

Part 1.

Friday.

My eyes look tired in this light that's not real

Strange how it can feel like times passing but not moving

Day to day

Like sitting on a train in the station waiting to pull away, waving through the window to the kid on the train adjacent and in the split second that stasis is broken you look at each others faces unsure as to whose train's still and whose is in motion.

I could say it's funny how things turn out

I was only supposed to be here two weeks

Now it's been four years and

One third of my monthly income is taken by the education I didn't use

To get me this job I don't want to pay off the degree I earned to answer phones

I'm a broken record

Two charity shop shirts, one battered hand-me-down tie and tired brown cords rotate on a five out of seven day basis fooling no one

So I come in here

Four or five times a day knowing that even if any of my co-workers have noticed in between scribbling notes on post-its.

They wouldn't say. Not to my face anyway.

Maybe they have clocked me, maybe on Monday mornings in the smoking room

sitting sipping shittily brewed coffee they mock me as that moody one who can't stop going to the potty. He must have a bowel condition.

Or maybe they know

That I'm a 28-year-old man stuck on a loop that every day involves me playacting taking a shit.

I used to hold it in when I was young. On the football pitch I'd offer to go in goal and stand stern-faced, legs crossed until the urge passed. We'd lose a goal or two but everyone knew I was no keeper. On the days when we rode our bikes I'd pretend I thought I had a puncture and role-play checking for air leaking, the whole time tensing my abdominal muscles, straining against nature so I wouldn't have to go home and miss something.

Now here I am

Staff Toilets. Hiding from my day.

I know what he'd say. He'd say what he always says,

- Just quit, leave. Stick two fingers up at the whole place and breeze.

And part of me agrees, believe me I must have at least seventeen daydreams between nine and five where I walk out of this trap and grab the rest of my life.

Then it's like

Another side of my mind kicks in. The side that prides itself on realist deterministic thick skin.

It says,

- This is what people do. A job is where you have to go, not what you need to do.

Now get your head down and make your money cos think about it, if every day was sunny there'd be no need for the summer.

Like Harrison Ford in Bladerunner, you don't realise you're a robot til you spend some time with the others.

Our 3rd floor open plan office is an open hand promise that slowly closes in on the day and the staff are like some kind of United Colours of Benetton advert for decay.

Like Jane, a 38 year old girl prone to panic, emotional damage and an over-excitement for salad,

- Look, this one's got croutons in.

Has it?

Or Mavis, a middle-aged single mom whose one prized possession is a photo of her as a contestant on Jim Davidson's Big Break playing with Steve Davis.

When I told her I thought Jim Davidson was racist she just went quiet and pulled one of those faces intended to remind me exactly what my place is.

There's Dean, nineteen and born to work in an office. He drinks expensive espresso coffees and smells of lemon fabric softener. On a Monday morning he's always talking in his broad brummie accent about some girl who could have been an actress that he met Friday night.

About how he banged her over the washing machine or nailed her on the stairs.

When I ask him why it all sounds so aggressive he just stares, then carries on with his pornographic story.

Most days they all just fucking bore me.

I feel like I'm supposed to be somewhere else.

Thank god for Malcolm.

Malcolm Fox, the Leo Sayer-haired wearer of paisley shirts and never a pair of socks. He always knocks on my desk like it's a door when he comes over even though I can see him coming. I call him the encyclopedia comedian cos he knows stuff and he's funny.

The in jokes we share save me and random film and book references and often conflicting yet respected musical preferences are exchanged daily. He's a maverick. A choice I think he made as the only way to handle it, cos in this monotonous lifestyle that's lifeless, maybe it takes electric shock hair and bemused co-worker stares for that piece of mind that's priceless.

Malcolm always says,

- If things don't alter, they'll stay as they are, word to the wise.

He never mentions a family, but there are echoes in his eyes.

I've told Jess about him. About how he can name the year, director and studio for every film Marlon Brando ever made, or his ability to break down any life situation with a football analogy using a famous game played or how his ties are made from the same material as curtains or how when he calls me son it feels like I've always known him.

I don't mention any of the other staff, on those nights when I get back late and I go straight to the bath where I know she lies naked and warm under a blanket of bubbles her face glowing by tea light and the room is a cave and I sit on the floor with one arm reaching over and the tiny flame crackles as my hand makes a hole in the foam like I'm ice fishing in a dream and through that portal I can see a snap shot of her body, darker under water, my girl, submerged and my sole purpose is to make

her laugh at least once before she asks me to pass her a towel.

I don't say anything else about work. Once I leave it disappears until morning.

Like mist. A grey daydream, that takes time and gives money.

Instead I listen to Jess, about the bitching and political mess that is a primary school staffroom. About a boy that just joined from another school who the other staff refused to allow in their groups and how it boils her blood and as her mouth moves

I notice the grooves above her lip and how the wet edge of her hair sticks to the left side of her neck, curling round into the bath water like vine on a peanut butter-coloured tree reaching for the river.

She loves her job and though I've never known that feeling, I know it's nice to be around.

- Just quit.

His voice lives in my pillow.

And as Jess sleeps next to me spread out like a starfish I lie straight on my edge and explain my life.

The rent needs to be made and I say I hate it but it pays me and the truth is that I'm safe and that safety's made me lazy.

He's always said it.

- Safe David.

Just to get me mad, and it does, cos things that are true sometimes do that.

I know what I am and

That's the worst part

I'm Bruce Wayne in a Robin suit. Doing what I've gotta do

So when he tells me to quit, I wanna hit him

and hug him at the same time

Ever since I've known him we've been like that.

