

'Everything's Fine' (a young-adult novel)

and

'Worlds Made of Words: how Children's Literature promotes psychical growth and well-being.'

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PhD Thesis Submission

I hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: Rosemary Rowell Date: 5 September 2022

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a novel, 'Everything's Fine', and a critical thesis. The novel, written for a young adult readership, tells the story of three teenagers: Coco, Angus and Angus' older brother Ian, and is about the confusion associated with navigating adolescent attraction, love and friendship, and the distress of watching someone you love in the grips of a mental health breakdown.

The critical thesis explores the ways in which literature written for children can support their psychological growth and well-being. The introduction offers an overview of the pedagogical nature of children's literature, and the overlap of interest in the growing child's inner workings shared by psychoanalysts, teachers and writers of children's literature. I employ psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's theories on early child development as a basis for exploring the conditions that enable healthy psychological development and the role of the imagination and creativity in mental well-being from early childhood and throughout life. In the first chapter I use my reading of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a basis for examining the power of a healthy imagination in promoting psychological growth and well-being. The second chapter focuses on the novel *Marianne Dreams* by Catherine Storr as an example of the ways in which symbolic writing for children works, at the unconscious level, to address the more challenging aspects of growing up. The third chapter investigates Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* and Neal Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* — each a portrayal of a young person suffering severe psychological breakdown. I consider the techniques each writer employs in creating these anarchic internal worlds and their effectiveness. The conclusion considers the responsibilities and opportunities attached to writing literature for children. I reflect on how my research challenged and influenced my writing of *Everything's Fine*, both technically and creatively.

EVERYTHING'S FINE

COCO

According to the online personality quiz Bish sent me last night, of my friends, I am the most likely to go to university, least likely to get arrested, least likely to find instant fame and fortune, and most likely to marry someone from my school year.

If you could see my options currently slouching into LH1 you'd understand just how depressing that is. Bish keeps telling me I have unrealistic expectations. For Bish, boyfriends are like a pair of trainers you wear to death then chuck out. Me — I'm holding out for the metaphorical pair of limited edition Beluga trainers — and this room is fresh out of limited edition anything.

I'm sitting in our row of desks — on the side of the room closest to the exit, just over halfway back. I say 'our' row, but today I am alone. Bish, who is most likely to find instant fame, is currently in the loos with Maya and Tash (most likely teenage mum). Maya has locked herself in a cubicle because her life is not worth living. She claims she's just been dumped but I don't think the guy had any idea he was going out with her in the first place. That was my observation and it did not go down well. My attitude sucks, according to Bish. It has sucked since she doesn't know when. And what actually is my problem? I have to agree with her on the attitude. Even I know that it's not great. But about the problem — well, Maya and Tash are my problem. Unfortunately, Bish wouldn't call them a problem, she'd call them hilarious, so much fun. So, it's not a problem that can be solved.

Anyway, the point is that Bish's question was rhetorical because, for as long as I've been friends with her, I've been the one with the perfect life. Everyone knows there's no such thing as a perfect life, but it's surprising how easily a comment, repeated often enough, becomes a fact. So, because I have a perfect life and my attitude sucks, I'm sitting alone, midway between the in-your-face nerds at the front and the morons at the back, and one of them my likely future life partner. Grim times for Coco Collins.

At the front of the room Natalie Randell — *Doctor Randell* for those who are interested, but no one is — from the PSHE department, is concentrating on her laptop, glancing back towards the whiteboard, obviously trying to connect up her presentation. This is our twice-a-month Form slot, presented by a range of unlucky staff members. So far, we've covered edge-of-your-seat topics such as 'Making the most of Sixth Form!' and 'Mindfulness & well-being when the going gets tough'. And because we're now considered seniors, the class is held in school's only lecture theatre. After a few more moments of sighing from Natalie, today's topic appears on the screen: 'Thinking ahead: Apprenticeships, Degrees, College or Work? Part 1.' She ignores the groans from the back and looks up with a determined smile.

My mind wanders back to that online survey: I know it's all rubbish, but I'm bothered that I come out as so middle of the road, so ... *irrelevant*. Why couldn't I be most likely to become prime minister, or be a mega-successful online entrepreneur? Most likely to marry someone from my class? I'm no better than Mum.

Dr Randell has decided to kick off the session with the 'show-of-hands' number — who wants to go to college? Who wants to work? Who has no idea what to do with the rest of their lives? That gets her a laugh but it takes her five minutes to regain control. You can almost see her mentally adjusting the next forty minutes. The door at the bottom of the room opens and a boy slinks in. Natalie Randell frowns at him but doesn't slow down, lest she lose the room again. I try to keep up with what she's saying — something about more options than any generation before — but suddenly the boy is sitting down next to me. My seat is five places in from the end of the row so that I'm neither all alone in the middle of the row, nor hogging it. It means someone can sit down without actually being next to me, but this boy may as well be sitting on my lap. After a minuscule glance at him, I fix my gaze on the white board. I recognise him from my Eng Lit class, but he's hardly said a word there since the beginning of term (to be fair, you wouldn't call me a big talker either). I think he

hangs around with the skaters — Ellis and that lot — but I couldn't tell you his name. Bish would know. Within the first week of term, she'd divided everyone into three groups: 'cool', 'tolerable' and 'irrelevant'. Since she broke up with Robbie, all skaters are irreversibly irrelevant.

This boy takes his time getting sorted. I'm tempted to shift one seat down but it seems rude. He keeps his eyes on the front as he takes out his laptop and a notepad and carefully puts his bag on the floor, as if trying to convince us he's been here all along. His clothes — faded black Nike hoodie and worn-out beige cargo pants — smell musty. Not bad, just the absence of soap.

Natalie Randell pauses to have a sip of water. She looks at her watch. 'Time for a break,' she says with a forced laugh that makes me think she might be hating this even more than us. 'I'd like you to take a couple of minutes with your neighbours to come up with one question you may have about higher education options.'

Perfect. Group work is stressful enough. *Partner* work with strangers who have no sense of personal space? No. The room breaks up into a hundred conversations, not one of which is about uni options. I shift away and turn to face the boy. He has curly light brown hair, tucked behind his ear, and a hoop earring. He's kind of — *ohmygod* of course. He's Ian Munro's brother. He has to be. Ha! Ian has a brother in my year. I know this because I had a crush on Ian Munro for all of Years Nine and Ten (I know that's sad but he is seriously fit) and I know everything about him without ever having spoken to him. This boy is definitely the younger brother.

An eraser lands on the desk in front of him. As he turns, I can't help but look back too. Ellis is sitting in the back row, his hoodie pulled around his face, despite the rule about hoodies in class. The boy next to me lifts his chin in greeting. 'Later, yeah,' calls Ellis.

The boy turns to me. He and Ian have the same eyes. Apart from that they don't look that similar at all, or maybe they do, but Ian is just on another level. It kind of makes me feel sorry for this guy.

'You have a brother,' I say.

His jaw clenches for just a second. He probably hates being compared to Ian. 'And?'

'Nothing.' I shrug.

'Do *you* have a brother?' he asks, fake polite.

'Yes.'

'That's nice.' Now he's just being rude.

'Not really. My brother is subhuman, not like—'

He raises an eyebrow as Dr Randell taps her pen on the lectern. 'Let's hear some of your questions.' She looks around.

'Excuse me, miss,' calls Robbie, from the back row.

'Yes?' Her face lights up.

'What type of a doctor are you?'

The whole class is silent, staring at Natalie. She makes an attempt at a smile. 'My doctorate is in Social Anthropology.'

'So, you couldn't save my life?' Robbie continues. Robbie makes up for the fact that he's really bright by having the emotional age of a twelve-year-old.

'I'm not a medical doctor, no.'

'If I collapsed on the floor what would you do?'

'We'd cheer,' says Ellis.

'Let's get on,' says Natalie, with a tone that kills even Robbie's backchat. She looks down at her notes. 'Let's hear from Angus Munro.' She looks back up blindly and scans the room. The boy next to me sits up and clears his throat.

That's right. His name is Angus.

'We were discussing what degree makes you most employable. Also, we were wondering whether a gap year looks good or bad on your CV.'

Dr Randell's face floods with relief at a reasonable answer. 'Let's take those issues one at a time,' she says and sets off on a long 'pros and cons' discussion.

'Quick thinking,' I say.

'But nothing like my brother,' he says.

Ha! Right there is the reason I don't bother with boys my age: they are just so immature. I spend the rest of the lesson trying to think of a response — something clever but not bitchy. Something memorable.

At the end of the lesson he gets up without looking at me.

'Bye, Angus,' is all I can come up with but he doesn't even turn around.

The sky is close and damp as I emerge from the tube station. Every day since the beginning of October we've been losing a bit of light but I don't mind. Autumn is about crunchy leaves and chunky jumpers. Autumn rocks. I take the short cut home across the common, despite Mum's obsession with dodgy old men lurking behind every bush. Whenever I'm alone I plug in my AirPods. I'm not actually listening to anything because I hate my current playlist, but can't be bothered to make another. However, if you walk at a certain speed with your ears plugged up, people don't bother you. It's the time of day for dogs and kids and fed-up looking mums. The playground in the middle of the common is a mess of kids running wild and nannies staring at their phones. A little boy passes me on a scooter, crouched low and laughing like a maniac, pursued by his mum yelling at him to slow down. I smile. Scooting away from Mum used to be a favourite trick for Leo and me. Up ahead is a bunch of guys kicking around a football on the playing field. They look about Leo's age but in the gloomy light it's impossible to see.

My phone rings: Bish. 'Let me guess: right now you're doing your headphones-in power-walk across the common, right?'

I laugh.

'I didn't see you all day. What did I miss in Form?'

'Nothing of value. But Ian Munro's brother sat down next to me.'

'Ian Munro. The one who got away.' Bish sighs. 'But his brother? Urgh. I don't see how that boy can be related to Ian, they don't look anything alike.'

'They have the same eyes.'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'Listen, I'm going over to Maya's house. She's not in a good place. That guy was such an arse to her. Do you want to come?'

'Um... I have a tonne of work,' I mumble.

'Coco, you could at least try...'

The silence is filled with all the words I really feel like saying to Bish and all the words she'd say back, but neither of us wants to go there.

Bish sighs. 'Well, ok then, I guess—'

The back of my head explodes into pain. 'OW! *Fuck!*' I stumble forwards, my phone shoots out of my hands. My hands find the ground, for a moment the world is reduced to a throbbing blur.

A hand pulls me up. I jump backwards, imagining one of Mum's paedophiles in a trench coat.

'I am so sorry!' The voice is male but doesn't belong to a trench-coat, it belongs to someone about my age.

My shock morphs into anger. 'Goddammit!' I look up, but my eyes won't focus and I shut them again.

'Sweet mother of God, are you ok?' He leans closer.

'Ow,' is the only thing that comes out. Who says 'sweet mother of God'?

'I have healing hands, but that might come across as inappropriate.'

'What?' I say. I unplug my ears and open my eyes, and there in front of me is Ian Munro. *The one who got away*, Bish's voice says in my head. His face so close that it's kind of all I can see and it's so beautiful that I close my eyes again, because I must be hallucinating. This is all too weird, some kind of fever dream.

'Wow,' he says and sits down beside me, really close, all the time looking at me. There is that trick they do in movies to show an intense moment where they fade out everything in the picture other than the couple staring at each other. Well, that's real. As he is looking at me, the whole world fades so that it's only him, vital and sharp.

'You're it,' he says, a little smile on his face.

I'm what? Does he mean like the game, like tag? Did he hit me on purpose? 'I'm it?' I repeat.

'One hundred percent. Cosmic synergy.' He laughs a little and rubs his hand over his face. His eyes are like an HD version of Angus'. 'This is intense, but I can feel it. Tell me you feel it?'

I am feeling a lot of things, none of which I can make any sense of. 'Yes?'

He breaks into a smile that liquefies my bones. The spell is broken by Bish's voice, shouting my name from my phone. Ian reaches for the phone and chucks it further away.

'What are you doing?'

'Bad for your health.' He picks up the football. His mates are calling him.

He glances at them, then back at me. 'Are you going to be around?'

'When?'

But he reaches toward me and touches the spot where the ball hit my head, so lightly that maybe it doesn't happen at all. 'Don't go anywhere.'

'I won't,' I say. He stands up, holds out a hand to pull me up and I'm still wondering whether he means don't go anywhere *now*, or just generally, when he says, 'See you soon,' turns and jogs back to his mates.

Bish is still shouting my name down the phone when I pick it up. 'Coco? What is going on? Should I call 999? Talk to me, Coco!'

There's only one thing to do: start walking. After seven paces, I check that Ian's not watching, then put the phone back to my ear. 'Stop shouting, I'm here.'

'What's going on?'

'I got knocked on the back of the head by a football.'

She laughs. 'Sorry. But who were you talking to?'

It takes less than a millisecond to know I'm not going to tell her. 'Just some ...'

'Anyway, what I need to know is, did you hand in that final Paris form?'

'M-hmm.' I make a funny noise. Because the sound is not exactly a 'yes', it's not technically a lie. Bish doesn't notice.

'Good. We're going shopping tomorrow after school, all of us. You will be nice to Tash and Maya, and it *will* be fun.'

I'm home before Mum and head straight downstairs into the kitchen for a quick scavenge before she arrives. Like probably every house in suburban London looking for that element of uniqueness on a terraced street, our basement has been converted into a big-ish kitchen, a small TV room and a tiny garden. Since Leo and all his stuff left, the house is depressingly tidy. After Leo refused to take up the job Dad had set up for him at his sports marketing firm, he insisted on Leo moving out. If Leo refused to go to university, if he refused every decent opportunity he'd been given, he'd have to pay his own way because Dad didn't work 'this hard for this long for my son to be a barista'. I'm pretty sure Mum gives Leo money behind Dad's back. In the kitchen, I turn on the radio and press the TV remote, still rubbing the back of my head. I thought I'd love having Leo out the house, but actually it's kind of dull. Not that I'd admit that to another living person. The other thing that's changed since Leo moved out is that Mum has stopped buying normal food. It coincided with her turning forty-five and embracing gucky green juice as a lifestyle choice (not a diet). Dad keeps us in chocolate digestives — we have to hide them from Mum's food cupboard detoxes.

I wander around the kitchen, nibbling my way around the edge of the biscuit, and end up in front of the glass doors, staring out into the darkness. *The one who got away*. I'm thinking about that day in Year Nine when I pointed Ian out to Bish. He was in a group of his mates on the common. By then I had liked him for at least three months. I knew who his

friends were, when he played football — I knew as much as I could possibly know about him, which was next to nothing, but still. So, I pointed him out to Bish and she literally said, ‘Bagsie. That boy is mine.’ I couldn’t believe her. Obviously, at that moment I should have said, ‘No, Bish, that’s the guy I like,’ but I didn’t. And from then on, she was all *Ian this, and Ian that* for at least six months until — naturally — she got with him at a party. Nothing came of it, but I was right there. I’ve never said anything to her, because it would make me look pathetic. But I liked him first.

Anyway, today has just been too weird. To begin with, what are the chances of him kicking a ball that hits me on the head? And what are the chances of it happening on the same day as his brother randomly sitting down next to me? And how do you describe that feeling, that intensity when he looked at me? Bish wouldn’t believe me. I’m not sure I believe it myself, head injuries and all, but I want it to be real, so badly. I can’t have Bish ruin it for me.

The front door bangs shut. Mum appears. Recently she’s been walking around with a hollowed-out, carbohydrate-starved Munch painting look. She claims it’s all about ageing gracefully, but she’s losing the plot. Just have the Botox and we can all go back to eating pasta for supper. Leo is behind her. He looks rough — he’s shaved his hair down to a number two.

‘What happened to your head?’ I say.

‘Awesomeness happened to my head. You wouldn’t understand,’ he replies, rubbing it proudly.

‘It makes your ears look like saucers. Did you also get a tatt on your bum?’

‘No, I leave that kind of skanky behaviour to you.’

‘Enough,’ cuts in Mum. ‘Leo’s home for supper, let’s enjoy it. OK?’

‘Actually, I was summoned,’ replies Leo, staring at the empty snack cupboard.

'Hope you brought your own food,' I say to Leo, 'unless you've developed a taste for dandelion and celery soup.'

'I only came on the condition we have meat,' says Leo.

'You'd better double-check it's proper cow flesh, not reconstituted hemp or something.' I can tell I've gone too far by the way Mum breathes out, so I make my escape upstairs.

Once we're sitting down for supper, Mum turns to Leo. 'Dad said you didn't reply to his message. Please just send him a short text.' Dad is coaching tonight, as he does every Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. He coaches the development side for the local rugby club. The things that make Dad happiest in life are coaching, Mum, me, work, and Leo, in that order. Leo dropped to bottom place when he refused to go to university.

Leo grunts and shovels in another forkful.

I make a face. 'No wonder you don't have a girlfriend.'

'Who says I don't have a girlfriend?' replies Leo, purposefully with his mouth full.

'Do you have a girlfriend?' Mum jumps in.

'Girlfriends, Mum, plural.'

'Yeah right,' I scoff.

'How was school, Coco?' says Mum, poking about at her tuna and spinach salad.

'Fine,' I reply on instinct. 'We had a talk about university applications.'

Leo snorts.

'Ignore your brother, it's important,' Mum says.

'Is it though?' cuts in Leo. 'What did university do for anyone?'

Not even Mum can hide her look of dismay at the disappointing lump that is my brother. But she sits up and smiles. 'Anyway, the reason I asked you to come over tonight, Leo, is that I'm planning a little trip.'

'Can't, I'm busy,' says Leo quickly.

'I haven't even said when it is! Anyway, you're not invited.'

'Fine, but I get in cash what you're going to spend on Coco.'

'What happened to paying your own way?' I ask.

'Coco isn't invited either, actually,' says Mum.

'Ha!' says Leo.

'It's a retreat of sorts,' she continues in a falsely bright tone.

'Meaning spa break.' It just slips out and I regret it immediately.

'Tone, Coco,' Mum says.

'Or you'll end up in your room,' adds Leo.

I mouth my retort across the table.

'*Not* a spa break, it's a course for women my age, to evaluate their life goals and relationships and ... that kind of thing.'

Leo and I stare at her. This is new. Mum doesn't need life goals. She is Mum, end of.

'Anyway.' Mum sits up with resolve. 'The point is that I'm going to be away next week, over half term.'

'Cool,' says Leo.

'And Dad has a training camp until the end of that week, which means you need to move back in,' Mum finishes, looking at Leo.

'Nope, can't do it.'

'Leo!'

'I'm busy, Mum! Coco is big and ugly enough to look after herself.'

Mum sighs. She turns to me. 'Hang on, aren't you signed up for that form trip to Paris this half term?'

Ohmygod how am I going to get out of *Paris*? I told Ian I was going to be around. He said, 'Don't go anywhere.'

'Coco?' Mum is waiting for me to say something.

'Paris was cancelled,' I reply, my voice steady. 'Everyone behaved so badly last year.'

'That's annoying,' says Mum.

'Yup.'

Leo leaves as quickly as humanly possible after supper and suddenly the house is even quieter than before. Mum looks like she wants to chat, but all I can think about is that moment on the common, so I stack the dishwasher in record time. I mutter something about homework and head up to my room, but really I collapse on my bed, pick up my laptop and stare at the black screen. Who gets to have that kind of a smile? And those eyes! I feel a bit weird, as you do when you're about to be sick, but I know it's nothing to do with my tummy. It's him. And I don't want to stop feeling this way.

I hear the sounds of Dad getting back: the bang of the front door, the thump of his training bag on the hallway floor, and the keys landing on the table. For about five minutes there is quiet as he'll be downstairs in the kitchen, drinking a beer and talking to Mum, then I hear his heavy tread on the stairs. He pokes his head around my door. It sometimes makes me feel guilty how much Dad loves me. I do nothing to deserve it.

'Good day?' he asks.

'Yup.' I smile.

'Friends all good?'

'Uh-huh.' I nod.

'Brilliant. Going to jump in the shower.'

'Cool,' I say.

Mum comes up later and looks into my room. 'Working hard?'

'Hmhf.' She looks tired. I force myself to sit up. 'I'm supposed to be starting an essay on *Mrs Dalloway* but I can't get past the first few pages.'

Mum's face brightens. She walks up to my desk and picks up my copy of the book. 'I love *Mrs Dalloway*,' she says, stroking the cover.

'That's very weird,' I say, taking the book back. I fan through the pages. 'Look, it's continuous, solid writing. There is no way in.'

'But you'll love it. Try listening to it on audiobook.'

I grunt. Mum is really annoying when she gets practical. 'You haven't mentioned this retreat thingy before?'

She puts her hands on her hips and looks away. 'I don't know. Maybe I'm having some kind of middle age existential crisis.'

Obviously, I've heard of an existential crisis, but I'm not one hundred percent sure what it is so I type it into my browser. A moment when you question whether your life has meaning or value or purpose? That isn't Mum — she is always rushing around full of purpose. I'm not sure what that purpose is, but she's never short of it.

'Dad says I need to stop talking about it and do something. So I am. The girls at Pilates were talking about this retreat for women of our age — how life affirming it is.' She says 'women of our age' in a dramatic voice and rolls her eyes. For a moment she looks sad, but she catches it, and produces her trademark Mum smile. She leans forward and kisses me. 'Don't stay up too late, precious.'

'Ok,' I reply and return the bright smile, because she's making me feel nervous.

'You'll be ok with Leo? You won't kill him while I'm gone?'

'What's the worst that can happen?' I look up and we laugh.

ANGUS

This is going to hurt.

That much is fact. I wouldn't even call it attraction. Sitting there for forty minutes while she was busy blowing my mind, triggering in me some gene bent on self-destruction, wasn't *fun* — nothing fuzzy about it. It was actually physically painful, so that by the end of the lesson I felt that if I didn't get away from her, my veins might explode. Her long, thick dark hair, her shampoo, the tip of her nose — I don't even know what it was. I could hardly look at her, let alone speak. Of course I know who she is, everyone knows who Coco Collins is, she hangs out with Bish and those 'cool to be dumb' girls, although unlike them, Coco hasn't got with half of the year group. I don't know of anyone who has managed to get with her. And now I know why — she plainly, embarrassingly, has a thing for Ian. The only person who has always effortlessly outshone me. Me, only better. Another fact. I don't blame her, but it leaves me fucked.

Ellis' face is in front of me. He is frowning, his mouth moving. The end-of-day stampede surges around us down the corridor and out into the afternoon.

'What?' I lean closer.

'Southbank, yeah? What's the matter with you?'

'I dunno.' I peer outside — it looks sure to rain. But what else would I do? Go home and stare at my bedroom wall? Relive the last forty devastating minutes for the one hundredth time? 'Yeah, alright.'

I stop at home for my board. Pushing open the front door, I listen. Nothing. No Ian. But the smell of fish reminds me it's Wednesday, the day Maria cooks and cleans. She offered to cook meals for us while Mum is away. Fish-pie Wednesdays — God help us. As the door bangs shut, she appears from my parents' room, duster out, ready for battle.

'Hmph,' she says.

'Hi Maria.' Maria is married to the building janitor Roman. Officially she cleans a number of flats but in truth she's the building's secret police.

'When is your mummy back?'

'Well, she's waiting for my grandmother to die, so ...' I answer, dumping my bag in the passage. *And by the way*, I continue in my head, *I'm sixteen, I don't have a mummy. In fact, my mum was never a mummy.*

'We need cleaning products: bleach, bathroom cleaner, black bags—'

'OK, leave Dad a note,' I say, heading towards my room.

'Your daddy is too busy,' she replies, following me down the passage. I pick up my board. Maria is standing in the doorway of my room with her hands on her hips. 'I'm not going inside Ian's room. It's disgusting.'

'OK.'

Maria looks deeply unsatisfied. I glance at my watch. She tuts as I squeeze past. 'Your mummy needs to come home. She needs to sort out Ian.'

'Yup,' I call and make my escape.

I'm out of breath by the time I get to the Southbank. The afternoon has deteriorated into a sludgy drizzle. Ellis is leaning against the railing in front of the Undercroft, his hoodie pulled low over his face. I glance into the murky depths behind him, but it's empty apart from a couple of kids.

'Where is everyone?'

Ellis looks me in the eye. 'If by everyone you mean Jez, she left about half an hour ago.'

I look away. Jez is cool, funny and easy to be around. I walked into that class today thinking maybe I'd give Jez a call and walked out ... what? Different.

A clump of brightly anorak-ed tourists trudge past, heads down against the drizzle. 'I don't know what Jez is saying, but it's all in her head.' OK, that is a shitty thing to say. I feel guilty because Jez is no comparison to Coco, and there is nothing I can do about that.

Ellis scuffs the ground in front of him. 'You missed some action. Colin was here, getting worked up about something. The police came and moved him on.'

I smile. Colin is as crazy as a cat on crack but he's pretty harmless. He walks around in sandals and a blanket, like our Southbank messiah. Because I know Ellis has been waiting for me, we skate for a bit but I shouldn't have bothered. I feel the familiar scratchiness under my skin, stubborn as the drizzle. Wherever I am, I want to be somewhere else. When I take a break, Ellis joins me and gets out his tobacco. 'You need to say something to Jez, mate,' Ellis says, handing me a roly. 'It's not cool, man.'

'Leave it, Ellis.'

The silence that follows lasts longer than the smoke, long enough that I'm about to split when Ellis stiffens and looks down at his feet. 'Four-o'clock incoming,' he mutters. Shifty is approaching, but to be honest you'd know it was him in the pitch black — eau de Shifty is unmistakable. I don't know what his real name is; he's one of those characters who is either whining for money or making a nuisance of himself. He stops right in front of me, his head so far back into his hoodie that you'd barely be able to see his face if you were looking for it. Ellis shuffles a few feet away and looks in the opposite direction.

'Where's your brother?' Shifty says.

'Dunno,' I reply.

'He said he'd be around.'

'Yeah.' I dig my hands into my pocket, trying not to breathe in.

'So?'

'Seriously, I don't know,' I repeat.

Shifty stands there for what feels like forever, just staring at me, before he turns abruptly and walks off.

Ellis watches him walk away and makes a gagging sound. 'That guy is rank!'

I breathe out slowly and close my eyes.

'When did Ian start hanging out with Shifty?' Ellis voices the question bouncing around in my head.

I manage a shrug. 'Ian hangs out with everyone.'

'Yeah, but Shifty and that crew — they're not everyone, are they?'

'I better go,' I say as a reply. 'Family supper.'

Dad is at the table, scrolling through his emails when I bring my plate and sit down. He puts down his Blackberry. Last guy on the planet to use a Blackberry, because 'it's still perfectly usable.' That pretty much sums up Dad. That and the fact that he's head of compliance at an insurance company in the city. My mum calls Dad her bohemian downfall. 'I was supposed to run away with an artist or a girlfriend-swapping hippie, but instead I fell for your dad.'

'Gussie,' he says and passes me the ketchup. Dad and Mum are opposites in every way — Mum reckons this is a good thing, it keeps life interesting. Coco hasn't made my life interesting, she's made it painful. Dad glances at the empty place opposite where Ian should be. 'Dinner together once a week. Is that too much to ask?'

'Einstein's theory of madness: repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome.'

He manages a smile and looks down at his plate. 'Maria's fish pie?'

'You couldn't tell by the smell in the flat?'

A second shadow of a smile flickers across his face. I'm doing well. The worst thing about Mum being away is that because she's such a good cook, it's as though she reminds us of her absence every time we sit down to eat. Dad has a sip of wine. 'I tried to chat to Mum earlier. This time difference is a pain.'

I grunt.

Dad takes another sip and works at freeing a prawn from its bed of potato. 'How's school?'

We have arrived at our weekly Question Time. They never vary. I wouldn't be surprised if he has a list of them somewhere.

'Fine.'

'Keeping on top of things?'

'Yup.' I don't even bother smirking at the way that sounds.

'Any tests coming up?'

'We're only a few weeks into term, Dad.'

'Of course.' He looks mortified.

'Chill, Dad, it doesn't matter.'

'It does though,' he says, shaking his head at his mistake.

'Everything's fine, Dad, don't worry.'

The front door bursts open and a moment later Ian appears, looking far too pleased with himself. He's barefoot, wearing jeans and a crumpled shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

'You're late,' says Dad.

'Ask me where I've been,' says Ian, running a hand through his hair. 'Go on!' At a glance Ian and I look similar — same curly hair and long face. Genetically speaking though, he rolled the metaphorical double six and I got a three and a two.

Dad puts his fork down. 'OK, Ian, where have you been?'

'Drinking sherry with Winnie.' Ian is grinning like a mad man.

'Who?' I ask.

'Winnie, the old lady from 12A. She was struggling to push open the entrance door. I carried her shopping in.'

'Right,' says Dad. 'Sit down and have some supper.'

'She's been there for fifteen years. Why don't we know our neighbours? She told me off for being barefoot. Apparently I could pick up all sorts of diseases from the pavement. She invited me in for a sherry. And peanuts and raisins. And some weird candied fruit. I changed the bulb in her hall for her. It's been broken for three years but she can't reach it.'

'Why didn't she get Roman to change it?' asks Dad.

'She doesn't trust him. She doesn't trust any nationality east of France. Used to be east of Athens but since her husband died she can't be too careful.'

'Jesus,' I say.

If Mum were here she'd auto-cue me on my language, but the edges of Dad's mouth twitch. 'Of course, by Winnie's logic she wouldn't trust Him either.'

Ian stares at Dad, then laughs, too loudly. Dad winces. 'Ian, sit down.'

Ian is circling the table, as though we were playing 'murder and detective'. 'I think I ate too many candied fruits.'

'Please sit down.'

'Maria was here today, Ian,' I cut in. 'She said she refuses to go into your room because it's so disgusting.' I don't add that she said Mum should come home and sort him out — that would just upset Dad.

'Good,' replies Ian. 'There's important stuff in there.'

I snort and get some fish up my nose.

Ian's pacing is seriously getting to Dad. He puts his fork down and tries to assert his authority. 'How is the job going?' Ian's mate Olly got him a part-time job in the toy department at Harrods. He spends all day flying mini drones or showing off the latest Scalextric track.

'Technically, it's not a job, it's modern-day slavery. It's immoral.' Ian squirts some ketchup onto his finger and sucks it. 'Other than that, it's fine.'

'OK, let's talk plans, Ian. A plan for this year. You have to start taking life seriously.'

‘But I am! I take it very seriously, which is why the archaic institution of tertiary education is a waste of time.’

Dad sighs. ‘And what do you propose to do instead? And for God’s sake, Ian, stop pacing.’

Ian stops and leans over the table towards Dad. “I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear; nor do I wish to practise resignation.” He pauses dramatically. “I want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”

I laugh. ‘That’s disgusting, mate.’

Ian looks at me and starts giggling.

Dad rolls his eyes. ‘It’s a quote, Angus.’

‘Among other things,’ says Ian. ‘Didn’t Mum talk to you about it? She said she would.’

‘Your mother has more than enough going on right now.’

‘Anyway, Trev and I have a business idea.’

‘Trevor?’ Dad looks horrified. ‘He’s not in jail yet?’

‘Dad!’ I laugh.

‘Trevor is a genius,’ replies Ian. ‘A free thinker. You may have heard of them — they are people who exist outside the world of compliance.’

Dad’s rapid three blinks is his only reaction to Ian’s jab. Mum calls Dad’s blinking the blinkometer — the number of blinks in a row is the only way to tell how stressed or upset Dad is. ‘So what is the opportunity?’

‘I’m not allowed to say yet, but you are going to be amazed.’

I laugh.

‘But what are you selling?’ Dad persists.

‘Something you can’t live without.’

I look at him, wondering whether he’s made this up on the spot. ‘Who is your market?’

'The world,' says Ian, rolling his eyes. His phone pings. He takes it out and looks at the screen. 'Got to go. I'm late for a meeting.'

'This conversation is not over,' says Dad.

We sit in silence until we hear the entrance door on the ground floor bang. Dad rubs his hands over his face. 'Do you think ...' He blinks three times and tries again. 'You would tell me if you thought—' but he doesn't finish his question. He looks haggard.

I push away my plate. 'I can't face any more. Ice cream?'

'Sure,' he says. When I come back into the dining room with a box of Magnums, Dad is in exactly the same position.

'Don't even think of taking the almond one,' he says, looking up, but the blinking is back. He gets up. 'Let's take them to the telly.' Dad is the only person I know who actually watches terrestrial TV. As we sit, staring at the screen, he turns to me. 'Any plans for the weekend?'

'Maybe,' I say, mouth full of mint chocolate. 'Half term coming up,' I add.

'Good, good,' he says, but his mind is far away. His Blackberry beeps. He picks it up and sighs. 'Sorry, Gussie. I'm going to have to take this one.'

COCO

Bish won't stop talking about our Paris shopping trip this afternoon. Her voice is grating to the point that I have to bite my lip to stop telling her to shut up. I know that's horrible, but after yesterday, everything that isn't Ian seems irrelevant. I woke up this morning and I was smiling. I felt happy. When last did I feel happy? On the way in to school all I could think about were his eyes, his smile, the way he said 'wow' while staring at me.

But now it's Bish who's staring at me. 'What is with you today? You're not even listening.'

'Paris, shopping ... I get it. It's just not very...'

Bish tips her head and narrows her eyes.

'Relevant.'

'And what in your life is suddenly so much more relevant than Paris?'

I'm so close to telling her. I'm suddenly dying to tell her what happened, moment by moment, but Maya and Tash have arrived. They stand on either side of Bish, like bodyguards of stupidity.

'Well?' Bish asks.

'Nothing,' I say and walk away.

In a move that has a certain symmetry, I don't join Bish and Maya and Tash for the next lesson, I lock myself in a cubicle in the loos. As the last stragglers leave, the temperature seems to drop ten degrees. I pull my knees up against my chest and wrap my arms around them for warmth. Forty-five minutes seems like a seriously long time to spend in a toilet cubicle. But it's quieter here and I can think. I have to tell Bish I'm not going to Paris. Ian said, 'See you around'. He said, 'Don't go anywhere'. It doesn't bother me that I don't know when or where. Something is going to happen and there is no way I'm missing out on it. It's ridiculous that I'm scared of telling Bish. I felt nothing about lying to Mum about Paris. This

morning I sent the Admin office an email from her laptop saying that due to family reasons I couldn't go to Paris after all.

God, these loos are rank. A few weeks ago, we were all in here at the end of lunch and normally I would have had to rush off to get to Eng Lit because it's literally the furthest away classroom, and Tash must have thought I'd already left because she interrupted herself midway through an inane story and dropped her voice to a stage whisper: 'I've been wondering, do you think Coco is gay?' There was a silence. I could just picture everyone gawping at Tash. She must have loved that. 'I mean, who was the last guy she got with? Ever?'

Above Maya's smack-me giggle, Bish said, 'Just because she's not a sket like you doesn't mean she's gay.'

'Yeah, OK,' Tash replied, disbelievingly.

'Anyway, I don't give a shit either way. Why are you so interested in Coco's sex life?'

'Just saying,' Tash replied as they walked out.

I didn't go to English, I bunked off for the first time in my life and went home. It wasn't a big deal and Bish had completely shut Tash down and I couldn't care less about what Maya or Tash say or think about me, but how can Bish tolerate them? They are just so vacuous. Since we met in Year Seven, it's been me and Bish. Then September comes, and suddenly Maya and Tash are there. *Everywhere*. And we never talked about it because I can see that Bish likes the way they follow her around, copying everything she does, laughing at everything she says. They bring out this other side to Bish and it makes me feel like I don't know her, not really, and that makes me feel like I can't trust her.

So Bish can go to Paris with Dumb and Dumber. She won't even know I'm not there. Except that she will. I know her, she'll be hurt and furious, and Bish is the only real friend I have. Until now she's the only friend I needed. School and life without Bish is ... unthinkable.

Someone walks in, humming to herself. She chooses a cubicle a few doors down. I stay perfectly still. A few moments later I hear her sigh. 'Do you have a tampon?' she says in a loud voice.

It takes me a moment to realise that she must have clocked me in my cubicle and is talking to me. 'Uh, no. Sorry.'

She sighs. The loo flushes, followed a few seconds later by the sound of running water. 'What are you doing?' she says.

Good question. Freaking out? Hiding from my best friend? 'Just ... shit.'

She laughs and I realise I've made a joke despite myself. 'They check these loos during lessons.'

'Thanks.'

'Sorry,' I say to Bish as I catch her up on her way to the canteen.

'I don't understand what's going on with you,' she says.

'I know.' This isn't her fault. She's only being herself. 'Hey, how about just the two of us have lunch today? Like we used to, before...'

Bish stops and looks at me.

'I just thought it would be a nice change.'

'That's a bit mean to Tash and Maya, especially as Maya's going through so much right now.'

'But why does that have to mean—'

'Ooh, this looks serious, what are you guys talking about?' Tash says, as always appearing at the worst moment.

'Astro-physics,' I snap and head towards the lunch queue.

Bish is extra loud and funny all the way through lunch. I haven't said a word. Is it always like this? Am I always this quiet? Each time I gather the energy to say something, the talk has moved on, and it would just be weird. Finally, there is a pause and I'm opening my

mouth when Bish gathers her empty tray and stands up. 'So, bus stop after school.' She turns and looks at me directly for the first time. I smile back but underneath the smile something hardens.

As we leave the canteen, I spot Angus ahead of us. He's standing in the middle of the corridor, talking to Ellis. He glances towards us but I look away.

'Seriously, this is a corridor, not a skate park,' says Bish loudly and makes a big deal about walking around them. After a moment, I follow her. I can feel Angus watching us and for the first time in my life I feel embarrassed to be with my best friend.

We're in the end-of-day crowd at the bus stop after school — Bish, Maya, Tash and me, off shopping for the Paris trip I'm not going on. I have to tell her. I have to tell her now. I swallow twice to force the panic back down and glance sideways at Bish to see whether she's noticed. But she is in 'send' mode this afternoon. Her excitement about shopping and Paris is making her hyper. She knows she's speaking twice as loud as everyone around us; she's counting on the fact that we're all listening in on her performance. It's cold for October. I dig my hands into my pockets, tuck my chin inside my puffa, and force myself to zone back into the chatter.

