The Bone Clocks
Also by David Mitchell

Ghostwritten
number9dream
Cloud Atlas
Black Swan Green
The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet
The Bone Clocks

David Mitchell
For Noah
A Hot Spell

1984
I fling open my bedroom curtains, and there’s the thirsty sky and the wide river full of ships and boats and stuff, but I’m already thinking of Vinny’s chocolatey eyes, shampoo down Vinny’s back, beads of sweat on Vinny’s shoulders, and Vinny’s sly laugh, and by now my heart’s going mental and, God, I wish I was waking up at Vinny’s place in Peacock Street and not in my own stupid bedroom. Last night, the words just said themselves, ‘Christ, I really love you, Vin,’ and Vinny puffed out a cloud of smoke and did this Prince Charles voice, ‘One must say, one’s frightfully partial to spending time with you too, Holly Sykes,’ and I nearly weed myself laughing, though I was a bit narked he didn’t say, ‘I love you too,’ back. If I’m honest. Still, boyfriends act goofy to hide stuff, any magazine’ll tell you. Wish I could phone him right now. Wish they’d invent phones you can speak to anyone anywhere anytime on. He’ll be riding his Norton to work in Rochester right now, in his leather jacket with LED ZEP spelt out in silver studs. Come September, when I turn sixteen, he’ll take me out on his Norton.

Someone slams a cupboard door, below.

Mam. No one else’d dare slam a door like that.

*Suppose she’s found out?* says a twisted voice.

No. We’ve been too careful, me and Vinny.

She’s menopausal, is Mam. That’ll be it.

**Talking Heads’ Fear of Music** is on my record player, so I lower the stylus. Vinny bought me this LP, the second Saturday we met at Magic Bus Records. It’s an amazing record. I like ‘Heaven’ and ‘Memories Can’t Wait’ but there’s not a weak track on it. Vinny’s been to New York and actually saw Talking Heads, live. His mate Dan was on security and got Vinny backstage after the gig, and he hung out with David Byrne and the band. If he goes back next year, he’s taking me. I get dressed, finding each love bite and wishing I could go to Vinny’s tonight, but he’s meeting a bunch of mates.
in Dover. Men hate it when women act jealous, so I pretend not to be. My best friend Stella’s gone to London to hunt for second-hand clothes at Camden Market. Mam says I’m still too young to go to London without an adult so Stella took Ali Jessop instead. My biggest thrill today’ll be hoovering the bar to earn my three pounds pocket money. Whoopy-doo. Then I’ve got next week’s exams to revise for. But for two pins I’d hand in blank papers and tell school where to shove Pythagoras triangles and *Lord of the Flies* and their life cycles of worms. I might, too.

Yeah. I might just do that.

Down in the kitchen, the atmosphere’s like Antarctica. ‘Morning,’ I say, but only Jacko looks up from the window-seat where he’s drawing. Sharon’s through in the lounge part, watching a cartoon. Dad’s downstairs in the hallway, talking with the delivery guy – the truck from the brewery’s grumbling away in front of the pub. Mam’s chopping cooking apples into cubes, giving me the silent treatment. I’m supposed to say, ‘What’s wrong, Mam, what have I done?’ but sod that for a game of soldiers. Obviously she noticed I was back late last night, but I’ll let her raise the topic. I pour some milk over my Weetabix and take it to the table. Mam clangs the lid onto the pan and comes over. ‘Right. What have you got to say for yourself?’

‘Good morning to you too, Mam. Another hot day.’

‘What have you got to say for yourself, young lady?’

If in doubt, act innocent. ‘Bout what exactly?’

Her eyes go all snaky. ‘What time did you get home?’

‘Okay, okay, so I was a bit late, sorry.’

‘Two hours isn’t “a bit late”. Where were you?’

I munch my Weetabix. ‘Stella’s. Lost track of time.’

‘Well, that’s peculiar, now, it really is. At ten o’clock I phoned Stella’s mam to find out where the hell you were, and guess what? You’d left before eight. So who’s the liar here, Holly? You or her?’

*Shit.* ‘After leaving Stella’s, I went for a walk.‘

‘And where did your walk take you to?’

I sharpen each word. ‘Along the river, all right?’
'Upstream or downstream, was it, this little walk?'
I let a silence go by. 'What diff'rence does it make?'

There’re some cartoon explosions on the telly. Mam tells my sister, ‘Turn that thing off and shut the door behind you, Sharon.’

‘That’s not fair! Holly’s the one getting told off.’

‘Now, Sharon. And you too, Jacko, I want—’ But Jacko’s already vanished. When Sharon’s left, Mam takes up the attack again: ‘All alone, were you, on your “walk”?’

Why this nasty feeling she’s setting me up? ‘Yeah.’

‘How far d’you get on your “walk”, then, all alone?’

‘What – you want miles or kilometres?’

‘Well, perhaps your little walk took you up Peacock Street, to a certain someone called Vincent Costello?’ The kitchen sort of swirls, and through the window, on the Essex shore of the river, a tiny stick-man’s lifting his bike off the ferry. ‘Lost for words all of a sudden? Let me jog your memory: ten o’clock last night, closing the blinds, front window, wearing a T-shirt and not a lot else.’

Yes, I did go downstairs to get Vinny a lager. Yes, I did lower the blind in the front room. Yes, someone did walk by. Relax, I’d told myself. What’s the chances of one stranger recognising me? Mam’s expecting me to crumple, but I don’t. ‘You’re wasted as a barmaid, Mam. You ought to be handling supergrasses for MI5.’

Mam gives me the Kath Sykes Filthy Glare. ‘How old is he?’

Now I fold my arms. ‘None of your business.’

Mam’s eyes go slitty. ‘Twenty-four, apparently.’

‘If you already know, why’re you asking?’

‘Because a twenty-four-year-old man interfering with a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl is illegal. He could go to prison.’

‘I’ll be sixteen in September, and I reckon the Kent Police have bigger fish to fry. I’m old enough to make up my own mind about my relationships.’

Mam lights one of her Marlboro Reds. I’d kill for one. ‘When I tell your father, he’ll flay this Costello fella alive.’

Sure, Dad has to persuade piss-artists off the premises from time to time, all landlords do, but he’s not the flaying-anyone-alive type.
'Brendan was fifteen when he was going out with Mandy Fry, and if you think they were just holding hands on the swings, they weren’t. Don’t recall him getting the “You could go to prison” treatment.’

She spells it out like I’m a moron: ‘It’s – different – for – boys.’


‘I’m telling you now, Holly, you’ll be seeing this . . . car salesman again over my dead body.’

‘Actually, Mam, I’ll bloody see who I bloody well want!’

‘New rules.’ Mam stubs out her fag. ‘I’m taking you to school and fetching you back in the van. You don’t set foot outside unless it’s with me, your father, Brendan or Ruth. If I glimpse this cradle-snatcher anywhere near here, I’ll be on the blower to the police to press charges – yes, I will, so help me, God. And – and – I’ll call his employer and let them know that he’s seducing underage schoolgirls.’

Big fat seconds ooze by while all of this sinks in.

My tear ducts start twitching but there’s no way I’m giving Mrs Hitler the pleasure. ‘This isn’t Saudi Arabia! You can’t lock me up!’

‘Live under our roof, you obey our rules. When I was your age—’

‘Yeah yeah yeah, you had twenty brothers and thirty sisters and forty grandparents and fifty acres of spuds to dig ’cause that was how life was in Auld feckin’ Oireland but this is England, Mam, England! And it’s the 1980s and if life was so feckin’ glorious in that West Cork bog why did you feckin’ bother even coming to—’

Whack! Smack over the left side of my face.

We look at each other: me, trembling with shock, and Mam, angrier than I’ve ever seen her, and – I reckon – knowing she’s just broken something that’ll never be mended. I leave the room without a word, as if I’ve just won an argument.

I only cry a bit, and it’s shocked crying, not boo-hoo crying, and when I’m done I go to the mirror. My eyes’re a bit puffy, but a bit of eye-liner soon sorts that out . . . Dab of lippy, bit of blusher . . . Sorted. The girl in the mirror’s a woman, with her cropped black hair, her Quadrophenia T-shirt, her black jeans. ‘I’ve got news for
you,’ she says. ‘You’re moving in with Vinny today.’ I start listing the reasons why I can’t, and stop. ‘Yes,’ I agree, giddy and calm at once. I’m leaving school, as well. As from now. The summer holidays’ll be here before the truancy officer can fart, and I’m sixteen in September, and then it’s stuff you, Windmill Hill Comprehensive. Do I dare?

I dare. Pack, then. Pack what? Whatever’ll fit into my big duffel bag. Underwear, bras, T-shirts, my bomber jacket; make-up case and the Oxo tin with my bracelets and necklaces in. Toothbrush and a handful of tampons – my period’s a bit late so it should start, like, any hour now. Money. I count up £13.85 saved in notes and coins. I’ve £80 more in my TSB bank book. It’s not like Vinny’ll charge me rent, and I’ll look for a job next week. Babysitting, working in the market, waitressing: there’s loads of ways to earn a few quid. What about my LPs? I can’t lug the whole collection over to Peacock Street now, and Mam’s quite capable of dumping them at the Oxfam shop out of spite, so I just take Fear of Music, wrapping it carefully in my bomber jacket and putting it into my bag so it won’t get bent. I hide the others under the loose floorboard, just for now, but as I’m putting the carpet back, I get the fright of my life: Jacko’s watching me from the doorway. He’s still in his Thunderbirds pyjamas and slippers.

I tell him, ‘Mister, you just gave me a heart-attack.’

‘You’re going.’ Jacko’s got this not-quite-here voice.

‘Just between us, yes, I am. But not far, don’t worry.’

‘I’ve made you a souvenir, to remember me by.’ Jacko hands me a circle of cardboard – a flattened Dairylea cheese box with a maze drawn on. He’s mad about mazes, is Jacko: it’s all these Dungeons & Dragons books him and Sharon read. The one Jacko’s drawn’s actually dead simple by his standards, made of eight or nine circles inside each other. ‘Take it,’ he tells me. ‘It’s diabolical.’

‘It doesn’t look all that bad to me.’

‘“Diabolical” means “satanic”, sis.’

‘Why’s your maze so satanic, then?’

‘The Dusk follows you as you go through it. If it touches you,
you cease to exist, so one wrong turn down a dead-end, that’s the end of you. That’s why you have to learn the labyrinth by heart.’

Christ, I don’t half have a freaky little brother. ‘Right. Well, thanks, Jacko. Look, I’ve got a few things to—’

Jacko holds my wrist. ‘Learn this labyrinth, Holly. Indulge your freaky little brother. Please.’

That jolts me a bit. ‘Mister, you’re acting all weird.’

‘Promise me you’ll memorise the path through it, so if you ever needed to, you could navigate it in the darkness. Please.’

My friends’ little brothers are all into Scalextric or BMX or Top Trumps – why do I get one who does this and says words like ‘navigate’ and ‘diabolical’? Christ only knows how he’ll survive in Gravesend if he’s gay. I muss his hair. ‘Okay, I promise to learn your maze off by heart.’ Then Jacko hugs me, which is weird ’cause Jacko’s not a huggy kid. ‘Hey, I’m not going far . . . You’ll understand when you’re older, and—’

‘You’re moving in with your boyfriend.’

By now I shouldn’t be surprised. ‘Yeah.’

‘Take care of yourself, Holly.’

‘Vinny’s nice. Once Mam’s got used to the idea, we’ll see each other – I mean, we still saw Brendan after he married Ruth, yeah?’

But Jacko just puts the cardboard lid with his maze on deep into my duffel bag, gives me one last look, and disappears.

Mam appears with a basket of bar-rugs on the first-floor landing, as if she wasn’t lying in wait. ‘I’m not bluffing. You’re grounded. Back upstairs. You’ve got exams next week. Time you knuckled down and got some proper revision done.’

I grip the banister. “‘Our roof, our rules,” you said. Fine. I don’t want your rules, or your roof, or you hitting me whenever you lose your rag. You’d not put up with that. Would you?’

Mam’s face sort of twitches, and if she says the right thing now, we’ll negotiate. But, no, she just takes in my duffel bag and sneers like she can’t believe how stupid I am. ‘You had a brain, once.’

So I carry on down the stairs to the ground floor.
Above me, her voice tightens. ‘What about school?’
‘You go, then, if school’s so important!’
‘I never had the bloody chance, Holly! I’ve always had the pub to run, and you and Brendan and Sharon and Jacko to feed, clothe and send to school so you won’t have to spend your life mopping out toilets and emptying ash-trays and knackering your back and never having an early night.’

Water off a duck’s back. I carry on downstairs.
‘But go on, then. Go. Learn the hard way. I’ll give you three days before Romeo turfs you out. It’s not a girl’s glittering personality that men’re interested in, Holly. It never bloody is.’

I ignore her. From the hallway I see Sharon behind the bar by the fruit-juice shelves. She’s helping Dad do the restocking, but I can see she heard. I give her a little wave and she gives me one back, nervous. Echoing up from the cellar trapdoor is Dad’s voice, crooning ‘Ferry ’Cross The Mersey’. Better leave him out of it. In front of Mam, he’ll side with her. In front of the regulars, it’ll be ‘It takes a bigger idiot than me to step between the pecking hens’ and they’ll all nod and mumble, ‘Right enough there, Dave.’ Plus I’d rather not be in the room when he finds out ’bout Vinny. Not that I’m ashamed, I’d just rather not be there. Newky’s snoozing in his basket. ‘You’re the smelliest dog in Kent,’ I tell him to stop myself crying, ‘you old fleabag.’ I pat his neck, unbolt the side door and step into Marlow Alley. Behind me, the door goes dunk.

West Street’s too bright and too dark, like a TV with the contrast on the blink, so I put on my sunglasses and they turn the world all dreamish and vivider and more real. My throat aches and I’m shaking. Nobody’s running after me from the pub. Good. A cement truck trundles by and its fumey gust makes the conker tree sway a bit and rustle. Breathe in warm tarmac, fried spuds and week-old rubbish spilling out of the bins – the dustmen are on strike again.

Lots of little darting birds’re twirly-whirlying like the tin-whistlers on strings kids get at birthdays, or used to, and a gang of boys’re playing Kick the Can in the park round the church at Crooked
Lane. *Get him! Behind the tree! Set me free!* Kids. Stella says older men make better lovers: with boys our age, she says, the ice-cream melts once the cone’s in your hand. Only Stella knows ’bout Vinny – she was there that first Saturday in the Magic Bus – but she can keep a secret. When she was teaching me to smoke and I kept puking, she didn’t laugh or tell anyone, and she’s told me everything I need to know ’bout boys. Stella’s the coolest girl in our year at school, easy.

Crooked Lane veers up from the river, and from there I turn up Queen Street where I’m nearly mown down by Julie Walcott pushing her pram. Her baby’s bawling its head off and she looks knackered. She left school when she got pregnant. Me and Vinny are dead careful, and we only had sex once without a condom, our first time, and it’s a scientific fact that virgins can’t get pregnant. Stella told me.

Bunting’s strung across Queen Street, like it’s for Holly Sykes’s Independence Day. The Scottish lady in the wool shop’s watering her hanging baskets, and Mr Gilbert the jeweller’s putting trays of rings into his front windows, and Mike and Todd the butchers’re offloading a headless pig from the back of a van where a dozen carcasses are hanging from hooks. Outside the library a bunch of union men are collecting money in buckets for the striking miners with Socialist Workers holding signs saying *coal not dole* and *THATCHER DECLARES WAR ON THE WORKERS*. Ed Brubeck’s free-wheeling this way on his bike. I step into the Indoor Market so he can’t see me. He moved to Gravesend last year from Manchester where his dad got sent down for burglary and assault. He doesn’t have any friends and shows no sign of wanting any. Normally that’d get you crucified at our school, but when a sixth-former had a go at him Brubeck punched his nose out of shape, so he’s been left alone since. He cycles by without seeing me, a fishing rod tied to his crossbar, and I carry on. By the games arcade a busker’s playing funeral music on a clarinet. Someone lob a coin into his case and he bursts into the theme from *Dallas*. When I get to Magic Bus...
Records I peer inside. I was looking at ‘R’ for ‘Ramones’. Vinny says he was looking at ‘H’ for ‘Hot’ and ‘Horny’ and ‘Holly’. There’s a few second-hand guitars along the back of the shop, too. Vin can play the intro to ‘Stairway To Heaven’, though he’s never got past that. I’m going to teach myself to play Vin’s guitar while he’s at work. Vin and me could start a band. Why not? Tina Weymouth’s a girl and she’s the bassist in Talking Heads. Imagine Mam’s face if she goes all, ‘She’s not my daughter any more,’ then sees me on *Top of the Pops*. Mam’s problem’s that she’s never loved anyone as deeply as me and Vin love each other. She gets on okay with Dad, sure, though all her family in Cork were never crazy about him not being Irish or Catholic. My older Irish cousins enjoyed telling me that Dad got Mum pregnant with Brendan before they were married, but they’ve been married for twenty-five years now, which isn’t bad going, I s’pose, but still, Mam’s not got this amazing bond with Dad like me and Vin. Stella says me and Vin are soul-mates. She says it’s obvious, we’re made for each other.

Outside NatWest Bank on Milton Road, I run into Brendan. Moussed-back hair, paisley tie and his blazer slung over his shoulder, you’d think he was off to Handsome School, not the offices of Stott and Conway. Bit of a heart-throb, is my older brother, among my friends’ older sisters – pass me the vomit bucket. He married Ruth, his boss Mr Conway’s daughter, at the town hall, with a flashy reception at the Chaucer Country Club. I wasn’t a bridesmaid ’cause I don’t wear dresses, specially dresses that make you look like a *Gone With the Wind* collectable, so Sharon and Ruth’s nieces did all that stuff, and loads of our Cork relatives came over. Brendan’s Mam’s golden boy and Mam’s Brendan’s golden mam. Later they’ll be poring over every detail of what I say right now.

‘Morning,’ I tell him. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Can’t complain. All well at the Captain?’

‘Fine. Mam’s full of the joys of spring today.’

‘Yeah?’ Brendan smiles, puzzled. ‘How come?’

I shrug. ‘Must’ve got out on the right side of bed.’
'Cool.' He notices my duffel bag. ‘Off on a trip, are we?’
‘Not exactly. I’m revising French at Stella Yearwood’s – then I’m staying overnight. It’s exams next week.’
My brother looks impressed. ‘Good for you, little sis.’
‘Is Ruth any better?’
‘Not a lot. God only knows why it’s called “morning sickness” when it’s worse in the middle of the night.’
‘Perhaps it’s Mother Nature’s way of toughening you up for when the baby arrives,’ I suggest. ‘All those sleepless nights, the arguing, the puke . . . Needs stamina.’
My brother doesn’t take the bait. ‘Guess so.’ It’s hard to imagine Brendan being anyone’s dad but, come Christmas, he will be.

Behind us the NatWest opens its doors and the bank clerks start filing in. ‘Not that Mr Conway’ll fire his son-in-law,’ I say to Brendan, ‘but don’t you start at nine?’
‘This is true. See you tomorrow, if you’re back from your revision-a-thon. Mam’s invited us over for lunch. Have a great day,’
‘It’s the best day of my life already,’ I tell my brother and, in a second-hand way, Mam.

One flash of his award-winning smile and Brendan’s off, joining the streams of people in suits and uniforms all going to work in offices and shops and factories.

On Monday, I’ll get a key cut for Vinny’s front door, but today I go the usual secret way. Up a street called The Grove, just before the tax office, there’s this alley, half hidden by a skip overflowing with bin-bags smelling of bubbling nappies. A brown rat watches me, like Lord Muck. I go down the alley, turn right, and now I’m between Peacock Street’s back-garden fences and the tax-office wall. Down the far end, the last house before the railway cutting, that’s Vinny’s place. I squeeze through the loose slats and wade through his back garden. The grass and weeds come up to my waist and the plum trees are already fruiting up, though most of the fruit’ll go to the wasps and the worms, Vinny says, ‘cause he can’t be arsed to pick it. It’s like the forest in Sleeping Beauty that chokes the castle
when everyone’s asleep for a hundred years. Vinny’s s’posed to keep
the garden neat for his aunt but she lives up in King’s Lynn and
never visits and, anyway, Vinny’s a motorbike guy, not a gardener.
Once I’m settled in I’ll tame this jungle. It needs a woman’s touch,
that’s all. Might make a start today, after a session teaching myself
the guitar. There’s a shed in the corner half hidden by brambles,
with gardening gear and a lawnmower. Sunflowers, roses, pansies,
carnations, lavender, and herbs in little terracotta pots, that’s what
I’ll plant. I’ll make scones and plum pies and coffee cakes and Vinny’ll
be all, ‘Jesus, Holly, how did I ever get by without you?’ All the
magazines say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. By
the rainwater barrel a fingery purple bush is swarming with white
butterflies, all confetti and lace; it’s like it’s alive.

The back door’s never locked ’cause Vinny’s lost the key. Our
pizza boxes and wine glasses’re still in the sink from last night, but
no sign of breakfast – Vinny must’ve overslept and raced off to work,
as per usual. The whole place needs a good tidying, dusting,
hoovering. First a coffee and a fag’s in order, though – I only ate
half my Weetabix before Mam started her Muhammad Ali act on
me. I forgot to get any ciggies on the way up – it flew out of my
head after meeting Brendan – but Vinny keeps some in his bedside
table, so I pad up the steep stairs and into his bedroom. Our bedroom,
I should say. The curtains are still drawn and the air’s like old socks
so I let the light in, open the window, turn round and jump out
of my skin ’cause Vinny’s in bed, looking like he’s cacked himself.
‘It’s me, it’s only me,’ I sort of gupper. ‘Sorry, I – I – I – I thought
you were at work.’

He claps his hand over his heart and sort of laughs, like he’s just
been shot. ‘Jesus, Hol. I thought you were a burglar!’

I sort of laugh too. ‘You’re . . . at home.’