I remember that first day when he parked his Raleigh 'Mongoose' on the bike rack, he had the look in his eyes of a kid ready to fight that said if you bite me, I'm a bite back.

And he did. Pretty much straight away. Playing football that break he wouldn't take any kicks from any of the others, even the ones from the year above us and he clearly loved pissing them off. I liked that.

Before he came they all used to kick the shit out of me for not passing, but after that first day when he worked his way around nearly ten kids then when the biggest one kicked him he put his fist in the kid's face then passed to me in the space and I scored the tap-in while everyone ran to see the damage, my kicking never happened. In that fifteen-minutes things changed.

By then Maradona was playing for Napoli and after school we happily played one-on-one skill marathons emulating our hero til the sky went deep red.

I remember in PE one time after we'd worked a sublime one-two, ending in me flicking the ball up, and him following through with a bicycle kick like Roberto Baggio the teacher had a go at us.

- As long as I make the rules, you'll never play for this school.

- Why?

- Because there's no 'I' in team.

Riley looked him straight in his eye and said,

- Team doesn't have an 'I' but I've got two and I can see your team's shit.

One weeks detention later we were best friends.

It was about that same time that I first saw Jess. One afternoon in a classroom we'd

shared for half a year, she appeared and that was that.

I remember I forgot to breathe as in one second everything I'd previously thought about girls was taken to one side and told,

- Oi You've got to leave.

I didn't really understand it cos it hadn't been planned but as the fingers on her left hand stroked strands of pinecone-coloured hair behind her right ear in what looked like slow motion, my river reached the ocean.

In that second things changed.

I remember getting home that day and going straight to the kitchen where I knew my granddad would be working on dinner, all day soup with spinners and within a minute of being home I'd pronounced my eternal love for Jessica Brown. After granddad told me to slow down I tried to explain what had happened, about how the pink and white chequered pattern on her dress had left me flattened and how when she bit her bottom lip with the bottom bit of her top two teeth to think, nothing else mattered.

We became three. Jess, Riley and me. Through climbing trees and ten o'clock sunsets,

Through 3 feet high and rising and doing the running man to Mantronix at afternoon school discos wearing dungarees and acid suits. Through those spots on your forehead with the worst ever timing, and an awkward perfect first kiss in the park pressed against each other like movie stars and the burn of first shaves and exams and college and a car trip to Cornwall. Through fumbling in a sleeping bag by torchlight with Portishead playing on a tape running out of batteries and the taste of Jack Daniels and not really knowing what we were doing and the feeling of being in

her staying long after she fell asleep.

Through arguments about leaving home to study and following her to a new city and floating through a degree and Riley deciding he was a weed dealer and getting stoned and fights and throwing stones up at windows at four in the morning. To moving back home and talking about getting our own place and the look on her face when I told her I'd been offered a job and that we had a deposit and finding a flat in the same building on the same floor in fact across the hall from the one that I grew up in and her saying it was fate and starting her teacher training and me riding the excitement blind to the fact that the whole time my life was stuck somewhere between fast forward and rewind. To here.

A place with no windows.

A place where I've actually timed the space between the pre-programmed flush of the urinals. 32 seconds.

A place where my boss thinks flirting means pinching my arse and double entendres.

A place where people get possessive over stationary.

A place where nobody knows who I am.

I get the same bus every weekday morning, the 140, which comes somewhere between seven forty and seven forty five. A carriage carrying the same characters on a well-worn path to boring lives. If I close my eyes I can see them. A grey cast of people with a firm disbelief in the term *carpe diem*.

Tired suited businessmen with dark eyes. Long let go dreams of high flying in penthouses with exotic dark wives. The heavy drinking livers of red broken blood vesselled faces leave traces of vain bottle bottom escape attempts from dark lives.

Seventeen-year-old factory floor Friday night dreamers. All tracksuit bottoms, proud

mom packed lunches and shadowed upper lips. Two months into forty year careers already rehearsed actions of carbon copy days, page three pinned under developing muscled arms.

That woman. The one who smells of old fashioned soap and pride. Knocked out of her stride into a new routine since last year when her husband died.

Her arse is one and a half seats wide and the one time I tried to sit next to her I had to kind of perch on one cheek and by the time we reached town I was numb in the backside.

There's usually a couple of students talking their mix of coursework and useless verbal abuse and that used to be me. But these days I usually choose to switch into a half-awake state until my autopilot moves me off the bus to where I'm supposed to be.

This morning though, there was someone else, someone I couldn't help watching.

A boy.

I'm guessing nine, or maybe ten, but a young ten.

Wearing a dark blue parka like you used to get with the bright orange lining and the hood you can zip right up and pretend it's the periscope of a submarine, a fake fur frame on the world.

His stays zipped down as his young lips mouth words I can't quite work out from where I sit near the back. He seems to be reading over whatever he wrote down into a small notepad that came from his battered rucksack.

He blends in and yet stands out down near the front amongst the usual suspects of the bus crowd and for most of the journey he doesn't do much but look down.

Dark brown hair cropped close might curl given half a chance and after the occasional glance up when his pale face looks like he came up with an idea he

makes notes with what looks like one of those small pencils you can steal from Ikea in his notepad.

I can't see his eyes clearly and I'm sure at one point he nearly caught me staring, so I looked down and the scuffed brown shoes that he's wearing have definitely seen a football.

Part 2.

Now school's started its harder to get into town and back before register.

So today I faked a note saying I've been sent to the doctors. It's pretty easy, all you've go to do is get last years report that mom signed and find some paper thin enough so when you hold it up to the light you can see through it. Then what you do is trace the signature onto the thin paper then get some better letter paper, put it underneath and go over the signature again in pen and this time press hard. Now when you lift off the thin paper the signature impression from you pressing has stayed on the better paper and you just have to go over it again carefully in black, cos mom doesn't use blue and put the report back cos leaving traces is slack and that's the tricky bit done.

