in the hallway. Jamie was right. Everyone's bloody got one. He moves into the kitchen and drinks a pint of water. Their mum's mugs are stacked on the shelves just like she liked them – always upside down. After George's death she did all the things she always did – made the tea, lit the fire, put on her uniform – but her actions had a new emptiness to them. Fewer people came to the back door.

Here in the front room, Jamie sat clutching his new football, surrounded by uncles and Grandad and with the fire blazing. It had been a better time. Who can blame Stephen for wanting to fight for it?

Ian has a ridiculous urge to climb the stairs and get into bed with his brother and cuddle up with him – something he has never done, not even as a child. It was George who lifted him onto his shoulders, not Stephen.

He should tell him about his son, but how can he? Where can he draw the line? Stephen will rage, probably try to interfere with the investigation. The worst possibility is that Stephen himself knows more than he is letting on about his son's disappearance.

Ian allows himself to dream of the vast grasslands of Siberia. He wants to go back in time too, to when there were wild horses and wolves

and the only people living were nomads.

It is too early to drive to Liverpool but he cannot face his childhood bed again. He will stop on the way, maybe sleep in the car with the engine on.

Then Stephen is there, standing in the kitchen doorway in his Y-fronts, socks and a jumper. He runs one hand through his hair. ‘Think I overdid it last night.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘No worries.’

‘If you find out anything about Christopher, will you come straight here?’

‘Course I will.’

‘He’s probably just, you know, doing stuff young people do.’

‘That’s right. That’s probably it.’

‘Shall we eat summat before you go?’

Stephen nips upstairs to put some trousers on. Ian puts the gas on under the skillet. The kitchen fills with the smell of bacon. Stephen cuts the white bread thick and the fat makes it soft and salty. Ian makes two mugs of coffee. Stephen plates up the butties and, as the cold dawn begins to brighten the sky, they move to sit next to each other outside on the back step.

Before he sits, Ian pulls his wallet out of his back pocket. ‘Can I give you summat, towards the breakfast?’

‘Don’t be daft.’

Ian opens the wallet. ‘Come on. Don’t be proud. It can’t be easy.’

Hesitation flickers across Stephen’s face. Then he says, ‘Orate. If you’ve got a fiver. Thanks.’

They are both affected by this and they eat in silence. Ian would like to bottle this moment, the tang of the butties, the sweetness of the coffee, his brother’s woollen socks with a hole in the right big toe.

Stephen says, ‘We used to laugh at him, but Grandad was right, you know. We have to lift each other up. There’s no other way.’

Ian takes a gulp of coffee. ‘You’re probably right.’

Stephen pushes his brother in the shoulder. ‘Ah, give over with your flannel. If we stood together, we would never be defeated. I know that to

be true. I've seen it. That's what kills me, Ian: Jamie and the rest of them are throwing it away. I know that for a fact.'

Ian wipes the last bit of bread around his plate. He stands up to take the dishes back into the kitchen but Stephen pats the step beside him and says, 'Leave them here. I can do them. You get off now. Don't forget to call me if you hear owt about Christopher.'

'Will do.'

As Ian pulls away from the house, Stephen does not move from his place on the step.

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Thursday, 3rd February 1972

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No one in Murton knew Freddie Matthews – he was from Doncaster – but still they *knew* him because he was one of their own. Freddie was killed picketing outside a power station in North Lincolnshire, crushed by a lorry that mounted the kerb. The driver didn't stop and the police had to borrow the pickets' cars to hunt him down.

Freddie is talked about on street corners, in the queue at the Co-op; the same account told over and over and over, greeted with nods and angry affirmations. Those who'd already heard what happened are happy to hear it again. The village seems to be full of people nodding and saying, I know, I know.

Six children who've lost their dad!

I know. I know.

Christopher is five years old.

Stephen is in the club after a day's picketing when he hears the news. It could have been him crushed by that lorry, and then what for Janet and Christopher? Who would look after them then?

Stan Howe walks in with his mates and Stephen stands up and shouts at him, 'Have you heard about Freddie Matthews?'

'Oh aye, Stephen. Terrible.'

'You NACODS scabs should hang your heads.'

Marj, wiping down the bar, says, 'Come on, Stephen. It's not Stan's fault. NACODS is different. We all know that.'

Stephen turns away because he doesn't want to make a scene. But it is hard to contain his anger. 'It makes me want to do something, change something.'

Mick agrees. 'Course it does. I feel the same. But these things never change anything.'

Stephen slams his fist on the table. 'Well, for once it should change something. Fred Matthew's death should change the world!'

And so Stephen becomes part of changing the world. At five a.m. he rolls out of Christopher's narrow bed and walks downstairs in his socks. Before he switches the light on, he shuts the kitchen door quietly behind him. He cracks eggs and bacon into the pan, slices himself doorsteps of bread. It might be a long day. Best to have a good meal and a brew inside him. The house is silent, Janet and Christopher asleep together in the double bed.

By the time he leaves the house, Jamie, Mick and Tweety are already standing next to the Cortina. They pile into the seats and the car sinks under their weight.

'Where's Billy then?' Stephen says.

'Snoring,' says Mick.

'We can pick him up on the way out of the village.'

'If his missus will let him out,' Tweety says. 'Come on, Stephen, stick the heating on.'

The car coughs and chokes, but refuses to kick into life.

'I thought New Cortina is More Cortina, eh?' Tweety says.

'It's not the new bloody Cortina, you idiot. It's the old one.'

'When we win the strike, you can buy the new one,' Jamie says.

Stephen steps out and lifts the bonnet. He sprays WD40 on the plugs, then sits back in front of the wheel.

Jamie, next to him in the passenger seat, says, 'Don't flood it.'

Tweety joins in from the back. 'Easy now.'

Stephen takes his hand off the key.

Mick says, 'Quiet now, lads. Stephen's concentrating.'

Stephen shakes his head and turns the key again. The engine fires. A puff of smoke and a smell of burning rises from the bonnet. There's applause inside the car.

Stephen turns the wheel and pulls away. 'You lot are funny. Les Dawson needs to watch his back.'

At the turn in the road, Tweety gets out of the car and hammers on Billy's front door. Billy comes out clutching his snappin tin.

As they drive through the suburbs of Birmingham, darkness gives way to twilight. Milk carts whirr through the streets. Curtains are opening; lights come on.

Seven a.m. and the lorries are already queuing. The scabs are supplying the whole country with coke from the depot. There are

hundreds of police, and the miners are twenty at most. They stand in a blast of cold wind that whips across the wide road. And by a public toilet, for God's sake.

'At least we've got somewhere to get warm,' Jamie says.

'All of us could probably fit in them bogs too,' says Mick.

Even standing outside, they catch the whiff of urine. The endless convoy of lorries go in empty and come out heaped with coal.

Billy has brought cheese and Branston sandwiches and he's eaten them by eleven. They take the mick out of him for that for a bit.

The coppers are bored too. Hundreds of them holding the wide gates open and stamping their feet against the cold. Others wait in buses in back streets. A truck serves the police tea and butties.

'Hey, lads,' Stephen says. 'Strong please, three sugars.'

One of them brings him a cupper over.

'Where's me butty?' Stephen says.

'You'll be lucky.'

The copper is about their age and his accent is Birmingham pea soup. Stephen reaches into his jacket and brings out a roll of rich tea biscuits. He offers one to the copper but he shakes his head.

'Ah, give over,' Stephen says. 'Even the Germans accepted gifts.'

The copper smiles and takes a biscuit. '*Danke schön* then I suppose.'

There's a bit of laughter.

'Bugger, forgot me football,' Mick says.

But when Stephen hands the cup back, one of the bizzies – a young lad with a pointy chin – thanks him for paying to have his driveway done, what with all the overtime and all.

'Yeah, that's right,' Stephen says. 'And it leaves your missus lots of time on her own in the house.'

'Bugger off, why don't you?'

'Thanks for the tea, all the same.'

There are so many lorries that they have to queue to get into the depot and queue to get out. One driver has a snarling Alsatian dog at the passenger window. The pickets shout *scab* and the driver sticks two fingers up at them. The lorry rumbles on through. What can they do? Standing around achieving nothing by a public toilet. It's a mockery. Stephen's feet get colder and colder.

Jamie asks after Christopher.

‘Oh yes, he’s good.’ He doesn’t want to talk about his boy.

‘And Janet?’

‘Yeah, grand.’

When they get back to the car, there is a parking ticket on the windshield.

‘Bloody joke,’ Stephen says.

They have to push it to get it to start.

By the time Stephen gets home, Janet is asleep, Christopher beside her. Five years old and still not in his own bed. He worries about the boy, but Janet probably knows best. He goes to lift his son and Janet wakes. She brushes her hand across her face.

‘How was it?’

Stephen doesn’t want to wake the boy with chat, so he shrugs.

‘Don’t go back tomorrow, eh? Take Christopher out. Give me a bit of time to study.’

‘I’ve got to go back. Sorry. It’s only us. If I don’t go there’ll be no one.’

The boy stirs in his arms, but when Stephen puts him in his bed, his eyes are shut. Standing at the sink, brushing his teeth, Stephen hears Christopher’s door open and his son’s feet tripping across the landing back to his mother.

On the picket line, the chat rises and falls. Billy’s missus has got the handcuffs on.

‘But then of course that might be Billy’s thing,’ Mick says.

‘Each to their own,’ Stephen says.

Tweety asks Mick about Madge, the blow-up doll he brought into the canteen one day. ‘You two still walking out?’

‘Oh aye,’ says Mick.

On Sunday morning, there are more men. The local branch of the NUM has requested help and Yorkshire men now mingle with the Staffordshire miners. There’s a bit more pushing, and no more cups of tea from the police. Still the lorries go through.

The chat ebbs and flows, is dropped and returned to. There is plenty to be said about Stoke City.

‘Can’t beat Tranmere Rovers?’

‘We’ll beat ’em on Wednesday,’ Stephen says. ‘Coz I’ll be wearing me lucky pants.’

‘Did you hear about the Tory MP found dead in a Leeds strip?’ Tweety says. ‘Police had to dress him up in women’s underwear to save his family the embarrassment.’

‘That weren’t a Leeds strip,’ says, one of the Yorkshire lads. ‘It were Man United.’

‘How’s Madge?’ Tweety says harking on about the blow-up doll again. ‘Sits with you of a night, does she? Watch the telly together?’

‘We do.’ The whole Madge thing has got boring, but Mick does his best. ‘She makes a great shepherd’s pie. You should come round. Make a night of it. Mebee catch *Play for Today*.’

‘She’s educated then,’ Stephen says.

‘Like your Ian,’ Mick says.

‘What about you, Jamie?’ Tweety asks. ‘Never seen you with a girlfriend? You carrying a torch for Madge?’

Jamie shakes his head.

‘Leave him be, heh.’ Mick says. ‘He’s shy.’

‘Lloyds bank, our Jamie is,’ Tweety says. And when no one asks him, he adds. ‘Bit of a dark horse.’

‘We got it already,’ Mick says.

‘What’s up with you then? Got your period?’

‘Well, not everyone has to always be shooting their mouth off,’ Mick says, finally losing his patience.

‘Shooting his mouth off. You talking ’bout me?’

‘Yes, Tweety, I am. I’m talking ’bout you.’

‘Well, for a start my name’s Eddie, not Tweety. Only my friends get to call me Tweety.’

‘Everyone calls you Tweety, Tweety. And if you’re wondering why, it’s because you never stop. I’m just asking you to give it a rest.’

‘Come on, lads,’ Stephen says. ‘We’re all cold and fed up. Who wants a polo?’

Mick takes one. He sucks on it and then comes out with the most perfect impression. ‘I taut I taw a puddy-tat.’

Everyone laughs except Tweety, who says, ‘All right. Well done then.’

Mick grabs him, hugs him in a huge bear hug. ‘Who’s my little Tweety then?’

Tweety wriggles. ‘Oh, fuck off why don’t you?’

‘I taut I taw a puddy-tat.’

Everyone’s laughing, even the lads who don’t know Tweety. Mick holds onto him just long enough to kiss him a huge smacker on the cheek, and that’s it, over.

A lorry pushes through and the cry goes up. ‘Scab. Scab. Scab.’

Jamie’s eyes meet the glance of one of the Yorkshire miners. The man has curly hair, blue eyes, plump lips and he smiles.

A moment later, Jamie tries to steal another look, only to meet the man’s eyes once more. He smiles again. Now Jamie is certain and he looks at the ground to stifle a grin. But the man moves off to join some others and he’s uncertain again. How his mind feeds on such small incidents. Details and suggestions that others do not even see consume him. Nothing has happened but it’s been a soap opera of reversals, and all done and dusted in just five minutes.

Stephen is on strike but still, it seems, he cannot make time for Janet to study, not even at the weekend. Stephen’s mum maybe sees more than she lets on because, a week in, she rings and says her husband is away to see his parents up north and she’s had to stay in Stoke because of her shift pattern. She’s all alone and she would love to see her grandson. Maybe Janet would like to bring some books over so she can have a look at them if she gets bored?

Janet gets Christopher up and dressed in good time. He wants porridge with golden syrup poured in a circle. He won’t wear his coat and Janet doesn’t argue. They walk across the playing fields and down the lane. Janet has Christopher’s drawing things and her own notebooks in her bag. The light is silvery and the catkins are out. Christopher stops and sketches. It is already eleven o’clock when they arrive at Christopher’s grandparents’ house. June is working a late shift at the hospital. She must feel that time is short because she puts too much pressure on Christopher to leave his mother alone in the front room to study and the morning’s amenability dissipates. Christopher bursts into tears. With her Shakespeare in front of her, Janet hears the upset going on beyond the closed door. She closes the book. The only thing that will console Christopher is sitting with him in the kitchen. Then it’s time to eat.

As Christopher draws at the table, June, Janet and Ian – home from university for the weekend – clear away. Ian has his back to them, putting crockery in a cupboard and June, passing Janet a wet saucepan, takes the opportunity to touch her hand lightly.

'You'll have plenty of time to achieve everything you ever dreamt of, love – just a bit later than you planned. Remember what Churchill said. *They also serve who only stand and wait.*'

Ian turns, winks at Janet and says 'That was Milton, Mum. The man who wrote *Paradise Lost*.'

'Thanks, Ian, but I don't need telling who Milton was, all the same.'

Ian raises his eyebrows and tries to catch Janet's eye, but she avoids him. It makes her uncomfortable, this feeling that he sees the impatience that she tries to contain.

She dries the saucepan and remembers walking to her English class, up the curved wooden staircase to a Victorian room with high arched windows and light falling in shafts onto the girls' desks. She remembers too shutting the door in the girls' drafty unheated toilets and pulling down her pants, staring at them, willing them to show just a smear of blood. The terrible loneliness of those stalls of toilets, with their high small windows and crinkly chemical paper.

How much she and Stephen had been able to find in a kiss. Once they gained momentum, they'd had no brakes. She had wanted to crack him open: so good-looking, so mysterious and brooding with his tragic past. But she hadn't meant to change her whole life.

She got her O level results. Nine As. They called her into school. Miss Swift hoped she'd choose Latin at A level and Miss Calder thought she should consider studying history. 'Cambridge,' she said and, when Janet laughed at the absurdity of it, Miss Calder said, 'Why not?' Miss Calder was a steely-eyed spinster and Janet was her project, not a girl who would run away from their meeting and pull her pants down in ever diminishing hope of good news.

'All the way', they called it, and it turned out this was what that meant: not the act after all, but its consequences. The problem went round and round in Janet's head. Pregnancy. Birth. Then what? A rumour about a bottle of gin, a hot bath and a knitting needle filled her with terror. She didn't want to harm herself, or the baby even though in her

imagination, it was huge and alien, like the earth-orbiting foetus in Kubrick's *A Space Odyssey*, but growing inside her own body.

Down by the drained paddling pool, Stephen guessed. It wasn't real until then, and even then, it wasn't really real. It only took him a heartbeat to step up. That's grand, he said. They'd get married. They'd be happy.

And she did so want to be happy. She wanted marrying Stephen to be the answer. The baby had started to move inside her, turning circles and pressing his heels against her belly. Her mother said, 'Wait and see. Tell them you want to delay the wedding until after you've got your figure back. Maybe you'll want to give the baby up for adoption. See how you feel after the birth.'

But Christopher was not Kubrick's huge abstract foetus. He was a mewling bloodied scrap who smelt of wet straw. From the plastic sheet on which he landed, he reached out to her and her heart answered him immediately. He was in her arms and against her breast. Six weeks after the birth, she and Stephen were married. It was a small wedding in her mother's church. Miss Calder came with Miss Swift. The flow of time itself had already changed, divided into diametrically different moods. Paradise – baby Christopher, reaching up to touch her face with his little hands. Paradise Lost: dirty nappies soaking in their bucket of Milton Sterilising Fluid.

Plate after plate, neatly stacked. Only the bowls left. The tea towel is wet through. Janet glances at the clock. Nearly one. June will give them a lift home on her way into the hospital.

'Leave what's left on the rack,' June says, drying her hands, and Janet thinks she will gather all Christopher's stuff together and head home, but Ian says, 'Hey, Christopher, want to go to the park with me for a bit?'

As though he has been waiting for this all morning, Christopher jumps out of his chair. He likes Uncle Ian. In an instant he is sitting on the doormat, concentrating on his laces. Janet is swept with a wave of relief. A whole hour of not being needed!

June takes the wet cloth out of her hands and pats her on the arm. 'You take some time with your books.'

June gathers her things and pulls on her coat while Ian waits on the path outside. Christopher, his shoelaces finally tied, follows his grandmother out. The back door closes and peace settles like dust.

It is the first time Janet has been left alone in this house. She feels the trust of it. Still, she climbs the narrow stairs to George's old room. What she is doing is shameful but she finds she can hate herself and still do it. She knows June has kept everything.

In a drawer, she finds George's buff-covered exercise books. Approving comments are written in red in the margins. She thinks she knows now, but something in her needs to be certain. She takes one of George's books back downstairs with her. In the front room she tucks the exercise book into the bag with her own notebooks and her Joseph Conrad. Then she sits at the kitchen table and opens her Shakespeare.

It is more than an hour later that the back door opens and Christopher runs in, rosy with his adventure. Ian follows behind. He waits in the doorway for Christopher to take his shoes off, and looks over at Janet wanting to share his affection for her funny son.

'Get much done?' he asks.

'Yes. Lots. Thanks so much.'

'No trouble. I enjoyed it.'

Christopher has his bath and, with Janet beside him, lies down in his parents' bed. She turns the pages of his picture book. In the little boy Max's room, a forest grows. At last Christopher's breath becomes deep and regular. Janet slips out of bed and downstairs to the living room. Her bag is on the sideboard, by the television. She opens the bottom drawer, where the photographs and tablecloths are kept. At the bottom is the Valentine's card. She takes it out of its envelope and traces her finger over the black ink handwriting. *Guess Who?* Then she takes George's exercise book from her bag. She traces her fingers across the history essay. *Otto Von Bismark was known as the Iron Chancellor …*

The handwriting is the same.

She has always known this – that's what she thinks. Why does it even matter?

The card itself remains resolutely banal: a picture of a bumble bee with a human face saying, *Be My Honey*.

Stephen isn't back from Birmingham until eleven o'clock but he finds Janet still awake in the kitchen, studying.

'Cup of tea?' he says.

'That'd be nice.'

He puts the kettle on. ‘I’m sorry I’m late, love. You get much done at Mum’s?’

‘A fair bit.’

‘Well done. I know it’s hard, but you are going to smash these exams in the autumn.’

She tries to concentrate. She has resolved not to think any more about the stupid card. This is her life and she must see the good in it. Stephen is a good man. Christopher is a blessing.

Stephen puts the teapot on the table and pulls a chair up.

Janet says, ‘I’m sorry, love. I need to finish what I’m doing.’

‘OK, but just so you know, it’s all going to be worth it. Things are really turning now. We’ve got to seize the moment.’

On Monday the Yorkshire miners’ leader appears. He wears a suit and tie, and carries a megaphone. He walks among them and his voice is packed with vitamins. Good to see you, lads, he says, shaking hands. He talks about his own colliery – Wooley – and his family: miners for generations. He started just like Stephen did, sorting the coal as it came up from the ground. They should all take heart, he says. Never be downhearted, because that’s what they want. There are people, even in their own communities, who want to betray them with talk of caution and moderation. But they shouldn’t listen. There may be setbacks, but history travels only in one direction.

He stands on top of the toilet, the megaphone in his hands. There is an endless reservoir of talk inside him and he speaks all day. There is a battle here that will be won, and winning this battle will send a message, a message not just about this strike but about this country and how it might be run. There is a lot to be won here outside these gates.

Stephen is inspired. Suddenly, instead of being ridiculous, the scene is monumental. The circular gas holders, rising and falling, the gates, the wide industrial roads: this place is at the centre of everything. The country is shaped and powered wherever the working man lives out his life. In the docks, on railway sidings where the coal stands embargoed. In the headframe at Murton colliery, whose might has been stilled against the skyline by the solidarity of the working man.

As the lorries move towards the gates, there are surges. The police link their arms and hold them back. It is hard in there, pushing your body

up against the others, impossible to see what is happening too. The Yorkshire leader – Arthur Scargill his name is – stands on the top of the toilets and eggs them on. ‘Come on lads, we’ve got them on the run now.’ The police are riled and they start kicking. Stephen’s shins are raw but he doesn’t mind. He has found at last what he can do. This is how it feels to put your shoulder to the wheel with others. Arthur has gone to meet with the local union leaders. He’s been blunt. He doesn’t want money to salve consciences. Stuff that. Solidarity means strike action. But there is no sign of help. The lorries enter empty and exit piled high. There are too many police and too few pickets.

A lorry moves towards the gates and is caught in a sudden crush. All around men bang on the sides of the truck. It is hard in this mass of bodies to know how to make a difference, how to be more than just a body pushed forwards and backwards. But Stephen feels the imperative. This is how history can be turned. He starts climbing the rig towards the driver’s window, shouting at the driver, ‘Turn it round! Turn it round!’

At the wheel is a fat bloke with a red face, reaching behind him for something. ‘Fuck off!’ Someone is behind Stephen, trying to get the door open. What are they after then? Are they going to drag the driver out of the cab? Then what? The thing the driver is reaching for is an iron bar. Stephen sees it in his hand and how he cannot swing it in the confined space.

Suddenly he is calm. This man just needs to understand. Stephen says, ‘Mate, you’re one of us.’

Next thing, someone has grabbed Stephen from behind. His fall is cushioned by a swell of blue serge, as if he is being carried on a warm sea of constables. Somehow, while he’s been climbing, the police have got the upper hand. He finds his feet but, as if he is standing in a river in spate, it’s hard to hold his footing.

Jamie smells diesel, the distinctive metal tang of the coke, the wet wool of men’s coats. He sees Stephen climbing the cab, leaning in through its open window. The police are in among the pressing bodies, pulling the men away. The wheels are huge, rolling forward slowly. Jamie climbs, to pull Stephen down before the police can nab him. The engine revs. Smoke belches. The police surge and engulf them. Jamie tries to grab

Stephen's coat, to take him back in among the miners, but he himself is pulled back through the crowd.

'You'll just get nicked too.'

In the moving crush, a hand is slipped into Jamie's, and he turns to see the curly-haired man with the blue eyes. This man smiles broadly and, in this crowded place where everyone is fearing for their lives, this brief intimacy is suddenly possible. Too much is happening for anyone to notice two men hand in hand.

Stephen sees Jamie reaching towards him and then being carried away by the sea of people. Stephen falls. Black boots are all around him and he looks up at the lorry's huge tyres. The engine roars as the driver tries to move forward out of the crowd. All around, feet are falling back, stepping over him and on him, trying to get away from the grinding wheels. He thinks of Fred Matthews, and is afraid.

But the lorry is free and clear. Its huge bulk moves along the line of the tarmac, rumbling towards the gates. The line of police opens to let it through and the shouts go up. Scab! Scab!

The crowds have divided into their separate camps, and Stephen is on the wrong side, a sole denim-jacket corpuscle among a surge of blue serge. He is dragged along the road by his shoulders, away from his men.

'Let me go, will you? I'll walk.'

Two coppers have hold of his arms, pinned behind his back. They are doing something agonisingly painful, twisting his hand back towards his forearm.

'Give over. I'm not fighting.'

He is in the back of a van, hands cuffed behind his back. The doors are slammed on Saltley Gate and it is just the metal walls of the van and three coppers staring at him from the bench seats.

'Bit of a cunt, aren't you?' one of them says.

'But not as big a cunt as that cunt on top of the bogs,' another one says.

It is hard to know exactly how much time is passing. When they stop and the van doors open, Stephen isn't outside a police station but rather in a place with large detached houses and big trees. One of the coppers pushes him forward over his knees while another takes the cuffs off.

'Bugger off now. Be a good lad.'

‘Where am I?’

‘Go on. Ask us another.’

They drive away, leaving him standing. He walks in the direction they have gone. In a park, a solitary boy is kicking a ball. Rich neighbourhoods are always so lonely. Further on, some men are digging up the road. They down tools and laugh when Stephen tells them what’s happened.

‘Kind of like *It’s a Knockout*, is it?’ one of them says. ‘See if you can get back while carrying a bucket of water. That kind of thing.’ He is a big shaggy man who, in the middle of February, works in a string vest.

‘That’s right,’ Stephen said. ‘And I’m representing Murton Colliery.’

The man smiles. ‘And will you be playing your joker on this one, coz if so, I’ll give you a lift to the main road.’

‘Course I’m playing me joker. You got a car?’

‘Much better than that.’ The man gestures in the direction of the road roller. ‘You’ll be travelling in style.’

Holding the frame, Stephen rides the back of the roller to the A47, where an empty coke lorry quickly stops for his outstretched thumb.