‘Cock-up with the rota – the new secretary’s bloody hopeless –
so Kev phoned to say I’ve got the day off, after all.’

‘Brill,’ I say. ‘That’s great, ’cause . . . I’ve got a surprise.’

‘Great, I love them. But put the kettle on first, eh? I’ll be right
down. Shit, what am I saying? I’m out of coffee – be a sweetheart,
pop out to Staffa’s and get a jar of Gold Blend. I’ll pay, uh, you when you get back.’

I need to say this first: ‘Mam found out ’bout us, Vin.’

‘Oh? Oh.’ He looks thoughtful. ‘Right. How did she, uh . . .’

Suddenly I’m scared he won’t want me. ‘Not great. Went a bit ape-shit, actually. Told me I couldn’t see you again and, like, threatened to lock me in the cellar. So I walked out. So . . .’

Vinny looks at me nervously, not taking the hint.

‘So can I . . . like . . . stay with you? For a bit, at least.’


It doesn’t sound very okay. ‘Is that a yes, Vin?’

‘Ye-es. Sure. Yes. But now I really need that coffee.’

‘Serious? Oh, Vin!’ The relief’s like a warm bath. I hug him. He’s sweaty. ‘You’re the best, Vinny. I was afraid you might not—’

‘We can’t have a furry-purry sex-kitten like you sleeping under a bridge now, can we? But really, Hol, I need coffee like Dracula needs blood, so—’ He doesn’t finish the sentence ‘cause I’m kissing him, my Vinny, my boyfriend who’s been to New York and shaken David Byrne’s hand, and my love for him sort of goes whoosh, like a boiler firing up, and I pull him back and we roll onto a lumpy hill of duvet, but the hill wriggles and my hand pulls the duvet away and here’s my best friend Stella Yearwood. Stark naked. Like I’m in a bad sex dream, only it’s not.

I just . . . gape at her crotch till she says, ‘It can’t look so very different to yours, can it?’

Then I gape at Vinny, who looks like he’s shat himself but then does this spazzo giggle: ‘It’s not what it looks like.’

Stella, cool as you please, covers herself with the duvet and tells Vinny, ‘Don’t be dense. This is precisely how it looks, Holly. We were going to let you know, but, as you see, events have overtaken us all. Fact is, you’ve been dumped. Not pleasant, but it happens to the best of us, well, most of us, so c’est la vie. Don’t worry, there are plenty more Vinnys in the sea. So why not cut your losses now and just go? With a little dignity intact?’

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When I stop crying, finally, I find myself on a cold step in a little courtyard place, with five or six storeys of old brick and narrow blind windows on each side. Weeds drilling up through paving slabs and dandelion seeds drifting around like snow in a snowglobe. After slamming Vinny’s door my feet brought me here, round the back of the Gravesend General Hospital, where Dr Marinus got rid of Miss Constantin for me when I was seven years old. Had I punched Vinny? It was like I was moving in treacle. I couldn’t breathe. He caught my wrist and it hurt – still does – and Stella was barking, ‘Grow up and piss off, Holly. This is real life, not an episode of Dynasty!’ and I ran out, slamming the front door and hurrying as fast I could, anywhere, nowhere, somewhere . . . I knew the moment I stopped I’d break down into a sobbing, snotting jelly, and then one of Mam’s spies’d see me and report back and that’d be the cherry on her cake. ’Cause Mam was right. I loved Vinny like he was a part of me, and he loved me like a stick of gum. He’d spat me out when the flavour went, unwrapped another and stuffed it in, and not just anyone, but Stella Yearwood. My best mate. How could he? How could she?

Stop crying! Think about something else . . .

Holly Sykes and the Weird Shit, Part 1. I was seven years old in 1976. It didn’t rain all summer and the gardens turned brown, and I remember queuing with buckets down the end of Queen Street with Brendan and Mam for water from standpipes, the drought got that bad. My daymares started that summer. I heard voices in my head. Not mad, or drooly, or specially scary, even, not at first . . . the Radio People, I called them, ’cause at first I thought there was a radio on in the next room. Only there never was a radio on in the next room. They were clearest at night, but I heard them at school, too, if everything was quiet enough, in a test, say. Three or four voices’d chunter away at once, and I never quite made out what they were saying. Brendan had talked ’bout mental hospitals and men in white coats, so I didn’t dare tell anyone. Mam was pregnant with Jacko, Dad rushed off his feet at the pub, Sharon was
only three and Brendan was a plonker, even then. I knew hearing voices wasn’t normal, but they weren’t actually harming me, so maybe it was just one of those secrets people live with.

One night, I had a nightmare about killer bees loose in the Captain Marlow, and woke up in a sweat. A lady was sat at the end of my bed saying, ‘Don’t worry, Holly, it’s all right,’ and I said, ‘Thanks, Mam,’ ’cause who else could it be? Then I heard Mam laughing in the kitchen down the corridor – this was before my bedroom was up in the attic. That was how I knew I’d only dreamt the lady on my bed, and I switched on the light to prove it.

And sure enough nobody was there.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ said the lady, ‘but I’m as real as you are.’

I didn’t scream or freak out. Sure, I was shaking, but even in my fear, I felt it was like a puzzle or a test. There was nobody in my room, but someone was speaking to me. So, as calm as I could, I asked the lady if she was a ghost. ‘Not a ghost,’ said the lady who wasn’t there, ‘but a visitor to your mind. That’s why you can’t see me.’ I asked what my visitor’s name was. Miss Constantin, she said. She said she’d sent the Radio People away, because they were a distraction, and hoped I didn’t mind. I said no. Miss Constantin said she had to go but that she’d love to drop by soon because I was ‘a singular young lady’.

Then she was gone. It took me ages to fall asleep, but by the time I did, I sort of felt I’d made a friend.

What now? Go home? I’d rather stick pins in my gums. Mam’ll make me steaming shit-pie, dripping in shit-gravy, and sit there smug as hell watching me eat every shitty morsel, and from now until the end of time, if ever I’m anything less than yes-sir-no-sir-three-bags-full-sir, she’ll bring up the Vinny Costello Incident. Okay, so I’m not living in Peacock Street but I can still leave home, at least for long enough to prove to Mam that I’m old enough to take care of myself so she can stop treating me like I’m seven years old. I’ve enough money to feed myself for a bit and the hot spell looks set to last, so I’ll think of it as my summer holiday beginning early.
Screw my exams, screw school. Stella’ll twist things round so that I was this hysterical pathetic Clinging Ivy who just couldn’t face the fact her boyfriend was tired of her. By nine a.m. on Monday morning, Holly Sykes’ll be the Official Windmill Hill Laughing Stock. Guaranteed.

An ambulance siren gets closer, more urgent, echoes round the courtyard and stops, like, in mid-sentence . . . I rejiggle my duffel bag and get up. Right, where now? Every runaway teenager in England makes a bee-line for London, imagining they’ll get picked up by a talent scout or fairy godmother, but I’ll strike out the opposite way, along the river, towards the Kent marshes: if you grow up in a pub you overhear exactly what sort of scouts and fairies pick up runaway teenagers in London. Maybe I could find a barn or an empty holiday chalet to stay in for a bit. That might work. So, off I set round the front of the hospital. The car park’s full of windscreens flashing in the bright sunshine. In the cool shady hospital reception area, I see rows of people smoking and waiting for news.

Funny places, hospitals . . .

Holly Sykes and the Weird Shit, Part 2. A few weeks went by, and I began to think I’d only dreamt Miss Constantin, ’cause she’d never come back. ’Cept for the fact I didn’t know that word she’d called me, ‘singular’ . . . I looked it up and wondered how it’d got into my head if Miss Constantin hadn’t put it there. To this day I still don’t know the answer to that. But then one night in September, after we’d gone back to school and I’d turned eight, I woke up and knew she was there, and I was more glad than I was scared. I liked being singular. I asked Miss Constantin if she was an angel, and she laughed a little, saying, no, she was human, like me, but she’d learnt how to slip out of her own body, and go visiting her friends. I asked if I was one of her friends now, and she asked, ‘Would you like that?’ and I said, yes, please, more than anything, and she replied, ‘Then you shall be.’ And I asked Miss Constantin where she came from, and she said Switzerland. To show off, I asked if Switzerland was where chocolate was invented, and she said I was one of the
brightest buttons she’d ever known. From then on she visited me every night, for a few minutes, and I’d tell her a bit about my day, and she’d listen, and sympathise or cheer me up. She was always on my side, like Mam or Brendan never seemed to be. I asked Miss Constantin questions, too. Sometimes she’d give me direct answers, like when I asked her her hair colour and she told me ‘chromium blonde’, but as often as not she’d sidestep my questions with, ‘Let’s not spoil the mystery quite yet, Holly, shall we?’

Then one day our school’s most gifted bully, Susan Hillage, got me as I walked home from school. Her dad was a squaddie in Belfast and, ’cause my mam’s Irish, she knelt on my head and wouldn’t let me go unless I admitted we kept our coal in the bathtub and that we loved the IRA. I wouldn’t, so she threw my bag into a tree, and told me she was going to make me pay for her dad’s mates who’d got killed in Belfast, and that if I told anyone, her dad’s platoon’d set fire to my pub and my family’d all roast and it’d all be my fault. I was no pushover, but I was only little, and Susan Hillage had pulled all the right levers. I didn’t tell Mam or Dad about it, but I was worried sick about going to school the next day and what might happen. But that night, when I woke up in the warm pocket of my bed and Miss Constantin’s voice came, it wasn’t just her voice in my head – she was actually there, in person, sitting in the armchair at the end of my bed saying, ‘Wakey-wakey, sleepyhead.’ She was young, and had white-gold hair, and what must’ve been rose-red lips were purple-black in the moonlight, and she wore a gown thing. She was beautiful, like a painting. Finally I managed to ask if I was dreaming and she replied, ‘I’m here because my brilliant, singular child was so unhappy tonight, and I want to know why.’ So I told her about Susan Hillage. Miss Constantin said nothing until the end, when she told me that she despised bullies of all stripes, and did I want her to remedy the situation? I said, yes, please, but before I could ask anything else Dad’s footsteps were coming down the corridor and he’d opened the door, and the light from the landing shone in my eyes, dazzling me. How was I going to explain Miss Constantin sitting in my bedroom at, like, one o’clock in the
morning? But Dad acted like she wasn’t even there. He just asked me if I was okay, saying he’d heard a voice, and sure enough, Miss Constantin wasn’t there. I told Dad I must’ve been dreaming and talking in my sleep.

Which was what I ended up believing. Voices are one thing, but women in gowns, sitting there? The next morning I went to school as usual, and didn’t see Susan Hillage. Nobody else did, either. Our headmaster hurried late into school assembly and announced that Susan Hillage had been hit by a van while she cycled to school, that it was very serious and we had to pray for her recovery. Hearing all this, I felt numb and cold, and so much blood left my head that the school hall sort of folded up around me, and after, I had no memory even of hitting the floor.

The Thames is riffled and muddy blue today, and I walk and walk and walk away from Gravesend towards the Kent marshes and before I know it, it’s eleven thirty and the town’s a little model of itself, a long way behind me. The wind unravels clouds from the chimneys of the Blue Circle factory, like streams of hankies out of a conjuror’s pocket. To my right, the A2 roars away over the marshes. Old Mr Sharkey says it’s built over a road made by the Romans in Roman times, and the A2’s still how you get to Dover, to catch the boat to the Continent, just like the Romans did. Pylons march off in double file. Back at the pub, Dad’ll be hoovering the bar, unless Sharon’s doing it to get my three pounds. The morning’s gone muggy and stretched, like it does in triple maths, and the sun’s giving me eye-ache. I left my sunglasses in Vinny’s kitchen, sat on the draining board. Fourteen ninety-nine, they cost me. I bought them with Stella, who said she’d seen the same sunglasses on Carnaby Street for three times the price so I thought I was getting a bargain. Then I imagine myself strangling Stella and my arms and hands go all stiff, like I’m actually doing it.

I’m thirsty. By now Mam will’ve told Dad something ’bout why Holly went off in a teenage strop, but I bet a million quid she will’ve twisted it all. Dad’ll be joking ’bout ‘The Girls’ Bust-up’ and PJ and
Nipper and Big Dex’ll nod and grin like the shower of tossers they are. PJ’ll pretend to read from the *Sun*. ‘It says here, “Astronomers at the University of Bullshitshire have just found new evidence that, yes, teenagers really are the centre of the universe”.’ They’ll all cackle, and Good Old Dave Sykes, everyone’s favourite landlord, will join in with his you’re-so-witty-I-could-wet-myself laugh. Let’s see if they’re still laughing by Wednesday when I haven’t shown up.

Up ahead, in the distance, men are fishing.

Weird Shit, Last Act. Even as I was half carried to the school nurse’s room, I could hear the Radio People were back. Hundreds of them, all whispering at once. That freaked me out but not as much as the idea that I’d killed Susan Hillage. So I told the nurse about the Radio People and Miss Constantin. The old dear thought I was concussed at best and nuts at worst, so she called Mam, who called our GP, and later that day I was being seen by an ear doctor at Gravesend General Hospital. He couldn’t find anything wrong, but suggested a child psychiatrist he knew from Great Ormond Street Hospital in London who specialised in cases like mine. Mam was all ‘My daughter’s not mental!’ but the doctor scared her with the word ‘tumour’. After the worst night of my life – I prayed to God to keep Miss Constantin away, had the Bible under my pillow but, thanks to the Radio People, I could hardly sleep a wink – we got a call from the ear doctor saying that his friend the specialist was due in Gravesend in one hour, and could Mam bring me up right now?

Dr Marinus was the first Chinese person I ever met, apart from the ones at the Thousand Autumnns Restaurant where me and Brendan were sometimes sent for takeaways if Mam was too tired to cook. Dr Marinus spoke in posh, perfect English, quite softly, so you had to pay close attention to catch everything. He was short and skinny but sort of filled the room, anyway. First he asked ’bout school and my family and stuff, then moved on to my voices. Mam was all, ‘My daughter’s not crazy, if that’s what you’re implying – it’s just concussion.’ Dr Marinus told Mam that he agreed, I wasn’t
remotely crazy, but the brain could be an illogical place. To help him rule out a tumour, she had to let me answer his questions on my own. So I told him about the Radio People and Susan Hillage and Miss Constantin. Mam went all jittery again but Dr Marinus assured her that auditory hallucinations – ‘daymares’ – were not uncommon in girls my age. He told me that Susan Hillage’s accident was a big coincidence, and that coincidences even of this size were happening to people all over the world, right now: my turn had come, that was all. Mam asked if there was any medicine to stop these daymares, and I remember Dr Marinus saying that, before we went down that route, he’d like to try a simpler technique from ‘the Old Country’. It worked like acupuncture, he said, but it didn’t use needles. He got Mam to squeeze a point on my middle finger – he marked it with biro – then touched a place on my forehead, in the middle, with his thumb. Like an artist putting on a dab of paint. My eyes shut . . .

. . . and the Radio People were gone. Not just quiet, but gone-done. Mam knew from my face what’d happened, and she was as shocked and relieved as me. She was all, ‘Is that it? No wires, no pills?’ Dr Marinus said, yes, that ought to do the job.

I asked if Miss Constantin’d gone for ever, too.

The doctor said, yes, for the foreseeable future.

The End. We left, I grew up, and neither the Radio People nor Miss Constantin ever came back. I saw a few documentaries and stuff about how the mind plays tricks on you, and now I know that Miss Constantin was just a sort of imaginary friend – like Sharon’s Bunny Bunny Boing Boing – gone haywire. Susan Hillage’s accident was just a massive coincidence, like Dr Marinus’d told me. She didn’t die, but moved to Ramsgate, though some people’d say it’s the same difference. Dr Marinus did some sort of hypnotism thing on me, like those cassettes you can buy to stop yourself smoking. Mam stopped saying ‘Chink’ from that day on, and even today she’s down like a ton of bricks on anyone who does. ‘It’s “Chinese” not “Chink”’, she tells them, ‘and they’re the best doctors in the National Health.’

*
My watch says it’s one o’clock. Far behind me, stick-men are fishing in the shallows off Shornemead Fort. Up ahead’s a gravel pit, with a big cone of stone and a conveyor-belt feeding a barge. I can see Cliffe Fort, too, with windows like empty eye-sockets. Old Mr Sharkey says it used to house anti-aircraft batteries in the war, and when people in Gravesend heard the big guns, they knew they had sixty seconds – tops – to get into their air-raid shelters under the stairs or down the garden. Wish a bomb’d fall on a certain house in Peacock Street, right now. Bet they’re scoffing pizza for lunch – Vinny lives on pizza ’cause he can’t be arsed to cook. Bet they’re laughing about me. I wonder if Stella stayed over last night. You just fall in love with each other, I thought, and that’s all there is to it. Stupid. Stupid! I kick a stone but it’s not a stone it’s a little outcrop of rock that mashes my toe. Pain draws a jagged line up to my brain. And now my eyes are hot and watering – where’s all the water coming from, f’Chrissakes? The only liquid I’ve drunk today is when I cleaned my teeth and the milk on my Weetabix. My tongue’s like that oasis stuff they use for flower-arranging. My duffel bag’s rubbing a sore patch on my shoulder. My heart’s a clubbed baby seal. My stomach must be empty, but I’m too miserable to feel it yet. I’m not turning round and going home, though. No bloody way.

By three o’clock, my whole head’s parched, not just my mouth. I’ve never walked so far in my life, I reckon. There’s no sign of a shop or even a house where I can ask for a glass of water. Then I notice a small woman fishing off the end of a jetty thing, like she’s sort of sketched into the corner where nobody’ll spot her. She’s a long stone-throw away, but I see her fill a cup from a flask. I’d never normally do this but I’m so thirsty that I walk down the embankment and along the jetty up to her, clomping my feet on the old wooden planks so as not to scare her. ‘Scuse me, but could you spare a drop of water? Please?’

She doesn’t even look round. ‘Cold tea do you?’ Her croaky voice sounds from somewhere hot.

‘That’d be great, thanks. I’m not fussy.’
‘Help yourself, then, if you’re not fussy.’

So I fill the cup, not thinking about germs or anything. It’s not normal tea but it’s the most refreshing thing I’ve ever drunk, and I let the liquid swoosh all round my mouth. Now I look at her properly for the first time. Sort of elephanty eyes in a wrinkled old face, with short grey hair, a grubby safari shirt and a leathery wide-brimmed hat that looks a hundred years old. ‘Good?’ she asks.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘It was. Tastes like grass.’
‘Green tea. Lucky you’re not fussy.’
I ask, ‘Since when’s tea been green?’
‘Since bushes made their leaves that colour.’

There’s a splish of a fish. I see where it was, but not where it is. ‘Caught much today?’

A pause. ‘Five perch. One trout. A slow afternoon.’
I don’t see a bucket or anything. ‘Where are they?’
A bee lands on the brim of her hat. ‘I let them go.’
‘If you don’t want the fish, why do you catch them?’
A few seconds pass. ‘For the quality of the conversation.’

I look around: the footpath, a brambly field, a scrubby wood and a choked-up track. She must be taking the piss. ‘There’s nobody here.’

The bee’s happy where it is, even when the woman stirs herself to reel in the line. I stand off to one side as she checks the bait’s still secure on the hook. Drips of water splash the thirsty planks of the jetty. The river slurps at the shore and sloshes round the wooden pillar things. Still seated, and with an expert flick of the wrist, the old woman sends the lead weight loopy-looping away, the reel makes its zithery noise, and the weight lands in the water where it was before. Circles float outwards. Dead calm . . .

Then she does something really weird. She takes out a stick of chalk from her pocket and writes on a plank by her foot, MY. On the next plank along she writes, LONG. Then on the next plank, it’s the word NAME. Then the old woman puts the chalk away and goes back to her fishing.
I wait for her to explain, but she doesn’t. ‘What’s all that about?’
‘What’s what about?’
‘What you just wrote.’
‘They’re instructions.’
‘Instructions for who?’
‘For someone many years from now.’
‘But it’s chalk. It’ll wash off.’
‘From the jetty, yes. Not from your memory.’
Okay, so she’s mad as a sack of ferrets. Only I don’t tell her so
’cause I’d like more of that green tea.
‘Finish the tea, if you want,’ she says. ‘You won’t find a shop until
you and the boy arrive at Allhallows-on-Sea . . . ’
‘Thanks a lot.’ I fill the cup. ‘Are you sure? This is the last of
it.’
‘One good turn deserves another.’ She turns a crafty sniper’s eye
on me. ‘I may need asylum.’
Asylum? She needs a mental asylum? ‘How d’you mean?’
‘Refuge. A bolt-hole. If the First Mission fails, as I fear it must.’
Crazy people are hard work. ‘I’m fifteen. I don’t have an asylum,
or a, uh, bolt-hole. Sorry.’
‘You’re ideal. You’re unexpected. My tea for your asylum. Do we
have a deal?’
Dad says the best way to handle drunks is to humour them, then
dump them, and maybe the doolally are like drunks who never
sober up. ‘Deal.’ She nods and I drink until the sun’s a pale glow
through the thin bottom of the plastic.
The old bat’s gazing away again. ‘Thank you, Holly.’
So I thank her back, and return to dry land. Then I turn around
and go back to her. ‘How do you know my name?’
She doesn’t turn round. ‘By what name was I baptised?’
What a stupid game this is. ‘Esther Little.’
‘And how do you know my name?’
‘Cause . . . You just told me.’ Did she? Must’ve.
‘That’s that settled, then.’ And that was Esther Little’s final word.