The rest is just making sure you get the loop in the d and the l as well as the s with no top and it's really important you don't stop once you've started, just keep the pen on the paper, like mom does when she writes fast.

I've done it plenty times in the past and no one's ever asked any questions.

Graphology. That's what it's called, and if the round bit of your b is balled too tight or your k looks wonky or your words lean to the right they can tell if you might be angry or upset or a murderer.

I keep practising in my pad.

Practise makes perfect.

There's always a shopping list on the fridge to copy and as long as you don't get sloppy and try to explain too much you're fine. Just the facts,

Dear Miss Burly,

I would be grateful if you would allow David to leave half an hour early for lunch today so he can make his doctors appointment. He'll be back in time for afternoon class. Many thanks.

Yours sincerely, P.M. Gardener.

That's it, and it worked just like every other time I've used it, which is why I'm so stupid, cos I'm already late and if this bus doesn't come I'm gonna miss him anyway.

Things I know so far.

1. He lives across the hall in flat 15 with a lady who must be his girlfriend.
2. He doesn't suspect anything
3. His girlfriend has dark shiny hair and wears a scarf that goes round her neck twice.
(I've followed her too. She works in our school over in the infants)
4. He works in an office in town and wears the same brown trousers every day.
5. He catches the bus at 7:40 in the morning and 5:00 in the afternoon with an hour-long lunch break between one and two. (I've followed him at lunchtime twice this week already).

It's not my fault I'm late.

It was the new kid. And I know it sounds stupid cos before school today I never even knew him but now I feel like I've always known him.

At break this morning, playing football like always, he just showed up. In our school colours with dark side parted hair looking grown up.

Usually when new kids start the older ones throw stuff, especially Danny Jones, but today they didn't and without saying anything he was playing with us. We were a man down so we got him and straight away I spotted he was alright.

He had a wicked touch and could do what he wanted with his left or right. His

dribbling was ace, and the look on his face said he shouldn't be messed with and the best bit was he kept passing to me.

Now I'm good. I'm not quite big enough but I can play though. I've got a pretty good right foot and I sometimes wish it was my left like Diego but I can't complain though. The other call me greedy which is really them admitting they need me cos there's always at least one genius in all the best sides.

This morning we were like Maradona and van Basten running round going past em like they weren't even there and that goal where he flicked the ball in the air and I came round the back and whacked it top corner, was awesome.

We even Hi-5ed, even though we know Hi-5's are lame, but this one wasn't the same. We really meant it and after I got chopped down and scraped my hand on the ground he found a spot in the wall and bent it round up and down and left the goalie dumbfounded. Brilliant.

Danny Jones nearly had a fit, and for a second I thought he was gonna hit me for cheering but as he came near me, the new kid moved in between us and frowned and in front of everyone, Danny backed down. I couldn't believe it.

That's why I'm late. It wasn't planned, and I think I've still got a little bit of grit in my hand.

Imagine a grain of sand.

Now imagine every grain of sand on a beach.

Now imagine all the beaches you know.

Now imagine all the beaches in the world.

In our universe there are one million stars for every grain of sand on every beach on the planet.

I don't know how many that is, but I know it's a lot.

We went to a beach once but there was no sand. Just pebbles, and rocks and when you lifted up the rocks little rusty coloured jumping insects tried to escape.

Jenny didn't like the beach or the jumping insects or the grey sea. I tried to tell her about giant squid and the Kraken but she just wanted to go home.

Giant squid can be as long as forty-three feet, which is longer than a bus.

We'd watched 'The Little Mermaid' and mom had got Jenny one of those transfer sets with all the characters so she just stayed inside and did that. The film was alright but transfers are pretty rubbish when there's a beach and jumping insects and animals hiding under stuff.

Mom didn't like the film. She said it was offensive to get obvious actors to speak in stereotype accents instead of just giving the jobs to people who actually come from the places. I think she meant the crab that sounded like uncle Lenny when he's drunk.

Dad said she could take the fun out of anything.

That was last summer and we were in Ireland staying with mom's aunty Rose. She's me and Jenny's great aunty but I couldn't see why she was so great.

Except she did have dogs. Two massive German Shepard dogs called George and Ringo and I got to take them for walks on the beach and they'd fetch bits of wood from the sea when I threw them. It was brilliant. They'd keep doing it all afternoon til I got tired.

Dogs can't sweat properly. They have to do it through their tongue. That's why you

see them panting like crazy when it's hot. They still run around though.

We haven't got a dog. They're not allowed in the block. Cats either. It wouldn't be fair, they'd have to get the lift down just to go and wee.

We've got three fish, one each.

Mine's Bruce Wayne.

He's not as big as the other two but he's clever.

There used to be four but dad's fish died 13 days ago, the day after he left.

Top Best things.

1. Writing stories
2. Maradona
3. Batman
4. Going up to the roof
5. Jessica Brown

The roof is mine and Dad's secret. We don't do much else together so whenever we go up there whether the weather is lovely or ugly the time always feels like treasure.

It's all about stories. We sit on the edge and I tell him what I've been writing or written and he listens til I'm finished then usually takes a minute before he tells me what he thinks. Sometimes he brings up books that he likes and we take turns reading bits and I get the strange feeling he's different up there.

From so high up we can spy on the passers by and we try and make up stories to go with their lives. Dad is always really good at it and I remember looking at him that time we sat laughing at the man with the funny walk and thinking he looked happy. I didn't say anything though.