The driver rolls down his window and leans out. ‘What way you heading, mate?’

‘Funny you should ask that.’

He climbs into the cab. ‘You stopped for me coz you saw me for what I am: a working man, like yourself. But you’re still going to drive through the pickets, are you?’

‘I don’t agree with it.’

The driver sticks the radio on.

Ahead is the lengthening queue for the gates. The driver leans forward and feels in his back pocket. ‘Let me buy you a drink anyway.’

‘I don’t want your money. I’d never have got in your cab, but I needed to get back on the line.’

The driver puts his wallet back in his pocket. ‘I’m just doing my job.’

‘Thanks for the lift, but you’re not, are you? You’re betraying your own.’

Stephen walks back to the picket line to the sound of applause that gives way to a round of ‘We Are H-A-P-P-Y’.

The area in front of the gates is packed but, threading his way through, Stephen finds Mick.

‘Two pickets been injured by that lorry,’ Mick says. ‘And a policeman run over. Scargill’s talking to the local unions tonight. Trying to get more in.’

‘Where’s the others then?’

‘Billy and Tweety got a lift home. Billy says he needs to see his missus. Tweety? God knows why he had to go. The Transport and General are offering us beds for the night. I don’t know where Jamie is. I think the coppers must have took him when they took you, but no one saw it happening. They’re finding it hard to make arrests apparently. Not enough of them. Maybe he’s finding his way back like you did.’

The man’s name is Austin. He’s got a car parked about a mile from the gates and he says he knows somewhere. Jamie knows what this means but he’s never been to such a place before. He wishes they could stop at a pub – alcohol would surely help – but he is nervous to suggest it. Austin seems so relaxed, confident. Look how he spotted that one moment on the line: Austin is everything Jamie isn’t. Jamie feels sick with fear, but also with excitement. In spite of himself, a smile keeps breaking out on his face. They drive through lamp-lit streets.

‘You one of the Staffordshire lads then?’ Austin asks. ‘That’s rate.’

‘Looks like we might have them on the turn.’

It’s feels so strange to be talking about the strike when Jamie’s mind is on more pressing questions. Does Austin do this a lot? Do other people know? Will they meet again?

They arrive at the outskirts of a wood and Austin pulls into a layby. The trunks of the trees are white like bones in the moonlight. Feeling like the shy girl at the dance, Austin puts his hand on Austin’s arm, but Jamie misunderstands, and laughs.

‘Hold your horses. Got to get a bit further on.’

Except for the sound of the road, it’s quiet. Other men move through the stripes of moonlight and darkness. They are properly within the trees now, another world where normal rules are suspended. Austin steers Jamie towards a broad-trunked tree. Jamie leans against it and Austin puts his hand round the back of his neck. Jamie puts his hand against Austin’s lips, just wanting to feel the plumpness of them before they kiss. But there’s a sudden piercing whistle and Austin steps back.

‘Fuck. Police.’

Whistles whip through the wood. Jamie is frozen by the sight of men fleeing through the slanted moonlight. The only hope is to scatter, to be the sole fish who evades the net. Austin tears away and, almost immediately, Jamie runs too, his heart large in his chest. They are heading towards the car but two men stand on the path, blocking the way. The shadow of one of their arms moves away from his body and Jamie sees the truncheon and how the gesture anticipates the beating. But it isn't the beating he fears most; it's the unmasking. There will be more police, perhaps, waiting by the cars. Jamie turns sharply left off the path, not knowing where he is going. But Austin is no longer with him and as he runs, he hears voices. It sounds almost like a heated argument. He slows, hesitates, glances behind him. Two officers have hold of Austin. He's pulling away, trying to escape. Uncertain what to do, Jamie steps into a pool of shadow, hears a shout from the group that has Austin: 'Over here!'

Other police are running through the trees towards the group, one so close Jamie could put out a foot and trip him. Perhaps he should have done that but the heat and panting of this man are already gone, leaving him with a wave of regret. Maybe only fifty yards away, there is a disorganised bundle around Austin, and Jamie watches in a kind of trance of sadness. One has Austin by the arm. Austin tries to throw a punch but loses his balance. He's on the ground and they are over him. Like baboons, Jamie thinks. Shouts are still carrying across the air but it looks as though Austin's resistance is all but over. A couple of the police stand in silhouette, looking around as if this is a picnic and they are looking for more guests to turn up.

Jamie steps further back into the darkness but his movement betrays him because a shout goes up and the two police are running towards him. He turns and runs, headlong. Nothing in his head but escape. Down into dips, up the small banks, his breath coming in gasps. Terror lends him stamina and speed. Elsewhere, voices, figures running within their own horror stories. The distance from his pursuers is increasing. He senses them falling back. Like school bullies, perhaps they are tiring of chasing him. In his relief he momentarily loses attention and a tree root catches his stride. A sharp pain in his knee. He runs on, limping slightly, not sure whether he needs to continue to flee but too afraid to stop. To his right, a sudden thickening of undergrowth. Light shines off holly leaves. He

forces his way in among the holly and brambles and lies on his side on the damp soil. A smell of earth and decomposition. Some animal has died near here. Shouts. More whistles. A man runs past, bare-chested and luminous with no one chasing him, as if he's is caught in flight and will run forever. Jamie lies still and thinks of Austin. The baboons crouching over him. He puts a hand over his face and stifles his weeping.

From the phone box by the toilets, Stephen rings Janet. He raises his voice against the noise of the crowd and the growl of the engines. 'It's not just miners anymore. Arthur's speaking to the local lads tonight. We're going to have car workers here, all sorts. Some of the locals are offering us somewhere to stay the night—'

Janet shouts back, 'It's more than a week now.'

'Got to see this out.'

'But I need you to look after Christopher.'

'It's make or break right now. You must understand that.'

He can still hear Janet through the pips, but he doesn't have any more change.

'Last time there weren't enough of you for you to leave. Now there's more, you can't leave either … '

And then the call is cut off.

Stephen stays in the spare bedroom of a neat little house that belongs to a welder at British Leyland. By eight in the morning, he is back outside the gates. A steady stream of men is arriving, filing their way forward as if towards Saturday kick off. Stephen pushes his way through to where Mick and Jamie stand together.

'What happened to you yesterday?' Stephen asks.

'I got grabbed but they let me go. Spent the night in the Trades and General building. Bloody hard floor and a prickly blanket.'

'What happened to your face?'

Jamie puts his hand to his cheek, which has a bloody scratch. 'Must have happened when I was trying to get away. Didn't even notice it at the time.'

'Where's Tweety then?' Stephen asks.

'Must have stayed home like Billy,' Jamie says.

'His name's not Tweety anyway, it's Eddie,' Mick says.

‘Do it again,’ Stephen says.

‘Not sure I can.’

‘Oh, go on.’

‘All right then. Hang on.’ He psyches himself up. ‘I taut I taw a puddy-tat.’

Everyone is in stitches.

Stephen’s attention shifts away. Today is different. There is singing and chanting, waving banners and placards. Men from the Valor Factory, the Rover car works, women from the carburettor factory in short skirts and knee-high boots. This is more like it! Word is spreading; Nechells Place, St Clement’s Road and Saltley Road, are all filling.

Mick says, ‘It’s like how I feel when it looks like Stoke might score a late winner.’

Mick has got hold of a placard and waves it above his head. *Arise ye workers!* It makes Stephen laugh. Jamie too. They are all laughing. And Stephen remembers that bonfire in the allotment, George running with a full bucket of water and shouting, *Jigsaw Two and Nine, how is your fuel?* Sitting in the wagon with the firemen: cups of hot chocolate from tartan flasks and sweet digestives. And, strangely, it feels like a similar type of heaven.

A huge roar goes up like you might hear in the bible – a blowing of trumpets and all that – and over the hill, like a dream fulfilled, comes a river of men. A short man at the front waves his arms. Behind him, a line of Goliaths and a banner. *The miners’ struggle is our struggle.* From all sides, a sea of men floods. As far as Stephen can see, a mass of people is marching towards the gates. A roar and from the other side of the hill, another flood of bodies. A chant goes up. *Shut the gates. Shut the gates.* The short barrel-chested man runs ahead, approaching the lines of police, and stands with his left arm extended and his right arm beckoning the marchers through as if he is directing traffic.

The bodies pack into the roadway that the police have been keeping open by holding the men back. And then another crowd pours in behind the police and hems them in. The positions have been reversed. It is the police who are contained now.

The shouts go up. *Shut the gates! Shut the gates!* Then – unbelievable! – cheers. Stephen cannot see what has happened. Arthur is talking through a megaphone from the top of the toilet block. Stephen

only catches a couple of words – *working people* – because his voice is snatched away by the wind and the roar of the crowd but he knows what Arthur is saying because it is in his heart.

Together they have shut the gates.

Stephen bends down and picks up one of the lumps of coke which has fallen on the road. He puts it in his pocket. He'll keep that. He looks around and sees men crying. He is crying himself. Another cheer goes up so loud that it feels like it is lifting all that coke and just blowing it all away. All the aggro with the police is gone.

One of the older coppers offers his hand. 'Well done, lads. You've done a good job.'

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Sunday, 2nd December 1984

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Since his brother left, Stephen has been sitting on the back step. Only now does he realise how the cold has settled into his bones. He gets up and takes the plates and the cups through to the kitchen sink. He washes the bacon grease from the plates and stacks them in the drainer.

He has been about thinking of Christopher and how he doesn't even know where to start looking for him. If he had been able to stay living with him, he could have been a real father to the boy. But Janet kicked him out the night that he returned from the victory at Saltley. She asked him to sit down while she made him a cup of tea and then she began, 'You're a good man, and a good dad,' she said, her back turned as the kettle boiled.

He remembers standing behind her, putting his arm round her. 'What on earth are you on about? I haven't got cancer, have I?'

She pushed him away. Gently, but firmly.

He should have picked something up for her. Some flowers maybe. Just shown that he understood it had been difficult for her.

'Where's our Christopher?' he asked.

'At my mother's.'

He got his car keys out of his pocket and waved them. 'Come on then ducky – let's go have an Indian.'

She put the tea on the table. She wanted to talk.

'OK, but let's go have that Indian first. We can talk after.'

He thought she'd had too much time on her own. She needed cheering up. But still. Was there no place for celebrating the achievement of Saltley Gate? The lump of coke was burning a hole in his pocket and he couldn't stop himself.

'I know it's been hard, but it weren't for nothing, Janet. It were game changing what we did at Saltley. And you should be proud because by looking after our boy, you were part of that.'

She said it wasn’t Saltley. Not him being away. She’d had time to think.

‘Sweetheart—’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘We weren’t meant to be together. It was a childish crush, but I got pregnant.’

The words were a physical pain inside his chest. ‘Why would you say that? You’re a terrible person to say that.’

She told him not to take what she was saying the wrong way and he said what then, you were lying then when you married me, when you promised to love me? That really set it off. That’s when she said the stuff that turns inside him still. What about him? she said. He had lied about his brother and the card. He had misled her. Her whole life, the whole wrong turning it had taken, had started from that lie.

‘Wrong turning?’ he said. ‘How can you call Christopher a wrong turning?’

‘You’re so determined to twist what I’m saying.’

She was right. He had been on the defensive. But what did that card even matter when they had been together for nearly seven years! That wasn’t all down to some silly Valentine’s card. But it did matter to him because he was so ashamed. He’d managed to bury it. The lie had got smaller and smaller until it hardly existed. So, he lied again. He lied about lying. And they were both shouting and crying. She smashed a cup in frustration because he wouldn’t tell her the truth. Then she resorted to proof. She told him about comparing the handwriting, about the card and the exercise book.

‘How bloody could you?’ he shouted. ‘My brother George’s stuff. My poor mother.’

He was right and she was ashamed. She hated herself. He could see she meant what she was saying and he felt reassuringly righteous and not in a hurry to forgive. But then she continued, ashamed, but still determined and he felt this terrible dread.

She was pleased for him about Saltley. It wasn’t those few days away; he should never think that. He had been generous to offer to marry her – she recognised that. Many men would have left her to it when she got pregnant. He was a good man. That made him angry again because he hadn’t been generous; he had *wanted* to marry her because he *loved* her. Hadn’t she ever loved him?

She wiped her hand across her face. ‘Of course I had feelings for you. But we were both children. I was still at school. It wasn’t meant to be forever.’

That was it then.

He went back to live with his mother and father.

Most of the time it was the three of them. His mum, his dad, him. From time to time his brother came back from university in skinny jeans and leather jackets. But Ian was just passing through.

‘What’s going on with the clothes?’ he asked Ian. ‘You a rocker now?’

‘Don’t be soft. I’m just not interested in songs about hobbits.’

Ian had an air about him, caught the eyes of the girls but didn’t seem interested. Stephen remembered that game him and George and Jamie played as kids. Finding the best words. Aloof – maybe that would have been Ian’s word. George would have liked that.

Neither Ian nor he seemed to know what it was, this dark shifting space between them, but they did try. They went to a match, which was easy because it was like old times when Stoke lost, and they went to the pub, which was awkward until Mick and No-I-Can’t Billy and Tweety turned up and a crowd formed around the table.

‘What you going to do with all that education, going to be a teacher then?’ Mick said and Ian said, ‘Teaching? I don’t want to teach people; I want to arrest them.’

That got a good laugh. But Stephen, nursing his pint, knew his brother meant it. It was so like Ian to do something so contrary as to join the police. Sometimes it seemed to Stephen that he’d been born loathing his brother. Which was ridiculous because of course he loved him. OK, he did wear skinny jeans when everyone else was in flares. That was reason enough to hate him, of course, but blood is thicker than water. But Ian didn’t seem to feel the same ties. He came home less and less. Stephen could see how his parents longed for him, but still they let him go like a bird from their hands.

Stephen knuckled down. His parents got older. Christopher visited, sat at the kitchen table, kicking his thin legs and drawing. All Stephen could think of doing was being there, a big mountain if his son should ever need a mountain. Now Christopher is missing, and he doesn’t even know where to begin looking for him.

Stephen pulls on his jacket and takes the front door out. He will draw the heat he needs from standing with the others on the picket line.

At the low gate, he pauses. The street is waking, lights coming on in windows, curtains being drawn. These houses have always been bursting with children, too many for the bedrooms. Bunk beds and kids lying head to toe in double beds. All sorts of arrangements. The houses being so crammed, the children have always spilt out into the street with their noise and secret plans and crazes. Girls sit on walls, discussing their secrets; hopscotch courts are drawn with coloured chalk on the road; skipping ropes turn and reedy voices call the rhyme, *Mary is the winner and she wants to have her dinner*. Go-karts made from fruit boxes and old bicycle wheels whip race dangerously down the lane.

Into these memories, a police car drives, pulling round the bend and drawing up slowly just short of the gate. Stephen runs over to the car and the copper in the front winds down the window.

Stephen says, ‘Is it Christopher?’

‘Jump in the back.’

‘It’s not bad news?’

‘I’m sorry. I’m not allowed to talk about it here. You’ll have to wait til we get to the station.’

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Admiral Police Station is a squat little 1970s two-storey fort that flies the Union Jack in the middle of Toxteth. The small temporary office that has been set up for the murder inquiry makes Detective Superintendent Dan Oakley seem cartoonish.

‘Ian,’ he says, pushing the chair back.

‘Sir.’

Oakley looks behind him as if someone might be hiding in the room. ‘No sirs here that I can see.’

‘Of course not, boss.’

Oakley stands and reaches out a paw. He squeezes Ian’s hand much too tightly and Ian remembers laughing with Harry about Desperate, able to lift a cow with one hand.

‘Sit yourself down, lad. Can one of the boys get you something? Coffee, something stronger? Bit early for that?’

‘I’m OK, thanks.’ Ian sits, wondering about this new warmth. This was the man who couldn’t get him out of the office quickly enough when he submitted his resignation papers. ‘I was wondering if you had anything more about Liam Holdcroft’s murder.’

Desperate scratches the side of his face. ‘Well, it’s Toxteth, as you know, so no one saw anything. But we’re putting in the legwork. The lads on the serious crime squad will be buying themselves Alfa Romeos on the back of the overtime.’

Something like boredom, something like irritation, passes through Ian.

Desperate pushes his chair back, stretches his legs. ‘That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about,’ he says. ‘I’ve been thinking about you, Ian. I owe you an apology,’

Ian shrugs. ‘It’s all water under the bridge, boss.’

‘No, when you left us, you wanted to talk to me about the death of Jacob Levene and I put you off.’

‘But you were right. I’m very happy in Cannock. Doing a lot of birdwatching.’

‘I should have made the time. Listened to you.’ Oakley rubs the back of his neck. ‘You want to talk about Jacob now?’

‘Ever heard a curlew, boss? They have an incredible song.’

‘Yes, all right. Shut up about the fucking birds.’ Oakley smiles aggressively. Then his face falls into seriousness. ‘Back at that commendation ceremony, I told Roberts you weren’t the ideal man to be recruiting into his CID but I’ve changed my mind.’

‘You were right the first time. Like you said back in August, when I put my papers in, I’m not tough enough.’

‘Maybe it wasn’t toughness held you back; maybe it was integrity.’

‘You’re blowing smoke up my arse.’

Desperate laughs. ‘I am.’ Then his good humour dies. ‘Fact is, I need you. You’re close to Harry.’

‘That’s not me, boss. I like Cannock.’

‘You came to me upset about what had happened to your grass. Now I’m interested too. Harry seized 2kg of heroin the morning of Liam’s murder. He was out with his team celebrating when the job came in. Dropped everything to go to the scene. I want to know why.’

‘What did Harry say?’

‘Said he was near when it came out over the radio. Likes to keep his hand in. But I’ve been a cop long enough not to think bullshit smells like lavender.’

‘What’s your version?’

‘I want to know why he’s lying to me. And it worries me that the criminals that Harry gets to know are getting killed. It could be that Harry’s targeting organised crime and he’s tougher than anyone. Or it could be that Harry’s part of organised crime and he’s settling scores. Did he ever do anything that made you suspicious?’

Ian remembers Harry, Patty and him snorting cocaine off the bonnet of Harry’s MG outside a Stranglers concert in Sheffield.

‘Not really.’

‘There was a hidey hole in Liam Holdcroft’s flat. Underneath a rug. Nothing in it. Harry didn’t mention a stash spot, but I can’t believe he didn’t find it. He was first on scene. Perhaps he took something.’

‘What would he have taken?’

Oakley shrugs. ‘Stuff that incriminated him maybe? You find anything, you come to me. I’ll be sure to listen this time.’

‘I can’t see I’ll be much help. I’ve dropped the prints and the casings off. I’m straight back to Stoke.’

But there’s a knock and there’s Harry in the doorway, fatter than he used to be but still putting on the show. Blue jeans. Afghan coat. Ridiculous.

Ian glances at Oakley, who smiles. ‘You two are old friends. Ian, I asked Harry to pop by, update you on the investigation.’

Harry takes the moment. He hums a tune and does a bit of air guitar. He begins the lyrics and turns up the volume a bit. Harry always loved a power ballad and rock stars with long hair and tight trousers. He hasn’t got a bad voice either. Throws in some vibrato. It’s Scorpions. ‘Still Loving You’.

The canteen is empty except for the woman who sits behind the counter reading *Woman’s Weekly*. On offer is a congealed hot plate of beans and shiny eggs and another of bacon and sausages. On seeing Harry, the woman gets up and smooths down her bright blonde hair.

‘Kim, be a dear, won’t you, and fry my old pal up something fresh?’ Harry says.

Kim smiles and blushes. ‘Spose so.’

‘It’s OK, thanks,’ says Ian. ‘I’ll just have coffee.’

‘You’re looking pretty shit on just coffee, *mon amour*. I thought all that farming would have given you a nice rosy complexion by now. Two coffees then, Kim, and I’ll have a couple of bacon butties on two plates whatever my skinny friend says.’

They sit at a table as far as possible from the counter. Kim has returned to sitting with her legs crossed reading her magazine. The windows are dirty. Winter light falls into the room as if through gauze. Harry hums ‘Still Loving You’ again and pushes the second plate, across the table towards Ian. Ian pushes it back.

‘Ah come on now. Old times’ sake.’

‘Had a butty this morning with my brother.’

Harry runs his hands through his hair. ‘What are even you doing here, Ian? I thought you’d said goodbye to the excitement and fun.’

‘Birdwatching’s where I get my kicks nowadays.’

‘So what the fuck are you doing here?’

‘Family stuff. Friday night, my nephew, Christopher, left the bar where he works with a man who turned up dead in a lake Saturday morning. Christopher’s been missing since. The dead guy had a Liverpool accent and was dealing. I’m worried Christopher’s somehow got mixed up in whatever beef ’s going down here in Liverpool.’

A silence. Then, ‘Yeah, I know about the guy in the lake. You’ve brought the prints up, right?’

‘Yep.’

‘How’d he look?’

‘Mixed-race. Snub nose. Freckles. Leather jacket.’

‘My guess is Felix O’Connell, Lester’s nephew.’

‘Lester’s still king psycho round here?’

‘And some.’

Harry pulls out a cigarette and taps it on the Formica table. He pops three perfect smoke rings. It’s still showtime apparently, but maybe it’s wearing thin. Harry’s skin is grey.

Ian says, ‘The lad in the lake used to work with Liam Holdcroft. What can you tell me about Liam?’

‘Low-level drug dealer.’

‘That really all you’ve got to say about him?’

Harry shrugs. ‘Why would I have more?’

‘Because he was your grass?’

‘That’s interesting. Why do you say that? Did Desperate say something?’

‘Oh, come on, Harry. I didn’t need anyone to *say something*.’ Ian leans back. ‘Desperate said you went to the scene. You’d seized 2k of heroin. Liam give that up to you?’

‘I was careful, Ian. Nobody knew he was grassing but him and me. Nobody.’

‘Still, not careful enough. I’ve known Liam since he was a boy. He’s got a wife and a daughter.’

Harry leans forward, his voice a pressured hush. ‘Someone’s bent, Ian.’

Ian can smell pear drops on Harry’s breath. Maybe he’s been drinking.

Harry continues. ‘Liam wasn’t killed for the H. Lester’s got a cop in his pocket and Liam was gathering evidence.’

‘I dunno, Harry. Giving up two kilos of smack is really all you need for a death sentence.’

‘I went straight to his house after the murder came out to find the evidence but I just found an empty stash hole. Someone must have got there first. He swore he had it. Wouldn’t hand it over until I’d got him protection.’

Ian remembers Oakley. *Come to me first.* He leans forward and speaks equally quietly. ‘Maybe it’s you who’s bent, Harry.’

Harry moves back. ‘Me? Bent? Fuck off. Why am I bent all of a sudden?’

‘Well, you used to hand out all those sweeties for a start.’

‘You liked them well enough.’

‘Until I didn’t.’

They look at each other. It’s a thin line between love and hate.

‘What’s your evidence about the bent cop?’

‘I don’t have any, do I? Like I said, Liam hadn’t given it to me.’

‘Doesn’t sound good.’

‘I am aware.’

‘If this is real, you need to tell an outside force.’

‘I don’t trust anyone. And now Liam’s dead, I’ve got nothing but hearsay. Which force should I go to with all this nothing?’

‘I don’t know. The Met?’

Harry laughs. ‘The Met. Yeah. Right. Great idea.’

‘What about Patty? She’d know someone you could trust.’

‘I don’t have her number. No idea where she lives. Last I heard, she’s engaged to a Met commander. She’s just where she’s meant to be.’

Ian’s head swims with that. Engaged? So quick? ‘I didn’t know.’

But Harry’s impatient. ‘Oh why so sad, Charlie Brown? It was you broke up the band. We could have made it big. We could have cracked America. Patty’s moved on and she’s right.’ His eyes are on Ian, assessing him. ‘I was trying to find out who killed Jacob. You’re not interested?’

‘But we know who killed Jacob. It was us. We weren’t careful.’

‘Stop whining. We don’t know who gave Jacob up to Lester, and that’s who killed him, not us. There’s a cop talking to Lester. You in?’

Ian considers Harry’s reluctance to tell anyone about all of this. He remembers that Harry has already visited Stephanie, Liam’s wife, looking

for someone – Zammo maybe, the man with the white Transit van. Harry left his card. If he wants Ian to help him, why's he not told him about this? After all, Ian's based in Stoke. He'd be best placed to trace Liam's associates. Is Harry investigating or is he silencing? And who would Ian be helping if he started working with him?

He stretches out his arms and yawns. 'I just want to find Christopher, Harry – that's it. I don't want anything to do with this. I've resigned.'

Harry stubs out his cigarette and lights another. There's a long silence.

Harry says, 'So it must be suiting you then, country life?'

'I saw an otter.'

'Fancy that.' Harry inhales his cigarette. He scribbles a number on a piece of paper and pushes it quickly across the table. 'But if you do find anything, that's direct to my home.'

Then he looks up and across the room. His smile is entirely unconvincing. 'Boss!'

Oakley walks over. 'You two catching up then?'

Harry nods. 'It's just like old times.'

'I thought you'd both want to know. I had the prints from the corpse in the lake fast-tracked and we've just got an ident. No surprises there: Felix O'Connell, Lester's nephew. Tit for tat for our Stoke chap. Let's hope they've stopped killing each other now.'

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At the door of the police station, DC Kirk Baker shakes Stephen's hand with a firm grip. He dresses like a prat but he's not so bad after all.

'Thanks for your help,' he says. 'We'll be doing everything we can to find your son. I can promise you that.'

'Thank you. I appreciate it.'

Propelled by his thoughts, Stephen walks quickly down the stone steps. He needs to be with Janet. He fights so hard for his community, but right now, with Christopher missing, all he really wants is family. His mum and dad used to talk so passionately about the better future that was coming but Stephen looks back at that fire burning in the grate and George and Ian playing animal pairs together on the carpet and he thinks, why did they ever need a better future? What they had was good enough.