'Last night I laid out my wardrobe for Paris. Then I got all depro because my clothes are so ... unsophisticated,' says Tash when Bish finally takes a breath.

'All I want is a pair of Belugas,' says Bish. 'Those trainers would sort every wardrobe problem.'

Tash laughs. 'Yeah, but that's never going to happen, so I ordered a Breton top online, but now I'm worried that that's trying too hard.'

'I don't think it's trying too hard. I have three of those tops,' says Maya in a small voice that makes me want to slap her. After yesterday's 'break-up', she's milking the 'fragile but brave' vibe.

'There you go then, Maya has three of those tops,' I say.

Bish narrows her eyes at me. She knows something is up. She can smell my fear.

'You are coming to Paris?'

Tell her! I demand of myself. I feel a trickle of sweat running down from my left armpit.

'Of course she's going,' says Maya, 'it's the highlight of the year. Everyone's going.'

Angus walks past us, his hands in his pockets, shoulders up by his ears. I remember Bish's rudeness after lunch and look down at my feet.

'Everyone who matters,' Maya corrects herself, glaring at Angus' back. Maya is a blind devotee to Bish's rules on who's ok and who's not. But when have I ever challenged Bish? Am I that different to Maya? That is a terrible thought.

Bish is finally on to me. 'Coco?' she says in her scary mum voice.

I turn to Bish. 'Fine!' We now have everyone at the bus stop watching, but I have to do this. I have to be better than Maya. 'I've changed my mind. I'm not going. Happy?' My heartbeat is drumming in my ears.

Bish is genuinely speechless for the first time since Year Seven.

'But everyone's going!' breathes Tash.

'Not me,' I say.

'Nor me,' comes Angus' voice, from the other side of Tash.

'No one asked you,' says Tash, moving away from him.

Angus shrugs.

'I cannot believe you,' says Bish, glaring at me, 'Why not?'

Because everything in my life has changed. 'I've been to Paris already.'

'Everyone's been to Paris,' says Bish.

'I haven't,' says Maya.

'I just don't want to go,' I say as the bus pulls up.

Bish's face is a mixture of disbelief and confusion, but mostly hurt. 'Fine. Whatever,' she says and marches off to the bus, Maya and Tash running after her.

As soon as they disappear into the bus, the dizzy relief I felt at telling Bish gives way to panic. What was I thinking? I've just lost my only friend. The bus starts to move off. I shout Bish's name, but there's no way she'd turn around even if she did hear me.

Angus is beside me. 'Ouch,' he says.

'You shouldn't listen to other peoples' conversations,' I say. Instead of taking the hint and leaving me alone, he stays exactly where he is. He takes out his maths coursework book and starts paging through it, as if trying to find the page he last read. It's such a weird thing to do.

I let out a sigh. What do I do now?

He snaps the book shut. 'I thought it went quite well. Apart from your excuse — that was shit.'

'Yeah. Well.'

'So, what's the real reason you don't want to go?' Angus says.

The shock of his question must be all over my face because he laughs and looks past me down the bus lane. The messy drizzle has made up its mind to become proper rain, just in time for my walk to the tube. The thought of our empty house or, worse, Mum wanting to chat, makes me almost wish I'd gone shopping. A second bus pulls up.

'Coming?' Angus nods towards the door.

None of the buses at this stop go anywhere near Balham. I'm about to shake my head when it occurs to me that this is exactly what I need to do. I'm far more likely to see Ian 'around' if I'm sitting next to his brother than feeling shit at home. It's so out of character for me that I feel light-headed, but I follow Angus on to the bus.

There are two empty seats halfway down. The bus moves off with a jerk as we sit down, causing a woman with shopping bags to stumble into Angus as she tries to get her balance. 'Would you like to sit here?' he asks her, half getting up.

'S'fine, love,' she replies and indicates a space further back.

I reach into my bag for my phone.

'You're upset about Bish.' The way he says it is so odd, as if he's talking about the weather.

'Of course.'

'But you're the least likely person to go on a school trip to Paris.'

I frown. It's like he's quoting the online personality quiz. 'You don't even know me—'

'I'm very good at reading people. See that guy with the flat cap and raincoat?' Angus nudges me.

I look across the aisle at an elderly man.

'He's so a spy.'

'No, he's not. He's just an old man.'

Angus shakes his head. 'Way too much of a stereotype. You've got to look behind the obvious.'

I give him a look. This guy is so random, it's weirdly relaxing.

'Alright then, what's behind your faded hoodie and cargo pants?'

'Easy, we've only just met.'

'Not *literally*.' I look out the window to hide my blush, but it's misted up.

'It's OK, I get that a lot.'

'If I'm the least likely person to go on the school trip, what am I the most likely person to be?'

He takes his time, his head to the side. 'You are most likely completely different to how you pretend to be.' He watches for my reaction. 'That's a compliment,' he adds.

His comment leaves me feeling exposed. I turn back to the window and wipe the condensation away with my sleeve. We are crawling along Wandsworth Road. A couple of schoolgirls are sharing a seat in front of us, giggling at something on one of their phones, just as Bish and I used to. I pick up my phone again to send her a message, but can't think of anything to say.

Angus nudges me. 'Your turn. What am I most likely to be?'

'You are most likely to ...' I feel stuck.

'Oh God,' he says at my hesitation.

'Hang on, give me a chance.' I take a breath. 'You are the most likely person to be the next Elon Musk,' I finish.

His look says it all.

'That was crap, wasn't it.'

His nod is both smug and mortally offended.

'Ok, let me try again. You're the—'

'Too late.' He speaks over me. 'You can't take it back.'

'Actually, the fact that I can't think of anything is a good thing, because it shows you're mysterious, or ... You're enjoying this too much.'

He laughs and despite myself I smile. This is good. If I can get Ian's brother to like me, that can only be a positive. The bus wheezes to a stop and more soggy people get on. A mum puts her child down next to Angus. The little boy climbs on to the seat. 'Bradley!' the mum scolds. 'It's OK,' says Angus, shifting towards me, 'More than enough room, isn't there?' He grins at the look on my face.

'I didn't put you down as being this chatty,' I say.

'How did you put me down?'

I shrug, feeling myself going red.

'Maybe as a bit of a douchebag skater?' He tilts his head to the side.

An embarrassed giggle escapes as I wait for him to laugh, but he just stares at me. I turn away. Through the rain-splattered window I spot one of the entrances to Battersea Park. 'Oh look, there's Battersea Park.' Even I can hear the desperation in my voice.

'Good idea, change the subject.' Angus matches my squeaky tone. He gets up and squeezes past the little boy.

'What are you doing?'

'Getting off.'

'I didn't say you were a—'

A grin spreads across his face. 'This is my stop. I live just around the corner. Come on, I'll make you a douchebag skater cup of tea.'

I'm torn — it's completely weird and a million miles out of my comfort zone going to a guy's house I don't even know. On the other hand, the possibility of seeing Ian again is the only reason I followed Angus on to the bus in the first place.

'OK.' I shrug, in a way I hope is cool, that implies I do this kind of thing all the time.

ANGUS

The front door won't open. I glance back at Coco and try again. Something is blocking it from the inside. I peer around — perfect. Ian has simply stepped over the pile of food delivery bags and left.

'Douche,' I mutter, as I give the door a last shove. 'Not you,' I add quickly, looking back at Coco as she follows me in. She's quiet as I move the bags to the kitchen.

'There's a reason they call them mansion blocks — your flat is huge.' She peers down the passage and into the dining room. 'I love the rugs and paintings and sculptures and stuff.'

'That's my mum.'

Coco picks up the last bag and follows me into the kitchen. 'Is she an artist?'

'Might be overstating it,' I reply, glaring at the mess Ian has left behind. An open pack of bacon, butter and sticky globules of raw egg over the counter. 'Sorry about the mess. My brother ...'

'Does your mum work?' asks Coco.

I laugh. 'No. She's in Australia. My grandmother is dying.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine. It's not fine, obviously, but it's fine.'

Coco looks at me. 'I get it.' She walks out the kitchen and crosses the hall into the sitting room. While she's gone I try to find the dishcloth underneath the mess of dishes in the sink. I swallow down the need to gag. It smells rank.

'What about your dad?' she calls.

'Works in the city,' I say, praying she doesn't go into my room.

'My mum has no imagination at all. She can't get beyond her six and a half shades of beige,' comes her voice. 'Your mum must be very cool,' she adds, arriving back. There is a pause, then she says, 'Does your brother live here too?'

I glance out the kitchen window. It overlooks the light well between our building and the next. They've strung netting across the top of it so that birds don't get trapped.

'I'm only asking cos my brother moved out. My dad made him because he refused to go to university. It's a bit harsh, but my brother is a moron, so ...'

As I turn around from dumping Ian's leftovers in the bin, our eyes meet. She's taken her jacket off and is wearing a faded hoodie. My stomach nosedives through the floor and at the same time my brain short-circuits because she is effortlessly, mind-blowingly beautiful. I'm supposed to say something funny. I turn away and open a cupboard door for no reason. I was doing fine on the bus because on the bus I could avoid looking at her. On the bus I pretended to be Ian, or my version of Ian, and it seemed to work. I can't keep staring into the cupboard. I force myself to turn around and notice she's about to sit down on a pile of ossifying Weetabix and milk mix on the chair. 'Stop!' I take a swipe at it with the cloth. 'Sorry.'

'Tea?' she prompts, a smile strokes the corners of her mouth.

'Course,' I look around but can't find the kettle. 'Wait here.' The kettle is next to Ian's bed, along with the tea bags and now rancid milk.

This is a disaster. I can't believe I thought it a good idea to bring her here. I fill the kettle and switch it on. The longer the silence lasts, the more I wish she'd just leave.

'I like it here,' she says. 'I do,' she insists at the look on my face. 'I'd love it if my mum went away for a month, although with my Dad's cooking we'd probably all get scurvy. My mum's about to go away for four days, which has to be the first time ever—' Coco stops. There is the sound of fumbling at the door, as if a person with no thumbs is trying to work the lock. She looks at me, then quickly away, trying to stop herself from smiling. The next moment Ian bursts through. The air inside the flat reacts to his arrival, with a kind of electric charge. Perfect — trust the most unreliable person in the world to arrive at exactly the wrong moment.

'Gussie!' he calls, his voice galloping around the flat. Coco sits up. She tucks her hair behind her ear. I can't bear to look at her.

There is the sound of Ian chucking his keys at the table, and a moment later them landing on the floor.

'No, screw *you*, gravity,' he says, too loudly. A moment later he's in the kitchen. Today — when it's five degrees outside — he's wearing a grubby blue t-shirt, shorts that balance on his hips and flip-flops. His hair is a tangled mess — like an unkempt dog. He smells like one too.

'You're not going to believe this, Gussie. Seriously, you're probably going to want to sit down for this.'

He sees Coco sitting at the table and stops. I know him so well, I can see it happen in slow motion: he switches on his killer smile, a little lopsided to add a bit of cute-factor and she blushes and tries to look unaffected. In that moment I hate Ian. He has no idea how hard it is to be his brother.

'You! Didn't I say I'd see you soon?' Ian says with a laugh.

Wait, what? 'You know Coco?'

Ian doesn't take his eyes off her. 'As of yesterday. I knocked her off her feet.'

'That's a coincidence,' I say, looking back at Coco.

'No such thing as coincidence, Gussie, not when the universe is willing it.' He pulls out a chair and sits down, looking pleased with himself. He drums out a rhythm on the tabletop, stops abruptly and turns back to Coco. She glances sideways at me.

'Coco is the perfect name for you,' he declares grandly, 'unlike Angus.' He turns to me. 'What *were* they thinking? You're way too cool to be an Angus. Do you know how cool my brother is?' He glances back at Coco. I want to kill him. He looks back at me. 'You should be a Ralf. No.' He shakes his head, disagreeing with himself. 'Merlin?' He looks up thoughtfully.

'Merlin?' I make a face.

'No, you're right.' Ian leans back in his chair and stretches his arms out. His biceps pop out. He seems to be stripped of anything but bone and lean muscle. When did that happen? I want to say something, to pull Coco's attention back to me, but it would be pointless. Anyway, when it comes to my brother and me, I'm the audience. It's always been that way. Ian looks about the kitchen restlessly, then leans over and reaches for the carton of eggs on the counter. He touches each of the three eggs in turn, chooses the top right one, and examines it in the palm of his hand. A smile spreads across his face and he looks up at me. 'Benedict. You'd make a great Benedict.'

'Idiot,' I shake my head, laughing. I can't help it — I love the way his mind works. I can feel Coco watching us, trying to keep up.

'You two have the same eyes,' she says.

'And yet, mine are so much better,' says Ian. 'I got the looks. Poor old Benedict got the ...' He looks at me and cocks his head to the side. 'You got the common sense.'

'Piss off,' I say which is deeply unclever, but I feel deeply unclever and uninteresting and unattractive and, at the same time, caught up in the experience.

He picks up two more eggs. 'I'm very good at juggling.' He jumps up and starts tossing the eggs up into the air. 'Ian,' I say, but he's surprisingly good.

'See!' he says, 'What did I tell you?' He laughs, all his concentration on the eggs, which are going faster and higher. Suddenly he throws them all into the air and bows.

'Tadaa!' he shouts as one of them lands on him, the other two smashing to the floor.

Coco gasps with her hands over her mouth and nose. Ian looks like a very pleased five-year-old. 'That was eggscellent!'

'Says the eggomaniac,' I reply as I get up and reach for the paper towel.

Ian bows and backs out of the kitchen.

'He's hilarious,' says Coco, looking after him.

I know it's not personal; he can't help showing off. Even on a slow day Ian takes quirky to a new level. Mum reckons they should have christened him 'Just Ian' because she

used that so often as an explanation / apology. 'Ah, that's just Ian,' she would say repeatedly to explain his choice of clothing / conversation / instrument choice (a piccolo). But recently it's as though he's dialled it up a couple of levels and it makes me want to take a step back. It's like for the first time in his life, his timing is off.

Coco is waiting for an answer. I chuck the eggy paper towel into the bin. 'That's Ian. Hilarious.'

'Wow.' She turns back and smiles at me, but it seems forced after her laugh-out-loud reaction to Ian.

'So ...'

Down the passage something bangs. 'Shit!' comes Ian's voice, followed by 'I'm OK!' which makes Coco laugh again.

Suddenly he's back, wearing one of my t-shirts. In one move he sits down in my chair next to Coco.

'Did you hurt yourself?' asks Coco.

'When?'

'Just now,' she replies, looking confused.

'Oh! No. My bed keeps moving.'

It's only when we're around normal people that I realise how odd my brother can be.

'Hey, did I tell you I met God?' Ian sits up straight, his eyes shining.

Coco laughs. 'No, seeing as we've barely met.' She's trying so hard to match Ian. She doesn't stand a chance.

Ian frowns at her. 'That's a very Western view on things.' Seeing Coco's face, Ian continues, speaking slowly. 'We probably met hundreds of times in different lives. We could have been snow leopards, roaming the Mongolian peaks; Aztecs; Pompeiians running for our lives.' He moves closer to her and drops his voice: 'Anthony and Cleopatra.'

'That I would have remembered,' says Coco, which makes me laugh. She glances at me, then turns back to Ian. 'So, God...'

Ian looks momentarily surprised. 'Right, yes.'

'What was he like?'

Ian breathes in. 'A little tired. A little weary.'

Coco laughs.

Ian frowns. 'He's not like Dumbledore, if that's what you're thinking.'

'Sorry,' she says and tries to pull a straight face. 'Where were you?'

'At Wandsworth station. I was struggling to read the timetable with all those tiny numbers and letters.' He shakes his head. 'And each time I try to focus in on one, it starts jumping about, playing snakes and ladders with the numbers around it. All of a sudden there is this whoosh and the numbers burst into tiny kaleidoscopic lights, one after the other, like Guy Fawkes night, which is kind of weird, so I take a step backwards. But as I do, it's like I step into this insane wind tunnel — the sound is deafening, like the earth is threatening to split open. I look up and a train is hurtling towards me, out of control, and suddenly I understand that it's the end of the world that is approaching, not a train, and it's sucking everything towards it as it approaches, and I feel myself getting sucked into its vortex, towards the train, and I can't resist it, I'm nothing more than a leaf.' He stops for a breath. 'Then I feel this hand on my shoulder, solid, like a tree trunk, no — like a hand reaching up from the centre of the earth, and it pulls me backwards. Just like that the lights and sound and shuddering stops.' Ian blows his cheeks out. 'And I looked up and there was God. Only not as you would expect. He was this middle-aged builder guy with heavy muscles and tattooed arms and he looked at me and said, "Don't be an arse," and walked off.'

The kitchen is very quiet; the only sound the ticking clock on the wall. 'That was God?' Coco says after a pause.

'Obviously,' replies Ian. He looks between us expectantly. 'Gussie?' he prompts.

'That's ... whacked,' I say.

Ian nods. 'It was an awakening. A re-birth.'

I wish it had been me disappearing in the vortex. I can tell Coco is completely lost in the silence that follows. She thought he was joking. I have to save the situation. I have to save her. 'Well, Ian,' I start, trying to think of something to say, 'Next time you see Him, ask Him about climate change.'

Coco laughs but Ian nods solemnly. 'I will. It wasn't the right time.'

The doorbell goes. Thank fuck.

Ian jumps up. 'More guests?' He laughs. 'Fantastic!'

He presses the intercom. 'Trevor! Clever Trevor!' He opens the door and disappears into the hall.

Coco is ominously quiet.

'Never take Ian's stories literally.'

'Yeah, obviously,' she says, lightly.

'Tre-vaar!' Ian's voice floats back inside.

Juggling eggs is one thing, but end-of-the-world vortexes are a different level. How much of it is real, and how much made up on for the sake of a good story? I feel Coco looking at me, waiting for me to say something else, but how do you follow kaleidoscopic train times? I push my chair back and start running water in the sink, pretending to wash up.

The front door bangs shut. I brace myself for the sound of our downstairs neighbour thumping his walking stick on the ceiling in protest. Trevor's snatched breath in the hall sounds like that of a cancerous old man rather than an overweight eighteen-year-old. Surely nothing else Ian says could make things any worse?

'Guess what, Trev — we have a guest!'

'Wicked, mate.'

Ian laughs. 'Actually, she looks like she could be very wicked.'

'Sorry,' I mutter, although Coco probably likes it. I pick up the washing up cloth. I want to shove it in Ian's mouth.

Ian propels Trevor into the kitchen, his arm around his shoulders. Trevor, larger and paler than ever, is dressed in his gangsta-rap gear of shiny tracksuit and baseball cap. Today he's added a couple of street-stall chunky gold chains. Perfect. We may as well have a sign above the door saying 'Freaks welcome'.

'Now, Coco, Trevor may not look like the sharpest tool on the bench, but don't be deceived. He's a bloody genius,' says Ian.

He's properly lost it. Trevor is the furthest thing from a genius you'll ever come across.

Trevor blushes and shuffles his feet. 'Mate, we have to go.'

'Where?' Ian drops his arm.

Trevor looks at him, 'Remember I called you this morning?'

'This morning? But that was ages ago.'

'A life-time ago,' says Coco.

'Ian's met God since you last spoke, Trev,' I add.

Trevor looks confused and gives a half-laugh. But Ian is already at the front door.

'Don't you need a coat, mate?' Trevor says.

'Why?' replies Ian impatiently, 'Let's go.'

As the door bangs again, I look down at the cloth in my hands. The sudden silence rings in my ears.

'I never made you that tea.' I switch the kettle on.

'Your brother is intense, kind of ... amazing.'

'If you think Ian's crazy, you should see my dad.'

'Seriously?'

I laugh. 'No, Coco, my dad's the most oppressively normal guy I know.'

'But it's crazy in a good way, you know? A great way.' Suddenly she's up, pulling her coat on. 'My mum's going to freak,' she mumbles.

She's halfway out the door when I say, 'The train story — you know it's not real right?

He just says shit like that to get a reaction. He's messing with your head.'

Coco looks at me. 'Duh.' Her face changes back to the Coco I recognise from class. Closed off. I've made her feel stupid and it's Ian's bloody fault. She's never going to talk to me again.

*

Something wrenches me out of sleep. It's still dark. Noises, like someone moving around clumsily. Shit. Do I play dead or act the hero? A phone rings. There is the low grumble of Dad's voice, a pause, then a string of choice words I had no idea he even knew.

I pull myself out of bed and find Dad in his room, half-dressed, tapping at his phone. 'What's going on?'

He looks up, his forehead crinkled up. 'Some idiot has created a shit storm in the Bermuda office.'

'Are you going in now?' I rub my face. 'It's the middle of the night.'

His face is grim. 'Got to attempt some damage control before the city wakes up.' He pats his jacket pockets, looks around and picks up his glasses from the table. His phone rings again. 'Yup. Yup. I'll be there in thirty minutes.'

Out in the passage, Ian, still dressed, starts pacing up and down, making the sound of an alarm. 'Code red! This is compliance code red! A free thinker has got away! Prepare for total lockdown!'

Dad picks up his laptop bag, not bothering to reply to Ian.

'Go get that free thinker, Dad, we're counting on you!' shouts Ian as Dad opens the front door.

I look at Ian. 'You're a wanker.'

Ian laughs. 'It's funny. What happened to your sense of humour?'

COCO

Friday lunchtime I'm in the library. It's bitter outside — crunchy, cozy autumn has developed a glacial bite — but I'm really avoiding Bish. She hasn't spoken to me since the bus, almost forty-eight hours ago. This is the longest we've ever not spoken to each other; this is new 'friendship' territory. On the one hand, it is a relief. But it leaves me with a lot of time to fill. I should be using the extra hours to read *Mrs Dalloway* and get started on the essay that is due, but I can't find my book. I swear it was in my bag. All of the library's five copies have been booked out. This isn't me. I don't lose things.

To kick off our study of the blessed *Mrs Dalloway*, Mrs Evans wants one thousand words — 'nothing too long' — on what I think about the book, what 'stays with me', what I find most 'interesting or difficult or even boring, haha'. I knew she'd be trouble. One thousand words of what I think gives me anxiety on a good day. One thousand words of what I think about a book I haven't finished and cannot find is meltdown territory. I googled Virginia Woolf but gave up immediately. There is way too much information. I wouldn't know where to start.

My whole life is pretty much meltdown territory. I don't know how to feel. Everything that was solid has been replaced by a lot of nothing. I miss Bish. Without her my life is so pathetic that it makes me angry. In the past forty-eight hours I've spent so much time alone I don't know what's real and what isn't anymore. The only thing I do know is that around Ian, everything is different. I am different. I want to be that Coco, not this Coco. But that lasted literally five minutes on the common and one afternoon in the flat, before that idiot Angus went and humiliated me. He did it on purpose. So everything is shit and *Mrs Dalloway* can piss off.

Without looking up, I can feel Bish coming towards me. The library is not her natural habitat. She takes the more direct 'copy and paste' approach to research. She's looking around with a slight frown on her face. I know why — she's surprised so many people use the library. I know her inside-out but here I am feeling panicky as she approaches. *She's*

your friend for God's sake. She catches my eye and pulls a 'what-the-crap' face. The old Bish seems to be back.

She slides into the chair next to me and reads off the only two words on my page. 'Mrs Dalloway? Rock on.'

'Sshh!' says an upper sixth sitting across the table.

Bish leans across me and tears the top page off my pad. The girl across the desk sighs and coughs pointedly.

'Let's be Mrs Runaway,' says Bish, looking at the girl across the table.

'Good idea,' replies the girl, with such a look of distaste that we giggle all the way out of the library.

Outside, Bish takes the sleeve of my jumper. 'Coffee? I'll buy.'

'You never buy.' Bish has been promising to 'buy the next one' for years.

'Exactly.'

It feels nice to be standing in a coffee queue with her again.

She puts her arm around me. 'Aah, Cokes, I've missed you. You haven't even been at the lockers.'

'I know.' I shrug. 'Shit tonne of work.'

'Hey, I checked with Admin — you can still come. Tell them your parents were fighting, which was why you changed your mind but it's all OK again.' When I don't respond, she pulls on my arm. 'I don't understand. Why are you doing this? Talk to me, Coco.'

'God, Bish, what's the big deal? It's just a crappy school trip.'

Bish looks stung. She looks as if she doesn't recognise me. Maybe that's the problem here — neither of us is actually who we thought we were. It's been a friendship between two people who don't exist anymore.

'You won't even know I'm not there,' I add.

She sighs. 'I get it. You feel excluded.'

It's not even the way she says those words — superficially kind but actually patronising as shit. It's the fact that she says them, even thinks them, that I can't handle.

'It used to be just us two and now it's the four of us,' she continues.

'OK — to begin with, there is no four of us — this isn't some kind of Year Three club. And I really just don't want to go to Paris.'

'I don't believe you. I think you're being a childish bitch.'

I laugh.

'You've got to be open to change, Coco. Life is changing, that's a good thing.'

'Thanks for the Tedtalk. Are you all done?'

We fall into a horrible silence as we wait for our lattes. I don't know how to act around her. Bish nudges me. 'Rice cakes with chocolate? Seriously?' She's pointing at the snack counter. 'That's like what my mum will buy and eat twenty of them because they're rice cakes.'

She waits for me to laugh, so I do, but it makes me feel sad. I imagine a conversation where I tell her about bumping into Ian on the common, going to his flat and the way he looked at me and said the universe stuff and it was meant to be and juggling eggs and how different I felt around him and then I remember her saying, 'Bagsie. That boy is mine,' and I can't imagine ever being able to tell her.

The lattes arrive and Bish makes a big deal about paying for them.

As we walk away, Bish pulls on my arm again. 'Don't do that silent Coco thing.'

I know she's actually just asking me to try, for the sake of our friendship, so I look around. 'Why is Zack staring at you like a mournful mole?'

She flaps her hand with a dismissive grunt.

'Bish?'

She sighs. 'I may have borrowed his Business notes.'

'You're a cruel kitty.'

'He takes the best notes.'

'Miaow.'

'I'm not responsible for others' emotional well-being. Everyone in this life has a purpose. Zack's purpose is to take good notes and get 'A' grades. My purpose is to borrow his notes and make him feel good. Your purpose is to go to Admin and tell them you're desperate to go to Paris.'

I eventually see Angus in English Lit. In English Lit I sit alone. Angus saunters in and flumps down at the other side of the room, completely disinterested in anything around him. He is so odd. Mrs Evans spends the lesson contextualising *Mrs Dalloway*, which makes no sense to me as I haven't started the stupid book. Mrs Evans is excited to read our essays. Mrs Evans needs a slap. At the end of the lesson, I can feel Angus glance over at me. I keep my head down, taking time over packing away my stuff. When he starts walking towards me, I pick up my phone and laugh, as if I've just read the funniest message ever. I start texting a reply to no one.

'You left your book at mine.'

I count three seconds before I look up. This is not the Angus from the bus. Did I dream up the whole afternoon? Him being weird makes me feel weird. 'Do you have it?' My tone comes out overly aggressive, how I talk to Leo.

He shakes his head, then looks around the room.

'I need it for the essay.'

'Yeah, well.' He yawns. He looks as though he hasn't slept for days.

Why is he being like this? I get up but he's blocking my way, which makes me feel even more stupid and that makes me angry. He has no right to make me feel like this. 'You look like shit.'

He looks me up and down. 'Likewise.'

I lean backwards at the impact. 'Excuse me?' Confirmation, as if I needed it, of why I don't bother with boys my age. This may not be my best look ever, but I definitely don't look

like shit.

Normally Friday afternoons are spent shopping or hanging out at mine, but I haven't heard from Bish, obviously. Could that bloody book really just have dropped out of my bag? It seems more than a little suspect — why that book and nothing else? I suppose I could just get another copy on Amazon, unless ... unless this was meant to happen. Unless, this is a sign or a message from Ian, or the universe or whatever it is he says, and I need to believe, and go and pick it up. It has to be, there's no other explanation.

There is no reply to the buzzer at the entrance to his building. I don't know what to do, so I just keep pressing it. Eventually the entrance door swings open.

As I climb the stairs I practise saying 'hi' in a way that is offhand but friendly. But I needn't have bothered because blocking the entrance to the flat is Ian, wearing a sarong tucked around his waist — and that's it. I'm literally speechless.

Half-naked Ian breaks into a dazzling smile when he sees me. 'Coco! Perfect timing.' He reaches out and pulls me inside. Could he have been waiting for me? Could he have set it up?

'You're the first person to see this.' He leads me by the hand down the passage. 'Prepare to be amazed!' He stops just inside the dining room and drops my hand. The large oval table is covered in paper, the floor around it littered with crumpled up balls. Some of the pages on the table are heavy with writing; others seem to have equations and some sort of diagrams. At the far end of the table is a tall, messy stack of them. He turns to me, his eyes shining. 'Amazing, right? I've been working all day.'

This is not what I expected. 'What is it?' My hand where he held it feels hot. I try not to look at his torso but I can't help it. It's lean, but not school-boy lean, like, man lean.

'A play! Or a book. Not sure. It's probably a brand-new genre. Actually, it's more like a life force. It woke me up, *demanding* to be let out.' He's getting more and more excited. With no warning, he picks up the large stack of pages and throws it into the air. Paper rains

down all around us. He looks so pleased with himself that I laugh. 'I hope you numbered the pages.'

'Crap.' He leans down and starts picking up the pages randomly. I would help, but the sarong is looking dangerously loose. 'I had no idea it was all inside me, waiting to come out. There is so much more. I have so much to give.'

'Why are you writing on paper? Why not put it on your computer?'

He shakes his head as he collects up the pages, his body like rippling water. 'The screen breaks the flow. It gives off this electronic, impatient energy, judging the words.' He stops next to me. 'Paper is pure, virgin, always wanting more.'

I step back. 'Right. Are you nearly finished?'

'God, no. I've got volumes and volumes still to write. It feels like a pressure building in my head and if I don't get it out it's going to explode!' He laughs. 'It's like this pulsing, you know, the heartbeat of the universe. *In my head*. So on a level it's about love and chemistry, but really it's about the life-healing force of the universe. And it's up to me to get it out, to get it down.' He stops and looks at me. All his attention is focused entirely on my face. I can't breathe. Without looking away, he tucks the pages under his arm, steps towards me, and touches my nose. 'God, I love that nose.'

I feel too hot. I look away.

'It's perfect, so perfect it belongs here.' Suddenly, all that fizzy, breathless intensity has gone. He sits down at the table, and grabs a random piece of paper and a pen.

I don't know what to do. 'I came to fetch my book.'

He doesn't reply or even look up. It is as though he's forgotten that I'm here. I can't think of anything else to say, so I back out of the dining room.

The further I walk down the passageway the darker it gets. The curtains in the sitting room are closed. I pass what must be Angus' parents' room, the loo and a bathroom. At the end of the corridor are two bedrooms opposite each other. The door closest to me is closed.

It has a pirate-style sign on it that says 'Here be monsters'. No, I cannot picture Angus still having that sign on his door.

I recognise Angus' black hoodie flung over the chair in the room to my right and step inside. It's stuffy. I have to resist the urge to pull up the blind and open a window. The bed is unmade; clothes scatter the floor. I sit down on his bed and look around. In contrast to the rest of the flat, which feels like a cluttered art studio, Angus's room has nothing that would give you any clue to his personality. There is a messy pile of books on the floor next to his bed, and on the desk, his open laptop and my book. 'Ha!' I say to the empty room.

As I lean over for the book, I notice the printed-out pages lying next to the laptop. I glance at the door then sit down. It's his essay. Oh my God, he's already finished it? I glance up guiltily every few lines. It's about the impact of class structure post-WW1. What? *That's* what the book is about? I read the first paragraph. It's good — annoyingly good.

'What are you doing?'

I look up. Angus is in the doorway. I jump up, clutching the book. 'Fetching *this*.'

'You're reading my essay.'

'No, I'm fetching my book.'

The way he's standing — arms folded across his chest — means there is no way for me to escape.

Ian is behind him. 'I told you Cocalicious was here. I started showing her my oeuvre.'

Angus looks set to argue, but as Ian's words sink in, he shakes his head. 'You showed her your *oeuvre*?'

'She liked it,' Ian nods, with a wide smile.

'Book! He's talking about the book he's writing,' I put in quickly.

Angus flops down onto his bed and looks at his brother. 'What are you wearing, bro? You're not in freaking Malaga.'

This is all wrong, trapped in Angus' room. I want to be on the other side of the door frame, standing with Ian, not inches away from Angus. 'I'll just take the book,' I say, getting up.

'Uh not so fast, Coco Collins. *You've* just been reading my essay.'

'Oh please, like I need to read your essay.'

Ian claps his hands. 'Tension! I love it. This is exactly what I'm talking about, it's all going in the book!'

'Piss off, Ian.'

Ian laughs and disappears down the passage.

When I glance back at Angus, he's looking at me. His eyes are a complicated greeny-brown in this light. I look away, and remind myself how rude he was this afternoon. He reaches for some dirty clothes and chucks them to a different part of the floor. I look down at the book *Mrs Dalloway* in my hands. The cover is a pattern of watercolour flowers. This stupid book is so not worth the awkwardness I am feeling right now.

He tucks some hair behind his ear and blows the air from his cheeks. I stand up to go.

'Coco, when I said earlier—'

'It's fine, God.' I try to edge past him. My face is burning up. But he reaches out and holds on to my arm.

'When I said you looked like shit, I meant ... I meant that you don't.'

'I don't,' I repeat.

'No.' He glances at me, but only for a second.

This guy is so awkward. He is the opposite of Ian. I look back at his essay. 'So, what you got from your first reading of the book was the representation of post-World War One class structure?' I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Angus smiles. 'Only because I happen to know that Mrs Evans is particularly interested in class structure.'

'Clever. Anything else Mrs Evans is interested in?'

Angus looks at me. 'Victorian bisexuality.' I wait for the purile joke my brother would make right now but Angus' face remains blank. I just don't get him.

'Well, that's great. Thank you.'

'Good to chat,' he calls as I walk back down the passage.

ANGUS

In the week since I found Coco in my bedroom, my life has been about one thing — avoiding any actual contact with her. She may have assumed complete control of my brain but at least if I don't speak to her I can't make it worse by behaving like a total freak. Normally that would be fairly easy as the girls she hangs with — Bish and those other two — are reliably loud, but it seems like every time I turn around she's there, on her own. It's unbearable. It's unbearable seeing her, it's unbearable not seeing her. It's unbearable the way she looks at my brother, that she'll never look at me that way. It's unbearable that she thinks I took that book out her bag because I did, obviously. But I wasn't going to tell her I had it, I was just going to keep it. Stupid, but that's me. I wasn't going to tell her until I found myself telling her and then, to round it off perfectly, telling her she looked like shit. She's tormenting me. In the few moments she's not tormenting me, Ian takes over. Last night he burst into my room.

'Where's Coco?'

'It's one-thirty-seven am, Ian.'

'You and Dad — so defined by time and space.' He sits down on my bed and leans towards me, studying my face. There's a definite smell about him. I shift away. 'I like you better when she's around,' he says.

'I like you better when you don't wake me up in the middle of the night.'

He jumps up and starts and starts rifling through the cupboard. He pulls out a hoodie and swaps it with the t-shirt he was wearing. 'This will do. Get some sleep, Gussie. It's a school night.'

'Where are you going?'

'To save the world.'

Today all I have to do is get through Form and then I have half term to sort my shit out. I'm on my way to class, where Coco will hopefully be sitting in the fifth row safely surrounded by

those annoying friends, when I hear a sound, a voice that stops the blood in my veins. Someone knocks into me from behind and swears. 'Sorry,' I mumble, but I can't move. People zigzag around me to get to class. I glance at the notice board. Maybe it was just in my head. There is a Samaritans poster with the by-line: 'It's okay to talk'. If my fears are real, I'm going to need more than a bloody Samaritan. Sure enough, there it is again. Laughter. I turn the corner. Ian is standing in the middle of the corridor, in everyone's way, talking to a group of upper sixth boys. *Walk away, Gus. Now, quick.* But in excruciatingly slow movements, he looks up, catches my eye, breaks into a smile and shouts, 'Boyo!' I'm fucked.

Boyo is Mum's pet name for me. No one in my family has used it for at least five years and he calls me that now? I need to act, fast. The next few minutes are all about damage limitation.

'Ian!' I say, but it comes out as a croak. He's wearing the suit Mum bought him for his school-leaving dance, complete with the white shirt. His shoes are gleaming. He's even brushed his hair. 'Why are you in a tux, mate?' I try to pull him off to the side of the corridor.

'This is the first day of the rest of my life. Day Zero. I have to look sharp.'

'Like James Bond?' The corridor is getting busier. A thousand feet and voices ricochet between my brain and the walls. 'What are you doing here?' I ask, my voice low.

Ian's face drops. He looks down at the visitor's card he must have got at the office, then leans in close. 'To be honest, Gussie, I had a spot of bother this morning.'

Breathe, in and out.

'My phone,' he says, and looks around before continuing. 'I was working on the book, almost done, when the phone started interfering. Actually it began with my laptop. But the phone was a whole different level. Pulses, straight to my brain. Then this ringing starts in my ears. Seriously, bro, it was fucked up.' Ian pauses for breath, and looks around again. 'The sound got so intense it was physical, I could see it rushing around the room, clinging to the curtains. I thought my head was going to explode.'

'From your *phone*?' I pull a face to drive home how crazy that sounds.

'Definitely my phone.'

'How do you know?' I try to keep my voice slow and calm, when what I want to do is shout 'that doesn't happen in real life, Ian!'

'Because when I smashed it, the noise disappeared.' He matches my slow and calm voice and puts his hands in his pockets. As I'm trying to think of something to say, he catches the attention of a bunch of girls passing, winks at them and delivers a sailor's salute.

'So, it's sorted. But I need a favour.'

I don't know what to do with his story about the phone. I'm just grateful no one else was around to hear it. 'What kind of favour?'