Granddad came 10 days ago. He's mom's dad and used to live here before I was born then he left to go back to Jamaica.

Jamaica is an island, which is hot and could fit thirteen times into Great Britain.

Mom says that even the rain is warm so when you go out in it, it feels like one big shower for everyone. She says the air is different and you feel it run into your lungs as soon as you step off the plane.

I've never been there but the clock in the kitchen is shaped like Jamaica. It's made of light brown wood the same colour as a caramac bar and is varnished and the hands are really thin and a goldy metal colour. It's hard to tell the time because there are no numbers on it, just names of towns and areas. Granddad is from is where ten o'clock should be, a place called Chester Castle, fourteen miles south west of Montego Bay.

Mom goes out there every summer to see family and help organise things.

It costs a lot of money to get there cos you have to fly and that's why she goes on her own, usually for three weeks, but it always feels like forever.

Granddad's here to help mom and look after Jenny and me because mom works far away and leaves early in the morning and only gets back in time for dinner.

Yesterday I came home thinking about what had happened in class; Granddad must've seen it in my face. He sat down and asked me to explain. So I did, about how I was trying to draw the claws of the boss monster from my latest story when I looked up and saw her, sitting two seats in from the corner. How I had to ask somebody her name and how it felt like she just appeared at the exact same time that I saw her and how all I wanted was more of her. How the clock was above her head

and it said half past two and the last few claws of my monster never got drawn cos it suddenly felt like the whole class knew that I was staring and Granddad said fine. Other grown ups would have told me I was being silly, but I've seen films and I know what it means. It means she takes over my dreams and that it always seems like she can make things better and Granddad said fine. When I asked if he thought I was being foolish and whether being in love so quick was stupid he said,

- Son. It doesn't take a whole day to recognize sunshine.

When I asked him why dad left he said that some people don't know what they have until they lose it.

Granddad talks like that sometimes. He says things in a way that don't really make sense but let me know that I'm not supposed to ask any more questions.

I remember the night before he left. Mom had stormed off to Aunt Cynthia's and Jenny was asleep. He called me into the living room and we watched Robocop on video even though it's an 18 and we both knew Mom wouldn't like it.

We sat in the dark and watched in silence and I tried not to look away in the bits that got really violent like when the man gets in the acid and he's melting and saying 'help me' and the car runs him over.

I knew it was a treat so when it was over and I'd brushed my teeth I went back to say thanks but dad was fast asleep in his chair. I told myself I wasn't scared and that I was keeping my torch in bed just to be prepared.

Reasons why people leave.

1. There's somewhere better for them to be
2. They did something wrong

3. Somebody did something wrong to them
4. They're scared
5. They bang their head and lose their memory and get amnesia like Michael Knight

The flat smells different now. A mix of Granddad's aftershave, soap and the vegetables that he brings back from his allotment that hang in a red and white striped plastic bag on the hook inside the pantry.

I like Granddad. He talks like uncle Lenny and uncle Roger and his voice is warm and he always wears a vest underneath his shirt and you can see it cos his shirts are thin and never wrinkled like my school shirt and he smells like the aftershave from the dark green bottle with the long neck and last night he let me put some on.

The bottle said 'for men' which means I'm a man, even though I'm not eleven til May. He tipped a little bit into my palm and told me to rub my hands together and splash it onto my cheeks and neck, so I did and it felt like somebody set fire to my skin. Granddad wears special shoes that don't make any sound when he walks so he can sneak up on you whenever he wants, like a ninja.

A ninja is an assassin, which means they kill people for money and they wear black so you can only see their eyes and they move in silence and kill you with ninja stars or some of the wire they use to cut cheese.

In the morning he makes breakfast for me and Jenny, dumpling, beans, bacon if there is any or sometimes fish fingers.

This morning he tried to get us to eat this stuff called acky, but it was like snot and me and Jenny couldn't eat it so we just had Frosties.

I've only seen him eat once and he went really slowly, like he was thinking about every fork-full. He chewed like he really meant it and just like his shoes, his mouth didn't make any sound.

I've been leaving before him and Jenny in the morning so I can get to the bus stop in time for 7:40.

After school I play football til half four then get into town in time for five to catch him leaving through those frosted glass doors.

When I get home I go straight to my room and put my notepad in the shoebox under my bed, then go through to the kitchen, have some Vimto and join in with whatever game Granddad and Jenny are playing. Either; gin rummy with granddad's shiny deck, tic-tac-toe with the pebbles from the kitchen drawer, Connect 4 or Dominoes. Granddad can hold all seven in one hand and he knows which ones you're holding without even looking. I don't know how he does it; I can only hold four and then they slip out. He says practise makes perfect.

I think he lets jenny win but I don't tell her that.

I haven't told him about my mission. I haven't told Jenny or Mom either. I won't tell anyone til I find out enough then I'll get them all together and explain.

Today will be lunchtime tracking number three and I'll see if he does the same thing. Walk through town ignoring all the shops and he only stops outside the jewellers. Twice now I've seen him go right up to the glass so his nose almost touches the window. He doesn't go in though. After a minute or so he carries on, usually faster, like a dog getting away from his master and I have to speed up but not make it obvious that I'm following. Which is hard, because if he stops I have to carry on so I look natural when in actual fact my reactions have trapped me cos I can't look back and that happening is exactly why I need practise.

He goes to a small shop that looks messy with an old glass and green door and looking through the window I've never ever seen more records or books or films in one place. All the walls, half the floor and even the windowsills are filled with a million covers, some older than others, some different versions of the same thing and as he goes in the bell on the door sounds with the same ring.

I pretend to browse through the glass and as the lunchtime town crowd moves past behind me I try and see what's happening inside.