*
Around four o’clock I get to a strip of shingly beach by a wooden groyne thing sloping into the river. I take my Docs off. There’s a doozy of a blister on my big toe, like a trodden-on blackberry. Yum. I take my Fear of Music LP out of my duffel bag, roll my jeans right up and wade in to my knees. The curving river’s cool as tap-water and the sun’s got a punch to it, but not as hard as it was when I left the crazy old woman fishing. Then I frisbee the LP as hard and far as I can. It’s not specially aerodynamic, and flies upward till the inner sleeve with the record in drops out, plops into the water. The black album cover falls like a wounded bird and floats for a while. Tears, more tears, seep from my aching eyes and I imagine wading over to where the record’s spiralling down now, down the slope of the river-bed, strolling through the trout and perch to the rusty bicycles and bones of drowned pirates and German aeroplanes and flung-away wedding rings and God knows what.

But I wade back to shore and lie down on a bed of warm shingle, next to my Docs. Dad’ll be upstairs with his feet up on the sofa: ‘Reckon I’ll go and pay this Costello fella a call, Kath,’ he’ll be saying. Mam’ll drown her cigarette in the cold coffee at the bottom of her mug. ‘No, Dave. That’s what Her Ladyship wants. Ignore her Big Statement long enough, and she’ll start appreciating just how much we do for her . . .’

But, come tomorrow evening, Mam’ll start fretting ’bout school on Monday, ’cause once school asks where I am and why I’m not sitting the exams, she’ll be a whole load less snotty about my Big Statement. She’ll march round to Vinny’s house, all guns blazing. Mam’ll tear strips off Vinny – good, ha! – but she still won’t know where I am. Decided. I camp out for two nights, and then see how I’m feeling. So long as I don’t buy any cigarettes, my £13.85 in coins is enough for two days’ worth of chip butties, apples and Rich Tea biscuits. If I get to Rochester I could even take some money from the TSB and extend my little vacation.

A massive freighter heading downstream blasts its horn. Star of Riga is written in white letters on the orange hull. Wonder if Riga’s a place, or something else. Sharon and Jacko’d know. I do a huge
yawn, lie back on the clacking pebbles, and watch the wash from
the massive ship lap the shingle by the shore.

Christ, I’m dead sleepy all of a sudden . . .

‘Sykes? You alive? Oy . . . Sykes.’ The afternoon breaks in and it’s
Where am I? and Why am I barefoot? and What the hell is Ed Brubeck
doing touching my arm? I jerk it back, get up and scuttle a couple of
yards while the soles of my feet go ow ow ow on the hot pebbles
and then I bang my head on the wooden groyne thing.

Ed Brubeck hasn’t moved. ‘That hurt.’
‘I know it bloody hurt. It’s my bloody head.’
I rub my head. ‘Do I look like I’m dead?’
‘Well, yeah, a second ago, you did, a bit.’
‘Well, I’m bloody not.’ I see Brubeck’s bike lying on its side with
its wheel still spinning. His fishing rod’s still strapped to its crossbar.
‘I was just . . . snoozing.’

‘Don’t tell me you walked here from town, Sykes?’
‘No, I came by space hopper but the fecker bounced off.’
‘Huh. Never had you down as the great outdoors type.’
‘I never had you down as the Good Samaritan type.’

‘We live and learn.’ A bird’s singing, a loopy-loony-tweety one,
a mile or so up. Ed Brubeck pushes his black hair back from his
eyes. His skin’s so tanned he could be Turkish or something. ‘So
where are you going?’

‘As far away from that shit-hole as my feet can carry me.’

‘Oh dear. What’s naughty Gravesend done to you now?’
I lace up my Docs. My blister hurts. ‘Where are you going?’
‘My uncle lives thataway.’ Ed Brubeck waves an arm inland. ‘He’s
not too mobile these days and almost blind, so I go and keep him
company a bit. I was cycling off to Allhallows for a bit of fishing
when I saw you and—’

‘Thought I’d died. Which I haven’t. Don’t let me keep you.’
He makes a suit-yourself face, and climbs up the embankment.
I call after him, ‘How far is it to Allhallows, Brubeck?’
He picks up his bike. ‘About five miles. Want a backie?’

I think of Vinny and his Norton and shake my head. He mounts his bike, poser-style, and he’s gone. I scoop up a fistful of stones and fling it over the water, hard and angry.

A speck-sized Ed Brubeck vanishes behind a clump of pointy trees way up ahead. He didn’t look back. Wish I’d said yes to his offer, now. My knees are stiff and my feet are two giant throbs and my ankles feel like they’ve been attacked with tiny drills. Five miles at this rate’ll take me for ever. But Ed Brubeck’s a guy, like Vinny’s a guy, and guys are all sperm-guns. My stomach growls with dry hunger. Green tea’s great while you’re drinking it, but it makes you pee like a racehorse, and now my mouth feels like a dying rat crapped in it. Ed Brubeck’s a guy, yes, but he’s not a total tosser. Last week he got into an argument with Mrs Binkirk, our RE teacher, and got sent to Mr Nixon for calling her ‘Bigot of the Year’. A grown-up insult, that. People are icebergs, with just a bit you can see and loads you can’t. I try not to think about Vinny, but I do, and remember how only this morning I dreamt of starting a band with him. Up ahead, from behind the clump of pointy trees, comes a speck-sized Ed Brubeck, cycling back my way. Probably he’s decided it’s too late to fish, and he’s heading back to Gravesend. He grows bigger and bigger until he’s life-sized, and does a show-offy skid-turn that reminds me he’s still a boy as well as a guy. His eyes are white in his dark face. ‘Why don’t you get on, Sykes?’ He slaps his bike saddle. ‘Allhallow’s miles. It’ll be dark before you get there.’

We wobble along the track at a decent clip. Whenever we go over a bump Brubeck says, ‘You okay?’ and I tell him, ‘Yeah.’ The sea-breeze and bike-breeze slip up my sleeves and stroke my front like a pervy Mr Tickle. Sweat’s glueing Brubeck’s T-shirt to his back. I refuse to think ’bout Vinny’s sweat, and Stella’s . . . My heart cracks again and goo dribbles out and stings, like Dettol on a graze. I grip the bike rack with both hands, but then the track gets rucklier so I steady myself by hooking one thumb through a
belt-loop on Brubeck’s jeans. Probably Brubeck’s getting a hard-on from this, but that’s his problem, not mine.

Fluffy lambs are nibbling grass. Ewes watch us, like we’re planning to serve up their babies with sprouts and mash.

We scare birds on stilts with spoony beaks: they skim off across the river. Their wing tips touch the water, sending out circles.

Here the Thames is turning into the sea and Essex is turning gold. That smudge is Canvey Island; further on, Southend.

The English Channel’s biro-blue; the sky’s the blue of snooker-chalk. We judder across a footbridge over a rusty creek, half-marsh, half-dune, inland: WELCOME TO THE ISLE OF GRAIN.

It’s not a real island, mind. Once upon a time, perhaps.

That loony, loopy, tweeety bird’s followed us. Must of.

Allhallows-on-Sea’s basically a big holiday park spilling up to the storefront from a nothingy village behind. It’s all rows of caravans and those oblong cabins on little stilts they call trailer-homes in American films. There’s half-naked kids and totally naked toddlers all over the shop, firing water-pistols and playing Swingball and running about. Half-sloshed mums’re rolling their eyes at sun-pinked dads burning bangers on barbecues. I try to eat the smoke. ‘Dunno about you,’ says Brubeck, ‘but I’m starving.’

Too enthusiastically I say, ‘Just a bit,’ so he parks his bike at the fish-and-chip place, next to Lazy Rolf’s Krazy Golf. Brubeck orders cod and chips, which is two pounds, but I just order chips ’cause it’s only fifty pence. But then Brubeck tells the bloke at the counter, ‘Two cod and chips, please,’ and hands over a fiver, and the bloke glances at me and gives Brubeck that nice-one-son look that men give each other, which pisses me off ’cause me and Brubeck aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend and we’re not bloody going to be, however many battered cods he gives me. Brubeck gets us two cans of Coke too and notices my face. ‘It’s only fish and chips – no strings attached.’

‘You’re damn right there’s no strings attached.’ It comes out spikier than I meant. ‘But thanks.’

We walk past the last cabin and on a bit to a concrete shelter,
just on the lip of the dunes. A whiff of wee leaks through the slitted window but Brubeck climbs onto its low, flat roof. ‘This is a pillbox,’ he says. ‘They were machine-gun posts during the war, in case the Germans invaded. There’s still hundreds of them around, if you keep your eyes peeled. This is peace, if you think about it – machine-gun nests being used as picnic tables.’ I look at him: You’d never dare say something that clever at school. I scramble up on my own and take in the view. Southend’s across the wider-than-a-mile mouth of the Thames and the other way I can see Sheerness docks on the Isle of Sheppey. Then we open our Cokes and I peel off the ring carefully to put in the can after. They slice open dog’s paw-pads. Brubeck holds his can towards me so I clunk it, like it’s a wine glass, but I don’t meet his eyes in case he gets any ideas, and we drink. My first gulp’s a boom of freezing fizz. The chips are warm and vinegary and the batter’s hot in our fingers as we pull it back to get at the fat flakes of cod. ‘It tastes great,’ I say. ‘Cheers.’

‘Not as good as a Manchester chipper,’ says Brubeck.

A stunt kite writes on the blue with its pink tail.

I fill my lungs with one of Brubeck’s Dunhills. That’s better. Then I think of Stella Yearwood and Vinny smoking his Marlboros in bed, and suddenly I have to pretend I’ve got something in my eye. To distract myself, I ask Brubeck, ‘So who’s this uncle of yours, then? The one you visited earlier.’

‘Uncle Norm. My mum’s brother. Used to be a crane operator at Blue Circle Cement, but he’s stopped working. He’s going blind.’

I take another deep drag. ‘That’s awful. Poor guy.’

‘Uncle Norm says, “Pity is a form of abuse.”’

‘Is he completely blind, or just partly, or . . .’

‘He’s lost about three-quarters of his sight in both eyes, and the rest’s going. What gets him down most is that he can’t read the papers any more. It’s like searching for your keys in dirty snow, he says. So most Saturdays I cycle out to his bungalow and read him pieces from the Guardian. Then he talks about Thatcher versus the
unions, why the Russians are in Afghanistan, why the CIA are taking
down democratic governments in Latin America.”

‘Sounds like school,’ I say.

Brubeck shakes his head. ‘Most of our teachers just want to get
home by four and retire by sixty. But my uncle Norm loves talking
and thinking and he wants you to love it too. He’s sharp as a razor.
Then my aunt makes a big late lunch, and my uncle nods off, and
I go fishing, if the weather’s nice. Unless I see someone from my
class at school lying dead on the beach.’ He stubs out his cigarette
on the concrete. ‘So. What’s your story, Sykes?’

‘What do you mean, what’s my story?’
‘At eight forty-five I see you walking up Queen Street, ducking—’
‘You saw me?’
‘Yep – ducking into the Indoor Market, but seven hours later the
target is sighted ten miles east of Gravesend, along the river.’

‘What is this? Ed Brubeck, Private Investigator?’

A little tail-less dog that’s all waggling bum comes up. Brubeck
chucks it a chip. ‘If I was a detective, I’d suspect boyfriend trouble.’
My voice goes sharp. ‘None of your business.’

‘This is true. But the tosser’s not worth it, whoever he is.’

Scowling, I drop the dog a chip. He scoffs it so hungrily, I wonder
if he’s a stray. Like me.

Brubeck makes a funnel out of his chip-paper to pour the crispy
bits into his mouth. ‘You planning on going back to town tonight?’

I abort a groan. Gravesend’s a black cloud. Vinny and Stella and
Mam are in it. Are it. My watch says 18:19 and the Captain Marlow’ll
be cheerful and chattery as the evening regulars drift in. Upstairs
Jacko and Sharon’ll be sat on the sofa watching The A-Team with
cheese thingies and a slab of chocolate cake. I’d like to be there,
but what about Mam’s slap? ‘No,’ I tell Brubeck, ‘I’m not.’

‘It’ll be dark in three hours. Not a lot of time to find a circus to
run away with.’

The dune grass sways. Clouds’re unrolling across the sky from
France. I put my jacket on. ‘Maybe I’ll find a nice cosy pillbox.
One that’s not used to pee in. Or a barn.’
Here come seagulls on boingy elastic, scrawking for chips too. Brubeck stands up and flaps his arms at the gulls like the Mad Prince of Allhallows-on-Sea to make them scatter, just for the hell of it. ‘Maybe I know somewhere better.’

We’re cycling along a proper road again. Big fields in the pancake-flat arse-end of nowhere, with long black shadows. Brubeck’s being all mysterious ’bout where we’re going – ‘Either you trust me, Sykes, or you don’t’ – but he says it’s warm, dry and safe and he’s stayed there himself five or six times when he’s been out night-fishing, so I’ll go along with it, for now. He says he’ll head off home after Gravesend. That’s the problem with boys: they tend to help you only ’cause they fancy you, but there’s no unembarrassing way to find out their real motives till it’s too late. Ed Brubeck seems okay, and he spends his Saturday afternoons reading for a blind uncle, but thanks to bloody Vinny and Stella, I’m not so sure if I’m a good judge of character. With night coming on, though, I don’t have much choice. We pass a massive factory. I’m ’bout to ask Brubeck what they make there when he tells me it’s Grain Power Station and it provides electricity for Gravesend and half of south-east London.

‘Yeah, I know,’ I lie.

The church is stumpy with a tower that’s got arrow-slits and it’s gold in the last light. The wood sounds like never-ending waves, with rooks tumbling about like black socks in a drier. ‘ST MARY HOO PARISH CHURCH’ says a sign, with the vicar’s phone number underneath. The village of St Mary Hoo is up ahead, but it’s really just a few old houses and a pub where two lanes meet. ‘The bedding’s basic,’ says Brubeck, as we get off the bike, ‘but the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit handle security, and at zero quid a night, it’s priced competitively.’

Does he mean the church? ‘You’re joking, right?’

‘Check-out’s seven sharp or the management get shirty.’

Yes, he means the church. I make a dubious face.
Brubeck makes a face that says. *Take it or leave it.*

I’ll have to take it. The Kent marshes are not dotted with cosy barns full of warm straw, like in *The Little House on the Prairie.* The only one I’ve seen was a corrugated-iron job a few miles back, guarded by two Dobermans with rabies. ‘Don’t they lock churches?’

Brubeck says, ‘Yeah,’ in the same way I’d say, ‘So?’ After checking no one’s around, he wheels his bike into the graveyard. He hides it between dark brushy trees and the wall, then leads me to the porch. Confetti’s piled up in dirty drifts. ‘Keep an eye on the gate,’ he tells me. From his pocket he digs out a leather purse-thing and inside’s a dangly row of spindly keys and an L-shaped piece of thin metal. One last look at the lane, then he pokes a key into the lock, and jiggles it a bit.

I feel a lurch of fear we’ll get caught. ‘Where did you learn to break into buildings?’

‘It wasn’t footy or repairing punctures that Dad taught me.’

‘We could get done for this! It’s called, it’s called—’

‘Breaking and entering. That’s why you keep your eyes peeled.’

‘But what am I s’posed to do exactly if somebody comes?’

‘Act embarrassed, like we’ve been caught snogging.’

‘Uh – I don’t *think* so, Ed Brubeck.’

He does this half-hiss, half-laugh. ‘Act it, I said. Relax, you only get nicked if the cops can prove *you* picked the lock. If you don’t confess, and if you’re careful not to bugger the mechanism . . . he feeds a skeleton key into the keyhole . . . then who’s to say you didn’t just happen along, find the door left ajar and go in to satisfy your interest in Saxon church architecture? That’s our story, by the way, just in case.’ Brubeck’s got his ear against the lock as he’s twizzling. ‘Though I’ve stayed here three Saturday nights since Easter and not heard a dickie-bird. Plus it’s not like we’re taking anything. Plus you’re a girl, so just sob your eyes out and do the “Please, Mr Vicar, I’m running away from my violent stepfather” bit and, chances are, you’ll walk away with a cup of tea and a Penguin biscuit.’ Brubeck holds up a hand for hush: a click. ‘Got it.’ The church door swings open with the perfect Transylvanian hinge-creak.
Inside, St Mary Hoo Church smells of charity shops, and the stained-glass gloom’s all fruit-salady. The walls’re thick as a nuclear bunker and the thunk when Brubeck shuts us in echoes all around, like a dungeon. The roof’s all beams and timbers. We walk down the short aisle, past the ten or twelve pews. The pulpit’s wooden, the font’s stone, the organ’s like a fancy piano with exhaust pipes. The lectern-thingy must be fake gold, or a burglar – Brubeck’s dad, for example – would’ve swiped it long ago. We reach the altar-table and look up at the window showing the crucifixion. A dove in the stained-glass sky has spokes coming off it. The Marys, two disciples and a Roman at the foot of the cross look like they’re discussing whether it’s starting to rain or not. Brubeck asks, ‘You’re Catholic, right?’

I’m surprised he’s ever thought ’bout this. ‘My mum’s Irish.’

‘So do you believe in Heaven and God and that?’

I stopped going to church last year: that was me and Mam’s biggest row till this morning. ‘I sort of developed an allergy.’

‘My uncle Norm says religion’s “spiritual paracetamol”, and in a way I hope he’s right. Unless God issues personality transplants when you arrive, Heaven’d mean a never-ending family reunion with the likes of my uncle Trev. I can’t think of anything more hellish.’

‘So Uncle Trev’s no Uncle Norm, then?’

‘Chalk and cheese. Uncle Trev’s my dad’s older brother. “The Brains of the Operation,” he says, which is true enough: he’s got brains enough to get losers like Dad to do the dirty work. Uncle Trev fences the merchandise if the job’s a success, does his Mr Non-stick Frying Pan when it goes belly-up. He even tried it on with my mum after Dad got sent down, which is partly why we moved south.’

‘Sounds a total scuzzball.’

‘Yep, that’s Uncle Trev.’ The psychedelic light on Brubeck’s face dims as the sun fades. ‘Mind you, if I was dying in a hospice, maybe I’d want all the spiritual paracetamol I could get my hands on.’

I put my hand on the altar rail. ‘What if... what if Heaven is real, but only in moments? Like a glass of water on a hot day
when you’re dying of thirst, or when someone’s nice to you for no reason, or . . .’ Mam’s pancakes with Toblerone sauce; Dad dashing up from the bar just to tell me, ‘Sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite’; or Jacko and Sharon singing ‘For She’s A Squishy Marshmallow’ instead of ‘For She’s A Jolly Good Fellow’ every single birthday and wetting themselves even though it’s not at all funny; and Brendan giving his old record player to me instead of one of his mates. ‘S’pose Heaven’s not like a painting that’s just hanging there for ever, but more like . . . Like the best song anyone ever wrote, but a song you only catch in snatches, while you’re alive, from passing cars, or . . . upstairs windows when you’re lost . . .’

Brubeck’s looking at me like he’s really listening.

And, feck it, I’m blushing. ‘What’re you looking at?’

Before he can answer, a key rattles in the door.

Slow-motion seconds lurch by me, like a conga of piss-heads, and Brubeck and me are Laurel and Hardy and Starsky and Hutch and two halves of a pantomime horse, and he bundles me through a wooden door I’d not noticed behind the organ, into this odd-shaped room with a high ceiling and a ladder going up to a trapdoor. I think it’s called a vestry, this room, and the ladder must lead to the bell-tower. Brubeck listens through the door crack: there’s no other way out, only a cupboard thing in the corner. Coming our way are at least two men’s voices; I think I hear a third, a woman. Shit. Brubeck and me look at each other. Our choices are: stay here and try to talk our way out; hide in the cupboard; or squirrel it up the ladder and hope the trapdoor opens for us, and whoever’s coming doesn’t follow. We probably wouldn’t make it up the ladder now. Suddenly Brubeck’s bundling me into the cupboard, then he gets in too and pulls the door shut the best he can. It’s smaller than it looked from the outside: it’s like hiding yourself in half a vertical coffin – with a boy you have no interest in being crushed up against. Brubeck pulls the door shut . . .

‘But the man believes he’s the Second Comin’ of Fidel soddin’
Castro!' The voices enter the vestry. ‘Love Maggie Thatcher or loathe her, and there’s plenty who do both, she did win an election, which Arthur Scargill hasn’t. He didn’t even ballot his own union.’

‘None of that’s the point,’ says a Londoner. ‘This strike’s about the future. That’s why the government’s using every dirty trick in the book – MI5 spies, lies in the media, no benefits for miners’ families . . . Mark my words, if the miners lose, your children’ll be working Victorian hours for Victorian wages.’

Brubeck’s kneecap in my thigh’s giving me a slow dead leg.

I swivel a bit: his ow ow ow is quieter than a whisper.

‘We can’t keep dying industries alive for ever,’ the yokel’s arguing back, ‘that’s the point. Otherwise we’d still be forkin’ out for castle-builders or canal-diggers or druids. Scargill’s arguing for the economics of Fantasy Island and the politics of Bullshit Mountain.’

I feel Brubeck’s chest, rising and falling against my back.

‘Ever been to a mining town?’ asks the Londoner. ‘You can’t go now ’cause the fuzz won’t let you near, but when the mine goes, the town dies. Wales and the north ain’t the south, Yorkshire ain’t Kent, and energy ain’t just another industry. Energy’s security. The North Sea oil-fields won’t last for ever, and then what?’

‘A quality debate, gents,’ says the woman, ‘but the bells?’

Feet clomp up the wooden ladder: lucky we didn’t choose the bell-tower. A minute goes by. Still no sound from the vestry. I think all three’ve gone up. I shift a fraction and Brubeck gasps in pain. I risk whispering, ‘Are you okay?’

‘No. You’re crushing my nuts, since you asked.’

‘You can adopt.’ I try to give him more room, but there isn’t any.

‘Think we should make a run for it?’

‘Perhaps a silent creep, once the—’

The stuffy darkness booms with bells. Brubeck opens the door – fresher air floods in – half-hobbles out, then helps me climb out. High above, two chubby calves are dangling down through the hatch. We tiptoe to the door, like a pair of total wallies from *Scooby-Doo* . . .