A few days after he moved back into his parents', he rang Janet and offered to take Christopher out. 'Give you some time to study,' he said. It was a peace offering: was what had happened really so bad they couldn't get over it?

Christopher came to the front door. He already had his coat and shoes on. Stephen tried to look behind him into the house but he couldn't see his wife.

'Mum in?'

'She's upstairs.'

He walked back with his son towards the village. It wouldn't be forever, that's what he was thinking, just until Janet saw that he was serious about making it up to her. He wanted so badly for his son to understand and he tried to find the words to explain what had happened at Saltley Gate.

'Imagine Stoke winning the FA cup,' he says, 'but better.'

Christopher didn't say anything. It was hard to get through to the boy. He just wanted him to know that his dad hadn't been bunking off, like Janet seemed to think. It wasn't that he didn't care.

‘Kind of like the Battle of Britain,’ Stephen told Christopher. ‘All those Spitfires going up from the airfields. Like that.’

But Christopher seemed to be in a dream. God only knows what was going through the boy’s mind. Billy’s mother was on the other side of the street, both hands laden down with shopping. She crossed over in a breathless hurry, put down the bags, offered her hand. ‘Well done, Stephen.’

‘Your Billy was there too.’

He said this out of politeness because Billy didn’t stay. He went home. But Billy’s mum latched onto his words. She had no shame.

‘He was too. He had to come home for the last couple of days to help out with the kids. But he was part of it. I’m so proud of him.’ She cupped Christopher’s chin in her hand. ‘This your boy, is it?’

Christopher pulled away from her. How to explain – the boy doesn’t like to be touched. Disapproval flitted across Billy’s mum’s face but she turned back to Stephen with a quick smile. ‘Well done, us, heh?’

‘That’s right, Mrs McKee.’

Unsatisfactory: the word just pops into Stephen’s head as he completes the walk from the police station and turns into Janet’s road. I’m like the bleeding Rolling Stones, he thinks. He just can’t get no satisfaction. And he’s tried, and he’s tried, and he’s tried.

Janet answers the door and he is instantly crestfallen. He always hopes for more than she gives. Her face has a curiously blank expression that he guesses hides something worse.

‘The police have just left.’

‘What?’

‘They got a warrant.’ She shakes her head and speaks with furious emphasis. ‘Because of what you told them, Stephen. When the police knocked, I thought it might be good news. But no. They turned the place upside down.’

Stephen thinks of Kirk, that so friendly detective, nipping out to search his son’s place without telling him. But Janet’s not finished.

‘Apparently, you told Christopher’s mother not to let him work in that bar, but she didn’t listen—’

‘Janet.’

‘I’m worried sick! Christopher would have rung me by now if he was all right.’

Stephen rubs his forehead. One of the lads at work had a brain haemorrhage. Just keeled over and died in the car park. Stephen can see how that happens.

‘He’s my son too.’

She opens her hands, exasperated. ‘I dunno, Stephen. It’s always so … difficult. Christopher needed you to tell the truth. Not saying, no way is my son a homosexual.’

‘I was trying to protect him. The police don’t need to know his business. I’m worried sick too. I love him.’

‘What’s a straight boy doing working in a gay bar? That’s what the police said. Now they’re saying Christopher’s involved in the death of that man in Trentham Gardens. He’s some sort of criminal. A drug dealer. Our Christopher! He’s not missing. He’s done a runner.’

‘Hang on a moment. What man in Trentham Gardens?’

‘The *dead* man, Stephen. The man found murdered. Christopher had a chat with him in the bar on Friday night and now the police think he’s involved in his death. They need to be looking for Christopher, not suspecting him of a crime.’

‘They didn’t tell me anything about a murder.’

‘What is the matter with you? When did you start trusting the police? When it’s the miners, they’re Thatcher’s army. When your son’s missing, they’re your best friend?’

It’s like trying to stay on your feet in too strong a sea. The stones keep rushing away beneath him; the waves keep knocking him over. Where is Christopher? What has happened?

‘OK. OK.’

He thinks of his little boy, running on the beach, near the campsite in Wales. All long limbs and high spirits, like a fragile-legged foal he saw once running about in a field. He thinks of that lying detective.

‘I’m sorry, Janet. You’re right.’

Janet softens. ‘Do you want to come in?’

Stephen’s mind is a huge blank. If he goes inside his old home, he will be undone. ‘Thanks. But not right now.’

‘OK.’

She nods and shuts the door. In Stephen’s head is a wordless roaring. He is worried it is going to break out and escape in some unpredictable way into his body. He walks like a robot in the direction of his village.

Did Janet never see how he loved, and not only Christopher?

He has a huge heart. It beats inside him like a massive engine. He has inherited his grandfather’s strength. He could easily have cut another man’s coal, if that had been what was needed. He would have liked to do that. Would have liked to do something so straight-forward. Why is everything so complicated? The problem with his heart is not that it isn’t big enough but that it doesn’t seem to be any good for anything. He loves his son. He couldn’t give a shit if he’s gay. He loves him. It just took him a moment to catch up. That’s all.

He has been tricked by dickhead Kirk with his stupid wavy hair and his pointy shoes, fooled into saying things. Janet’s right: tell him his son is missing and he’s putty in their hands. Ian, he realises suddenly, could have told him what was happening. His own brother. He sat on the step this morning. Off on a murder inquiry, he said. He knew about the dead man in Trentham Gardens. Must have known Christopher was being linked to it. Ian said he’d tell him if he heard anything about Christopher but he said nothing. Nothing.

He takes the tarmacked path across the tidy little park that once was a field of pale-green sedge, purple clover and yellow rattle. Even the paddling pool has gone now.

This was where he waited for Janet once, sitting on one of the swings. He remembers her arriving still in her school uniform, walk-ing over to the roundabout and lying down with her feet to the centre, head out over the edge. He pushed her round and round because that must be what she wanted and because she didn’t tell him to stop. Then she was staggering across the grass and throwing up. He followed and stood behind her.

‘What’s up, love?’

But being sick was such an obvious sign, that and the look in her eyes. He didn’t need her to tell him and he grasped as quickly as he could for the right thing.

‘But that’s grand. I’ve got a job. It’s norra problem.’

She needn’t be afraid, because he would stand by her.

‘Don’t worry, Janet. We’ll get married. We’ll be happy.’

Stephen turns left out of the park, up the road and then turns into the lane where the gypsies used to camp. The hedge and fields beyond lead up to the university. The old toll-house has some building work going on and he stops there. The builders are working late. He asks them, can he have a brick, and they exchange looks but then they shrug because it's none of their business. Help yourself.

Help yourself, he thinks. That's all he can do. He's tried to help others, but that's not worked out.

He walks the two miles with the brick, shifting it from hand to hand. It's a surprisingly awkward thing to carry, a brick.

In the village, perhaps someone will stop him, invite him in for a cup of tea. Perhaps he can throw off these feelings. But although people say hello to him – Jack Skerret, No-I-Can't Billy's mum – none of them ask him about the brick. But they notice it all right. Their eyes flick to it and the edges of their mouths curl, as if there's something funny about it. They are laughing at him. Or perhaps that smile is because they are afraid of him and his brick. Or – perhaps worse, he realises – he is imagining their reaction. They do not concern themselves. They are not like his mother, who turned out for anyone from the village. They mind their own business. Who knows? Stephen doesn't know; how can he begin to grasp how other people are thinking. It's like looking at the world through a fish eye.

How respected his family was. At the club, his grandfather could never pay for his own pint.

There's no one outside on Jamie's road. Stephen slips the latch on the small gate and stands in the front garden, weighing the brick. He can see so precisely Jamie's immaculate front room with its oh so precious china and the framed picture of his brother, George. This is the man who has crossed the picket line. Couldn't bring himself even to wait for a shift when Stephen wasn't standing on the line.

He has walked here with this brick; now he will throw the damn thing.

But standing on this bit of trimmed grass, with uptight Lucy and the boys probably inside – he lacks the necessary conviction to swing his arm back.

He should have done it at night but the act is righteous, not shameful, and he wants to do it in broad daylight. Tweety offered to come with him and he can feel that would have been easier too. Chucking the brick in

the dark with a mate and running away up the hill towards Keele: that's more believable. But this doesn't include Tweety. This is *personal* : him and Jamie.

His mother would have disapproved. His grandad too. Even though they are both dead, he cannot get out from under imagining their disapproval. And he imagines Ian telling their dad in the sitting room of the nursing home. *Our Stephen's thrown a brick through Jamie's window.* Or – even worse – trying to keep it from him. With this damn brick in his hand, he has arrived somewhere ridiculous.

The door opens.

Jamie has his snappin tin in his hands. He is off to work. His eyes fall almost instantly on the brick and he says, 'Well, if you're going to throw it, you better bloody throw it.'

'I've decided not to.'

'Good of you.'

There's a silence between them that goes five miles deep.

Jamie says, 'I'm sorry, Stephen. I am. But I've got to do this.'

This is a mistake, Stephen knows. He shouldn't be here. He should be somewhere else. But where? Where? He perseveres. 'No. You don't have to.'

'Some sort of loyalty test, is that it? I have to keep on and on and on. No matter that we're losing. Even when people are throwing concrete blocks off bridges, killing people, I have to keep showing my support until you tell me it's all right. And if I don't, then I'm nothing to you.'

'It's nothing to do with concrete blocks.'

'You've got a brick in your hand, Stephen.'

'I'm not throwing the brick.'

How farcical this is.

'It doesn't mean you're right, Jamie. You're not right.'

'That's what you think. We'll both have to live with that.'

'But how can you live with that? You've got my brother's photo up in your front room. He believed in sticking up for people. He jumped in a pond for the weakest of us. For Alfie Kemble. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

Jamie steps towards him and Stephen sees in a flash the angry Jamie. That rage he's always known must be hidden away beneath Jamie's quiet ways.

‘Standing in my front garden with a brick in your hand! Why aren’t you ashamed?’

Perhaps I am ashamed, Stephen wants to say.

Jamie is speaking, and he seems completely calm. ‘If you had thrown it, Stephen, I’d have mended the window, and Lucy and me, we would have both been OK. We would have been OK. It’s you who wouldn’t have been all right.’

The pain Stephen has been trying so hard to avoid bears down on him like a massive wave. ‘My brother died because of you and your mum. And you don’t even have the grace to be ashamed of yourself and how you carry on.’

Stephen walks away, still holding the stupid brick. Everything he has ever wished for has been a hallucination. And Christopher is missing.

Jamie watches Stephen walking away, the brick still in his hand. The high ground he has claimed does not answer the ache he feels inside.

Lucy steps out of the front door and stands beside him. She kisses him lightly on the cheek. ‘Don’t let him get to you, love.’

‘You’re right. I better hurry up if I’m not going to be late.’

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The Monkey Puzzle is housed in an old brick warehouse on the derelict docks. Ian parks up beside a British racing green Jaguar XJS. The two huge black men who stand on the door of the club stamp their feet against the cold. They wear black nylon zip-up jackets, black shirts and grey ties. Ian walks over and shows his warrant card.

‘Long way from home, aren’t you?’ one says.

‘I am,’ Ian says. ‘And I’m no bother at all.’

The man who spoke takes Ian’s brief and studies the crest. With his wide smile, he is the gentler-seeming of the two. The other man has a brow like a cliff and a jaw that keeps tensing.

‘I’m mainly policing the sheep-dipping nowadays,’ Ian says as he takes back his warrant card and pops it in his pocket. ‘Is Lester around? I’d like a chat, if possible. Strictly off the record.’

The silent one goes into the venue.

Ian nods towards the Jaguar. ‘That’s not a sports car. That’s a family car with a five-litre engine. Probably got a couple of kids seats in the back.’

The bouncer laughs. ‘You’re right. How could they follow a beauty like the E type with something bogus as that?’

‘I won’t tell your boss you said that.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. It’s not his.’

‘Not his?’

The man swallows and changes the subject. ‘So you’re sheep-dipping you say.’

The car’s interesting. He should have checked out the plates. He’ll catch it on the way out.

‘That’s right. They step on their heads to make sure they’re completely submerged.’

The grumpy one is back and gestures with his head for Ian to enter. Once inside the doorway, the path is blocked by the man mountain who

says nothing. Ian takes off his jacket, then his shirt, then his shoes. The bouncer opens his hands, as if expecting more. Ian pulls his trousers up at the knee.

‘Come on,’ Ian says, ‘I’m not taking them off. I’ve got skinny legs.’

‘Boss won’t speak to you unless he’s sure there’s no wire.’

So he takes off his trousers too.

Lester has arrived. He dismisses his security with an impatient wave and takes the opportunity to smirk at Ian in his underpants. He’s a short man with pale freckled skin and a wide thin mouth. He’s suited in a tight-fitting little pinstripe and shod in brown leather winkle-pickers. It’s a ridiculous outfit but Ian doesn’t underestimate Lester. This man is a murderer who gets away with it.

Lester gestures for Ian to follow him into a small windowless room furnished with a red velvet sofa and a leather armchair. Lester nods towards the sofa. Ian sits and Lester stands.

‘I heard you were following the monastic life? Retreated to a small village and taken a vow of celibacy.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘It was in the parish magazine. Everyone respected your decision. This is a prayerful city. You should have stuck with it. What brought you back to Liverpool?’

‘Your nephew, Felix.’

‘OK?’

‘Found in a lake. Bullet wound to the chest.’

‘Ah.’ Lester’s head goes back as if he wants to consider the ceiling. It’s a good gesture: hard to read but Ian sees no surprise in Lester’s reaction. He’s sure that even though the identification only came through a couple of hours ago, Lester already knew.

Lester looks back at Ian. ‘Does my sister know?’

‘Merseyside will be informing her.’

‘And you – why are you informing me, Staffordshire?’

‘I wondered if you could shed any light.’

Lester takes the handkerchief from his top pocket and wipes his eyes. ‘It’s very sad.’

‘Another man’s been killed – Liam Holdcroft. Unsurvivable trauma from a point-blank shot to the head.’

‘Sounds like whoever did that is very violent. Capable of anything. Probably best to stay away from him.’

‘I’d love to.’

‘It can be a very violent place, Liverpool, if you get on the wrong side of people. Horrible things happen. The bodies of young men wash up on the beach. You’d be surprised the things that go through my head sometimes.’

‘Your nephew’s dead. Mine’s missing. Last person he was seen with was Felix. Christopher Weldon: I find him, I promise I’m back to the green fields.’

Lester folds his arms. ‘Love to help but I’ve never heard of him.’

‘Can you give me anything?’

‘I can tell you this. Even before he took a shot to the head, which should be considered merciful in the circumstances, Liam Holdcroft was a world class idiot. He made some friends in prison but he was never good enough to play for Liverpool. Barely good enough for Stoke City. Loved to talk and it got on people’s nerves, if you get my drift. And Felix? I’m sorry for my sister but it turns out he was an idiot too. Poppers and pills and flash cars. Big mouth, no trousers. The whole thing sounds to me like some kind of momentous cock-up. No one will ever get to the bottom of it.’

‘There was a big drugs seizure.’

Lester smiles. ‘Was there?’

‘Same day as Liam’s murder.’

Lester smiles again and puts his hands over his ears. ‘Hear no evil, see no evil …’

Ian thinks about Stephen. He may be giving away too much of what he knows, but he has to ask about the van. ‘Someone from Stoke moving drugs in a white Transit. Any idea who that might be?’

Lester smiles nastily. ‘Well, you’re from Stoke, aren’t you? Do you know anyone who drives a white Transit?’

When Ian leaves the club, the XJS Jaguar has gone. Ian drives a few streets, and finds a phone box to call Roberts. The floor is sticky with piss and the panes of glass are full of tart cards. Ian imagines the girls walking these lonely streets with their high heels and short skirts. Lester’s probably taking a cut from that too.

Massage, fun and games!
Spanking fun with sexy sixteen-year-old!

Extraordinary how many men seem to want to be beaten, Ian thinks as he finds some change and dials the number. Harry, he remembers, had a tart card made up with the home telephone number of a superintendent he didn't like and stuck it in boxes around Toxteth. The superintendent had to change his number but he couldn't do anything about his new nickname. At first it was Aching Buttocks. Then just Aching.

Ian is still smiling at the memory of newcomers asking where the name came from when Roberts picks up.

'Ian.'

'I've got the ident for the guy in the lake—'

'Dan's already told me. What I actually *need* to know from you is what the hell you are doing still in Merseyside? What are you up to? I need to talk to you and I want you back right now.'

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In the lamp room, everybody is talking about the body found in Trentham Gardens.

No-I-Can't Billy McKee says, 'It's where they go, the poofters, you know, to have it off.'

The lamp man hands Jamie his lamp and says, 'It never is.'

They ride the belt down to the coalface, sitting opposite each other. Memories spill through Jamie. Finding his mum hidden behind the chapel at George's funeral, standing in a little gap of dark earth before a steep drop down to a brook. Her face covered by her two hands.

'Come on, Mum. Not your fault.'

She bent down and straightened his tie. 'Not yours neither.'

But neither of them could ever really believe that.

Best man at Stephen's wedding. It made no difference. He was always carrying that weight. It is almost a relief that, at last, Stephen has said it out loud. You should be ashamed.

'Must be more than nine months since you've been underground,' Billy says.

I've lived my whole life underground, Jamie thinks. The fans roar. The glare of the strip lights turns the skin of their arms white. He thinks of that dark wood on Friday night. Ian didn't tell him someone had been killed. But it can't have been Christopher, because someone in the lamp room would know if it was Stephen's son.

At the coal face, he nearly throws up. He stands bent over his knees. His hands are sweaty. His chest feels like it is being squeezed.

'You all right?' Billy says.

'Maybe it's the curry I had last night.'

'You best go back up. Need me to ride the belt with you?'

'I'll be fine.'

The back door is locked and he has to use his key. Lucy is in the hall, shepherding the boys out through the front to her mum's for lunch. Her

eyes are sceptical. He mumbles his way past towards the stairs. *A bit poorly*. George reaches up and hugs him: his eldest has a worrying instinct for his father's distress. The boy's shoulder blades, as fragile as birds' wings, slip beneath his hands.

'Come on, boys, get a shifty on,' Lucy says.

His son, named for his childhood friend, is now the same age George was when he drowned. He should never have tied his boy to that history.

'I'm sure Mum can fit another one round the table,' Lucy says, taking George by his shoulder and handing him his coat.

'No thanks, love. I need to lie down. Say hello to Nanna for me, boys.'

The three of them are out of the door and moving towards the gate. Little Michael kicks a stone along the path. He loves that boy! He cannot regret this life. Things have happened. Love has happened. This is the life that has happened.

He unlaces his boots, washes his hands at the sink. He makes himself tea. Switches on the TV.

Officers stand by the edges of Trentham Lake. In the distance, divers sit in a small boat that moves across the water.

A reporter with a microphone stands with Janet outside her house and Jamie remembers how she has always seemed to him. That moment when she stepped out of her home and looked at Stephen, his hair standing up like the bristles on a shoe brush, his jumper burnt and his shoes caked with clay, clutching his brother's bent Valentine's card to his chest. Grace Kelly, he thought because she was one of his mum's favourite screen stars. Which was a ridiculous thought, and yet not, because Janet was a princess, and surely intended for George, who was, after all, a prince.

'My son is missing,' Janet says to the reporter. She is angry and desperate. 'The police are treating him like a suspect. Would they do that if he was straight? Would they do that if he was white?'

Christopher, standing behind the bar in that unbuttoned green shirt. And then outside, reassuring him that he'll never tell his dad he's seen him. It had been a kind of magic to see him there, so free. Free enough to be beautiful; even free enough to be kind. And he remembers his own words, the well-practised lie.

Just-popped-in-for-a-pint-no-idea-what-kind-of-place-it-was.

He hates himself.

His eyes move to the picture of his two boys in their school uniform. And that tiny china house with the high steps.

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27

There is very little traffic on the M6 and Ian puts his foot down. To his raging mind, the speeding cars on the edge of his vision are no more than streams of colour. His left hand gropes blindly in the glove compartment and finds a tape. He slots it into the machine: Prince, the new wunderkind. Psychedelic sheen and banging rock pour out of the car's tinny speaker. Ian wishes it were louder. Apocalyptic. *Bodies of young men wash up on the beach.* Ian puts his foot right down to the floor. He's doing the ton, thinking of that look on Jacob's face as the Johnson brothers walked him away down the station platform.

The traffic slows abruptly and Ian has to brake. He thinks of Christopher. His little hand in his. What an honour that was to be favoured by him. Another innocent. Cars jostle and weave, seeking the lane that is travelling fastest. Horns sound. Brake lights flare. The three lanes slowly feed into one and the road quickly jams. Blue lights flash in the rear-view mirror and sirens wail as police cars wind their way through the traffic, pressuring the cars in front to move aside. There's been an accident.

Lester's got away with murder for years. He's not stupid. If he's talking to you, he's got a reason.

He was happy enough for Ian to know – with no proof, of course – that Liam worked for him until the moment he had him shot through the head. Why not? You rule through fear, you got to feed the legend. Liam loved to talk, Lester said, got on people's nerves. He wanted it put about that he had him killed for grassing. That's the cardinal rule: never talk. No one will ever get to the bottom of this.

The traffic is almost stationary. Ian switches his engine off and closes his eyes. His thoughts return to his brother's Ford Transit. Who is driving it? A horn sounds one long loud beep and Ian opens his eyes. The traffic is moving forward slowly and there is a big gap between his car and the one in front. In his rear-view mirror, an angry driver flashes his lights at

him and leans on his horn again. On the left is a slip road into a service station and some cars are zipping along the hard shoulder towards that, planning to sit out the time while the road clears. Ian indicates left with the other cars and pulls up the slip road. He parks and reaches to the back seat for his *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*.

Knutsford service station's design carries a fading sense of the 1960s excitement about motorways. Ian buys a black coffee at the counter and watches as humanity streams steadily towards the toilets. A family moves past. Two girls and a boy run ahead. Their mother, in a purple sari and buttoned up cardigan, follows in no hurry.

Ian takes his ancient Parker ballpoint from his jacket pocket and opens the birding book onto the back page, but he does not write. That pen in his hand and the open book are no more than props, nursing his brain into thinking.

The noise and activity of the service station fade as his attention shifts right back to the post office robbery. This must be where it started.

Roughly two months ago, Liam is released from prison. He's looking for cash to start investing in his new drugs supply business. First, he conducts some surveillance at the post office. But Brenda's fed up of the parking violations. She watches through her net curtains and scribbles down number plates in her little red notebook. She notes down Liam's unreliable Ford Capri and Stephen's white Transit.

On the day of the robbery-a week or two after Liam's release-the Capri isn't working, so they take the van. A man pulls on a balaclava and goes in. He's tall, like Liam. He *is* Liam. He's only been a burglar before, so he's not good at armed robbery. But Liam wants to buy his wife and child nice things and he's been made promises about the drugs business he's buying into, so he goes through with it. The shopkeeper cuts him. The little revolver jams. Then it releases a bullet and Ian remembers well the ballistics on that bullet: it's fired from the same gun that later kills Felix in Trentham Gardens.

Liam is dead by the time Felix is murdered. So, who inherits that gun from the robbery? Who uses it to kill Felix? Surely the man is waiting outside the post office in his brother's van because they're partners. He's right back to the same question: who's driving his brother's van?

Stephanie said the man who visited the house in a Ford Transit used the nickname Zammo. Why Zammo? Because he's a baby drug dealer

from some kids' TV show. No helpful information there. It's commonplace for criminals to use street names to protect their identities.

But Stephanie did remember one thing that might help identify Zammo: he was a childhood friend of Liam's. And Ian remembers standing on the steep hill, watching Liam and Stephen taking on all comers in the all-Murton go-kart competition. He's avoiding the obvious conclusion because it doesn't suit him.

He leans his elbow on the counter. He rubs his forehead.

He wants so badly to walk away. His whole life has been based on that principle. He walked away from his family. Then he walked away from Merseyside. But he can't walk away from that small boy who put his hand in his. That boy who left the Brewery with Felix on the night of his death and hasn't been seen since. Ian will find Christopher and then move to Pitcairn Island. If Stephen's dealing drugs, then that's on him.

He catches the eye of the woman behind the counter. She puts a hand on her hip and smiles. 'Cheer up, sunshine. It might never happen.'

He taps his cup. 'Another one of these, please.'

There is a racket of scraping. Chairs are being pushed back. A movement of cold air. People are returning to their cars. Ian takes a drink of the fresh coffee.

How does Felix fit into this? He's a young man making his way in the family business. Until he handed the franchise to Liam, he used to deliver drugs to the Brewery from Liverpool. Then – the day after Liam's death – Felix is back, telling Dave normal service will be resumed. And straight after that, he goes to Trentham Gardens because, if he wants to be part of Lester's organisation, he has to prove he can take care of business.

Lester needs Liam's associate offed because he might be able to give evidence against him. They have some pretext for the meeting – taking over the line into Stoke, maybe, or handing over the evidence – but it's a set up. Lester must have thought killing Zammo was a slam dunk. He thought Felix was armed and Zammo wasn't. Now he's cross with his nephew for getting himself killed.

But the question that matters to Ian is: what happened to Christopher? He can almost see him leaving the bar that night. Ian remembers Christopher's vulnerability, how his face filled with colour at a family dinner when it was found out he had been buying presents for one of the boys at school. Christopher had feelings for Felix.

But then he grasps one important ingredient. Felix knew about Trentham Gardens *because it was a gay cruising ground*. It was lonely and isolated: good for criminal activity. And Christopher would go there to be with Felix. Was Felix stupid enough to plan to mix business with pleasure? Or – worse – was he taking Christopher along for backup? And was Christopher so keen to be with him that he said yes?