The man who works in the shop always stops what he's doing when he walks in and they start talking and do a funny handshake that looks like it takes practise and must mean they're friends.

The shop man has darker side-parted hair and a rough sort of beard and looks sort of weird like he's always nearly angry, but handsome, like someone from a film.

Then they go to the pub and I can't follow so I think from tomorrow I'll stop coming at lunchtime.

It was 10 days ago. The day Granddad came, after dinner, mom sent me to the outdoor for bin bags and peanut brittle and on the way back I took a little detour and went up to the roof for the first time on my own. I did what dad would never let me and climbed onto the ledge and walked right along the edge looking down and that's when I saw him. Walking towards the main doors, the man I've seen a couple of times before, who lives across the hall and the idea hit me.

I quickly ran down the metal stairs, back into the hall, called the lift, reached our floor and sprinted to our door just as I heard the other lift doors open.

I stood on the yellow pages to see through the peephole. It seemed to take ages before he reached number 15 and put his key in the keyhole. As he stepped inside he looked back and I really thought he could see me and I nearly fell off the phonebook but the feeling I got made it easy. This was what I had to do.

Now it's day nine and I reckon in three or four more days time I'll be ready to start writing.

Plan.

1. Follow man from number 15 and people close to him
2. Become expert private detective by watching films and reading books on subject
3. Write best ever story
4. Find out where Dad went
5. Give Dad story

Now where's this bus?

Part 3.

Monday.

We'd gone to the park cos it snowed and dad showed me how to build a barricade.

A barricade is a wall you build to protect you.

He built one too and we had a snowball war. He taught me about strategy and how you had to be ready, but then I got tired and he caught me off guard and threw a hard one just as I looked out and before I heard him shout duck I'd been knocked down.

That was my first black eye. This is my second.

The others said it was an accident, but I know that he meant it.

He's jealous about Jessica and

There's only me and him could've bent it over their heads round the wall full force and put it exactly where we wanted.

There were four in the wall, all pretty tall, so I didn't know it was coming right for me til it was too late.

Straight in my face and it went numb.

The wall parted and even with one eye I could see in his face he knew exactly what he'd done.

We just stood, like cowboys, waiting for me to cry. The side of my face started tingling like it was made of ice.

I just walked past him and went inside.

In the glass door of the sick room I could see my face was red on one side and I felt my mouth start to smile.

Then, as I sat down I touched my face and felt something wet. The ice had melted. I had cried, I just hadn't felt it.

In the bus window now I can see my reflection with one dark eye as buildings move past behind it.

Today I wait for him outside his office building and get him to explain what he was doing on the roof yesterday. How does he know? And why did he take her?

It didn't matter that I got into town late on Friday. As I came round the corner before the jewellers, there he was, same as always, staring, and that's when the daring started.

Do it.

Just walk over and speak.

And say what? Hello, you don't know me but I've been watching you closely for just over a week. I live across the hall and I'm not a stalker I'm writing a story and

Then he actually went in.

I moved closer and lent on a post box.

He came out holding a small plastic bag and moved off, not as fast as normal, more thoughtful, and his face looked like Jenny's does when she wins at Connect 4.

I followed him round to his friends shop.

Standing across the street by a black van I was imagining Hannibal and BA in the front seat.

You know you want to go in. Go over and open the door. You can find out loads if you can hear what they're saying, are you doing this for real or are you just playing?

I felt a long breath come blowing out of my mouth as I crossed over the road, then just as I got close enough to open the door I saw the sign change from open to closed as the shop man's hand turned it over. I could see his face, he looked angry and for a second I thought he looked at me so I turned away.

Looking back through the glass bit on the door

they started talking. The shop man was shaking his head and walking around while the other man just stood holding the bag from the jewellers.

I moved out of the way as they came out. One man smiling, the other with a frown and as they walked away together the shop man's head turned round and stared. Just for a second and, I'm telling you, that time it definitely felt like he was sending a message.

Stay Away

I got back to class late.

I told Miss Burly the Doctors was really busy.

She bought it, and told me to choose a seat then, as she started talking to the class about our animal reports, something caught my eye.

The new kid was sitting over by the window right next to Jessica Brown. Cos of my story I was late and he'd made a move for her.

What are you waiting for Mr Gardener, applause? The class laughed and I felt my face go red and all I wanted was to smash his head on the radiator, then he waved at me to come sit with them. He'd saved me a seat.

I'd thought he was being really sneaky but it was just me being mean.

I looked at Jessica quickly but she was too pretty so I looked down.

I could feel the excitement of being near her starting in my feet.

In a way him being in between us made it easier cos it meant she couldn't really see me.

She had this pen that I've never seen with red, black, blue and green sliding buttons on the top and when you pressed a button you could write in a different colour. My pencil looked rubbish.

The new kid was making conversation as he drew his Bengal Tiger. He wasn't bothered that he was sitting right beside her and as she sat talking, while writing about the natural habitat of the golden eagle, I started to find it easier to breathe.

He looked at the title on my report 'The Nomads of the North',

Did you know Polar Bears cover their own noses when they go hunting?

That way they're completely white against the snow so they can get really close before the seals know.

Jessica seemed impressed so I did my best not to correct him. See I know about polar bears and that fact isn't true it's just something that people made up cos it sounds cool. I could have told them a better one, the fact that Polar Bears are the only animal on the planet with no natural predator except themselves and man and man can't eat polar bear meat because there are things in it called enzymes that can kill us. Basically, like an animal superhero, nobody messes with a polar bear.

She asked him why he'd come half way through the year and he told us what had happened.