'I need some dosh, to get to this meeting.'

'Where is your bike?'

He gives me a pitying look. 'I can't turn up looking this good on a *bike*!'

I've only got a couple of quid and I need it to get home. He's already ruined my day enough. I shrug. 'Don't have any.'

Ian keeps glancing at the tide of students passing like a kid who is dying to join in the fun. 'Ask one of your mates.' The way he's standing, with his hands in his pockets and legs slightly apart, like a model in a perfume ad, is attracting way too much attention. Girls keep turning around to take a second look. I need to get rid of him. If I give him what I have, he'll leave. I can walk home. I start fishing around in my pockets.

'Gussie, there's your girl!' Ian booms in a voice too loud for the corridor. Too loud for a football pitch.

Coco is walking towards us. She's alone, looking at her phone but at Ian's voice, her head jerks up.

I try to pull Ian away. 'She's not my girlfriend, dickhead.' I hiss.

'Bollocks! She's always at ours.' Ian laughs.

Bish appears, followed by those other two. At Ian's words, she stops and turns to Coco. 'Did he just say you're Angus' *girlfriend*?' she demands.

Coco shakes her head. Bish gives her a death stare. One of the other girls, who has been checking Ian out, says, 'Are you a model or something?'

Ian laughs, delighted. 'No, I'm an entrepreneur.'

'Ian.' I hear the pleading in my voice. 'I have to get to class.'

'Excellent,' says Ian, 'lead the way.'

'You can't come to my lesson, Ian. What about your meeting?' I call.

'Chill, Gussie, it's not till later,' he says and slings an arm around Bish.

'Watch yourself, Ian Munro,' she says, smacking his arm away, but it looks as though she's quite aware of the envious looks from her friends. She flashes a look at Coco. When Ian laughs and puts it back, she leaves it there.

Coco turns to me. 'What's going on?' Her voice is quiet, but her face is all mixed up. She glances in the direction of Ian and Bish.

I can't answer her because she's standing too close to me and I can't answer her because I really don't know what is going on. I shake my head. 'We're late.'

Dr Randell is already talking as we troop in. This is a disaster waiting to happen. Correction — it's a disaster already happening, in excruciatingly slow motion, and I don't know how to stop it. We file into the nearest empty row — Ian between Bish and her entourage, Coco and me.

Natalie stops and waits for us to sit down, tapping her pen impatiently on the lectern. 'If you're quite ready? She turns back to the class, but then stops and looks back at us. 'Ian Munro?'

Ian grins. 'Have you missed me?'

'Not especially. To what do we owe this unorthodox appearance?'

'Just visiting my little brother,' he replies.

Natalie rubs her eyebrow. 'OK,' she says. The room is silent. Everyone is watching

Natalie to see how she decides to play this. There is also an unmistakable buzz that 'Future Learning Options — part two' has been interrupted. 'Seeing as you are here and a recent student leaver, tell us about your further learning experience. I seem to remember you were offered a place at Exeter?'

'Correct,' Ian says encouragingly.

'And you took it?' Natalie prompts.

'No,' Ian says. The room erupts into laughter. Ian looks around, warming to the attention.

'Why not?' Natalie asks.

'Because life is too precious to spend supporting an outdated, patriarchal institution.'

This gets loud applause.

Natalie frowns. 'And what do you plan to do instead?'

'Well, to start with, I'm an entrepreneur. Launching something huge any day now.

You remember Trevor?'

'Trevor *Knight*?' Natalie can't conceal her surprise.

Ian nods. 'T-Knight. We're about to hit the big time.'

Natalie is about to say something but Ian isn't done. 'And — I'm writing a book.'

'About starting a business?'

'No, about the exquisite, mind-fuck of a holy accident that is this universe. And love.'

Snickers around the class which Ian takes as appreciative laughter. 'Almost done.

Would have been finished if it weren't for my phone. Using my little bro here and his girlfriend as inspiration.' Every single person in the room is gawping. Coco isn't just gawping.

All the colour has left her face. She looks horrified.

'Shut up, shut up, shut up,' I mutter.

'Well, that is fascinating,' replies Natalie.

Ian looks very pleased with himself. Bish is staring at Coco, who is glaring at her hands. Bish picks up her phone and starts typing a message. I close my eyes. This is worse than a disaster.

'God! What are you doing?' Bish shouts.

Ian is half on his feet, he's swiped Bish's phone out of her hands. It lands on the floor.

'What is your *problem*?' Bish hisses at him.

'Sit down, Ian,' I plead.

'She has a ... I told you ... it's *toxic*.' Ian looks at me, his eyes wild.

'What's the issue there?' snaps Natalie.

'Nothing,' I reply, 'All good.' I lean over and hiss at Bish, 'Just leave it there or he'll smash it.' As Bish opens her mouth I hold up my hand. The look on my face must be desperate because she doesn't say anything, but the look she returns could slice your leg off.

Ian sits back down.

Natalie moves on to her topic for the day, "The value of internships and apprenticeships."

I have to get Ian out of here. *Do you have any money?* I scribble on Coco's notepad. Instinctively she tries to move her pad away, then frowns at my words.

Piss off.

PLEASE?

She glares at me, reaches down to her bag for her wallet, then hands me a £10 note.

I lean forwards and push it towards Ian. 'Bro, here's your money.'

He looks down. 'Magic!' he says in a loud voice and stands up. Natalie stops again, and turns to us. 'What are you doing?'

'Have to run,' he says, squeezing behind Bish and Coco. 'Important investment meeting to get to.' He's at the door. He delivers a bow to the room, and leaves.

COCO

And that is how years of careful social camouflage is blown apart in a little under ten minutes. As Ian leaves Natalie's class, I can already sense the digital buzz. For the rest of the lesson my eyes don't leave Natalie. It is just a fucking endless nightmare. Stifled snorts, sniggers and glances in my direction make it perfectly obvious who the butt of the joke is. Only when I'm alone in the classroom do I take out my phone. I'm not wrong.

WTF? Coco and Angus??

LOL. A love so deep they're writing a book about it.

Coco and Angus: the love story

Fifty Shades of Coco.

Lol! Co-Gus love

Cogus4eva

It deteriorated from there, along the lines of

Angus: I have Coco every night.

Coco tastes hot, sweet and creamy.

By the time I get home there is an account called 'Co-Gus4eva'. And where are my 'friends' at this moment of social obliteration? After Maya hearts the page, I delete myself from all my social accounts. It does not bring me the peace of mind and mental cleansing that the digital detox people promise. My best friend (ex best friend?) thinks I'm lying to her about my 'boyfriend' Angus — I mean *Angus!* It's as though I've slipped into some kind of bizarre parallel universe.

Now it's Monday and she's off to Paris and Mum is about to abandon me as well. Ironically, this is exactly what I wanted — to be left alone — and it's less liberating than I imagined. Total social obliteration is not devastating, it's seriously boring.

Leo arrives home just as Mum is supposed to leave. She's been vacuuming and dusting all day. The stack of notes and instructions on the kitchen counter could be published as *The Maniac's Guide to Obsessive Housekeeping*.

Leo stomps into the kitchen in his Neanderthal way and dumps a large carrier bag on the counter. 'Greetings slave, ready to start work?' he says.

'What's in the bag?' Leo has never been inside a supermarket; he still believes that food magically appears in the fridge every morning. I can't believe that a few months away from home has turned him into a house-trained human being.

'Nothing,' he says but I'm too quick. There are two tubs of powder and a bunch of plastic sachets. The writing is all in Chinese. I look up at him. 'What is this?'

'Protein drinks, not that it's any of your business.'

I give him a disbelieving look. 'No amount of Chinese magic powder is going to make you any taller.'

'Girls are more into in a ripped torso than height.'

'No, they aren't.'

'How would you know?' Mum insists Leo's just going through a phase. '*He started puberty late, he's catching up.*' She'll still be saying that when Leo turns thirty. She simply can't admit that her son is a moron.

A few minutes later, Mum is hovering on the doorstep. She has the look of someone being released from a long prison sentence. She checks through her bag, muttering, 'phone, keys, charger, wallet'.

'Go!' says Leo.

'You seem happy to be leaving,' I comment.

She looks so stung I feel guilty and soften the comment with a 'Joking.' Not.

'Nonsense!' Leo laughs loudly. He slings an arm around me, his hand like a clamp on my shoulder. 'You deserve this, Mum. And we'll be fine, won't we, Coco? It will be good to have some sibling bonding time.'

Mum glances between us. 'Call me, if you need anything. And If I don't pick up, call Dad. Understood?' she asks, fixing me with a look.

Leo jabs my shoulder.

'We'll be fine,' I mutter.

'Have a great time!' Leo says. As Mum gets to the car she looks back. Leo waves. 'Love you!' he calls, and gives me a fake hug before pulling me back inside.

He turns on me as he closes the door. 'You need to leave.' He moves around the sitting room, picking up Mum's porcelain bowls and the silver-framed photographs on the mantle-piece, then disappears upstairs with them.

'What are you doing?'

Back downstairs, Leo scans the room. He unplugs the table lamps. 'Pack a bag, go to Bish. You've got ten minutes.'

'Piss off,' I say, turning to go upstairs, but he catches my arm. 'I'm not joking, Cokes. My mates are coming around in half an hour and you need to be gone.' He reaches for his wallet in his back pocket. 'Here — take twenty quid. Go shopping. Or whatever.' When I ignore the money, he chucks it on the sofa and heads upstairs with the lamps.

I follow him upstairs. 'If you're planning a party, I'm phoning Mum right now.'

The lamps join the other valuables on Mum's bed. 'Not a party, just a few friends. But you cannot be here.'

I stare at him. 'I have nowhere to go. Bish has gone to P— ... she has gone away. Everyone is away. Anyway, this is my house. I actually live here. Do you know what, I'm calling Dad.' I take out my phone.

Leo makes to dive for the phone. 'Stop! Fine. But you have to stay in your room.'

'I'll do what I want.'

For a moment, he looks like he's about to lunge at me, but with enormous self-control, takes a breath. 'If you come down into the basement I will kill you.'

'Like I want to spend any time with you and your loser friends!' I yell, and slam my bedroom door.

Leo wasn't kidding. Within an hour the doorbell starts ringing and boy voices fill the house. I turn my music up, and flump onto my bed with my laptop, but a moment later I'm up again. This was not the plan. Not going to Paris felt like an act of defiance or independence, but here I am stuck in my bedroom like a little girl. I give it thirty-five minutes, then go down to the kitchen. There are a couple of six-packs of beer and open packets of crisps on the counter. Laughter and cigarette smoke drift in from the garden, my brother's voice the loudest, trying too hard as usual. The TV is on so loud Mum would be hyperventilating if she were here. Already the house feels different without her. Less like home. I get a Coke Zero out the fridge and help myself to an unopened bag of Doritos.

I'm in the sitting room, about to head back upstairs when the doorbell goes. Leo obviously presses the intercom buzzer in the kitchen because the front door is pushed open and there, standing in front of me, is Ian. He's in flip flops, baggy jeans, a t-shirt and the jacket from the suit he was wearing at school. His hair is messed up and he's holding a six-pack. He looks like a member of an indie band. He looks incredible.

Keep it together, I tell myself, as if that's going to help. He's glancing around, his expression distracted, as if he's surprised to be here.

'What are you doing here?' I ask.

He looks at me, and it's like his face comes back into focus. He discards the six-pack on the sofa and takes a step towards me. 'What are any of us doing here really?'

'You ruined my life.'

'Not possible.'

'I think I'd know. You ruined my friendship with Bish, you told my whole year group I'm in a relationship with your brother, which is ridiculous, and I mean we've barely spoken and ...'

Instead of apologising, he looks bored. Ohmygod I'm boring him. He pulls his hand through his hair, the same way Angus does. He glances downstairs, like that's where he really wants to be. He's going to leave.

'How's your book?' I say.

He turns back to me. 'Magnificent.'

I laugh, half in relief.

'I'm not joking. It's spectacular, it's really the closest anyone has come to capturing ... truth.' His eyes again. Hypnotic, like some kind of force that you can't look away from.

'Wow.'

'Yes, exactly that. Wow! Everything is aligning, all the lights are green, there is literally nothing in the way.' He breaks off and touches my nose again. 'Coco, with the perfect nose. And when you've experienced truth, you can't hide from it. Nothing else matters, right?'

I literally can't breathe. I nod. He is so close to me, just like the afternoon on the common.

Leo calls his name. So typical. But Ian ignores him, he's just staring at me. I feel my heartbeat pulsing in my skull.

'Ian!' Leo's voice comes again, even in that one word I can hear he's wasted already.

'I'm busy,' Ian shouts back.

There are footsteps coming up from the kitchen. Ian sighs. 'I'll be back. Don't go anywhere,' he says and heads downstairs.

Once again, Ian walks away and I'm left wondering what the hell 'don't go anywhere' is supposed to mean. I sit down on the sofa, listening to the noises from downstairs, my brother's too loud voice above everything else. I open the camera on my phone to check I don't have anything in my teeth, then remember Ian had that weird thing about phones, so hide it under the sofa cushion. The length of two songs pass and I have to get up. This is ridiculous, I am not some pick-me girl, hanging around for a guy to finish having fun with his mates. I go back upstairs, and am brushing my teeth, when suddenly he's there, leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom, grinning like it's the funniest thing in the world.

I'm not an idiot, OK. I wanted it to happen. As it turned out, I wanted more to happen and I wanted it more than he wanted it, which is where the humiliation begins. It was just that as soon as we were on my bed, it was like he wasn't there. His face was kind of blank. All that electricity, the 'I can't breathe' tension was gone. And because he went blank, I kind of went blank too. Then, as he got my bra off, he looked at me, and he was 'back', his eyes clear and endless. He stopped, said 'no-no-no', like he was disagreeing with himself, got up and left. I mean, what the actual fuck? Am I that disgusting? What did I do wrong?

I wake up on Mum's side of my parents' bed, next to the lamps and photo frames. Her pillow smells of the lavender sleep spray she swears by. It takes me a moment to remember why I'm here, how I couldn't sleep. I thought it was the music downstairs, or the thoughts on repeat in my head. But it turns out it was my bed. It was just too humiliating to stay in my bed.

I have to leave the house. It's the ungodly hour of seven am, and I don't have anywhere to go, but I need to get out. I avoid looking at myself in the mirror. There is nothing more to think or say, but I still don't feel like facing myself.

The kitchen is a disaster zone. The smell makes me want to puke. The table is littered with what looks like Dad's entire drinks cabinet. Even Mum's bottle of Baileys is lying

on its side, in a sticky pool. Fag ends on the floor, in the sink, even in Mum's precious orchid. As I'm about to open the fridge, I notice one of Leo's friends passed out on the kitchen floor. I wonder whether I should check that the boy is breathing, but then he shifts in his sleep and burps.

In the sitting room, I retrieve my phone from under the sofa cushion. There is a text from Mum: 'Morning sunshine' and a string of woodland animal emojis. As I'm staring at the message, she phones.

'You're up early!'

'Why are you phoning at this hour?'

'I was just going to leave a message. We're about to go into a breakfast yoga session. Lucky me!' She laughs. I don't have the energy to respond. 'How are you?' she presses on.

'Fine,' I reply.

'Well of course you are!' Mum's voice is squeaky with relief. 'The other ladies on the retreat told me I was being ridiculous worrying about you two. But I lay awake all night with visions of various horror scenarios.'

'Really?' I ask.

'Of course I trust you, it's just that Leo is — well, he's just not all that...'

Leo appears in the doorway. He looks green. 'We're fine, Mum,' I say loudly, glaring at Leo. 'Don't worry. Love you.'

I hang up. 'You owe me for the rest of your sad little life,' I say to him as I walk out the door.

ANGUS

A lot of killing helps. For forty-eight hours after Ian came to school and ruined my life, I roam San Andreas, immersed in 'infantile hyper aggression and senseless violence' as Mum calls the game. It does help. If Mum were here, she'd stomp in, pull up the blind, open the window and tell me how disgusting the state of my room is. If I ignored her, she'd come back with the vacuum cleaner and turn it on until I got out of bed. She'd insist she needed milk and send me down to the Tesco's, just to force me to leave the house. But she isn't here. She sends me messages, to which I reply 'don't worry' or 'all good'. Ellis' messages I leave unread.

The virtual firefights help every time I remember Ian, in the corridor, calling me Boyo, every time I see Coco's face light up at the sight of him and the disappointment as he puts his arm around Bish, his ridiculous speech in class, the laughter. Mostly the 'senseless violence' helps when I remember the way Coco looked horrified at Ian's suggestion she was my girlfriend. Horrified.

Dad comes in a few times over the weekend, looking crumpled. He cooks Bolognese on Saturday night, and we eat it in front of the TV. It tastes of nothing. He sits on my bed and apologises about not being around, and mutters about packing it all in, while stabbing away at his Blackberry. He asks repeatedly about Ian, and because Dad looks so stressed, and because I don't want to think about Ian, I lie and say he's gone to stay with his friend Olly for a few days. Dad likes Olly because Olly got Ian the Harrods job. I don't know where Ian is. I haven't seen him since school and that's fine by me.

The killing works until Monday. When I wake up on Monday, I have to leave my room. I walk along the corridor towards the kitchen and the silence makes me feel uneasy, as if someone is about to jump out and spray me with bullets. Definitely too long on Xbox. In the kitchen Dad has washed up. There is fresh milk and even orange juice in the fridge although it's some weird brand Mum never gets. I fill up a bowl with cereal and milk, right to the brim which always drives Mum mad, and wander into the dining room.

In the corner of the room is a messy stack of paper, what must be Ian's precious book. 'Not my book, Gussie, my *oeuvre*,' he says in my head. His voice is so real and normal that I smile and step towards it. If it's about me, I may as well read it. The pages are covered with Ian's scribble handwriting. Some of them are diagrams or some kind of formulaic equations, some pages are full writing with bits heavily crossed-out. But none of it makes sense. I pick up a half-page lying to the side of the main pile. The writing is barely legible and it's written in the pink pen Mum keeps in the kitchen because she knows none of us would ever nick a pink pen.

*I am the light watchman.
Do not close your eyes. Darkness tears through your veins.
Stay in the light. Light = e = infinity.
light = e = me = me
The night is long and full of terror.*

I make myself breathe. Relax. He's just messing. He's been re-watching 'Game of Thrones'. Everyone else has moved on, but not Ian. Even so. *The night is long and full of terror*. I'm taken back to when we were little, Ian a bit less little than me. He's cracking up because I'd just seen a spider and slapped my hands over my eyes. 'Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it's not there, dummy!' With those words, my older brother, who always knew more, was always in charge, let loose in me a horror of the dark. I've been afraid of it ever since. Not like everyone is scared of the dark — this is sweaty palms, piss yourself, can't breathe scared. You can throw crate-loads of snakes or scorpions at me and I'm fine. Sharks and walking a high-wire are not a problem. But the dark.

It's not as bad as it used to be. I've managed to limit the fear to the 'can't see your hand in front of you, don't know whether your eyes are open or closed' kind of dark. It's the fact that you don't know what's out there, what's hidden, just out of reach, watching, waiting. It's alive.

Somehow being afraid of the dark is so much more pathetic than being scared of spiders. Ian is the only person who knows about it, it's been a safe secret. It was his bed I

would go to in the middle of the night. ‘Dummy,’ he’d mumble and shift over to make space for me.

But this — is he making fun of me? It’s cruel. The Ian I know takes things too far, but he’s never cruel.

The front door buzzer makes me jump. For a few seconds I let myself imagine it’s Coco. Of course not. Waiting to be let in is the personified opposite of Coco — it’s Trevor.

‘Your brother around?’ he asks. He’s shiny from the effort of walking up the stairs.

‘Nope,’ I say.

He peers past me, into the flat. ‘Where is he?’

‘No idea.’

‘For real, where is he?’ He takes a step inside. Despite myself, I step backwards, effectively letting him in. Trevor is a big guy, even though it’s all fat, he’s still a big guy.

‘For real, Trevor, I haven’t seen him since Friday morning, when he rocked up at school in a tux, saying he had an important business meeting.’

‘Business meeting,’ he scoffs. He takes his cap off, revealing a pink forehead, wipes his head and puts it back on. ‘Ian!’ he shouts.

‘Trevor!’ I find myself shouting back. ‘He’s not here.’

‘His *business meeting* was a trip to the dogs. His idea. He said he was the rainmaker, it was a sure thing. But he was behaving all psycho, all over the place and he just left.’

Trevor takes a breath. ‘He’s committed, Angus. He can’t just disappear and leave me in the shit, man. He’s committed. We have until Friday and that is not a joke.’

Trevor Knight is a confirmed idiot but his words are making me feel sick. I swallow. ‘Ok, I’ll pass on the message,’ I say, in a voice sure to annoy him. He glares at me but realises there is nothing else he can do. He turns to go. ‘Thanks for stopping by!’

He stops and turns back. For a moment, I’m worried he’s going to smack me, but he leans forward. ‘Shifty says Ian told him he’s been chosen by the universe. Apparently, he’s

going to save the fucking world.' He stares hard at me. 'Friday,' he says again and heads down the stairs.

I walk back into the dining room and stare at the pages. What the hell, Ian? I shift the pile around with my toe, as if worried something might jump out at me. I don't want to read anymore, I don't want to know what else is in there. I don't like this Ian who scribbles crap about the terror of the night.

The front door opens. Automatically, I move away from the piles of paper.

'Ian?' comes Dad's voice.

Hearing his voice is like a plank in the ocean — not dry land, but a definite positive. I'll show these pages to Dad, he'll know what to do. The door clicks shut and I hear him dump his laptop case on the floor.

'Glad I caught you, Ian, I need to—' He walks into the dining room. 'Oh, it's you Gus. I was hoping to catch Ian.'

The stubble on his face makes him look ten years older. He points at the pile of paper. 'What's that?'

This is not the time. I'll talk to him tomorrow. 'Nothing,' I say, 'Ian's been clearing stuff out I think.'

'That will be a first. Have you seen him? I've been trying to talk to him for days. Why can't I get him on his phone? I know I've been busy, but—'

'He's been away, remember? Why are you home?'

Dad's mouth is a tight line. 'I have to go to Bermuda, to sort this crap out.'

'OK,' I say. I take a few more steps away from the pages, towards Dad.

'But I really wanted to see your brother before I go.'

'I'll tell him.'

He rubs his face.

'Don't worry, Dad. We're all good.'

Dad looks sceptical. 'I have a car waiting. I have to get to the airport.' He looks so defeated that I hate Ian all over again. And Mum, for not being here.

'Seriously, Dad, you're worrying about nothing.' I follow him out of the dining room and close the door behind me.

A few minutes later, he's hovering in the passage, his suit carrier slung over one shoulder, laptop bag on the other. 'Call me for anything. If I don't pick up, call Mum, or better still call Evie. Evie will always come over.'

Evie? Is he joking? I am one hundred percent never going to call Evie. She is one of Mum's oldest friends. She's a nurse — not a nice nurse — a pretty scary nurse. I know Dad's a bit scared of her. But I nod and say, 'Sure, but we'll be fine.'

Dad squeezes my shoulder as he leaves. I'm taller than him now.

My smile lasts until I hear the entrance door downstairs bang shut. Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit. I walk back down the passage until I'm standing in front of Ian's closed bedroom door. Where the hell is he? There is a sign on the door, all the way back from Ian's pirate obsession days: 'Here be monsters'. It's one of those stale family jokes now — Mum says it's become more appropriate the older he's got.

Don't be such a pussy, Angus. Open the door.

The blinds in his room are down which means the first thing to hit you is the smell. It's not your average airless bedroom smell — this is something like bananas rotting in dark cupboards mixed with too much human sweat. No wonder Maria won't come in here. I switch on the light and sit down on the edge of his bed. The framed Superman poster is lying on the floor. Superman was another obsession, sometime after pirates and before girls. He wore the outfit every day for a year. Every game we played was Superman, and no matter how many times I complained, I was always the kid in trouble. Not once did I get to put on the red cape. I look again at the poster: it is designed to look like Superman is flying out the frame, his front arm raised in a fist, red cape spread wide behind him. Across his ripped chest,

where the big red S is, Ian has written **NO** in thick black marker. He has gone over the letters many times. I sit back. My brother wouldn't do that. Only when I look back up to where the poster used to hang, do I realise all the posters have gone — the porno blondes, the surfing, the hundreds of photographs — everything has been ripped off and instead the wall is covered with more of his scribbles. At the top are the words **Keep out the dark. Light = e ∞**. Arrows lead away from the e ∞, towards more nonsensical formulas. A heavy arrow leads all the way down to the bottom, to the words **THE SOURCE**. I shiver. Although I know it's Ian's writing, it feels like someone else has used his hand to write it. I'm freaking myself out, I need to get out of here. I glance around as I'm about to leave and there, in the corner on the floor, is Dad's hammer and his smashed phone. I can't stop staring. It looks so violent, and after a weekend of 'infantile hyper aggression', I should know. Who does that, who takes a hammer to their phone? The screen is splintered into tiny shards, but he's taken the back off and smashed up the data boards too. It's so odd. It's so not Ian. In one small part of my brain I know what this means, this and whatever Trevor is on about, and countless tiny, tiny things. It means I have to do something. There is something wrong with Ian.

But that thought is so terrifying that as soon as I allow for it, another part of my mind tells me to get a grip, I'm being a moron. It's not Ian whose life is a joke, who can't stop thinking about a girl who finds him horrifying, the same girl who is in love with supposedly messed-up Ian. Ian can get away with any shit he wants to — Ian is Ian.

I have a shower, but the bathroom makes me feel claustrophobic. The ringing silence in the flat gets louder until the point that I need to get out. I text Ellis: 'heading to Southbank'. I pick up my board and almost run out the flat.

COCO

I walk. I walk around the common, twice. I walk around the streets, up and down, avoiding the rubbish trucks and the mums with their buggies. I threw myself at him. I didn't even have anything to drink! And he just stopped. '*No-no-no-no.*' I mean, why? Who does that?

This is why I didn't go to Paris? What kind of an idiot am I? Bish would not put up with the way he behaved — she'd be outraged. But then this would never happen to her. *She'd* never cling on desperately to a couple of sentences a guy says to her. *She* wouldn't change her life for a few words and piss off her only friend. God, I'm pathetic.

I can't keep walking. I have nowhere to go. Back home, I bang the front door shut and shout, 'Clean up this fucking mess or I'm calling Mum.' I spend the rest of the morning in bed, with Tik-Tok and reruns of 'Pretty Little Liars'. But neither successfully block out the repetitive, 'Why? What did I do wrong?' in my head.

Downstairs, Leo's attempt at cleaning up is pitiful. I find him on the sofa in front of the TV. He looks green. I sigh. If Mum finds the house in this state she'll never go away again.

Cleaning is actually better than doing nothing. Spraying kitchen disinfectant over everything is therapeutic. For minutes at a time I manage to forget. How can I have messed up so badly? '*Don't go anywhere.*' He said that. 'He said that!' I stamp my foot and shout at the kitchen.

'What?' croaks Leo.

'Nothing,' I mutter. 'It's all nothing.'

The kitchen is looking pretty decent. I had to mop the floor twice to get it back to its usual colour. Maybe it's the fumes from all the cleaning products, but I'm feeling better. Is this how Mum spends her days? There is loud knocking on the front door. Not the doorbell, actual knocking on the glass.

'Coco!' Ian is standing outside. Not standing really, shifting from one foot to another, like he needs the loo. He doesn't look great, to put it mildly. He looks ragged.

Naturally, I look like shit. Walking and cleaning and not having bothered to shower this morning. I can't deal with this. I'm about to close the door when he starts talking. 'Coco, look, I got it wrong.'

'Yeah?' My chest tightens.

'Yeah! I thought...!' He looks behind him, then drops his voice. 'I thought you were the sign.' He laughs a little and shakes his head. 'I thought it was you. It's not you. I got distracted.'

He glances at me, as if I'm supposed to say something, but I have no words. For a moment there, for a stupid, moronic, desperate moment, I thought ...

'Yeah. I got distracted. But I get it now. I have so much to do. In fact, you helped me see that. Because, for this to work, I have to do it alone. Trevor too, he was another distraction.' He looks annoyed.

'What do you have to do?'

He blinks a few times, runs his hand through his hair. 'Anyway, you're meant to be with my brother.'

'Ian, listen to me, I am not ever going to get with your brother.'

'Not yet.'

'Never.'

He frowns again, as though I'm being difficult. 'I know you don't understand. It's not your fault. But now that I'm not distracted, it makes total sense. It's all in the book. It's just the way you look at it, but it's all in the book.' He's quiet for a moment, then turns and jogs back down the path and on to the street.

ANGUS

Ian is shaking me. 'Brother-man, why are you sleeping?'

I try to focus on his shape in the darkness. He doesn't smell good. 'It's the middle of the night.'

'Wrong. Well, not *technically* wrong. But emphatically wrong. Morally wrong. *Wrong* wrong. *Wrong-wrong!*' He makes the sound of a telephone. 'Anyone home?'

I put my arm over my eyes. 'Seriously Ian, stop it.'

'Stop what?'

'Waking me up in the middle of the night. Jesus.' I pull the pillow over my head. He yanks it away, with too much strength, then shoves a book in my face. I screw my eyes up to read the title: *The Doors of Perception*.

Ian takes the book back. '*The Doors of Perception*, by Aldous Huxley,' he says in a school teacher voice. He flips over to the blurb on the back: "... the most fascinating accounts of the visionary experience—" Nope, that doesn't describe it at all.' He starts paging through the book. 'Listen to this, Gussie: "He sees what Adam saw on the first day of the world..." That's not it. Here! Listen: "the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.'" He looks up at me, beaming. 'That's it. Naked existence.' His eyes are big, too big, as he stares at me. 'I thought I'd lost it, you know. After Friday. I couldn't understand it. I thought I'd fucked it up. But then I read this, and this, *this*, is what I'm talking about. Not entirely. It is, but with some annoying limitations.'

'What is it?'

'It is the closest words come to touching truth. And that just shows how useless language is, because nothing can begin to explain it. Huxley needed drugs and even then he didn't *do* anything with it, but for some of us ... Read it, maybe you can understand.' He thrusts it back at me.

I take the book because he's not going to leave until I do. It's small, thin and slightly bent, as if it has been in a back pocket. The copy is old, the cover worn with a mug stain on the front. 'Where did you get this?'

'It's Dad's, which is the greatest irony.'

"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

Ian is nodding as I read, like a born-again believer. 'That's Blake, not Huxley. Blake knew.' He stops abruptly and turns his head. 'Do you smell bacon?'

I put the book down. I want to ask Ian what it was that Blake knew, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer. 'No bacon,' I reply instead.

'Pity. Listen, Boyo. I need to talk to you about something.'

I sit up. He'll finally tell me what is going on. I can ask him about the crap he's been writing, about his room.

'Evie dropped by.' He smiles when he sees the reaction on my face. 'It was totally bizarre. Some weird shit has been happening recently, but this was crazy. Get this, it was so classic, she wanted to know whether I think I am a danger to myself or others.'

I laugh to cover over the stab of worry I feel. 'Why would she say that? What did you say?'

Ian's eyes take me back to when we were little and he'd cooked up a crazy scheme which had landed us in trouble, like booby trapping the entrance door to the building, but it was worth it. 'I said, "Do you think Jesus had to put up with this shit?" She laughed and said, "And then some"'.
"

I shake my head.

'Then she said, "Do you think you have a lot in common with Jesus?"'.
"

'Seriously?'

Ian's grin takes up his whole face. 'So I said, "Yeah, we listen to the same music"'.
"

I laugh. 'She is so weird.' But why would she have dropped by? She would know Mum is in Australia. It seems more than a coincidence after Dad brought her up.

Ian is quiet. I yawn and fall back on to my pillow. He jumps up. 'Read the book, Gussie, "all is in all"'.

'What?'

He's out my room and heading towards the front door. I scramble after him. 'No, Ian. Stop.' I say to his back.

He tips his head back in frustration, the way he used to do when Mum made him stop to put his coat on or tie his laces.

'What is going on with you? Where have you been?'

Ian turns with the brightest smile, creepily bright: 'I will tell you, Gussie, but not yet.'

'What does that mean? You're gone for days and you're full of these weird quotes and seeing God at the station and Trevor is going ape-shit about some money ... what money?' I can't bring myself to ask about the writing, about his room.

Ian looks at me pityingly. He takes a step towards me. 'Boyo, stop worrying! Trust me. It's all good. I've sorted everything.'

I laugh in disbelief. 'What are you on? You've messed up everything. Literally everything!' I'm shouting now.

'Shh,' he says and points upstairs. As if he's ever worried about the neighbours before.

He walks back towards me. 'You're talking about Coco.' He says it kindly, but in a matter-of-fact voice. 'Don't worry, I've sorted everything out.'

'What?'

'I set her right. It's about the big picture.'

'You did *what?*'

'I can't explain it now, I have to go.' He's shifting, like there is a force inside him he's struggling to contain.

'But *where* are you going?' I shout.

'Trust me,' he repeats, opening the front door. Then he stops and looks back, his face suddenly hard. 'But if Evie comes around again, don't let her in.'

COCO

I am on the Southbank, staring at the entrance to the Undercroft. It's a dead ugly building and the clumps of kids hanging around outside seem pretty random, but other than that it's disappointingly normal. Today there is a busy mix of people: stressed-out professionals weaving around the slow groups of tourists or families on days out, and bored-looking community support officers. There's even the obligatory guy in a grey jacket giving off major paedo vibes. A couple of oversized seagulls scavenge around my feet and decide I'm not worth the bother. A woman with a heavy shoulder bag knocks into me as she walks by and looks back irritably as if it's my fault. Yeah, jog on love, as Bish would say. Three weeks ago I wouldn't even have walked into the school canteen on my own, yet here I am, completely alone.

All these rules — only losers and weirdos walk around alone, skaters are subhuman — I've never really thought about them. I want to say they're Bish's rules, but up until now I've liked rules, they make life simpler. But standing here today, I can't help wondering. I can't help but think they're a bit pointless.

Anyway, I'm here to talk to Angus. Another thing I wouldn't have dreamt of doing three weeks ago — taking a bus and a tube to speak to an 'irrelevant' as Bish would call him. But the thing is, after Ian's doorstep rejection, I felt worried. You'd think I'd be humiliated by his flat-out put-down. I mean that is about as brutal as it gets, but I'm weirdly fine about that side of it. Maybe I never really believed it could happen to me, or maybe it was because the guy standing there was not the hilarious egg-juggling Ian, or the super intense 'don't go anywhere' Ian — this Ian was not OK. And I think Angus needs to know.

I swallow. Am I nervous about speaking to Angus? Come on, that's ridiculous. I mean, it was *his* brother who came into school and made a scene in front of the whole year, not mine. A man wrapped in a grubby blanket shuffles past. Something about him — his wild, overgrown beard maybe, makes me think of bible stories. Just get on with it, Coco.

I force myself past the tourists, between a queue for the burger van and another for pancakes, close enough to be able to make out the graffiti-covered walls under the overhang, the handful of actual skaters, and a scattering of onlookers, but mostly just kids hanging out.

Finally, I spot him. He's turned away from me, chatting to Ellis. When Ellis sees me, he stops what he is saying. Angus turns around. Ellis glances at Angus, then back at me, then turns and walks away. It's so obvious I start laughing. 'What's the matter with him?'

'Who, Ellis? I think he's scared of you.'

'Rubbish.'

'You have a scary look on your face.'

'Good,' I say, which kills the conversation. This is so awkward I want to die. Someone standing with Ellis calls Angus' name. He swings around. I take out my phone, although there is nothing to look at. Now that I'm here, I can't remember any of the speech I'd perfected on my way over. The clear and simple logic has completely evaporated. I should just go.

'I didn't have you down as a skater,' he says eventually.

'I'm not. Skateboarding is for ten-year-olds. And idiots.' Ohmygod, this is terrible. I sound just like Maya.

'So why are you here?'

'I need to talk to you. About Ian.'

Angus looks down at his feet. 'Sorry ... about Friday. Shit, I owe you ten pounds.' He starts digging in his pockets. 'I'll pay you back, not today, but I will.' He blushes. 'Ian's just ... not himself ... at the moment.'

'I know.'

Angus' look says 'what are you on about, you don't know anything'.

'That's why I'm here.'

Someone says Angus' name. It's a stumpy-looking guy with jeans hanging around his knees and a terrible smell. 'Mate, do you know where—'

'Fuck off, Shifty!' Angus says with such sudden force that without thinking, I pull him away, and keep walking. We're almost at the river before I realise I'm still holding on to his sleeve and let go. As I do so, I feel him glancing down at the place where my hand had been. When we get to the railing, he turns, leans against it and takes out a ready-rolled cigarette. I look out over the paint-water brown river. The tide is out. The exposed banks are scattered with litter. There is a sharp wind coming off it that makes me dig my elbows into my sides. I turn around I lean back next to him. He takes a drag, and offers it to me, but I shake my head, so we stay there in silence until he drops the cigarette butt and crushes it with his shoe.

It's strangely relaxing standing next to him, even though we're not saying anything. It reminds me of how I felt on that that bus journey, which now feels like so long ago, when I felt like I was myself.

'So?'

I tell him a version of Ian coming over, where Ian rocks up at my brother's thing, tells me a lot of weird stuff, and leaves. It doesn't really add up.

Angus is quiet for a while. 'But why was he at your house?' he asks.

'He plays football with my brother sometimes. They were in the same year.' Why do I feel like I'm lying to him? I'm hardly going to tell him about throwing myself on his brother.

'That's all he said?' he asks. 'Nothing else?'

'What else would he say?' I look down at my feet to hide the threatening blush.

'I need to find Trevor,' he says eventually but he doesn't move. I feel him glance sideways at me.

'No you don't,' I reply. Trevor is walking towards us, wearing the same black track pants, black Adidas zip-up sweatshirt and grey cap. Does he own a number of them or is it the same ones every day? He doesn't look happy.

Angus sighs.

'Well? Did you talk to him?' Trevor demands, still a few paces away.

