The Shock of the Fall
For Emily
the girl and her doll

I should say that I am not a nice person. Sometimes I try to be, but often I’m not. So when it was my turn to cover my eyes and count to a hundred – I cheated.

I stood at the spot where you had to stand when it was your turn to count, which was beside the recycling bins, next to the shop selling disposable barbecues and spare tent pegs. And near to there is a small patch of overgrown grass, tucked away behind a water tap.

Except I don’t remember standing there. Not really. You don’t always remember the details like that, do you? You don’t remember if you were beside the recycling bins, or further up the path near to the shower blocks, and whether actually the water tap is up there?

I can’t now hear the manic cry of seagulls, or taste the salt in the air. I don’t feel the heat of the afternoon sun making me sweat beneath a clean white dressing on my knee, or the itching of suncream in the cracks of my scabs. I can’t make myself relive the vague sensation of having been abandoned. And neither – for
what it’s worth – do I actually remember deciding to cheat, and open my eyes.

She looked about my age, with red hair and a face flecked in hundreds of freckles. Her cream dress was dusty around the hem from kneeling on the ground, and clutched to her chest was a small cloth doll, with a smudged pink face, brown woollen hair, and eyes made of shining black buttons.

The first thing she did was place her doll beside her, resting it ever so gently on the long grass. It looked comfortable, with its arms flopped to the sides and its head propped up a little. I thought it looked comfortable anyway.

We were so close I could hear the scratching and scraping, as she began to break up the dry ground with a stick. She didn’t notice me though, even when she threw the stick away and it nearly landed on my toes, all exposed in my stupid plastic flip-flops. I would have been wearing my trainers but you know what my mum’s like. Trainers, on a lovely day like today. Surely not. She’s like that.

A wasp buzzed around my head, and usually that would be enough to get me flapping around all over the place, except I didn’t let myself. I stayed totally still, not wanting to disturb the little girl, or not wanting her to know I was there. She was digging with her fingers now, pulling up the dry earth with her bare hands, until the hole was deep enough. Then she rubbed the dirt from her fingers as best she could, picked up her doll again, and kissed it twice.
That is the part I can still see most clearly – those two kisses, one on its forehead, one on the cheek.

I forgot to say, but the doll wore a coat. It was bright yellow, with a black plastic buckle at the front. This is important because the next thing she did was undo the buckle, and take this coat off. She did this very quickly, and stuffed it down the front of her dress.

Sometimes – times like now – when I think of those two kisses, it is as though I can actually feel them.

One on the forehead.

One on the cheek.

What happened next is less clear in my mind because it has merged into so many other memories, been played out in so many other ways that I can’t separate the real from the imagined, or even be sure there is a difference. So I don’t know exactly when she started to cry, or if she was crying already. And I don’t know if she hesitated before throwing the last handful of dirt. But I do know by the time the doll was covered, and the earth patted down, she was bent over, clutching the yellow coat to her chest, and weeping.

When you’re a nine-year-old boy, it’s no easy thing to comfort a girl. Especially if you don’t know her, or even what the matter is.

I gave it my best shot.

Intending to rest my arm lightly across her shoulders – the way Dad did to Mum when we took family walks – I shuffled forward, where in a moment of indecision I couldn’t commit either to kneeling beside her or staying standing. I hovered awkwardly between the two, then overbalanced, toppling in slow motion, so the first this weeping girl was aware of me, was the entire weight
of my body, gently pushing her face into a freshly dug grave. I still
don’t know what I should have said to make things better, and I’ve
thought about this a lot. But lying beside her with the tips of our
noses nearly touching, I tried, ‘I’m Matthew. What’s your name?’

She didn’t answer straight away. She tilted her head to get a
better look at me, and as she did that I felt a single strand of her
long hair slip quickly across the side of my tongue, leaving my
mouth at the corner. ‘I’m Annabelle,’ she said.

Her name was Annabelle.

The girl with the red hair and a face flecked in hundreds of
freckles is called Annabelle. Try and remember that if you can.
Hold onto it through everything else that happens in life, through
all the things that might make you want to forget – keep it safe
somewhere.

I stood up. The dressing on my knee was now a dirty brown. I
started to say we were playing hide-and-seek, that she could
play too if she wanted. But she interrupted. She spoke calmly,
not sounding angry or upset. And what she said was, ‘You’re not
welcome here any more, Matthew.’

‘What?’

She didn’t look at me, she drew herself onto her hands and
knees and focused on the small pile of loose earth – patting it
neat again, making it perfect. ‘This is my daddy’s caravan park.
I live here, and you’re not welcome. Go home.’

‘But—’

‘Get lost!’
She was upright in an instant, moving towards me with her chest puffed out, like a small animal trying to look bigger. She said it again, ‘Get lost, I told you. You’re not welcome.’