*
Me and Brubeck leg it down the lane, like we’ve escaped from Colditz. The bells sound sloshy and shiny in the blue dark. I get a stitch so we stop at a bench by the village sign. ‘Typical,’ says Brubeck. ‘I want to show off my How to Survive in the Wild skills, and it’s the Invasion of the Wurzels instead. I need a fag. You?’

‘Okay. Will they be ding-donging for a while?’

‘Guess so.’ Brubeck hands me a cigarette and holds out a lighter: I dip the tip in the flame. ‘I’ll let you back in when they’ve gone. Yale locks are a cinch, even in the dark.’

‘But shouldn’t you be getting home?’

‘I’ll call my mum from the phone box by the pub and say I’m staying out night-fishing after all. Little white lie.’

I need his help, but I’m nervous ’bout a price-tag.
‘Don’t worry, Sykes. My intentions are honourable.’

I think of Vinny Costello and flinch. ‘Good.’
‘Guys don’t just think ’bout getting off with girls, y’know.’

I fire a beam of smoke straight at Brubeck’s face, so he has to squint and look away. ‘I’ve got an older brother,’ I tell him. We’re by an overgrown orchard, so when we’ve finished our cigarettes we climb in and scrump a few unripe apples. There’s a brick wall to clamber up. The apples are tart as limes, but good after an oily dinner. Lights blink on the power station we passed earlier. ‘Out thataway,’ Brubeck chucks an apple core in the general direction, ‘past them hazy lights on the Isle of Sheppey, there’s a fruit farm, Gabriel Harty’s. I worked the strawberry season there last year and made twenty-five quid a day. There’s dorms for the pickers, and once the exams are over, I’m going back. I’m saving for an InterRail in August.’

‘What’s an InterRail?’

‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously.’

‘A train pass. You pay a hundred and thirty quid and then you can travel all over Europe, for a month, for free. Second class, but still. From the tip of Portugal to the top of Norway. Eastern-bloc countries too, Yugoslavia and places. The Berlin Wall. Istanbul.'
Istanbul, there’s this bridge, right. One side’s in Europe and the other’s in Asia. I’m going to walk across it.’

Far away, a lonely dog barks, or perhaps a fox.

I ask, ‘What do you do in all these countries?’

‘Look around. Walk. Find a cheap bed. Eat what the locals eat. Find a cheap beer. Try not to get fleeced. Talk. Pick up a few words in the local lingo. Just be there, y’know? Sometimes,’ Brubeck bites into an apple, ‘sometimes I want to be everywhere, all at once, so badly I could just . . .’ Brubeck mimes a bomb going off in his rib-cage. ‘Do you never get that feeling?’

A bat flaps by, like it’s on a string in a naff vampire film.

‘Not really, if I’m honest. The furthest I’ve ever been’s Ireland, to see my mum’s relatives in Cork.’

‘What’s it like?’

‘Different. It’s not all checkpoints and bombs like up north, though the Troubles are still in the air a bit, and it’s best to shut up about politics. They hate Thatcher ’cause of Bobby Sands and the hunger strikers. I’ve got this one great-aunt, my mam’s aunt Eilísh – she’s brilliant. She keeps hens and has a gun in her coal-hole, and when she was younger she cycled all the way to Kathmandu. Really, she did. She’d felt that wanna-be-everywhere boom thing, for sure. I’ve seen photos and newspaper cuttings and stuff. She lives on this long headland near Bantry – the Sheep’s Head peninsula. It’s like the edge of the world. There’s nothing there, no shops or anything, but’ – there’s not many people I’d admit this to – ‘I really loved it.’

There’s a moon sharp enough to cut your finger on.

We say nothing for a bit, but it’s not an awkward nothing. Then Brubeck says, ‘D’you know ’bout the second umbilical cord, Sykes?’

I can’t make out his face any more. ‘You what?’

‘When you’re a baby in the womb, there’s this cord—’

‘I know what an umbilical cord is, thanks. But a “second” one?’

‘Well, psychologists say there’s a second umbilical cord, an invisible one, an emotional one, which ties you to your parents for the whole time you’re a kid. Then, one day, you have a row with your mum if you’re a girl, or your dad if you’re a boy, and that argument
cuts your second cord. Then, and only then, are you ready to go off into the big wide world and be an adult on your own terms. It's like a rite-of-passage thing.'

'I argue with my mam, like, *daily*. She treats me like I'm ten.'

Brubeck lights another fag, takes a drag and passes it to me. 'I'm talking a bigger, nastier fight. Afterwards you know it happened. You're not the kid you were.'

'And you're sharing these pearls of wisdom with me why?'

He lines up his answer carefully. 'If you're running off because your dad's a petty crim who beats your mum up and throws you downstairs when you try to stop him, then running away's the clever thing to do. Go. I'll give you my InterRail money. But if you're sat on this wall tonight just because your umbilical cord got snipped, then, yeah, it hurts, but it had to happen. Cut your mum a bit of slack. It's just a part of growing up. You shouldn't be punishing her for it.'

'She *slapped* me.'

'Bet she feels like shit about it now.'

'You don't even know her!'

'Are you sure you do, Sykes?'

'What's *that* s'posed to bloody mean?'

Brubeck lets it drop. So I let it drop, too.

The church is quiet as the grave. Brubeck's asleep in a nest of dusty cushions. We're up on this gallery thing along the back wall, so we won't be spotted if any Satan worshippers drop by for a black mass. My calves are sore, my blister's throbbing and my mind keeps rewinding to the scene with Vinny and Stella. Wasn't I good enough at sex? Didn't I dress right, talk right, like the right music?

22:58, glows my Timex. The maddest minutes of the week at the Captain Marlow are right now: last orders on a Saturday night. Mam, Dad and Glenda, who just works weekends, will be going full pelt: a roaring wall of drinkers flapping fivers and tenners through the fog of smoke and the racket of chatter, shouts, laughs, curses, flirting . . . Nobody'll care where Holly's ended up tonight. On the
jukebox ‘Daydream Believer’ or ‘Rockin’ All Over The World’ or ‘American Pie’ will be booming through the building. Sharon’s fallen asleep with her torch on under the blanket. Jacko’s asleep with people murmuring foreign languages on his radio. Up in my room, my bed’s unmade, my schoolbag’s slung over my chair. A basket of washed laundry’s just inside the door where Mam puts it when she’s pissed off with me. Which is most days now. The big glow of Essex at night’ll be shining orangey light across the river, through my undrawn curtains, over the Zenyattà Mondatta and The Smiths posters I scavved from the Magic Bus. But I’m not going to start missing my room now. No feckin’ way.

1 July

Tin whistles, scratty noises, birdsong, and a stained-glass angel. The little church on the Isle of Grain, I remember now, lit by sun through the first crack of the day. Mam. The row. Stella and Vinny, waking up in each other’s arms. My throat goes tight. I s’pose if some man’s been inside you often enough, it’ll take a while to get rid of him. Love’s pure free joy when it works, but when it goes bad you pay for the good hours at loan-shark prices. 06:03, says my Timex. Sunday. Ed Brubeck: there he is, asleep on his cushiony things, mouth squashed open, hair floppy. His baseball cap sits on his neatly folded lumberjack shirt. I rub the sleep from my eyes. I was dreaming about Jacko and Miss Constantin holding open a curtain of air, and stone steps going up like in an Indiana Jones film . . .


Ed Brubeck snores like a bear. Brubeck wouldn’t two-time his girlfriend. If he has one. Most boys in my year drop hints ’bout losing their virginity at a mate’s party, specially boys who haven’t, stroking their bum-fluff moustaches . . . Ed Brubeck doesn’t do any of that, which means probably he has done it. If it was with someone
at our school, I’d’ve heard. Dunno, though. He keeps his mouth shut.

Mind you, he told me quite a bit yesterday.

His dad, his family, everything. Why me?

Watch his sleeping, pointy, half-man-half-boy’s face.

And the answer’s obvious: ‘Cause he fancies you, you prawn!

If he fancies me, why didn’t he make a pass at me?

He’s clever, I realise. First he makes you grateful.

Right. Of course. I do believe it’s time I was off.

Dandelions and thistles grow along the cracked track and the hedges are taller than me. The early sun’s like laser beams. Dunno why I nicked Brubeck’s cap as I crept away, but I’m glad I did. He won’t mind, much. Should be able to cut across the fields to the main road to Rochester – six, seven miles away, I reckon. My blisters’ll take it. They’ll have to: I don’t have a first-aid box in my duffel bag. I feel a jab of hunger, but my stomach’ll just have to put up and shut up – I’ll find something to eat at Rochester. Perhaps I should’ve said bye and thanks to Brubeck but if he’d have answered, ‘No worries, Sykes, but are you sure I can’t give you a backie back to Gravesend?’ all cheerful-like, I’d’ve found it too hard to say no.

Up ahead, I see the track ending at a farmyard.

I climb a gate and skirt round a field of cabbages.

Another gate. A hawk thing’s a speck in the sky.

Six days should do it. The police only get interested in missing teenagers once a week’s up. Six days’ll show Mam I can look after myself in the big bad world. I’ll be in a stronger, whatchercallit, a stronger negotiating position. And I’ll do it on my own, without a Brubeck to get all boyfriendish on me. I’ll have to be careful to make my money last. Remember that time I tried my hand at shoplifting?

One Saturday last year a bunch of us went to Chatham Roller Disco for Ali Jessop’s birthday, but it was so lame that me and Stella and Amanda Kidd sneaked off to the high street. Amanda Kidd said, ‘Who wants to go fishing, then?’ I didn’t want to but Stella said
okay, so I acted all cool too and we went into Debenhams. I’d never nicked anything in my life and really I almost peed myself, but I watched Stella. She asked the shop assistant something pointless and a bit later, accidentally on purpose, dropped two lipsticks from the cosmetics stand. When she bent down to pick them up she put one of them in her boot. I did the same with some earrings I liked, and on my way out of the shop, I even asked the assistant what time they were open till. Once we were safe outside, the world felt different, like the rules had been changed. If you keep your nerve, you get what you want. Amanda Kidd had got a pair of sunglasses worth a tenner, Stella had some Estée Lauder lippy and my fake diamond earrings sparkled like real ones. Next we went to the Sweet Factory where me and Amanda Kidd stuffed sweets into our clothes while Stella told the Saturday boy she’d seen him here every week for ages, and even dreamt about him, and would he like to go for a walk with her somewhere private after work? Last we went to Woolworths. Stella and me drifted away to look at the Top 40 singles, innocent enough, but the next minute the manager and an assistant were walling us in, and this store-detective guy had Amanda Kidd — shaking and white as a sheet — by the arm and was saying, ‘These are the two she came into the shop with.’ The manager ordered us upstairs to his office. All my will-power and attitude withered away, but Stella snapped back, ‘By whom am I being addressed?’ Her voice came out posh and sharp.

The manager said, ‘Just come quietly, sweetheart,’ and tried to put his hand on her shoulder.

Stella slapped it away and snapped at full volume, ‘Keep your grubby paws off me, you horrid little man! I neither know why you’ve linked my sister and me with this . . . shoptifter,’ she sneered at Amanda Kidd, who now shook and sobbed, ‘but you’ll tell us exactly why we’d steal any of the crap you sell in your ghastly little shop —’ here she emptied her handbag onto the record counter ‘— and you’d better be right, Mr Manager, or my father will serve you a writ first thing Monday. Make no mistake: I know my rights.’ Lots of customers were rubbernecking our way and, miracle of miracles,
the manager backed down, and muttered that perhaps the store detective was mistaken and we were free to go. Stella snapped, ‘I know I’m free to go!’, put her things back in her handbag and out we huffed.

We sneaked back to the roller disco and didn’t tell anyone what’d happened. Amanda Kidd’s mum had to go and get her in the end. I was panicking she’d grass us up, but she didn’t dare. Amanda Kidd ate lunch with a different bunch of girls that week, and we’ve never really spoken since. She’s in the second-from-top class in our year now, so perhaps getting caught was good for her, sort of. The point is, unlike Stella, I’m not a natural thief, or a natural liar. That day in Woolworths, she even convinced me we were innocent. And look what a fool she made of me, when my turn came to be Amanda Kidd-ed. Doesn’t Stella need friends? Or for Stella, are friends just a way to get what you want?

On my left’s a steep embankment, with a dual-carriageway running along the top, and on my right a field’s been cleared for a massive housing estate by the looks of it. There’s diggers and bulldozers and Portakabins and tall wire fences and notices saying, ‘HARD HATS MUST BE WORN’ and over a sign saying, ‘UNAUTHORISED ENTRY IS FORBIDDEN’ someone’s sprayed ‘AIN’T NO BLACK IN THE UNION JACK’, plus a couple of swastikas for good measure. It’s still early: 07:40. Brubeck’ll be cycling home, but back at the pub Mam and Dad’ll still be in bed. Up ahead’s the entrance to an underpass running below the fast road above. When I’m about a hundred metres away, I see a boy there, and I stop, and this is really odd, but I could swear . . .

It’s Jacko. He just stands there, watching me. The real Jacko’s twenty-odd miles away, I know, drawing a maze or reading a chess book or doing something Jacko-ish, but the kid I’m looking at’s got the same floppy brown hair, shape, way of standing, even a red Liverpool FC top. I know Jacko and this is him or an identical twin nobody knows about. I keep walking, not daring to blink in case he vanishes. When I’m fifty metres away I wave, and the kid who
can’t be my little brother waves. So I shout his name. He doesn’t shout back, but turns and walks down into the underpass. I don’t know what to make of it, but I jog along now, nervous that Jacko’s done a runner to come and find me, even though the sensible part of me is sure it can’t be him ’cause how’d Jacko know where to look?

I run as fast I can, now, knowing something strange is going on, but not knowing what. The underpass is for walkers and cyclists only so it’s quite narrow, and as long as the width of the four traffic lanes and the grass in the middle it goes under. Ahead, down and then up a bit, the far exit’s a square of fields, sky and roofs. I’ve taken a few steps in before I notice it: instead of getting darker towards the middle of the underpass, it’s actually getting lighter; instead of getting echoier, it’s getting more muffled. I tell myself, It’s just an illusion, don’t worry, but after a few more steps, I’m sure of it: the underpass is changing its shape. It’s wider and higher, with four corners, a big diamond-shaped room . . . It’s becoming somewhere else. It’s incredible and it’s terrifying. I know I’m awake but I know this can’t be real. I stop walking altogether: I’m scared of hitting the wall. Where is this? I’ve been nowhere like it. Is it a daymare? Is all that stuff waking up again? There are narrow windows to my left and right, about ten paces away. I’m not going to look through them – they’d be well past the underpass walls – but through the left window I see dunes, grey dunes, climbing up towards a high ridge, but through the right-hand window it’s darker: the dunes roll down towards a sea, but it’s a black sea, utterly black-black, like darkness in a box in a cave a mile underground. A long table’s appeared in the middle of the chamber, wherever we are, and I’m walking down on the left side of it, and look, there’s a woman, keeping pace with me, on the right. She’s young and beautiful in a cold way, like an actress who can’t be touched; she’s got white-blonde hair and bone-pale skin, rich rose-red lips and a midnight-blue ballgown like a woman from a story . . .

Miss Constantin, from my armchair when I was eight years old. Why’s my mind doing this to me now? We head towards a picture
hanging in a sharp corner, of a man like a saint from Bible times, but his face has no eyes. I’m inches away now. There’s a black spot on the saint’s forehead, a bit above where the eyebrows meet. It’s growing. The spot’s a dot. The dot’s an eye. Then I feel one on my own forehead, in the same place, but I’m not quite sure I’m still Holly Sykes, not exactly, though if I’m not me, who else could I be? From the spot between my eyes something comes out and hovers there. If I look straight at it, it goes, but if I look away a bit, it’s like a small, shimmery planet thing. Then another comes out, and another, and another. Four shimmerings. I taste green tea. Then it’s like bombs going off and Miss Constantin’s howling and her hands are talons, but she’s flung away, bowled down the table by whip-cracking blue light. The old saint’s mouth’s opened, full of animals’ teeth, and metal screams and stone groans. Figures and shadows appear like a shadow-puppet show in the mind of someone going mad. One older man springs onto the table. He has piranha-fish eyes, curly black locks, a busted nose, a black suit, and there’s a strange indigo light coming off him, like he’s radioactive. He helps Miss Constantin up, and she points a silver-tipped finger straight towards me. Black flames and a roaring loud as jet engines fill the place, and I can’t run and I can’t fight, and I can’t even see any more so all I can do is stand there and listen to voices, like voices shouting as a building collapses on their owners, but I catch one clear voice saying, *I’ll be here.* Then there’s a new shaking, and a light brighter than suns is powering up and up and up until my eyeballs melt in their sockets . . .

. . . and grey comes in through the cracks, birdsong too, and the sound of a lorry passing overhead, and a sharp pain from a knocked ankle, and I’m crouching on the concrete ground of an underpass, just a few yards from the exit. A breeze that smells of car-fumes washes over my face, and it’s over, my daymare, my vision, my whatever-it-was, is over. There’s no one to ask, *Did you see that too?* There’s just those three words, *I’ll be here.* I wobble out into the light, into the dry blue morning, still shaking with the gutted
weirdness of it all, and sit on the grass bank. Perhaps daymares are like cancer, which goes away and comes back when you think you’re all clear. Perhaps whatever Dr Marinus did to fix me is wearing off. Perhaps the stress of yesterday, of Mam and Vinny and everything, triggered some sort of relapse. I just dunno. There was no sign of Jacko, so I must’ve imagined seeing him, too. Good. I’m glad he’s safe at the Captain Marlow, twenty miles away, even though I’d love to see him, to know he’s okay, even though I know he’s fine and there’s nothing to worry about.

The first time I saw Jacko, he was in an incubator ’cause he was born too early. That was in Gravesend General Hospital, too, though the maternity wing’s in a different building. Mam, who’d just had a C-section, looked tireder than I’d ever seen her, but happier, too, and told us to say hi to our new brother, Jack. Dad had been at the hospital all the previous day; he looked and smelt like he’d been sleeping in a car park for a week. Sharon, I remember, was most dischuffed at losing her Cutest Thing At the Captain Marlow crown, specially to this monkey-shrimp in a nappy with tubes coming off him. Brendan was fifteen and spooked by all the bawling, breast-feeding, sick and poo in the ward. I tapped on the glass and said, ‘Hi, Jacko, I’m your big sister,’ and his fingers waggled, just a tiny, tiny bit, like he was waving. The God’s honest truth, that: nobody else saw but I felt a tickle in my heart and I felt willing and able to kill to protect him, if I had to. I still feel it, when some twat talks ’bout the ‘weirdo’ or the ‘freak’ or the ‘premature one’. People can be so crap. Why’s it okay to draw spaceships if you’re seven, but not okay to draw diabolical mazes? Who decides that spending money on Space Invaders is fine, but if you buy a calculator with loads of symbols you’re asking to be picked on? Why’s it okay to listen to the Top 40 on Radio 1 but not okay to listen to stations in other languages? Mam and Dad sometimes decide Jacko needs to read less and play footy more, and for a bit he’ll act more like a normal seven-year-old kid, but it’s only acting, and we all know it. Just now and then who he really is smiles out at me through the
blacks of Jacko’s eyes, like someone watching you from a train zipping past. At those times, I almost want to wave, even though he’s just across the table, or we’re passing on the stairs.

Hallucinations or not, I can’t just sit on my arse all day. I need food and a plan. So off I walk, and after a roundabout, the fields stop and I’m back in the world of garden fences, billboards and zebra crossings. The sky’s hazing over a bit and I’m thirsty again. I haven’t had a proper drink since me and Brubeck got some water from a tap in the church, and the rules say that you can’t knock on a door and ask for a glass of water in a town the way you can in the middle of nowhere. A park with a water fountain’d be perfect, or even a public toilet, but there’s no sign of either. I’d like to brush my teeth, too: they’re all scaly like the inside of kettles. I smell bacon from a window and stomach pangs wake up, and here comes a bus with ‘GRAVESEND’ written on it. Hop aboard, I could be home in forty-five minutes . . .

Sure, but picture Mam’s face when she opens the side door. The bus wafts by, and on I trog under a railway bridge. Up ahead there’s a row of shops and a newsagent where I can buy a can of drink and a pack of biccies. There’s a Christian bookshop, a knitting shop, a betting shop, a shop that just sells Airfix models and stuff, and a pet shop, with scabby hamsters in cages. Everything’s mostly closed and the street looks sad. Okay, so I’m arriving in Rochester. Now what?

Here’s a phone box, strawberry red.
Strawberries. That’s an idea.

The Directory Enquiries woman finds Gabriel Harty and Black Elm Farm on the Isle of Sheppey, no bother, and asks if I want to be put straight through. I say yes, and a moment later I hear the ringing tone. My watch says 08:57. Surely not too early for a farm, even on a Sunday. Nobody’s answering. I don’t know why I’m so nervous but I am. If it rings ten times and no one answers, I’ll hang up and assume this wasn’t meant to be.

On the ninth ring the phone’s picked up. ‘Ye-es?’
I ram in my ten pence. ‘Hi. Is that Black Elm Farm?’

‘It was when last I looked, ye-es.’ A rusty drawl.

‘Are you Mr Harty?’

‘When I last looked I was, ye-es.’

‘I’m phoning to ask if you’re hiring pickers.’

‘Are we hiring pickers?’ In the background a dog’s going mental and a woman yells, Boris, shut your cake-hole! ‘Ye-es.’

‘A friend worked on your farm a couple of summers back, and if you’re hiring, I’d like to come and pick fruit for a bit. Please.’

‘Done picking before, have you?’

‘Not on an actual farm, but I’m used to hard work, and –’ I think of my great-aunt Eilish in Ireland ‘– I’ve helped my aunt with her vegetable garden, which is massive, so I’m used to getting my hands dirty.’

‘So all us farmers have dirty hands, have we?’

‘I just meant I’m not afraid of hard work, and I can start today, even.’ There’s a pause. A very long pause. Very, very long. I’m worried I’ll have to put more money in. ‘Mr Harty? Hello?’