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28

Jamie is standing at Janet's door. His words make sense but she can't process them. Her body is storming, while on the surface, she isn't moving at all.

'What do you mean, you might know where Christopher is?'

She has never known Jamie to step into the centre of anything. His habit is always to stand a little to the side of any event. Today he looks completely changed, as if someone's pulled down hard on his cheeks or pressed their hand flat against his face. Wah wah wah, he says.

She interrupts, 'Why would you know anything about the murder in Trentham?'

There is something extreme in Jamie's expression – horror perhaps, or fear – and it brings to mind how Stephen suddenly ran from her and the other boys followed immediately, disappearing up the lane over the ruts left by the diggers and away. Whatever it is must not make Jamie run now. She grabs him tightly by the arm, pressing her fingers down.

'Forget what I just said. I don't need to know anything. Only where Christopher is.' She fixes him in her gaze. 'Whatever it is you've done, I won't tell anyone.'

She pulls him into the hallway and shuts the door behind him. She grabs her car keys.

Janet keeps forgetting to change gear and the car grinds and roars. Jamie is silent. The bruise on his face has entered her consciousness. How's he got that? But she daren't ask in case he stops helping her. They are passing through the countryside that has suddenly expanded and makes this place so different from the packed houses that they both know better. The branches of broad-trunked trees overshadow the lane. The road sinks into steep banks. This was a long slow walk back home with Stephen when they were teenagers, but in a car, it's over in minutes. There are houses again, and soon they will be at the junction.

Jamie speaks quietly, 'I was cruising.'

Janet swallows, takes a breath, strives for patience. All she wants is to find Christopher. ‘I don’t care about that.’

‘You said, “whatever it is you’ve done”.’

‘But I didn’t mean anything by it.’

‘I was cruising.’

‘Jamie, I don’t give a shit.’

‘I want you to understand why I didn’t look for long enough. And, I never, not for a moment, thought it might be Christopher. I wasn’t even sure I saw a man—’

‘What?’

‘On the ground.’

‘For God’s sake.’

He gestures with his hand towards a side road. ‘Down there.’

She has to slow to wait for an oncoming car. They don’t speak, she because she is afraid of interrupting the help he is giving her, he she understands, because he is ashamed.

As the car passes and she takes the right turn, he says, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I need to find Christopher.’

‘Of course.’

He gestures with his hand again towards a lay-by. ‘Pull in there.’

The car bumps over the unmade ground and comes to a standstill. She pulls the handbrake on. She is unsure whether this is where they need to get out or if he has changed his mind about helping her. Jamie does not move and she dare not speak. She bites down on her tongue and waits.

Then she says, ‘Jamie, please—’

He clears his throat and puts his hand to his face. Then he releases his safety belt and steps out of the car. ‘It was near here.’

Janet follows Jamie down through the long grass towards the woods. She walks quickly and, in spite of her short breath, calls out her son’s name as she hurries. ‘Christopher!’

A startled blackbird flies away.

‘Are you sure this was where you were?’

‘Yes. Here.’

She listens with every nerve for any sign. The grass is wet, the undergrowth dense. Ahead, a dip in the earth, hidden by brambles and bracken. A trainer, as if discarded, that she knows immediately to be her son’s. She wades unthinking into the undergrowth. The ground is

uncertain. Her shoes and the legs of her jeans are soaked through in an instant. She turns her ankle in a dip but it doesn't really register because, motionless at the bottom of a dip, he is there. Her child. With her hands, she tears away at the brambles that cover him. She is mindless.

Jamie speaks from a very far place. 'I'll run and call for an ambulance.'

Christopher's eyes are closed. She touches his face. He is horribly cold. She puts her ear to his mouth. Breath. She says his name and hears a barely audible moan, as if in protest at being disturbed when he is sleeping. She gets herself beneath him, cradles him in her arms, his head on her lap, and waits.

The ambulance surges, brakes hard and surges again. Janet holds onto the trolley bed. Christopher, connected to a drip, is deathly pale and unresponsive. His skin is streaked with dirt and a deep bruise spreads up from his jawline.

'He's going to be all right? He made a sound when I found him so he's OK?'

'I don't know, love. We're doing our best – let me work now.'

She sits in silence. If the man told her it was important not to breathe, then she would not breathe. They swing to left and right. The siren wails and sometimes a flash of reflected blue splashes onto the blackness of the window. They swing right, pull up. The doors open onto white double doors and the red brick of the old infirmary.

She sits for a limitless time in a corridor on an orange plastic seat.

There was no blood so he will be all right. Once they've given Christopher fluids and stuff and whatever it is they do, he will be OK.

She gets up and walks, sits down again.

A man sits in the corridor, wearing nothing but a short blue cotton gown and black leather shoes. His hairless legs are lumpy and marbled with blue veins. His clothes are in a plastic bag next to him. He looks at her and smiles. She smiles back, willing their kindness to each other to cast a magic spell that makes them both safe.

A nurse approaches. Such a neat little picture – white cap pinned on her head, grey dress with a belt, flat black lace-ups. She brings to mind those paper dolls whose different clothes you can cut out and attach with

their folding tabs. Janet has never taken drugs, but this must be what it is like.

‘Mrs Weldon?’

‘Janet.’

‘Felicity,’ the nurse replies with a kind smile.

Felicity: happiness. Good fortune. That is a good sign.

Felicity says, ‘There’s a room.’

What on earth is she talking about?

‘Where the doctor and you can talk. In private.’

A swoop of terror.

Felicity puts a hand on Janet’s shoulder and steadies her with her eyes. ‘No, it’s not *that*,’ she says. ‘The surgeon will be through in a minute. Mr Howlett. He’s very good. Don’t want to keep him waiting.’

Not keep the surgeon waiting: that’s an imperative Janet can understand. She is up on her shaky legs immediately.

The white walls, thethe framed print of the flowers, the chairs with checked cloth covers and wooden legs: this is a room you only get to sit in if things are bad.

‘Mr Howlett will be here in a moment.’

‘Of course.’

Janet places one hand on top of the other. She slips the tip of her tongue between her teeth and applies pressure. Her chest is inflating and deflating as if she is recovering from a run.

The surgeon slips into the room quietly. He is small and powerful with neat little hands and, to her surprise, seems perhaps to not be entirely white. This is something that would interest her another time because normally she lives her life in a sea of whiteness, but this is the man who holds her son’s life in his hands and her interest in his colour is only momentary. He must be good at his job. That is all. He is nothing except this requirement.

He stands. Is that good or bad? Is he in too much of a dangerous hurry to save her son to have the time to sit? Or is it not so serious that Christopher’s mother warrants a sitting surgeon?

‘Mrs Weldon.’

‘Janet.’

‘Janet.’

‘How is he?’

‘Poorly, I’m afraid. His haemoglobin is very low—’

‘What does that mean?’

‘He’s lost a lot of blood. There’s a deep bruise under his left rib so I’m worried he may have a ruptured spleen. And he’s been lying out in the cold—’

‘But he’s going to be all right?’

‘I’m very sorry, I don’t know. But we are going to do our very best for him. He’s being got ready for theatre. Is there someone Felicity can ring to be with you?’

Her mother is in Lewes with her new husband, and in her shock, Janet cannot remember the number. There’s her friend, Helen. But no. She will have not have the patience for Helen. She shakes her head.

The doctor closes his hands in front of his chest, like a priest. ‘And Christopher’s father?’

‘We’re not together.’

‘Do you have a number for him, perhaps? Or an address?’

The information drops into her like a stone: the doctor is asking because Stephen is also Christopher’s next of kin. That’s how serious this is.

Felicity says, ‘I’ll get that information, Doctor.’ She takes Janet’s hand. ‘Cup of tea, maybe? And I can make you some toast. I’ve got some strawberry jam. Made it myself. There’s a pick-your-own place—’

‘No. Thank you.’

‘Well, you say that but I’m sure you’ll drink a cup of tea if I bring it.’

Janet stares at the white walls. What a strange place the hospital is. Long green-tiled corridors. Wooden banisters. Stone floors. This room is like a capsule in a gothic castle, as if modern medicine is trying to make a home inside a ghost story. She’s only been in this hospital once before: for the birth of Christopher. And there is that memory of him again, that dear little scrap of humanity, reaching out for her. And there she is, lifting him to her breast.

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29

Stephen sits in his front room. The brick is on the floor in front of him. Since he got in, he has not stirred himself to set a fire and the cold has begun to settle in his bones. The recollection of Ian and him sitting together on the back step eating bacon butties buzzes inside his head. It enrages him.

Knobbly knees Ian. Little Ian who ran out to him in the dark, asking where George was. Ian who owes him surely for all his years of forbearance, all his older brothering. Ian who, while the rest of his family were all looking at George's coffin covered in white lilies, took the opportunity to go dumb. Dumb! It's unbelievable what a little bastard he was.

Their mum gave the little shit a notebook and tied a pencil to it with string.

God knows Stephen would have liked to stop talking too. But his job was to be good and cause no trouble. Someone had to look after their mother. So he invented a different kind of silence. A silence that bothered no one, because no one even knew it was silence.

After a few months, like ping pong balls, words began to pop out of little Ian. Once, randomly, a whole line from *Quatermass and the Pit*. What a trick it was to pull that one out of the bag. His mum and dad exchanged such a look. That look! So much hope in it. Stephen had wished he had cancer or something so that they would exchange such a look about him. All Ian had to do was speak to win joy from them. His own task was more complicated.

At the top of the stairs, he pushed his little brother so hard in the chest he nearly lost his balance.

'You can talk, so why don't you? It's hard enough for Mum, you little prat.'

Twenty-five years later and Ian isn't speaking again. It fills Stephen with rage, and behind the rage, more rage. Working on a murder

investigation, Ian said. Now Janet has told him that the police think Christopher's somehow caught up in the murder of a man in Trentham Gardens. Ian must have known that as he bit into his bacon butty, but he said nothing.

The phone rings and Stephen is on his feet, full of hope, already anticipating leaving this desperate place. Christopher will have been found. Good news will change everything. He can be large again, generous, forgiving.

A short man in a checked shirt has stepped quietly into the room. He offers Janet his hand. 'Mrs Weldon.'

She doesn't take it. 'Yes?'

'Paul Roberts. I'm the detective chief superintendent investigating the assault on your son—'

'I don't want to talk to you.'

'I understand that, Mrs Weldon. You're in shock.'

'It's not because I'm in shock.'

'Can I sit down?'

'No.'

'I'm truly sorry to disturb you when your son is so ill. But I need to find out who's hurt your son. We need to move quickly.'

Even though it doesn't feel a safe thing to do, Janet stands. 'Move quickly? Are you serious? You could have started by looking for Christopher when I reported him missing to you.'

There is a short pause before Roberts answers. 'But we did look, Mrs Weldon. We got a 999 call that someone had been attacked in the woods and we did look and we found someone. How were we to know there was someone else?'

'I reported Christopher missing. He was missing for two days. For some reason you searched my house instead of looking for him. Am I speaking English?'

Roberts stretches out his fingers and closes them again. 'And I've come in specially to apologise for our failure to search the park. Normally I would send one of my more junior officers.'

'That's just soft soap. You want stuff out of me. I can't help you anyway. I don't know anything about what happened to Christopher.'

'But how did you know where to find him? That might help us.'

She thinks with momentary exasperation about Jamie, who has also left her son for those *two days*, but she puts this information on a shelf at the back of a dark cupboard, to be retrieved later when she can consider it properly.

‘I didn’t know where to find him. I went to look for him. Like you should have done. I have no confidence in you at all.’

‘Someone must have helped you.’

‘Do you know what? You’re right. Someone helped me. And I’m not going to tell you who it was because that man was in Trentham because he’s gay. He said he thought it might be police attacking Christopher.’

‘Well, there weren’t any police in Trentham. This was to do with drugs. Serious crime. A man was murdered.’

‘Hang on a moment.’ She sits quickly in the chair, leans forward and holds her head.

Roberts steps forward. ‘Are you all right?’

She glares up at him. ‘I am never going to tell you who helped me because it was a gay man and he doesn’t want anything to do with the police. Who can blame him? In any case, he doesn’t know anything. He was just cruising.’

‘I need to talk to him.’

‘No.’

‘Mrs Weldon. He must have seen something if he knew where your son was.’

‘Do I need to spell it out? Is my English not good enough? I can’t ever seem to GET THROUGH TO YOU. Whatever is the matter with me, I wonder.’ Janet laughs again, but this time the laugh borders madness.

Roberts takes a card out and puts it on the bedside table. He waits before speaking, perhaps hoping for something. Then he says, ‘Well, OK. I’ll leave you. But please, have a think about it. I’m leaving you my details if you change your mind. I urgently need to find whoever did this to your son. I’m worried that whatever happened isn’t over.’

Janet leans forward, her elbows on her knees and her forehead in her hands. She senses Roberts leaving the room but his parting is more like a fade out, a kind of trance. And here is Felicity with that promised cup of tea and toast. A tiny little jar of jam. Bless her. Janet has to press the tears from her eyes with her thumb and index finger. Felicity puts the tray on

the table and sits next to Janet without speaking. Janet sits up straight and Felicity takes hold of her hand. She turns the palm upwards.

‘Your hands?’

Janet half expects the nurse to say that extraordinarily it turns out they belong to someone else.

‘What about them?’

‘I need to clean them. You’ve hurt them.’

Janet looks down at her hands. The palms are cut, lacerated by the brambles. Splinters or thorns have slipped under the skin.

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Since the ambulance left, Jamie has been walking.

First along the main road, then right, over the dirty old River Trent and along the Whitmore Road, where he stands for a moment, both hands holding the metal barrier, as he looks down over the perpetually rushing lanes of motorway. He takes the left turn along the lane through the quiet village of Butterton. He walks. Past Lymes Farm and back under the motorway. At Keele village, he turns right down the hill until he finds himself outside the lodge to the university.

He is not ready to go home, so he turns in.

On the paved area between the students' union and the library, the students are in donkey jackets, as if they are pretending to be miners too. The students' union is 1970s chequered glass walls and concrete. To the right, a heavy grey brick chapel with a round turret and tiny windows that makes him think of Colditz. Beside it stand white Nissen huts with corrugated tin roofs. The jumble of styles is unsettling. Each building seems to press for something better than its present, but what that better is seems to be constantly changing, the promise never fulfilled.

Jamie walks on, into the grounds of the old Sneyd estate. Coal lies deep under the lawn that runs down to the lake. Coal paid for the gardens and for the ugly Victorian house where some Russian grand duke and his wife once lived, and where Jamie's mother works, serving wedding parties and drunk men from the golf club and the rotary wives' dinners. He thinks of her, pulling on her dark coat and hat at the top of the stairs. She has always been too good for the work she does, too elegant in her low heels, with her hair tied in a French bun, and it has always made him sad that this is her life. After George's death, they moved out to a little flat above a shop and she started working at the hall. Neither of them speak to his father, who, after a few arrests for banging at their door and shouting in the street, moved back to the Durham coalfields where his family had worked.

Jamie takes the path that runs alongside a chain of shallow lakes. The ground is splotched yellow and red by the remains of fallen leaves. The light is silver. He remembers Sunday afternoons here with his boys running ahead, jumping out from behind the trees and shouting, Your money or your life!

He met Lucy for the first time just two days after Saltley, his face still marked by the scratches he got escaping into that ditch. She was in Sainsbury's car park, struggling to free her cardigan, which she had somehow managed to catch in the latch of her car boot. He slipped it free by climbing inside and tilting the back seats down. There was a little gizmo to trip. If you knew about it, it was easy. She smoothed her hands down her grey woollen skirt.

'Thank you.'

Together they put her bags in the car. He asked for her number. She said, 'Give me yours instead. I'll have a think if I want to ring it.'

Ziggy Stardust was already saving the world in high-heeled boots and mascara, but Jamie and Lucy started stepping out as if they were being filmed in black and white.

She dressed well. Maybe a green scarf. A matching corduroy jacket and skirt. A belted coat. Not many pairs of shoes, but all elegant and well-made. It made him think of his own mother, how beautiful things formed a force field around her.

Lucy was shy, and grateful to him for not rushing her.

'I like you,' she said. 'You're not like other men.'

Jamie was hopeful. Maybe this was how it happened. You fell in love and the rest followed on. It just took time. It was just learning something new. It was growing up.

Still, he thought of Austin, his curly hair, his smile, his blue eyes. There was no way to know what had happened to him. Had he got away or had he been arrested? Was there any way to find him?

He's at the far lake. The motorway that cuts off this neck of land roars, heedless that this shaded place should be silent. The water is thick and musty. The water lilies have browned, their edges curled up against winter. He sits on the earth, puts his hand in the cold water.

He's heard somewhere that a werewolf can be cured by scolding and, God knows, there is always plenty of scolding to be had. He just has to read the papers or – better – listen to the jokes in the pithead baths about

watching yourself with the soap. Then there's been AIDS. God's punishment. You'd think that would work. But if George's death didn't work, then what would?

For the last twelve years, which has been the real Jamie? The man who stood next to Lucy in St Luke's church? The father of George and Michael? Or the man who goes in secret to Trentham woods?

He is always telling himself how bad he feels. How he hates himself. How afraid he is of being discovered. Still, those trips out to Trentham woods – he cannot say he exactly hates himself then. Not at the time because, as if with a razor blade, he divides himself perfectly. Christopher has been lying in a ditch because he has been so determined not to be found out.

He thinks of Alfie Kemble and understands him completely. Shame can kill a man.

Jamie stands and brushes down his trousers and makes himself think of George and Michael. After a moment he walks again, past the observatory, over Keele Road and across the fields. A hare runs out across the rough ground. There are still wild things.

He lets himself in via the back door. The house is silent but he senses that he is not alone. He moves through to the sitting room. The fire is lit and Lucy sits wrapped in a blanket.

'Where are the boys, love?' he asks.

'At my mother's.'

Jamie stands, taking in the heat of the fire.

After a moment Lucy says, 'I thought we needed some quiet for you to tell me what's really been going on.'

Jamie can never say it out loud.

Lucy leans forward and touches his leg. 'Sit down.'

Jamie sits. Still, he cannot speak.

'I think I already know, but I need to hear it.'

Jamie feels that his eyes have become strangely wide and that his breath is all in his chest. He can barely get the words out. 'I'm really sorry.'

They sit in silence. Then Lucy says, 'It's killing me, your silence.'

Jamie leans forward and clasps his hands together to still himself.

Lucy says, 'In those early days, I told myself you were different. That's why you didn't pressure me to do things quickly. Then,

when you didn’t want to make love very often, I told myself that not every-one does. You always had a good reason to be out late. Union business, you said. I’ve always closed my eyes to all the questions I had and some of the comments people made. But these last few days? Picking a fight with some strangers over the strike? That’s not you. Why would you lie to me? What’s going on? And where have you been today? You said you were sick, but you’ve been gone for hours.’

‘I love you and the boys. I do.’

‘But you’ve lied?’

‘Yes. I have lied.’

She takes a breath. ‘Was it about men?’

‘Yes. About men.’

‘Might I be ill?’

‘God, no.’

‘You’ve been careful? Do you promise?’

‘Christ, Lucy. Is that all you have to say?’

‘I don’t have a right to ask that?’

‘I don’t know. You’re right. Yes, I’ve been careful. God.’

Lucy stands and puts her blanket on the chair. She stands looking at the fire. She is lovely in her hand-sewn woollen skirt and jacket.

‘One of the things is …’ She turns to him and her face is flushed with the effort of this. ‘ … is that I’m so hurt you lied to me because I really loved you.’

‘I loved you too.’

‘But did you really? Did you ever?’

‘Lucy.’

‘I feel so … stupid.’

‘You’re not stupid.’

Lucy puts her hands over her eyes. Then she takes them away. Here is the steel. She takes up the blanket and folds it neatly. ‘Well, I’ve packed a bag. I’m going to my mother’s while I think about this.’

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Stephen doesn’t have a car to get to the hospital. The police rang him a few hours ago to tell him that his van is in a compound in Nottingham. Someone drove it down an underpass, apparently. It’s a write-off. Did he want to come and talk to them about that? No, he didn’t.

He phones Tweety, who says he can borrow a car. In fifteen minutes, a red Ford Capri is outside the house.

‘Whose is this then?’ Stephen asks, getting in and pulling the safety belt across.

‘It’s a mate of mine’s.’

‘Well tell him thank you.’

‘Sure thing.’

They pull up at the front entrance to the hospital. Stephen sits, as if in a trance. It feels an impossible effort to leave the car.

Tweety switches the engine off. He reaches out and places his hand on Stephen’s shoulder. ‘It’ll be all right.’

‘Thank you. And not just for the lift.’

‘No bother.’

The entrance walls are tiled in glassy green and white. The windows are arched and leaded with coloured glass. Two white-haired volunteers sit knitting. Their table is laid out with baby clothes in pastel shades. Little stripy socks for tiny feet. Hats with silky ribbons to tie under chins. Jumpers with pearly buttons at the neck to open wide for a baby’s head. One of the women pauses the clicking of her needles to point the way. Stephen tries to wait for the lift, but he cannot master his anxiety for long enough for it to arrive. He takes the stairs two at a time. His steps echo down the stairwell. When he opens the heavy doors, the hush of the Intensive Care Unit assails him. A nurse sits at a desk, head down, writing. Rooms give off a central space. Stephen has to equalise his pressure with the environment. The hurry, the excitement, the storm inside not just his head but his body too: all must be subdued to

something that will not cause harm. The nurse points him in the direction of a glass door. Light falls through the windows in shafts.

He is too large, and unkempt. He licks his lips, looking for the size to be in this room. His heart might burst with the fear and disappointment of what he sees.

Christopher is surrounded by machinery. Lights and screens. Lines snake out from him into bags and bottles. A tube is down his mouth. There is a continuous rhythmic sound that Stephen realises is made by the machine that is breathing mechanically for his son. Stephen is a fitter: he works out easily enough that the sucking sound is the machine drawing in air, followed by the tap as it forces it into his son's lungs. There is a rhythmic beep beep too: measuring the beat of his son's heart.

When Janet opens her eyes, Stephen is in the room. For such a big man, he moves surprisingly softly. She presses her hands together in front of her chest, as if to silence her own noise. He takes his seat on the other side of the bed, looks across at her.

'Hey.'

Janet glances around the room as if she has to take it all in again. 'Hey.'

They sit either side of the bed in silence. Janet takes her son's hand. She will cultivate the discipline of remembering the things that she would never have seen without him: that water droplets can remain briefly intact on the surface of a pond, rolling along like beads. Or the memory of Christopher in the garden with her, searching out the snails, showing her their variety: delicate pink, spiralled with a dark-grey line. The two of them collected them in a jam-jar stuffed with leaves and walked up the hill together – his small, right hand warm in hers, his left clutching the jar tightly. He knelt and set the snails free. His knees when he stood up were patterned with soil. That night, sitting next to her in front of the telly, he said, 'Do you think they'll be all right, Mum?'

'I bet they had a party as soon as we left.'

She squeezes Christopher's hand and speaks quietly. 'Do you remember the snails, Christopher? How we used to rescue them?'

The ventilator sucks and bangs the air into her son's lungs. The green mountain ranges pattern themselves out on the monitor.

Stephen leans forward in his chair, strokes his hand across Christopher's face. 'It's your dad, son. I'm here, Christopher. And your mum too. We're both here. We love you.'

Felicity and Mr Howlett tap on the door and enter quietly. Howlett apologises that it's taken so long to see them. He's had a long list. Christopher's spleen has been damaged, the doctor says. He has had to remove it.

'The anaesthetist has struggled to keep Christopher's blood pressure up because his heart function is impaired – by the low blood pressure and the hypothermia. We can replace the blood he's lost, and we can support his kidneys with dialysis but what is uncertain is whether his heart or his brain is going to recover.'

Christopher is alive. And this man is not saying he is dying. And they are in a hospital. These must be good things.

'If things go well, we'll try to take him off the ventilator, see if he can breathe on his own.'

Janet makes a quick decision not to ask what will happen if things don't go well. She will hold onto just this much comprehension. She will live moment by moment, with hope. Stephen stands and offers his hand to the doctor and Janet, reminded by his gesture how important the doctor is to her son, stands too and thanks him.

When the door shuts, Stephen sits. For a long minute he presses the heels of his hands into his eyes and Janet realises that if – and this bad luck thought should somehow not be fully expressed – but that if the worst thing does happen Stephen and she will have it uniquely to bear. How have they got to this place where they are as strangers to each other? She sees them as they once were: sixteen years old, standing outside her house, carried away by the things that carry young people away.

She wants so badly to have the good things back. They are suddenly so brightly coloured. Standing with Christopher in the rain in a campsite in Wales, doing the washing up, Christopher taking an age to dry a single plate. She smiles at a sudden memory: how she and Christopher waited in the car together while Stephen took the tent down in the pouring rain in his underpants. Oh, if she could do it all again, she would do things differently. She would value every good moment.

Stephen says, 'Don't cry, love. He's going to be all right.'

But the door opens and here is that wavy-haired detective, with his tight shirt and his Old Spice, the one who took her report in the station a very long yesterday ago. The one who never had any intention of doing anything to find her son.

Janet stands. ‘Your boss given up on me then—’

‘He’s busy.’

‘So he sent the idiot instead?’

Kirk barely glances at her. ‘I’m not here to talk to you. I’m here to talk to your husband.’

Stephen says, ‘An’ I’m not talking to you neither. Last time we talked, you were getting a warrant to search Christopher’s house instead of looking for him.’

‘If you’d just come outside into the corridor for a minute, we can discuss it.’