She didn't seem shocked and then she told us about how her dad had been killed in a car crash last summer. She had the saddest face I've ever seen as she told us how he'd been walking on Three Shires Oak road and hadn't seen a silver Cortina come between two parked cars from the side and take him.

That kind of stopped the conversation and in the space I could've told them about my dad, but I didn't.

We walked home together, the three of us and for some reason it seemed normal.

We were talking about Danny Jones and how some of the other kids were saying that the new kid had hit him even though we knew different.

As I talked she was really listening and I was watching her lips and thinking they looked like little bits of tangerine and imagining kissing them.

The sky was two different greys as she walked the other way glancing back with a smile.

The new kid's house was the one with the really big wooden front door and it was crazy to actually go in to a place I've walked past on my way home ever since I was

four. There was an old rug that covered the hall floor and I could smell furniture polish and perfume. He said his aunty was asleep in the front room so we went upstairs.

There was a batmobile poster on his door and looking round the room I'd never ever seen more toys or books or films in my life. The toys looked like they'd never been touched and some of the films were 15s and 18s like, Gremlins and Predator and Nightmare on Elm St and it must mean he's allowed to watch them on his own.

It was like somebody had decided he could live like a grown up.

He told me I could take anything I wanted and pointed to one corner where there were a couple of Christmas presents he hadn't even opened and I noticed a framed photo of the Joker next to his bed.

He went over and lay down, as I moved round from one thing to another like a playground. He seemed bored as I sat on the floor and opened a Shoot magazine from a pile that had never been read, he just lay staring at the ceiling then said, "I'm gonna think about her when I wank later".

Things I know about the New Kid.

1. He knows how to play football properly
2. He's not scared of girls
3. He drinks his calypso by biting a hole in the bottom and squeezing it instead of using the straw
4. He lives in the posh house
5. He watched a mugger kill his mom and dad last Christmas

Today is the same as always. The bus is nearly empty. Just the old man and woman

who sit down near the front and say nothing the whole way, and me.

Why were they sitting on the edge of the roof?

I was on my own in the flat on Sat morning. Granddad had gone to the allotment before I got up and Mom and Jenny had gone into town to buy Jenny new shoes. The ones from the girly advert with the fairies. They've got a little key that's supposed to be for the door to a secret garden stuck in the heel. Everybody knows it's not real, I mean even if you found the door, how could you open it with the key glued inside your shoe? I didn't tell Jenny that.

I was sat on the sofa watching Gordon the Gofer annoying Philip Schofield on the telly.

Dad's chair was empty.

Nobody really sits there now but I could hear him trying to tempt me.

I sat down and sank into the cushion and straight away it felt like I shouldn't have done it.

I felt small, like when I used to sit in his footprints in the snow. But different.

Philip Schofield told the boy who'd phoned in he hadn't won.

I shuffled to get out then felt something uncomfortable pushing the side of my bum.

I felt under the cushion and pulled it out.

It wasn't mine but I recognized it.

Black with an elastic band holding it closed. I know you're not supposed to go through someone else's notes but he told me to do it.

Just read the first page you don't have to go through it.

I sat up straight and pulled the elastic band off gently

Every page was the same.

Empty.

There was no one to tell me I wasn't supposed to so I ate peanut butter and square crisps for breakfast and thought about my day, follow the lady from number 15 then come home and piece together the things that I've seen.

She sat down near the front, where the old couple are now. Brown handbag, a long black coat and that scarf over a dark blue dress.

I decided to risk it and sat right behind her.

She smelt like my bed and it felt nice just being near her. Her head leaning against the window her hair was the colour of wood and I wanted to touch it.

Then we reached town.

I knew where she was going I just didn't know why. That same shop with all the records, books and films inside. It was closed.

She went right up til her nose touched the glass and I wanted to ask her why she was looking for the shop man. I passed her and stood leaning on a lamppost and if she'd looked over her shoulder she would've seen me.

I could see the air she was breathing steaming up the window. That's condensation.

Condensation is what happens when something warm touches something cold.

You get water.

She just stood looking and I could feel her brain working. Part of her hair was across her face like Roger Rabbit's girlfriend.

Then she moved on, this time faster. Like a dog getting away from its master, but I'm really good at this now so I knew that as long as I could still see her, letting her get further away wasn't a disaster.

So at first I kept my distance, outside Smiths whistling. She went left, checked back, went right and crossed over. And I got closer. So close I could almost touch her shoulder.

Then she went into a pub.

Looking through the window I saw her go into the toilet. Inside was smoky and full of old men playing dominoes.

There was a little telly up on a shelf showing horse racing and two men were making faces and waving their fists. Then I noticed the ones sitting down were all holding all their dominoes in one hand.

She came out, counted some change in her hand, walked to the pay phone then changed her mind.

I followed her all the way up the high street, past McDonalds, past the road his office is on, out of town to the park.

She went into the phone box by the little kids playground.

I wanted to know more so I moved round to the opposite side to the door where she couldn't see me, but I could just about make out her voice say, 'I need to see you'.

Then she hung up. I waited til she came out then when she moved away I made sure I went the other way round.

She sat on the bench just past the swings. There was a man pushing two little girls one with each hand. They were laughing and had matching coats.

I was fed up of hiding and walked over and sat down on the other end of the bench.

She took something out of her handbag. It looked like a pen but she didn't hold it like one. She stared at it then put it back.

The fingers on her left hand moved strands of dark hair behind her right ear.

I felt weird.

Don't I know you? She said looking over. And I didn't even feel like I'd blown it.

Maybe. My name's David.

She smiled and I forgot to breathe.

Yeah. I know you.

I sometimes see you in the mornings. You go to our juniors don't you? I've read your work on the wall. You're the boy who writes the stories.