‘Ye-es. No picking on a Sunday. Not at Black Elm Farm. We let the fruit grow on a Sunday. We’ll start tomorrow at six sharp. There’s dorms for pickers, but we’re not the Ritz. No room service.’

Brilliant. ‘That’s fine. So . . . have I got a job?’

‘Thirty-five pence a tray. Full punnets, no rotten fruit, or you’ll be picking the whole tray again. No stones, or you’re out.’

‘That’s fine. Can I turn up this afternoon?’

‘Ye-es. Do you have a name?’

I’m so relieved I blurt out, ‘Holly,’ even as I realise giving a false name might be cleverer. There’s a poster by the railway bridge advertising Rothmans cigarettes so I say, ‘Holly Rothmans,’ and regret it straight away. Should have chosen something forgettable like Tracy Smith, but I’m stuck with it now.

‘Holly Bossman, is it?’

‘Holly Rothmans. Like the cigarettes.’

‘Cigarettes, is it? I smoke a pipe, me.’

‘How do I get to your farm?’
‘Our pickers make their own way here. We’re no taxi service.’
‘I know. That’s why I’m asking you directions.’
‘It’s very simple.’
I bloody hope so, ’cause at this rate I’ll run out of coins. ‘Okay.’
‘First you cross the bridge onto the Isle of Sheppey. Then you ask for Black Elm Farm.’ With that, Gabriel Harty hangs up.

Rochester Castle sits by the Medway river like a giant model, and a big black lion guards the iron bridge. I pat its paw for good luck as I pass. The girders groan as trucks go over and my feet are aching, but I’m pretty pleased with myself: only twenty-four hours ago I was a weeping bruise, but I just passed my first ever job interview and next week’s sorted, at least. Black Elm Farm’ll be a place to lie low and get some money together. I think of small bombs going off in Gravesend, one by one. Dad’ll go round to Vinny’s later, I reckon: ‘Oh, morning, I believe you’ve been sleeping with my underage daughter: I’m not leaving till I’ve spoken with her.’ Ka-boom! Vinny’s ferretty face. Ka-boom! Dad’ll rush back to tell Mam I’m not there either. Ka-boom! Mam’ll start replaying that slap, over and over. Then she’ll march round to Vinny’s. Shit, meet Fan. Fan, this is Shit. Mam’ll leave Vinny splattered down the hallway and hurry to Brendan and Ruth’s to see if I’m there. Brendan’ll report I was on my way to Stella Yearwood’s yesterday morning, so he and Mam’ll stomp off there. Stella’ll be all, ‘No, Mrs Sykes, she was never here, actually I was out, I’ve got no idea,’ but she knows a heat-seeker missile’s heading her way. Monday comes and goes, and Tuesday, then on Wednesday school’ll phone ’cause I’m missing exams. Mr Nixon’ll say to her, ‘So, let me get this straight, Mrs Sykes. Your daughter’s been missing since Saturday morning?’ Mam’ll mumble ’bout a small disagreement. Dad’ll start wanting details, like what she said to me, and what she means by ‘a little slap’. How little? Ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom. She’ll lose it and and snap, ‘I already feckin’ told you, Dave!’ and go upstairs to the kitchen, and as she’s looking out over the river, she’ll be thinking, She’s only fifteen, anything could’ve happened . . . Serve her bloody right.
Gulls kick up a racket on the river, below.
A police boat buzzes under the bridge. I walk on.
Up ahead, there’s a Texaco garage – it’s open.

‘Where’s the best place to hitch a ride to Sheppey from?’ I ask the bloke at the till, after he’s handed me change and my two cans of Tizer, my Double Decker and pack of Ritz biscuits. My £13.85 is down to £12.17.

‘I never hitch,’ he says, ‘but if I did, I’d try the A2 roundabout, the top of Chatham Hill.’

‘How do I get to the top of Chatham Hill?’

But before he answers, a woman with raspberry-red hair comes in and the Texaco bloke just drinks her in.

I have to remind him I’m there. ‘Scuse me? How do I get to the top of Chatham Hill?’

‘Head left out of the forecourt, over the first set of traffic lights, past the Star Inn and up the hill to the clock tower. Take the left turn to Chatham and follow your nose a bit further, past St Bart’s Hospital. Keep going till you get to an Austin Rover dealer and you’re at the Chatham roundabout. Stick your thumb out there, wait for a knight in a shining Jag to stop’ He deliberately says it all too quick for me to take in. ‘You might get lucky, or you might be waiting hours. You never know with hitching. Make sure you’re dropped at the turn-off to Sheerness – if you find yourself in Faversham, you’ve gone too far.’ He readjusts his crotch and turns to the woman. ‘Now, what can I do for you, sweetheart?’

‘Not calling me “sweetheart” would be a good start.’

I don’t hide my laugh. The guy stares daggers at me.

Less than a hundred yards later this knackered Ford Escort van pulls over. It might’ve been orange once, or perhaps that’s just rust. The passenger winds down the window. ‘Hi.’ I’ve got a gobful of Ritz biscuit and must look like a total spaz, but I recognise who it is straight off. ‘It’s not quite a shiny Jaguar,’ the woman with the raspberry-red hair slaps the door cheerfully, ‘and Ian here definitely
isn’t a knight,’ the guy driving does a little lean-over and a wave, ‘but if you’re after a lift to Sheppey, we’re going nearly to the bridge. Guide’s honour, we’re not axe-murderers or chainsaw-killers, and it’s got to beat standing on a slip-road for six hours waiting for someone like that –’ she cocks her head towards the Texaco garage ‘– to stop and “What can I do for you, sweetheart?” all over you.’

My feet are killing me, and a lift off a couple’s safer than off a single man, she’s right. ‘That’d be brill, thanks.’

She opens the back of the van and shunts some boxes to make space. I wedge myself in, but there’s windows on all sides so I’ve got a nice enough view. Ian, who’s mid-twenties, baldish and has a nose as big as Concorde, asks, ‘Not too crushed back there, I hope?’ ‘Not at all,’ I say. ‘It’s dead cosy.’

‘It’ll only be twenty-five minutes,’ Ian says, and we move off.

‘I was saying to Ian,’ the woman tells me, ‘if we didn’t give you a lift, I’d spend all day worrying. I’m Heidi, anyway. Who are you?’ ‘Tracy,’ I answer. ‘Tracy Corcoran.’

‘You know, I never met a Tracy I didn’t like.’ ‘I could find you one or two,’ I say, and Ian and Heidi laugh, like that was pretty witty, and I s’pose it was, yeah. ‘Heidi’s a nice name, too.’

Ian does a dubious mmm, and Heidi gives him a poke in the ribs. ‘Stop interfering with the driver,’ he says.

We pass a school ordered from the same catalogue as Windmill Hill Comprehensive – same big windows, same flat roofs, same muddy football pitch. I’m actually starting to believe I’ve left school: it’s like Old Mr Sharkey says, ‘Life’s a matter of Who Dares Wins.’ Heidi asks, ‘Do you live on Sheppey, Tracy?’ ‘No. I’m going there to work on a fruit farm.’ Ian asks, ‘Gabriel Harty’s place, would that be?’ ‘That’s right. D’you know him?’ ‘Not personally, but he’s known for having a subjective grasp of arithmetic when it comes to totting up your pay, so keep your wits about you. Errors are likely to be in his favour.’ ‘Thanks, I will. But it should be okay. A friend at school was
there last summer.’ I find myself gabbling to make myself more believable. ‘I’ve just done my O levels ‘cause I’m sixteen, and I’m saving for an InterRail in August.’

That all sounded like I read it off a card.

‘InterRails look great fun,’ says Heidi. ‘Europe’s your oyster. So where’s home, Tracy?’

Where would I like home to be? ‘London.’
The lights are red. A blind man and his guide dog step out.
‘Big city, London,’ says Ian. ‘Whereabouts, exactly?’
Now I panic a bit. ‘In Hyde Park.’
‘What – in Hyde Park? Up a tree, with the squirrels?’
‘No. Our actual house is closer to, uh, Camden Town.’
Heidi and Ian don’t answer at first – have I said something stupid? – but then Ian says, ‘I’m with you,’ so it’s okay. The blind man reaches the other side of the road, and Ian struggles with the gearbox before we move off. ‘I stayed in Camden Town when I first went to London,’ he says, ‘sleeping on a mate’s sofa. In Rowntree Square, by the cricket ground next to the Tube station. Know it?’

‘Sure,’ I lie. ‘I go past there, like, all the time.’
Heidi asks, ‘Have you hitched from Camden this morning?’
‘Yes. I got a lift off a truck driver to Gravesend, then a German tourist brought me to Rochester Bridge, and then you pulled up. Jammy or what?’ I look for a way to change the subject. ‘What’s in all these boxes, then? Are you moving house?’

‘No, it’s this week’s Socialist Worker,’ says Heidi.
‘They sell that in Queen Street,’ I say. ‘In Camden.’
‘We’re with the central London branch,’ says Ian. ‘Me and Heidi are postgrads at the LSE, but we spend our weekends near Faversham so we’re a sort of distribution hub. Hence all the boxes.’
I pick up a copy of the Socialist Worker. ‘Good read, is it?’
‘Every other British newspaper is a propaganda sheet,’ replies Ian. ‘Even the Guardian. Take one.’

It seems rude to refuse, so I say, ‘Thanks,’ and study the front page: the headline is ‘WORKERS UNITE NOW!’ over a photo of striking miners. ‘So do you, like . . . agree with Russia?’
‘Not at all,’ says Ian. ‘Stalin butchered Russian Communism in its cradle, Khrushchev was a shameless revisionist and Brezhnev built luxury stores for Party sycophants while the workers queued for stale bread. Soviet imperialism’s as bad as American capitalism.’

Houses loop past, like the background on cheap cartoons.

Heidi asks, ‘What do your parents do for a living, Tracy?’

‘They own a pub. The King’s Head. Near Camden.’

‘Pub landlords,’ says Ian, ‘get bled white by the big breweries. Same old story, I’m afraid. The worker makes the profit and the bosses cream it off. Hello-hello, what’s all this about?’

The traffic ahead’s come to a standstill, halfway up a hill.

‘An invisible war’s going on,’ says Heidi, which confuses me till I realise she doesn’t mean the slow traffic, ‘and all through history – the class war. Owners versus slaves, nobles versus serfs, the bloated bosses versus workers, the haves versus the have-nots. The working classes are kept in a state of repression by a mixture of force and lies.’

So I ask, ‘What sort of lies?’

‘The lie that happiness is about borrowing money you haven’t got to buy crap you don’t need,’ says Ian. ‘The lie that we live in a democratic state. And the most weaselly lie of all, that there is no class war. That’s why the Establishment keeps such an iron grip on what’s taught in schools, specially in history. Once the workers wise up, the revolution will kick off. And, as Gil Scott-Heron tells us, it will not be televised.’

I don’t know who the heron is, but it’s hard to think of our history teacher Mr Simms as a cog in a vast plot to keep the workers down. I wonder if Dad’s a bloated boss for employing Glenda. I ask, ‘Don’t revolutions often end up making things even worse?’

‘Fair point,’ says Heidi. ‘Revolutions do attract the Napoleons, the Maos, the Pol Pots. But that’s where the Party comes in. When the British revolution kicks off, we’ll be here with our structure in place, to protect it from Fascists and hijackers.’

The traffic inches forward: Ian’s van rumbles on.

I ask, ‘D’you think the revolution’ll be soon, then?’
‘The miners’ strike could be the match in the gas tank,’ says Ian. ‘When workers see the unions being gunned down – first with laws, then bullets – it’ll be clear that a class-based revolution isn’t some pie-in-the-sky lefty dream, but a matter of survival.’

‘Karl Marx,’ says Heidi, ‘proved how capitalism eats itself. When it can’t feed the millions it spits out, no amount of lies or brutality will save it. Sure, the Americans will go for our jugular – they’ll want to keep their fifty-first state – and Moscow will try to grab the reins, but when the soldiers join in, as they did in 1917 in Russia, then we’ll be unstoppable.’ She and Ian are so sure of everything, like Jehovah’s Witnesses. Heidi leans out to look ahead: ‘Police.’

Ian mutters about Thatcher’s pigs and attack dogs, and we reach a roundabout where a lorry’s lying on its side. Bits of windscreen are scattered across the tarmac, and a policewoman’s merging three lanes of traffic into one. She looks calm and in control – not piggish or wolfish or on the lookout for a runaway teenager at all, so far as I can see.

‘Even if Thatcher doesn’t trigger the revolution this year,’ Heidi turns to say, strands of her raspberry-red hair blowing in the wind, ‘it’s coming. In our lifetimes. You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. By the time we’re old, society’ll be run like this: “from each according to his or her abilities, to each according to his or her needs”. Sure, the bosses, the liberals, the Fascists, they’ll all squeal, but you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs. And speaking of eggs –’ she looks at Ian, who nods, ‘— fancy breakfast at our place? Ian cooks a five-star full English.’

Heidi’s bungalow’s surrounded by fields and isn’t what I’d imagine as Kent’s HQ for a socialist revolution, with its net curtains, cushion-covers, porcelain figurines and Flower Fairies. There’s even carpet on the bathroom floor. Heidi told me it was her gran’s house before she died, but her mum and stepfather live in France somewhere so she and Ian come here most weekends to make sure squatters haven’t moved in and to distribute the magazine. Heidi shows me how to lock the bathroom from the inside and makes a joke about the
Norman Bates Motel, which I pretend to get. I’ve never used a shower before – we only have a bath at the Captain Marlow – so I freeze myself and boil myself before I get the water right. Heidi has a whole shelf of shampoos, conditioners and soaps with labels written all in foreign, but I try a bit of everything till I smell like the ground floor of a department store. When I get out, I see the ghost of letters written in last time’s steam: ‘WHO’S A PRETTY BOY THEN?’ Did Heidi write it for Ian? Wish I hadn’t lied ‘bout my name, now: I’d really like to be friends with Heidi. I smear a bit of Woods of Windsor moisturiser on my suntanned skin, thinking how easily Heidi might have been born in a grotty Gravesend pub, and me the one who’s clever and confident and studying politics in London, and who has French shampoo, and a kind, funny, caring and loyal boyfriend who also cooks a five-star English breakfast. Being born’s a hell of a lottery.

‘They’ve got this bridge in Turkey,’ I harpoon a sausage and juice dribbles from the prong holes, ‘with Europe on one side and Asia on the other. I’m going there. The Leaning Tower of Pisa. And I love Switzerland. Well, I love the idea of Switzerland, though the closest I’ve ever been is eating a bar of Toblerone . . .’

‘You’ll adore it.’ Heidi swallows her toast and dabs her lips with a tissue. ‘La Fontaine Saint-Agnès is one of my favourite places on Earth, nestled up near Mont Blanc. My mother’s second husband had a lodge there so we’d go skiing most Christmases. Switzerland’s pricey, that’s the only thing.’

‘Then I’ll drink snow and eat Ritz biscuits. And thanks again for breakfast, Ian. These sausages are incredible.’

He shrugs modestly. ‘I’m from three generations of Lincolnshire butchers, so I ought to know my stuff. Will your Grand Tour be a solo expedition, Tracy, or will you take a travelling companion?’

‘The poor lass’s love-life is none of your business,’ Heidi tells him. ‘Captain Snoop. Ignore him, Tracy.’

‘It’s okay,’ I say, swallowing. ‘Actually, I don’t have a boyfriend right now. I – I – I did up till recently, but . . .’ My throat sort of closes.
‘Any brothers and sisters?’ As Heidi changes the subject I can tell she’s kicked Ian under the table.

‘One sister, Sharon, and my brother Jacko.’ I slurp some tea and leave Brendan out of it. ‘But they’re both a few years younger so, yeah, it’ll be a solo expedition. How ’bout you two? Any holidays planned?’

‘Well, between the Party conference and helping the miners,’ says Heidi, ‘we’ll try to get to Bordeaux in August. Visit my mother.’

‘Can’t wait,’ Ian mimes being hanged, ‘I don’t think. I’ve used my wicked wiles to seduce Heidi into an evil cult of lefty loonies, you see.’

‘The joke is that Ian’s parents are sure I’ve done the same to him,’ says Heidi. ‘We should have an anti-wedding and split up.’ She dabs her lips again. ‘Is Corcoran an Irish name, Tracy?’

I nod and fork a tomato. ‘Mum’s from West Cork.’

‘Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Troubles,’ Ian reaches for the ketchup, ‘every post-1920 revolution owes a debt to the Irish. The English reckon they handed Ireland over out of magnanimity, but no: the Irish won it back, by inventing modern guerrilla warfare.’

‘My aunt Roisín,’ I reply, ‘says the English never remember and the Irish never forget.’

Ian’s still slapping the bottom of the ketchup bottle, but nothing’s coming out. ‘I despair of humanity. We can put a man on the Moon but can’t invent a way of getting tomato sauce out of a bottle without—’ A huge dollop gollops out, smothering his bacon.

I’m doing the washing-up. Ian and Heidi were all ‘No no no, you’re our guest,’ but I insisted. Secretly I’m hoping they’ll offer to give me a lift over to Black Elm Farm later, or maybe invite me again next Sunday, if I don’t go back to Gravesend. Heidi might share her hairdye with me. I rinse the glasses first and wipe them with a dry cloth, like we do at the pub so you don’t get streaks. Suds drip off the marble chopping board, and I let it drain next to a lethal carving knife. A song called ‘As I Went Out One Morning’ by Bob Dylan’s
on the cassette player: Ian told me to choose anything so I chose this *John Wesley Harding* tape. The mouth-organ would normally put me off, but this song’s great: his voice is like the wind swerving through a weird day. ‘Cool choice,’ says Heidi, passing through the kitchen barefoot. ‘I haven’t heard this for aeons.’ Inside I glow. She goes outside with a book called *Inside the Whale* by George Orwell: we did his *Animal Farm* in English, so maybe I can impress her later. Heidi leaves the patio door open so the smell of grass drifts in. Then Ian comes in and puts a Pyrex jug of milk into the microwave. I’ve never seen one close up. Turn the dial, push a button and forty seconds later, *ping*, the milk’s steaming. I tell Ian, ‘That’s like *Star Trek*.’

‘The Future,’ says Ian, in a film-trailer voice. ‘Coming soon, to a Present near you.’ He puts the jug on a tray with three mugs and posh coffee made in a plunger-thing. ‘When you’re done, join us outside for *café au lait*.’

‘Okay,’ I say, wondering what one of them is.

Ian takes the tray out to the patio. I check the time: ten thirty. Mam’ll be going to church now, maybe with Jacko, who sort of goes to keep her company. Dad’ll take Newky along the river for a run in the Ebbsfleet direction, towards London. Or are they walking up to Peacock Street now? Here am I, doing fine, carrying on with the washing-up, and Dylan moves on to a song called ‘I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine’. It’s a ploddier, howl-at-the-moon sort of song, but finally I get why everyone raves ’bout Dylan. Through the window, down the long garden, foxgloves and red-hot pokers sway a bit. The lawns and flower-beds are pretty as a picture on a tin of shortbread, and earlier I asked Ian and Heidi if they were gardeners as well as postgrads. Heidi says a man from Faversham comes a few hours a fortnight ‘to breathe order into chaos’. That didn’t sound very socialist to me, but I kept my mouth shut ’cause I don’t want to come over smart-arsy.

The washing-up water glurps down the plug-hole, a teaspoon clatters in the sink, and Bob Dylan has a cardiac arrest halfway through ‘All Along The Watchtower’. Oh, no! The tape’s being eaten: when
I press eject, a tangle of brown spaghetti spills out. I’m a dab hand at fixing tapes with a little rectangle of Sellotape, though, so I go onto the patio to ask Ian and Heidi where they keep it. They’re both lying on these wooden lounger things, behind a wall of Ali Baba pots full of herbs. Heidi’s book’s dropped to the ground, with her thumb still sandwiched in it: she’s out for the count. Ian’s snoozing, too, his head tilted to one side and his sunglasses skewed. The tray of coffee things is on a low wall. They must’ve been exhausted. Cautiously I call Heidi’s name but she doesn’t stir. Bees graze the herby hedge, sheep baaa, a tractor drones away. That low bump half a mile away is the Isle of Sheppey, and that sticky-up thing’s the bridge. Then I notice three, four, more busy black dots zigzagging up Heidi’s arm.

I take a proper look ’cause they can’t be ants . . .

They are. ‘Heidi! You’ve got ants crawling up you!’

But she doesn’t react. I sort of brush the ants off her, but I smear a couple by mistake. What’s wrong with them? ‘Heidi!’ I shake her arm harder, and she slides over onto the side arm of the lounger, like a comedy drunk, but this isn’t funny. Her head slumps over and her sunglasses slide off and then I see her eyes – they’re all iris and no black bit in the middle. I sort of leap back with a scared gaaa! noise and almost fall over. Ian hasn’t stirred so, frantic now, I call his name – and see a furry fly crawling along his plump lips. My hand’s unsteady as I lift the baseball cap off his face. The fly buzzes off. His eyes are the same as Heidi’s – like he’s just died of some new plague – and I drop the hat and that same shaky gasp judders out of me. A bird in the pink roses threads sharp and shiny notes together, and my mind’s throbbing and woozy and only half here, but it serves up one explanation regardless: Heidi and Ian have food poisoning from breakfast. Food poisoning from breakfast. But after only twenty minutes? Possibly, but I don’t have the same symptoms. We all ate the same stuff. Next I think, Heart-attack, but that’s not much of a theory. Drug overdose? Then I think, Stop thinking, Sykes – call for an ambulance now . . .

*
... the phone’s on a stand thing in the lounge, through the kitchen. Dash through, dial 999, and wait for the operator. *Answer, hurry hurry hurry, now now now!* The line’s silent. Then I notice a man in the mirror, watching from the armchair in the corner. The gears of what’s real slip. I turn round and there he is, in the archway between the kitchen and lounge. I know him. The piranha’s eyes, the curly black locks, the busted nose – the man from my daymare in the underpass, in the diamond-shaped room. His chest’s heaving like he’s run uphill. He barks at me, ‘Which one are you?’