I feel Angus glancing over at me, I ignore him and smile at Trevor.

'You remember Coco?' Angus says to Trevor.

'What?' Trevor looks blank.

'Hi Trevor,' I say.

He looks at me fleetingly, but turns right back to Angus. 'Did you ask him how he's going to get the money, by Friday?'

'I did,' Angus says slowly. His voice is calm, verging on chatty. 'He says it's all going to be fine.'

This doesn't go down well. 'No, Angus, it's not fine. This is your brother's fuck-up. And if Ian doesn't sort it, I'm giving them your address, OK?'

'Awesome. Look forward to it.'

Trevor glares at Angus, turns and stalks off.

'Bye, Trevor,' I say when he is out of earshot.

I wait for Angus to say something, but he doesn't. He just looks miserable.

'So clearly it's none of my business... but do your parents know about this?'

Angus shakes his head.

'Mums have an annoying way of sorting shit out.'

'She's in Australia, remember, watching her mother die.'

I look down at my feet to hide my blush.

'Sorry.'

I shake my head. 'Your dad?'

'In Bermuda, trying to save his job.'

'OK well, you clearly can't just do nothing'.

'Really, Coco? Thanks for that.' His sarcasm doesn't hide the scared look in his eyes.

'Anyone else? Does Ian have a job?'

'Kind of. His mate Olly got him a job at Harrods.'

I laugh. '*Harrods* Harrods?'

'Selling toys to rich kids.'

'Let's go there. Maybe Olly can help.'

'What?' His face changes as he realises what I'm suggesting. It settles in a severe frown. 'No, Coco, that's a stupid idea. Olly isn't going to help. He's not that kind of guy.'

'It's our only idea, which makes it a great idea.'

He groans. 'Fuck sakes. You're going to regret this,' he mutters but follows me in the direction of the tube.

ANGUS

Going to Harrods is a terrible idea. It's pointless and a waste of time, and it's going to be humiliating. Olly is Ian's oldest friend. He is also one of the biggest wankers to walk the earth.

But here I am, heading towards the tube next to the most beautiful girl in the world. And that's my whole problem — I'd do just about anything to keep walking next to her. I brush the side of her arm by mistake. It lasts a millisecond but it makes me jump and I step out into the middle of the walkway to avoid doing it again. A bicycle swerves around me. The cyclist looks back and swears, which makes Coco giggle. I can't help it. The fact of her — her inches-away arm, her weird silver trainers, her pace just shy of a jog — makes me do stupid things. There is no way this can go well.

The tube carriage is full. We stand near the doors, which means that every now and then she bumps against me. My head is so dizzy I'm having trouble focusing my eyes. As she turns to me, the smell of her shampoo short-circuits my brain.

Her face is inches from mine, close enough to see the faint freckles on her nose. She tucks her hair behind her ear. She's speaking but her voice sounds very far away and I can't understand what she's saying because I can't take my eyes off her lips. *Oh God.* Oh pissing hell. Coco's eyes grow wide.

She steps backwards.

'Were you about to try and kiss me?'

'Christ, no!' *What is the matter with me?*

She glares at me.

I fix a smile on my face. 'Trust me, Cocopops, you'd know if I were going to kiss you. You'd be unable to breathe, you'd be—'

'Yeah, whatever.'

It hits you as soon as you emerge from Knightsbridge tube station. The density of people on the streets makes you feel short on air. The entrance to Harrods is clogged with tourists waiving selfie-sticks in the air. Ian calls it the Mothership of Greed. A shiny black Mercedes pulls up. The driver jumps out and opens the door for three women dressed in burkas. As they approach the entrance, the Harrods doorman in his ridiculous mushy-pea coat opens one of the heavy glass doors and fusses them inside. When we walk past he doesn't even look up.

Coco stops inside the lobby and looks around. 'My mum brought me one year to visit Santa's grotto.'

'Creepy.' I'm still trying to get over the fact that my body tried to kiss Coco. I had no say in the matter.

'It wasn't creepy! You're creepy.'

The Toy Kingdom is a very creepy place. It smells of hot doughnuts. We pass a lifesize toy giraffe, bizarrely next to a unicorn and a family of polar bears who move their heads back and forth in slow motion, like they're all deeply stoned. The next room is a temple to Disney. Coco holds up a shiny pink dress. 'I used to have the Cinderella dress,' she says.

'Figures,' I reply and dodge her thump.

We pass a gigantic Scalextric racetrack and a pair of toddlers fighting over the controls of a ride-on red Ferrari.

'Anus,' says a voice behind us. 'Do I need to check your pockets?'

'Piss,' I mutter as I turn around. 'Oily.' He's holding a remote control in one hand and a mini drone in the other.

Olly is staring at Coco. 'It's Olly actually, because I'm not oily, whereas he—' He jerks a thumb in my direction, 'really is an anus.'

The last time I saw him, Olly was desperately trying to cultivate a head of dreadlocks. He was all about the people's revolution and global mobilisation. The new Olly looks like a hopeful for a One Direction tribute band.

'What are you doing here, Anus?' says Olly. He launches the stupid drone, obviously showing off in front of Coco. A blonde woman with a child hanging off her arm bears down on him. 'Excuse me,' she says loudly, taking Olly's arm. 'Sorry,' she adds vaguely in our direction, clearly not sorry at all.

While Olly tries to explain drones to the blonde and her whiny child, Coco looks at me. 'What did you do to make Olly dislike you so much?'

I shrug. 'Do *your* brother's friends like you?'

The question seems to catch her off-guard. 'No, apparently not.'

'Anyway,' Olly turns back to us.

'We are trying to get hold of Ian. Have you seen him?' Coco says.

'Why?' says Olly.

'Just answer the question,' I mutter.

Olly turns so that he doesn't have to look at me. 'Are you Ian's girlfriend? Because that will seriously piss me off. The guy's a nutter, yeah. And not in a good way, so I don't know why you're wasting your time.' He shakes his head. 'How does Ian of all people get to have such a hot girlfriend?'

I can't bear to have Olly call Coco hot. It's degrading to her. 'She's not hot,' I say.

Coco turns on me, mouth open.

'She is so that hot,' Olly replies, still staring at Coco. At her breasts, to be more precise.

'Stop it, both of you.' Coco says.

Olly grins. A floor manager walks by, looking pointedly at us. 'Are you interested in a drone for yourself?' Olly says in a loud voice, whizzing the thing around my head. Like I said, wanker.

'I haven't seen Ian. Don't want to either. He almost got me fired.'

'When?' I ask.

'Uh, maybe when he got fired? Funny story, not.' He's speaking directly to Coco.

'First, he just doesn't bother pitching up for shifts — more important things to do apparently.

Then, when he does finally make it, he tells a customer that instead of buying a Lego Bugatti set for their spoiled, overweight brat, they ought to be donating it to saving the lives of actual deserving children.'

Coco half-laughs, half-gasps and puts her hand over her mouth.

'Go Ian,' I say.

'Go away,' Olly says to me, 'and tell your brother to stay away.'

'Not a problem,' I snap.

Olly turns back to Coco. 'Don't waste your time on Ian.' He's practically pleading. 'Do you want my number?'

'Oh my God,' I mutter.

Coco blinks at him. 'No.'

'Suit yourself.' Olly shrugs and walks off.

Neither of us speaks until we're back out on the street.

'Is this a good time for 'I told you so'?'

She rolls her eyes. 'So what do we do now?'

The 'we' in that question makes me want to somersault. But much more urgent is the sudden need to get away. It's been too much. This whole day has been too much. 'Coco, this is not your problem.'

A woman emerges from the shiny glass doors, bags in one hand, phone in the other. She walks up to a car and waits for the driver to come around and open the door. A tourist standing nearby takes a photo of her.

'Maybe he's using?' Coco looks at me side-ways. 'Maybe that's what the weird behaviour and the money is about.'

Recently it's as if Ian doesn't need to sleep. He comes home for a bit but always goes back out later, when we've gone to bed. Sometimes I hear him pacing in his room, talking to himself, laughing, acting exactly as if he was using. 'No.'

'How do you know?'

If she weren't so mind-blowingly hot, I'd smack her. 'You don't know my brother, OK? Neither does Olly, or Trevor. I told you this was stupid.'

Coco steps back at the tone of my voice. 'You're right. Really stupid.'

'OK then,' I say, but she's already turned and walked away.

COCO

On my life, I am done with Angus Munro. Rude. So rude! What a loser. There is a boy with serious issues. It's not about him, it was about Ian. Maybe it's something genetic in the family. But to be honest, whatever is up with Ian is preferable to the rudeness of Angus Munro.

To top it off, the Northern line is down so I have to get a bus home. It could not be moving more slowly. The woman sitting next to me on the bus side-eyes me in a major way, then moves to the empty seat across the aisle. That's also rude, somehow, although I'm the first to champion personal space.

This is why I can't be bothered with boys my own age. They are just so up themselves. The bus driver seems to be having an in-depth discussion with a passenger. Can you please just drive?

'You OK, love?' The woman reaches across the aisle and touches my arm briefly. She leaves it hovering, as if she's scared I'll bite. 'You seem a bit ... upset?'

That's a bit rich. 'I'm fine, thank you.'

'You're talking to yourself...'

The two passengers in the seats opposite are not even pretending not to be listening. Talking to myself? I will not let Angus rob me of my sanity.

'It's nothing. Just this *boy*...' I shudder.

'Ah.' The woman sits back into her seat. 'That's alright then.' She laughs a little and the other two passengers opposite share a 'we've been there' smile. Sweet, but they really have no idea. Still, no more muttering.

Whatever I was thinking earlier about not needing rules? I was wrong. Rules are good. Rules save you from wasting your time and energy on ungrateful people who in return go out of their way to humiliate you. Again.

My nosy neighbour gets to her feet as we approach Lavender Hill. 'Chin up, darling,' she says, as she holds onto the pole to steady herself. 'Plenty more fish.'

I look down, because for some reason her random kindness makes me want to cry.

There are no lights on at home. On the step is a Tesco's bag, heavy with what looks like a stack of paper. It's too random to be left there by chance, so I pick it up and take it inside.

I switch on the lights and stand in the doorway, looking around the sitting room. The furniture looks odd, as if everything is placed a few degrees off. It feels less and less like home.

There is no noise from downstairs. As I head upstairs, I pull the pages out of the bag and glance through the top few. They are a mess. Whole paragraphs are scribbled out; a couple of pages only have a few lines written on them. It's all the same handwriting and it's all over the place, sometimes big, sometimes so small it's difficult to read. I flick through a few more pages until a paragraph stands out:

*Hollow eyes, echoes
Diluted. Dissipated. Cut. Tapered.*

I sit down on my bed. Is this ... could this be Ian's 'book'? But why is it here, on my doorstep? Would he have left it here? That's a seriously odd thing to do. A few pages on, written letters that puncture the paper, taking up the whole page:

*The universe has opened itself to me. I stand in its core.
It lives in me.
I am it.*

Ian said it was a story about love, that it was based on Angus and me. There's nothing lovely in these pages. In fact, they creep me out. Anyway, I've had enough of that family for one day. I put the pages back and dump it on the floor.

Despite my cleaning, the basement smells of sick and unwashed boy. The only light comes from a football match on the TV. Leo is still on the sofa; the only change is the bowl on the floor in front of him.

I switch on the lights and position myself in front of the screen. 'Seriously, what is the matter with you? You haven't moved.'

He shifts himself into a position to be able to see around me.

'Leo.' I lean over for the remote. Only when the screen goes dead does he look at me. I've never seen green-tinged skin. It's a real thing. 'What's with the puke bowl?'

'Can't stop.'

'That's not normal.'

He grunts, then moves to roll over, but suddenly launches at the bowl and dry retches into it. The effort makes him shudder.

'Ew. You should drink water.'

He shakes his head. 'Straight back up.'

What would Mum do? 'Do you have a temperature?' I don't know why that's always her first question.

He shrugs, the same way he does with Mum. I take out my phone. My brother might be the most annoying creature on this planet, but I can't leave him in this pathetic heap. 'It says that if you can't keep water down, you should go to hospital.'

'Leave it, Coco, please.'

It must be serious: Leo said please. It's already dark outside. I will not phone Mum. The person I really want to phone is Dad, but I can't. If Dad saw Leo in this condition it would only justify everything he's been saying about Leo and strangely, even though it's all true, I can't do that to my brother. In desperation, I try Bish but her phone is off. If only Angus weren't such a prat, I'd even call him. Leo rests his head on the side of the sofa, just above the puke bowl. He doesn't even respond when I pick up his phone and press his thumb on the home key. There are four missed calls from Mum.

He's been lying in the same spot for two days and he's puking all the time and according to Google he should go to hospital. What am I supposed to do?

'I'm calling an Uber,' I say, as I pick up my phone.

'Coco, no.'

'Put some clothes on, it will be here in three minutes.'

Leo sits in the back next to me, clutching his puke bowl. He groans and the driver frowns at us in the rear-view mirror. I squeeze my hands between my knees. but it does nothing to lessen the awkwardness.

For a few blocks the streets are empty except for the odd taxi and a few night dog walkers. But as we reach Battersea, it's like a different town: buses and cars queue up at the traffic lights. The pavements are busy with people walking — some look like they're just coming home from work, others have definitely been to the pub. We turn on to Albert Bridge Road.

'Where are we going?' Leo says.

'Chelsea and Westminster. It's the only one I know.' What do I do when we get there? Do I need Leo's NHS number? Will they call Mum? Damn Leo. We stop at a red light. I study the bulge of smokers outside a pub. There is a girl in a tiny dress, talking to a guy in a heavy city coat. The girl flicks her hair, trying too hard. The guy smiles lazily. Mum has a friend Jenna who lurches from one messed-up guy to another. She's recently paid a huge amount to join a tennis club even though she doesn't play, because she met a guy at a bar who mentioned he was a member. I will never be a Jenna.

The last couple of blocks are endless, but at last I see the hospital up ahead.

'Thanks,' I say, almost falling out the car, as the driver pulls up outside the entrance. I open the door for Leo. The driver leans back, to check Leo hasn't been silently sick. 'Will you be OK?'

'Absolutely!' I reply as I half drag Leo to the entrance doors.

The nurses at A&E reception don't seem very impressed with anything about us. They glare at Leo and his puke bowl. Name, date of birth, symptoms?

'It's not a virus,' I say.

The nurse looks at me: 'Diarrhoea?' I think I might be sick. They send us away to wait.

Nobody in the waiting room looks particularly ill. You would have thought that by 9.30pm on weeknight there would be a few proper emergencies, but actually everyone looks mostly bored. The TV mounted on the wall is set to the news. A man in Adidas pants asks the nurse to change the channel but apparently she can't. 'Can't or won't?' the guy mutters as he sits back down.

My phone battery is running low. For the hundredth time, I decide to call Mum, and lose my nerve. The time for that is over.

'Do you remember when you knocked your tooth out and Dad wouldn't take you to A&E until the Chelsea game had finished?'

Leo doesn't look up but manages a weak smile into his bowl.

'And after you'd broken your wrist and then your collarbone, Mum refused to take you in for your ankle because she said social services would be on to her.'

This time Leo laughs.

'Why was it never me going to A&E?'

'Because you're little miss perfect.'

His tone makes me glance at him. The usual older brother voice has been replaced by something more honest, closer to a real person. I look down at my fingers. 'Yeah, well, not anymore.'

Bish calls as I'm getting a coke from the vending machine. We haven't spoken since Natalie's class. The gulf between then and now seems almost too big. But I miss her. I need to hear her voice.

'Why are you talking in such a weird voice?' she asks. No 'we need to talk' or 'about last Friday'. But right now her being normal feels like an act of kindness, a lifeline.

I sit back down next to Leo. 'I'm at A&E with Leo. He can't stop puking and my mum is away.'

Leo looks up. When he's better he'll hate me for saying that.

'TMI, Coco. Put something over your mouth or you'll come home with a superbug. True fact.'

'How was Paris?' I say, watching my battery turn to red. I should hang up.

'Oh my God, amazing! You're an idiot to have missed it. It is the city of *l'amour*.'

I could swear Bish was single a week ago.

'So much to catch up on.' Bish giggles. Bish never giggles.

'Come over tomorrow,' I say.

'If you make it out alive,' she replies. She starts to say something but my phone dies. Shit. I glance over at Leo. 'Bish reckons we're going to catch something here with all these sick people.'

'It's a hospital.'

'We've already been here an hour. You need to be dying to get any attention. Do something! Groan. Roll about on the ground.'

Leo shakes his head.

'How about I hit you in the guts?'

Leo makes a retching sound which makes me laugh. I haven't said this much to Leo in years. It must be because he's too weak to insult me. I figure I might as well go for broke.

I hold my phone as if I'm playing a game and say, 'So you're mates with Ian Munro.' My tone is light and not bothered either way.

Leo grunts without looking up.

'He was at ours the other night.'

'Just turned up.'

I let a couple of unbothered minutes go by. 'Do you rate him?'

Leo picks up his head. Of all my brother's many terrors in life, the greatest is that one of his mates will hook up with me. I'm not even allowed to look at them if they're over, which isn't very often. Mum pretends he's being protective, but it's basic insecurity. And it's really annoying because somehow over the years he's landed some hot friends.

'Coco, I swear if you—'

'Relax, moron.'

'He was kind of off, talking a lot of shit.'

'Like what?'

'Coco.'

'Chill. You'll be puking up your intestines soon.'

Eventually Leo gets called. Suddenly I'm not sure whether to follow him. That's a mum job, not a sister job. What if they do something gross? But he looks back at me, and I realise that my brother is scared.

He is officially diagnosed as being an idiot. I knew it all along, but it doesn't harm to have it confirmed by the doctor on duty. Those were her exact words after she examined him. She gives me leaflets about alcohol abuse and helplines to call. He almost passes out when they insert the needle into his arm. He turns away and holds my hand so hard I think he's going to crush it. I sit next to him as they pump fluids back into him. After an hour I take a walk, to see if there is anything interesting going on in the other cubicles. By the time I return, the relief on Leo's face is pitiful.

'Why are you so freaked out?' I ask.

'I could have died.'

'Please.'

After another hour the nurse comes back to check on Leo and announces that she is going to keep him in overnight. 'You can go,' she adds, glancing at me.

'Leo?' He has closed his eyes. 'Will you be OK?'

He grunts sleepily, not bothering to open his eyes. Perfect. I don't want to go home to a dark house. I have just about enough money for an Uber home, but I don't want to get one on my own — what if I get abducted? What other choice do I have?

I barely breathe until the driver turns into our road. As he comes to a stop outside our house, I glance at it. The lights are all on. How can that be? Then I see something properly terrifying: Mum's car is parked outside.

ANGUS

'My Gus. Hearing your voice is like sunshine.'

I grunt. As usual, Mum is a little bit taking the piss. My answers so far have been monosyllabic at best.

'It's a bit grim here, Gussie. Your gran doesn't want to let go. Always been so stubborn.' Her little laugh is sad. 'It's all a bit bloody grim. How are things at home?'

'Likewise.'

'I'm sorry Dad's so stressed. I'm sorry he's had to go away. I'd be home in a shot ... I just ... don't know what to do.'

I think she's crying. She blows her nose to try and hide it. I don't know what to say.

Mum coughs in that 'pull yourself together' way. 'Dad's so worried about Ian. I'm texting you Evie's number. She'll come over any time. Day or night.'

'No Mum, she's already been around. What else can she do?'

'Whatever needs doing. She's the most capable person I know.'

'But she's terrifying.'

She laughs. 'That's all a front. She's the best.' She asks about school and what I've been eating, whether the Ocado deliveries are arriving, whether Maria is keeping the flat tidy. I answer 'fine' or 'yes', because that's what she wants to hear. Seconds after she hangs up, Evie's contact details arrive.

Everything is shit. Since watching Coco walk away from me a day ago, I'm living in layers of shittiness I never knew existed. I've tried to stop thinking about her because it physically hurts too much. It makes me want to break stuff. For the first time I understand the impulse to cut. So now that I am definitely not thinking about Coco, definitely not having to remind myself every other minute not to think about Coco, that just leaves Ian and his saving the

world and Trevor and this story about the money and people coming to collect it. I walk into the dining room to find his 'book'. Maybe there is something in those pages that will explain. Explain what? What the crap is going on. But the mess of paper has disappeared from the dining room. I force myself to walk back into his room. I look through the heap of clothes and general shit on his floor but can't see them. They have to be here somewhere. I push back the pile of duvet and sit on the bed and look at the scribbles on the wall. I don't know what to do. There is a single piece of paper lying face down. I pick it up.

The earth is singing
So much SO MUCH bigger than words, too loud for words
This is the essence of everything
Everything is in me
And I am
 I am
 I an
 In everything

Underneath it he has written his name in what looks like his blood.

I take out my phone and stare at Evie's contact details. I type her a message. Ian's words come back to me: *'If Evie comes around again, don't let her in.'* I look back at the bloody mess he's made of his name, take a breath and press send.

COCO

I've never seen Mum this angry. She struggles to get words out — deserted ... house ... darkness — let alone make any sense. When she finally remembers to breathe, I take the gap: 'Why didn't you phone?' Bad question. How could I let my battery die? Her questions get faster and louder. Do I know how irresponsible that is? How do I think that she must have felt?

'But you were only supposed to come back tomorrow.'

'So that makes it *fine*? Where the hell have you been? Where is your brother?'

'I took Leo to A&E. He couldn't keep anything down, so they put him on a drip overnight to rehydrate.'

This information shifts Mum's anger into the 'dangerous to human life' zone. I move towards the stairs, but not quickly enough. Which hospital? Why couldn't he keep anything down? How long has he been like this?

'A couple of days,' I mumble. I don't mention the party. That conversation I'll leave to Leo.

'*Two days*? Why didn't you call me?'

'Because you were on a retreat!' I explode.

Mum closes her eyes. When she opens them again it looks as though she's practising super-human restraint. But it's a deception. The next round of questions come just as thick and fast: Why didn't I phone Dad? Why didn't I get the hospital to phone her? What if they'd needed his medical history? How can I be so irresponsible?

'*Excuse me*? You know exactly why I didn't phone Dad. He would have gone ballistic. What did I do wrong? You should be thanking me.'

She picks up her bag and starts rooting around in it until she pulls out her car keys. 'I need to go to him.'

'Mum, he's fine. They only kept him in as a precaution. He'll be sleeping now.'

She looks at me as if I'm suggesting leaving a toddler next to an open flame, not an eighteen-year-old in hospital. She reaches for her coat, muttering loudly.

'He's at Chelsea and Westminster,' I say as she's heading for the door.

She stops and turns back. 'Why *there*?'

'It's the only hospital I knew.'

She holds up her hand. 'Forget it.' As she opens the front door she stops and looks back. 'You're grounded.'

Finally, *finally* in bed, I feel the adrenalin of the day draining out through my pores. I rub my face and find tears, but I don't even know what they're about. My brain skids about between Southbank and Harrods, between that awkward as hell moment on the tube, and the Tesco's bag full of Ian's mad writing. I get back up and bring the bag back to bed. There is no order to his so-called 'oeuvre'. Back in class, Ian said it was about love, that Angus and I were his 'inspiration', but the stuff I read earlier, the hollow eyes and endless universe, had nothing to do with love. Standing on the doorstep, he said 'it's all in the book', like it would explain everything. I flip through some pages that seem to be diagrams and formulae. I'm no genius but they look like nonsense to me. Finally, I find a page that starts with Angus' name:

Gussie she's right in front of you, and you're too scared. She is perfect — her nose, her tits, her lips, her nervous eyes and you're so scared. Too scared to live. You're both too scared of each other. Of what's there. You can't see it, you can't look at her, the way she wants you, back. You're too shit scared of the raw, pulsing, clawing ache. You don't know what to do with her, how to touch her. You think you'll drown in her, you'll drown her in your wanting. You're aching and she's aching and the world is aching from wanting and not getting. The heartbeat of the world is not life but aching. The aching keeps us going, the aching will eat us alive.

No. I toss the page away. *No-no-no-no-no*. I feel hot, much too hot. My heart is thudding, 'pulsing', in my ears. Is this his idea of a joke? Did he plant it in there to make fun of me? I pick up the page and put it right at the bottom of the pile. I stand across the room and stare at the pile of paper, as if it might move. This is bad, on every level. I've been brought into

those pages without my permission. What does Ian know about my 'wanting'? How dare he write about my tits? No. And the thought of anyone aching for me is ... weird? Not something I want to read about. Definitely not something Ian should be writing about. It's not right. There must be a law against this. I march back to the desk. I'll burn it. I have no idea why he left it for me, but I'm pretty sure Ian won't know if one page is gone. What if Angus has read it? Ohmygod no. I place my closed laptop on the pile of pages, then add a few textbooks for good measure. Anyway, it's bullshit. Angus does not want to 'drown' in me. That's laughable. There is no raw, pulsing, clawing ache. Angus made that very clear.

As I get back into bed I glance at the pile of books again. Just to be sure I understood it correctly, I find the page and read it through a few more times.

I wake up feeling as though something has pushed me out of sleep. It's gloomy outside although the morning traffic has started. Mum too has started downstairs, restoring law and order. The something that pushed me out of sleep nags away at me, but I can't remember what it is. Southbank? Angus? A&E? Mum? Stupid woman. How can she ground me for being responsible? I'll stay in bed all day. Nothing drives Mum to the edge like one of her children 'wasting the day' in bed. Something crinkles under my pillow as I turn over. *That* page. Of course. I pull it out and stare at it. What the hell am I supposed to do?

The kitchen door slams shut. I can sense Mum's rage even before she yells, 'Kitchen, now!'

She meets me at the bottom of the stairs. 'Why are the contents of your father's liquor store sitting outside, along with a gazillion other empties?'

'That is a question for your beloved first-born. You know the one you rushed off to see in hospital?'

'Hmph,' she says.

I turn and start back upstairs.

'But you knew about it,' Mum calls. She's seriously missing the point. Anyway, the only thing that matters at the moment is that page — *is Ian mocking me, or not?* Which is worse? It's awkward, obviously, because I don't fancy Angus. Ew. But I still want to know. How should I be the next time I see Angus, what do I say? Hearing the front gate click reminds me that Bish is supposed to be coming around. The doorbell rings. I hold my breath, but Mum opens and closes the front door without Bish appearing. I feel sick at the thought of seeing her. I should have a shower, clean my face. But I don't want to see myself in the mirror. I get back into bed and pull the duvet over my head.

When Mum returns with Leo, I listen for a while to the fire and brimstone, but I start to feel sorry for him and plug up my ears. You could argue that it was ridiculously naïve of her to leave two teenagers alone at home and not expect anything to happen, but I suspect now is not the time to bring that up.

By late morning I am so bored of my own company I'm ready to crawl downstairs and beg Mum's forgiveness, even though I've done nothing wrong. When I hear the gate shut again, I know this time it's Bish.

She finally gets past 'border control' in the sitting room, and runs up the stairs, but once inside my room, she stops. My best friend, who has known all my secrets since Year Seven. Between us stands Paris, Maya and Tash, the last few weeks, Ian's shit-show at school, and all the things I've accused her of in my head. Neither of us knows how to start. She fiddles with what looks like a diamante Eiffel tower pendant around her neck. I created this gap, it should be me reaching across it.

Bish sighs. 'So, obviously I was hurt that you didn't even tell me you were Angus' girlfriend.'

'Oh my GOD, I'm NOT! Ian was shooting his mouth off.'

'Why didn't you say?'

'You weren't exactly listening.'

This brings another silence, although the gap between us seems a little smaller. This is the moment when I tell her all about Ian, that day on the common, then at his flat and Leo's party. The story is so mad, she'd forgive me about not going to Paris and everything between us will be fine again. But my mouth stays shut.

Once again, it's her who makes the effort. 'Fine, but how can you get yourself grounded when you stay at home all week alone, and even your mum goes away? You didn't tell me your mum was going to be away.'

'Leo had a party.'

'Ew.' I wait for her brain to catch up. 'Oh my God, did that party involve Sam?'

Sam is the hottest of all Leo's mates. I'm not even allowed to look at Sam without Leo coming out in hives. 'Nah.' I can't meet her eye. Even though it's not exactly the fairy tale I had imagined, Ian and everything that has happened is mine and I still don't want her to be a part of it.

'So why are you grounded?'

'After you called last night my phone died and my mum couldn't get hold of me. She went off about that.'

That seems to satisfy Bish. 'Another thing, why have you disappeared from online everything? Tash reckons it's because—'

'Enough. My turn: why is Paris so very romantic?'

Bish blushes. I didn't know it was physically possible for her to blush, I've certainly never seen it before.

'Who?' I demand.

'You'd know if you hadn't deleted yourself from the world.' Bish is too excited to pick up my dangerously passive-aggressive smile. She takes a breath. 'Don't laugh—'

'Not Robbie,' I say.

'No! God.' She shudders. She looks down at her hands and mumbles something.

I laugh. 'I thought you said Zack.'

She looks up. 'He's really smart, and funny, and when he takes his glasses off, he's seriously hot.'

But Zack is a life-member of the 'irrelevants' list! I want to shout. Your rules, not mine. You can't just change with no warning. You only talk to Zack so that you can borrow his notes. And you were so rude about Angus, and Angus is a zillion times better than *Zack*. 'Wow,' I manage eventually. 'Did Zack the demi-god buy you the jewels?'

She fingers the diamante pendant again. She looks so rom-com happy, it's gross. 'Anyway, what did you do all week?'

'Nothing much,' I say, and look out the window. I don't feel guilty anymore, I'm seriously put out by this Zack business.

Bish picks up her bag. 'Yeah, so, um, I bought these along for you to read. Don't get mad.' She hands over a couple of NHS leaflets. The cover photo is of two girls, one with her arm around the other.

'*Depression?*' I laugh. It takes me a while to get it. 'Do I look depressed to you?'

She eyeballs my pyjamas and unwashed hair. 'First, you refuse to come to Paris, which we've been looking forward to since forever, then you block all your online accounts and spend the week on your own at home. You've not been yourself, everyone says so. Just read what they have to say.' She motions towards the pamphlets then gets up. 'It's ok to feel down,' she adds, sounding like a bad PSHE teacher.

I don't recognise this new Bish. The old one would have made a comment about the Samaritans waiting for my call, that I should step off my soap box because some people have real problems. 'Great. Thanks,' I say in my deepest sarcastic-happy voice, but all she does is smile. By the time she's walking down the front path she's already on her phone, her duty done.

I'm too weirded-out to stay in my room any longer. Leo is flat out on his bed. Mum is in the kitchen, at the sink. She seems to have calmed down enough that I risk getting something

to eat, although I keep a small distance. 'Why exactly am I grounded? Is it for taking my brother to the hospital or for not being at home when you came back unexpectedly early?'

'It's for giving me a fright. And letting your phone run out of battery.'

'You do know how unreasonable that is, right?'

Mum sighs. 'You're not grounded. Your brother is until after your father gets back.'

'Can you ground an eighteen-year-old?'

'I can,' she says in a voice that leaves no room for doubt.

I open the fridge. Somehow this morning Mum has managed to do a 'Leo' shop. She may be furious with him, but she's still stocked up on her baby boy's favourite things. It is exciting to have real food again. I take out cheese and salami and Parma ham. 'So why did you come home early?'

Mum takes a while to answer. 'It wasn't exactly what I expected. It was advertised to be something about empowering women in the second half of their lives, but turned out to be about accessing our inner goddesses and Mother Moon ...' She wrinkles up her nose. 'It just felt silly.' She laughs. 'It's difficult to explain. Everyone else seemed so fired up about it, I felt like an imposter.'

'You didn't drink the kool-aid,' I say. About a year ago Mum told me about the mass-poisoning of members of some cult, in a lecture about the dangers of not thinking for yourself.

Mum smiles but she seems sad.

'Did you just drive off?'

'No, I told them there was an emergency at home. Turns out I wasn't far off.'

I pop a bagel in the toaster. 'Why do you feel unempowered?'

I meant it as a joke, but she takes it seriously. She doesn't answer while she takes off the washing-up gloves. 'Disempowered. I don't know. That's part of the problem I guess, I wanted the course to fix it.'

'You don't need to be fixed, Mum.' I smear thick butter on the warm bagel and layer on the ham, cheese and salami, and finally a generous dollop of mayo. I can feel Mum watching me, and the bagel, biting her tongue. To placate her, I chuck some cherry tomatoes on the side of my plate.

I take a bite. Oh my God, it is perfection. Mum is kneeling at the cupboard under the sink. 'Did you use up all the cleaning products while I was away?'

'Leo's friends are disgusting,' I say. I don't want to talk about Leo anymore. 'Bish thinks I'm depressed, she brought around a bunch of pamphlets.'

Mum puts the bottle of bleach down and stands up. Symptoms of teenage mental ill-health is one of her specialist areas of interest. She'll print out articles and leave them in the loo or on the kitchen table. 'Why does she think that?' she asks in a carefully measured voice.

I finish chewing. 'Because I didn't want to go to P—' I stop myself just in time. 'A party,' I finish.

'Right.' Mum tries to hide it, but she thinks Bish is odd. 'Quirky' is the word she uses. 'Do you feel depressed?'

I feel as though no one and nothing makes sense. I feel as though all my instincts are completely whacked and it's terrifying. I feel as though I've been sleeping for sixteen years and suddenly everything is too bright and too loud and I can't make any sense of it. I shrug. 'Nah.'

'Well then.' She gives me a small smile. 'The moon goddesses at my retreat would claim that the planets are out of alignment or something. Mars has got stuck in Venus.'

'Mars is stuck in Venus?' I laugh. You can rely on Mum to get it wrong.

'What we need is a run. Look at the sunshine! Half an hour, max.'

No chance. Mum's runs are never half an hour max. 'Actually, I'm about to take a wise old woman's advice and listen to *Mrs Dalloway*. My essay is already late.'

I watch Mum choose whether to react to the 'wise old woman' dig. She goes for the high ground. 'The world needs more wise old women,' she says lightly.

'We'll see.'

The windowsill in my room is wide enough for me to sit on and long enough to stretch my legs out fully. The sun, although watered-down and wintery, is making an effort, and at this time of day my window is the perfect sun trap. I arrange some cushions under my bum and pop in my AirPods. I will not think about the page or Bish or anything. I will listen to this blasted book all day. I even have my copy of the book in case I feel inspired to read along.

When I open my eyes, Mum is standing in the doorway, sweaty and blotchy red from running in the cold. Her face lights up when she realises that I'm still listening. 'How is it going?'

I pause the book. 'It's like the awkward love child of "Downton Abbey" and you.'

Mum laughs. 'Me?'

I tip my head to the side. 'She spends I don't know how many pages worrying about the flowers she is going to buy for her party that evening.' Mum is about to respond but I press on. 'And she gets super excited because she thinks she sees the King drive past. If you saw Kate Middleton drive past, you'd be exactly the same.'

'But Mrs Dalloway is old,' Mum says, sounding a bit like Mrs Dalloway herself.

'Fifty-two.' I reply.

Mum stares at me. 'That's the most depressing thing I've heard all day.' She shakes her head and leaves me to it.

The words flow slow and dense without a break, swimming about in my head. The reader should get into hypnotism. The combination of her rich syrupy voice and the sun on my face makes my scalp tingle. I close my eyes again to concentrate.

The sun has moved. There are sparrows speaking Greek in Regents Park. I sit up. What? We are a long way from flowers on Bond Street. I replay the last section.

A man, Septimus, writes things down on pieces of paper. Random sentences that are both meaningless and chilling. *Ian*. No. Ian's sentences are weird, and random, but he doesn't write about the dead. He doesn't see the dead. Ian is all about living and changing the world and *longing* — I blush at the thought of that page. I press play again but forty minutes later the Ian thought still won't go away.

Mum is in the kitchen.

'You know the guy in the book with the singing sparrows?' I say, stealing one of the carrots she has peeled. 'He turns out OK in the end, right?'

My mum looks up at me, trying to remember. Her face changes.

'Oh my God, Mum.' I feel cold.

She frowns at my reaction. 'He had PTSD from the war, Coco. And it was a long time ago. These days they'd deal with it so much better.' She is watching my face. 'It's not real darling, it's just a book.' She places a hand on my arm.

'I've got PTSD,' says Leo, from the doorway.

'From what?' Mum asks, still looking at me.

'Living with Coco.'

He must be feeling better if he's insulting me again. I wait for the familiar feelings of Leo-induced aggravation but find instead that I have to bite my cheek to stop myself smiling.

'You.' Mum turns on him. He's not out of the Mum-rage woods yet. 'Your father is coming home on Friday and you will be here and you will behave.'

ANGUS

Ian is going to hate me. The moment I'd sent that text I knew it was the wrong thing to do.

I hate myself for getting so freaked out, for being such a pussy. I hate myself for letting Ian down like this. I hate myself for feeling relieved.

Evie replied almost immediately: 'I'll be over later.' The words sounded busy and in control. Anyway, Mum told me to call her, she said Evie was the best, and Mum trumps Ian, right?

But as the day drags on, I feel less and less sure. I can't leave the flat in case either of them turns up. I haven't seen Ian since he woke me up with that stupid book. That's a day and a half. What if Evie arrives and he doesn't show? And she gets annoyed with me for wasting her time? I decide to leave, and then when Evie arrives there will be no one here, and she'll have to go away. But I just sit here, like a moron, doing nothing.

By the time it's getting dark outside, Ian still isn't home. I send Evie another text: 'Actually it's all fine. Sorry to bother you', hoping she'll take the hint. Two minutes later, the buzzer goes. Fuck.

'There you are,' she says as I let her in. She pauses just inside the doorway to unwrap herself. As the beanie, chunky scarf and woollen coat come off, she gets smaller and smaller. But her size is deceptive — she once beat Ian at arm wrestling. 'On the way up a tiny woman opened her door and asked me if I was an evangelist. Apparently, someone keeps trying to heal her.'

'Sounds like Ian,' I say, 'he said they were friends.'

Evie raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything as she dumps her layers in the sitting room. She walks into the kitchen. The reality of her here confirms what a huge cock-up this is. She leans against a counter. 'Evie, this is—'

'How's your mum?' she interrupts me.