Then there she was, sitting on her own on one of the swings. The strange thing was I hadn't noticed her approaching. She hadn't noticed me either. Her thin metal headphones blocking out the sound.

She smiled and moved them round her neck as I sat down on the swing next to hers.

I smiled back and we just sat with no messy words.

It felt different to school. Just the two of us, out of uniform, on a Saturday afternoon.

I watch you sometimes.

She leant her head against the grey metal chain. She had light blue jeans and her grey jumper was a little bit too big but perfect.

I know.

I asked her what she was listening to and she told me to get closer so I could hear.

It was a tape her dad made her of a man called Neil. We sat with our swings leaning and heads together and nothing moved.

-'I have a friend I've never seen. He hides his head inside a dream'

When I got back to our block it was gone seven o'clock but I was too excited to have an excuse, and that's when I saw him, waiting,

Looking up at the flats.

He looked different at night. His hair wasn't side parted anymore and he looked like he was getting ready for something as he sat on the wall staring up.

I went to move behind the main doors but he came towards me with that same stare from outside his shop.

I held my breath and pretended to look for my keys. As he came closer I smelled the pub I wanted to hide but it was no good.

But he wasn't bothered about me. He went over to the lift pushed the button and stood watching his feet.

I told myself that this was one of those moments when you can either show what you're made of or prove that you're hopeless.

Like Dad said about Maradona,

- Great players make things happen.

I walked over as the lift doors opened, showing no panic.

He stared at the buttons then pressed the one for our floor and as the doors closed the lift smelt like the pub.

When it moves it usually makes my stomach move with it, but this time I couldn't tell if it was the lift or who was stood in it.

Then it was like the little numbers that light up above the doors were the source of my power as we went up the floors and I wasn't scared.

The doors opened and I stepped out but he just stood there frozen. His eyes looked down and his mouth opened, but before he could say anything the doors close.

It's just before 5.

I'm bang on time.

It's colder than it looked through the window. I wish I had my coat and that sounds like a siren.

There's a crowd of people in the road outside his building.

They're all stood around something. I get nearer.

I wanna see, but I can't get through, there are no spaces to squeeze in between, the people are packed too close. They look serious.

I look up and think of the The Joker falling.

The sky is one kind of grey and someone says, it's too late, he's not going to make it.

Things a great story needs.

1. A baddy
2. A girl
3. Someone trying to do something
4. Something you don't understand that becomes clear later
5. Someone to die

Part 4.

Everything was touched with orange from the lamppost outside.

The swirls of paint on the artex ceiling looked like deep whipped cream and as she lay fast asleep next to me I wanted to reach up and feel it.

I heard her mumble something and felt her body moving rolling over throwing her left arm over her shoulder and whack! She hit me.

She didn't even wake up as I sat up holding my face and I watched as she curled into a ball somehow taking up most of the space on the mattress.

This morning went quickly. I came in, people stared shared a joke asking who'd hit

me. I told Mavis I'd opened a door into my own face and she bought it, told me my education had been wasted. Jane offered to make me a tea but sat down again when Mavis told her stupidity didn't deserve sympathy.

Malcolm just looked over the top of his monitor and smiled like he knew what I was going to do.

Dean went into his usual routine, this time he was particularly pleased because he'd got some girl into bed and only spent a fiver. He didn't care if I was listening as he walked away punctuating his latest tale with a cocky smile and, 'Nice Shiner'.

I didn't mind.

This time tomorrow I won't be here.

We were in the smoking room making tea when I told her I was leaving. She was taking the piss about my eye asking if I wanted her to kiss it better.

I just did what I always do and let her carry on thinking about how if roles were reversed and I was her boss I'd probably have lost my job.

She didn't believe me. She waited for me to say it was a joke and when I didn't her smile broke and she told me that I was supposed to give two weeks notice and if I left today I'd owe two weeks pay.

Ok. And she walked away.

The metal handle of the teapot burned my fingers as I poured.

I told myself if I let go before my mug was full Jess would die.

He never phones, especially not at work. He sounded like he'd been drinking when he told me he'd walk over and meet me outside at five.

The numbers above the doors say the lift is down in reception and I've already pressed the button so all I can do is wait. Something I've been doing every day since I came here. I won't have to look at that clock anymore. That clock, that can make two minutes take an hour if you look at it in the wrong way.

My days are gonna be different now. I know I've got enough saved to not have to work for about six months and that's gonna have to be enough to get most of the writing done.

I knew what he'd say when I showed him the ring. I was ready for it so I just stood steady and let him rant. I knew he wouldn't give me a chance to speak so I just waited. He locked the shop door and laid it out. How all I was doing was ruining my way out, how I'd been like this since the playground, how all it would mean would be the end of excitement, safe David strikes again making bold gestures cos he's frightened.

I didn't mind. Everything feels different and I know he can tell. So after about five minutes of pacing and his face changing colour, he stopped. I love her.

He shrugged and I asked him to come out with us for Chinese later and he tried to do his usual,

- I can't make it

but I made him agree.

The three of us sat in a dark red booth eating hot and sour soup and noodles. One beauty in the middle of two stooges as we talked about how we used to do stuff together all the time.

I had Saturday planned and my hands wouldn't stay still as I fumbled with my chopsticks moving my noodles.

Riley said things change. You used to write stories.

Jess looked at him then at me and said nothing.

I'm thinking of writing a new one.

Both their faces changed and he coughed as a little bit of soup went down the wrong way.

What did you say?

I said I'm gonna write a story. I had an idea.

Jess smiled. Then the fortune cookies arrived.

I remember the three of us walking back from nights out in a University town.