‘I – I – I – I’m – I’m a friend of Ian and Heidi, I – I—’

‘Esther Little or Yu Leon Marinus?’ His voice is all hate and ice.

There’s a small sort of flickering on his brow, like, well, nothing like I’ve ever seen. Did he say, ‘Marinus’? Who cares? He’s a man from a nightmare, ’cept when you’re this afraid you usually wake up. I step back and fall onto the sofa. ‘My friends need an ambulance.’

‘Tell me your name, and I’ll give you a clean death.’

*This isn’t an empty threat. Whoever he is, he killed Heidi and Ian and he’ll kill you too, like snapping a matchstick. ‘I – I – I – don’t understand, sir,’ I curl up into a terrified ball, ‘I—’

He takes another step my way. ‘Name yourself!’

‘I’m Holly Sykes, and I just want to go – please, can I just—’

‘Holly Sykes . . . ’ He re-angles his head. ‘Yes, I know the name. One of those who got away. Using the brother as bait was clever, but look what you’re reduced to now, Horologist. Trying to hide in this slut-gashed bone clock. Xi Lo would shudder! Holokai would puke! If, of course, they were alive, which,’ he sneers, ‘they are not, after your midnight raid went horribly, horribly awry. Did you think the Shaded Way has never heard of burglar alarms? Did you not know the Chapel is the Cathar and the Cathar is the Chapel? Holokai’s soul is ash. Xi Lo’s soul is nothing. And you, whichever you are, you fled. As per your sacred Script, no doubt. We love your Script. Thanks to your Script, Horology is finished. This is a great day for Carnivores everywhere. Without Xi Lo and Holokai, what are you? A troupe of conjurors, mind-readers and
spoon-benders. So tell me before you die: are you Marinus or Esther Little?'

I’m shaking: ‘Swear to God, I – I’m not who you think I am.’

He reads me, suspiciously. ‘Tell you what. Those two sunbathers outside, they’re not quite dead yet. Use your Deep Stream voodoo now, you might save one. Go on. It’s what Horologists do.’

Far, far away, a dog’s barking, a tractor’s grundling . . .

. . . the man’s so close now I can smell him. Burnt ovens. My voice has gone all anorexic. ‘So can I call a doctor, then?’

‘You can’t heal them yourself?’

I manage to shake my head.

‘Then they’ll need a coffin, not an ambulance. But I need proof you’re not Horology. Marinus is a coward, but he’s a devious coward. Run away. Go on. Run. Let’s see how far you can get.’

I don’t trust him or my ears. ‘What?’

‘There’s the door – go. Run, little mouse.’ He steps aside to open up an escape route. I’m expecting a trick, or a knife, I don’t know what, but he leans in so close, I see grazes and tiny cuts on his face, and his big black eyes, with a halo of grey, and he shouts at the top of his lungs: ‘RUN BEFORE I CHANGE MY MIND!’

Through the thorny roses, between swaying bushes, down the dusty lawn, I run. I run like I’ve never run. The sun’s in my face and the wall’s not far. Halfway there, when I get to the trellis thing, I look back: he’s not running after me, like I dreaded, just standing there, a few steps from Ian and Heidi, who’re still lying dead so he’s letting me go – who cares why he’s a mental psycho so run run run run run, but, run, but, but, run, but . . . But I’m slowing, slowing, how, why, what, my heart’s straining like crazy, but it’s like the brake and accelerator are being pressed at the same time but whatever’s slowing down isn’t inside me, it’s not poison, it’s outside me, it’s time slowing up or gravity pulling harder, or air changing to water, or sand, or treacle . . . I have dreams like this – but I’m awake, it’s daytime, I know I’m awake . . . But, impossibly, I’ve stopped, like a statue of a runner, one foot raised for the next stride that’ll never
come. This is mad. *Infeckin’sane. It occurs to me I ought to try to scream for help, it’s what people do, but all that comes out is this grunty spasm noise . . .

. . . and the world starts shrinking back towards the bungalow, hauling me along with it, helpless. There’s ivy on the arch thing, I grab it, and my feet lift off the ground, like I’m a cartoon character in a hurricane hanging on for dear life, but the pain in my wrists makes me let go, and I fall to Earth with a bruising whack and I’m dragged along the ground, scraping my elbows and bumping my tail-bone, and I swivel onto my back and try to dig my heels in but the lawn’s too hard, I can’t get a grip, I sort of trip myself upright, onto my feet, and a pair of butterflies flutter by, up-current, like this unfightable force only works on me. Now I’m back at the rose-beds, and the pale man’s still framed in the patio doorway, his hands and fingers threading away, like sign-language for aliens, with a sort of hooked smile on his lips, and he’s doing this, he’s fishing me in, over the patio, past Heidi and Ian, who’re still as corpses, corpses this man killed somehow, this man stepping back into the kitchen to make room, and once I’m in this bungalow I’ll never ever leave it, so I desperately clutch at the doorframe and the handle, but then it’s like 20,000 volts shoot through me and I’m tossed like a doll across the living room and bounce off the sofa, onto the carpet, and flashbulbs go *kapow kapow kapow* in my eye-sockets . . .

. . . the daymare ends with the scratchy carpet digging into my cheek. It’s over. It was like epilepsy or something. A photo of Heidi as a schoolgirl and a white-haired gran draws into focus, an inch away, must’ve fallen – maybe I knocked it off the dresser when I fell. I should go home and go to hospital. I need a brain-scan. Heidi’ll give me a lift to Gravesend. I’ll call Mam from the hospital. Everything’ll be forgotten, all the Vinny stuff. It felt so *real*. One moment I was about to repair Bob Dylan with scissors and sticky-tape, the next . . . Ants up Heidi’s arm, that daymare man with the busted nose, and the elasticky shoving air. What nutso part of my
mind dreams up shit as weird as that, f’Chrissakes? I heave myself up, ’cause if Heidi or Ian finds me lying here they’ll think I’ve died in their living room.

‘I believe you, dear heart.’ He’s sitting on the leather armchair, one foot resting on one knee. ‘You’re an artless, vapid nothing in our War. But why would two dying, fleeing incorporeals blunder their way to you, Holly Sykes? That’s the question. What are you for?’

I’ve frozen. What’s he talking about? ‘Nothing, I swear, I just want to – to – to go away and—’

‘Shut up. I’m thinking.’ He takes a Granny Smith apple from a bowl on the sideboard, bites and chews. In the dull quiet, the sound of his munching is the loudest thing. ‘When did you last see Marinus?’

‘My old doctor? At – at – at Gravesend General Hospital. Years ago, I—’

He holds up his hand for silence, like my voice hurts his ears. ‘And Xi Lo never told you that Jacko wasn’t Jacko?’

Till now the horror’s been high-pitched: with Jacko’s name, there’s a bass of dread. ‘What’s Jacko got to do with anything?’

He peers at his Granny Smith with disgust. ‘The sourest, blandest apples. People buy them for ornamental value.’ He tosses it away.

‘There’s no Deep Stream field here, so we aren’t in a safe house. Where are we?’

I daren’t repeat my Jacko question, in case it brings this evil, ’cause evil’s the right word, to my brother. ‘Heidi’s gran’s bungalow. She’s in France, but she lets Heidi and . . .’ They’re dead, I remember.

‘The location, girl! County, town, village. Act like you have a brain. If you’re the same Holly Sykes whom Marinus fouled, we must be in England, presumably.’

I don’t think he’s joking. ‘Kent. Near the Isle of Sheppey. I – I don’t think where we are actually has a . . . has a name.’

He drums the leather armchair. His fingernails are too long. ‘Esther Little. You know her?’

‘Yes. Not really. Sort of.’

The drumming stops. ‘Do you want me to tell you what I’ll do to you if I think you’re lying, Holly Sykes?’
'Esther Little was by the river yesterday, but I never met her before. She gave me some tea. Green tea. Then she asked . . .'

The pale man’s stare drills into my forehead, like the answer’s written there. ‘What did she ask?’

‘For asylum. If her . . .’ I hunt for her exact words ‘. . . plans went up in flames.’

The pale man lights up. ‘So . . . Esther Little wanted you for an oubliette. A mobile safe-house. I see. You! A used pawn so insignificant, she thought we’d forget you. Well.’ He stands up and blocks the way out. ‘If you’re in there, Esther, we found you!’

‘Look,’ I manage to say, huddling, ‘if this is like M15 stuff, about Ian and Heidi’s Communism, I’m nothing to do with it. They just gave me a lift, and I . . . I . . .’

He steps towards me, suddenly, to scare me. It does. ‘Yes?’

‘Don’t come near me.’ My voice sort of shrivels up. ‘I’ll – I’ll – I’ll fight. The police—’

‘Will be baffled by Heidi’s gran’s bungalow. Two lovers on the loungers, the body of teenager Holly Sykes. Forensics will have a proper farrago to disentangle by the time you’re found – especially if the triple-murderer leaves the patio door ajar for the foxes, crows, stray cats . . . The mess! You’ll go national. The great, gory, unsolved British crime of the eighties. Fame at last.’

‘Let me go! I – I – I’ll go abroad, I’ll . . . go. Please.’

‘You’ll look adorable dead.’ The pale man smiles at his fingers as he flexes them. ‘An unprincipled man would have some fun with you first, but I’m against cruelty to dumb animals.’

I hear a hoarse gasp. ‘Don’t don’t don’t please please—’

‘Sssh . . .’ His fingers make a twisting gesture and my lips, my tongue and my throat shut down. All the strength drains from my legs and arms, like I’m a puppet with its strings cut, pushed into the corner. The pale man sits on the same rug I’m on, cross-legged, like a storyteller but sort of savouring the moment, like Vinny when he knows he’s going to have me. ‘What’s it like, knowing you’ll be dead as a fucking stone in sixty seconds, Holly Sykes? What pictures does your insectoid mind flick through just before the end?’
His eyes aren’t quite human. My vision’s going, like night’s falling, my lungs’re drowning, not in water but in nothing and I realise it’s been ages since I last breathed, so I try to but I can’t and the drumming in my ears has stopped ’cause my heart’s shut down. Out of the swarmy dusk the pale man reaches out his hand and brushes my breast with the backs of his fingers, tells me, ‘Sweet dreams, dear heart,’ and my last thought is, Who is that doddering figure, in the background, a mile away, at the far end of the lounge . . . ?

The pale man notices, looks over his shoulder and jumps up. My heart restarts and my lungs fill with oxygen, so quick I choke and cough as I recognise Heidi. ‘Heidi! Get the police! He’s a killer! Run!’ But Heidi’s ill, or drugged, or injured, or drunk, her head’s lolling about like she’s got that disease, multiple sclerosis. Her voice isn’t the same, either – it’s like my granddad’s since his stroke. She pushes out the words all ragged: ‘Don’t worry, Holly.’

‘On the contrary, Holly,’ snorts the pale man, ‘if this specimen is your knight in shining armour, it’s time to despair. Marinus, I presume. I smell your unctuousness, even in that perfumed zombie.’

‘Temporary accommodation,’ says Heidi, whose head flops forward, back, then forward: ‘Why kill the two sunbathing youths? Why? That was gratuitous, Rhîmes.’

‘Why not? You people, you’re so why why why? Because my blood was up. Because Xi Lo started a firefight in the Chapel. Because I could. Because you and Esther Little led me here. She died, didn’t she, before she could claim asylum in this female specimen of the great unwashed? A hell of a pounding she took, fleeing down the Way of Stones. I know, I gave it to her. Speaking of poundings, my sincere condolences over Xi Lo and poor Holokai – your little club of good fairies is decapitated. What about you, Marinus? Aren’t you going to put up a fight? You’re more a healer than a fighter, I know, but put up some token resistance, I implore you.’ Rhîmes does his finger-weaving thing and – unless I’m seeing things – the marble chopping board rises up from the counter in the kitchen, and hovers towards us, like the invisible man’s bringing
it over. ‘Cat got your tongue, Marinus?’ asks the pale man called Rhîmes.

‘Let the girl go,’ says head-flopping Heidi.

The chopping board hurtles across the living room into the back of Heidi’s head. I hear a noise like a spoon going into an eggshell. It should’ve knocked Heidi’s body forward, like a skittle, but instead she’s picked up by – by – by – nobody, while Rhîmes spins his hands and makes sort of snapping motions, and Heidi’s body spins too, herkily-jerkily. Snap, crackle, pop, goes her spine, and her lower jawbone’s half off and blood’s trickling from a hole in her forehead, like a bullet went in. Rhîmes does a backhand slap in the air, and Heidi’s mangled body’s flung against a picture of a robin sat on a spade, then lands on its head and tumbles in a heap.

Now it’s like I’ve got headphones superglued over my ears and through one speaker I’ve got ‘None Of This Is Happening’ blaring and through the other, ‘All Of This Is Happening’ going over and over at full blast. But when Rhîmes speaks, he speaks quietly and I hear every wrinkle in every word. ‘Don’t you ever have days when you’re just so glad to be alive you want to –’ he turns to me ‘– howl at the sun? Now, I believe I was squeezing the life out of you . . .’ He pushes the air towards me, palm first, then lifts his hand: I’m slammed against the wall and shoved upwards by some invisible force till my head bumps the ceiling. Rhîmes leaps onto the arm of the sofa, like he’s going to kiss me. I try to hit him but both my hands are pinned back and once again my lungs’ve closed off. One of the whites of Rhîmes’s eyes is darkening to red, like a tiny vein’s bust:

‘Xi Lo inherited Jacko’s fraternal love for you, which pleases me. Killing you won’t bring my lost Anchorites back, but Horology owes us a blood-debt now, and every penny counts. Just so you know. My vision’s fading and the pain in my brain’s blotting every-thing out, and—

The tip of a sharp tongue slides from his mouth.

Reddened, metallic, an inch from my nose. A knife?

Rhîmes’s eyeballs roll back, and as his eyelids shut, I slip down to the floor, and he falls off the arm of the sofa. When the back of
his head hits the floor, the knife blade is rammed out a couple more inches, flecky with white goo. It’s easily the most disgusting thing I’ve seen in my life and I can’t even scream.

‘Lucky shot.’ Ian drags himself in, gripping the counters.

It can only be me he’s talking to. There’s nobody left. Ian frowns at Heidi’s twisted body. ‘See you next time, Marinus. It’s time you got a newer vehicle, anyhow.’

What? Not ‘Oh, Holy Christ!’ or ‘Heidi, no, Heidi, no, no!’? Ian looks at Rhîmes’s body. ‘On bad days you wonder, “Why not just back off from the war and lead a quiet metalife?” Then you see a scene like this and remember why.’ Last, Ian twists his busted head my way. ‘Sorry you had to witness all this.’

I slow my breathing, slower, and – ‘Who . . . ’ I can’t do more.

‘You weren’t fussy about the tea. Remember?’

The old woman by the Thames. Esther Little? How could Ian know that? I’ve fallen through a floor and landed in a wrong place.

In the bungalow hallway a cuckoo clock goes off.

‘Holly Sykes,’ says Ian, or Esther Little, if it is Esther Little, but how’s that possible? ‘I claim asylum.’

Two dead people are lying here. Rhîmes’s blood’s soaking into the carpet.

‘Holly, this body’s dying. I’ll redact what you’ve seen from your present perfect, for your own peace of mind, then I’ll hide deep, deep, deep in—’ Now Ian—or-Esther-Little topples over like a pile of books. Only one eye’s open now, with half his face shoved up on the squashed sofa-cushion. His eyes look like Davenport’s, the collie we had before Newky, when we had him put down at the vet’s. ‘Please.’

The word lifts a spell, suddenly, and I kneel by this Esther-Little-inside-Ian, if that’s what it is. ‘What can I do?’

The eyeball twitches behind its closing lid. ‘Asylum.’

I just wanted more green tea, but a promise is a promise. Plus, whatever just happened, I’m only alive ’cause Rhîmes is dead, and Rhîmes is only dead ’cause of Ian or Esther Little or whoever this is. I’m in debt. ‘Sure . . . Esther. What do I do?’
'Middle finger.' A thirsty ghost in a dead mouth. 'Forehead.'
So I press my middle finger against Ian’s forehead. Like this?
Ian’s leg twitches a bit, and stops. ‘Lower.’
So I move my middle finger down an inch. ‘Here?’
The working half of Ian’s mouth twists. ‘There...’

The sun’s warm on my neck and a salty breeze has picked up. Down in the narrow channel between Kent and the Isle of Sheppey a trawler’s blasting its honker: I can see the captain’s picking his nose, and looking for somewhere to put the bogie. The bridge is a Thomas the Tank Engine job – the whole middle section rises up between two stumpy towers. When it reaches the top a klaxon sounds and the trawler chugs underneath. Jacko’d love this. I hunt in my duffel bag for my can of Tango and find a newspaper – the Socialist Worker. What’s this doing here? Did Ed Brubeck put it in for a joke? I’d chuck it over the barrier, but this cyclist bloke’s just arriving, so I open my Tango and watch the bridge. The cyclist’s ‘bout Dad’s age, but he’s slim as a snake and nearly bald, where Dad’s a bit chubby, and it’s not for nothing his nickname’s Wolfman. ‘All right,’ says the man, wiping his face on a folded cloth.

He doesn’t look like a pervert, so I answer him, ‘All right.’
The guy looks up at the bridge, a bit like he built it. ‘They don’t make bridges like that any more.’
‘Guess not.’

‘The Kingsferry Bridge is one of only three vertical-lift bridges in the British Isles. The oldest is a dinky little Victorian affair over a canal in Huddersfield, just for foot traffic. This one here opened in 1960. There’s only two like it, for road and rail, in the world.’ He drinks from his water bottle.

‘Are you an engineer, then?’
‘No, no, just an amateur rare-bridge-spotter. My son used to be as mad about them, though. In fact –’ he takes out a camera from his saddlebag ‘– would you mind taking a snap of me and the bridge?’ I say sure, and end up crouching to fit in both the man’s bald head and the bridge’s lifted-up section. ‘Three, two, one . . . ’ The camera
whirrs, and he asks me to take another, so I do, and hand him back the camera. He thanks me and fiddles with his gear. I slurp my Tango and wonder why I’m not hungry, even though it’s almost noon and all I’ve eaten since I left Ed Brubeck asleep is a packet of Ritz crackers. I keep doing sausagey burps, too, which makes no sense. A white VW camper drives up and stops at the barrier. Two girls and their boyfriends are smoking and looking at me, all ‘What does she think she’s doing here?’ even though they’ve got an REO Speedwagon song on. To prove I’m not a no-friends sad-sack I turn back to the cyclist. ‘Come a long way, then?’

‘Not far, today,’ he says. ‘Over from Brighton.’

‘Brighton? That’s like a hundred miles away.’

He checks a gizmo on his handlebars. ‘Seventy-one.’

‘Is taking photos of bridges, like, a hobby of yours, then?’

The man thinks about this. ‘More a ritual than a hobby.’ He sees I don’t understand. ‘Hobbies are for pleasure, but rituals keep you going. My son died, you see. I take the photos for him.’

‘Oh, I . . .’ I try not to look shocked. ‘Sorry.’

He shrugs and looks away. ‘It was five years ago.’

‘Was it’ – why don’t I just shut up? – ‘an accident?’

‘Leukaemia. He would have been about your age.’

The klaxon blasts again, and the road section’s lowering.

‘That must’ve been awful,’ I say, hearing how lame it sounds. A long, skinny cloud sits over the humpbacked Isle of Sheppey, like a half-greyhound half-mermaid, and I’m not sure what else to say. The VW revs up and moves off the moment the barrier’s up, leaving a trail of soft rock in the air behind it. The cyclist gets on his bike.

‘Take care of yourself, young lady,’ he tells me, ‘and don’t waste your life.’

He circles around and heads back to the A22.

All that way, and he never crossed the bridge.

Cars and trucks wallop by, gusting seeds off dandelion clocks, but there’s no one to ask the way to Black Elm Farm. Lacy flowers sway on long stalks as trucks shudder by, and blue butterflies are shaken
loose. The tigery-orange ones cling tighter. Ed Brubeck’ll be working at the garden centre now, dreaming of Italian girls as he lugs bales of peat into customers’ cars. Must think I’m a right moody cow. Or perhaps not. The fact Vinny dumped me is fast becoming exactly that, a fact. Yesterday it was a sawn-off shotgun wound but today it’s more like a monster bruise from an air-rifle pellet. Yes, I trusted Vinny and I loved him, but that doesn’t make me stupid. For the Vinny Costellos of the world, love is bullshit they murmur into your ear to get sex. For girls – me, anyway – sex is what you do on page one to get to the love that’s later on in the book. ‘I’m well rid of that lechy bastard,’ I tell a cow, watching me over a gate, and though I don’t feel it yet, I reckon one day I will. Maybe Stella’s done me a favour, in a way, by tearing off Vinny’s nice-guy mask after only a few weeks. Vinny’ll get bored of her, sure as eggs is eggs, and when she finds him in bed with another girl it’ll be her dreams of motorbike rides with Vinny that’ll get minced, just like mine were. Then she’ll come crawling back, eyes as red and sore as mine were yesterday, and ask me to forgive her. And I might. Or I might not. Up ahead there’s a roundabout and a café.

And the café’s open. Things are looking up.

The café’s called Smoky Joe’s Café and it’s trying hard to be an American diner off Happy Days with tall booths you can’t see into, but it’s a bit of a shit-hole, really. There’s not many customers, most of them glued to the footy on the knackered telly up on the wall. A woman sits by the door, reading the News of the World in a cloud of cigarette smoke coming from her pinched nostrils. Buttony eyes, stitched lips, frizzy hair, a face full of old regrets. Over her head is a faded poster of a brown goldfish bowl with two eyes peering out and a caption saying: ‘JEFF’S GOLDFISH HAD DIARRHOEA AGAIN’. She sizes me up and waves her hand towards the booths, meaning, sit where you want. ‘Actually,’ I say, ‘I just wanted to ask if you know how to get to Black Elm Farm.’