I look at her, wondering what to say.

'Stupid question, sorry. It must be hard having her so far away.' She says it in a kind but matter-of-fact voice that catches me off guard. I need to get her out of here.

She picks up an empty mug and puts it in the sink.

'Leave those,' I say, and it comes out too strong. She looks at me. 'I'm sorry Evie, I shouldn't have texted. See — everything's fine. Don't know what I was thinking.'

'Is Ian around?' she says lightly.

'Not at the moment.'

She picks up the kettle and moves to the sink to fill it. *Stop doing that, this is my home!* I want to shout. I scratch my neck. It's suddenly unbearably itchy. As she turns towards me, I force myself to stop scratching.

'I don't mind waiting,' she replies. 'Cup of tea?'

I mutter about homework and slink back to my room, wondering what on earth to do now. I sit at my desk and listen to each noise she makes. After washing the dishes, she empties the bin and finally starts up the handheld vacuum. Mercifully she doesn't go near Ian's room. I feel like an inconvenient guest trying to stay as invisible as possible. As I'm beginning to think I'll have to go back and talk to her, the key turns in the lock and Ian bursts in. I spring to the entrance of my room to watch his reaction to seeing Evie. But hanging on to Ian, with smudged purple-black lipstick, is Jez.

'Gussie?' he calls. Then he sees Evie. Ian seems to forget about Jez. He looks annoyed. He's wearing another of my t-shirts and the tux trousers.

'There you are,' says Evie, the same words she used on me. She eyeballs Jez, who responds with her '*yeah and?*' look but it bounces straight off Evie. Jez steps closer to Ian, but he shrugs her off. I feel bad for her.

Evie puts the vacuum down. 'Are you going to introduce me to your friend?'

Ian is still death-staring me.

'Her name is Jez,' I say and walk towards them. A bunch of reactions cross Jez' face, slower due to whatever she's taken earlier, but it settles on defiance. It definitely has more

effect on me than it had on Evie. I stop a few paces away from Ian, close enough to see that Jez has left her mark on his neck and the sleeve of my t-shirt.

‘Exactly,’ says Ian. He sighs theatrically and clasps his hands together, all the while staring at me. ‘This awkwardness you may be picking up on, Evie, is because Jez and Gussie were ... close. Maybe even a *thing*?’ He shrugs. ‘Depends on who you talk to. But Gussie doesn’t know what or who he wants, so I was happy to fill in. Keep it in the family, right? Take one for the team. I mean she’s not bad looking.’ He looks at Jez, his head to the side. ‘Nothing like Coco though.’ He turns back and winks at me.

‘Don’t be a dick,’ I say. Jez is staring at her fingernails.

‘That’s quite enough, Ian,’ says Evie.

Ian looks surprised. ‘But it’s true.’

‘No, it’s rude. You’re embarrassing your friend and your brother.’

Ian looks put out. ‘Why are you even here?’ he asks Evie.

He turns back to me. ‘Did you let her in? I fucking told you not to.’ His voice is rising. I start scratching my neck.

‘Your father asked me to come. He is concerned about Angus and you.’

‘Me?’ Ian laughs. ‘That man invents things to worry about.’ He sighs. ‘Jez and I were going to spend a cosy evening together, but that doesn’t look likely anymore, does it?’

Jez mumbles something and pulls out her phone.

‘Would you like a hot drink, Jez?’ Evie asks. But Jez seems desperate to leave. She opens the door and is half disappeared through it before Evie says, ‘Walk her out, Ian.’

‘So,’ says Ian on his return, rubbing his hands together, ‘what now?’

Evie looks at him. ‘How about a cuppa?’

‘Actually, I’d much rather have a mug of Coco, hey Gussie.’ Ian laughs.

‘Don’t be a prick,’ I say.

Ian walks into the kitchen, opens the fridge and pulls out a quiche. It's still in the box. It's been there for over a week, one of items Mum put on the Ocado delivery, hoping I guess we'd try it in desperation. Ian takes it out the box and bites into it. 'Fucking A,' he says.

'Why are you behaving like this?' I say to him, pushing my hands into my jean pockets, to control the urge to hit him.

Ian looks at me. 'Don't be greedy, Gussie, you can't have all the girls.' He laughs and takes another bite.

I don't know who this person is. Ian disappears into his room. I sit down at the kitchen table, watching Evie pour boiling water into a mug.

'I'll just take this to Ian,' she says. Then she's back, sitting down next to me. 'Gussie, how long has he been like this?' The kindly voice is back.

Whatever 'this' is, is none of Evie's business. But my silence doesn't put her off.

I sigh. 'He's just Ian, Evie, you forget when you're not around him.'

She purses her lips and is about to speak when Ian comes back into the kitchen. 'Good tea. I'm going out for a bit.'

'No Ian, not tonight,' replies Evie. He looks surprised. It occurs to me that no one really says no to him.

'I've got places to be.'

Evie stands up. I want to laugh — how is this tiny woman going to get in Ian's way? But it seems to confuse him.

'I'm jittery. I need to walk.' His voice is sulky.

'You can be jittery here,' she replies.

Ian looks around the kitchen, his expression seriously annoyed, but for some reason doesn't argue. 'Put that away,' he says, eyeing her phone on the counter. 'Those things are poison to the brain.' He walks around the kitchen.

'Yes, I've heard that,' says Evie conversationally. 'Or did I read it somewhere? Some people are very sensitive to the electro-magnetic rays.'

'Some people?' Ian snorts, '*Everyone*. They're eating out our brains, but no one cares. Mass stupidity. That's how the robots are going to take over, you know. They already are. See here?' He pulls up his sleeve to reveal a bruise the size of a tennis ball.

'How did you get that?'

Ian waves his hand dismissively. 'Do you know how many people won't listen to the truth? Dogged stupidity is endemic.'

Evie glances at me, but when she talks to Ian her chatty tone is back. 'Can't you get special phone cases to limit radiation exposure?'

Ian shakes his head. 'Useless. The only way to stop the rays is to smash the phone.'

'I had no idea it was so serious,' replies Evie.

'Would you like me to smash yours?' asks Ian, 'I've got the technique sorted.'

'Maybe tomorrow,' says Evie, 'I've some important info on it.'

'You're hooked, you're an addict.' Ian gets up again, glancing at the front door.

'I think you should write that down,' says Evie.

'I've already written a book,' replies Ian. He sounds like a five-year-old.

'About the radiation? There's a lot of public interest in that.'

Ian looks at her. I watch him. 'The previous one was about love, the universe ... No, it was about everything. But you're right. Another one won't take me long. The other book took just a few days. It's already out there, where it needs to be, doing what it needs to do.' He gives me a very strange look.

'You could probably finish this one tonight,' says Evie.

'I probably could,' agrees Ian.

'Get it down while you've got the inspiration,' says Evie. She keeps her voice chatty.

Ian jumps up. 'Good idea,' he says and leaves the room. Moments later his door slams shut. Ian's left-over energy hangs in the room, like static that can't disintegrate.

I look at her. I can't tell what she's thinking and I'm not sure I want to know either. 'It's not drugs, if that's what you think,' I say.

'I agree,' she says, completely unflappable.

'He really did write a book.'

'Can I see it?'

'I was looking for it earlier, I don't know what he's done with it.'

'That's OK.' She gets up and puts her hand on my arm. 'Gussie, the best thing you can do now is get some sleep.'

Evie looks determined to stay the night. Despite the fact that I'm quite sure it's going to end badly, I'm relieved. Ian won't get past her tonight. I fall asleep to the sound of Ian firing comments at Evie, and her low, calm replies.

COCO

All night long the audiobook reader talks inside my head in that slow, thick double-cream voice. She has somehow managed to take over control of my thoughts — I'm standing somewhere behind her, unable to interrupt. She describes the day, with Bish's visit, lovely Bish who deserves a much better friend than me. Bish, who will be happy ever after because she does not hide things from her friends. The voice becomes Mum, becomes Angus, all the time talking without taking a breath, and I can't wake up and I can't make her stop.

She becomes Ian, talking about my longing, my nose, the birds in Regents Park.

'Shut up, just shut up!' I yell, but Ian booms over me, words that make no sense, louder and faster and deeper, until the words are coming out of my bones.

At last I am awake — sweating — but in my bed. Silence. I'm too scared of that voice to go back to sleep.

ANGUS

Evie wakes me up with another cup of tea. One minute I was reading a book, the next she's knocking on my door. She smiles, but it puts me on edge. It's too official — it's her nurse's smile.

'I was healed twice last night,' she says cheerfully, as if announcing sunny skies. I shift and sit up and she perches on the side of my bed, like she's preparing to give me bad news. I want to run away from what she's about to say, from the flat, mostly from Ian. I take a sip. Fair play to her — she makes good tea.

'I've spoken to Dad, I tried to get hold of Mum but no luck yet.'

It's funny how grown-ups do that when they want to remind you of their authority — 'your dad' becomes capital D Dad. It means what she's about to say is going to be even worse. 'Need the loo,' I mutter and leave her sitting on my bed.

Ian passes me in his boxers. He's holding a Coke in one hand. 'Almost done!' he says, 'Book two in the bag. It's exceptional, Boyo.'

'Right,' I say and lock myself in the bathroom.

I sit on the edge of the bath, wondering how long I have to stay here before Evie needs to leave. It's already 8.30am. My knee is jiggling of its own accord. Trying to stop it only makes it worse.

'Angus?' Evie knocks on the door. Jesus Christ.

I unlock the door.

'Angus, please.' She's blocking my way. I wouldn't get past her without knocking her down. Despite her tiny size, I have a feeling she's stronger than me.

'Evie!' Ian calls, 'You're not going to believe this!'

She looks over her shoulder, then back at me. 'I know this is horrible. Awful. But I want to take Ian to see a friend of a friend, a doctor. He's managed to fit us in this morning, which is amazing, at such short notice. Your dad is in agreement.'

'Good luck with that. Ian hates doctors.'

Her face stays firm. 'And I'd like you to help me. He's not well, Angus. We need to get him help, someone who can start to address the mania.'

'Mania?' I laugh. This woman spends too much time with crazies. 'He's always like this, Evie.'

'No, he's not.'

'Evie!' shouts Ian.

'Hang on,' she calls.

'I don't have the *time* to hang on, Evie. Jesus!' Ian's voice booms back.

'You know that he is not himself. Have you been into his room?'

I look away.

'He is not going to get better without help, Angus, in fact he's only going to become more dangerous to himself and you, and strangers.'

'It's a phase, Evie, he's not *dangerous*.' I roll my eyes.

Evie gives me a hard look. 'I know it's unfair and it should be Dad or Mum, but I don't want to wait until your dad gets back, because the fact is that the longer we leave it, the longer the recovery.'

'Fuck sakes, Evie!' Ian's voice shouts. A door bangs.

'Will you help me?'

Evie's not going to let up until she feels like she's done something. All I need to do is go along with Evie to her doctor friend and play along with her story. I don't look at her, but I nod.

She stands next to Ian as he's scribbling away and tells him that her doctor friend is very interested in his healing ability, that he'd like to find out more. Ian doesn't even look up. It's out of the question. Leaving the house now would interrupt his flow. *Told you, Evie*, I gloat silently. But Evie is not finished. It could be important for Ian's book, she argues. Who

knows, the backing of the medical establishment might propel his work into a completely different domain of readership.

Ian stops writing and sits up. She's got him. He looks at me. 'Gussie?'

I look away.

'Why are you so negative about this?'

'I'm not negative,' I reply, feeling them both frowning at me.

'Unnecessarily negative. You don't want this to work, you're jealous of my gift. Evie's right — this could be a very good thing.' He stands up, rubs his hands together. 'Angus can't come with us, he's not a believer,' he says to Evie.

Evie fixes her eyes on Ian. 'Angus is coming.'

He turns back to me. 'You don't deserve this. But if I let you be a part of this, you need to improve your attitude.'

Evie has planned it all. A taxi arrives. Ian has chosen his outfit carefully — shorts, flip-flops and Mum's long brown furry winter coat. By the time we get downstairs the driver is obviously impatient. I get in first. The driver glances at Ian's outfit and swears under his breath. Ian is about to get in next to me, then steps away. 'I can't sit next to Angus — his negativity is polluting me. I need to keep my healing energy clean.'

The taxi driver turns around. 'Are we going or not?'

'Could he sit up front with you?' Evie turns to the driver. Her voice is pleasant; her calm seems to be unshakeable.

The driver snorts. 'No chance.'

'What if Angus turns away? And I sit between you. Would that work, Ian?' Evie says.

Ian rubs his nose. 'Yup, that will work, so long as he doesn't turn around.'

We are barely all in before the driver pulls into the road. I feel ridiculous, being forced to sit facing the window. Ian turns himself away from me, but every couple of minutes he swings around to check that I haven't turned back.

'I can still feel it,' he mutters, 'When did you get so toxic, Gussie?' He gives himself a body-shake.

The taxi driver is clearly keen to be rid of us as quickly as possible. He grumbles when he misses traffic lights, and switches lanes compulsively as we crawl up the edge of Hyde Park. The tops of the almost-bare trees seem to disappear into the low hanging cloud. The park is busy with runners and cyclists. Tour buses clog up the bus lane, which further infuriates our driver.

Ian has gone silent. Evie breathes out — long and slow, in a way that contradicts the 'Unflappable Evie' show we've had all morning.

'Gussie,' Ian swings around, making Evie jump. 'Where did I put my book?'

'You don't need your book, Ian,' replies Evie, back in character, but I can feel her body brace for more combat.

'Not *that* one,' he snaps. He leans across her and tugs my arm. 'Look at me, for God's sake. The first one. We're heading towards Bloomsbury. There a lot of publishers around there. We could just drop it off.'

'Maybe another time,' says Evie. 'We don't want to keep my friend waiting.'

'Don't we?' says Ian, 'I'm not sure we want to see your friend at all.' His words are ridiculous, like a seriously bad villain.

Evie elbows me and makes the tiniest head jerk towards Ian. I know she wants me to back her up but the way she's using me as her little puppet is really beginning to grate. On the other hand, if Ian was to find that his precious book isn't where he left it, he'd go next level ape-shit.

'Let's go to the doc, bro,' I say, staring at the back of the driver's head.

Ian leans forward and studies me, as though he can sense my deceit. I feel my face get hotter. He sits back. 'Gussie's right. He's always right.'

Evie breathes out and I feel even worse.

The driver turns on to Wimpole Street. 'Pissing roadworks,' he mutters as the left side of the roadworks and pavement is cordoned off.

'It's fine, we'll get out here,' Evie says quickly and hands him her card. We follow her up the pavement, passing a series of seemingly identical shiny black doors in a row of tall buildings that line both sides of the road. The roadwork barriers mean that she has to walk ahead of us, but she glances back at the two of us every few seconds. There is a cluster of workmen sitting on the steps leading to the door she stops at. 'Excuse me,' she says stepping around them, but they ignore her. A number of brass plates with doorbells line the right-hand side of the door. Evie rings the bell for Richard Dodds.

'At odds with Dodds,' Ian says to me. 'Dear Dicky Dodds.'

'Behave,' says Evie.

Ian makes a face. I feel an irrational giggle rising up inside and clamp my mouth shut. The entrance hall is wide, with a chessboard tiled floor. The doorman behind the desk takes a while to look up from his computer.

'Dr Dodds,' says Evie.

'Third floor,' he replies and returns to his computer.

'I bet that dude's watching porn,' says Ian in a much too loud whisper.

'Enough,' says Evie over her shoulder.

The staircase snakes up and back on itself in an oval; the type that makes an arty photo from above.

The receptionist on the third floor takes us into a consulting room. She smiles in a blank way. The room she leaves us in has a couple of armchairs in front of a neat desk with nothing on it other than a lamp, an empty in-tray and a pen beside it. There is a large window with a view of London rooftops. Slightly hidden by the open door is a long couch and a coffee table with a box of tissues. Ian walks over to the window, while Evie and I hover close to the door.

Richard Dodds walks in a couple of minutes later, holding a leather-bound folder and a clipboard. He looks older than Dad, the type of man who pulls up his trousers before he sits down. A look passes between him and Evie as he greets her. He turns to Ian and me, all smiles as Evie introduces us. Richard Dodds is delighted to meet us. He trusts we found our way here despite the dreadful roadworks. Such a bore. He holds out the clipboard towards Ian. 'I wonder if you could pop next door and fill this in, Ian? Just a way of getting to know you. We'll wait here for you. Obviously at this stage this is not a *formal* chat, but it's helpful.'

Ian takes the clipboard. 'A test! You know I'll ace it. Unfair advantage. Perhaps it's me who should be setting you the test.' He looks Richard in the eye and for a moment I think he's going to make a scene, but then he smiles that horrible, too big smile, and leaves the room.

'Sit,' Richard motions to Evie and me. He opens his folder, pulls a pen out of his inside suit pocket. The pen looks heavy, the colour of a bullet.

'While we wait for Ian, anything you want to mention about your brother?' He looks at me.

I don't know what to say. I feel Evie's eyes on me. 'Not really,' I mumble.

'Have you noticed a change in his moods?'

I shrug. 'I mean ...' YES, a voice in my head shouts, so loud and forcefully that I clamp my mouth shut. But since when? Since before the smashed phones and meeting God. Since Mum's been away and home got quieter and Ian got louder. His laugh got too long and loud. He started leaving me behind. Back when Ian wanted to be Superman, what I really wanted was superhuman legs, to be able to keep up with him, maybe even beat him. Back then he'd always stop and wait for me, eventually. He doesn't stop for me anymore.

Richard Dodds is waiting for an answer. Evie's eyes drill into the side of my head. The silence in the room is so intense, and their attention so fixed, it's suddenly like they're waiting to pounce. Like that moment in a kids' movie where the disguise slips and the nice old lady becomes a witch. I know that's ridiculous but my mouth stays shut.

Richard scribbles something on his notes. 'Is he sleeping less? Behaving differently? Anything you think may be noteworthy. Out of all of us here, you know him best.'

I do know him best and this feels like a trap, as though everything I say counts in a way that I don't understand and will somehow be used against Ian. This is Evie's fault. No, it's my fault for letting her in last night. I've let Ian down. All of this is my fault.

'Angus?' Evie prompts.

'Not really,' I say.

'Angus.' Evie breathes out, but Ian chooses this moment to burst back in.

'Done.' He presents the clipboard to Richard. 'Bit of an odd test, not sure where you were leading with the thoughts of suicide. Do many of your patients feel suicidal? Hopefully not after treatment!' Ian laughs.

Richard Dodds laughs as if appreciating a really good joke, but only for a few seconds. 'Indeed,' he says as he glances over the pages on the clipboard.

Ian walks to the window and rubs his hands together. 'So, Evie tells me you want to learn how to heal, Doctor?'

'Well, yes. Tell me about your ability, Ian,' says Richard, with the tiniest glance at Evie.

'That would be virtually impossible,' says Ian in a resigned voice, 'like teaching an ant Calculus.'

'I see,' says Richard, and writes something on his pad. 'Nonetheless, it sounds intriguing.'

'Ian, sit down and talk to Richard,' says Evie.

'That's fine, Ian is perfectly entitled to stand.' But Ian is irritated by Evie's comment and starts pacing. The window has a view of London's skyline, grey sky, darker grey roofs, a few yellow cranes dotted about. The crane arm closest to us starts moving. I imagine it smashing into our building: the impact, the feeling of being crushed. That makes me think of King Kong, grabbing chunks of building, sending cars and buses skidding through the air.

'I met another healer a long time ago,' says Richard.

'Where?' asks Ian, still pacing.

'India. An extraordinary man. It seemed as if all the power was in his hands. It was incredible to be touched by him, his hands were warm; almost buzzing.'

Ian stops and stares at Richard. 'I have that too. Sometimes. Did he heal you?'

'Well, I wasn't actually sick when I went to him. But I was very moved by the experience. He had a great following.'

Ian has his hands on his hips, sizing the doctor up. Richard maintains his chatty, 'this is not a *formal* chat' tone. He turns the discussion towards some people's unwillingness to get better, why they would want to stay sick.

'Laziness, mostly, and fear,' Ian replies, and looks at me.

Richard follows his gaze and for a moment there is a silence as everyone in the room stares at me. I study the picture on the wall behind Richard. It is a black and white print of a ballet dancer in a tutu, folding over her outstretched leg. Richard follows my gaze. 'Do you know the one thing ballet dancers have in common? You'd think flexibility or balance, but in fact it's an incredibly high pain threshold. Same with acrobats.' He turns back to Ian.

The dancer reminds me of Coco, even though she looks nothing like her. Along with the thought of Coco comes a pain — like a stab or a squeezing so intense I lose my breath and have to look away.

Richard is asking Ian about his life — is he studying or perhaps working?

'Investor-slash-entrepreneur.'

'Bravo. That's what I love about your generation. So much energy.' This so-called doctor's tone, mild and patronising, makes me turn back to him. He scribbles something on his pad. He's not listening to my brother. He doesn't see Ian. He's so caught up in his own knowledge and importance. I imagine King Kong picking up Richard Dodds and swinging him around his head before hurling him over the London roofs. Is Ian having trouble sleeping? Richard Dodds wants to know. Does he find himself skipping meals? It sounds as

though he is very busy. And this healing, is he aware of this ability all the time, or just sometimes? When did he first start feeling this way? Was there some event that triggered, or perhaps led up to this *ability*?

Ian is staring at Richard Dodds, apparently listening, but something in his brain has clicked into place. His perfect stillness gives off so much energy he could sell it commercially. He sits down carefully. Richard doesn't notice the change. When he finally stops talking, Ian puts his head to the side and says, 'I *have* been having trouble sleeping.' His words are slower, more measured. He pauses. I watch his Adams apple bob up and down as he swallows before he continues. 'If I could just sleep a bit more and remember to eat.'

Dodds is nodding like a toy donkey. 'Exactly.'

'It's what you were saying last night, Evie.' Ian turns to Evie. Evie is obviously trying to catch up with what is going on in the room. 'And I'm sure then I wouldn't feel quite so ...'

'Wound up?' Richard Dodds suggests.

'Exactly,' says Ian, nodding.

'Richard, if I could—' tries Evie, but Richard seems not to hear her.

'I'd like to see you back in a couple of days, Ian,' he says.

'Richard, as I mentioned on the phone, there is more to this than—' Evie tries again. But Ian has stood up. He smooths his hands down the sides of Mum's coat.

'Thank you, doctor,' says Ian. As he passes me on the way out, he gives me a wink, his face resembling a Jack Nicholson Joker.

I stay where I am, sunk into the chair.

Evie seems to have forgotten I'm there. 'Richard!' it comes out as a rush. She stops and starts again in a more measured voice: 'The delusion, or the inflated—'

‘Nothing in his presentation suggested he is a danger to himself or anyone else. Certainly not a need for *sectioning*, Eve. Without a direct family member ...’ They both look at me.

Evie ploughs on. ‘But as I said, there is substantial evidence of —’

‘You asked for my professional opinion, Eve, and I gave it to you.’

I stand up. ‘I’m going to leave now.’

‘No, Angus, stop!’ Evie calls.

Downstairs the workmen have decided to pull up the pavement. Specifically, there is one guy on a drill while the others stand around watching him. The drilling blanks out all the normal London sounds.

In the cocoon of noise I can push back the past half hour, the past twenty-four hours. As long as the thundering lasts, I am safe inside now. No Ian, no nagging Evie, no ridiculous doctors. I can cut off the rest of today. The juddering shakes aside all the thoughts I will have to think for a few blissful moments. But the guy stops, takes his hard hat off and wipes his sweaty forehead., ‘Fuck you, bastard,’ I say, although obviously not loud enough for him to hear. He’s still holding a drill, after all.

Ian has completely vanished of course. Sadly, I can’t say the same for Evie. She appears at my side and takes hold of my elbow. I have no interest in hearing what she’s about to say, so I jump in to save her the trouble: ‘That guy is a fuckwit. I’m not surprised Ian left.’

She ignores my comment. ‘Where do you think he’s gone?’ There is no trace of the firm and efficient, even the kindly nurse. Instead she looks worried, scared even.

That’s when I get scared.

I shake her hand off my arm. ‘Dunno, Evie. He’s not likely on his way home though, is he?’ Instead of hanging around for her reply, I zip up my jacket, pull my hoodie close around my eyes and start running.

COCO

God, that dream. My head feels thick and vacuum-packed, as if every molecule of water has been sucked out. I don't get nightmares. I barely remember my dreams, and I've certainly never had anything as horrible and endless as that. Despite the daylight, the feeling of it is still everywhere, like an invisible layer hovering over my skin. My copy of *Mrs Dalloway* sits innocently on my bedside table, painted flowers on the cover. There is no hint of the awfulness inside those endless paragraphs. Virginia Woolf did not have to make Septimus die. It's sensationalist. Irresponsible.

Downstairs, Mum is in her Pilates uniform — leggings, crop top and zip-up hoodie — head-to-toe Sweaty Betty. She's like their pre-menopausal poster girl.

She sees me and switches on a manic smile. 'Oh good you're up.' She holds out a take-away cup. 'On my way back from class I picked up a turmeric latte. I thought you'd like one too?'

I shake my head and switch on the kettle.

'It's actually delicious.' She sounds annoyed but I didn't ask for it. She knows I don't like that kind of stuff.

I put a tea bag into a mug and wait for the kettle. She's hovering. I can't deal with this today. 'What?'

'So at class this morning, I was talking to—'

'Here we go,' I mutter.

She sighs. 'Alright Coco, have it your way.' Her voice changes back to pissed-off Mum. No more manic smile. I knew it was a cover-up. 'Two things: firstly, I was talking to Lucy, whose niece is in your year.'

'And?'

'And Lucy's niece has just come back from a trip to Paris, the lower sixth group trip organised by school.'

Shit. 'And?'

'And I want to know why you told me it was cancelled.'

Double shit. Trust Lucy from Pilates to ruin my life. 'Jeez Mum, I don't know, I just didn't want to go—'

'You and Bish have been looking forward to that—'

'And I thought you'd make me go. It was just easier.'

'It was easier to *lie* to me?'

Mum goes ape-shit about lying, even about stupid things. *Just don't lie to me; there is no need to lie.* 'Why are you getting so heavy about this?' I say, edging out the kitchen.

'I'm not finished,' Mum says in a voice that forces me to stop. 'Lucy also knows about an excellent adolescent counsellor.'

I bang my mug down on the counter. Tea sloshes everywhere. 'Ohmygod Mother, what is your problem?'

Mum looks taken-aback but tries to hide it. 'After what Bish said, I was thinking about it, and not going to Paris ...'

'So you start talking to everyone at Pilates about me?'

'Hang on a moment, I'm your mother, I have every right to talk to whoever I want.'

'No, you don't. Stop interfering. Just because you're unhappy with your own life.'

Mum looks like I slapped her. I'm almost as shocked as she is. But her silence makes me angrier. 'Just leave me alone!' I shout and run upstairs.

Back in my room, there is a message from Bish on my phone. They are going to Starbucks and do I want to join them, because even if you don't always feel like it, it's good to get out?? Smiley face. A pity coffee, while she and Zack drool over each other? No thanks.

Sorry, I lie in reply, shopping with Mum. Rolled-eye face.

What you getting?

Beluga trainers. Not.

Laughing face.

I bet it's actually 'relieved' face, because she's done her duty, she's been a good friend. I know that's completely unfair of me, but I don't care. I don't. Everyone can piss off. I go over to the pile of paper and pick out a page.

No Dad no. I will not, cannot sit down. Sitting down = turning away from the light the light will not be squashed the light cannot be squashed the light is everything everything everything and I am the light the light is me. you cannot make light sit down it will only burn brighter brighter burning until the whole world sees.

None of this writing makes any sense, has any resemblance to Ian. But what did I actually know about that Ian? Was he even real? I made up a complete person, a whole potential relationship based on a couple of minutes and his intense, beautiful eyes. That's mad. It's completely insane behaviour. In my effort to prove that I'm in some way better than Bish, I've made a complete mess of everything. I've messed up every relationship in my life.

My door opens. Leo's head appears. 'Hey sis,' he says in his most annoying voice.

'What?'

He opens the door further and steps so that he's half inside. 'Do I sense a bit of tension in the air? A little bit of *upset* with Mum?' He is grinning broadly.

'You are loving this.'

'I am.'

'How is it that you're the one with alcohol poisoning and I'm the one being yelled at?'

'Actually, you were doing the yelling.'

'Is there something you want?'

'Yes, I want to enjoy this special moment of little miss perfect going rogue.' It's then that I notice his phone.

'Are you fucking filming this?' I shout.

'I am!' He giggles like a two-year-old and ducks out of my room.

I can hear Mum coming up the stairs. She pauses on the landing. 'I'm going out,' she says in a loud, pissed-off voice so that both Leo and I can hear.

'Get me something nice,' calls Leo from his room.

'I'm not going out for you. I'm getting organised for Dad. He's getting in this evening. You know this.'

Leo grunts. His good mood will just have crashed. I smile.

'It's nice for him to feel spoiled when he gets back, to feel that he's been missed. He *has* been missed.' Mum's voice is already taking on that stressy edge she gets when Dad gets back from a training camp.

The implosion of my world and now this. For the next twenty-four hours, Mum will be lost to a madness that can only end with her and Dad having a massive row. It happens every time. I turn over the page in my hand:

*I burn and will never burn because I am the one. Others fight the light. They fear the heat.
Fight and fear and tear and flight. But I am bigger than fear and fight. I burn through fear.*

I put the page back, carefully, and stand up. Ian isn't talking to invisible dead people, the way Septimus did, but it doesn't feel that different. It feels very similar. I have to do something. I pick up my phone and start typing a message to Angus:

I know you're sick of me but

No.

Angus, I really think

Still wrong. I chuck my phone on to my bed. Nothing sounds right. It's not the kind of thing you can write — I need to call him. I will call him and when he answers, I will start talking really, really quickly, everything I need to say before he can hang up. That feels like a good

plan. But I can't do it looking like this. I shower, dry my hair, do my make-up. I choose the Asos jeans that make my bum look good and vintage Led Zeppelin t-shirt because it makes me feel edgy. Perfect. I take up my position on the window ledge. I stare at his number on my phone. 'Don't be a moron,' I tell myself and press the green button.

It rings, three times. Then it goes dead. He's cut me off. He didn't even answer the phone. He just cut me off.

ANGUS

People get out the way when you're properly running. Especially if you're a teenage boy wearing a hoodie. I cross Baker Street, weightless as a freerunner. I imagine running across the tops of the queueing cars, then jumping onto the canopy of a passing truck. From the truck, I'd take a flying leap and land squarely on a low-level roof and then—

Screeching brakes and a blaring hooter bring me back. I miss running straight into a taxi by a couple of inches. The string of expletives and the fury on the driver's face make me want to laugh but I'm too out of breath. Still, the pain in my lungs takes away from the noise in my head.

I have to stop once I reach Edgware Road or I'll throw up. I bend forward to get my breath, riding waves of nausea. A waiter loitering outside a shisha café asks me if I'm ok. I nod and move away. My phone rings. It can only be Evie. I switch it off without bothering to check the number and cross the road into Hyde Park.

There is a loose crowd milling around Speaker's Corner — tourists, a handful of Jesus people, a group of Syrian refugee protesters and some environmentalists. Off to the side a flat earth-er is giving it stick to no one in particular. Behind cordoned-off boards they're setting up Winter Wonderland. Just another grey Friday to everyone else.

I follow a path that cuts through the middle of the park, passing runners and dog walkers. A little way off is a group of women doing sit-ups and a guy yelling at them. He has them up doing jacks and then back down into a plank. One woman on the edge of the group lies down on the ground and refuses to move. That would so be Mum. She despises exercise classes.

When my lungs are no longer in danger of exploding, my head starts working. Richard Dodds. What a moron. Behind those certificates up on his wall is a fat layer of ego and stupidity and behind that a professional douche. Where would Evie find such a clown? If

she's as amazing as Mum said, why would she call him? I could kill her. Almost literally. Maim her. Make her suffer. Ian is never going to go back home now. He knows. That wink as he was leaving. It wasn't just 'what a laugh I fooled the doctor', it was 'I know what you guys are up to, I know and I'm cleverer than both of you.' He's right, this stranger who has taken over my brother's body.

I pass the Serpentine pond and café where Mum would bring us for a juice and to feed the ducks. There are no outside tables today, the windows of the café are misted up. Even the ducks are somewhere else. Evie's going to call Dad if she hasn't already. I try and call up the responsible Angus, the Angus who cares and find that he's gone too.

An old guy is walking towards me: small and wiry, grey hair. His misshapen green Christmas jumper has a reindeer on the front with a red pompom for a nose. He starts coughing and has to stop in the middle of the path. As I step around him, he croaks my name.

I jump to the side. '*Jesus!*' Reindeer man is Colin from the Southbank, without his blanket.

His smile is ragged. 'That was a long time ago.' At my confused expression, he continues patiently, 'For a while I answered to that name.' He takes out a small pill bottle from his pocket and gives it a gentle shake. 'Fun times.'

I laugh, feeling embarrassed. I give him a side glance but he seems serious. 'If I had said "walk on water, Jesus", what would you have done?'

His cough sounds like a chainsaw struggling to start. 'I would have said you were the devil sent to test me.' He puts the pills away and rubs his hands together.

'Do you often come up here?'

'I like to walk,' he replies. 'Keeps the blood moving.'

'What happened to your blanket?'

He shrugs. 'Stolen, while I was sleeping.'

'That's shit.'

He nods.

This is the longest conversation we've had. 'If you were still Jesus you could have miracled a new one.' I laugh stupidly and feel like a shit. The guy just makes me nervous.

His look tells me exactly how little he thinks of me. 'Your brother is difficult to contact.'

No kidding. 'He broke his phone.'

He looks at me. 'He's out of reach.'

Perhaps he didn't hear me. It's difficult to tell with Colin, no one really knows quite how bonkers he is. 'I saw him half an hour ago.'

He stands up straighter, with a pained look on his face. 'I'm talking mentally, Angus.'

'Oh.'

'I tried to warn him, told him he's shooting too high, he's going to get burned. He didn't want to know.' He shivers under that stupid reindeer jumper. He'd always seemed a solid mass with the blanket around him, but today there seems nothing to him. I wonder how old he really is. He sniffs. 'Same old dance. I've had my share of whirls.' He takes a few wheezy breaths.

How dare he? I start laughing. 'My brother is not like *you*, Colin.'

Colin shrugs. 'It's painful.'

Painful? 'Shut up.'

He smiles, as though he's been told to shut up too many times to take it personally. 'More to the point, he and Trevor are in trouble. People have been asking for him, over that business.'

'I don't know anything about that.'

'Trevor's running scared.'

'Trevor's a moron,' I reply.

Colin shrugs his shoulders. 'Those people want their money. Shifty's been dishing out. You know what he's like for a couple of quid.' The coughing returns. He moves off, bent forward to protect himself from the cold.

'Colin!' I call. I check my pockets, then pull off my jacket. 'Here, take this.' He starts to resist, while eyeing it up. 'Go on,' I hold it out to him.

'Much obliged,' he says, putting it on, then turns and walks away.

As Colin shuffles off two things hit me immediately — it is bitching cold and I'm hungry. More than hungry — panicky hungry. I leave the park and load up at the first corner shop I find: two BLTs and three packets of crisps. The guy at the counter doesn't look up from his screen, so as a joke I ask for a bottle of peach schnapps from the shelf of alcohol behind the counter. He reaches behind him for the bottle, then adds it to my total. I don't like schnapps, or peaches but I can't back down now. I'm half-way through the first sandwich before I've left the shop. The bottle is obvious and embarrassing, and I don't even have my jacket to hide it in. But it was too expensive for me to just dump. When I've finished every last crisp my brain starts working again. I can't go home — Evie might be skulking outside, or to the Undercroft. I could call Ellis and share the bottle with him, but I'm not up to talking shit. What else is there to do? I wander back into the park and open the bottle, trying hard not to look like a sixteen-year-old drinking in public. Each sip reminds me how much I dislike peaches. I pass the Peter Pan statue. Another of Mum's outing destinations. The schnapps must be starting to affect me because a wave of something — sadness maybe, I don't know — dumps itself on my head. I should phone Mum. I miss her. I sniff. Just hearing her voice would ground me. She is so solidly grounded there is very little she considers worth worrying about. Certainly not money for charity days at school or permission slips or football kit. She'd never understand why it stressed me out.

'Would you rather spend your life worrying about football kit or how to live an interesting life?'

'Football kit!' I'd yell, close to tears, whilst Ian would holler, 'Interesting life!'

But this isn't small stuff and she isn't here and what would I say — *Hi Mum, Ian's gone missing and I don't think he'll be back after your friend Evie's shit-show this morning but actually he won't be back because of me. I let him down, I watched him go. I don't know what to do.*

I don't know what to do. *I-don't-know-what-to-do.* The sentence goes round and round, getting faster and louder until the only thing I can do, even though I know there is nothing she can do, is call her.

I switch my phone back on. The number rings for an age but I can't hang up. Eventually a voice answers, small and far away.

'Mum?' There is disturbance on the line, as though she is standing in a wind tunnel.

'Angus?' she asks. 'I've just had Evie on the line. She's so upset. What happened?'

I take the phone away from my ear. What am I doing? She's on the other side of the world. Nothing she could do would make it right.

'Evie's overreacting, Mum. It's fine.'

'It's not fine!' I hear her shouting. I end the call. She calls back. I wait for it to ring out, then switch off my phone.

By the time I get to the tube station I'm pleasantly numb. Time has passed because the sky is beginning to get dark. The cold is no longer an issue, neither is Mum nor Ian. I have a far better plan. I know her address. I looked it up weeks ago, that day I'd sat down next to her in Form. I laugh out loud at just how terrible this plan is.