Clothes stuck to our backs from four hours dancing to Northern Soul and only noticing the sweat as we stepped out into the cold.

Nineteen years old.

Not really knowing what we were doing but enjoying not being told.

I remember how he'd look at her as she pulled on her coat.

Like he used to at school.

Like he still does now.

I went through my desk this morning. Four years and the only thing I found that I wanted to take with me was a worn piece of A4 with two eleven man, all time fantasy football teams that me and Malcolm did nearly three years ago.

Most of his players were older than mine but we both only chose players who could change a game. A lot of people say you need muscle in midfield. The yin to balance

the yang of you skill player, but the best players do it all; win the ball, play it simple and short or maraud forward and terrorise the back four. They can be both. Great players make things happen.

It would've been a great game; battles all over the pitch and both number tens with the same name. Diego Armando Maradona.

I lay pretending to be half asleep when Jess left for town on Saturday morning.

I waited for enough time for the lift to reach down and her to be out, then I was up.

All the stuff from the living room went into the bedroom, except the sofa, which got pushed against one wall. When I'd put the 20-kilogram bag of sand round the side of the block on Friday nobody saw.

Getting it up in the lift would've been hard if I hadn't been so excited. I tipped it out onto the cheap laminated floor and, with my hands, spread it out so it covered all but a strip along the opposite wall to the sofa.

The dark blue sheets we never use lay in that strip and became the ocean.

With the windows open the breeze blew the leaves of the yucca plant we bought the day we moved which was now a palm tree swaying calmly in the tropical air.

The wall was the best bit. I've got a scanner and work had a projector and nobody had batted an eyelid when I walked out Friday with it under my arm and when I got home I would've told Jess I had a presentation to prepare but she didn't even notice.

The photo we took of the sun setting into the sea in Cornwall finished the scene. Our living room was a beach.

In the kitchen I made up a jug of my version of strawberry Daiquiri and didn't hold back on the rum, changed into my t-shirt and shorts, hit the repeat button on the 'sounds of the sea' CD I'd bought and sat on the sofa, my toes in the cold sand, one

hand holding half a coconut of badly mixed liquor, the other gripping a little velvet box in my hip pocket and waited for Jess to come home.

By the time I heard her key in the door it really was sunset and I was on my fourth daiquiri. She dropped her handbag and stood in the doorway.

I'm not sure what happened first, whether I tried to get up or she starting crying.

The door opening had made a space in the sand like a slice of pie and that's where she stood as I took out the box and opened it looking up into her eyes.

The pair of us sat, side-by-side on a towel on the sand on our living room floor looking at the view we'd seen when we were seventeen. The breeze from the open window was turning cold as I told her about my idea.

She liked it but even more she liked that I'm thinking about writing.

We sat with our backs against the sofa looking over at our frozen moment sipping our bad daiquiris and she wrapped herself around me.

When I woke up she wasn't there.

The bedroom window was wide open and it was cold and I could hear birds and as I sat holding my pounding head I felt bits of sand in my hair.

Cornwall flickered as I switched the projector off.

Then I heard the kettle.

She came in with tea and toast, and we sat on the sofa.

She was holding her mug with both hands and I noticed the ring.

It fits.

Of course it does and she sipped her tea, her knees up next to her chest wearing her knickers and vest and I got a flashback of her dropping her daiquiri as she got on top of me, then it was gone.

I'll clean this up later. When my headache goes.

Leave it. I like it in between my toes.

I hadn't been up to the roof since we moved out of the block into our first house that summer before secondary school. I remember trying to get used to living on the same floor as the main door and Jenny and Granddad playing drawn on connect four on the grey walls before we all painted over them.

We weren't even fully dressed when we got into the lift but Jess didn't question it.

We left the metal door open and stepped out onto the flat concrete.

The light hurt our eyes with no buildings to hide behind and it hit me just how close to the sky it felt up there.

We sat on the edge and I told her what I remembered.

I remember it being important. I remember sitting right here on the edge looking down and making up stories and I remember feeling warm.

The wind was blowing her hair as she sat staring at me. I'd seen that look before,

I want to tell you why I was so late yesterday

but before she could say any more

somebody slammed the roof door.

One time I thought I saw my dad. In town coming out of the station. I think it was him. It was just before Christmas a couple of years ago. Course there's no way to know now cos I didn't go over I just froze.

He looked smaller. The skin on his face looked loose and what was left of his hair was grey. He didn't see me and I remember feeling glad. He could've lived a million miles away or on the other side of town for all it mattered.

Last night I lay in the bath. Planning.

First thing I'm gonna do is buy a notebook. A proper one. Black moleskin.

The lift doors open and I step inside. There's no need for goodbyes. There lives won't change in the absence of mine and to be honest I haven't got time.

When I came out of the bath in my towel she was lying on the sofa and I looked at the TV and recognised the start of the film. She knows it's my favourite.

- I saved you a space.

As the doors go to close something stops them.

It's Malcolm.

He shakes my hand handing me something, smiles, says thank you then turns round and walks away.

The Bing sounds and as the lift doors close I look down at my hand and see a pen.

By the time it reached the final scene Jess was asleep.

Batman and the Joker on top of the cathedral and I knew every word.

- 'I'm going to kill you.'

- 'You idiot. You made me remember?'

I remember Riley.

I made you. But I don't need you anymore.

Walking across reception for the last time I've never felt this sure

I hear the sirens.

People are standing in the road

They're all crowded around something.

I move past and

I could look over their tightly packed shoulders

But I don't need to.

There is a boy. His name is David.

David writes stories. This is his.

‘If I Cover My Nose You Can’t See Me’

Written by Polarbear