She looks up, shrugs, looks back and breathes smoke. ‘It’s here, on Sheppey. I’ve got a job there.’
She returns to her paper and taps her fag.
I decide to phone Mr Harty: ‘Is there a pay-phone?’
The old moo shakes her head, without looking up.
‘Would it be possible just to make a local call using your—’
She glares at me, like I’ve asked her if she sells drugs.
‘Well . . . might anyone else here know Black Elm Farm?’ I hold
her gaze for long enough to tell her the quickest way to get back
to her paper is to help me.
‘Peggy!’ she bawls, into the kitchen. ‘Black Elm Farm?’
A clattery voice answers: ‘Gabriel Harty’s place. Why?’
Her button eyes swivel my way. ‘Someone’s askin’ . . . ’
Peggy appears: she has a red nose, gerbil cheeks and eyes like a
Nazi interrogator’s. ‘Off fruit-picking for a few days, is it, pet? It
was hops in my day, but hops is all done by machines nowadays.
You take the Leysdown road – thataway – ’ she points left out of the
door ‘— past Eastchurch, then take Old Ferry Lane on the right.
On foot, are you, pet?’ I nod. ‘Five or six mile, it is, but that’s a
stroll in the park for—’

There’s a god-almighty clatter of tin trays from the kitchen and
Peggy hurries back. I deserve a packet of Rothmans now I’ve got
what I came in for, so I go to the machine in the main part of the
café: £1.40 for a packet of twenty. Total rip-off, but there’ll be a
bunch of new people at the farm so I’ll need a confidence-booster.
In go the coins before I can argue myself out of it, round goes the
knob, plop go the ciggies. Only when I straighten, box of twenty
Rothmans in hand, do I see who’s sat behind the machine, bang
across the aisle: Stella Yearwood and Vinny Costello.

I duck down, out of sight, wanting to puke. Did they see me
just now? No. Stella would’ve said something breezy and poisonous.
There’s a gap between the machine and the screen. Stella’s feeding
Vinny ice-cream across the table. Vinny looks back like a love-sick
puppy. She runs the spoon over his lips, leaving dribbly vanilla
lipstick. He licks it off. ‘Give me the strawberry.’

‘I didn’t hear the magic word,’ says Stella.
Vinny smiles. ‘Give me the strawberry, please.’
Stella spikes the strawberry from the ice-cream dish and pushes it up Vinny’s nostril. He grabs her wrist with his hand, his beautiful hand, and guides the fruit into his mouth, and they look at each other, and jealousy burns my gut like a glass of neat Domestos. What sicko anti-guardian angel brought them to Smoky Joe’s right here, right now? Look at the helmets. Vinny’s brought Stella here on his precious untouchable Norton. She hooks her little finger through his, and pulls, so his arm and body follow, until he’s leaning all the way over the table and kissing her. His eyes are shut and hers aren’t. Vinny only mouths the next three words, but he never said them to me. He says it again, eyes wide open, and she looks like a girl unwrapping an expensive present she knew she was getting.

I could erupt and hurl plates, call them every name under the sun, and get a ride back to Gravesend in gales of tears and a police car, but I blunder back to the heavy door, which I pull instead of push and push instead of pull ’cause my vision’s melting away, watched by the old moo, oh, Christ, yeah, ’cause I’m bags more interesting than the News of the World now, and those button eyes of hers don’t miss one single detail . . .

Out in the open air my face dissolves into tears and snot, and a Morris Maxi slows down for the old fart at the wheel to get a good eyeful and I shout, ‘What are you bloody looking at?’ and, God, it hurts it hurts it hurts, and I clamber over this gate into a wheatfield, where I’m hidden from the roundabout, and now I sob and sob and sob and sob and sob and sob and punch the ground and punch the ground and sob and sob and sob . . . And That’s it, I think, I’ve no more tears left now, and then Vinny murmurs, ‘I love you,’ and reflected in his beautiful brown eyes is Stella Yearwood and here we go again. It’s like puking up an iffy Scotch egg – every time I think I’m done, there’s more. When I calm down enough for a cigarette, I realise I dropped them by the machine in Smoky Joe’s. Bloody great. I’d rather eat cat-shit on toast than ever set foot inside that place. Then, of course, I recognise the growl of Vinny’s Norton. I creep to the gate. There they are, sat on the back, smoking – I
just fucking bet – my fags, the fags I just paid £1.40 for. Stella would’ve spotted the box at the foot of the machine, still in its cellophane, and picked it up. First she steals my boyfriend, now it’s my fags. Then she climbs onto the Norton, puts her arms round Vinny’s waist, and buries her face in his leather jacket. Away they go, down the road to the Kingsferry Bridge, into the streaky blue yonder, leaving me grimy and hidden like a tramp with crows in a tree going What a laaarf . . . What a laaarf . . .

The wind strokes and stirs the wheat.

The wheat-ears go pitter patter pitter.

I’ll never get over Vinny. Never. I know it.

Two hours after the roundabout I get to an end-of-the-world village called Eastchurch. There’s a sign saying ‘RockEster 23’. Twenty-three miles? Little wonder I’ve got blisters like Ayers Rock on my feet. Strange thing is, after the Texaco garage in Rochester it’s all a bit of a blur till the Kingsferry Bridge onto Sheppey. Actually, it’s a total blur. Like a section of a song that’s been taped over. Was I walking along in a trance? Eastchurch is in a trance. There’s one small Spar supermarket, but it’s shut ’cause it’s Sunday and the newsagent next to it’s shut, too, but the owner’s moving about inside so I knock till he opens up and get a packet of digestive biscuits and a jar of peanut butter, plus another pack of Rothmans and a box of matches. He asks if I’m sixteen so I look him straight in the eye and say I turned seventeen in March, actually, which does the trick. Outside I light up as a mod and his modette drive by on a scooter, staring at me, but my mind’s on the shrinking pounds and pence I’ve got left. I’ll get more money tomorrow, as long as Mr Harty doesn’t play funny buggers, but I don’t know how long this working holiday of mine’s likely to last. If Vinny and Stella were out when Mam or Dad went to find me at Vinny’s house, they won’t know I’m not with him, so they won’t know I’ve left Gravesend.

There’s a phone box by the bus stop. Mam’ll go all sarky and Mamnish if I phone her, but if I phone Brendan’s hopefully Ruth’ll
answer, and I’ll say to get the message to Dad – not Mam, Dad – that I’m okay but I’ve left school and I’ll be away for a bit. Then Mam won’t be able to send me on a you-could’ve-been-abducted guilt trip the next time we meet. But when I open up the phone box I find the receiver’s been ripped off its cord, so that’s that.

Perhaps I’ll ask to phone from the farm. Perhaps.

It’s nearly four p.m. by the time I turn down Old Ferry Lane onto the chalky track that leads to Black Elm Farm. On-and-off sprinklers in the fields spray cool clouds, and I sort of drink the vapour in like it’s super-fine water-floss, and look at the little rainbows. The farmhouse itself is an old, hunkered-down brick building with a modern bit stuck on the side, and there’s a big steel barn, a couple of buildings made from concrete blocks, and a windbreak of those tall thin trees. Here comes this black dog, like a fat seal on stumpy legs, barking its head off and wagging its whole body, and in five seconds flat we’re best mates. Suddenly I miss Newky, and I pet the dog’s head.

‘I see you’ve met Sheba.’ A girl in dungarees steps out of the older part of the house; she must be about eighteen. ‘You’ve just arrived for picking?’ Her accent’s funny – Welsh, I think.

‘Yeah. Yes. Where do I . . . check in?’

She finds my ‘check in’ amusing, which pisses me off ‘cause how am I s’posed to know the right word? She jerks her thumb at the door – she’s wearing wrist-bands over both wrists like some tennis star but they just look spaz to me – and walks over to the brick barn to tell all the other pickers ’bout the new girl who reckons she’s staying at a hotel.

‘There’ll be twenty pallets’ worth by three o’clock tomorrow, see,’ comes a man’s voice from the office down the hall, ‘and if your truck isn’t here at one minute past three, then the lot’ll be going to the Fine Fare depot in Aylesford.’ He hangs up and adds, ‘Lying twat.’ By now I’ve recognised Mr Harty from my phone call this morning. The door behind me flies open and an older woman in
stained overalls, green wellies and a spotted neckerchief thing sort of shoos me on. ‘Chopsuey, young lady, the doctor will see you now. Mush-mush. New picker, yes? Of course you are.’ She bustles me forwards into a poky office smelling of potatoes in a sack. There’s a desk, a typewriter, a phone, filing cabinets, a poster with ‘GLORIOUS RHODESIA’ on it and photos of wildlife, and a view of a farmyard and a decomposing tractor. Gabriel Harty’s in his sixties, has a low-tide sort of face and hair tufting out of his nose and ears. Ignoring me, he tells the woman, ‘Bill Dean was just on the blower. Wanted to discuss “a distribution niggle”’. ‘Let me guess,’ says the woman. ‘His drivers have all got bubonic plague, so could we run tomorrow’s strawberries over to Canterbury.’ ‘Ye-es. Know what else he said? “I wish you landowners would try to help the rest of us.” Landowner. The bank owns the land and the land owns you. That’s what being a landowner means. He’s the one taking his family to the Seychelles, or wherever it is.’ Mr Harty relights his pipe and stares out of the window. ‘Who are you?’ I follow his gaze to the dead tractor until I realise he means me. ‘I’m the new picker.’ ‘New picker, is it? Not sure if we need any more.’ ‘We spoke on the phone this morning, Mr Harty.’ ‘A long time ago, this morning. Ancient history.’ ‘But . . . ’ If I don’t have a job here, what’ll I do? The woman looks over from the filing cabinet: ‘Gabriel.’ ‘But we’ve already got this – this Holly Benson-Hedges girl on her way. She rang up this morning.’ ‘That’s me,’ I tell him, ‘but it’s Holly Rothmans, and . . . ’ Hang on, is he being funny? He’s got one of those faces where you can’t tell. ‘That’s me.’ ‘That was you, was it?’ Mr Harty’s pipe makes a death-rattle noise. ‘That’s lucky, that is. Then we’ll see you tomorrow at six, sharp. Not two minutes past six. No. Nobody sleeps in, we’re not a holiday camp. Now. I have more telephone calls to make.’

*
‘The place is rather deserted on Sundays,’ says Mrs Harty, as we walk back across the farmyard. She’s posher than her husband and I wonder what their story is. ‘Most of our Kentish pickers go home on Sundays for a few creature comforts, and the student mob have decamped to the beach at Leysdown. They’ll be back by evening, unless they get waylaid at the Shurland Arms. So: the shower’s over there, the loo’s down there, and there’s the laundry room. Where did you say you’ve come from today?’

‘Oh, just . . .’ Sheba dashes up and runs happy-rings round us, which gives me longer to get my story straight ‘. . . Southend. I just took my O levels last month. My parents are busy working and I want to save a bit of money, and a friend of a friend worked here a couple of summers ago, so my dad said okay, now I’m sixteen, so . . .’

‘So here you are. Is it sayonara to school?’

Sheba follows a scent-trail behind a pile of tyres.

‘Will you be going back to do A levels, Holly?’

‘Oh, right. Depends on my results, I s’pose.’

Satisfied, and not that interested, Mrs Harty leads me into the brick barn through the wide-open wooden door. ‘Here’s where most of the lads sleep.’ Twenty or so metal beds are arranged in two rows, like in a hospital but with barn walls, a stone floor and no windows. What I think of sleeping among a bunch of snoring, farting, wanking guys must show on my face, ’cause Mrs Harty says, ‘Don’t worry – we knocked some partitions up this spring,’ she points to the end, ‘to give the ladies some privacy.’ The last third of the barn’s walled off to a height of two men or so with a plywood partition thing. It’s got a doorway with an old sheet across it. Someone’s chalked ‘THE HAREM’ above the doorway, which someone’s drawn an arrow from to the words ‘SIZE DOES MATTER GARY SO DREAM ON’. Through the sheet, it’s a bit darker, and like a changing room in a clothes shop, with three partitions on either side, each with its own doorway, two beds, plus a bare electric bulb dangling from the rafters. If Dad were here he’d wince and mutter about health and safety regs, but it’s warm and dry and
safe enough. Plus there’s another door in the barn wall with an inside bolt, so if there was a fire you could get out in time. Only thing is, all the beds look taken with a sleeping-bag, a backpack and stuff, until we get to the last cubicle, the only one with the light on. Mrs Harty knocks on the doorframe and says, ‘Knock-knock, Gwyn.’

A voice inside answers, ‘Mrs Harty?’

‘I’ve brought you a room-mate.’

Inside, the Welsh dungaree-wearing smirker is sitting cross-legged on her bed, writing in a diary or something. Steam’s rising from a flask on the floor, and smoke from a cigarette balanced on a bottle. Gwyn looks at me and gestures at the bed, like, it’s all yours. ‘Welcome to my humble abode. Which is now our humble abode.’

‘Well, I’ll leave you two girls to it,’ says Mrs Harty, and goes, and Gwyn gets back to her diary. Well, that’s bloody nice, that is. F’ Chrissakes, she could try to make a bit of small-talk. Scratty scrat-scrat goes her biro. Probably writing ’bout me right now, and probably in Welsh, so I can’t read it. Well, if she’s not talking to me, I’m not talking to her. I dump my duffel bag on the bed, ignoring a Stella Yearwood-sounding voice saying that Holly Sykes’s great bid for freedom has ended in a total shit-hole. I lie next to my duffel bag ’cause I’ve got nowhere else to go and no energy. My feet feel well and truly Black & Deckered. I don’t have a sleeping-bag, either.

My goalie whacks the ball clean down the table and, slam!, straight into Gary the student’s goal and the impressed onlookers cheer. Brendan calls that shot my Peter Shilton Special, and used to whinge ’bout my left-handed goalie’s unfair advantage. Five–nil to me, my fifth victory in a row, and we’re playing winner stays on. ‘She bloody demolished me, what can I say?’ says Gary, his face fiery and speech slurred after a few Heinekens. ‘Holly, you’re a progeny, no, a prodigy, thassit, a prodigy, a bona fide table-football prodigy – and there’s no dishonour in losing to . . . one of them.’ Gary does a pantomime bow and reaches over the table with his can of Heineken so that I
have to clink mine against his. ‘How d’you get to be so good?’ asks this girl who’s easy to remember ’cause she’s Debby from Derby. I just shrug and say I always used to play at my cousin’s. But I remember Brendan saying, ‘I cannot believe I’ve been beaten by a girl,’ which I’ve only just realised he said to make my victory sweeter.

I’ve had enough table-football for now, so I go out for a smoke. The common room’s the old stables and it still whiffs a bit of horse poo, but it’s livelier than the Captain Marlow on a Sunday night. Must be twenty-five pickers sat round the tables yacking, snacking, smoking, drinking, flirting and playing cards, and although there’s no telly someone’s got a paint-spattered ghetto-blower and a Siouxsie and the Banshees tape. Outside, the fields of Black Elm Farm slope down to the sea, and lights dot-to-dot the coast past Faversham, past Whitstable and further. You’d never believe it’s a world where people get murdered or mugged or kicked out by their mothers.

It’s nine p.m.: Mam’ll be saying, ‘Lights out and God bless,’ to Jacko and Sharon, then pouring herself a glass of wine and watching Bergerac on the telly. Or maybe tonight she’ll go downstairs to bitch about me to one of her supergrasses: ‘I don’t know where I went wrong with that one, so help me, God, I don’t.’ Dad’ll be telling Nipper the plumber and TJ the sparky and Old Mr Sharkey, ‘It’ll all come out in the wash,’ or something else that sounds wise but means nothing.

I get my box of Rothmans out of my shirt-pocket – eight gone, twelve left – but before I can light up Gary appears in his ‘REALITY IS AN ILLUSION CAUSED BY A LACK OF ALCOHOL’ T-shirt and offers me one of his Silk Cut, saying, ‘This one’s on me, Holly.’ I thank him and he says, ‘You won it fair and square,’ and his eyes flicker up and down my chest, like Vinny’s do. Did. Gary’s ’bout to say something else but one of his mates calls him over, and Gary says, ‘I’ll see you later,’ and goes. Not if I see you first, I think. I’ve had it with boys.

Three-quarters of the pickers are students at college or uni or waiting to go this September, and I’m the youngest by a couple of
years, even counting my age as sixteen, not fifteen. I’m trying not
to act all shy, ’cause that might give my age away, but they aren’t
going to be plumbers or hairdressers or bin-collectors: they’ll be
computer programmers or teachers or solicitors, and it shows. It’s
in how they speak. They use precise words, like they own them,
like Jacko does, in fact, but not like any kid in my year at school’d
dare to. Ed Brubeck’ll be one of them in two years. I look over at
Gary and just at that moment he sort of senses me and gives me a
fancy-meeting-you-here look, and I glance away before he gets the
wrong idea.

The pickers who aren’t students sort of stand out. Gwyn’s one.
She’s playing draughts with Marion and Linda and, apart from a ‘Hi’
and a fake smile when I came in, she’s ignored me. Cheers very
much, Gwyn. Marion’s a bit simple and her sister Linda fusses all
mummishly and finishes her sentences for her. Picking fruit at Black
Elm Farm’s their annual holiday, sort of. There’s a couple, Stuart
and Gina, who have their own tent, tucked away in a dip. They’re
late twenties, look like folk-singers, with earrings, and hair in pony-
tails, and actually they are amateur folk-singers, and busk in market
towns. Gina’s taking me and Debby food-shopping to the Spar at
Eastchurch after I’ve been paid. They act as go-betweens to the
other pickers and Mr Harty, Debby told me. Last, there’s a kid called
Alan Wall, who sleeps in a tiny caravan parked round the side of
the farmhouse. I saw him hanging out washing to dry when I was
having a look around. He can’t be more than a year or two older
than me, but his scrawny body’s tough as cables and he’s tanned like
tea. Debby told me he’s a gypsy, or a traveller, as you’re s’posed to
say these days, and that Mr Harty hires someone from his family
every year, but Debby didn’t know if it’s a tradition or debt or
superstition, or what.

Coming back from the toilet, I see a narrow canyon between the
farmhouse and a shed. Someone’s waiting. A match strikes. ‘Fancy
meeting you here,’ says Gary. ‘Care for another smoke?’

Yes, Gary’s good-looking, but he’s at least a bit drunk, and I’ve
known him all of two hours. ‘I’ll get back to the common room, thanks.’

‘Nah, you’ll share a smoke with me. Go on, Hol, everyone’s got to die of something.’ He’s already stuck his box of Silk Cut in my face with one stuck out for me to take with my lips. I can’t refuse without making it into a big issue so I use my fingers and say, ‘Thanks.’

‘Here’s a light . . . So, tell me. Your boyfriend in Southend must be missing you something rotten.’

I think of Vinny and heave out a ‘Christ, no,’ think, You idiot, Sykes, and add, ‘Kind of, yeah, he is, actually.’

‘Glad that’s sorted.’ In the glow of his fag, Gary grins dead slinkily. ‘Let’s go for a stroll and see the stars. Tell me about Mr Christ-no-sort-of-yeah.’

I really don’t want Gary’s fingers inside my bra or anywhere else, but how do I tell him to piss off without bruising his pride?

‘Shyness is cute,’ says Gary, ‘but it stops you living. C’mon, I’ve got alcohol, nicotine . . . anything else you might need.’

Christ, if guys could be girls being hit on by guys, just for one night, lines as cheesy as that’d go extinct. ‘Look, Gary, now’s not a good time.’ I try to walk around him to get back to the farmyard.

‘You’ve been eyeing me up.’ His arm comes down like a car-park barrier, pressing against my stomach. I smell his aftershave, his beer, and his horniness, sort of. ‘All night. Now’s your chance.’

If I tell him to feck right off, he’ll probably turn all the pickers against me. If I go nuclear and call for help it’ll be his version against the Hysterical New Girl’s, and how old is she again, and do her parents really know she’s here anyway?

‘Polish your mating rituals, Octopus Boy,’ says a Welsh voice. Me and Gary both jump a mile. It’s Gwyn. ‘Your seductions look very like muggings to me.’

‘We were – we were – were just talking.’ Gary’s already scuttling away to the common room. ‘That’s all.’

‘Annoying but harmless.’ Gwyn watches him go. ‘Like mouth ulcers. He’s propositioned every female on the farm except Sheba.’
Being rescued’s humiliating and what comes out is a grumpy ‘I could’ve handled him myself.’

Gwyn says, a bit too sincerely, ‘Oh, I don’t doubt that.’
Is she taking the piss? ‘I can look after myself.’
‘You don’t half remind me of me, Holly.’

How do you answer that? ‘Up The Junction’ by Squeeze booms from the ghetto-blaster. Gwyn stoops. ‘Look, Octopus Boy dropped his ciggies.’ She lobs them my way and I catch the box. ‘Hand them back or keep them as compensation for harassment. Your call.’

I imagine Gary’s version of this. ‘He’ll hate me now.’
‘He’ll be scared shitless you’ll tell everyone what a horse’s arse he made of himself. Rejection makes lads like our Gaz feel four feet tall and two inches long, full size. Anyhow, I came to say I borrowed a sleeping-bag off Mrs Harty for you. God only knows how many previous owners it’s had, but it’s been washed so the stains aren’t sticky at least, and the barn can get chilly at night. I’m turning in, so if I’m asleep before you, sweet dreams. The hooter goes at five thirty.’

2 July

My period’s only a few days late, so I don’t see how I can be pregnant, so what’s this belly doing, or this blue-veined third boob pushing out below my normal two, which Vinny named Dolly and Parton? Mam is not taking the news well and doesn’t believe that I don’t know who the father is: ‘Well, someone put the baby inside you! We both know you’re not the Virgin Mary, don’t we?’ But I really don’t know. Vinny’s the chief suspect, but am I quite sure nothing happened with Ed Brubeck in the church? Or Gary at Black Elm Farm, or even Alan Wall the gypsy? When you know your memory’s been monkeyed around with once, how can you ever be sure of any memory again? Smoky Joe’s old moo glares
over her copy of the Financial Times: ‘Ask the baby. It ought to know.’