It takes me a while to find her road. I know it's because of the schnapps but I'm in no hurry. Everything else has gone to shit, I might as well tell her. As I get to her gate I feel momentarily elated before the terror sets in. I'm not as lashed as I'd like to be, as I need to be to tell Coco that I'm sorry for being a douche the other day, that she's the only thing in my life that isn't broken. I'm almost ready to say that, to be able to ring the bell. I sit down on the

top step. One more gulp and I'll be Tom fucking Holland. I don't actually get the hype about him, but claiming I'd be Chris fucking Hemsworth is beyond the powers of a bottle of schnapps.

A car pulls up. A man gets out of the back seat. He's dressed like a PT teacher. The boot pops open and he pulls out a suitcase. He's headed in this direction, then suddenly he's standing in front of me.

'Can I help you?' He's speaking as if he owns the place.

'Nope,' I say and take another sip.

'Are you a friend of Leo's? What's your name?'

'I'm Tom fucking Holland, thank you for asking,' I reply.

'Move on, or I'll call the police. This is private property.' He steps towards me. I stay where I am. He sighs and steps past me, his suitcase bashing against my head.

'Prick,' I say, getting up. As I turn, I notice he's taken out a key. He's turning it in the lock. He disappears inside.

COCO

'Don't get up.'

Mum actually jumps up off the sofa. I came downstairs half an hour ago for some food, she took my presence as an apology and half suffocated me in a hug. At least I didn't have to say sorry, because I'm not, but to smooth things over I grabbed a fat slice of cheese and sat down on the sofa and started filling her in on the latest developments on *Hawaiian Hook-Up*. But now she is up, taking on the nature of her name Robin, and fluttering about like a trapped bird. Dad stands in the doorway separating the kitchen and the TV room. He's in trackpants, a team-branded beanie and his treasured 'COACH' jacket. It will take more than a shower from him to lose the tough-guy training camp smell.

'Chris! We didn't hear the door.' Mum kisses him on the cheek.

Mum has a bunch of 'empowering' quotes saved on her phone, downloaded from God knows where, such as 'I am strong, brave, kind, unstoppable and fierce' or 'A wise woman once said, "Fuck this shit" and lived happily ever after.' Seeing her now makes me both annoyed and sad for her. Her flapping seems to make Dad more alien. 'Yeah, well, here I am!' he says. He takes off his jacket and carefully folds it over the back of the sofa.

Mum disappears into the kitchen. 'Drink?' she calls.

Dad takes Mum's place next to me.

'Hi Dad,' I say.

'Seriously? Not, "Hi Dad, missed you, Dad, you look exhausted, my beloved hardworking father"?''

I roll my eyes and sigh dramatically. 'Don't be so needy, Dad.' But I tuck my legs in to make more room for him. He scans the room, taking everything in, then tries to focus on the TV.

'What educational and informative programme is this?' he says, eyeing the bikini-clad girls lying on the beach.

‘This, beloved hardworking father, is *Hawaiian Hook-Up*.’

He groans. ‘When did teenage soft porn become mainstream viewing?’ He hauls himself off the sofa and goes in search of flappy Mum.

I mentally set the ‘Dad’s Home’ timer. For the next twenty-four hours this house will breathe madness. Despite the fact that he’s only been gone a week, Mum will be unbearable, trying to be the ultimate domestic goddess and convince him that nothing has changed in his absence. Dad, in response, will demand updates on everything: ‘Why is the outside tap leaking? Why are all the lights on in the house all the time?’ At the compulsory family dinner, Dad will talk rugby and pick a fight with Leo, who will leave. Mum will get upset and storm off, at which point they will yell at each other for half an hour, and things will settle down. Sort of. It’s all so predictable. Bish likes to accuse me of having the perfect little family in the perfect little house, but this is the part Bish will never see — the dad who bullies his son for not being the person he never got to be. It’s so transparent. He named him Leo, for Christ’s sake. ‘If it weren’t for my knees’ is Dad’s favourite phrase. If it weren’t for his knees he’d have had a shot at national selection, if it weren’t for his knees he’d have had at least another ten years of professional play in him, instead of having to give up after three years — not even close to his peak — and settle for his job in sports marketing.

I turn down the volume on the TV so that I can hear Mum’s update in the kitchen.

‘Where’s Leo?’ asks Dad.

‘Upstairs. He’s not been well,’ Mum replies. Technically she’s not lying. ‘He’s been staying at home actually, with Coco, while I was away on that retreat.’ There is no reply from Dad. ‘Between you and me, I think it did both of them good spending time together,’ Mum adds.

I sit up — she’s not going to mention the party and the hospital and the empty drinks cabinet. Of course not. Back when we were little it was impossible to break their alliance.

Dad mumbles something to which Mum replies, ‘Don’t start, Chris, he’s working hard.’

'Really?' replies Dad, 'Some wasted mate of his was sitting outside as I arrived home, on the front step, pissed or high or whatever and when I told him to get lost, he called me a prick.'

'No!' says Mum.

A boy, sitting on our front step? I scramble over the back of the sofa. Mum and Dad are sitting at the counter, each with a glass of wine. 'How long ago?' I ask.

Dad turns, but I'm up the stairs and peering out the window. No one. Dammit. Back downstairs. 'What does he look like? What was he wearing?' I ask.

Dad looks at me. 'Who?'

'The boy outside!' My words come out louder than I anticipated.

'I don't know,' he gives me a look, then turns back to Mum.

'I can't believe you made him leave,' I say.

'Coco!' Mum's voice is reprimanding but her look is questioning.

Dad turns back to me. 'It had better not have been one of your friends. One drop-out in the family is enough.'

I turn and head upstairs, I feel momentarily bad about abandoning Mum, but she married him after all.

'For heaven's sake, Chris,' comes Mum's voice.

'It's a joke, Robin,' he snaps. Dad is always out of sync with us when he gets back from a training camp — his jokes are testosterone-fuelled and not funny. Mum says it's hard for him to make the transition back and we need to try to make him feel welcome, but it wouldn't do him any harm to make the same effort. He's supposed to be the grown up.

Back in my room, I sit down at my desk, staring at the stack of paper. The last few pages I've picked out have been nothing more than scribbles or nonsensical formulae. Whatever it is, it's not a book, or even a story. If I could only find some sort of hidden logic. The piece of paper I pick is written in capitals:

NOTHING CAN CAPTURE THIS ... THIS ... **EVERYTHING**
IT IS BIGGER THAN LIFE. FLYING AND DROWNING.

My hand is shaking as I turn it over. On the reverse side, the shape of his handwriting, the indentation of his pen on the page is like a braille for the seeing.

Half an hour later, hunger drives me out of my room. Dad's voice drifts up from the kitchen: 'That's a great plan, Robin. In fact, why don't you go and get a full-time job and I'll sit at home all day.' God, this is going to be a long evening.

'For heaven's sake, Chris, it's just an idea.' Mum's voice is tight.

'But it's not part of the plan,' Dad speaks slowly, as if he's being made to repeat himself.

'Whose plan?' I say, walking in on them. The wine is open, Mum is chopping vegetables.

'Exactly!' says Mum. She dumps the potato peel in the bin, then opens the fridge and turns back with a pile of steaks. 'When did any plan ever work?'

Dad turns to me with that smile they use when they've been caught arguing. 'Been studying hard?' I bet he couldn't even name my A level subjects.

'I wish I hadn't learnt what I did today,' I say, thinking about the mess of pages on my desk.

'Knowledge is power.'

'Not always,' I reply.

Dad is about to reply when Leo walks in. I watch Mum's jaw clench as Dad gets up. The more Dad tries to engage, the quieter and less responsive Leo becomes. He barely says a word until we sit down.

Mum tries to make normal family conversation over dinner. It comes out in prompts like 'The funniest thing happened—', 'You've never believe it, but—' or 'Coco, did you tell Dad about

...?' I play along reluctantly because I feel sorry for her. Mum tops up her wine glass. Her cheeks are pink. 'Emma was updating me on Jake's progress. Do you remember her son Jake, Chris? He won the sports scholarship to Harrow?' I glare at her. Why would she bring up a story about her friend's son's sporting success, or any success really, when Leo is sitting right here at the table?

Dad puts down his fork. 'There's a boy who's going places.'

I kick Leo under the table, hoping he'll take it as a 'let it go' kick, but Leo ignores it.

'Where exactly is he going, Dad?' Leo's tone is dangerously innocent.

'To the top,' replies Dad.

Leo catches my eye and I start giggling.

'Why is success funny?' asks Dad, looking from us to Mum.

'You don't know anything about him,' Leo says.

'I know enough to know he'll make a success of his life,' replies Dad.

'Wow,' mutters Leo.

'Seconds, anyone?' asks Mum. Her wine glass is empty again. Dad launches into his favourite topic: the work ethic of his rugby development squad. 'The dedication of the new blood coming through ...' He shakes his head. 'Those boys would sell their mother even for a chance at a place on the team.'

'Aren't you lucky I'm not in the development squad?' Leo says to Mum. Mum smiles back but Dad cuts in. 'A bit of dedication to anything in your life would be an improvement, Leo.'

'At least my knees still work,' Leo spits back.

Mum gets up and starts collecting the plates even though I'm not finished. 'Apple crumble and cream, anyone?'

'I've lost my appetite,' Dad says, eyeing Leo. He pushes his chair back. 'I'll go and unpack.'

'Perfect,' mutters Mum. She gets up, looking set to follow Dad, but then stops and bends down so that she's eye level with Leo. 'You and I need to have a serious talk. This—' She makes an imaginary circle with her finger, which could mean Leo or the situation, or anything really, 'is not finished.'

Once she's left the room Leo leans over the pudding shoves a serving spoon of crumble into his mouth. 'Love to stay and chat, but ...' he says, bits of pie escaping as he speaks. He dunks his finger in the cream and gets up.

'Mum said you were grounded till Sunday.'

'Fuck that,' he mutters. Leo takes the stairs two at a time up to the front door, opens it and is gone. For the first time in my life I envy my brother.

ANGUS

Ian is standing over my desk, opening drawers, picking up books and paper and dumping them on the floor. I pull my duvet over my head. He has not disappeared, he has not done something stupid, he is right here. 'What did I do with it, Gussie?' My duvet is yanked away and replaced with Ian's face. 'Did I give it to someone? Oh God, what is that smell? Gussie you smell terrible.' He pulls a gagging face and steps away. He's right. Ethanol is oozing out of every pore in my body. I'm not sure whether the urge to be sick is genuine or just down to my own body odour. Ian pulls back my curtains. 'For God's sake Gussie, it's the afternoon. Someone's taken my book.' He spins around. 'Does *she* have it? Did you give it to her?'

'Who?'

'Bitch. Devil-woman. *Evie*. Living up to her name. Should have clocked that earlier. I've never trusted short people.' His face breaks into a huge, five-year-old grin. 'Ask me why. Ask me, Gussie.'

I rub my face and try sitting up. So far, so good. 'Why don't you trust short people, Ian?'

'They never get to see the full picture.' He holds out his hands, in a ta-da motion, but only for a moment. Everything about him is speeded-up, or maybe it's that I'm only just functioning.

'Evie doesn't have your book, bro.'

His hands drop and he frowns at me.

'You told her that it was where it needed to be or something, doing its job.'

He narrows his eyes. 'That doesn't sound like me.'

'Yeah, well.' Nothing sounds like you anymore, Ian.

'*Yeah well*, I told you not to let her in. All that shit yesterday could have been prevented if you'd only listened to me.'

'You seemed happy to talk to her, and heal her apparently, all night.'

'It was all lost on her, little brother. She isn't intelligent, or *tall*, enough to understand what I was talking about.'

'Scientifically speaking, you can't claim that short—'

'I'm bigger than science.' He walks out my room.

I'm finishing in the bathroom when he bangs on the door. 'Don't tell anyone I've been here, OK? No one.' Ian's words take another moment to register. By the time I'm out the shower he's almost out the front door. 'Don't go, Ian. Let's hang out.' I sound pathetic. I wouldn't want to hang out with me.

'Not possible. She'll be back before we know it.'

'Ian! Stop it! Just stop!' I am too tired and physically ill to say it any other way.

He does stop. He walks back towards me, the look on his face like when he'd explain away why we have to have darkness in the world and why vegetables exist and why I'll never run as fast as him. 'I can't stay here. I can't *hear* here. It's too loud.'

'Fine. Let's go away.'

'Where?' He looks at me suspiciously. He hasn't forgiven me for yesterday but at least he's interested.

I can't think of a single decent idea. 'The sea?'

He takes in a deep breath. 'The sea,' he says. 'The sea, the sea, the sea.' He squeezes the tip of his nose repeatedly.

'Stop doing that.'

'I like your idea, Boyo. This is the first good idea you've had in a very long time. We're going to the sea.'

As we're leaving the flat, I think about Dad coming back to find us gone. Evie will have called him. 'Should we leave a note?'

'It's not safe — the serpent woman will find it.' *Sorry Dad*. I'll text him later. Ian looks me up and down. 'Where is your coat?' He's wearing Mum's coat again. It looks like it's had a rough twenty-four hours.

'I gave it to Colin. His blanket got stolen.'

'Colin is a weirdo. You need to watch who you're hanging out with, Gussie.' Ian opens the front door, then stops and looks back. 'No phones.'

My hand instinctively clutches it in my pocket. 'Leave it here or I'll smash it. I will smash it,' he repeats, raising his voice.

'I know you'll smash it, Ian,' I say. I have a bad feeling about leaving my phone behind. He watches me put the phone down on the key table and waits for me to walk out in front of him.

Outside, Ian's anxiety levels hike. He keeps checking behind us, peering into the cars we pass then jerking up every time he hears a noise.

I see her from a block away. No! The last time I saw her was outside Harrods, and then — Christ — I swore at her father. I stop walking. What do I do? It's too late to run. Ian looks back at me in irritation, then follows my gaze. She's almost reached us.

'Your dad,' is all I can say. I know I'm blushing. 'Did he say anything?'

Almost a smile from her. Very close, but not quite. 'Yup.'

Ian tugs at my arm. He can pull it out of its socket if he likes but I physically can't pull my eyes away from her. 'Are you coming or not, Gus?'

Coco doesn't stop looking at me either, even when Ian walks right up to her.

'Coco! Lovely Coco. No time to stop I'm afraid. You missed us. You didn't see us, understand?' He's stepping from one foot to another. 'She's definitely here somewhere, Gus. I can feel it.'

Coco looks at him. 'Where are you going?'

'Bognor Regis,' he says, 'Our granny took us there. We're re-enacting it. Without the granny, obviously. Sadly. But we're off to the seaside of kings.' He steps into the road and just misses being hit by a car.

'That explains the posh coat,' says Coco.

Ian looks confused, glances down, then bursts out laughing, more like explodes into a harsh, thigh-slapping kind of laughter. 'Now. We are leaving now.'

I'm still looking at Coco. Her eyes move away from Ian and back to me and everything goes completely quiet. Ian, Evie, Richard Dodds — all the shit that has been banging around in my head since yesterday — all the noise stops. It is *that* moment — the one people write songs about, the fireworks, trumpets, heart-thumping look — and it lasts long enough for her glance to become a look, to become everything.

Everything, until Ian literally drags me down the road. I glance back and she's still watching us, but *the* look has been replaced with a frown. Her face is full of worry.

Victoria station is busy with weekend shoppers. Ian eats his two Maccy D burgers and mine as I buy tickets and find the platform. I can't eat. I don't know why I'm going along with this. Our granny did take us to Bognor Regis, but like ten years ago and it wasn't great. Why would he choose there? Why am I letting him choose it? Because I'm terrified of losing sight of him. I'll go anywhere. The train is already on the platform but we have ten minutes to wait and the doors are still locked. Ian presses the button repeatedly until finally they beep and open. 'Got to be near the doors,' he announces as he steps onboard. The seats nearest the doors face each other, with a table in between. I don't want to be staring at strangers for the entire journey, but Ian has already dumped his coat on the table and settled into the window seat and I don't have the fight in me to make him move. I sit down next to him and fold the heavy coat on to my lap. It doesn't smell great. Ian stretches. At least he is stuck in the corner.

A shiny-faced man in a suit sits down opposite us with a sigh. He pulls out his phone and laptop and dumps them on the table. Ian stiffens. It hits me: phones. I glance around the carriage, which is filling up. Everyone seems to be holding a phone — all I see are phones. This is about to get so much worse. Ian is looking at me, code-red all over his face.

'This is the only way to get there,' I say, in an attempt at a normal voice.

Ian cowers into the corner, holding his arm in front of his face. The shiny-face man looks at Ian and frowns.

'You can stay here or spend the journey in the loo,' I say. I am using Mum's fed-up voice.

Ian sits up. 'Good idea. Let's go.' He has half risen.

'I am not going anywhere. Those loos are rank.'

'You've just said—'

'I didn't say anything about me. I'm not the one with phone issues.'

Ian looks at me, then around the carriage, where people are crowding us in in a barricade of phones. 'Unbelievable,' he mutters and sits down. He pulls his t-shirt up so that it covers his face. Moments later, he sits back up. 'It's not working, Gussie.' His voice has taken on a threatening tone. 'All the radiation. It's going to kill me. I will die and it's your fault.'

Shiny-face glances up again. He stares at Ian. The train starts moving. 'I will be dead by the time we get there,' Ian says, louder.

I look down, feeling more eyes on us. It's only a matter of time. I'm overheating under the coat. 'The coat,' I say. 'Put the coat over you. It's so thick, it would survive a nuclear meltdown.'

Ian considers the coat. 'Would look a bit stupid,' he says.

'I thought you were about to die.'

He sighs and pulls the coat over him. By now everyone in sight is looking at us. I look down at my hands and hate my brother.

Every couple of minutes, the automated announcer breaks into another run-through of the stations to come, a reminder of how much longer has to be endured. 'Clapham Junction, East Croydon, Gatwick Airport, Three Bridges, Crawley, Horsham — where the train will divide.' Her voice sounds just like the Radio 4 programmes Mum insists on having

on in the kitchen, which seem to flip randomly between discussing the migrant crisis and incontinence.

'Gussie,' says Ian, from under the coat. He lifts the side of it. 'A train divided against itself cannot stand. Everyone knows that.' He waits for me to laugh or come back with something else, but I can't. A group of kids get on at Clapham. They're nudging each other and pointing at Ian under the coat. The smart-arse comments start. One of them throws a pencil at Ian, which misses and hits Shiny-face's computer. He swears at them. They get off at East Croydon. All through this, I stare at my hands. My mind flips between two thoughts: *Where the fuck are we going?* and *Coco!* Sometimes the *where are we going* expands into what the hell do we do once we get there? But then the image of Coco comes back — her eyes, the look. I think about the look so many times that I decide it didn't happen. It couldn't have because it was perfect. And the chances of her coming to find me the day after I sat on her front step and called her dad a prick are less than zero. I must have made it up, hallucinated it as a result of Ian and the bottle of schnapps. But that look is the only thing stopping me from jumping up at the next station and running as far away from Ian as I can, so I decide to hold on to it. It feels like the only sane thing to do.

Most of the carriage gets off at Gatwick. The announcer starts up her list of stations again. I feel Ian shifting. When she gets to 'Horsham', Ian throws off the coat and shouts, 'Where the train will divide!' There is silence in the carriage as everyone turns and stares at us. Shiny-face closes his laptop. 'I cannot be under there any longer, Gussie, it smells like one hundred years of middle-aged armpits. I would rather die of radiation.' Ian sits up and looks around. Shiny-face packs up his bag and slides out of the seat. He stands next to the doors until we arrive at Three Bridges, where he gets off. The carriage is almost empty now, and obviously the threat of radiation has receded because Ian stays in his upright position and looks around. The announcer tells us we are approaching Horsham.

'At fucking last,' says Ian. 'I think I actually slept under that coat.'

'We should call Richard Dodds,' I say and want to smack myself.

Ian stiffens. He shifts away from me.

'It's a joke,' I say. The train doors beep and open. Ian stands up and swings around. The person who gets on couldn't be further from Richard Dodds. For one thing, he is huge — head and shoulders taller than me, and thick-set. He could be a farmer with his scuffed boots, khaki trousers and heavy-weather coat. Mountain Man. You just don't see that sort of man in London.

He sits down across the aisle diagonally opposite us and dumps a bulging Aldi shopping bag on the seat beside him. He stretches his neck to the side until it clicks, then repeats it on the other side. 'Lads headed to Bognor?'

I nod.

Mountain Man raises a hairy eyebrow. 'Not the liveliest destination at this time of year.' He has a gruff rumble of a voice.

Ian glances at him, then back at me. His knee has begun to jiggle up and down. He used to do that all the time, it would drive Mum mad. *Don't say anything*, I beg him silently. This is not the type of guy to get smart with.

We are the only people in the carriage. Ian's jiggling knee is getting faster. He is clutching his hands together and staring straight ahead. The stranger takes out a bottle of Coke, has a sip and puts it back in the bag. Ian glances at him, a quick side movement of his head which he then repeats every few seconds, as though his brain has got stuck in a loop. It catches the attention of Mountain Man. I smile at him, a smile that is supposed to say 'everything's cool!', but probably makes me look just as weird as Ian. The guy's looking at us, but after a beat he leans back against his seat and closes his eyes. I hate Ian for this. I don't want to be on this train. I want to be back standing in front of Coco. My hand lands heavily on Ian's leg to stop the jiggling. He glares at me. I don't want to be his brother.

'We are now approaching Christ's Hospital,' the automated announcement breaks the silence.

Ian sits bolt up and laughs. The stranger opens his eyes.

'Christ's Hospital? A station called Christ's Hospital? Christ's fucking *Hospital*?' Ian is shouting now. He jumps up, his eyes shining. 'Move!' He climbs over me and picks up the coat. 'It all makes sense.' He's standing at the doors, pressing repeatedly for them to open before the train arrives at the station.

'No Ian, we're going to—'

'What did I tell you, Gussie? I just had to leave London.' The doors beep and open. He steps off the train.

'Fuck it.' I scramble to get to the doors and off the train before it leaves. As it pulls off, I see Mountain Man half standing, peering out at us.

ANGUS

We were the only people to get off the train. Apart from us, the station is deserted. It's not a station so much as two tracks and a platform on either side, illuminated by a series of spotlights. I pull my hoodie as far over my face as it will go but it has no effect on the cold and dark.

Ian is looking up at the sky, his head cocked to the side as if he is listening.

'Ian.'

He holds his hand up, shushing me. After a little while he shakes his head and walks away, down the length of the platform. It's not a long platform so soon he is forced to walk back. He's talking to himself, counting things off on his fingers. He stops and looks around impatiently.

'It was a message. I just need to listen,' he says.

'Ian, please.'

'Shut up,' he barks and stomps off. After another minute of his pacing, he looks up at the sky. 'I'm here! Like before! Talk to me!'

The cold is as absolute as the silence. Between the platform and some lights in the distance is a blackness you would never find anywhere in London, thick and deep and breathing. Ian stands to the far side of a spotlight. 'What am I doing wrong?' he shouts, but it is more like a wail.

I sit down and bury my head inside my hoodie, pulling my arms tightly around my knees. *Do something, Angus!* I yell at myself. But what are you supposed to do on an abandoned station in the dark, when you don't know where the fuck you are and your brother is talking to the sky? I'll count to one hundred and then I'll try and talk to him. As I get to fifty-seven, a voice makes me jump. It's a woman's voice. She is sorry to say that the next train to Victoria has been cancelled due to a signal failure. She is sorry for the interruption to our journey.

'Signal failures,' Ian shouts down the platform, 'Signal failures!' He laughs.

I carry on with the counting. When I get to one hundred, I will cross the darkness and find a light, find a person, find a way home and Ian can do whatever the fuck he wants.

The rain starts without warning. I dig myself deeper into my hoodie. There is a kind of whooping noise, the sound Ian would make at Christmas, or Legoland or even an unexpected ice cream. It carries on, getting louder. I ignore it until I get to eighty-eight, then lift my head back up. Ian is standing under the spotlight, head upturned and arms outstretched, completely naked.

'Can you feel it?' he shouts.

'Your balls are going to freeze right off, idiot.'

He laughs. 'Can you feel it, Gussie?'

'The cold or the rain?'

'It's not rain, you moron.' He throws his head back up again. 'It's liquid stars. A baptism of stars.' He starts a crazy dervish dance but I don't bother to stop it as he's headed away from the tracks towards a metal railing, which predictably stops him. He looks at it, momentarily confused, then walks over to me and stands, feet apart, arms crossed as if we were watching a football match together. Me and my naked brother. He sighs contentedly. 'The stars are very different tonight.'

Obviously, there isn't a star in the sky but I know what he's doing. Dad had that album on repeat for most of our childhood. 'Well, this is Ground Control and I'm pissing freezing.'

He beams at me. It is like a beam. His eyes are huge and shining. I hated that song. I'd lie awake at night, imagining Major Tom spiralling through darkness for the rest of eternity, never making it back to earth. It terrified me. One night when I couldn't stand it I climbed into Ian's bed. He put his arm around me. 'Gussie, Major Tom doesn't disappear. He's the Star Man. He's going to come back and save the world.'

He turns his head back up to the sky. 'You can feel it too, Gussie. I'm your brother, I know.

'Ian.'

He looks at me, too earnest. 'This is the confirmation I've been waiting for. My anointing. I'm not joking, Boyo, there's no other word for it. The world is ... *pulsing*—' Ian's voice is getting louder with each word: '*Vibrating* with it and we all just ignore it but I — I've broken through. I am in it and it is in me. It's the blood in my veins. It is so powerful, it will heal the world. It is stronger than anything. Climate change, disease...' He crouches down in front of me and holds out his finger. 'Touch it. Go on, touch my finger.'

I shake my head.

'Touch it,' he shouts, so loudly that I obey. 'See?'

'I don't feel anything, mate.' I do, actually. I feel like a complete knob, touching his finger and any moment he's going to burst out laughing at his idiot gullible younger brother.

But he doesn't. He shudders and jumps up. 'You won't let yourself. But I can tell you it's exquisite.' He tips his head to the side. 'I bet you Coco feels it. She looks like she could feel it.'

The mention of Coco brings back the look on her face as we walked away. I stand up. 'No.'

He's not listening to me. But having said it once, I can say it again, louder: 'No, Ian. Stop it. Stop this shit. Stop it and go back to being you.'

Ian's arms drop to his sides. He stares at me as if I've just turned into an alien speaking gibberish.

'*This!*' I throw my arms in his direction, 'is not you.'

He stares at me.

'I want my real brother back.'

'You don't believe me.'

I start laughing but it dies as he steps closer, close enough so that I can see him clench and unclench his jaw, his breath on my skin, his eyes boring holes into me. 'Ground Control?' he says.

I take a step backwards. I swallow, then shake my head.

'People like you are the reason this world is a fucked-up place, Gussie. People like you. You're no different to Evie and Richard Dodds.' He's jabbing his finger at me and shouting. He holds his finger pointing at me, handgun-like, as he steps backwards. He turns, picks up his soaked pile of clothes and that stupid coat, and disappears down the stairs that lead off the platform and into the black.

COCO

'Where have you been?' Mum is at the bottom of the stairs. I don't need to reply because she's off again before I close the front door. 'No text, no phone call. I don't know what's got into you recently, but you're only sixteen, Coco, and you cannot just come and go as you please. I forbid it.'

'You forbid it?' This is crazy talk, even for Mum.

'And what in God's name is this?' She bends down and picks up the messy pile of Ian's pages.

Fuck shit. That's all I can think. Over and over. Faster and faster. *fuckshit*

'Is it yours?' Mum's voice is rising. Her neck is going a dark pink colour I haven't seen before.

Fuckshit

'Coco?'

I force out a high-pitched laugh. 'Of course it's not mine, that's not even my handwriting.'

'Whose is it?'

'Why are you going through my stuff?'

'I was tidying actually, and that's irrelevant because this is ...' She shakes her head and stares at the pile of paper in her hands.

Crazy shit? I suggest in my head. The work of a madman, who a short while ago was peering into parked cars, dressed in a fur coat, and yelling at his brother. His brother, who is now on the train with him to God knows where. His *brother*, who looked at me and the whole fucking planetary system shifted and realigned in that moment, by the way, and now they are gone and I did nothing to stop them because it all happened so quickly and I'm scared because that person who was shouting and performing was Ian but not Ian. If you were

watching it in a movie it would be over-the-top funny but it wasn't funny, it was chilling. Freefall scary and all I did was stand there.

Mum is talking again, but even thinking about that moment again has brought back that horrible feeling and—

'Whoever wrote this needs help,' Mum says.

'You think?' I step towards her and reach for the pages but she hugs them into herself.

'You'd better start talking,' she says.

But I can't. It's too close, too much of a physical thing to put into words. This in itself is frightening. 'It's none of your business,' I shout, at which point Dad appears: 'Don't shout at your mother. What's going on?'

Neither of us reply. Mum stares me down, unblinking.

'What is that?' Dad asks, pointing at the pages.

'It's not mine. It belongs to a friend,' I reply.

'Who?' Mum asks.

I sigh loudly. 'Ian, if you must know.'

Mum's face wrinkles up because she doesn't know any Ian.

'That little prick who was sitting on the steps last night?'

'No! *God*. That was his brother.'

Mum takes a breath. 'This is serious, Coco. If this Ian character wrote these words, he needs help.'

'I know! I'm not an idiot, Mum.'

Dad crosses his arms over his chest. 'I don't like the sound of this. You don't want to be getting involved in this kind of thing, Coco.'

'Oh my God, what is wrong with you all? You are the reason that people die!' I barge past the two of them, up the stairs and into my room.

I wait for Dad to come storming up the stairs behind me but there is no sound. It's so unfair! Everything, everything, everything is beyond unfair. I bang my door closed. Still nothing. I don't want to be in my room. I want to go downstairs and keep yelling at them because it felt better than being stuck here in my mixed-up trash-can of a head but if I go back downstairs I'll just cry and I refuse to cry. I refuse to acknowledge how relieved I am that Mum found those pages.

ANGUS

'IAN!' I say, loud enough to reach Ian across the darkness, loud enough to make him stop and turn around. Nothing comes out. 'Ian.' This time it's a whisper. *Ian* I say a few more times but maybe I'm just thinking it. I become aware that I'm shivering — more than shivering. Shaking, so hard that I force myself to sit down, pull my knees in and grip on to them. It doesn't stop the shaking but at least I'm holding on to something. He's going to die out there. The blackness is too black. I failed him. The blackness is too black and he's going to die out there and I've failed him. Facts. Solid and true. The shaking gets worse. The blackness is too black. I cannot go there. The only place I will not go. The Darkness.

'The train now approaching is the eighteen thirty-seven train to Bognor Regis.' The announcement makes me jump.

Get up. Get on the train. Coco's voice is so clear, so real, that I look around.

'I can't leave. What if he comes back?' I say aloud.

He's not coming back. She sounds a bit annoyed, a bit bored, like that first day in class when she was so disinterested in my existence. I smile for a moment, then remember where I am.

'I can't leave,' I say again, but I know she's right. Ian only goes forward. He's not coming back.

Get back on the train, Angus. Get back on the train.

I am the only person in the carriage. It is light and warm. If I could just stay here. But the train seems to be getting faster as we go, as if it isn't heavy enough to remain on the tracks, or the driver can't wait to get home. We fly through the darkness that fills everything between the stations. At each stop one or two people leak out of surrounding carriages. No one gets on. The names sound more and more unreal — Amberley, Arundel. I repeat imaginary

Coco's words to myself, like a mantra to prevent myself from totally losing my shit. *Get back on the train, Angus.*

A board at the station exit says, 'Welcome to Bognor Regis! The Sunniest Town in Britain.' It's at least ten degrees colder than London. I pull my hoodie closer over my face but it does nothing against the biting air. *Hope you're nice and warm, Colin.* A thick, wet sea mist hovers just above the ground. And it's very dark — even the streetlights seem unable to properly light up the middle of town. What now? What the fuck do I do now? *Stop being such a pussy Angus.* That doesn't sound like Coco's voice anymore, but I can't just stand here all night. I pull my shoulders up and dig my hands into my pockets.

It can't be later than seven-thirty but the streets are deserted. How can anywhere in the world be deserted on a weekend evening? There are always buses or taxis or people or crawling about in London, next door or in the flat above or roughing it in doorways. I pass a kebab shop, the Sunny Garden Chinese take away, a mobile phone shop — no different to London. But here it's like I've stepped out onto an abandoned movie set. I stop walking.

'Hey,' I shout, but the sound disappears into the mist. That freaks me out. The street freaks me out. I turn around and start walking back to the station entrance, trying not to run. My own fear freaks me out. I keep my head down, rather than looking around.

Back at the station a roller door has been pulled down across the entrance. 'Fuck!' I say out loud. I bang my hand against the metal and turn around.

Mountain Man is standing a few feet away, watching me. 'You're that guy from the train. Where's the crazy one?' He looks beyond me, as if Ian is about to jump out of the shadows.

I can't run away from him. I can't fight him. There is the sound of a car in the distance but it doesn't come any closer.

'Not here?' He raises an eyebrow. He walks a few steps towards me. If I step backwards I'll hit the barrier. He pulls a roll of fruit pastilles from his coat pocket and holds it out to me.

When I don't respond, he shrugs. 'I eat them three at a time. Four is too many, two not enough.'

'Why is the station shut?' My voice sounds squeaky.

'No more trains tonight. They're working on the lines.'

No more trains tonight. No more trains tonight?

Mountain Man sniffs. He scrunches up the wrapper and puts it back in his pocket. 'So where is your brother?'

I drop my eyes to my shoes. Calm down. Just breathe. This is fine. It's so not fine.

'He didn't look OK back on the train. Seriously not OK.'

'Ian always ends up OK,' I say. My words hover in the mist around us. They are so ridiculous I almost laugh. 'He ... walked off.'

'Walked off?' He laughs. 'Where, at *Christ's Hospital*? Why didn't you go with him?' He pulls his coat closer. 'Cold night to be outside.' He looks around. 'Do you have anywhere to go?'

'Do I look like I've got anywhere to go?' I say before I can stop myself. Shit. That is the last thing I should have said.

'You'd better come with me.'

That does make me laugh. 'No. That is the very last thing in the world I'd do. On a night of fucking bat-shit crazy disasters, I am not going to add to them. Thanks, but no. Fuck off.'

He watches me. I make myself stop talking because otherwise I will never stop. He sniffs again, wipes his hand across his nose. 'I wouldn't fancy my chances on the streets of Bognor at night. We have a serious homeless problem, lots of immigrants. Alcoholism. Drugs. Rough lot. Desperate of course, but rough. Entirely up to you.'

'Yes, it is.'

He inclines his head to the side and turns away.

I am so cold. And fucked. And I can't handle the thought of a night alone. I don't think I'll survive my own company, let alone the dark. This oversized weirdo now seems less scary than being left alone. 'Fine. Jesus. Where are we going?'

'Shelter.'

'Obviously.'

'A shelter. A homeless shelter.'

'Woah. Why?'

'I live there.'

His steps are wide and fast. For a few blocks I'm concentrating on keeping up with him. The empty streets all look similar — low terraced houses line both side of the road, the odd corner shop. Everything is murky in the mist-heavy light. I've no idea which way we've come. We could be going around and around the same block for all I know.

'I thought Bognor Regis was a seaside village,' I say, partly to try and slow him down.

He snorts. 'Maybe a hundred years ago. Now it's casinos and nightclubs. A motherfucking big Butlins. A motherfucking homeless problem too. You are bloody lucky I came along.' He slows his pace and glances at me. 'What's your name?'

When I don't reply he laughs. 'You think I'm some kind of weird sicko, don't you? I'm Des. I might be weird but I'm not a sicko.'

'If you say so. What are you doing out?'

'Looking for my sister.' He doesn't say anything else.

After a few minutes I say, 'Is she missing?'

'Yup.'

'How long?'

'Ten years. Give or take.'

I laugh. He turns and glares me, then clears the gob out of the back of his throat and deposits it on the pavement. 'Someone has to do it.'

We turn a corner, there is a church up ahead. He seems to be slowing down. Next to the church is a hall and then a house, set in its own small, overgrown garden. He pushes open a pointless front gate and climbs the few stairs to the front porch. I watch him punch in a code on a keypad on the front door. The door gives and he pushes it open. There is the distinct after-smell of something bean-like.

He looks at me. 'Vegetarian curry. Lentils and shit. Best avoided.'

The entrance hall is large. The walls have waist-high wooden panelling and knackered-looking wall-paper. It could be your granny's home apart from the unmissable exit signs and the officious notice board above the blocked-in fireplace. In the corner is a metal rail of coats. The door leading into the rest of the house is closed, on one of those heavy hinges. There is a notice listing all the reasons you can be thrown out: aggressive language or behaviour, carrying alcohol, drugs or weapons. Des goes over to a shoe rack, takes his boots off and puts them in an empty pigeonhole. 'Shoes.' he points to my feet.

'Why?'

'No weapons,' he says, like I'm the idiot.

The door opens and a small, square woman walks through. She seems familiar, which is obviously impossible. 'Des,' she says with a comfy smile. 'Nothing?'

'Not tonight,' he says in a quiet voice. Something from the way the woman looks at him convinces me that she knows, and everyone but Des knows, that his sister is never coming back.

Des sniffs. 'I found this little shit instead.'

She turns to look at me. 'He looks underage, Des. You know how the Council is about us taking in minors.'

'Screw the Council, Jan, it's freezing outside.' Des replies.

She nods. 'It is that. You don't even have a decent coat, silly boy.' She smiles in a way that could be sweet or really creepy. Ever since Dolores Umbridge, I don't trust small, smiley women. Just look at Evie. 'You look like you need a hot drink.'

It occurs to me that this could be a cult. Who in their right mind follows a man into a passcode-requiring house? They're going to cut me up and harvest my organs. Or sell me into the sex trade. Maybe not the sex trade.

Des picks up an exercise book with a pen attached by a long piece of string. 'You need to sign in. You can tell us your name, but you don't have to. All you have to do is abide by the rules.' He points to the notice on the door.

I'm hugging my shoes to my chest. I have to put them down to take the book. My hand shakes as I fill in my details.

'Wow, you look freaked out. Don't you think?' He turns to Jan.

'Des,' she tuts.