‘I’m not discussing nowt. You never looked for my boy. If Janet hadn’t found him, he’d still be lying in a ditch.’

Kirk reaches into his pocket and takes out his warrant card. ‘Mr Weldon, please—’

‘I told you—’

‘Neither of us wants a fight in here, with your son so sick. So, please, step out into the corridor.’

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Roberts's desk is covered in papers. There's also a half-drunk cup of cold tea. Ian isn't invited to sit and he doesn't ask. He's in a hurry.

'Boss, we need to look for Christopher—'

'If it's about Christopher, you can relax. He's been found by his mother.'

'Found?'

'Yes, lying in a ditch in Trentham. He's in hospital. Critical but stable. How she found him is an interesting question. I was sympathetic. I went to the hospital myself to find out the answer but she refused to co-operate.'

'Co-operate? What kind of a word is that?'

'It's the right kind of word.' Roberts eyes Ian coolly. 'What kept you so long in Liverpool?'

Something fundamental has shifted in the room. Ian's voice sounds to him strangely airy, disembodied almost. 'I was investigating.'

'Investigating?' Roberts folds his hands behind his head and leans back in an imitation of relaxation that is all irritation and no relaxation. 'Did you find out anything about car registrations?'

Ian hesitates. 'OK, I think I know what you're talking about.'

'You know what I'm talking about?' With surprising swiftness, Roberts thumps the desk. The swipe of his arm knocks over his cold tea.

Ian lifts the papers out of the expanding spill. Roberts takes a cotton handkerchief from his pocket and soaks up the worst of it. He hardly misses a beat.

'You thought you could get away with not telling me?'

Ian puts the papers back on the desk. 'No, I didn't—'

Roberts puts the handkerchief in the empty cup and dries his hands on his trousers. 'Brenda came into the station, wanted to know what was happening with her notebook. The sergeant on the desk, who is nobody's fool by the way, puts two and two together about the location. Asks the

name of the officer who took it. And Brenda, who's no slouch herself, remembers your name.' Roberts folds his arms across his chest and presses his lips together in an angry line. 'You think everyone's stupid but you.'

'I'm a screw-up. I've never pretended anything else—'

Roberts flicks his hand through the air as if he's batting away an irritating fly. 'Get your warrant card out and put it on the desk.'

Ian puts his warrant on the desk.

'Brenda's notebook too. Or do I have to arrest you to get hold of it?'

It's in Ian's jacket pocket and he hands it over. Roberts opens it and starts looking through the pages.

'Merseyside have had surveillance on a local gangster, Emmet O'Connell, street name Lester, for a while. Last few weeks, a white Ford Transit has cropped up – registered to your brother, Stephen.' Roberts peers up at him sharply. 'Anything to say about that?'

'The van's listed in Brenda's notebook too.'

This information stills Roberts momentarily. 'In spite of everything, I still can't quite believe you've said that. Your brother is a clear line of investigation in a double murder inquiry and you kept it to yourself.'

'You're right. I'm sorry.'

Roberts snaps his thumb and his third finger impatiently. 'Who's driving the van?'

'I don't know.'

'Your brother? His son?'

'Christopher? Are you serious?'

'Why not? He was found in Trentham where there was a murder. His mother was able to find him. How did she know where to look? She won't tell. What about you?'

'Me? Are you kidding?'

'It's looking like a family business.' Roberts rubs the back of his neck as if there is a lot of tension stored there that's giving him considerable discomfort. 'Your brother should be arriving downstairs any moment to be interviewed as to what his van's doing in Liverpool.'

'You've had him arrested?'

Roberts shakes his head, more in sorrow, he seems to want to suggest, than anger. 'Of course I've had him arrested. I'm a police officer. And so

are you by the way, although you seem to have forgotten. Tell me what you know.'

Ian hesitates. The confusion of it floods his mind.

'Chop-chop now.' The boys-go-scouting expression is at odds with Roberts's demeanour. His jaw gives a furious little twitch.

'Can I sit?'

Roberts nods and Ian draws up the ladderback chair. He sits, plants his feet on the floor. He looks down. A dark pool of water is spreading across the floor of the office, climbing the walls, filling the room.

'I know how this looks—'

'How this looks? How it *looks* ? Really?'

Ian glances at his warrant card. 'I thought you were going to save me from being a twat.'

Roberts sort of laughs. 'There's not a man alive who can save you from that.'

There's a pause as they consider each other.

'Sir, I'll be straight with you—'

'How refreshing—'

'Something's very wrong.'

'You can say that again.'

'Maybe we need to get an outside force in to investigate.'

Roberts's smile is exasperated. He shakes his head. 'Well, fair play to you. I wasn't expecting *that*.'

'One of your mates in Merseyside is bent. I just can't work out who.'

'They're not *mates*. They're colleagues.'

'Well, I've spoken separately to Harry and to Superintendent Oakley and they've both told me they suspect corruption.'

'I'll talk to Dan. Find out what he's worried about.'

'But what if it's him?'

'Dan?' Roberts opens his hands. 'Dan Oakley? Please.'

'Lester's been a player for a long time, suspected of several murders and no one's ever touched him. How's he done that?'

'He's done it by being a psychopath. Liam was a grass. Both Dan and Harry have told me that. He gave up two kilos of Lester's heroin. Unsurprisingly Lester had him killed. And then there's some aftermath beef in Trentham. One of Liam's friends kills Lester's nephew. Maybe it was your brother did that. I'll ask him in a moment.'

‘I spoke to Lester—’

‘On whose authority?’

‘He seemed very happy for someone who’s just lost two kilos of smack. He actually said it out loud. Nobody’s ever going to get to the bottom of this.’

Roberts leans forward, elbows on the table and rests his chin in his hands. ‘You are losing your mind. The only actual solid evidence of possible corruption I have is you withholding Brenda’s notebook to protect your brother.’

‘That wasn’t corruption.’

Roberts laughs. ‘It wasn’t? What was it?’

‘I was waiting for things to get a bit clearer. I know how things go. People jump to conclusions.’

Roberts offers a mirthless smile. ‘Not when I’m investigating.’

He seems to expect a reply so Ian says, ‘OK.’

‘Let’s go through it. Your brother’s driving a Transit van that’s linked to armed robbery, drug dealing and murder, but you’ve got no information about that. Your nephew is found at the scene of a murder. His mother won’t say how she found him. You yourself left Merseyside under a cloud. Don’t get on with your family. Live on your own in the middle of nowhere. You have no partner. No ambition. No future to speak off. First time I hear about you it’s because you’ve gone alone into a farmhouse where there’s a man with a loaded shotgun. I can’t decide whether I should have you arrested or sectioned.’

Ian looks at his feet. Roberts is right. There is madness inside him. It expands across the floor, an expanding slick of dark water.

‘Stuff went wrong. I had … I don’t know. Something broke inside me.’

There’s a silence.

‘Oakley will have told you. Harry and me, we had a source. The boy was vulnerable and it was me who recruited him. Harry pushed and pushed. I told him not to. Jacob was begging me to let him off the hook.’ For a moment Ian can’t speak. ‘I saw his body. Lester had him tortured before they killed him. It’s the most shameful, disgraceful thing I’ve ever been part of.’

When Roberts speaks, his tone is careful. ‘And maybe it’s clouded your judgement?’

Ian stands, suddenly impatient. If Roberts wonders why Ian doesn't trust anyone – well, here it is. That patronising question. He's not *listening.*

'I was perfectly happy with my stolen chickens. You were the one who insisted I was part of this investigation. I've done what you asked and now I'm telling you that something's wrong. Harry said Liam was collecting evidence about a bent cop. Harry was careless, but he was never stupid. Either he's bent or someone else is bent.'

'The information I need is who was driving your brother's van.'

'I don't know who was driving Stephen's van.'

Roberts pushes the warrant card towards Ian. 'Go home and think it over, lad.'

'You're not listening. It's because you're friends with Desperate Dan Oakley and Harry the so-called dog. You've been taken in by a warm handshake and a bar room crooner.'

'I'll never dismiss allegations of corruption, but I'll need more convincing evidence to take this further.'

'Go ahead. Ignore me.'

'I won't go on a wild goose chase in another force. Where would I begin? What have you actually given me?'

'Fair enough. Just be careful you're not the one who ends up being the twat.' Even as the words are leaving his mouth, Ian regrets them. He reaches for his warrant card but Roberts is quicker. He puts it in his drawer.

'My patience has run out. You're suspended.'

Ian sits in the car in the yard for a length of time he cannot measure. Could be five minutes, could be an hour. His mind is blank. There are no officers to drive him home and Roberts has taken pity. Ian can keep the car until tomorrow, when officers from Stafford will pick it up. Then he will be alone in his police house. The question dawns on him: isn't that what he wanted?

Officers move past, going in and out. One of the coaches, packed with Met, swings out through the gate. They're singing.

We get to go home. We get to go home. You have to live here. We get to go home.

He turns the key in the ignition.

He asks himself whether that wasn't all a big charade from Roberts. He's so close with Merseyside. Why wouldn't he be in on it? And now Ian's no longer an officer with any powers to investigate. No one will ever listen to him.

But Roberts is right about one thing. The key to all of this is to find out who was driving his brother's van.

And then another thought comes. Maybe the simplest explanation is the right one. It was Stephen outside the post office and in Liverpool and in Trentham Gardens, killing Felix with Liam's gun. How well does he really know his brother? For years they have been strangers to each other.

And then for no apparent reason, the memory of that farmyard comes to him. The anxious collie dog standing in the yard and him walking straight through the open door of the kitchen to the farmer with his shotgun. He had felt absolutely no fear.

That is madness.

Ian pulls out of the station and turns towards the roundabout that will lead him towards the motorway and back to Cannock. The rain is coming down in a fine mist that clouds orange in the street light. The back windscreen is fogged with cold and spattered with rain-drops. Still Ian notices the car in his rear-view mirror. He takes a left and then a right. The headlights turn with him. The road shines wet. Ian pulls over. The car slows. Ian can almost feel the driver hesitate, uncertain what to do. Then the car speeds up and overtakes.

Ian's done enough surveillance himself to be almost amused by the incompetence. How could Roberts possibly summon up a good team at short notice in Stoke-on-Trent on a Sunday night? He feels a sad acceptance at being followed. His brother's van is linked to murder and organised crime and he's hidden the evidence. If he were Roberts, he would have put him under surveillance too. Maybe Roberts even let him keep the car so that he could drive easily to places that would incriminate him and unravel the conspiracy. An instant later Ian has to pull over and stop the car. He closes his eyes against the wave of shock that sweeps through him. He is no longer a policeman. He is a suspect. His years of running away have put him far outside all the worlds that could once have protected him. His police house in Cannock feels for the first time unbearably cold and isolated.

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The detectives have given up on small talk, so everyone waits in silence. Kirk in the corner with notepad and pen. Stephen in front of the small wooden table. Nicola McNulty, a member of a law firm that's been working out of Nottingham to support the striking miners, sits next to him.

Roberts steps in. He takes the chair opposite Stephen and offers his hand. 'Sorry you've been waiting, Stephen. Took your solicitor a while to get here from Nottingham.' He glances at Nicola. 'And thanks for coming all this way. Although we do have lawyers here in Stoke, you know.'

'I'm Mr Weldon's named lawyer and he wanted me, not one of the lawyers you have here in Stoke.'

Roberts smiles. 'And it's very good of you to come. I'm Paul, the detective chief superintendent here.'

'First names now, is it?' Stephen says, leaning back.

Roberts ignores the snark. 'Can Kirk here get you both anything? A cup of tea?'

Stephen says, 'Bottle of champagne would be nice.'

Roberts nods. 'You're frustrated. I understand that. We didn't find Christopher. I'm sorry.'

Nicola raises her hand. 'Your officer arrested Mr Weldon on suspicion of murder. He is right to be wary. This is not a first names friendly chat.'

'You're right.' Roberts turns to Stephen. 'If you tell us what's been going on, it's possible we can wrap this up fairly quickly.'

Stephen doesn't reply.

'We've got two murders. And the attack on your son.'

'I don't know owt about any of it.'

'Your van, you see – it's everywhere. Outside the post office where there was an armed robbery.'

Stephen smiles. ‘If it was there on Friday, then you’ll know it wasn’t me driving it. I reported it stolen on Friday.’

‘I’m not talking about Friday. Friday morning, your van was found in an underpass in Nottingham where you’d gone to do some picketing in breach of your injunction. You made off from police. Fair play to you getting away. Another time, I’d ask you how you pulled that off. They had a hell of a job getting the van out.’

‘How could I have been in Nottingham? Like I said, my van was stolen.’

‘Have it your way. You weren’t in Nottingham.’ There’s a brief silence. ‘Thing is, none of that picketing stuff matters to me right now. The slate’s wiped clean.’

‘Wiped clean, is it? More than nine months we’ve been out, you lot beating us up. Spying on us. Joe Green killed at Ferrybridge. David Jones dead at Ollerton. Fractured skulls and charging horses at Orgreave. But the slate’s wiped clean when you want it to be.’

‘The men we’re trying to identify are murderers.’

‘You lot are murderers.’

Roberts shrugs. ‘I’m sorry you feel like that. I’m just an old-fashioned copper. I don’t like being dragged into politics.’

‘Easily said.’

Roberts shrugs. ‘You think so?’

‘You left my son lying in a ditch.’

‘I’m sorry about that too.’

‘You’re sorry.’

‘I am.’

Stephen shrugs.

Roberts presses on. ‘You and I don’t agree on everything but I appreciate you’re a man of strong principles. I’ve got a feeling this business is nothing to do with you.’

‘How’ve you got this feeling then? How do you know anything at all about me? Got a grass?’

‘I don’t need a grass to know you’ve been striking to save other men’s jobs. That sounds principled to me.’

‘And that sounds like flannel to me.’

There is a moment’s silence before Roberts continues. ‘Merseyside have been conducting surveillance on Liam Holdcroft, a drug dealer who

has been found murdered. Your van was photo-graphed outside his house.’

‘You didn’t get a pic of the driver then? Bad luck.’

‘If the violence in Merseyside and Trentham have nothing to do with you, then I’m asking you to help me put these men away, whoever they are.’

‘If you know so much about me, you’ll know I’ve never been to Liverpool. I’m a Stoke City fan and I don’t have the cash for away games.’

‘Is that meant to be funny?’

‘Not especially. My son’s in intensive care. You’re holding me here while he fights for his life.’

Stephen stares straight at Roberts, and Roberts returns his gaze.

‘In the week before an armed robbery, your van was seen several times outside the post office in Hartshill. I’d say whoever was sitting in it was casing the joint. You ever lend it to anyone?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Did you lend it to your son at all?’

‘You’re asking me that? Seriously?’

‘Your son’s caught up in this, somehow.’

‘He’s not caught up in this. He’s in hospital—’

‘People involved in violent crime are also often the victims of violent crime. That’s how it works. He was found in Trentham where another man was murdered. He worked in bar where drugs were dealt. You said yourself he wasn’t gay—’

‘I was wrong to say that—’

‘And then there’s your van again. Seems an obvious connection to your son.’

‘Christopher doesn’t drive. He’s the most harmless lad you’ll ever meet.’

‘If you’ve lent your van to someone, you should tell me. That’s all I need to know. If it wasn’t you, then who was using your van?’

‘At the moment my son is on a ventilator. And you’ll need a lot more than my van to pin something on me that I didn’t do.’

‘What about your brother, Ian?’

‘What about him?’

‘You ever lend him your van?’

‘He’s a police officer.’

‘Yes, and he’s currently suspended.’

‘Ian’s suspended?’

Nicola leans in. ‘Is this all you have against my client? His van has been seen in various places? You’ll need more than that to put a murder charge in front of a jury.’

Roberts speaks irritably. ‘I’m asking your client for help with a murder inquiry.’

‘But you are not speaking to Mr Weldon as a witness. You have arrested him on suspicion of murder and my job is to defend him.’

Roberts turns to Stephen. ‘Will you speak to me as witness?’

‘I’ve told you all I’m going to.’

Nicola interlocks her fingers. ‘This feels like a fishing expedition. Stephen, you are under arrest on suspicion of murder and I advise you to make no comment to any further questions.’

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Ian pulls up outside Liam's terraced house. The mad Cotswolds cladding has darkened in the rain. Stephanie leads him through to the kitchen. She's wearing tight jeans, a pale-blue mohair jumper and slippers. Dirty dishes are piled up by the sink. An open bottle of Liebfraumilch stands on the table. Ian walks and talks like a whole person but inside he is shattered glass.

'You drink on duty?' Stephanie asks, taking a gulp with a defiant smile. She sees him like a whole person, like a detective no less. It's a relief to give up the pretence.

'I'm not a cop anymore. I've been fired.'

'That's all right then.'

'Sandra with the neighbour again?'

'Thought you weren't a cop anymore?'

Ian shrugs. 'Old habits.'

Stephanie opens a cupboard and places a glass on the table. Ian fills it. Stephanie raises her glass and he takes a gulp. It's nasty, but he swigs it down. Two empty bottles stand by the bin. She meets his eyes and raises her eyebrows. She finishes her glass and pours herself another.

'Yes, she's with Julie. Sleepover.'

'OK.'

Ian stands his empty glass on the table and Stephanie empties the last of the bottle into it.

'That van you saw – it was my brother's. I'm trying to find out who was driving it.'

'That what you're here for? Coz if so, you can go. I'm not interested.' She turns her back, gets two more bottles from the cupboard. She pauses in the kitchen doorway. 'But if you're staying, bring the bottle opener and the glasses through.'

He pauses alone in the kitchen, as if he is thinking it through, but his mind is blank. He follows her to the living room and they sit next to each

other on the sofa. She opens one of the bottles and pours them both brimming glasses that stand on top of the coffee table. No one could lift those without spilling them and she leans forward and slurps the top of hers. He does the same. She takes a cigarette out of the box on the table and lights it.

‘Help yourself if you want one.’

She moves over to the sideboard that supports the telly and starts leafing through the record albums stacked on the shelf beneath it. She lifts one of them up as if for his opinion – The Moody Blues: *A Question of Balance*.

‘Sorry, I can’t stand The Moody Blues.’

‘Well done, you’ve passed the test. It were Liam’s.’

She takes it out of its sleeve and hits it hard on the corner of the coffee table. It breaks and they both laugh.

‘Got one I can smash?’

She hands him *Days of Future Passed*. What a stupid bloody title.

He takes it out of its sleeve. ‘You sure now?’

‘God, yes. Just don’t get it in your eye.’

He breaks it on the table and she downs the remains of her glass of wine.

‘Cheers.’ She fills her glass. ‘No matter how much I drink, I just can’t seem to get pissed.’ She starts searching through the albums again. ‘There’s a couple more somewhere – hang on.’

She finds the albums and turns back to him, holding one in each hand. ‘Look! One each! Ta da!’

Every Good Boy Deserves Favour and *On the Threshold of a Dream*.

‘I dunno. Stephanie. They are proper shit. But still.’

‘You’re no fun.’ She has one of the records out of its sleeve and smashes it on the table. A piece flies up and her hand darts to her cheek. There’s blood on her fingers. He goes to help but she pushes him away. ‘I don’t know why you’re here if you won’t join in.’

It is only now that he realises how drunk she is.

‘Come on. Let me look.’

She relents. He kneels beside her. Perhaps this tenderness is what he’s really here for, not for any information about his brother’s stupid van. He lifts her hand away from her face. It’s a nasty little nick. It will scar.

‘Let’s clean it up in the kitchen. You got any plasters?’

She takes his hand and brings it to her mouth. ‘In a minute.’

He can so easily lean into this impulse, and he does. He kisses her and she yields. He lies awkwardly beside her among the shards of broken records, one leg over hers, his arm stretched around her body. He feels the slightness of her back. The nobble of her vertebrae. She smells unwashed and tastes of cigarettes. The sadness of it brings its own compulsion to continue, as if this bleakness is a tunnel down which they can both escape. But there’s a resistance too, a shred of him that warns of disaster.

In any case she pushes him away. ‘I’m going to be sick.’

‘I’ll get you a saucepan.’

He sits beside her while she hangs her head over the pan, stroking her hair away from her face and behind her ear.

She passes her hand across her mouth. ‘It’s OK. It’s gone.’

‘Coffee?’

They stand in the kitchen.

‘I knew where the money was coming from, and I let him.’

‘No way you could have known what would happen.’ He pushes the cup of instant coffee across the counter towards her. ‘Let me run you a hot bath.’

‘I can’t. I haven’t been upstairs since the news. Can’t face our old room.’

Into his mind comes the possibility – *stay at mine*.

‘I can ring someone to be with you. You shouldn’t be alone.’

‘You don’t want to be with me.’

‘It’s not that.’

There’s a silence.

‘There’s my sister. She wasn’t talking to me when I was with Liam but I expect she will now.’

He rings the sister. She’s on her way. Twenty minutes. Ian says he’ll wait.

Turns out that when it comes to her sister, Stephanie still has some pride. They clear up quickly, dump the empty wine bottles in the bin outside. Ian smashes *On the Threshold of a Dream*, because, as they both agree, might as well. Stephanie asks him to get her toothbrush from upstairs and she brushes her teeth in the kitchen sink. They sit with tea.

Stephanie opens a cupboard and takes out the jade box that held Harry's card. 'That lad I told you about, Zammo. He came by very early Saturday morning.' She puts the box on the counter and gestures for Ian to open it. 'He give me that. Said him and Liam went way back. He wanted to help.'

Ian opens the box and sees a loose pile of used notes of different denominations. 'How much is it?'

'A hundred quid.'

'Exactly?'

'Exactly.' Stephanie's face burns. 'For the funeral.'

The notes are used. This is not money that has come fresh from a bank. But maybe it's money that's been used to pay for little wraps of drugs.

'He was shitting himself. Had anyone been to see me? Did I know anything?'

'You gave him Harry's number?'

She nods. 'He told me not to tell anyone. Said he couldn't trust no one.'

'Left you his number?'

She nods again.

'Ring him. Tell him who I am. Ask if he'll meet me.'

Stephanie passes Ian the phone.

A voice crackles through a bad line. 'Liam were me marra.'

Marra: the warmest word for friend, and as Stoke as clay itself. It tugs on Ian's heart like a homecoming. The accent is so familiar that Ian feels for an instant that he must actually know this man, but it's not Stephen, that's for sure.

'I want to get them bastards as killed him.'

'What about Harry? Have you talked to him?'

'That bent cunt.'

'Harry's bent?'

'That's what Liam said.'

'Were you in Trentham?'

'I'm not going to talk about that.'

'That's a yes then. You killed Felix—'

‘Look, I got summat for you. Proof. Do you want to meet me or not? Coz I’m not hanging around.’

‘Yes, I want to meet you.’

‘Come on your own, mind. I don’t trust no one no more.’

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Outside the cell, someone sings the same line over and over.

Roll out the barrel we'll have a barrel of fun.

Stephen lies on his back and stares at the ceiling. He thinks of Liam and him working together on the best ever go-kart. They took on all comers until the wheels fell off. Liam broke his arm! Liam, son of a hero fireman – how did Liam Holdcroft end up a dead drug dealer? Maybe because that's how things are going.

Stephen gets up and stands by the wicket. His loneliness – usually forcefully hidden, by being busy, by being part of something bigger, by anger and impatience – stands in the room with him.

Saltley Gate. The early morning flood of people marching in, singing, laughing, blocking the gates. Jamie with that daft placard. Workers of the world unite! The laughter and the cheer that went up and the policeman stretching out his hand in friendship.

He put his chest against the wheel with others like him then, and they achieved something extraordinary. No-I-Can't-Me-Mum-Won't-Let-Me Billy had left Saltley early to be with his kids and Stephen despised him for missing that moment when history turned. But Billy kept his family and Stephen lost his. And for what? History didn't turn after all. Saltley Gate was a skirmish. At Orgreave, Thatcher was waiting for them. The police ripped off their shoulder numbers and rode them down on horses, threw them into the back of vans, beat them until their batons broke and then lied about what they'd done. But worse than that was the steelworkers not standing by them. It wouldn't matter – none of it would matter, that's the thing – if they had all stuck together and were strong to the end.

The wicket slides open. Nicola's there next to a police officer.

'Stephen, I'm making representations to get you released. You'll be bailed with conditions. The officer here will get your property and paperwork together. But it'll be a while. OK?'

Stephen lies back on the cell's concrete bed with its thin mattress and the smell of other men's sweat. He stares at the ceiling. It's speckled with little flinty bits of glass.

After Saltley he took Christopher into a corner shop in the village and the man behind the counter wouldn't take money for the liquorice sherbet.

'Got them on the run this time, haven't we?' the shopkeeper said and Stephen remembered Arthur standing on the toilets with his megaphone and he wants to keep faith with that memory, the blistering joy of it.

'You can't imagine it,' Stephen said to Christopher, who walked solemnly beside him, holding his sherbet aloft unopened in his left hand as if it was the Olympic torch. 'You had to be there. Look what the working man can achieve. And one man died, Christopher, killed by a scab lorry driver on a picket line. That's how much it matters to everyone: the working man is prepared to die. It's not just about wages, not like Heath and his lot would say. It's—' And he had wanted to say what his grandfather always used to say – *we lift each other up* – but he couldn't get the words out. He wanted so much for Christopher to understand why he had stayed in Saltley instead of coming home.

Christopher had stopped walking. There were tears in his boy's eyes. He reached out and put his small hand in his father's. 'You can have my sherbet if you like, Dad.'

'No, lad. It's yours. You have it.'

Stephen wipes his hand across his face as he thinks of the sweetness of his son who now lies in a hospital bed with a machine breathing for him.

And he thinks of Tweety too. Always by his side. Through all of this. Tweety at Saltley. Tweety at Orgreave. Tweety in Nottingham. Tweety who said only his friends got to call him that because his real name is Eddie. How well has Stephen ever known Tweety, the friend who kept asking to borrow his van?