A seagull laughed mockingly, and Annabelle shouted, ‘You’ve ruined everything.’

It was too late to explain. By the time I reached the footpath, she was kneeling on the ground again, the little yellow doll’s coat held to her face.

The other children were shouting out, calling to be found. But I didn’t look for them. Past the shower blocks, past the shop, cutting through the park – I ran as fast as I could, my flip-flops slapping on the hot tarmac. I didn’t let myself stop, I didn’t even let myself slow down until I was close enough to our caravan to see Mum sitting out on the deckchair. She was wearing her straw sun hat, and looking out to the sea. She smiled and waved at me, but I knew I was still in her bad books. We’d sort of fallen out a few days before. It’s stupid because it was only really me who got hurt, and the scabs were nearly healed now, but my parents sometimes find it hard to let stuff go.

Mum in particular, she holds grudges.

I guess I do too.

I’ll tell you what happened because it will be a good way to introduce my brother. His name’s Simon. I think you’re going to like him. I really do. But in a couple of pages he’ll be dead. And he was never the same after that.

When we arrived at Ocean Cove Holiday Park – bored from the journey, and desperate to explore – we were told it was okay for us
to go anywhere in the site, but were forbidden from going to the beach by ourselves because of how steep and uneven the path is. And because you have to go onto the main road for a bit to get to the top of it. Our parents were the kind to worry about that sort of thing – about steep paths and main roads. I decided to go to the beach anyway. I often did things that I wasn’t allowed to do, and my brother would follow. If I hadn’t decided to name this part of my story the girl and her doll then I could have named it, the shock of the fall and the blood on my knee because that was important too.

There was the shock of the fall and the blood on my knee. I’ve never been good with pain. This is something I hate about myself. I’m a total wimp. By the time Simon caught up with me, at the twist in the path where exposed roots snare unsuspecting ankles – I was wailing like a baby.

He looked so worried it was almost funny. He had a big round face, which was forever smiling and made me think of the moon. But suddenly he looked so fucking worried.

This is what Simon did. He collected me in his arms and carried me step-by-step back up the cliff path, and the quarter of a mile or so to our caravan. He did that for me.

I think a couple of adults tried to help, but the thing you need to know about Simon is that he was a bit different from most people you might meet. He went to a special school where they were taught basic stuff like not talking to strangers, so whenever he felt unsure of himself or panicked, he would retreat to these lessons to feel safe. That’s the way he worked.
He carried me all by himself. But he wasn’t strong. This was a symptom of his disorder, a weakness of the muscles. It has a name that I can’t think of now, but I’ll look it up if I get the chance. It meant that the walk half killed him. So when we got back to the caravan he had to spend the rest of the day in bed.

Here are the three things I remember most clearly from when Simon carried me:

1/ The way my chin banged against his shoulder as he walked. I worried that I was hurting him, but I was too wrapped up in my own pain to say anything.

2/ So I kissed his shoulder better, in the way that when you’re little you believe this actually works. I don’t think he noticed though, because my chin was banging against him with every step, and when I kissed him, my teeth banged instead, which, if anything, probably hurt more.

3/ Shhh, shhh. It’ll be okay. That’s what he said as he placed me down outside our caravan, before running in to get Mum. I might not have been clear enough – Simon really wasn’t strong. Carrying me like that was the hardest thing he’d ever done, but still he tried to reassure me. Shhh, shhh. It’ll be okay. He sounded so grown-up, so gentle and certain. For the first time in my life it truly felt like I had a big brother. In the few short seconds whilst I waited for Mum to come out, as I cradled my knee, stared at the dirt and grit in the skin, convinced myself I could see the bone, in those few short seconds – I felt totally safe.
Mum cleaned and dressed the wound, then she shouted at me for putting Simon in such a horrible position. Dad shouted at me too. At one point they were both shouting together, so that I wasn’t even sure who to look at. This was the way it worked. Even though my brother was three years older, it was always me who was responsible for everything. I often resented him for that. But not this time. This time he was my hero.

So that’s my story to introduce Simon. And it’s also the reason I was still in Mum’s bad books as I arrived, breathless, at our caravan, trying to make sense of what had happened with the small girl and her cloth doll.

‘Sweetheart, you’re ashen.’

She’s always calling me ashen, my mum. These days she calls me it all the time. But I forgot she said it way back then too. I completely forgot that she’s always called me ashen.

‘I’m sorry about the other day, Mum.’ And I was sorry. I’d been thinking about it a lot. About how Simon had to carry me, and how worried he had looked.

‘It’s okay, sweetheart. We’re on holiday. Try and enjoy yourself. Your dad went down to the beach with Simon, they’ve taken the kite. Shall we join them?’

‘I think I’m going to stay in for a bit. It’s hot out. I think I’m going to watch some telly.’