He takes the book back. 'Angus? Obviously not your real name, right?'

'It is actually,' I mumble.

'Oh.'

Jan opens the door and disappears back into the house. Des follows but looks back as he holds the door open. His voice drops low. 'Remember, don't let her give you the curry.'

I could easily end up being one of those unsolved disappearances. If this were a documentary on TV, you'd be shouting, 'Don't go through the door, idiot!' But I can't stay in the entrance hall all night.

The room I walk into is empty of people. There is nothing left of the homey feeling, apart from the maroon velvet curtains. Instead it's all bright, florescent lights and a hospital-style linoleum floor. Ahead of me is a ping-pong table and beyond that a TV with a couple of long, sagging sofas. The TV is turned on low to the BBC news. There is a trestle table with benches, but it's the kitchen I can see through the large serving hatch that has my attention. Toast. The smell of toast makes me dizzy. Jan opens the swing door into the kitchen and

beckons me through. 'Thought you might be hungry. I'm afraid we finished off the curry earlier.' Ahead of me on the metal counter is an industrial size margarine tub next to a plate with four slices of toast. Peanut butter, jam, Marmite. I want to tell her how grateful I am, but I can't because I'm so busy stuffing toast into my mouth. 'So good,' I manage between slices two and three. She laughs. 'Shall I keep going?' She indicates the toaster. 'Please,' I say with my mouth full.

After six slices I begin to feel vaguely human again and a little bit embarrassed by how much I'm eating.

'Sorry, I—'

She holds up her hand. 'Tea? Why don't you sit down.' She points out a stool I hadn't noticed before. On the wall opposite is a large whiteboard. Across the top, written in green marker, it says, 'On Duty Tonight: Jan.' Jan, perhaps, has drawn a little smiley face next to her name. Underneath this is a printed-out notice: *No aggressive behaviour of any form, towards the staff, other residents, or yourself, will be tolerated.* A big clock on the wall says its 9.15pm. It seems that time, along with everything else tonight, is completely unreliable.

'It is bitter out there, you're lucky Des found you. Without a coat and everything.' She shakes her head. Suddenly I know why she seems so familiar — she looks exactly like the lunch ladies at school, without the permanent scowl. She puts a large steaming mug in front of me, and then an old ice cream tub filled with sugar and a spoon. 'Don't put the spoon back in the sugar once you've used it. Drives me scatty.' She gives a little shudder to emphasize how awful that is. 'Not everyone is as lucky as you. Just last week ...' But she doesn't finish the sentence. I feel her glancing at me as I take a sip. It's strong. I add sugar.

'I wonder if Des wants a hot drink. He usually goes for a mocha. Not strictly on offer, but he gets special treatment around here, bless him.' She bustles out of the kitchen. I realise my legs are shaking. I put my hands on my thighs to try and make them stop but it just seems to get worse. I turn back to the counter and lift up the mug but my arm is shaking now too and tea starts slopping over the rim. I clunk it back down. *Stop*, I tell myself. But it

feels as though my bones have lost their solidity, that I'm going to fall in a heap on the floor. At the same time my mind is flipping all over the place, my breathing is out of whack. I can't get enough air in. *Calm down.* It's Dad's voice, from when I was little and hurt. *In and out, that's all you have to do. Think about breathing in and think about breathing out.* It helps and after a while my body feels like it can hold me up again. I get up and look for a cloth to clean up the spilled tea. Jan comes back in as I'm wiping up my mess. 'Ah!' she says, 'That's nice of you. Now, I'm afraid we don't have any beds available tonight, we've been chocker all week, but you can make yourself comfortable on one of the sofas. You have your pick, everyone seems to have turned in for the night. Our liaison officer comes on at eight and you can talk to him ...'

My face must give away that I have no idea what she's talking about.

'We're only an emergency solution here.' She smiles, apologetically. 'Do you need a shower?'

'No, I'm fine. Thank you, Jan.'

'Alright then, why don't you go and make yourself comfortable.' She clearly wants me out of her kitchen. I follow her back through to the living area. 'I'll get you a blanket,' she says and disappears through a door into the rest of the house.

The sofa creaks and yawns under me.

'Here we go.' She's back again, holding a grey blanket. She looks at me. 'Is there someone you want to call?'

I shake my head.

'Mum? Dad?' she prompts.

'They're both away.'

'Ok then, if you need anything, I'll be in the office off the kitchen.' With that she disappears.

I put my mug of tea down on the small coffee table, sit back and close my eyes, desperate to fall asleep but my mind skids back and forth between things I'm trying not to

think about: no Coco thoughts, no Mum or Dad thoughts and definitely no Ian thoughts. I open my eyes. The sofa is lumpy in all the wrong places. I swear it smells of soup. There doesn't seem to be a remote, so I sit and stare at the news looping between the weather and a look at tomorrow's front pages.

Des comes back in and collapses on the other sofa. 'You chose the soup sofa.'

'It really does smell of soup.' I drain the last of the tea.

'Pea soup. It's always smelt like that. Weird, huh.'

'What do you do, Des, during the day?'

Des frowns at me. 'Tell me about your brother.'

His question catches me completely off guard. I stare at him. Where would I start? Where would I stop? I picture Ian, wondering naked around the blackness — lost, freezing, calling my name. I shake my head.

Des sits up. 'I understand, you know. I get it.'

I start laughing. How can this total stranger, a nutjob at that, understand about my brother, when I don't? 'Thing is, Des, my brother is *alive*.'

Des' face erupts. 'Fuck you, she's alive,' he thunders. He picks up the mug, hurls it against the wall and storms out. The mug lands on the floor, handle snapped off.

It brings Jan back out of the kitchen. 'What on earth? Des?'

The sound of the front door. She comes back in. 'What did you say to him?'

'He was comparing my brother to his sister, which is rubbish. My brother may be crazy, but he isn't dead.'

'Oh dear.' Jan smooths her hands over her trousers. 'I often wonder, what is crazy, *really*?' Her voice is shooting-the-breeze conversational.

I laugh. 'Crazy is thinking you are the chosen one and have healing powers and crazy is writing a book full of nonsense and crazy is writing illogical formulae all over the wall. And crazy is thinking your dead sister is alive.'

Jan looks at me. 'Maybe crazy is being obsessed with building up piles of something you can't even see, working your whole life to make what's actually a number on a computer screen bigger. Or crazy is not speaking to your child because they choose to lead a different type of life to you. For Des, believing that his sister is alive keeps the rest of him from falling apart. Who is it harming?'

'It's not true.'

Jan smiles, that smile Dad uses when he thinks I'm too young to understand something and therefore he doesn't need to press his point. She bends down to pick up the mug and handle.

'Reality is based on hard facts.'

'And Des will tell you that he knows for a fact that his sister is alive.' She gets up. 'The people who sleep here, who keep coming back, aren't hard-core drug addicts and serious nutters. Most of them have just been broken by one too many hard facts in this world.'

I underestimated Jan, there is a lot more fire in her than I gave her credit for. She's quiet for a moment, then says, 'Where is he now?' Such a simple question, from a kind lady who fed me toast. I know she's talking about Ian. Something in the way she asks it makes me answer.

'I don't know. He walked off at that station. He just left and—'

I was too scared of the darkness, too scared to follow Ian into the black but all along the darkness has been sitting inside me. There is no reason to resist it anymore. It's inside me and rising and I watch it and feel it, sticky and cold.

'Which station?' Jan asks.

I wipe my eyes. 'Christ's something,' I reply.

Jan is kind enough to ignore my face, to leave me alone. Nothing matters anymore. If the pea sofa would just creak a little more, open up and swallow me whole, that would be fine. That would be OK with me. I close my eyes.

'I've done a little ring-round.' With Jan's voice I realise I must have dozed off. 'No reports of accidents in that area and no related admissions to local hospitals. So that's good.'

'Or it's very bad,' I say.

Jan folds her lips in on each other. She allows for the very bad. She doesn't shrink away from it, doesn't try and make it better. It seems this little, homey woman, someone you'd pass without even seeing, can handle the very bad. She can hold it and look it in the eye and stay standing. Not even flinching.

'Try and get some shut eye,' she advises, 'Things get going early around here.'

COCO

There is a knock on my door, a Mum-knock. She steps in quietly. She replaces the pages on my desk. For a moment neither of us says anything. She picks up my towel off the floor and puts it over the back of my chair.

‘I got scared when I read that stuff. I know it’s not your handwriting obviously but I got scared anyway. What with Bish thinking you’re depressed and your behaviour ... I’m sorry, I handled it badly.’

I shrug, I don’t trust myself to speak. I don’t trust myself not to cry.

‘And I think I understand where your questions about Septimus came from?’

I sniff. ‘Ian doesn’t have PTSD.’ My voice comes out petulant. Rather petulant than—

‘If you let me, I’ll try and help you help him?’

Here are the tears. More than I expected, more than I’ve cried since I was little.

Through snot and hiccups, I tell Mum everything about Ian and Angus — even the meeting God and smashing phones. I tell her everything except for Ian upstairs and that moment with Angus today because that was ... that was too strange and I don’t want to even think about it. I don’t understand any of it. That moment I keep at the edge of my thoughts where I don’t have to do anything about it.

The effort and relief of the tears and telling Mum leaves me worn-out, to the point that even my bones hurt. I could close my eyes right now and sleep until next week.

ANGUS

The building is shaking. My head is caught in a clamp. I jerk myself up into a sitting position and regret it instantly. My body aches. It's rattling pipes, not an earthquake. I'm on the most uncomfortable sofa ever constructed in the history of sofas. I need to be in my own bed. I need to be gone from here. Ian. *Where are you, bro? What are you doing?* Maybe he will be waiting for me on that platform and will get on the train and he will laugh about my bat-shit night in Bognor Regis. Maybe not.

Jan's voice reaches me from the kitchen: 'Yes, alright then, I won't forget. I promise. It will be here when you get back.' A man walks out of the kitchen, older than Jan, but not yet old. He glances back at me as he picks up two Lidl bags. He doesn't look homeless or crazy.

The clock in the kitchen says it's just past seven. Outside it seems barely light. Jan appears from her little office. 'Cup of tea?'

I shake my head. 'No, thank you.'

She smiles, hesitates, then says: 'Still nothing.'

I nod.

She follows me out to the entrance hall and watches me put my shoes on. Des. I straighten up. 'About last night, and Des. If I upset him, I'm sorry. I didn't mean ... the words came out wrong.'

Jan smiles her Dolores smile. 'You need a coat. I cannot let you go without one. It's perishing out there.' She walks over to the coat rail. 'Here, take this.' It's a thick grey duffel. The way she's holding it shows off the quilted padding on the inside. It does look warm enough to keep that horrible sea wind out, but I feel bad. 'Go on,' she urges, 'I had it cleaned and everything. It won't be missed.'

I take it from her. It doesn't smell of anything. It's a bit big, but reassuringly heavy. Des appears through the door. He glances at me, then reaches for his shoes.

'Oh good, Angus wanted to see you,' Jan says to him.

He stands up straight and looks at me again. 'Dead man walking.'

'Des,' Jan tuts.

Des shrugs. 'It's true. Belonged to old Pete.'

My brain is slow to catch on to what they're saying. 'I can't wear a dead man's clothes!' I start to take it back off, but he stops me. 'He's not going to miss it.'

The three of us stand in silence for a moment. Jan gives me an encouraging smile. I clear my throat. 'Des, mate, I'm sorry about upsetting you.' He is so big that I feel six years old again. I can't tell in the silence whether he's considering my apology or thinking about something else entirely.

He sniffs. 'Come with me.'

'Uh, thing is, I've got to get back to London,' I say.

'Come,' he growls and opens the door. I glance at Jan, who waves in farewell. I can't upset him again after just apologising.

Outside, Des strides ahead. I think about giving him the slip at the end of the block, but as if he's reading my thoughts, he turns back to check on me. Bognor looks very different in daylight. Smaller, dirty. The sea smell is thick and sticky. Sea gulls swirl overhead. Soon I can see the sea front. I pull my hood low over my eyes. Dead Pete's coat weighs me down.

Des stops at the edge of a four-way intersection. The traffic lights are not working and everyone seems to be looking for the gap. Through the mess of cars, an old woman steps into the road and walks towards us. She's slightly bent forward against the wind, wearing a thick coat with the collar turned up so that her head sticks out, like a tortoise. A few cars hoot, a driver lean out of his car and yells at her, but she ignores them all.

'Morning, Rhonda,' Des calls cheerfully when she reaches us.

The woman stops, turns and takes a moment to focus on Des. 'Fuck off,' she says and carries on her way.

Des laughs.

'You asked what I do apart from my nightly walks,' he says once we've made it to the other side of the road. 'I'm the Birdman.'

I stare at him, thinking I must have misheard him. 'The birdman,' I repeat.

'I am.'

'No.' I shake my head. 'No, no-no-no. I am done with crazy people.'

'I'm serious.'

'That's the fucking problem, isn't it. You're all so fucking serious about it.' I am sick of being made to do things I don't want to do. I see Coco on the pavement yesterday. Her face as Ian pulls me away.

'This isn't what you think. This is real.'

'It's always different. It's always real.' I think I'm shouting now. 'But what about me? What about what I want?'

'You're kind of messed up about your brother.'

'D'you think?'

He looks at me, then claps his hands together. 'So, Birdman. I can't believe you haven't heard about it. It's international. Look it up if you don't believe me. You've got to imagine this now. Summer. Huge crowds. Babes in string bikinis—' He grins. 'Ok, maybe not so many bikinis, it's Bognor, not Ibiza. At the end of the pier is a ramp leading up to a platform, right, the Launchpad.' He starts striding down the pier as he's explaining.

I'm still having to grab at the air to get it into my lungs. Did he not hear me? Does no one ever hear me?

'Keep up!' he calls, looking back over his shoulder. Saying what I did out loud was a big thing and he's just ignoring me. Well, fuck him. He is going to listen. Someone is going to listen. I'm going to smack his stupid face, until it's blue, to break his fucking nose and then go for his ribs. You're going to fly, birdman. I'm just behind him, my arm pulled back, ready, my fist tingling. But just as I'm about to launch myself on him, he turns around and catches my arm, mid-air.

'If you're going to hit me, at least do it to my face,' he says evenly. He turns around, and plants himself squarely in front of me. 'Right, go.'

'What?'

'Hit me.'

'I'm not going to hit you.' I feel like a douche.

'Yes, you are, you're fucking furious. Hit me!'

'This is stupid.' I turn away. He punches me in the shoulder. 'What the—'

'Come on, chickenshit.' He lands another.

'Stop it! *Jesus*. What is your problem?'

'You not up to it?'

'I will fucking kill you!' My words come out like a roar and I launch myself at him. As much as I thump him, he doesn't seem to move, which opens up a completely new layer of fury. I'm five years old again, trying to beat up my dad, who just laughs. 'You don't know!' I shout, throwing fists that seem to land everywhere and nowhere. At some point, Des becomes Ian. 'It was you and me. That was the deal. You promised me. You PROMISED. You've fucking ruined everything, you asshole. EVERYTHING.' I have to stop because I have no more air. I double over. At first all I hear is my blood thundering in my ears. After a while I feel Des' hand on my back. He pats it a few times. I stand up. Des is looking at me with his hands in his pockets. 'You need to get to the gym more often, lad.'

I get up and wipe my mouth.

'So, Birdman,' he says and starts making for the end of the pier.

Unbelievable. 'Des!' I call. My anger is spent. 'I don't care about your stupid flying competition. I'm sorry, but ...' I shake my head.

He walks back towards me. 'There is method in my madness,' he says, 'Just follow me.'

We walk in silence to the end of the pier. The waves are muddy and choppy. 'Do the waves ever reach over the pier?'

'Yeah, of course. It's the ocean. So, the platform is two metres up, and you've got about five metres run-up, max, so you run like the devil and at the end you launch yourself off.' He looks at me with a huge grin on his face.

'And then?'

'You drop like a stone, or a boulder if you're like me, into bloody cold water. But seven years ago, I won it.'

I laugh. 'You're insane.'

'Lots of different types of crazy.'

I'm tired of this line. It's a plaster on a stab wound. 'No. Not all crazies are created equal. Some craziness fucks you up fundamentally.'

'I know.' He sniffs. 'Anyway, I just wanted to tell you about the Birdman.'

'Sure,' I reply.

Des leans back against the railing, cups his hands together and blows into them. 'Someone told me that the more "crazy" a person's behaviour seems, the stronger their desire is to live. So, in actual fact, they're just having to try harder, to go to more extreme measures, to make sense of things.'

'Great chat. Any more advice?'

Des laughs. 'Get to the gym. That was embarrassing.'

Then he's gone, and I'm on this godforsaken pier in a dead man's coat. Nothing is better, nothing has changed. The water below me shifts itself about, too irritable to make decent waves. I am so tired but there is something more. I don't care anymore. It's difficult to explain how weird it is — it's as if I'm staring at a deep, bloody gash on my arm. I ought to feel pain, that's what the nervous system is designed for. I look at it and I feel nothing, not even curiosity.

COCO

We have a plan because Mum loves a plan. Plans and logical responses. Mum hasn't mentioned school this morning and I can't work out whether it's because she's just forgotten that half term is over, or because her plan is more important. Either way I'm not going to bring it up. Despite the fact that I've told her that Angus' parents are both away, we are back at their flat, with Ian's 'book', because 'if Ian were my child, Coco, if the situation were reversed, this is what I'd want.' So maybe not a completely logical response.

'This is it. There won't be anyone here,' I repeat as we walk up the front stairs of the building.

'I love these old mansion blocks,' says Mum. 'They were purpose built, so the room size you get is amazing and the walls are beautifully thick.' She's sounding like Kirstie Allsopp on *Location, Location, Location*.

I frown at her.

'It's true,' says Mum. 'They're worth a fortune.'

While I press the buzzer, Mum peers in through the glass panels on the doors. 'See, they have those lovely old-fashioned lifts.'

'Stop it,' I say, just as a woman says hello.

I'm so surprised I just stare at the silver box.

Mum steps forward. 'Is that Angus and Ian's flat?' she asks.

'Stop it, Mum!' I say to her.

There is no answer from the other end. 'I'm Angus' friend,' I add lamely, glaring at Mum.

'Come on up.' The voice sounds tired. The door buzzes open.

Standing in the open doorway is a woman who can only be Angus' mum. It's kind of bizarre because as well as looking just like Angus, she has fly-away grey hair loosely pulled back from her face. She's wearing a loose 'M&S'-style shirt, something Mum would never be

seen dead in, and leggings. She looks like mums are supposed to look — a little overweight and middle-aged. I glance at Mum's made-up face and skinny jeans and feel a little silly. I look back at the woman. 'I'm Coco, I'm in Angus' year at school. This is my mum, Robin,' I say. Even Mum's name sounds stupid.

'Penny.' Her smile is brief. 'I'm sorry, I just got in from Melbourne.'

'How is your mum?' I ask.

She gives me a surprised look, which I suppose is understandable seeing as she's never met me. 'Not good. Still hanging on.'

'Gosh, you must be shattered,' says Mum. She glances at me and inclines her head in a 'start talking' way.

I glare at her but I don't know how to start.

'Angus doesn't seem to be here,' says Penny.

'I know. They left yesterday. Ian said he had to leave London. He mentioned something about Bognor Regis?' I scrunch up my face.

Penny frowns. 'I can't get hold of either of them. Angus left his phone here.'

'That's because Ian won't allow phones. He says they're evil.'

Penny rubs her hands over her face. She steps back. 'How rude of me. Come in, sorry.'

'We won't stay,' says Mum.

I hold up the Tesco's bag. 'This is Ian's book. Well, he calls it that. He gave it to me, but the thing is—'

The buzzer rings. Penny looks up at the little screen next to the door. 'Ah, Evie,' she says with obvious relief, then turns back to me.

I hand the bag over. Including that page. It would have been weird to keep it.

'OK,' she says, peering down into the mess of pages.

A small woman in a scarf and purple coat puffs into the flat. Penny's face breaks into a smile. She steps forward to hug the woman.

'Right,' the woman, Evie, says, in a taking-charge kind of way. She pulls off her scarf and unbuttons her coat. We all watch her, unsure of what to do next. I feel Mum glancing at me, but I have no idea who she is. She walks into the kitchen and dumps her stuff on the kitchen table.

'This is Gussie's friend Coco,' Penny says to Evie, 'and her mum.'

Evie looks at me as she walks back towards us. 'Not the same one as the other night.'

Penny clears her throat. 'Well, Coco brought around this pile of pages belonging to Ian, which is apparently a book.' She laughs a little.

'Ah, yes, the first book.'

The confident bossiness of this woman is seriously beginning to grate me. How can she know so much about Ian and Angus and what does she mean about the other friend?

'Seems everyone knows about the book then.' Penny laughs, but it's short and tight. 'Coco also saw Ian and Gussie yesterday. They were leaving London. Apparently mentioned Bognor Regis.'

'Christ,' says Evie.

Its official — I really don't like this woman.

'Can't say I'm surprised. The way he was in Richard's office. And yet Richard just let him go. Said there was nothing he could do, when it was clear as day.' Evie shakes her head. 'I'm so sorry, Penny. The system is fucked.'

Penny's face is struggling to settle on an expression. She reaches for the butterfly clip that has been hanging on to the back of her hair, smooths her hair back, then replaces the clip in the same position.

Evie looks at Penny. Her face softens. 'We'll have them back in no time, safe and sound.' She puts a hand briefly on Penny's arm, then rubs her hands together. There is a silence. I'm relieved when Mum announces that we'll leave them in peace. It's weird being surrounded by grown-ups in the flat. They change it, make it smaller. I don't like it.

‘Thank you. Thank you,’ Penny repeats and touches my shoulder. ‘I’ll tell Angus you were here.’

Mum and I don’t speak until we are back in the car. ‘We did the right thing. You should feel proud. And Penny is back now, so she’ll sort it out. She and that funny little woman.’

‘She wasn’t funny, she was seriously annoying.’

‘She had that way about her — she must be a teacher or something.’ Mum looks over at me as she starts the engine. ‘Do you want to go shopping now we’re out? Or pop into Wagas for some lunch?’

‘No, I just want to go home!’ I shout.

Silence in the car. Mum bites her lip.

‘I’m sorry. Thank you for the offer, and thank you for doing this, but I actually just want to go home.’ I say, in the calmest voice I have.

COCO

This is some kind of a bullshit outcome. Obviously, it's the best thing that could happen, having Angus' mum back. She'll sort Ian out and Angus won't have to worry anymore. What's bullshit is that at the end of it all, I'm back in my stupid bedroom, staring out the window. Not that it's about me, obviously. But that's just it — it's not about me. It goes back to that main character stuff: Bish goes to Paris and falls in love. Main character. I spend most of half term staring out my window.

But what I really want to know is, who is that Evie woman, and what did she mean about 'Richard's office' and another book, and excuse me, but who was the 'other friend'? Why did those words catch me off guard? It must have been the way she said them, annoying little woman. Obviously, Evie meant that the other 'friend' was a girl. And obviously that doesn't bother me in the slightest. I pick up my pillow and throw it at my door, but it barely makes it past my bed. Typical.

And what about that moment, outside on the pavement? an irritating half-Bish-half-Tash voice says.

I don't know what you're talking about.

You do — that moment you refuse to think about.

There was no moment.

The world stopped. Not in the way it did on the common with Ian. That was you wanting it to be real. This was something entirely different. You felt weird, tingly. You couldn't stop looking at him. You didn't want to, because in that moment you felt ... alive.

Nope.

The voice doesn't reply, which is so annoying that I carry on: People don't think they fancy one brother and then go after the other — that's just basic behaviour. Anyway, he is too young and seriously immature and not half as good looking as his brother.

Coward, whispers the little voice and disappears.

I'm so irritated with that voice that I can't stand my own company any longer. Leo is in the kitchen with Mum, having one of their cosy chats.

'I thought you couldn't wait to leave,' I say to him.

He frowns at the tone of my voice. 'Just picking up some stuff,' he replies. At the far end of the counter there is a large, beautifully ironed pile of his clothes. Clearly Mum has done all his washing. Again.

'Leo, are you ever going to grow up?' I say.

He doesn't reply. It's as if he doesn't hear me, as if I'm not even here.

I get this intense feeling, a heaviness or a suction force in my forehead. There is a buzzing, like I'm locked into a sound wave. I reach out for the counter. Neither of them notices. The heavy intensity spreads to my chest. If I don't get rid of it, I'm going to explode. I take a breath. 'It's pathetic.'

Mum looks at me.

'Why do you keep babying Leo? You're enabling him. You are the reason he's fucking up on every level.'

'What the fuck?' I hear Leo say, but my eyes are fixed on Mum.

'Does Dad know you do his washing and give him money? You spend your life tiptoeing between him and Leo, trying to keep them both happy when actually what you need to do is stand up to both of them.' I take a breath. My voice is calm, matter-of-fact. 'You're not the one who needs to go on a course to get your shit together — they need to get their shit together. Dad needs to stop bullying Leo and Leo needs to grow up. But they don't have to because you're always here. You're wasting your life.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' Leo says.

'Yes, actually I do. I've had sixteen years of it, I'm an expert.'

'I don't know where this is coming from—' Mum starts.

'Ohmygod, Mum, it's hardly rocket science.'

I don't know where those words came from and I don't have any more. Leo looks furious. He turns on me. 'Are you done?'

I shrug. 'It needed to be said.'

'Well, you are a self-obsessed, jumped-up little bitch. That needs to be said.'

My mouth drops open. I look at Mum but she doesn't jump to my defence. I wait. She's staring down at her hands.

'Fine,' I say. I make myself walk calmly out of the kitchen and upstairs. Then I run up to my room and grab my bag and phone.

'Coco!' Mum shouts.

I'm already opening the front door, whilst at the same time trying to shove my feet into my trainers, when Mum appears.

'You can't just flounce out. I forbid it. You are only sixteen years old. Do you hear me?'

I bang the door shut behind me.

Even as I'm running down the road, hobbling to be more precise as my trainers are still only half on, all I can think is 'what was THAT?' One minute I was in my room and the next saying stuff that doesn't even make sense. Ok, it did make sense, and it was true, but *why?* And the way I said it was mean. Leo is right, I was a total bitch. I glance behind me to see if Mum is coming after me, but the pavement is empty. Good, I can't face her. I turn the corner and stop on the far side of the bus stop to catch my breath. I take out my phone. Bish. The only person who I can talk to now is Bish. Her number rings. I realise she'll be in school, but come *on*, Bish. She will answer. According to her I'm depressed after all. She can't not answer. Three unanswered calls later, I leave a rambling message which even to me sounds a little unhinged. Maybe that will make her call me back.

I have no one else. I have nowhere to go. '*If Angus is back from the seaside, he'll probably be cosyng up to the "other friend"*', the mean-girl voice is back. I shove my feet

properly into my trainers and start walking, away from the bus stop, away from home, away from the thought of Angus' girlfriend. But surely Ian would have said something about another girl — and what about that whole thing at school — Ian's book about love, about his brother and his brother's girlfriend?

Stop it!

And, what about *that* page? The page that still makes me blush.

I stop dead. It wasn't about me. I just assumed. Oh my God. How can I be such a idiot?

Angus has a girlfriend and you're not it.

Yes, thanks, I get it.

There is only one place I could go where Mum would definitely not find me, not that she seems to be looking. A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have been seen dead there. Now it feels like a safe house.

It really should be raining. A main character would at least get rain to match the mood. But the weather doesn't give a shit. The sky is neither here nor there. The river, the Southbank buildings — everything is a can't-be-arsed kind of grey. I walk alongside the building slowly, but today there is just a handful of kids mucking around. At the far side I spot Trevor leaning against the wall.

'Trevor?'

He looks up. 'Where is he?' Trevor's face is red. The acne has gone up a level since I saw him last.

I shrug, feeling powerful. I know more than Trevor. 'They've gone to some seaside place.'

Trevor blinks. 'You are—' He swings away, like he's physically rejecting my words, then back again. 'You are joking. Tell me you are joking.'

I sit down on one of the steps leading up the side of the building.

'I'm dead. I can't believe he's done this to me. He promised. He said he'd sort it. How can he...' He's shaking his head. 'I trusted him, you know, it was his whole idea...' He sits down next to me and rubs his hands over his face. The thought of touching his face makes me nauseous. Then he's up again, pacing, on the edge of majorly losing it.

'Trevor! Stop spiralling. Just tell me the problem in plain English.'

He does stop. He looks a little alarmed by my tone. 'He said it was a sure thing. A quick-fire way to raise money for our business venture.'

'What business venture?'

'The trainers. Cut price designer trainers.'

I shake my head. 'I literally have no idea what you're talking about.' He looks at me like I'm the moron. I stare him down. He's no match for me.

'We were going to sell trainers. Cut price designer trainers from a guy I met.' He looks at me.

'Fake trainers,' I say.

He shakes his head. 'I said there was no way we couldn't make a fortune. It was a done deal. We just needed the initial cash to get going.'

'Right.'

'So Luke agreed to a short term loan.'

'Who is Luke?' I ask but Trevor ignores the question, because he's off again.

'And I had this idea to put the money on the dogs, because when you're tapped into the source, when you *are* the universe, there is no such thing as a bet.'

'Is that even legal?'

This tips Trevor over the edge. 'It's the dogs, of course it's legal. It's the dogs!'

'Stop yelling!' I shout back. 'OK, so you bet the money from this Luke guy on "the dogs",' I say, making air quotations. 'And you lost the money? How much?'

Trevor looks morose. 'Three grand. Plus interest,' he mutters.

'Jesus.'

Trevor leans towards me. 'And Luke's patience has run out. His words. And Luke knows people. Also his words.'

I shift away from him. 'So ...'

Trevor looks up abruptly. He stands up. 'You talk to him. Luke. You explain the situation. He won't hurt you, you're a posh white girl. He'll just beat me up.'

'Why don't you ask Angus' girlfriend to do it?' The words slip out before I can stop them. God, I am pathetic.

Trevor looks very confused. 'You're his girlfriend.'

Trevor isn't going to know either way. But still. I bite my cheeks to stop the thought that is dying to make itself known to me.

'You have to do it. Right now. It's broad daylight.'

I'm not a moron. This has stupid idea written all over it. But this is what main characters do. They make the action. 'Fine,' I say in my bored voice, 'Whatever.'

Brixton High Street. On the face of it, it's still London — the same mobile phone shops and clothing outlets and coffee chains you find on every high street, the same buses, cars, same style of buildings, but Brixton is a different world. It's in the air, the energy, the sounds and the smells. The expressions on people's faces.

Brixton Hill is very long. I can't think of a single thing to say to Trevor. The awkwardness grows with every shop we pass, and we pass a lot of shops — hairdressers and two curry restaurants; a tyre outlet, corner stores, betting shops and lots of kebab takeaways. A woman passes, pushing a pram bursting with shopping bags and a toddler jammed into her hip.

'Right, so it's the Tennessee Fried Chicken,' Trevor says, looking back down the hill. 'Other side of the road, up a block. Ask for Luke. Just explain the situation. Do your posh thing.'

I make a face at that. 'Let's go.'

'I'm staying here,' he says, still looking in the opposite direction.

Really? I sigh. Fine. His refusal to move makes me more determined. As I walk up the block, I suddenly feel ridiculously exposed. Every time I lift my eyes, it feels as though someone is looking at me. I stop next to a bus shelter to let a group of girls pass. They don't look nervous, they look just like we must do walking out of school. I start walking again, more slowly. Tennessee Fried Chicken is wedged between Stanley's Funeral Directors, with grubby curtains and plastic flowers in the window, and a self-storage unit. There is a family sitting inside, squashed into a table next to the window. A couple of boys are hanging about outside, looking bored.

I stare at it, until I feel the cold creeping up my legs. Just do this. I glance back at Trevor. He lifts his hands in a 'go already' kind of way. Cheers, Trev. I take out my phone and take a picture of the shop. I send it to Bish, adding, 'In case you're looking for me, this is where I am. Ha ha. Not really. Jokes.'

Inside saturated fat hangs in the air in almost visible globules. But at least it's warm. Up on the board there seems to be every imaginable option of fried chicken — chicken burgers, chicken wraps, Cajun chicken wings, buffalo chicken wings and a 'family surprise bucket' (of chicken). I stare at the board for so long that the Chinese guy behind the till clears his throat. My nerve fails me. This is a stupid thing to be doing. Every cell in my body is telling me this. 'Um, a Coke?' I say in the end.

He frowns at me. 'No chicken? Chicken burger? Chicken wrap?'

'No, thank you.'

He raises an eyebrow and turns to the fridge to get the Coke.

I take a breath. 'Is Luke here?'

He shakes his head, not bothering to answer.

'Do you know when he'll be back? I have a message for him. From Ian.' I make myself stop talking.

The tall guy behind the grill turns and stares at me. A bandana covers his hair, to keep the grease out I'm guessing. There is a grubby dish towel over his shoulder. His apron used to be white a very long time ago. He wipes his hands on the dish towel, flicks it back over his shoulder.

I hand over the money for the Coke. I don't even want it. I feel like an idiot. Trevor is going to go nuts, but I tried.

As I'm walking back down the road, one of the boys who was hanging around outside runs after me. 'Oi!' He inclines his head. I follow him back inside, behind the counter, past the fryer, down a narrow passage and into a tiny room which is obviously the stock room. The tall fryer guy follows us in, hands the tongs he is holding to the boy who called me back, and motions for him to leave. He closes the door. 'What do you want?'

It's not like a movie — he's not a skinhead or a hulk of muscle, he doesn't have tattoos all over his neck. He's a regular guy you'd pass on the street or stand next to on the tube. This makes me feel more confident.

'It's about the money.'

He makes a face at me, as if to say he has no idea what I'm talking about. 'I was speaking to Trevor and he's really stressed out but I'm sure if you understand the situation...'

Still he stares, blank-faced.

'Do you know Trevor?'

He just shakes his head and smiles, like he can't believe I'm wasting his time.

'You definitely know Ian. Actually, that's the thing.' There is not very much air in the room. The door opens, the cashier guy pokes his head in, looks at me, then the guy, and disappears quickly, closing the door.

The guy crosses his arms. Deep-fried oil radiates off him. It glistens on his skin. 'What are you doing here?'

'I think if you understood the situation—'

The guy starts laughing, shaking his head. 'I thought that clown and his moron sidekick were bad enough, but now they send me a mini Kardashian?'

'My name is Coco, actually,' I say automatically and immediately regret telling him my name.

'Coco, what the fuck are you doing here?' he repeats, this time more aggressively.

'So.' I take a breath, 'as I was saying—'

'No!' he shouts. I jump. 'It doesn't work like that! Jesus! How old are you?'

'Sixteen,' I say. The wobble in my voice is nothing compared to the panic I'm feeling inside.

'Well, Coco — sixteen — you have done a very stupid thing walking in here today and getting involved with something that has nothing to do with you.'

I force myself not to look at the door. If I look down, I'll cry. I clench my bum so hard that it hurts and clamp my jaw shut.

'I can't take my hard-earned money. I worked for every penny of it. You probably haven't heard of it, Kardashian, hard fucking work.' His tone of voice is both cruel and patronising. What he doesn't realise is that it helps me. As long as he keeps being insulting, I can keep it together. As long as I don't think about the fact that no one in the world knows where I am, I'll be fine. This is not a movie. He is not going to kill me and slice me up and serve me to his customers. That stuff does not happen in the real world.

'I think we all just need to calm down,' I say.

I can instantly see on his face that that was a very stupid thing to say. Two things happen at the same time. His phone beeps and someone yells his name from the front of the shop. The message he reads seems to tip him over the edge, because he is suddenly much bigger and the space between us smaller. 'Fuck this. I gave them till Friday. Friday came and went. You are going to stay here until I get my money back.' It's not even a statement, it's a command.

'You're holding me hostage? *Kidnapping* me? That is ridiculous! I'll call the police. I'll scream until someone comes and finds me. You can't kidnap me!'

'Calm the fuck down, Kardashian. No one's kidnapping anyone, as soon as I get my money you can walk out.' He takes a step towards me. 'I do not give a single shit about you, or Ian, or any of the other half-wits in your life. I am the wronged party here. You kids with your happy little lives, you're all the same. Nothing means anything. There are no consequences. Well, there are. This, here, is what we call consequences.' Without dropping his gaze, he leans towards me and takes my phone. It's such a slick movement that I don't even register it until my phone is in his back pocket and the door is closing in my face. A key turns in the lock.

This is so ridiculous I start laughing. But the sound freaks me out so I stop. Trevor will come. It's just a matter of waiting it out until this chicken frying moron comes to his senses. It's simply about not panicking.

I consider trying to bang the door down, but he's probably still standing outside. So instead I keep absolutely still. Eventually he'll get bored and then I can raise all hell. The wall in front of me is lined with make-shift metal shelves, each of which is stacked with plastic buckets and tubs and cartons of sauces and oil and salt and breadcrumbs. By the looks of it, there isn't a natural ingredient in sight — it's like an a-z of carcinogens and e-numbers. Mum would have an anxiety attack just being in this room. It's calming to think of Mum freaking out. On the floor are towers of take-away boxes and a stack of fizzy drinks crates. No knives or sharp instruments. There is a tiny sink and some bright pink soap in a decanter above it. A health and safety sticker above the sink reminds you to wash your hands. Underneath it someone has scribbled, 'fuck you, I'm a dirty bastard'. Nice. On the back of the door is a fire escape plan, which involves leaving through the door. There is no fire canister. I'm leaning against one of two chest freezers. I open them. Inside are bags of pre-cut chips and a lot of chicken. But no bodies, as far as I can tell. I close them again and hoist myself up so that I'm

standing on one of the freezers. There is a long narrow window just below ceiling level but it is fixed glass and has serious looking burglar bars outside.

Mum loves to bang on about how humans are uniquely adaptable, it's our evolutionary lottery ticket, and the most dangerous thing about us. Now that I have accepted that I'm stuck, my fear is morphing into serious annoyance. I cannot believe the nerve of that idiot standing a couple meters away, frying chicken as if there is nothing going on. I'm trying to help here, I'm trying to make things better. But he's not interested. He won't listen. I am so tired of people not listening to me. 'Stop it,' I say out loud. I sit down on top of the chest freezer and practise controlled breathing. It doesn't work.