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36

Ian drives along the Shelton Road. Josiah Wedgewood named this part of Stoke Etruria for the ancient homeland of the Etruscans with their fine pottery. The pride of it is in Stoke's bones. Tea sets for the royal houses of Europe. And the ambition for a better world too. The anti-slavery cameo was fired here in Jasperware. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother* ? Look at Etruria now. On the right, subsided into the earth, lie what remains of Wedgewood's abandoned works. The mighty steelworks on the left are being dismantled into the promise of a Garden Festival. Ian's heard there will be a cable car. Wedgewood's long fought for Trent and Mersey Canal will be part of a heritage garden.

The car passes over the stagnant waters and takes a right into brick terraces named after the distant places of a past empire. Kimberley, Ladysmith, Pretoria. He pulls the car beyond the turning to the dark railed park and switches the engine off.

Afeared, he thinks: a Stoke word that is naturally part of life here, as if Staffordshire is an island mysteriously connected to a deeper past. And Ian is afeared. Zammo might well have evidence, but it also sounded very much like he killed Felix in Trentham Gardens. If so, he's got a gun. Ian takes his 2D Maglite out of the boot of the car and feels the heft of it in his palm.

The cobbles have been covered over but they are breaking through the tarmac. The ground is puddled with rain that in the darkness shines like pools of oil. As he walks down the back of the terraces, a light comes on in one of the yards and a dog barks. Ian counts down the houses. A few have been done up with fresh double-glazing, but number eleven still has the old brick outhouse and a clapped-out zinc bath hanging on the wall. The bricks are soft with moss, the window frames rotting. He steps past the lee of the outhouse and crosses the yard. The back door is unlocked. He steps into the narrow kitchen. The house is silent. The door to the next room is shut and he risks the light switch. A single bulb throws bright

light onto walls blackened with mould. There's a dirty gas stove, cupboards with doors hanging at angles. In the corner, an old extendable table, with both leaves missing. He moves towards the door and listens. The house is silent.

Holding the Maglite down by his side, he moves through. A bobbled purple rug lies next to a tiled fireplace, where a bar heater burns red. The room is boiling. Like fat from a stab wound, yellow foam bursts through the split crimson leatherette sofa. Ian slides his hand inside the breach and finds nothing. He looks underneath, checks the hearth, lifts the rug and shines his torch over the floorboards, looking for a hidey hole. Nothing. He moves into the hallway. The front door is boarded shut from the inside. He takes the narrow stairs. The first room has peeling purple geometric wallpaper, and a double bed with a pillow and blanket. In the second room, at the back, there is nothing except a closed brown curtain patterned with orange circles, in front of which stands Harry himself.

Ian must be dreaming.

Harry nods hello.

Ian still can't work it out. What's Harry doing here?

Then Harry says, 'Come on your own, was it?' and – although he doesn't fully understand it – Ian realises that he and Harry have been set up.

'Shit.'

With surprising gentleness, Harry smiles. 'I was taken in by Zammo's friendship with Liam. I thought he wanted justice for his friend. What's your excuse?'

'Stupidity.'

Harry laughs.

Ian says, 'I was trying to find out who's bent. Thought it might be you.'

'You tell anyone?'

'My boss. Roberts.'

'That's so perfect. When they find our bodies, I'll look bent and you'll look vindicated.'

Ian nods. 'Or we'll both look bent: two dirty coppers.'

Harry smiles. 'So much history, so much friendship, so much dirt. Even if one of us survives, he'll look rotten.'

Ian walks over to the window, pulls the curtain aside and looks down into the yard. ‘No one there yet, but they’ll be coming that way. Front door’s boarded up. Out the sitting room window?’

But Harry seems oddly relaxed. ‘I still don’t get it. Why does Zammo want to hurt us? After the beef in Trentham – Zammo killed Lester’s nephew for God’s sake – surely he should be hiding from Lester, not trying to harm the only people who might be able to protect him?’

‘Harry, we’ll need to be alive to work that one out.’

Ian moves onto the landing towards the top of the stairs, but he hears the latch on the back door below them. With Harry behind him, he steps quickly into the front bedroom.

Ian tries to open the window, but it won’t budge. It’s painted shut.

‘Happen to have a putty knife?’ Ian says.

‘Very funny.’

They both step back quickly from the window and move back across the landing to the back room. Ian tests the window: this one moves. He pulls the curtain shut for a second.

Harry leans into him and speaks quietly. ‘I’ll introduce myself— you go out the window and run like fuck for help.’

Ian offers rock, paper, scissors, but Harry pats his full belly. ‘Should never have stopped with the amphet.’

It is only now that Ian realises that Harry has had this plan from the outset. The only possibility is for one to distract while the other runs down the alleyway.

Harry leans close and hisses in Ian’s ear, ‘Liam had evidence. Find it.’

The back door opens a second time and Ian hears the sound of low voices. Whoever is downstairs has been waiting for a second man.

Ian whispers back, ‘No worries.’

Harry leans in and barely breathes a phrase of *Careless Whisper*. Then he kisses Ian on the cheek. ‘Now be a dear and get a shifty o

Ian holds out the Maglite. Harry takes it and steps away from Ian, out onto the landing, and calls down the stairs, ‘Zammo?’

‘Down here, mate.’

That voice again, Ian thinks. Familiar, but unplaceable.

Harry is making a good job of it, banging slowly down the stairs.

Ian draws the brown and orange curtain back and glances down. The yard is empty. He pulls down hard on the window frame and it opens. He

clambers onto the sill, twists his body and hooks his fingers round the window frame as he lowers himself outside. He swings a leg out towards the metal downspout hanger, but doesn't stand a chance of reaching it. He lets go and is on the dirty wet ground with a bitter pain in his wrist. He gets to his feet. As he runs down the ginnel, from behind he hears a gunshot.

The beep of Christopher's heart has sped up. Felicity studies the machines. She says, 'I'm just going to pop out and have a little chat with the doctor.'

Janet closes her eyes for a moment. Then she opens them and smooths the bed covers.

'I'm going to take us both on a trip to Paris to visit some of those art museums. I've got some money saved. We'll spend time together—'

She has to stop talking. She closes her eyes and pushes the V of her index finger and her thumb against her throat and stifles what is rising there.

When she opens her eyes, Stephen is back in the room. He takes his seat on the other side of the bed.

'How's he doing?'

'The nurse has just gone to talk to the doctor.'

Stephen takes his son's hand. 'I'm back, Christopher. It's your dad.'

Janet says, 'Why did the police need to talk to you?'

Stephen turns and Janet sees a stillness in his face that frightens her.

'Wasn't the strike then?'

He shakes his head.

The opening door interrupts them. Felicity is there with a different doctor. This one is extremely thin, and tall. A praying mantis. Janet doesn't want him – a busy man, after all, a doctor in an intensive care unit – to have the time to speak to her. He has introduced himself but in a second Janet has forgotten his name. He is just the frightening doctor. A flush of heat rises through her. It's as if a voice in her head is shouting loudly to prevent her from hearing what the doctor is saying.

'*… maximum dose of drugs to support his heart.*'

She is lost in the print of the vase of flowers behind the doctor's head. The flowers are super real, more intense than they can ever be in life.

Whites and pinks and blue. Petals and stamens and a stem winding down over a marbled table.

Felicity's hand is on hers. 'Are you able to take in what the doctor is saying?'

'Yes, yes, I'm following.' Janet nods for the doctor to continue. She concentrates.

'Christopher's blood pressure is very low so his heart is struggling to continue to supply itself with blood. If the blood pressure gets lower—'

Janet puts the heel of her hands into her eyes and presses hard.

'—there will be a time when the heart can no longer pump blood to itself. It will start to slow down, and it will stop.'

Stephen says, 'Are you saying Christopher is going to die?'

'I'm trying to prepare you, should the worst happen.'

Janet says, 'Prepare myself? How should I do that?'

Stephen says, 'Janet.'

'If Christopher's heart stops, you can start it again.'

'I'm very sorry. If Christopher's heart stops it will be because it is irreversibly damaged. There will be nothing we can do.'

Janet looks back at the flowers. *Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.* She clasps her hands together and, hiding what she is doing, rubs the knuckle of her right thumb hard round her left palm. It helps to feel some pain.

Ian stands in a phone box by the park. All he can hear is that gunshot. He has dialled 999 and it is taking an age to be put through. He bangs his own forehead with the handset. He looks towards the dark park. Perhaps he should call Roberts directly, but he can't trust him. He needs plod. Someone who pounds pavements and drives cars. Someone who is not part of whatever is happening. He is losing his mind. He needs an ambulance. He hits his fist against the coin box just as the operator takes his call.

'Can I have your name please?'

'A man's been shot,' he says. 'I need an ambulance.'

'Your name and location please, sir.'

Ian hesitates. Then, desperate to hurry up the operator, he gives his name and rank. 'I need urgent assistance.'

He runs back along the line of terraces towards the house. He can hear sirens. Down Kimberley Road, the undipped headlights of a car flare. He steps back and presses himself into the shadow of the buildings. As the car accelerates down the road towards him, he has to resist the urge to put his hand over his eyes to shield the glare. He wants no movement to draw attention. Instead, he presses himself hard against the wall and, as he closes his eyes, imagines the sudden impact of one and a half tonnes of speeding metal. But the car passes and he opens his eyes. He is still blinded by the headlights but can make out the outline of an XJS Jaguar. Same as outside Lester's nightclub. He'd recognise that ugly car anywhere. A siren wails and an ambulance turns into the road. Ian runs into the road and flags it down.

'You can't get in through the front door. It's boarded up. You'll have to go round the back.'

He follows the ambulance as it bounces down the alleyway and enters the house behind the two paramedics. Harry is on the floor, eyes open. His head is smashed. There is stuff splattered up the wall behind him. Ian looks for the Maglite but cannot see it. From a hole in Harry's stomach blood, has bloomed. Ian runs up the stairs, but, apart from the paramedics and dead Harry, the house is empty. From the street, more sirens. Hammering at the front door. *Police!* Ian turns and runs out of the house, taking the alleyway towards his car.

Janet cannot calm herself. She gets up and walks. She turns to Stephen, exasperated by his silence and his stillness. 'You were saying something when the doctor came in. About being arrested. What did the police ask you about?'

Stephen rests his hands on his knees. 'They wanted to know who'd been borrowing my van.'

'Why?'

'They said it's linked to a murder in Liverpool and the dead man in Trentham Gardens. They said whoever borrowed my van is part of what's happened to Christopher.'

In an instant, she is exhausted. She sits. 'Who was it, Stephen?'

'Tweety.'

'That idiot has got something to do with what's happened to our son?'

‘I know. I can’t get me head round it. He drove me here, Janet, when I got the news Christopher was in hospital. How could he do that if he’s got summat to do with it? But no one else borrowed the van. It’s like I’ve been friends with a stranger.

‘For God’s sake. Why ever did you make friends with him?’

‘Because I was trying to do the right thing.’ Stephen puts his hands on his thighs as if he is steadying himself. ‘Got to think maybe it was him grassing us up to the cops too. They always knew where we were going to be picketing.’

‘Who gives a shit about the picketing? Look at our son.’

She can’t even look at Stephen. She is beside herself. She gets up again. Walks two paces. Stops. For days she has been riding a rollercoaster and the calm she felt only a few hours ago has deserted her. She knows she is doing something very wrong reacting like this, but it is stronger than her. All she wants is for Christopher to be well. Has Stephen brought this on them with that stupid friendship? How big he is, and how unable to contain anything. It was never just her studies; that was always the cruellest thing. It was him: Stephen. Stephen, for God’s sake. That wasn’t his fault, but it wasn’t hers either. They were kids snogging. Then they were parents.

‘Did you tell the police that it was Tweety?’

He shakes his head.

‘Why not? He’s dangerous.’

‘I think he might be in with the cops. They’ve suspended our Ian. Who knows what’s going on? I can’t trust anyone. Got to sort it myself.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You don’t need to worry. I screwed up in all kinds of ways but I got this.’

She is exasperated and afraid and ashamed of herself. She is not the person she needs to be. ‘I said some terrible things …’

‘It’s OK.’

‘That stupid card. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter at all. Of course it didn’t.’

‘None of that matters now.’

‘It’s not true that I never loved you.’ She smiles. ‘That morning you took the tent down in your underpants … Christopher and me. We both loved you til our hearts would burst.’

He smiles too and, in a flash, she hates him again, just for the shortest instant … if he let danger into their life, that precious fragile life with Christopher. And for what? For what? Some stupid ideal.

Perhaps Stephen reads her mind, because he stands. ‘Don’t trust anyone, Janet.’ He leans over the bed and holds Christopher’s face with his huge hands. ‘I’ll be back soon, son. I love you all the world. You hang on in there for me. Everything’s going to be different from now on.’

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Ian drives.

A pursuit of a red Ford Capri near Kimberley Road is squawking out of the car's police radio. Liam's car, Ian thinks. Zammo. Wrong way up the dual carriageway at a hundred miles an hour. Then it's a loss somewhere near the Forest Park.

Ian's mind is blank except for that soft kiss on his cheek before he handed Harry the Maglite. Harry was telling the truth. He was trying to do the right thing by Jacob. Ian barely sees the turns he is taking as he drives. Between arriving outside his parents' house and being inside, it there is a gap in his consciousness.

He stands in his parents' cold, deserted front room. His mind solid as concrete. He is in shock – of course he is – but knowing that doesn't help him. How perfectly he and Harry were set up. Everything he's done looks criminal. Stephen too. His van is everywhere. Even his ex-wife won't say how she found Christopher. The whole family looks bent. Oakley or Roberts, he wonders, or both of them together? He has to act, to get ahead of the chain of events that are spooling out, but he doesn't know how to. He grasps onto his first impulse, his reason to come here: to talk to Stephen. But where is his brother? Still in custody or at the hospital. Both places Ian dare not go. When he called the ambulance for Harry, he gave his name and rank. He's linked to the crime scene and Roberts will surely have police looking for him in a matter of moments.

He goes upstairs. The sheets piled in the airing cupboard are old and threadbare: the sheets of his childhood. He rips one and binds his wrist. He has to leave here immediately. Get on top of it before he is arrested, but a part of him is so tired. He could lie down and sleep for a hundred years. On the landing, he pauses and gazes out of the window onto the street below, where his police car is parked. He can see the hushed procession of the village walking towards the house, suspended in time.

Stephen walking on his own. Jamie, wrapped in a blanket, his hair dark with pond water.

One light burns in the window of Jamie's sitting room. Ian sits outside with the engine off. His mind cannot let go of that spattered wall behind Harry. Although he tries to shake it off, it absorbs him utterly. The nauseating smell too, of blood and gristle. His usual contrivances have deserted him. The house in Cannock feels imaginary. Only that wall feels real. No more fleeing to faraway places. He must stir himself.

He went to Jamie before as a policeman, as a detective, and the policeman inside informs him that being here is unwise: Jamie could be the man who has been driving his brother's van. But Ian doesn't believe that for one second. It's not the policeman that has brought Ian to Jamie's door. It is the past. It is the man he knows.

He gets out of the car and walks to the front door. Jamie opens, takes one look at him and gestures for him to step inside.

Ian sits in front of a roaring fire with a cup of hot sweet tea. In this neat front room with its pretty curtains, he glimpses, in a brisk shuffle of revelations, every time he has seen but not considered Jamie's silence. Jamie at the oval family table, the brand-new football on his lap. Jamie at Stephen's wedding, the awkward best man with the too extravagant presents. Now his hallway, empty of his sons' shoes and coats.

Jamie returns with a couple of thick sandwiches stuffed with cheese and Branston pickle.

'You need to rest. Maybe go to casualty and get that wrist looked at.'

'My fingerprints will be all over Kimberley Road. I'll be arrested if I go to hospital.'

'Ring your boss. Tell him it was Tweety who borrowed Stephen's van.'

'There's a bent cop and I don't know whether it's my boss, or Harry's boss, Oakley. Or – full house – they're working together. I've been set up and I need evidence. There's so much I need to understand before I give anyone the chance to arrest me.' Ian bites into the sandwich. It is deliciously sweet and sour and heavy. 'If it was Tweety driving Stephen's van, we need to talk to him. Do you know where he lives?'

‘At his parents’ old home, out Smallthorne way. He’s an only child. Never moved out. When they died, it was his.’

With the heat and the sugar, with Jamie here, most importantly, Ian’s brain is beginning to work again, trying to thread the evidence together.

‘What do you make of Tweety, Jamie? Do you make him for a murderer?’

‘I’m not the person to ask, maybe. Never liked him. He’s a loud-mouthed little prat. Always trying to prove something. Hard to get past that. Even though I’ve known him forever I don’t really feel like I *know* him. But a murderer? I dunno.’

Ian remembers the conversation with his brother the night he stopped over. *They always know where we are.*

‘What was the earliest you could have been in Nottingham Friday morning?’

‘We met up five thirty – it will have been an hour after that. So six thirty, earliest.’

‘Roberts rang me at five on Friday morning to task me with informing Liam’s wife he’d been murdered. He said Stephen was already in Nottingham, breaching his injunction. How did he know that when you hadn’t even arrived yet?’

‘Well, Stephen thought there was a grass.’

‘Tweety?’

‘I’m not sure he could kill someone, but grassing? Definitely.’

‘OK. We’ll pay Tweety a visit, but I’ll ring Roberts first from a payphone. Try to find out what he knows.’

There are a couple of phone boxes in the car park of the working men’s club. The first has been jemmied for its coins, but the second one is working. Jamie stands outside, waiting. Feeding a ten pence piece, Ian hears Roberts’s voice through the pips.

‘Ian? Don’t hang up! I should have listened to you—’

‘No time for that. Harry was going after a bent cop and that’s why he was murdered. I’m trying to find out if it was you.’

‘Come in, lad. We’ll talk it through—’

‘I’ve only got one more ten pence piece, so don’t waste any more time.’

‘Question for you then. Someone dropped a Maglite when they were fleeing the scene. Is that going to have your prints on it?’

‘Yes, you’re going to find my prints on it.’

‘Ian, you better come in.’

‘I gave it to Harry to defend himself. Is that why you wanted me to work this investigation? To set me up?’

Roberts snorts. ‘Now I’m setting you up? You are desperate.’

‘That’s exactly what I am.’

Ian talks through the pips as he pushes a coin into the slot.

‘Friday morning, you rang me. You knew my brother was going to be in Nottingham, picketing, before he even left Stoke?’

‘OK, I knew where your brother was going to be. He was a ring leader and a law breaker so I received intelligence about him.’

‘So why all the bullshit about finding out who was driving his van?’

‘How would I know if he leant his van? This was intelligence about unlawful picketing.’

‘Who did you get the intelligence from?’

‘I don’t know because it was anonymised. I’m not authorised to talk about it. In any case I can’t see why it matters.’

And I don’t know why it matters either, Ian thinks, but it does. But then he thinks, who recruited Tweety?

The final pips are going. Roberts talks through them. ‘Meet me.’

Ian replaces the phone on its cradle.

Jamie pulls the door open. ‘Any clearer?’

‘I’m going to make another call. Someone who might be able to help.’

The number written on the piece of paper in Ian’s wallet is faded. He remembers for a moment finding it after Patty had left that cold morning in Cannock. He spotted the torn edge of paper in his wallet when he was paying for petrol in a garage. He can feel the moment still: taking the note out in that characterless place and feeling the invisible connection to her. He can just about read the number. He dials 100 and asks the operator to reverse the charges.

‘And who should I say is calling?’

‘Tell her it’s Ian Weldon.’

He holds on the line but it’s not Patty but a man who answers the phone. ‘Good evening.’

‘Good evening. It’s the operator here. Will you accept the charges from Ian Weldon?’

‘Could you just give me a second?’ It’s a masculine, no-nonsense, London voice. A voice that’s used to exercising authority. The line is muffled. There is talking in the background. This must be the new fiancé, the Met commander? Ian imagines him from his voice: a tough detective who’s risen through the ranks. That would be Patty’s type. Ian with his starlings rising from the field has been left behind.

‘Yes, I’ll accept the charges.’

The line clicks and the operator is gone. Now, of all times, Ian finds himself in the awkward world of the ex-boyfriend.

‘I’m Ian Weldon, an old friend—’

‘Yes, I know exactly who you are. Patty doesn’t want to talk to you I’m afraid.’

‘I’m sorry to ask you this. Could you tell her please that Harry’s been murdered?’

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Stephen goes down the alleyway round the back and lets himself in. There's no one in Tweety's kitchen, just dirty plates and a full ashtray on the small table. Stephen moves through into the sitting room. A car passes the house. He puts his bag on the floor beside him, gets on his knees before the hearth and builds a fire. Before he has put a match to the paper, the back door opens.

Stephen gets up and moves quietly along the hallway towards the kitchen. Tweety is standing in a pool of light from the window. He's in a daze, leaning on the table. He's got no coat on but he's wearing woollen gloves.

'Tweety.'

He jumps out of his skin.

'Didn't mean to frighten you. You've got no coat on. You must be freezing.'

'Yeah.' Tweety runs his hands through his hair distractedly.

'Remembered your gloves though.'

'Bloody hell, Stephen. Why you so interested in what I'm wearing?'

'No reason. I set a fire. I was gonna wait for you. Hope that's OK.'

'No problem. Any news of Christopher?'

'Still in hospital. In a coma.'

'That's good news that, isn't it? People get better from comas, don't they?'

'I guess sometimes they do and sometimes they don't.'

'Got to think positive. I was going to come see you funnily enough. See how you were doing. Just popped back for me coat.'

'When you realised how cold it was.'

'Fuck's sake, stop going on about me coat. Set a light to that fire.' Tweety grabs the kettle and moves over to the tap and starts to fill it. 'I'll make you a cuppa. Could do with one meself.'

‘Thanks, but I’m better off busy. Takes me mind off worrying. Do you mind?’

Tweety pauses, kettle in hand.

‘Anything! What do you wanna do? You wanna chuck that brick through Jamie’s window?’

‘I thought we’d do that other thing, that thing we’ve always talked about. Cut the belt. Feels the right time now somehow.’

Tweety puts the kettle down on the stove top. ‘Do you know what? You’re right. Let’s do it. About time. Have you got a car?’

‘No. I had to take the bus from the hospital.’

‘How we going to get there then? We can hardly ask Billy.’

‘Haven’t you got that car still, your mate’s Capri?’

‘I had to give it back.’

‘Well another bus then, I guess.’

‘Christ, it’s gonna take an age.’ Tweety puts his hand on Stephen’s back. ‘Never mind. It’ll be worth it. I’ll stick me coat on this time.’

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Ian and Jamie, each with their own thoughts, have fallen into silence as they drive to Tweety's house.

Ian plays the conversation with Patty over in his mind. She was upset to hear of Harry's death but still she felt remote to him. It was just like Harry said in the canteen: she had moved on.

'I'm guessing you're not ringing me just to offer condolences,' Patty said.

And he said, 'No, Patty, I'm not. I need your help.'

Even now, perhaps especially now, he is filled with regret that their relationship has come to this: him begging her for help on the wrong end of a reverse charge call and her telling him that she can't get that information but perhaps her fiancé, Glen, can. Ian understands. Glen's a commander. At his rank, people take his calls.

She put Glen on the phone and he said he could do it, but it would take time. He doesn't work with the unit that's collating information about the miners. He would have to make a few calls. Did Ian want to wait? And Ian said, 'No, I can't. But thank you for your help. I'll call back.'

Glen's a decent man. That makes it worse. He can see Patty standing in the cold lane outside his police house in her brown leather jacket and her short skirt. He remembers the three of them, him Patty and Harry, on a whim flashing their warrant cards and climbing to the roof of the Liver Building clock tower. The wind blowing. The dark Mersey flowing out to the sea.

Ian turns into Tweety's road. The house is part of a 1970s terrace. There are tiny front gardens and little paved paths to the front doors.

'Jesus,' says Jamie, releasing his seat belt. 'I always thought Stephen was being paranoid about the grassing.'

'Me too. I laughed at him.'

Ian pulls over to the kerb and releases his safety belt. Tweety's house stares blankly onto the street – plastic windows, concrete roof tiles, painted panels, a slab of concrete shielding the front door.

'Don't want to be a killjoy,' Jamie says, 'but Tweety's never been Brain of Britain. Don't know how much you're going to get out of him.'

When there's no answer at the front door, Ian takes out a credit card and slips it down the lock. He beckons Jamie from the car and they go in together. In the sitting room, an unlit fire in the grate waits for a match.

'Marie Celeste,' Jamie says.

'That it is. We need to find Stephen.'

'How about I go and check for him at the hospital? They're not interested in me. Give me your keys.'

'They'll be looking for my car.'

'Well, I'm not taking the bus.'

Ian throws him the keys. 'Park a few streets away and walk. Call me here when you have news. I'll wait here. Perhaps Stephen or Tweety will turn up.'

Ian calls from the phone in Tweety's hall. Patty answers, 'I'll pass you over to Glen.'

'Thank you—'

She's gone.

'Glen, thank you. Have you got something for me?'

'Yes, but you didn't hear it from me. The man who referred Eddie Bennet as an informant was Detective Chief Superintendent Dan Oakley from Merseyside.'

'OK, if Oakley referred him, perhaps he was also informing to Oakley about other matters—'

'Ian. Stop there. I can't work with you on this. I've already put myself on offer. I believe you because Patty vouches for you. But I can't be a part of this until it's completely legit. To be honest, I wish you'd called from a payphone.'

The words shock him with the realisation of how far out he is. He is an outlaw who cannot be harboured. 'Oh. OK. I'm sorry.'

'It's OK. I can say I wouldn't talk to you.'