‘On a lovely day like today? Honestly, Matthew. What are we going to do with you?’

She sort of asked that in a friendly way, as though she didn’t really feel a need to do anything with me. She could be nice like
that. She could definitely be nice like that.

‘I don’t know Mum. Sorry about the other day. Sorry about everything.’

‘It’s forgotten sweetheart, really.’
‘Promise?’
‘I promise. Let’s go and fly that kite, shall we?’
‘I don’t feel like it.’
‘You’re not watching telly, Matt.’
‘I’m in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek.’
‘You’re hiding?’
‘No. I’m seeking. I should do that really.’

But the other children had got bored of waiting to be found, and had broken off into smaller groups, and other games. I didn’t feel like playing anyway. So I wandered around for a bit, and I found myself back at the place where the girl had been. Only she wasn’t there any more. There was just the small mound of earth, now carefully decorated with a few picked buttercups and daisies, and – to mark the spot – two sticks, placed neatly in a cross.

I felt very sad. And I feel a bit sad even thinking about it. Anyway, I have to go. Jeanette from Art Group’s doing her nervous bird impression; fluttering around at the top of the corridor, trying to catch my attention.

That paper-mache won’t make itself.
I have to go.
The next thing I knew Mum was turning up the volume of the radio, so I wouldn’t hear her crying.

It was stupid. I could hear her. I was sitting right behind her in the car and she was crying really loudly. So was Dad for that matter. He was crying and driving at the same time. I honestly didn’t know if I was crying too, but I figured that I probably was. It seemed like I should be anyway. So I touched my cheeks, but it turned out they were dry. I wasn’t crying at all.

This is what people mean when they talk about being numb, isn’t it? I was too numb to cry, you sometimes hear people say on the TV. Like on daytime chat shows or whatever. I couldn’t even feel anything, they explain. I was just completely numb. And the people in the audience nod sympathetically, like they’ve all been there, they all know exactly how this feels. I reckon it was like that, but at the time I felt very guilty about it. I buried my head in my hands, so that if Mum or Dad turned around, they would think I was crying with them.

They didn’t turn around. I never felt the reassuring squeeze
of a hand on my leg, they never said it would be okay. Nobody whispered, Shhh, shhh.

I knew then – I was totally alone.

It was a strange thing to find out that way.

On the radio the DJ was introducing some new song in this really chipper voice, like it was the best song ever recorded and it made his life complete to be able to introduce it. But none of this made any sense to me. I couldn’t understand why the DJ was so happy when something so terrible had happened. That was my first proper thought. It was the thing that I remember thinking as I sort of woke up. And this is the best way that I can describe it, even though I hadn’t really been asleep.

Memories were falling away, like a dream when we first open our eyes. It was a lot like that. I could only make out the edges – night-time, running, the police were there somewhere.

And Simon was dead.

My brother was dead.

I couldn’t hold onto any of it though. I wouldn’t get to hold it again for a very long time.

I can’t talk about it yet either. I have one chance to get this right. I need to be careful. To unfold everything neatly, so that I know how to fold it away again if it all gets too much. And everyone knows, the best way to fold something neatly is to follow the folds that are already there.
My grandmother (Mum’s mum, the one we call Nanny Noo) reads books by Danielle Steel and Catherine Cookson, and whenever she gets a new one the first thing she does is flip straight to the back to read the last page.

She always does that.

I went to stay with her for a bit. Just for the first week or so. It was a very sad week, and probably the most lonely of my life. I don’t think it is even possible to feel more lonely, even if you didn’t have your granddad and your Nanny Noo to keep you company.

You’ve probably never met my granddad, but if you have then you will know that he is a keen gardener. Only he doesn’t have a garden. That’s kind of funny if you think about it. But it isn’t that funny because he rents a small allotment a short drive from their flat, where he is able to grow vegetables and a few herbs like rosemary and some others that I always forget.

That week we spent ages there. Sometimes I would help with the weeding, or sometimes I would sit at the edge of his patch of allotment and play Donkey Kong on my Game Boy Color, so long as I kept the volume turned down. Mostly though, I would just wander about lifting stones to look at insects. I liked ants the best. Simon and I always used to look for ants’ nests in our own garden. He thought they were brilliant, and he pleaded with our mum to let him have an Ant Farm in his room. He usually got his way. But not that time.

Granddad helped me lift the bigger paving slabs so I could see the nests. The moment a slab was lifted the ants would go mental, scurrying around passing secret messages to each other and
carrying their tiny white and yellow eggs underground to safety.

Within a couple of minutes the surface would be completely deserted, except for maybe a few woodlice wandering clumsily through to see what all the fuss was about. Occasionally I’d poke a twig down one of the little holes, and in an instant a dozen soldier ants would be back out on the offensive, prepared to give their lives for the colony. Not that I ever hurt them. I only wanted to watch.