Everyone starts chanting, ‘Ask the baby! Ask the baby!’ and I try to say I can’t, it hasn’t been born yet, but it’s like my mouth’s stitched up, and when I look at my belly it’s grown. Now it’s a sort of massive skin tent that I’m attached to. The baby’s lit red inside, like when you shine a torch through your hand, and it’s as big as a naked grown-up. I’m afraid of it.

‘Ask it, then,’ hisses Mam.

So I ask it, ‘Who’s your dad?’

We wait. It swivels its head my way and speaks in a badly synched-up voice from a hot place: When Sibelius is smashed into little pieces, at three on the Day of the Star of Riga, you’ll know I’m near . . .

and the dream caves in. Relief, a sleeping-bag, brothy darkness, I’m not pregnant, and a Welsh voice is whispering, ‘It’s okay, Holly, you were dreaming, girl.’

Our plywood partition, in a barn, on a farm: what was her name? Gwyn. I whisper back, ‘Sorry if I woke you.’

‘I’m a light sleeper. Sounded nasty. Your dream.’

‘Yeah . . . Nah, just stupid. What time is it?’

The light on her watch is mucky gold. ‘Five-and-twenty to five.’ Most of the night’s gone. Is it worth trying to go back to sleep?

A big fat zoo of snorers is snoring in all different rhythms.

I feel a stab of homesickness for my room at home, but I stab my homesickness back. Remember the slap.

‘You know, Holly,’ Gwyn’s whisper rustles the sheets of the dark, ‘it’s tougher than you think out there.’

That’s a weird thing to say and a weird time to say it. ‘If that lot can do it,’ I mean the students, ‘I bloody know I can.’

‘Not fruit-picking. The running-away-from-home deal.’

Quick, deny it. ‘What makes you think I’ve run away?’

Gwyn ignores this, like a goalie ignoring a shot going a mile wide.

‘Unless you know for a fact, a fact, that going back’ll get you . . .’ she sort of sighs ‘. . . damaged, I’d say, go back. When the summer’s
gone, and your money’s gone too, and Mr Richard Gere hasn’t pulled up on his Harley-Davidson and said, “Hop on,” and you’re fighting for a place by the bins behind McDonald’s at closing time, then, whatever Gabriel Harty says to the contrary, you will think of Black Elm Farm as a five-star hotel. You make a list, see. It’s called “All the Things I’ll Never, Ever Do to Get By”. The list stays exactly the same, but its name changes to “All the Things I’ve Had to Do to Get By”.

I keep my voice calm. ‘I’m not running away.’
‘Then why the false name?’
‘My name is Holly Rothmans.’
‘And mine’s Gwyn Aquafresh. Fancy a squirt of toothpaste?’
“Aquafresh” isn’t a surname. Rothmans is.’
‘That’s true enough, but I bet you a pack of Benson & Hedges it’s not yours. Don’t get me wrong, a false name’s clever. I changed mine often, in my first few months away. But all I’m saying is, if you’re weighing possible trouble ahead against the trouble you’ve left behind, times the “ahead” trouble by twenty.’

It’s appalling she’s seen through me so easily. ‘Too early for Thought for the Day,’ I growl. ‘Goodnight.’

The first bird of the morning starts twittering.

After I’ve washed down three peanut-butter-and-digestive-biscuit sandwiches with a glass of water we head out to the big south field, where Mrs Harty and her husband’re putting up a big tent thing. It’s cool and dewy but another sticky day’s ahead, I reckon. I don’t hate Gwyn or anything, but it’s like she saw me naked and I’m not sure how to meet her eyes, so I stick with Marion and Linda. Gwyn seems to understand and she’s picked a row next to Stuart and Gina, and Alan Wall, ten rows or so away, so we couldn’t talk now even if we wanted to. Gary acts like I’m totally invisible and is working on the far side of the students. Suits me.

Strawberry-picking’s boring work, sure, but it’s calming, too, compared to bar work. It’s nice being out in the open air. There’s birds, and sheep, and the sound of a tractor somewhere, and the
students’ chattering, though that dies away after a bit. We’ve each got a cardboard tray with twenty-five punnets in, and our job’s to fill each punnet with ripe strawberries, or nearly ripe. You snip through the stalk with your thumbnail, put the berry in the punnet and on you go like that. I start off squatting on my haunches but it murders my calves so I kneel on the straw as I go along. Wish I’d brought a looser pair of jeans, or shorts. If a strawberry’s a bit overripe and mushes in my fingers, I lick the fruity smear, but it’d be stupid to scoff the perfect one ’cause that’s like eating your own wages. When all the punnets are full, you carry the tray to the tent where Mrs Harty weighs it. If it’s on or over the right weight she pays you a plastic token, otherwise you have to go back to your row for a few more strawbs to bring it up to weight. Linda says at three o’clock we all troop back to the office to swap the tokens for money, so you keep your tokens safe: no token, no money.

Once we get going, it’s pretty obvious who’s used to field-working: Stuart and Gina move up their rows twice as fast as the rest of us, and Alan Wall’s even faster. Some of the students are a bit crap, which means I’m not the slowest at least. The sun gets higher and stronger and now I’m glad I’ve got Ed Brubeck’s cap to shield the back of my neck. An hour goes by and I’ve sort of slipped into autopilot. The punnets fill, strawberry by strawberry by strawberry, and my earnings go up, two pence by five pence by ten pence. I keep thinking ’bout what Gwyn said this morning. Sounds like she’s learnt a lot of bad stuff the hard way. I think about Jacko and Sharon eating breakfast with my empty chair there, like I’ve died or something. Bet Mum’s all, ‘I refuse to even discuss that young mademoiselle, I do.’ She sounds really Irish when she’s angry or wound up. I think about pinball, and how being a kid’s like being shot up the firing lane and there’s no veering left or right: you’re just sort of propelled. But once you clear the top, like when you’re sixteen, seventeen or eighteen, suddenly there’s a thousand different paths you can take, some amazing, others not. Tiny little differences in angles and speed’ll totally alter what happens to you later, so a fraction of an inch to the right, and the ball’ll just hit a pinger and a
dinger and fly down between your flippers, no messing, a waste of ten pence. But a fraction to the left and it’s action in the play-zone, bumpers and kickers, ramps and slingshots and fame on the high-score table. My problem is, I don’t know what I want, apart from a bit of money to buy food later on today. Until the day before yesterday all I wanted was Vinny, but I won’t make that mistake again. Like a shiny silver pinball whizzing out of the firing-lane, I’ve not got the faintest bloody clue where I’m going or what’ll happen next.

At eight thirty we break for sweet, milky tea, served in the tent by a woman with a Kent accent thicker than the Earth’s crust. You’re s’posed to have your own mug but I’m using an old marmalade jar fished out of the kitchen bin, which raises a few eyebrows but it gives my tea an orangey tang. Gary the student’s Benson & Hedges are stashed in my Rothmans box, and I smoke a couple: they’re that bit toastier than Rothmans. Linda shares her packet of custard creams with me, and Marion says, ‘Picking’s hungry work,’ in her flat, bunged-up voice, and I say, ‘Yeah, it is, Marion,’ and Marion’s really happy, and I wish her life could be easier than it’s going to be. Then I go over to where Gwyn’s sitting with Stuart and Gina and offer her a fag, and she says, ‘Don’t mind if I do, thanks,’ and we’re friends again; it’s that simple. Blue sky, fresh air, aching back but three pounds richer than I was when I picked my first strawberry. At eight fifty, we start picking again. At school right now, Miss Swann our form teacher’ll be taking the register, and when she reads out my name, there’ll be no reply. ‘She’s not here, miss,’ someone’ll say, and Stella Yearwood should start to sweat, if she’s got half a brain, which she has. If she’s bragged about nicking my boyfriend, people’ll guess why I’m not at school, and sooner or later the teachers’ll hear and Stella’s going to get summoned to Mr Nixon’s office. Maybe a copper’ll be there too. If she’s kept schtum about nicking Vinny, she’ll be acting all cool like she knows nothing but she’ll be panicking inside. So’ll Vinny. Sex with a bit of young fluff’s all well and good, I s’pose, as long as nothing goes wrong, but things’ll look pretty different pretty quickly if I stay at Black Elm Farm for a couple
more days. Suddenly I’m an underage schoolgirl whom Vincent Costello seduced with presents and alcohol for four weeks before she vanished without a trace: and Vincent Costello, twenty-four-year-old car salesman of Peacock Street, Gravesend, becomes a chief suspect. I’m not an evil person or anything, and I don’t want Jacko or Dad or Sharon to lose sleep over me, specially Jacko, but putting Vinny and Stella through the mangle at least a bit is very, very tempting . . .

When I carry my next full tray over to Mrs Harty’s tent, everyone’s crowding round the radio looking dead serious — Mrs Harty and the tea lady both look horrified — and for a horrible moment I think that I’ve been announced missing already. So I’m almost relieved when Derby Debby tells me that three bodies have been found. I mean, murder’s awful, of course, but bodies are always being found on the news and it never actually affects you. ‘Where?’ I ask.

‘Iwade,’ says Stuart, of Stuart and Gina.

I’ve never heard of it, so I ask, ‘Where’s that?’

‘Bout ten miles away,’ says Linda. ‘You’d’ve passed by it yesterday. It’s just off the main road to the Kingsferry Bridge.’

‘Shush,’ someone says, and the radio’s cranked up: ‘A police spokesman has confirmed that Kent Police are treating the deaths as suspicious, and urge anyone who may possess information relating to the deaths to contact Faversham Police Station, where an inquiry room is being set up to co-ordinate the investigation. Members of the public are urged not to—’

‘My God,’ blurts out Derby Debby, ‘there’s a murderer about!’

‘Let’s not jump to conclusions,’ says Mrs Harty, turning down the volume. ‘Just because something’s on the radio doesn’t mean it’s true.’

‘Three dead bodies is three dead bodies,’ says Alan Wall the gypsy. ‘Nobody’s made them up.’ I haven’t heard him speak till now.

‘But it doesn’t follow that Jack the Ripper Mark Two’s roaming the Isle of Sheppey with a meat-cleaver, does it? I’ll make some enquiries from the office. Maggs here — ’ Mrs Harty nods at the tea lady, ‘— will be in charge.’ Off she strides.
‘That’s all right, then,’ says Debby. ‘Sherlock Harty’s on the case. But I’ll tell you this: unless there’s a lock as thick as my arm on the barn door tonight, I’m off, and she can drive me to the station.’

Someone asks if the radio said how the people’d been killed, and Stuart answers that the exact words were ‘a violent and brutal attack’, which sounded more like sharp objects than guns, but nobody could be sure at this point. So we may as well get back to work for the time being, ’cause we’re safest in the open air with lots of people about.

‘Sounds to me like a love-triangle thing,’ says Gary the student. ‘Two men, one girl. Classic crime of passion.’

‘Sounds to me like a drug-deal gone wrong,’ says Gary’s mate.

‘Sounds to me like you’re both talking out your arses,’ says Debby.

Thing is, once the thought gets into your head that a psycho might be hiding in that huddle of trees at the end of the field, or over there in that hedgerow, figures start appearing in the corners of your eyes. Like the Radio People you quarter-see instead of half-hear. I think about the timing of the murders: who’s to say it didn’t happen just as I was walking only a field or two away to the Kingsferry Bridge? S’pose it was that cyclist I met, driven mad by grief for his son? He didn’t look like a psycho, but who does, in real life? Or how about those boyfriends and girlfriends in the VW camper-van? As we’re having lunch – Gwyn’s made me cheese and Branston sandwiches and given me a banana ’cause she’s worked out my food situation – we spot a helicopter over where the bridge is, and on the one o’clock news Radio Kent’s saying that a forensic team’s arrived at the bungalow, and they’ve tracker dogs and everything there. The police still haven’t issued the names of the victims, but Mrs Harty knows the local farmer’s wife and apparently the bungalow’s lived in at the weekends by a young woman called Heidi Cross. She studies in London during the week, and it looks like the dead woman’s her. There’s a rumour that Heidi Cross and her boyfriend were into ‘radical politics’ so now Gary the student’s saying it was a political hit, possibly sponsored by the IRA or the
CIA, if they were anti-American, or maybe by MI5 if the couple were pro-coal miners.

I thought universities only let you in if you’re dead brainy, but I sort of want to believe Gary, too, ’cause it’d mean there wasn’t a random psycho hiding behind the haystacks, an idea I can’t quite shake.

We put in another couple of hours after lunch, and when we’ve finished we trapse back to the office where Mrs Harty changes our tokens into cash. I earned over fifteen pounds today. Back at the barn where we sleep, Gabriel Harty’s fitting a lock onto the inside of the barn door, just like Derby Debby wanted. Obviously our employer can’t have all his pickers deserting while the strawberries ripen and rot on the plants. Gwyn tells me that normally a bunch of pickers all walk into Leysdown for food shopping and a bevvy or two, but today it’s only the students with cars who’ve gone. I’ll save my money, and dinner can be a bowl of muesli from the leftovers cupboard, and the last of the Ritz biscuits, plus Gwyn’s promised to give me a hot-dog. Her and me then sit smoking in the warm shade of the crumbling wall on a grassy bank by the farm entrance. From where we’re sitting we can see Alan Wall hanging up washing on a line. His top’s bare and he’s all muscled and coppery and blond, and Gwyn fancies him, I reckon. He’s unflappable, only speaks when there’s something worth saying, and he’s not worried by a murderer in the undergrowth. Gwyn’s pretty laid-back about the murders, too: ‘If you’d just bludgeoned three people to death yesterday, would you go to an island that’s as flat as a pancake less than a mile away, where strangers stick out like a three-headed Adolf Hitler? I mean . . .’

Must admit, it’s a good argument. Drag by drag we share the last Benson & Hedges. I sort of apologise for being grumpy this morning.

‘What,’ Gwyn sort of teases, ‘my little sermon? Nah, you should’ve seen me when I left home.’ She does a piss-take dozy-cow voice: ‘I don’t need your help so you can just get lost, can’t you?’ She stretches and lies back. ‘God almighty. I had not a clue. Not a clue.’
The supermarket van trundles off with the day’s strawberries.
I think Gwyn’s wondering whether to say nothing, a bit or a lot . . .
‘I was born in a valley above this village, Rhiwlas, near Bangor, in the top left-hand corner of Wales, like Ivor the Engine. I’m an only child, and my father owned a chicken farm. Still does, for all I know. Over a thousand birds, all in these little cages not much bigger than a shoebox that the animal-rights campaigners talk about. Egg to supermarket shelves in sixty-six days. Home was a cottage hidden behind the big chicken-house. My father inherited the house and land from his uncle, and built up the business over time. When God was ladling out charm, my father got a triple helping. He sponsored the Rhiwlas rugby team, and once a week he’d go to Bangor to sing in an all-male choir. Firm but fair employer. Donations to Plaid Cymru. You’d be hard-put to find a man in all Gwynedd with a bad word to say about my father.’

Gwyn’s eyes are shut. There’s a faint scar across her eyelid.
‘Thing is about my father, there were two of him. The public one, the pillar of the community. And the indoors one, who was a cruel, twisted, lying control freak, to put it nicely. Rules, he loved rules. Rules about dirt in the house. How the table had to be laid. Which way the toothbrushes faced. What books were allowed in the house. Which radio stations – we had no television. Rules that kept changing because, see, he wanted my mother and me to break them, so he could punish us. Punishment was a length of lead piping, padded with cotton wool so the skin wouldn’t show it. After the punishment, we had to thank him. My mother, too. If we weren’t thankful enough, it’d be round two.’
‘Bloody hell, Gwyn. Even when you were little?’
‘It was always his way. His da’d done the same.’
‘And your mum just . . . stayed put and let him?’
‘If you’ve not been through it, you can’t understand, not really. Lucky you, I say. Control is about fear, see. If you’re afraid enough of the reprisals, you don’t say no, you don’t fight back, you don’t run away. Saying yes is how you survive. It becomes normal. Horrible,
but normal. Horrible, because it’s normal. Now lucky you can say, “Not standing up to him is giving him permission”, but if you’ve been fed this diet since the year dot, there is no standing up. Victims aren’t cowards. Outsiders, like, they never have a clue how brave you have to be just to carry on. My mum had nowhere to go, see. No brothers, no sisters, both her parents dead by the time she married. Da’s rules kept us cut off. Making friends down in the village was being neglectful of home, and that meant the pipe. I was too scared to make friends at school. Asking anyone home was out of the question, and asking to go and play at other houses meant you were ungrateful, being ungrateful meant the pipe. A lot of method in that man’s madness.’

Alan Wall’s gone in. His shirt and jeans hang, dripping.

‘Couldn’t you or your mum report your dad?’

‘Who to? Da sang in Bangor choir with a judge and a magistrate. He charmed my teachers. A social worker? It was our word against his, and Da was a war hero, with a commendation for bravery from the Korean War, if you please. Mum was a husk of a woman, on Valium, and I was a messed-up teenager, who could hardly string a sentence together. And his final threat,’ Gwyn adds a note of false jollity, ‘on my last night at home, was to describe how he’d kill Mum and me, if I tried to blacken his name. Like he was describing a DIY job. And how he’d get away with it. I won’t spell out what he’d just done to me to bring things to that pass, but what you’re probably suspecting, it’s that. I was fifteen.’ Gwyn steadies her voice and I wish I’d not started this. ‘Your age now, right?’ I’ve nodded before I know it. ‘Five years ago, this. Mum knew what he did to me – it’s a small cottage – but she didn’t dare try to stop him. The day after it happened I left for school with some clothes in my gym bag, and I’ve not set foot in Wales since. Any more smokes, by the way?’

‘Gary’s are gone, so we’re back to mine.’

‘I much prefer Rothmans, if I’m honest.’

I pass her the box. ‘It’s Sykes. My name.’

She nods. ‘Holly Sykes. I’m Gwyn Bishop.’
‘I thought you were Gwyn Lewis.’
‘They’ve both got an i and an s in them.’
‘What happened after you left Wales?’
‘Manchester, Birmingham, semi-homeless, homeless. Begging in the Bullring shopping centre. Sleeping in squats, in flats of friends who weren’t so friendly after all. Surviving. Barely. It’s one miracle I’m here to tell the tale, and another that I dodged getting sent back – until you’re eighteen, see, all Social Services’ll do is pass you back to the local authority you came from. I still have nightmares about my father welcoming home the prodigal daughter while the liaison officer looks on, thinking, ‘All’s well that ends well,’ and then my father after he’s locked the door. Now, why I’m telling you this tale of joy and light is to show you how bad it has to be before running away is a smart move. Once you’ve fallen through the cracks, you don’t get out. It’s taken me five years until I can dare to think the worst is behind me. Thing is, I look at you, and—’ She breaks off ‘cause a boy on a bike’s skidded to a halt smack bang in front of us. ‘Sykes,’ he says.

Ed Brubeck? Ed Brubeck. ‘What’re you doing here?’
His hair’s spiky with sweat. ‘Looking for you.’
‘Don’t tell me you cycled? What ‘bout school?’
‘Maths exam this morning, but I’m free now. Put my bike on the train and just rode over from Sheerness. Look—’
‘You must really want your baseball cap back.’
‘The cap doesn’t matter, Sykes, but we need—’
‘Hang on – how did you know where to find me?’
‘I didn’t, but I remembered talking about Gabriel Harty’s farm, so I phoned him earlier. No Holly Sykes, he said, only a Holly Rothmans. I thought it might be you, and I was right, wasn’t I?’

Gwyn mutters, ‘I’m saying nothing.’
I say, ‘Brubeck, Gwyn, Gwyn, Brubeck,’ and they nod at each other before Brubeck turns back to me.

‘Something’s happened.’
Gwyn gets up. ‘See you in the penthouse suite.’ She gives me a go-for-it-girl look and waltzes off.
I turn back to Brubeck, a bit annoyed. ‘I heard.’
He looks uncertain. ‘Then why are you here?’
‘It’s on Radio Kent. The three murders. At that Iwade place.’
‘Not that.’ Brubeck bites his lip. ‘Is your brother here?’
‘Jacko? ’Course not. Why would he be here?’
Sheba comes running up, barking at Brubeck, who’s hesitating, like someone who’s got abysmal news. ‘Jacko’s gone missing.’
My head spins as it sinks in. Brubeck tells Sheba, ‘Shut up!’ and Sheba obeys.
I ask feebly, ‘When?’
‘Between Saturday night and Sunday morning.’
‘Jacko?’ I must’ve heard it wrong, over the noise. ‘Missing? But . . . I mean, he can’t be. The pub’s locked at night.’
‘The police were at school earlier, and Mr Nixon came into the exam hall to ask if anyone had information about where you were. I almost spoke up but I’m here instead. Sykes? Can you hear me?’
I’ve got that nasty floaty feeling you get in a lift when you can’t trust the floor. ‘But I haven’t seen Jacko since Saturday morning . . .’
‘I know, but the cops don’t. They probably think that you and Jacko cooked something up between you.’
‘But that’s rubbish, Brubeck – you know it is!’
‘Yes, I do know it is, but you have to tell them that, otherwise they won’t start searching for Jacko as hard as they should.’
My mind zigzags from trains to London, to police frogmen dredging the Thames, to a murderer in the hedgerows. ‘But Jacko doesn’t even know where I am!’ I’m shaking and the sky’s slipped and my head’s splitting. ‘He’s not a normal kid and – and – and—’
‘Listen, listen.’ Brubeck’s caught me and is holding my head like a boy about to kiss me, but he’s not. ‘Listen. Grab your bag. We’re going back to Gravesend. On my bike, then on the train. I’ll get you through this, Holly. I promise. Let’s go. Now.’