'Call it in if you have to. I'm fucked anyway. Thanks for what you've done.'

‘Hang on. There’s something else.’

‘OK.’

‘When I spoke with the unit, someone else had rung them needing to know this information. Detective Chief Superintendent Roberts.’

‘OK, that’s my boss, here in Staffordshire. If he’s asking for this stuff, it means he’s following up on what I’ve told him. Perhaps I can trust him.’

‘I hope so because what you really need to do with this is to hand yourself in and let the investigation take its course.’

‘I can’t do that until I’ve got evidence. I mean, my prints are on a Maglite that was used to assault Harry.’

‘Get some evidence then.’

Ian searches for voids around the fireplace. He lifts the filthy rug, takes the cushions off the sofa and slips his hand down the back. He moves to the back of the house. On the kitchen table are dirty plates, an ashtray and a full kettle. The kitchen cupboards hold only scratched Teflon saucepans and cracked plates. The kitchen looks out to a small area that is entirely paved and ended by a wooden gated fence. The only thing in this barren yard is a concrete washing pole with a plastic line that drags on the floor. He climbs the stairs. In the front bedroom, he finds an unmade bed and, on a wooden chair next to it, a full ashtray. On the chest of drawers is a Meccano helicopter and an extension phone with a rotary dial in the handset. Under the mattress, there is nothing but dust balls. The spare room at the back holds a single bed and black plastic bags. He empties them out. Old clothes. A set of shin guards. The wardrobe has a few shirts and trousers. In the hallway, he puts his hands in the pockets of Tweety’s coats. He finds soiled tissue, fluff and grit that works its way nastily under his nails and, on the inside zip pocket of a Belstaff leather jacket, a set of car keys with a diecast keyring of a Ford car.

Ian moves out into the street. A light drizzle falls as he glimpses for the first time the name of the road where Tweety lives.

Zamenhof Grove.

Zamenhof Grove: Zammo.

Of course.

Liam’s dad lived out at Smallthorne. Zammo and Liam: childhood friends. Probably went to school together. Not a television drug dealer

after all: a nickname from their childhood.

That voice he almost thought he knew on the other end of the phone line. It's Tweety. It's Eddie. It's Zammo. Three names: one person. Perfect for Eddie, a man who's never really been anyone. Nothing more than a tag-along mate of his brother's. Tolerated but never liked. Only part of the circle because Stephen insisted on it and always on the edge with his fall-flat bad jokes and his constant little digs.

The rain falls on Ian.

Tweety is also another man, a man none of them knew. The man who borrowed his brother's van and used it to transport drugs. The man who set him and Harry up. He remembers a detail: when Tweety went to the Brewery delivering drugs, he called himself Stephen. He must have hated his brother.

It's the perfect set up but still Ian doesn't fully understand it.

The only Ford he sees on the street is a blue Cortina, parked with two wheels on the pavement, two on the road. Ian tries the keys he found in the Belstaff jacket and jiggles them a bit. The door opens. But Ford keys work in any car and Ian is almost certain that these are not the keys for this car. Just in case he's wrong, he opens the glove compartment, climbs onto the back seats and lifts the cover that hides the boot. He reaches down and lifts the spare tyre. As he steps back onto the pavement, at the edge of his vision, he catches a curtain in one of the houses twitching and a shadow moving backwards away from the window. There's a Neighbourhood Watch sticker in the front window. That'll be someone who loves calling the police.

Ian moves quickly up the road. Two-storey houses give way to a short terrace of bungalows. At the end of the street is a tarmacked area with a row of garages with roll doors. The house numbers are painted on the concrete lintel above each door. Ian tries Tweety's garage. Locked.

He returns to the house at a jog and the curtain in the house twitches again. He takes a wire coat-hanger from the wardrobe in the back bedroom, unbends it and walks back up towards the garages. If he had time, he would find a proper tool, a wedge or something. But there is no time. Reaching up with his left hand, scuffing his knuckles painfully, he uses all his force to push the door away from the brickwork with his right hand. He forces the coat hanger down into the gap between the metal door and the brick frame and fishes blindly for the cord. No luck. He

pushes hard against the door and fishes again. The hanger snags and he reaches in carefully with his right hand. He grabs hold of the cord handle and pulls. The door slides about a foot before it jams. Ian lies on the ground, trying to push the door up from beneath. Peering into the dark gap, he can see the narrow grill and distinctive four headlights of a Ford Capri.

A siren is approaching. The driver is no good, Ian thinks: doesn't know not to scare him off. Surely this is good news. It's just plod responding to a routine call from the curtain twitcher. Still not a good idea to get arrested right now.

Squeezing himself through the too small gap, Ian forces his way into the garage. In a second he is on his feet. The siren is loud, approaching. He pulls the garage door down with the flats of his hands and steps backwards.

Ian's pupils dilate. The shape of the Capri emerges in the darkness.

The siren is extinguished while tyres turn slowly in the space outside the door. The car stops; a car door opens. Footsteps outside the garage.

Then a raised voice. 'Waste of time.'

The car door slams shut. The engine note deepens as the car pulls away. Ian lets the silence settle. Then he moves forward and puts his hand on the Capri's bonnet. It's hot. Driven fast in the last hour or so. He tries the Capri's door. It isn't even locked. He searches the car but there's nothing. He pulls open the garage door and lets in a crack of light. There are shelves. Paint cans. A cardboard box. He lifts it down: Christmas decorations. He travels round the back of the car. Lies flat and looks underneath. There's a large round tin. He reaches under and drags it towards himself. It's a Christmas Quality Street tin.

Avoiding the curtain twitcher, Ian follows the garages round to the wooden-fenced back alley that runs behind Tweety's terrace. He recognises the yard from the broken washing line. The back door is open. To have a good view of the street, he climbs the stairs to the front bedroom. He sits on the bed and tries to open the tin, but the lid is rusted on. He slides his nails around the rim and pulls. It sets his teeth on edge but to no effect. He goes downstairs and fetches a knife.

As he returns to the bedroom with the waiting tin, the phone rings.

He picks it up, waits before speaking, hears Jamie's voice. 'Stephen was released. He's been in the hospital—'

Outside, the sound of a car pulling up. Holding the phone, Ian moves over to the window.

‘Janet said he went looking for Tweety. She’s terrified. Frightened they’ll come for Christopher but can’t trust anyone. If Christopher’s a witness, she says, won’t they want him dead?’

Leaning into the shadow of the wall, Ian looks out. An XJS Jag. He steps back from the window.

‘Don’t come here. There’s a pub on the corner. Don’t know the name —’

‘The Green Star.’

‘Meet me there.’

‘What—’

‘Can’t talk. Ring Mick. Get him there too.’

He puts the phone down. Leans back into the window. Lester and Dan Oakley are walking towards the house.

Ian grabs the tin and, clutching it against his chest, he moves quickly and quietly down the stairs. He hears knocking – then the same thing he himself did earlier – a credit card being slipped down the lock. Luckily, it’s a long time since Oakley’s been on the beat and he struggles with the technique. Ian moves quickly towards the kitchen. Then there’s a bang from the front door. Then another. They’ve given up on the credit card. As the front door gives, Ian’s hand is on the back door and he hears Oakley’s voice.

‘Ian—’

He runs.

Even clutching a huge Quality Street tin, fear makes him fast. He takes a right before he realises it’s a cul-de-sac. But there’s an opening … a gap in the houses that leads through, to where? This is Zamenhof Grove too. How can that be? He’s utterly disorientated by these streets. He looks behind him. No one is following but through the line of houses, he hears a car starting. He runs, following the streets in any direction, and everywhere he runs, he hears a car twisting and turning, changing gear. He’s back at the damn garages. He curses the Quality Street tin that gets bigger and even more awkward with every step. He considers dumping it. What if there’s nothing inside it but a load of nails and screws? But it was on the floor, under the car.

A steep flight of concrete steps up a grassy bank takes him to an older narrow Victorian terrace. The houses give straight onto the street. There's no cover. No bushes. No low walls to crouch behind. He runs on. Takes a left. He can hear that car, if it is that car. Maybe he's running from no one now. At the length of the street, he takes a left. On his right is a house with a low wall and he considers jumping it and lying flat but he's chased enough suspects to know that any police officer will search in hiding places like this.

He turns down a long alleyway that runs along the back of the terrace. The Victorian houses have one-storey extensions running along the back and low walls that shield the small yards. He chooses one in the middle of the alleyway and slips in through the wooden gate. He lies flat, seeing only concrete, the wooden gate, the Quality Street tin by his side. His breath subsides. At the end of the alley, a car passes, moving slowly.

There is always a moment where the searcher has to judge that the fugitive has made off while he was looking elsewhere. He has to give up. But Ian, lying flat on the cold concrete, is afraid to take the risk of moving. Oakley and Lester have a lot to lose. They'll want to eliminate every piece of evidence and every person who can possibly bear witness against them. He tries to push the lid off the tin, but it will not move.

A light comes on in the house. Someone is home. Ian gets up and takes the tin. He runs.

Jamie is sitting with Mick in a corner of the Green Star, untouched pints in front of them. Ian's heart might burst at the sight.

'Ay up,' says Mick.

'Thanks for coming.'

'Don't be soft. Jamie's told me everything. Of course I'm in.'

Ian sits down.

Mick says, 'That's a big tin of Quality Street you've got there.'

Ian pushes it across the table. 'Can you open it at all?'

Mick hugs it to his chest. 'Jammed on.'

'I couldna move it either.'

'Ah now you've got me.' Mick squeezes so hard his face goes red. 'If I ever get this bloody thing open, I want all the purple ones.'

'I'm just worried it's full of screws and I've been carrying it for nowt. Found it in Tweety's garage.'

‘I got some tools in the back of me car.’

Mick gets up and moves towards the car park.

Ian turns to Jamie. ‘My old boss from Merseyside, Dan Oakley, turned up at Tweety’s house with the gangster I was telling you about, Lester. That big bloke who hit you with a truncheon in Trentham Gardens? That must have been Oakley. Now he’s trying to tidy up all the loose ends that might incriminate him.’

‘And Christopher? He assaulted Christopher?’

‘Yes. So Christopher’s in danger too. If he recovers, he might be able to identify Oakley.’

Mick is back with a flat head screwdriver. He sits and starts jemmying the lid.

Ian says, ‘Have either of you any idea where Stephen would have gone with Tweety? Somewhere he could hurt him maybe?’

Mick looks up at Jamie. ‘It wouldn’t be that thing, would it?’

Ian says, ‘What thing?’

‘Hang on. Lid’s off.’ Mick lifts it and peers inside. ‘Bugger, it’s like you said, only nails.’ He puts the lid back on and pushes it across the table. ‘Go on, open it anyway.’

The tin is packed: audio tapes, notebooks. Photographs.

‘No purple ones then?’ says Mick.

Ian pulls out one of the photographs. Lester and Oakley standing together beside an XJS Jaguar.

There’s a payphone outside the pub toilets. Ian takes the telephone number out of his wallet and runs his finger over it once more before he dials.

Patty picks up and Ian starts feeding in Mick and Jamie’s ten pence pieces.

‘Is Glen there?’

‘No. He’s the duty superintendent. Been called out to a high-risk missing child.’

‘Can you get hold of him?’

‘Not easily.’

‘Patty. I need you. It’s Dan Oakley. He’s working with Lester. I’ve got evidence. I need Glen to speak to Roberts. Move this on quickly. My nephew’s in danger.’

‘Why can’t you speak to Roberts?’

‘Because there’s something I’ve got to do.’

‘What have you got to do that’s more important than this?’

‘I’ve got to look after my brother. I can’t wait for things to be done properly. Listen, I’m going to give the evidence to a man called Mick Stein. Have you got that?’

‘Mick Stein. Yes.’

‘He’s going to call you soon as he can. Right now, I need you to get hold of Roberts. Tell him my nephew is in danger too because he’s a witness. I’m trying to make sure he’s looked after until help gets there.’

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Stephen and Tweety walk the mile or so from the bus stop to the little iron bridge by the church. Rain is falling and the ground is sodden. The elms in the churchyard, bare of leaves, are lifted against a dark sky. Behind them are the massive shadows of the colliery buildings. At the centre is the dark silhouette of the headframe with its tandem wheels. Underneath their feet is a labyrinth of service ducts and tunnels, taking methane and coal water out, carrying telephone cables, power, compressed air.

As they step down from the bridge, there is a little concrete pillar. Tweety follows Stephen as he takes the turn round to the other side. There are steps down, and quickly they are inside the culvert. They take their jackets off and leave them folded just inside the doorway.

The thin beam of Stephen's torch glances off the concrete walls. Underfoot, the ground is black from the accumulated water and dirt that leaks into the duct. The air smells damp. It is about a half a mile from here, underneath the control room, to the tops of the drifts.

Tweety hesitates. He isn't a fitter like Stephen and he doesn't work these tunnels.

'If summat happened to us here, no one would find us for weeks.'

'I can do it on my own. If you're scared, I mean.'

Tweety's face moves in and out of the partial light. 'I'm all right.'

'I'll go first, then.'

The way is narrow, and every footstep echoes. The beam of the torch moves in the darkness, showing now a flash of wall, now the ground ahead. They turn, left and right. After a few minutes, Tweety asks, 'You know where we are?'

'Course I do. I know the service tunnels like the back of me hand. Always something wants fixing down here. Even if the torch was to go, I'd be able to find me way.'

'You got a spare battery though.'

‘Somewhere in me bag.’

Stephen flicks the torch off for a moment. They are in total darkness. Near them something scurries.

‘Fuck’s sake.’

Stephen laughs. ‘It’s only a rat.’

‘Turn it back on.’

The switch clicks and the pale beam returns.

From time to time the direction changes. There is an intersection with another tunnel on the right, then a fork. Stephen doesn’t hesitate. He moves confidently in the near darkness.

‘Remember those days on the screens?’ he says.

‘How could I forget—’

‘Thought I’d never stick it. But it was important to me. It was a matter of pride.’

‘Course it was.’

‘That time left-handed Jack took us down the shaft I thought I’d shit meself. Now I’m like one of them old pit ponies. Nearly twenty years I’ve been mining. Coal runs through my bones now. It’s part of me, like me grandad and me dad.’

They walk on.

‘We go a ways back,’ Tweety says.

‘But you never was really ever one of us, was you?’

‘What d’you mean by that?’

‘The other lads – Jamie, No-I-Can’t Billy, Big Mick – all of them sons of miners and their dads, sons of miners too. We’re different.’

‘But it’s me with you now, not them sons of miners. Not Jamie, not No-I-Can’t Billy.’

Stephen turns. He holds the torch high and the light shines directly in Tweety’s eyes. ‘It is too.’

Stephen walks again. He says, ‘It’s Christopher, you know. Making me think about things.’

‘It doesn’t matter—’

‘Course it doesn’t.’

They have reached the end of the tunnel and face a steel door.

Stephen says, ‘Hope it’s not locked.’

‘You’re joking.’

Stephen laughs. ‘We’re that far underground, there isn’t even a lock.’

They step through and the noise of the vast fan, which has been muffled in their ears, roars. They are at the top of number one drift. The space is twenty metres in height. The air is cold, and misted with the water pulled from the depths of the mine. Even though there is stark fluorescent light, it is hard to see and hard to be heard.

Here is the pit.

Fifty to sixty miles of roadways, a million tonnes of coal a year drawn from its face. The ghost of an older mine too: two ancient shafts, half a mile deep, sunk more than a hundred years ago when men laboured with picks, and ponies lived in subterranean stables and drew the coal in wooden wagons. Above the roadways are houses, schools, even the bright lights of a motorway service station – cars pulling in, families running inside for a wee and a cup of tea. Three miles below, it is a different world: extraordinary, a massive retreat mine that drives a huge vacancy in the ground.

This pit has been Stephen's life, his community, the source of his most important principles, and he allows himself to fill with his sense of it. The huge thunderous disks of cutting picks only feet away from the two men who drive the shearer, walking beside it, nursing it onwards, leaning over while it cuts nearly a metre depth of coal in each pass and turns without pausing. The men on either end of the coal face, working the control unit, and others following behind, shortening the electrical cables, moving the hydraulic hoses, bringing the supports in. The ground caving in where the coal used to be in a chain of booming collapses. So hot the men wear nothing but pit helmet, underpants and boots. The teams working steadily, hour after hour, sending the thousands of tonnes of coal up the belt of number three drift. But now the mighty pit is silent, stilled by himself and every other striking miner. Stephen breathes that in, his sense of their struggle over these last nine months.

Tweety's hand is on his shoulder and Stephen gestures with his head to take the path down the drift.

The gradient is thermal: one degree of heat for every hundred metres they descend. At the start is the fog. Then Stephen and Tweety pass the dew point and the air clears. The fan's noise is distant and the landscape that clarifies is lunar: monochrome and silent. They come to the intersection with the parallel drift, and turn towards it.

Here is their target: the huge coal-carrying belts. Thick braided rubber stretched under high tension over a series of rollers. There are three in sequence ascending from the coal face, each with its own nine hundred horsepower engine. The motorway, they call it. You aren't supposed to ride this belt but sometimes they do, lying low on the hot damp coal as the belt powers up the incline, minding their heads, careful not to lose a hand or a foot.

When the mine is working, this drift is hot and deafening and the pit full of men. The lonely silence is uncanny.

There are cameras to monitor the flow of the coal, but it's easy to avoid them and they don't record. Someone will be up in the lamp room, sitting out the shift. Whoever it is is probably sleeping. Or, if there are two working, playing cards. Down here, they are not on earth, but on a distant planet, light years away through darkness.

Tweety pauses. Out comes a strange laugh. 'I don't believe we're actually doing this.'

Stephen glimpses the sixteen-year-old boy Eddie once was: always keen to seem braver than he is. He says, 'It was me came up with calling you Tweety. Did you know that? You never liked it, did you?'

Tweety shields his eyes. 'Why are you telling me that? I've come down to help you, haven't I? It's me with you, not them scabs.'

Stephen spits onto the ground. 'We'll go further down, cut the bottom belt first.'

'We don't need to cut two belts —'

'But why wouldn't we? I mean, if we're doing it and we can?'

'How we going to stop them catching us? We'll be right down the bottom.'

'It's going to take them hours to work out what's happened, get people down here. Who knows when they'll even notice summat's wrong? Morning shift, I reckon. I'll get us back into the service tunnels, then we'll be long gone. How's anyone going to know it was us?'

Tweety holds Stephen's gaze, then looks away.

'Come on,' Stephen says. 'Less than a kilometre now. We need to get a shifty on. I've got a flask. We'll have a break, drink a cup of tea before we cut the belt. We'll be back up in a flash, cut the second belt, then we're out of here. No one any the wiser.'

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Ian and Jamie step down from the bridge and turn round the concrete pillar that rises from the earth. Mick has given them the bag he keeps inside his car and Jamie reaches inside it and takes out the cap lamp Mick has pilfered. They find a small pile of clothing just inside the door. Ian lifts a jacket. It is made of a coarse wool with plastic shoulder protectors and he knows it at once as his brother's. The other jacket is thinner, fancier, leather. Jamie turns the light from his cap lamp on it and says, 'Tweety's.'

They walk quickly, Jamie's cap lamp throwing bouncing light off the walls. Ian has never been underground before. He must not think of the stories: that there are rivers and lakes that suddenly move, that sometimes the seam collapses, that there are ghosts who ride the belts and ping the bells.

Jamie's feet in their metal-capped boots find their way confidently. Ian holds tightly to the beam of his cap lamp as it shines a narrow light into the tunnel. The earth is heavy above him. As if the mine is squeezing his chest, he struggles to breathe. He fears a total darkness descending and being trapped here, sightless and unheard. Without light, he fears it will be hard for him to distinguish between his own life and death.

Perhaps Jamie senses his fear, because he begins to talk. 'How did this Oakley recruit Tweety then?'

Ian holds on to this stuff, the detective logic of it. He can see it clearly now. 'Probably a routine stop in Liverpool,' he says. 'Tweety acting suspicious, found with drugs. Beat cops probably, or crime squad guys. They give him to Oakley for the unit that's spying on the miners and Oakley has to hand him on to be seen to play by the book.'

'But why does Tweety grass? Just because he's a shit?'

'That, yes, and because they're paying him. Oakley's asking him about the drugs too, telling him he'll keep him safe from prosecution, and

Tweety thinks it all kind of legit – after all, he's talking to police. But Oakley is working for Lester.

'Liam's been told by Harry not to speak to anyone about grassing. But Liam and Eddie, they go way back. Maybe they get drunk. Maybe Liam's bragging. Maybe Liam thinks talking to someone you've known since you were boys doesn't count. Anyhow he lets it slip he's working for Harry and that Lester's got a cop in his pocket. This gets straight back to Oakley and from Oakley to Lester. He was a shit, Tweety, but I don't think he had any idea he was going to get Liam killed.'

'What an idiot.'

'That's right. Killing Liam's straightforward, but they'll need to discredit Harry too. So, they feed Harry information about someone else's stash and they make it look like Liam's been killed for giving up the heroin.'

And Ian thinks, but does not say, and I help them too. I leave Merseyside, blaming Harry for Jacob's death. And when I come back on the scene, Oakley uses this against Harry.

The weight of earth above him presses down on him again. He has kept it out of his mind but suddenly he can hardly breathe. He thinks of those men trapped by landfalls and dark water and he thinks, let me die in the light.

Jamie says, 'When Liam was killed Tweety must have been terrified.'

'Yes, but fair play, he doesn't freeze. He gets hold of Liam's gun and the evidence. He looks inside that Quality Street tin. He knows now Oakley's bent. And he works out that he's a loose end that they'll want to get rid of.'

'I almost feel sorry for him.'

'Well don't. Tweety doesn't go to the police with the evidence. Instead, when Felix invites him for a drugs handover, he accepts. He counts on Felix not knowing he's got a gun and he kills him. Then he pitches to Oakley to take over the business. He's got insurance: the evidence that Liam collected. And Oakley's not so scared of him anymore because Tweety's a killer too. They're partners.'

Ian and Jamie step out of the tunnel into the main body of the pit and there is momentary comfort in the bright fluorescent light, the huge vaulted space and the roaring of the fans. Ian continues talking. If he dies then someone else must know how this all fits together.

‘As for Harry and me, Oakley didn’t want me around at first but then he realised I could be useful. I could feed him information about what Harry was up to. I could make him look guilty. When Harry and I made contact with Zammo – Tweety – it didn’t really matter which of us was killed so long as we looked bent. And now, if Stephen dies, they can pin it all on him because it was his van.’

‘But they’re fucked. Mick’s got the evidence.’

‘Yes, but Tweety doesn’t know that.’

They walk into the fog. Ian cannot make out Jamie’s face through the beam of the cap lamp, which turns towards him and flares in the mist, but he hears his voice.

‘Put your hand on my back if you can’t see your way. Keep walking.’

The landscape clarifies in the fluorescent service light. Ian works hard to keep pace, fighting his thoughts of the earth pressing down above them, of being trapped here in darkness, of his body never being recovered. He cannot imagine what it is to be at ease here. Stephen and Jamie have known this pit since they were sixteen. They have fought for this place, fought to keep it roaring, producing. Ian imagines how it is when it is working: full of voices and activity, laughter, men sitting down, stretching out their legs and eating their snappin side by side, the cutting machines roaring, the men sending the hot coal up towards the light.

He tastes the coal, swallows it in his spit, feels it inside his nostrils and against his skin. He wipes his hand across his face and around the back of his neck. Without breaking step, Jamie takes the bottle out of Mick’s bag and hands it to Ian. It is grey with coal dust, the mouth smeared with a dark slime. Ian stops. He drinks and spits.

‘OK?’ Jamie says.

‘Yes.’

‘What are we going to do if we find them?’

‘We’ll know what to do.’ Ian takes another gulp. The water is unpleasantly warm. He’s drenched in sweat. He says, ‘Stephen can be such a bastard, that’s the thing.’

‘Yes,’ Jamie says, taking back the bottle, ‘But he’s our bastard.’ He screws the cap on and puts it in his bag. ‘It’s not far now to the last motor. If they’re here, we must be close.’

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The final drum motor is huge, a silent, caged beast. Stephen takes off his knapsack and makes himself comfortable against the drift wall.

Tweety takes his own pack off and sits beside Stephen, his knees bent up against his chest. He takes the flask out. ‘Anyone who sees us leaving will know we’ve been underground.’

‘We’ll be OK. Besides, who’d tell?’

Stephen takes a tin mug out and puts it on the ground. Tweety holds it steady and fills it.

‘You’re sure it’s safe to cut the belt?’

‘The tension will take it away from us. It’ll be a mess down the bottom of the drift. They won’t be able to cut coal for weeks.’

‘Why don’t we get a shifty on then? Do this thing? Cut the belt and fuck off?’

Stephen leans back against the drift. It’s hot as a jungle. He has a bottle of water in his pack and he splashes it on his face. ‘Do you know about me twin brother, George?’

‘Only that he died when you was both kids.’

‘There was a rope swing by the pond. Fellow called Alfie Kemble put stones in his backpack and swung out into the pond. Took his dog with him an ’all. George dived in to try to save him.’

‘God.’

‘I’ve always blamed Jamie. Shamed Alfie in front of everyone when he burst his new football. Shouted it out in front of everyone. His wife was on the game.’

Tweety laughs. Then he backtracks. ‘Terrible.’

‘You don’t get it. It weren’t funny. Jamie’s dad had only just give him that football and he was terrified of what his dad would do. That’s why he said it. And he was right. George and Jamie walked back home later and George heard Jamie’s dad beating his mum over the stupid ball. Our

dad used to walk the dog by the pond so George ran there to find him to put a stop to the beating. And that's how it happened.'

There's a long silence.