After Granddad had finished weeding or pulling up vegetables or planting new ones, we’d carefully place back the slab and head home for our tea. I don’t remember us ever talking. I know we must have done. But what words we shared have escaped from my memory completely, like ants down a hole.

Nanny Noo made nice food. She is one of those people who tries to feed you the moment you walk through the door, and doesn’t stop trying to feed you until the moment you leave. She might even make you a quick ham sandwich for your journey.

It is a nice way to be. I think people who are generous with food have a goodness about them. But that week or so that I stayed with them was very difficult because I had no appetite. I felt sick a lot of the time, and once or twice I actually was sick. This was difficult for Nanny Noo too, because if she couldn’t solve a problem through the stomach – like with a bowl of soup or a roasted chicken or a slice of Battenberg – she felt out of her depth. One time I spied her standing in the kitchen, hunched over the untouched dishes and sobbing.

Bedtimes were hardest. I was staying in the spare room, which never gets properly dark because there is a street lamp outside
the window and the curtains are thin. I would lie awake each
night for ages and ages, staring through the gloom, wishing that I
could just go home, and wondering if I ever would.

‘Can I sleep in here tonight, Nanny?’

She didn’t stir, so I walked in slowly and lifted the corner of her
quilt. Nanny Noo has one of those electric blankets on account of
her cold bones. It was a warm night though, so it wasn’t plugged
in, and next thing I knew I was letting out a quiet yelp as my bare
foot pressed down onto the upturned plug.

‘Sweetheart?’

‘Are you awake, Nanny?’

‘Shhh, you’ll wake up Granddad.’

She lifted the quilt and I climbed in beside her, ‘I stood on the
plug,’ I said. ‘I hurt my foot a bit.’

I could feel the warmth of Nanny’s breath against my ear. I
could hear Granddad’s rhythmic snoring.

‘I can’t remember anything,’ I said at last. ‘I don’t know what
happened. I don’t know what I did.’

At least I wanted to say that. It was all I could think about,
and I desperately wanted to say it, but that isn’t the same thing. I
could feel Nanny’s breath against my ear. ‘You stood on the plug,
my poor angel. You hurt your foot.’

When I went home it was just Mum and Dad and me. On our first
evening together the three of us sank onto the big green couch,
which is how it always was because Simon preferred to sit cross-
legged on the carpet – his face right up close to the television.
That was sort of our family portrait. It’s not the kind of thing you think you would miss. Maybe you don’t even notice it all those thousands of times, sitting between your mum and dad on the big green couch with your big brother on the carpet getting in the way of the telly. Maybe you don’t even notice that.

But you notice it when he isn’t there any more. You notice so many of the places where he isn’t, and you hear so many of the things he doesn’t say.

I do.

I hear them all the time.

Mum switched on the television for the start of EastEnders. This was like a ritual. We even videoed it if we weren’t going to be home. It was funny because Simon had a huge crush on Bianca. We all used to tease him about it and tell him that Ricky would beat him up. It was only for fun. He used to laugh out loud, rolling about on the carpet. He had the sort of laugh people call infectious. Whenever he laughed it made everything that bit better.

I don’t know if you watch EastEnders, or even if you do, I don’t suppose you’ll remember an episode from so long ago. But this one stayed with me. I remember sitting on the couch and watching as all the lies and deceit about Bianca sleeping with her mum’s boyfriend and a whole load of other stuff finally came to its bitter conclusion. This was the episode when Bianca left Walford.

We didn’t speak for a long time after that. We didn’t even move. Other programmes started and ended well into the night. This was our new family portrait – the three of us, sitting side by side, staring at the space where Simon used to be.
She keeps reading over my shoulder. It is hard enough to concentrate in this place without people reading over your shoulder.

I had to put that in big letters to drive the message home. It worked, but now I feel bad about it. It was the student social worker who was looking over my shoulder, the young one with the minty breath and big gold earrings. She’s really nice.

Anyway, now she’s skipped away down the corridor, acting bright and breezy. But I know that I’ve embarrassed her because people only skip like that, and act all bright and breezy, when they’re embarrassed. We don’t need to skip when we’re not embarrassed – we can just walk.

It’s good to be able to use this computer though. I had a teaching session on it with the occupational therapist. His name’s Steve, and I don’t suppose I’ll mention him again. But he was satisfied I knew not to try to eat the keyboard, or whatever it is they worry about. So he said it’s okay for me to use it for my writing. Except he still didn’t give me a password, so I have to ask each time, and
we only get forty minutes. It’s like that here, forty minutes for this, and ten minutes for that. But I am sorry about embarrassing that student social worker. I really am. I hate stuff like that.