'So, I've always blamed Jamie but it wasn't his fault.' Stephen brushes his hand across his eyes. 'And I've said stupid stuff too. Said a stupid lie to Janet once because I was in love with her.'

'Yeah, we all say stupid stuff. No big deal.'

Stephen shines his torch on Tweety's face.

Tweety shields his eyes. 'Why are you telling me this?'

Stephen dips the torch and reaches into his bag. 'I've brought a couple of Twix. Do you want one?'

'What is this? A picnic?'

'Do you want one, or don't you?'

'Yeah, all right.'

Stephen drops the chocolate bar into Tweety's hand.

'George was just starting grammar school. "No favourites in this house," me mum and dad always said. But it wasn't true. Course it wasn't. And when he died—'

Tweety shifts, waiting.

'I thought the answer was to stop letting everyone down. Be more like me brother. Try harder – for me mum, I mean. Make her happy.'

'I'm sure you made her happy.'

'We used to say at home – it was a kind of family joke – me grandad used to say, *we lift each other up*. But lately, I can't help meself, I've been thinking, *what if that's not true?* What if it's the opposite? What if we don't lift each other up? What if we drag each other down?'

'Why did you come to my house tonight?'

'Police arrested me, wanted to know all about my van. How come it was in Liverpool where some guy was killed? What it was doing outside the post office that was robbed?'

'You been arrested? What did they tell you?'

'Scab's not exactly strike-breaking, Tweety. Scab is character. It's me first. It's not caring for other people. It's no loyalty. And that's you. You lot, when the colliery's closes, you're going to be scraping every barrel you can find coz that's who you are.'

Stephen opens his hand. There isn't a Twix in it, but a Stanley knife.

Tweety's face has taken on a strange cast in the light, like a mask. He is half in shadow. 'Is that what you're using to cut the belt?'

'I'm going to get underneath where it's safe. It's only braided rubber. The belt will go down the drift like a snapped rubber band. Make a heck of noise, it will.'

'And what do you need me to do?'

'We'll get to that.'

There's another silence.

'Before all this happened, this stuff with Christopher, I was telling myself, it isn't nothing if we lose, it's still *something*. Men staying out in solidarity for a year, that's still *something*. That's not nothing.' Stephen rubs his eye. 'It was you grassing about the picketing all the time?'

Tweety does not speak.

Stephen grins. 'Course it was.'

Tweety puts his bag over his shoulder. 'You've always acted like you was better than me. Like you was some kind of royalty. Making up that stupid name for me. Me name's Eddie.' He stands up and takes a step backwards.

Stephen does not move. He puts the knife on the ground beside him. 'We're nearly a mile underground. No point trying to run off. Might as well sit back down. Eat your Twix.'

'I dunno. I don't fancy it now.'

Stephen laughs. 'Fair play to you.'

For the first time in days Stephen feels calm. He will put Tweety's body on the belt. Then he will lie underneath and cut it. The body will fly down with the belt, be lost forever perhaps or maybe they will find him but it will be such a mess that it will be impossible to know for certain what has happened. He drinks a gulp of tea, then empties what remains onto the ground.

'Do you remember left-handed Jack?' Stephen says. 'Lost his hand in the gob.'

'Is Christopher dead?'

Stephen takes the knife and pulls himself wearily to his feet.

'He's not dead, is he?'

Stephen tightens his hand round the knife.

Tweety takes another step back. 'I delivered some drugs and I shouldn't have done.'

‘And the people who get hurt by your drug dealing. Coz there’s always people hurt. That’s just, what?’

‘I was skint. I’ve been striking since March. I didn’t go back. Not like Billy. Not like Jamie.’

‘You were always a dickhead. You insulted my girlfriend. But then I thought, come on, you need to do better. I thought, George would try to save him. So, I made you my friend.’

‘I’m sorry I borrowed your van. I was skint. You’re going to kill me for that?’

Stephen wipes his left hand across his face. ‘Not just my boy you hurt. Liam too.’

‘I didn’t hurt either of them.’

‘You were part of it.’

‘I was just a driver. Nowt more than that. And I only did it coz I was skint.’

‘That dead lad in Trentham. That you too?’

‘They were coming after me. I had to defend myself.’

Stephen takes a deep breath. Disillusion washes over him like an ocean.

‘George should have let Alfie drown – that’s what I think. If he’d saved him from drowning, Alfie’d only have been drunk the day after. But where would George be now if it weren’t for Alfie? He could have been anyone. Done anything. Thatcher’s right. Every man for himself. Look after your family, and as for the rest, dog eat dog.’

‘Christopher isn’t even dead. You’re doing this to make yourself feel better. You’re going to kill a man to make yourself feel better.’

‘I was never like George. I wasted a lot of time not being honest with meself. I’m not the guy who jumps in a pond and tries to rescue someone. I’m the guy with the darkness inside him. That’s what I’m good at.’

Tweety holds his hands out wide. His chest is open, his neck exposed. ‘Come on then – may as well do it if you have to. Cheer yourself up.’

And, in an unwanted rush, Stephen imagines how they must have felt, those miners in Wales. The moment after they dropped the block and realised what they had done. And how he will feel, alone here in the dark with Tweety’s body.

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When Janet needs to go to the toilet, she rings the bell for a nurse to be with Christopher. If one is not available, she scampers there and back in a tearing hurry. Always she feels a heavy weight of relief when she returns to the room and finds the ventilator still working.

Felicity pops in and checks the monitors, changes the bag on Christopher's drip. 'You can go home, have a little wash up and a sleep. You need a break. He's out of the woods.'

'Thanks, but I'm not going home for the moment.'

'I expect you're wanting to be here when he stirs, but I'll make sure you don't miss it. The doctors won't reduce the sedation without you.'

Janet longs to confide her fears, but something holds her back. The feeling that she will not be believed. That Felicity will think she's lost her mind. The best she can hope for is that Felicity will tell the police and they are the ones she fears most.

'You're right.'

Felicity brushes herself down. 'I'm nearly at the end of my shift. I'll fetch us some tea before I go.'

To escape herself, Janet takes her book out of her bag. It is the new *it* book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* For a while she just sits with it on her lap. Exhausted. Afraid. On edge.

It's an age since she brushed her teeth. She rubs her index finger inside her mouth and takes a gulp of the water that stands by the bed.

She takes up the book and begins to try to read. The words are black insects on a white page that wriggle around and refuse to fall into any sense. Then, just as they start to order themselves into words and sentences, Janet slips away from Sabina and her bowler hat, and falls, deep deep into dreamless darkness.

It is a shock to be pulled out of this sensationless place. She opens her eyes, clammy and disorientated. How much time has passed? Was it a whole night or only moments? A huge man is in the room his back to her,

standing over the bed. He seems to have sensed her waking because he turns and says, ‘Mrs Weldon?’

He’s huge in a dark wool suit. His shirt is blue and his tie carries broad diagonal stripes.

‘Mrs Weldon, how are you doing?’

Janet shakes her head to wake herself.

‘I hear your son is out of danger. That’s good.’

The man has turned fully towards her and is reaching into his jacket pocket. Janet fears a weapon but, as if he is a magician releasing a satisfying surprise, he shows her an opening palm with a warrant card in it. Ta da!

‘Detective Chief Superintendent Dan Oakley.’

‘I’m sorry. I already told an officer. I don’t want to talk to police.’

‘I understand, believe me. The last few days have been hard. You haven’t received the best service. But this time it’s different, because it’s me.’

Janet reaches for her bag. She stands up. Holds it to her chest as if it is some kind of defence.

‘I’m serious. I don’t want to talk to you. Or not until Christopher is out of danger.’

The ventilator sighs and breathes. The man is between her and her son and he places his hand lightly on her shoulder.

‘I can ask the nurse to be with your son just while you talk to me at the station.’

‘No.’

‘I really don’t want to have to arrest you.’

‘Arrest me?’ She laughs. ‘You think I’m going to allow you to arrest me?’

He reaches towards her and she steps back and shouts, ‘Help!’

She can hear how ridiculous this sounds and he smiles broadly.

In an instant, he has her. He pivots her round, holding her from behind, his left hand over her mouth. She has dropped the bag. The man’s breath is warm against her cheek.

‘I don’t want you disturbing the ward.’

A small part of her thinks she should do as he tells her. But this part is nothing compared to the ferocious part that knows the truth and is trying

to work out how she can resist. Surely it was her waking that disturbed him from killing her son.

He is reaching around her body and under his own armpit. The tight hug of it squeezes her chest. Even as he does this, Janet realises how reckless he is. He is trying to get her out of the room quietly and she will die here rather than allow that.

Behind her, the door opens. She is pushed hard away and falls forward onto her knees. Felicity is there, two mugs of tea in her hands. There is a strange sound, an emphatic click and a whizz like an ultrasonic wasp. Remorse passes through Janet: a terrible anticipation of Felicity wounded. But as quick as this remorse, the bullet has missed and embedded itself in the door frame. Felicity steps forward and throws both mugs of tea in Oakley's face. Janet, off her knees, lunges towards him. He turns to her and before she is on him, lets off a shot. The window behind her shatters. The two women are on top of Oakley. It's surreal, ridiculous even. They have never done this before but they are doing their best. He's huge. He pushes Felicity away as effortlessly as King Kong. Another bullet goes off. Plaster falls onto them and the doorway is full of people forcing their way in. Big Mick Stein and No-I-Can't-Me-Mum-Won't-Let-Me Billy and two other men in stone-washed jeans that Janet doesn't know.

Oakley has got to his feet. His shirt is bloodied but he still holds his gun. The women get to their feet. They have plaster in their hair.

Mick nods at Janet. 'Ay up ducky. Sorry I'm a bit late. Did me best but me car's shit.' He turns to Oakley. 'Ian told us about you. Couldn't credit it to be honest. DC Patty Byrne is on her way up from London and she's getting hold of some boss copper in Stoke – Roberts, I think, she said. And she said it might take a bit, so in the meantime, I should arrest you.'

'Arrest me? I'm a Superintendent.' Oakley grins fiercely. 'Are you mad?'

Mick shrugs. 'I dunno. Ian Weldon told me to arrest you too, so I'm arresting you. Quite the story this is gonna be.'

Still Oakley points the gun. 'Back off.'

'Come off it, mate.' Mick steps forward, reasonable in the face of the weapon. 'What you going to do? Shoot us all? How many bullets you got left in there?'

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Stephen takes his safety goggles out of his bag. He ties a cloth around his mouth. He could do with his respirator but it's up at the pithead. He wriggles in under the belt, pulls the goggles down and starts to cut. Things are clearer now. He will do this thing and then surrender to whatever happens. He will go and be with his son. Stephen forces the knife with his wrist, working it into the belt, careful not to let it slip. His stomach muscles harden with the effort of the awkward position. He braces with his left hand to give himself purchase. The braids of rubber begin to give way as he works away with the blade. When the belt can no longer hold the tension, it will tear. There will be a cloud of dust and they will walk back up and tell the truth about Liverpool.

'Did you tell them, Stephen, who it was borrowed your van?'

Although Eddie stands by him, the voice seems distant.

'Why are you asking me that?'

Stephen's goggles are steaming and streaked with coal dust. He takes them off. 'Pass me my water bottle.'

It is placed in his hand.

'Did you tell them?'

Stephen turns his head to the side and runs water into the goggles and over his face. This voice belongs to a very different Eddie to the man who only minutes ago put his hand on his shoulder. For the first time he questions why Eddie has agreed to come down here with him.

'What does it matter? You're going to tell the police everything.'

'That's right. I'm nervous about it, I guess. How are you getting on?'

'Nearly there.'

'Do you need a break?'

'I'm fine.'

'Why don't you take a break?'

'I'll keep at it.' And he does; he works the blade into the belt with more urgency, because he senses that tearing the belt might be the thing

that saves him.

‘You’re not going to tell me whether you told them?’

Stephen thinks: a lie is best. Because what will be the point of Tweety killing him if he’s already told the cops who was driving his van?

‘I’m sorry, Eddie. I did. I told them it was you.’

Stephen turns to his left and sees the snub muzzle of a gun.

‘Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter either way. You’re going to disappear now, and if I’m asked, I’ll say you were lying, which would be a natural thing to do if it was you driving the van. Your brother looks guilty as fuck and if Christopher dies too, so much the better. You were all working together.’

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A roar rips through the tunnel and a cloud of darkness billows towards them. Ian closes his eyes and puts his hand over his mouth and nose. He cannot see. He is on the ground, struggling for breath. Coughing and spitting. He hears Jamie: *cover your mouth*. An arm is around him. Water splashes over his face and into his eyes. The bottle is pressed against his mouth.

The coal dust is thinning, but it hangs in the air and from the far end of the tunnel, a beam of light flares through the black fog. A stooped over figure is walking towards them and this figure is moaning and clutching his hand to his face.

Ian picks up a rock from the floor and places it in Jamie's hand. He speaks quietly. 'Keep low. Get some distance from me. He's got a gun. We're safer apart.'

Ian lies against the wall on the floor of the tunnel. The lights must be coated with coal but they still illuminate the veil of dust. Ian grabs two more rocks and crawls on his belly across the tunnel floor.

Tweety stops and bends over, one hand to his face, the other on his knees. He lets out a low moan. He thinks he is alone. As he straightens, his cap lamp flares, casting his face in silhouette. He looks at his hand, touches his face again, then walks. He is within a few feet of Ian when Ian throws one of the rocks as hard as he can. Tweety cries out. His left-hand shields his face but his right arm is stretched out and a bullet zips up the drift. It hits a wall and ricochets. Ian runs towards Tweety, and to his left a rock flies. Another bullet zips close to him, but he is already on Tweety, pushing him backwards. A bullet pings off the rock face above them. They are on the ground, Tweety twisting and turning to free himself. Ian punches him hard in the upper arm. Tweety cries out in bitter pain and Ian stretches his body over him like a lover and grabs the gun. He throws it away, out into the darkness. The beam from Tweety's lamp is in his eyes but he reaches for his wrist and turns it towards his elbow,

twisting him onto his front and bending the arm up between his shoulders. He puts his knee into Tweety's chest. It is only now that he feels a pain in his side where a bullet has grazed him. Jamie stands over them, his cap lamp shining down, casting a tent of light. In his hand is the gun. Tweety's face is peppered with injuries and there is a dark wound to his left eye.

Ian releases the pressure slightly.

Tweety whimpers, 'I've only been trying to stay alive. Your brother tried to kill me.'

Tweety is handcuffed to the belt. He is making no sense, crying out and afraid for his eyesight. Of what has happened to Stephen, he will say nothing, only that Stephen has tried to kill him.

Jamie's light begins to disappear up the drift as he jogs away to get help. Ian takes Tweety's lamp and starts to run alone down towards the motor. The air thickens. He spits a dark mucus of saliva and coal.

Stephen is lying on his back, on the machinery of the belt. His face is thick with blood and dust but it's impossible to tell the nature of the injuries. Ian kneels and puts his hand to his brother's stomach. It comes back wet. Ian takes his brother's hand.

Stephen nods and swallows. 'Underestimated him. Always did.' Stephen coughs and spits.

'Did he just let off one bullet?'

'The belt was nearly gone – must have been the ricochet tore it.'

'Caught him too. Jamie came down with me. He's gone up to the surface – to get help.'

Stephen licks his lips and Ian puts his hand to his brother's face. Then he lifts Stephen's shirt. He cannot see clearly past the sticky matted dirt. But blood is sliming across the machine and down onto the ground. His brother is lying in a pool of it.

'I was going to kill him, but I couldn't do it. I've always been a fool.'

'Not being able to kill doesn't make you a fool. You're not a fool, Stephen.'

Ian lies down beside his brother. He holds his hand. Their two lamps illuminate the motes of dust that hang in the air. Stephen turns his head and the light from his lamp flares in Ian's eyes.

'Christopher?'

‘Jamie saw him. Said it looks like he’s going to be all right.’

‘You lying to me?’

‘No.’

‘Will you tell him I love him?’

‘You can tell him yourself.’

Stephen puts a hand to his brother’s face. ‘OK, little brother. Have it your way.’

‘Jamie’s bringing help.’

‘Jamie.’ Stephen smiles and turns away. ‘Imagine that.’

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Tuesday, 5th March 1985

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Ian is woken by a blackbird singing. A pair have made a nest on the drainpipe that descends past the window. He imagines four mottled turquoise eggs lying together in a curved hand of twigs and grass.

He is still shocked to find himself waking here. He has cleaned out his parents' room and bought a new bed. Christopher's landscape of the lake at Keele is on the wall. But still he thinks of his mother and father, as they once were, lying side by side: his mum in her nightie, his dad in his pyjamas. Slippers waiting for them either side of the bed. The dog too, allowed in his old age to sleep there, instead of downstairs in the kitchen.

Who would have thought that Stephen would have bought this house from the coal board? That must have been against his principles.

There is a creak on the landing, followed by a soft knock. Ian says, 'Yes, I'm getting up,' but he stays in bed.

He thinks of his grandad sitting in his chair with his bendy legs. He thinks of his mother drawing the curtains in his childhood bedroom, just on the other side of the wall, and telling him it's time to get up for school: the grammar school where he sat next to the posh boys from Trentham and Hanchurch and Whitmore and learnt Latin and Shakespeare and from where he was meant to make his escape. He remembers Orpheus, always and irredeemably at the moment of turning back and forever losing Eurydice to the underworld. And he remembers too what it was like not to be able to speak after George's death, how impossible it felt to utter anything equivalent to what was inside.

But this time – a miracle – he has been able to step down from the chair and run out. He has brought his brother back. Stephen is recovering from his injuries on a prison mattress in HMP Stafford. Ian is paying the pitiful mortgage that remains on their parents' house so that Stephen will have somewhere to return to.

He remembers words returning to him after George's death as the world faded to a place where it was possible to endure loss. How they

surprised him, fragile as soap bubbles popping briefly into the air.

Ian presses his hands against his eyes. This house is haunted. Perhaps he should not have slept here. The house in Cannock with its view over fields is still theoretically his, but his dreams of staying there are over. The loneliness of it, once a comfort, is too hard to bear. He needs people around him. Roberts has suggested he give policing in Stoke a go before he makes a final decision.

Footsteps move down the stairs. Ian kicks off the covers.

He walks the five steps out of his room and across the landing. In the bathroom, he cups his hands and drinks from the tap. He stands at the landing window. The street is empty of movement but curtains are being drawn. Lights are on. The village is getting ready. Ian pulls on his blue suit, white shirt, blue tie, black polished shoes.

Downstairs, Jamie has tea and toast waiting. He has been staying here since Lucy moved back in with the boys. It makes sense. Jamie is as much family as anyone. Bacon is frying in the skillet. The back door is open and sunlight falls through into the kitchen.

Jamie says, ‘Saw Scargill on the telly. Said it was the tightest possible vote. Apparently the dispute’s not over.’

Ian takes his mug of tea. ‘What’s that mean then if they’re going back?’

Jamie shrugs. ‘Don’t think it means much.’ He plates up a bacon buttie and hands it to Ian.

Too early, Roberts is at the door. He taps on the door frame. ‘All right to come in?’

Roberts makes conversation for all of them. Yes, please, to toast and a bacon buttie and tea. They sit outside on the step. Roberts tells them that Tweety’s offered to plead and turn Queen’s evidence against Oakley, but no one’s interested in helping Tweety reduce his sentence. Oakley was arrested in Christopher’s room with a gun in his hand. They’ve got enough against Oakley without Tweety.

‘And Lester?’ Ian asks.

‘We’re working on it.’

It’s a sore point. Lester’s lawyers are contesting the admissibility of the Quality Street evidence, as everyone calls it, and how much it proves. And there’s nothing that puts him at any of the scenes. Somehow Lester got away from Stoke without being arrested. He’s provided witnesses to

him having spent the day at the Monkey Puzzle. Ian and Roberts are sure he was waiting in the hospital car park for Oakley but slipped away when he spotted police arriving. The Jag was found but it's registered to Oakley. Lester left no prints.

'And my evidence counts for nothing?' Ian says. 'I saw him in Stoke with Oakley. He chased me in that damn car for at least an hour.'

Roberts shrugs. 'We'd have to put you up against sworn witnesses and you'd look like a liar. Christ, one of his witnesses is a school teacher.'

Roberts picks up the plates and stands. Ian and Jamie follow him into the kitchen, taking what he's left behind. Roberts puts the crockery in the sink and takes off his jacket. Long sleeves today. Out of respect, Ian thinks. Roberts runs the taps.

Jamie says, 'Don't worry about that. We'll do it later.'

'It's no bother.'

The sink fills with warm suds and the air with the smell of detergent. Roberts doesn't seem to feel the awkwardness of him standing there at the sink with his shirt sleeves rolled up and how both Jamie and Ian wish he'd leave it. Stacking the crockery on the draining board, he says how grateful he is to be allowed to march in with them. He doesn't want the strike to leave bitterness between the police and the community. He's keen to get things back on track. Now the Met's gone home, things will improve.

'Ay, well maybe,' Jamie says, taking his jacket from the back of a chair.

Roberts dries his hands. 'Got to look on the bright side. There's hope now. This colliery's not one of the ones closing, after all.'

'But that's not it,' Ian says, surprised by his own sudden anger. 'That's not what's been lost. Don't you know what's been lost?'

'But where are we without hope?' Roberts says, shrugging on his own jacket and fastening the top two buttons.

Jamie says, 'Best be off then.'

The village has filled. Men and women pack the streets. There's the colliery banner and someone's got a cine camera and is filming. When the camera turns on them, the men say, 'Ah give over,' but the children giggle and wave. The march forms up. Ian looks around. Janet arrives with Christopher, from a side street. They make their way over, pausing

for the folk who want to shake their hands and give their regards. Janet wears a dark-grey coat and her hair is pinned tightly. She's off to London in a few weeks to start her new job. They've allowed a delay while her son recovered. Christopher himself is shy but beautiful in faded flares and a purple tie-dye T-shirt that is ten years out of date. He is still too thin, but he's ditched the stick he has been using for the last few months. A crowd forms around the family group. They are, for a moment, superstars.

'We're all right proud of your brother,' says one. 'He's with us here.'

'Down, but not defeated,' says another.

Ian cannot speak when he thinks of how Stephen must feel today, but it seems that nodding agreement is all that is required. No-I-Can't Billy comes over and says ay up and pats Christopher on the back, apparently as oblivious as ever to what someone might want and what people think of him. There is a press and throng of bodies. There are wives and children. A small contingent from the SWP with *Coal not Dole* badges still worn proudly on their donkey jackets and carrying *Support The Miners* signs.

'Whatever will they do with their time now?' says Jamie.

'They'll find summat,' says Mick.

One of them – a tall lad in shiny Lycra trousers – comes over and offers his hand. 'You're going back with heads held high.'

'Oh ay,' says Mick. 'Thanks for your support.'

Roberts stands a little to the side but Big Mick is magnanimous and goes over and offers him his hand. Mick towers over Roberts and there are some jokes about isn't he a bit small to be a copper and then they have somehow formed up and are walking to the colliery. Here's Lucy, running down a bit late, with Jamie's two boys. Jamie lifts Michael onto his shoulders. The sun shines off the plastic protective pads of the men's jackets and the women's hair. Near to the colliery gates, police line the way. They start to clap and from somewhere a song goes up. *You don't get me, I'm part of the Union.* The men grin and laugh at themselves for being so soft but everyone sings and it is this, finally, that makes Ian and the men around him weep. It is as if this has all been a big festival and nothing has been lost after all.

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Acknowledgements

This book is built on a lot of generosity.

The story is set in a fictional village and none of the characters in it are real people. However, many people helped me to write this book by sharing their experiences.

Principle among these is my brother-in-law, Richard Wood, who shared generously, funnily and passionately his experience of community, mining and the strike. How I loved our chats.

Other people gave me their precious time and shared their memories and experiences. The following list is not exhaustive and does not reflect the warmth, openness and generosity of those conversations. Heartfelt thanks and love to Susan Werikhe. It was marvellous to catch up after many years. Thanks too to Lord Kinnock, Kim Howells, Terry Sanderson, Andrew Kitchen, Paul Acres QPM, Jim Phillips, John Baldock, Josi Phene and Nick London. Thanks too to the retired Staffordshire officers who shared their experiences with me. I loved driving out into the Staffordshire countryside and listening to them and I am very grateful.

My brilliant editor and publisher, Margaret Stead, has been a steadfast companion, supporting, criticising and running alongside me when I was flagging. Her enthusiasm for books and writing is an inspiration.

Arzu Tahsin did a very important and close read of the book and her suggestions and insights moved it on immeasurably.

Laura Gerrard, Katie Lumsden and Natalie Perman were thoughtful, creative and dogged in the later stages of bringing this book to publication. Thank you. Thanks too, to my dear agent, Alice Lutyens, who has seen me and this book through many iterations. Alice makes me laugh, fights my corner and pushes me on.

Big thanks to the lively team at Firefinch, Kate Parkin, Blake Brooks, Nico Poilblanc and Nicola Mander..

Special thanks to Trilby Harrison and Shelley King. Huge thanks too to Tim Webb and Susan Smith. This book would not have been finished without their practical generosity.

The last but not least piece of generosity was from Dick Greener, John Hudson, and Richard Ford who allowed me to use lyrics from ‘Part of the Union’. The song is credited elsewhere, but I wanted to say thank you here.

And finally, and always, love and thanks to Uri, who puts up with me.

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First published in the UK by Firefinch Publishing Ltd
21 Lombard Street
London, EC3V 9AH
England

First published in Hardback in the UK, 2026
Hardback ISBN: 978-1-9181-0703-6
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-9181-0710-4
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-9181-0717-3
EPUB ISBN: 978-1-9181-0724-1

Also available as an ebook and an audiobook

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design and typeset by Envy Design Ltd
Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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