I make myself concentrate on the sounds from the shop — above the voices and banging of the frying pans or something, I make out Capitol radio station. I imagine phoning the station, telling them I'm a captive in a chicken shop on Brixton Hill. Surely Bish will have read my text. She'll call any time now and when I don't answer, she'll call Mum. But Mum isn't speaking to me. Neither is Dad. Where the hell is Trevor?

After another six-and-half minutes, I have to move. This brings my total time in captivity to seventeen minutes, more or less. Enough. 'Hey!' I shout and bang on the door. By the time I hear the sound of the fryer's voice on the other side of the door, my palms are sore and my voice is getting hoarse.

'Shut up, Kardashian. Write Ian's address on a piece of paper and slide it under the door.'

'Fuck you,' I say. Where is Trevor? Is he really going to leave me here? Between Trevor and Bish, surely someone will come looking for me.

The light in the storeroom is switched off and the door into the restaurant closes and suddenly it's very quiet.

A landline phone rings. The door to the restaurant opens and noise floods back in. Someone picks up the phone. 'Yeah, fine. Alright.' I can't make out whether it's the cashier or my jailer. 'Hello?' I call, but the door shuts and once again silence settles around me.

The light seems to be shrinking away from the small window, leaving behind an unfriendly gloom. This guy is not going to want to keep me overnight, that would make him a criminal. He's going to have to let me go. The door to the shop opens again. Shouting. The key turns, the door opens and Trevor is pushed inside.

'Fuck sakes,' I say.

Trevor leans over his legs while he gets his breath back. He doesn't smell great. He stands up, smacks his hand against the door, then swings around and bangs all his weight against it, as if to break it open, even though the door opens inwards.

'What did you say to him?' He turns on me.

'Excuse me?'

'We're gonna die.'

'Calm down.'

'We are. He's gonna kill us.'

'Why would he do that? That doesn't make any sense.' It actually helps to have Trevor losing his shit in front of me.

'Oh man.' He wipes his hands up and down his track pants. 'My nan is going to be going ape-shit.' He rattles the door, sits down on an upturned crate, takes his cap off, wipes his face, puts it back on.

'Trevor, for fucks sakes calm down. You cannot lose your shit right now!' I yell at him. It seems to have a positive effect. 'Just breathe, that's all you have to do.' Somewhere in the back of my head I hear Mum saying these words to me. For a couple of minutes, we sit in a sticky, claustrophobic silence. *Bish! Where are you?*

'Why did you go along with Ian's stupid-ass idea?'

'Because it's Ian.'

'God.' I sigh.

'The dog was called New World Order. Ian said it was confirmation. No room for doubt. We even had to go along to the track for the race.'

'What track?'

'Romford.' He looks at me as if I'm a moron.

'Don't children get killed because of dog racing?'

'That's dog *fighting*.'

'So you went to the track,' I prompt.

'He's dressed up in a tux, swaggering around, calling himself the rainmaker.'

'And it didn't win.'

'Second to last. Ian went mental. Left me there. I haven't seen him since.' He stares miserably at his hands.

'God, Trevor, why did you go along with it?'

Trevor looks so unhappy, it seems Ian was his superman. 'He's always right,' he says stubbornly.

'Well, a psycho frier has locked us in a cupboard and I don't see Ian coming to rescue us.'

Trevor leans forward, elbows on his knees and shakes his head. 'We're never going to get out.'

'He's not going keep us in here overnight, that's kidnapping.'

Trevor laughs. 'You think Luke gives a shit about that?'

Check your messages, Bish, I beg her. Please look at your phone.

Now it's dark. What time does a chicken shop close? It's never properly dark in London, but it is dark in this room, as if this room is the store cupboard of all the city's darkness. And it is getting smaller. Trevor hasn't said anything for a while. All I can hear is his breathing. I wonder if he's asleep.

'Ian's decent to me. He gives me the time of day.'

'It's going to be fine,' I say, as much for myself as for Trevor. There is no air vent. How long will it be before we use up all the oxygen in here? I try to slow my breathing down and take shallower breaths, but that makes me feel as though I'm not getting enough breath and that unleashes the panic. People do disappear, every day. The news is full of it — teenagers who were the apple of their parents' eye, who had so much potential and will be missed by everyone at their school. Why would I do this? What would possess me to do such a stupid thing?

It is here, in a smelly, dark, cramped storeroom, listening to the jagged breathing of someone I wouldn't have given the time of day to, wouldn't even have registered a couple of weeks ago, that the realisation hits me: *Coco, you freaking idiot, you major-league moron, you fancy Angus Munro.*

COCO

Shouting, familiar shouting. 'Coco!'

Trevor's head jerks up.

'Get your hands off me!' Dad. The door that leads into the shop opens. 'If I don't see my daughter in the next three seconds, I will call the police.'

'Dad!' I shout. 'We're here!' I bang the door. But it sounds like my dad has totally lost the plot. He's yelling obscenities and threats.

'Dad!' I hear Leo's voice, begging Dad to calm down.

'Shut up, Leo,' Dad's voice replies, and the ranting continues. The storeroom door opens and there is light and the nauseating deep fried oil and so much noise. Dad pulls me out, pushes me down the tiny passage and into the shop.

'If you even think about contacting any of these young people again, I will hunt you and your family down, and I will serve you up as a take-away!'

'Dad, stop it!' I shout.

But he pulls me out of the shop. I look back to see the window full of customers staring at us. Outside, the car is literally parked on the pavement. 'Get in,' he barks at me. I get in the front and as Dad is pulling off, I put my hand on his arm. 'My phone! He has my phone. I have to get it.'

'I'm not fucking going back in there,' he says. I turn around. Leo and Trevor are sitting in the back seat.

'Leave it, Coco, it's just a phone,' says Leo.

'I can't leave my phone!' I say.

But Dad has started the car. With unnecessary wheel-spinning we are back on Brixton Hill and sitting in rush-hour traffic. Dad turns into the bus lane, ignoring the blaring hooter of the bus and taxis he cuts off and speeds along it for two blocks before turning off the road. I turn around and catch Leo's eye but he just shakes his head. We sit in thick silence while Dad makes some nonsensical turns, which get us back to where we started.

The roads are jammed. Dad bangs the steering wheel as we sit in a queue. He still hasn't acknowledged me, not even a glance.

Trevor clears his throat. 'I could jump out here,' he says, 'I don't live that far—'

'Shut up,' says Dad. The thirty minutes it takes us to get home are sat in silence.

Mum is standing in the sitting room. When she sees me, she rushes forward and crushes me in a hug. Bish is just behind her. Dad barges past us into the sitting room. He looks at Bish. 'Thank you again, Bish, but you need to go.' Bish gives me a look and hurries out.

'Sit down,' he barks at all of us.

Leo and I obey meekly. Trevor hovers in the doorway. 'Er, should I take my shoes off?' he says.

'What?' shouts Dad.

Trevor's face appears. 'My shoes — should I take them off?'

My dad looks like he's about to smack him.

'Trevor, just sit down,' says Leo. But Trevor's already holding his trainers, so he puts them on the floor next to him when he sits down.

'Would anyone like a—' Mum starts.

Dad silences her with a look. He takes a breath and then lets loose a tirade which sounds like a jumble of words repeated over and over — illegal, out of control, jail time, inner city, thoughtless stupidity.

'Chris!' Mum shouts after a few minutes, 'I don't think—'

'And you!' he turns on her, 'Letting the children run riot, no discipline, no respect while I'm working my arse off.'

Mum glances at Trevor and then steps forward towards Dad. 'This is not the time,' she says. Her voice is quiet but icy. It's a tone none of us has heard before. She turns to Trevor. 'I'm sure your parents are getting worried. If you have any trouble this evening, just phone.'

I've never seen someone move so fast. He doesn't even put his shoes on.

'We need to get hold of this boy — Ian's family.' Dad says once Trevor has made his escape.

'No! They had nothing to do with this!' I shout. Mum and Dad both look at me as if I've completely lost my mind.

'Dad's right.' Mum's voice is firm. 'But not tonight.' She turns to Leo and me.

'Upstairs, go and have a shower. I will come and see you in a bit,' she adds, looking at me.

We nod, like we're five years old again, happy to be told what to do.

I can't hear Mum's exact words but it sounds loud. Every now and then Dad's voice attempts to butt in but Mum's voice just gets louder. I've never heard her like this, as though she has found her voice and is making up for twenty years of biting her tongue.

COCO

But back upstairs, home and safe, I feel itchy. I can't sit down, let alone have a shower and climb into bed.

Leo is on his bed. He glances at me as I lean against the doorframe, then carries on with his game. He took his gaming screens with him when he moved out so he's reduced to his old laptop. His face is furious.

'Well?' I say.

'I swear to God, Coco, you've caused enough trouble for one day.' Leo still doesn't look at me but he bangs his keyboard and chucks the laptop on to the floor.

'Is this about what I said in the kitchen? I'm sorry, but—'

'Is it not enough for you to be the favourite, perfect child? You're just like Dad.'

'What?'

'You only see things from your point of view. You're so self-involved. It doesn't occur to you that you may be wrong.'

'I was trying to help.'

'Bullshit. Even if you were, I didn't ask for it.'

I open my mouth but I have nothing to say. Is he right? Is that true? Do I just make everything worse? 'What happened after I left?'

'Nothing, because this is just the way it is.'

Hands on my shoulders. Dad propels me out of Leo's room, steps inside and closes the door behind him.

My copy of *Mrs Dalloway* is next to my bed. I pick it up. That essay is still unwritten. The concept of sitting down to write an essay seems to belong to a long-ago Coco, back in that old reality. The connection I feel with Septimus, the responsibility I feel for his death is ... weird. '*Freakish? Downright disturbing?*' Bish's voice fills my head. I smile. I reach for my

laptop and Facetime her. She's doing a mask, so her face is covered in a white sheet. The cut-outs of the eyes are slightly off and the mouth is way too big. 'Whose faces do they base these things on?' she asks.

I laugh.

'Are you OK?'

'Fine, thanks to you.'

'Seriously Coco, what the actual? I mean, God. You're supposed to be the one with the brains.'

I'm over having people yelling at me. 'It seemed the right thing to do.' Even as the words come out, I hear how stupid they sound. 'I wanted to make a difference.'

'You wanted to be the hero.'

'Turns out you were the hero.'

'Ah this thing is so annoying.' She pulls the sticky tissue mask off and disappears from the screen. A few moments later, she reappears, wiping her face with a flannel. 'Apparently it had extract of snail slime in it. Good for hydration.'

I screw up my face. 'That's disgusting.' There is silence for a while. 'How's Zack?'

'Not happening.'

'Really?' Hah! I knew it.

'No, what's not happening is you're not going to change the conversation. After saving your life, I think I deserve an explanation.'

'Of what?'

'Everything! Since — I don't know — September?'

I knew this was coming. I don't know how to explain it to Bish.

'You've frozen. Have you frozen? Fuck this connection.'

'I'm here.' This could be my final chance to save this friendship, but I don't know how to start. I decide to go back to the beginning. 'That online quiz said I was most likely to marry someone from my class. Do you know how sad that is?'

Bish pulls a face. 'What online quiz?'

'Basically, I'm turning into my mum and she's not happy. She's not fulfilled. It's the main character thing. Being the main character of your life.'

'Right.'

She doesn't get it and even though I knew she wouldn't, it hurts enough for me to add, 'And Tash and Maya...'

'They're not that bad, Coco.'

'They are.'

The horrible silence is back. Bish sighs. 'Do you want to know what happened in September? You stopped talking to me.'

'No, I didn't.'

'You did. After being friends for so long, you suddenly shut me out and I don't know why.'

I shake my head. My beautiful friend's face fills my screen. *Come on, Coco, you've got nothing to lose.* 'OK, Bish, if you want to know what been going on, here goes.' I start in Year Nine, on the common, and end with why the hell I ended up in the chicken shop.

'I didn't know, Coco, I never would have...' Bish says quietly, 'I'm so sorry.'

I look away from the screen and wipe the stupid tears from my eyes. 'Honest, it doesn't matter.'

My tears set off hers so that we're both crying-laughing. 'Jee-sus. Wow,' she says, wiping her face. 'And to top it off, all this time you've been fancying Angus Munro.'

'What? No.'

'Please, Coco, I can read you like a picture book.' Bish's smug grin fills my screen. She knows she has me. She's known all along. 'So, what happens next?'

I shake my head. 'Who knows. But thank you for being there, especially when I wasn't talking to you.'

Bish's little brother yells something. She rolls her eyes. 'Babysitting,' she mutters then turns her face away from the screen and yells, 'Shut up!'

I smile. 'So not everything has changed.'

She starts to smile but jerks her head to the side again. 'I swear to God I will kill you before the end of the night!' she screams like a possessed demon. She turns back and smiles sweetly. 'I'd be surprised if he makes it through childhood alive.'

'Especially with you as a babysitter.' It feels nice, this. It feels comforting, soothing. I yawn. 'I'm so tired. I gotta go.'

'Love you babes,' She makes a heart with her hands and is gone.

Still this mood won't let me go. Mum is sitting at the kitchen counter, wine glass empty and open bottle next to her. Her head is down, I know it's because she's scrolling on her phone but in this moment she looks older, too old. 'I'm sorry,' I say and hug her from behind.

She sits up and holds on to my hug. 'You're safe. That's all that matters.'

'No, I don't mean that. I do mean that, but I'm sorry about what I said. Earlier.'

Instead of replying, she gets off her stool and draws me in for a proper hug. She rubs my back. I've hurt her. Those words cannot be unsaid. In a day of near-misses and disasters, this suddenly feels the most serious.

'I am exhausted.' She lets go of me. 'Go and have a look.' She inclines her head to the TV room. Dad and Leo are sitting in front of the TV, opposite ends of the sofa, obviously, but the same sofa. They look so similar, beers in hand, watching football.

'You OK?' I ask them.

They both emit a Neanderthal grunt.

ANGUS

Ian did not spend that night wondering naked around farmland, crossing roads in his crazy state. He did not cause a major traffic accident or die of hypothermia or walk in front of a freight train. He didn't fall off a vertical cliff or get attacked and beaten up. When he left me on the station platform, he walked into a village, to the local church and was speaking to the dead when the priest guy found him. The priest guy listened to Ian's healing bullcrap all night and in the morning, phoned a local hospital.

Ian had a comfortable night, I spent the night on the soup sofa in a homeless shelter. Even in the height of madness, Ian ends up better off than me. The irony is so deep and dark that for the past two days I've been unable to move. My head just switched off and turned out the lights. It's not so bad. It's fucking quiet and I like that. I don't know what I had against the darkness all those years.

Mum seems to have spent the past two days cleaning compulsively. She comes in, opens my blind and puts down a mug of tea next to my bed. When she leaves, I close the blind. The only place she hasn't touched is Ian's bedroom. She walks in there from time to time. I can see her from my bed, looking at her son's craziness all over the walls. I think she thinks if she can decode it, she will understand what happened. I want to tell her it's a waste of time. But I just can't summon the energy.

Dad feeds me updates on Ian. The doctors have put him on medication to bring him down. He isn't reacting well. They say it's a process, it will take time. My parents ask me if I want to talk, they tell me I should talk. I'm not going to talk. It would destroy this nothingness, my very own isolation room. In this isolation room there is no Coco, but there is also no Ian. It is essential that there is no Ian. Back on the Bognor pier, Des thought that by provoking a couple of bad punches, he was helping me get rid of the anger I felt towards Ian. All he did was make me aware of it. I know it's there now. It's ugly and mean and it's unfair and pointless and I don't think I could control it once I let it out. I don't want to risk it.

From far away, through layers of densely packed nothingness, I can feel someone moving around in the flat. The lights are off. Too late to be Dad. It must be Ian. It's OK. He's home. I turn over but something's not right. Talking. It can't be Ian. He's in hospital. If it's not Ian, it must be about Ian. So much for my nothingness. *That* feeling — fear — is back so suddenly it's like a sucker punch. A huge hand has taken hold of my guts and is squeezing. That same hand had been constantly squeezing these past few weeks. I didn't realise it at the time and I hadn't noticed that it had stopped with Ian going into hospital, but I know it now that it's back.

Mum is in the kitchen, sitting at the table. She is resting her head on her hand. Her phone is in front of her. She looks up, focuses on me and tries to smile but her face doesn't obey.

'What's wrong?' I say. The hand squeezes tighter.

'It's just Granny, darling. Couldn't sleep so I thought I'd check in with the nurses.'

'And?' The hand releases its grip. I breathe out.

'She's OK. Hanging on by a thread.'

'Are you going back?'

'It's so far and expensive.' She sighs. 'We had our time together. We said our goodbyes.'

She looks so sad that I don't know what to do. I feel guilty at my relief that it's not anything to do with Ian. I sit down next to her and pick up her hand. We sit like this for a while. 'Boyo,' she says. Her voice is soft and heavy and thick. She kisses my hand and lets it go.

I feel her looking at me. 'Your friend seems nice. She probably thinks I'm a weirdo but I had literally just walked in from the airport and Evie arrived and it was just chaos.'

I sit back in the chair. 'What friend?'

'The girl. Long dark hair. Her mum was here too. The mum looks a bit school-gate hectic.'

I stare at her.

'She brought back Ian's book. She's the one who told us you'd left London,' Mum says as though this is all obvious, common knowledge.

'Coco? Coco was here and she had Ian's book?' My mind appears unwilling to leave the isolation room and start working again.

'I wouldn't call it a book.'

'Mum?'

She looks surprised. 'It's on his bed.'

I push the chair back and stand up.

'She's pretty,' she adds, as I leave the kitchen.

I pick up the stack of Ian's pages, his 'book'. It's dog-eared and grubby. It's not a book at all, just a random collection of what looks like mostly rubbish. More of the stuff I'd seen before. Formulae and scribbles. The stuff that's legible is horrible in some places and ridiculous and kind of cringey, self-righteous stuff Ian would surely be embarrassed about. Did Coco look through it all? Did she read every page? I'm embarrassed, for all of us. Is this why she kept coming around? But why would she take it in the first place? I sift through the pile and come across a page folded in half.

Gussie, Gussie. She's right in front of you, and you're too scared. She is perfect — her nose, her tits, her lips, her nervous eyes and you're so scared. Too scared to live. And you won't. You're both too scared of each other. Of what's there. You can't see it, you can't look at her, the way she wants you back. You're too shit scared of the raw, pulsing, clawing ache. You don't know what to do with her, how to touch her. You think you'll drown in her, you'll drown her in your wanting. You're aching and she's aching and the world is aching from wanting and not getting. The heartbeat of the world is aching. It keeps us going, it eats us alive.

What? No. This is not happening. He wouldn't. *Longing*, Ian? Aching? Her lips, her goddam *tits*, Ian? I can't stand it. There is no way she hasn't read it — that's why it's folded over.

How dare he. I have a desperate need to vomit or scratch my eyes out or something. I hate

him. How dare he? I want to die. I want to kill him. I want to hurt him very badly. I look around his room for something to destroy, something that means more than anything to him. His Great White shark tooth from my grandpa? His signed Messi shirt? But what is any of that compared to this? Nothing would cause him enough pain. I dump his crap on his bed, switch off the light and close the door behind me. That white hot rage has shifted. It's not there anymore. I don't need an isolation room anymore. I just feel dead.

'Are you planning on getting up today?' I hear Mum breathing from the doorway.

'No.'

'Enough now. Come on, Gussie. You need to get back.' Her no-nonsense voice is back.

'To what?'

I hear her sigh. 'To life, Boyo.'

'No!' I shout. 'Go away.'

She sighs. 'You can't lie there forever,' she says.

Actually, I can't see a reason to ever leave the flat again, but Mum can believe what she likes.

The buzzer goes mid-afternoon and a few minutes later, a knock on the front door.

'Robert,' my mum calls a few minutes later. 'Join us. Please.'

The tone in her voice is interesting enough to get me out of bed. Trevor is in the sitting room, just inside the doorway, looking sweaty and nervous. Mum and Dad are sitting down, staring at him.

'Slow down, Trevor,' Dad is saying, 'Start again.'

By the time Trevor has finished there is a stunned silence in the room. My brain refuses to accept what Trevor has been saying. I look at Mum who seems to be in the same state as me. Dad has his head in his hands. 'Unbelievable.'

'I'm not lying,' Trevor's voice rises.

'I believe you Trevor, it's unbelievable that it happened right under my nose.'

'Robert, you weren't to—'

'I was, Penny. You left me in charge, I—'

'Dad! Stop it, OK? Stop. You didn't know what was going on because I lied about what was going on. I thought I could sort Ian out.'

'It's true, I tried to tell Angus, but he didn't listen to me,' says Trevor.

I stare at him. 'Cheers, mate.'

He shrugs.

'But this friend, Coco?' asks Dad.

'Coco,' Trevor nods and I want to smack him for saying her name aloud.

'To think the danger she put herself in, what could so easily have happened,' says Dad.

'Lucky I was there,' says Trevor.

He needs to leave now because I really am going to smack him very hard. 'Anyway, I brought this for her, to say thank you.' He hands over a bottle of Badedas bubble bath. It's still in a cellophane wrapper but it looks like it's been at the back of someone's cupboard for a long time. 'It's all my nan had,' he mutters, colouring.

'That's a lovely thing to do,' Mum says, the way mums do. I don't think it's a lovely thing to do. I think it's intolerable that he should be giving Coco bubble bath — it's way too intimate. It makes me blush.

'We need to go and see her parents,' says Mum.

'No,' I say.

'That's exactly what we're going to do,' says Dad.

'You're coming too,' Mum says to me, even though I'm emphatically shaking my head.

Dad gets up.

'Should I come?' asks Trevor.

There is a pause as Mum, Dad and I stare at Trevor. 'Maybe not this time,' Mum says, 'but come back and see us soon. Ian is lucky to have you as a friend.'

Trevor blushes.

'He is,' Dad agrees. Dad turns to me. 'Get dressed.'

'No.'

'Five minutes,' Dad says in his 'conversation closed' voice.

COCO

The day is so grey it's not really a day at all. I've convinced Mum that I have a stomach bug, which means I can't go downstairs and make something to eat even though I'm starving.

The house is quiet, fragile, like an aching body trying not to touch anything that might hurt. A couple of re-run episodes of *Vampire Diaries* later, there is the sound of the gate outside and a knock on the door. Please may it not be Bish. I turn over.

'Coco?' Mum calls.

If I just ignore her she'll think I'm asleep. But when she calls my name again I can hear that she's half-way up the stairs.

'Fine,' I call and glance at myself on the way out of my room. Unwashed hair. Trackies, one of Dad's old hoodies and my snowflake fluffy socks from last year's Christmas stocking. Ten out of ten for worst look ever.

Mum's got her formal smile on. This looks like trouble but instead of bolting myself in my room, which would be the sensible thing to do, I follow her downstairs.

Standing in the hallway, looking awkward as hell, are Angus' mum, a man I assume is his dad, and not quite inside the house, Angus. He's staring at his feet, hands in his pockets. I force myself not to smile.

'Come in,' says Mum. 'Apologies, we're all a little ...' Mum looks around at the state of house. I know she's internally freaking out at the trainers lying in the hall, the bag of dirty washing Leo has dumped at the bottom of the stairs.

'Please don't, we just wanted to ... Well, we, um...' Angus' mum, Penny, glances at her husband. I look at back at Angus to see if he'll give me any clue as to what is going on, but he is still staring at the ground. For some reason, Angus' mum is holding a tattered-looking box of Badedas bubble bath, the type my granny used to have. Dad appears from the kitchen in the middle of this. Once the introductions have been made — Penny and

Robert — Dad makes the connection and looks past them towards Angus. I know what he is thinking.

‘I know you. You’re the little—’

‘Dad.’ I cut him off.

Mum moves in front of Dad. ‘Come on in.’ As Mum leads the parents into the sitting room, I step outside.

I can’t look at Angus. I can’t physically lift my eyes to meet his gaze. Too scared the look won’t be there. That I imagined it. Neither of us moves off the steps. Angus sits down on the step. He mutters something about having been here before but it kind of falls flat and I can’t think of anything funny to say.

He takes my phone out of his pocket. It takes me a moment to process. ‘How did you get it?’

‘On the way over, we stopped by your chicken friend. He seems nice.’

‘Why?’ The tone in my voice makes Angus glance at me, but only for a second.

‘Dad insisted on paying the guy back the money he gave Ian. He was a moron to believe Ian and when he locked you in the room that was obviously... but my dad feels responsible. He blames himself.’

‘When we all know it’s all your fault, right?’

He doesn’t respond. ‘I’m joking, Angus. This is no one’s *fault*. If anything, you were—’

‘Jesus, Coco, what were you thinking going to that shop? Anything could have—’ His voice wobbles, like it’s breaking all over again.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ I butt in.

He looks at me as if this is a trick question.

‘That little woman at your flat — Evie? — said ... so I just wanted to know ...’

‘No, Cocopops.’ It comes out more as a sigh than distinct words.

‘Oh.’

Silence. If he were interested, he'd ask me why I asked him that. But he doesn't say anything. He just sits there, looking miserable.

'How is Ian?'

Angus looks frustrated, angry at the change in topic. 'Fine. Batshit. I don't want to talk about Ian.'

'OK.'

'Why did you do all this? I mean, all of it, everything. Why?'

I sit down next to him. 'I wanted to help. That's not true. I wanted to' I can't finish the sentence. I don't know how to say it.

I watch Angus' Adam's Apple move up and down. I can feel his hand moving in his pocket. Making a fist. 'Ian's stack of paper. Did you ... read all of it?'

Oh my God. He's read that page. 'Yes,' I say, also staring at his feet. I can't breathe. I sneak a glance at him. Split second. There is the flicker of a smile.

'Nice socks,' he says.

'Yeah.' Don't back away, I silently beg him. Keep going. Don't wimp out.

He sighs. 'Fucking Ian,' he says. He shakes his head.

I laugh. 'Fucking Ian.' I pull his hand out of his pocket and lace his fingers through mine.

Finally, finally he lifts his head and looks at me.

ANGUS

A week has gone by. Things at home are very, very calm. It took me a few days to notice that along with the calm, my parents are watching me. I feel like an unpredictable animal at a zoo. If it weren't for Coco I'd check myself into Ian's hospital, just to get away from all the watching.

Coco is ... everything. I still don't think it's real. I still think she's going to turn around and laugh in my face every time I see her. But she doesn't. She smiles and looks into my eyes and that electric reaction happens. Every single time.

Dad gives me daily updates on Ian. They are adjusting his meds. He is calmer. I listen politely. Mum tells me I should phone him. The number for his ward is next to the landline. She tells me this in such a calm way that it feels too important, so I put it off.

Gran died yesterday. Mum left this morning to arrange the funeral. She seemed sadder and lighter. She woke me up very early to say goodbye. When I woke up again later, I saw she'd left the number for Ian's ward next to my bed.

I wait until I get back from school, before Dad gets home. I pick up the piece of paper with Ian's number and go into his room. I remove the posters and make myself look at the writing on the wall. I take out my phone. While a nurse is calling Ian, I start panicking. I don't know what to say. I don't remember the last time I spoke to my brother on a phone. We don't do that. There is a shuffle and I hear his voice, 'Hello?' He sounds tired. I fight the urge to put down the phone. My hands are sweating. I swallow.

'Major Tom?' I listen to him breathing. Maybe it's too soon. Maybe he still blames me for everything.

'Affirmative.'

One word. I wipe my eyes. 'Ground Control here.' Way back before camera phones, when we'd talk to Gran on the phone, she'd ask questions and I'd nod or smile. 'She can't

hear you smile, you moron,' Ian would say. But I think I can hear Ian smiling now. 'I think we lost contact for a bit, Major,' I say.

'That's crazy talk, bro.' he replies. I laugh. Ian is so close, he could be sitting next to me on the bed.

'I'll tell you what's crazy,' I say, and tell him about Des and the birdman competition. 'We should go down and watch it next summer,' I say.

'*Watch* it? We should do it, brother-man. We could be the Brothers Bird.'

There is a pause, but it is a good pause. 'I should go,' he says, 'these meds are as fun as lead balloons.'

I'm nervous about the next thing I say, because this good feeling between us is so fragile, and he may react badly. He may say the book was private. He may not even remember writing it. But I can't help myself. 'Hey Ian, about your book, and the stuff you wrote about me and Coco, *which she read...*'

I hear a sharp intake of breath, then a proper Ian chuckle. 'All part of the plan. You're very welcome,' he says and ends the call.

**WORLDS MADE OF WORDS: HOW CHILDREN'S LITERATURE PROMOTES
PSYCHICAL GROWTH AND WELL-BEING.**

INTRODUCTION

My primary objective of writing *Everything's Fine* within the framework of a practice-based PhD was to explore a scenario of the breakdown of a young person's mental health in a young adult novel. As such my early research focused on mental health in children and young adults to be able to write about it in my creative project. What I found was that it was the study of children's literature itself that helped me write about mental health.

'Children's literature' covers a vast and complex landscape. Kimberley Reynolds defines it as incorporating 'everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes — many of which date back to preliterate epochs — to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games'.¹ My interest in children's literature stems from my creative and personal curiosity in the adolescent experience. My previous two novels are both concerned with aspects thereof: *Leopold Blue* is a 'coming of age' novel in the traditional sense; *Almost Grace* explores the concept of not wanting to leave childhood behind and the ensuing consequences. Much of the material for each novel is drawn from my own childhood. When setting out to write *Everything's Fine*, I wanted to explore characters and scenarios beyond my own experience, and therefore my research and writing progressed in tandem, influencing the development and direction of each other.

My initial research concentrated on the nature of mental illness, specifically psychosis and mania, as these directly related to the development of my character Ian. As my early reading and writing progressed, my interest became increasingly focused on investigating how literature for children and young people can help them better understand themselves and improve their psychological wellbeing. To this end, I found that my research had two areas of enquiry. The first was an investigation into infant and child development, what

¹ Kimberley Reynolds, *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.

conditions promote the healthy internal growth of children and young people, and what amounts to psychical wellbeing. The second area of focus was on the nature and evolution of children's literature, and the impact it has on the young reader or listener. Both areas of study are vast, and a complete overview is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, of particular relevance to this commentary are the areas of overlap between the two fields of study, such as the nature and role of creativity and the imagination. The chapters that follow contain my reflections and insights on these connections, and how these added to my knowledge and skills as a creative writer.

Though the study of children's literature and even the recognition of it as a separate and distinct genre is a development of the last one hundred years, story-telling for children is arguably the oldest and most instinctive form of narrative for our species. From the beginning stories for children have been told both to educate and to entertain. The balance of these dual purposes is constantly shifting in response to both evolving societal and cultural value structures, and the individual writer's personal motivations. Before the mid-eighteenth century, texts were grounded in religious instruction (for example, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress*, published in 1678). When the cultural and philosophical focus shifted away from the overtly religious, the purpose of the texts remained instructive, preparing children instead for their expected roles and position within society.

A profound shift in the nature of children's literature has its origins in the philosophical value-shift of the Enlightenment towards individualism and reason. In his seminal *Émile, or An Education* (1762), philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau rejected the doctrine of original sin, proposing instead that the child is born innocent and is corrupted by their exposure to the world. Writers and poets of the Romantic era, such as Wordsworth and Keats, developed Rousseau's concepts into an ideation of the innocence of childhood, along with the celebration of the imagination and the natural world.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Victorian writers of children's literature responded with works such as *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley (1863) and Lewis

Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). These books heralded what is referred to as the First Golden Age of children's literature (as is discussed in Chapter One). While these narratives delight in entertaining the child (and adult) reader, they are simultaneously serious philosophical statements on the need to preserve and protect the innocence of childhood.

The industrialised and increasingly urban society of the early twentieth century affected not only the nature and purpose of children's literature, but how we view childhood today. Childhood came to be viewed as a 'commodity', based around the production of books and toys for children.² The extension and reach of formal education made for a longer and more protected childhood (for the economically fortunate), and for an accompanying industry of professions associated with this.

Also driving the interest in childhood and children's development was the expanding field of thought and study initiated by Sigmund Freud's theories on the human psyche and the establishment of psychoanalysis as a talking cure in the treatment of psychical ill-health. A basic premise of psychoanalysis is that early life experiences strongly influence human development and psychical functioning in adulthood. Thus, the study of child development has been central to all those who have interpreted and developed Freud's original theses, such as Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott. It is worth noting that while Freud's theories on infantile sexuality, and Melanie Klein's (and others') theories with regard to aggressive drives in early childhood may present the psychoanalytical child as more complex than previous interpretations of the innocent child, these drives are instinctive to human nature and are neither sinful nor innocent.

The overlap of interest in the inner workings of the child shared by psychoanalysts and children's writers is well documented. In his book *Freud in Oz: at the Intersections of*

² Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: at the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xi.

Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature, Kenneth Kidd writes that 'children's literature is shown to be as much a shaping presence within psychoanalysis as psychoanalysis is within children's literature'.³ He notes further that 'whereas the fairy tale and Golden Age classic have been incorporated into psychoanalysis, the picture book and the adolescent novel were fashioned from the start as psychological, thus authorising their best practitioners as partners in child-rearing'.⁴ (It should be acknowledged that in fact picture books for children have existed as far back as 1658 with the publication of *Orbus Pictus* by John Amos Comenius. Illustrated religious texts, alphabets and simple rhymes also contributed to the long tradition of children's picture books, both as educational tools and sources of entertainment.)

Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*⁵ is an example of a picture book grounded in psychological themes. Sendak had a life-long interest in the inner workings of the child. In an interview in 2002, he told Leonard Marcus: 'I only have one subject. The question I am obsessed with is: How do children survive?'⁶ Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams* (which is discussed in Chapter Two) is a work of fantasy fiction for older children that draws on the theories of psychoanalysts such as Donald Winnicott.

Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) was one of the best-known psychoanalytic theorists of the twentieth century in Britain. His contribution to the general British population's understanding of child development was significant, not least because he communicated complex and abstract concepts in accessible language, or in what Adam Phillips describes as a 'genre of simplicity'.⁷ Winnicott made over fifty broadcasts for the BBC between 1943 and the early

³ Kidd, p. viii.

⁴ Kidd, p. xxv.

⁵ Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (London: Red Fox, 2000)

⁶ ABC News, "'Where The Wild Things Are:' The Psychology Behind Maurice Sendak's Classic", *ABC News*, 2022 <<https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2012/05/08/maurice-sendak-the-pointed-psychology-behind-wild-things/>> [accessed 16 May 2022]

⁷ Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 14.

1960s on the subject of parenting and child development,⁸ the content of which was driven as much by his psychoanalytic research as by his observations as a paediatrician and child therapist. His creative approach to treating his child patients is evident in therapeutic innovations such as the 'Squiggle' game — a method he devised of using simple drawings to help access a child's thoughts and feelings. Winnicott's enquiring, multi-disciplinary approach is evident in an observation he made on his method of writing papers:

I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because my mind does not work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories, and then, last of all, interest myself to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any.⁹

Gathering 'this and that, here and there' is a typical example of Winnicott's ability to communicate in a 'genre of simplicity'. It also has striking similarities to the creative writer's process. Put another way, it highlights the central place creativity held in Winnicott's advancement of his theory and ideas.

In the discussion that follows, I examine and borrow from Winnicott's writing on child development as a means to explore four novels, aspects of children's literature in general and my own writing of *Everything's Fine*. My commentary is consciously limited to a psychoanalytical reading of the texts. By employing Winnicottian theory to interpret the narratives, I am framing the discussion around aspects of his research. There are many different schools of thought within the subject area of child development theory (such as Erik Erickson's psychosocial theory, Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, and behaviourist theory)¹⁰ which are beyond the scope of this commentary. Similarly, the references I make to the theory of the self is Winnicottian, and exists as a contribution to a

⁸ "Archive On 4 - From Donald Winnicott To The Naughty Step - BBC Sounds", BBC, 2022 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b01s7v7b>> [accessed 12 May 2022]

⁹ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 16.

¹⁰ <https://www.verywellmind.com/child-development-theories-2795068> [accessed 03 February 2023]

field of study that has long preoccupied philosophers, psychologists and more recently researchers in the discipline of neuroscience.

Central to understanding the beneficial role that literature can have in our lives is the acknowledgement of the importance of creativity and the imagination to our psychological health. Creativity and the imagination are the product of, and rely on, a healthy internal reality.

At this point it is useful to make some distinctions between the imagination and our internal reality, creativity and psychological health. In *The Psychoanalytic Psychology of Imagination*, David Beres describes the imagination in its broadest sense as ‘the capacity to form a mental representation of an absent object, an affect, a body function, or an instinctual drive’.¹¹ While the imagination is most often associated with creativity, ‘it is a complex psychic function, itself the resultant of a group of ego functions, and it enters into all aspects of psychic activity — normal mentation, pathological mental processes and artistic creativity’.¹² Our imaginations contribute to every aspect of our experience of being alive and mould our internal reality — how we perceive ourselves, separate to, but also in relation to the external world.

For Winnicott, creativity is more than the ability to produce or use original and unusual ideas.¹³ It is universal and belongs to being alive.¹⁴ The creative impulse is present when anyone ‘looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately’.¹⁵

¹¹ David Beres, ‘The Psychoanalytic Psychology of Imagination’, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. (1960) pp. 252–269, doi:[10.1177/000306516000800202](https://doi.org/10.1177/000306516000800202), p. 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹³ ‘Creativity’ in the *Cambridge Dictionary* [online] <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/creativity> [accessed 5 February 2023]

¹⁴ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge Classics edition, Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2005), p. 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Furthermore, it is the 'creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living'.¹⁶

In psychological health we are able to distinguish between the external world and our own internal, subjective realities. We are capable of tolerating psychological ill-health (such as periods of depression or anxiety) without being overwhelmed by them. Similarly, we can allow for expansiveness and imaginative creativity without destabilising the balance between our internal, subjective reality and the external world.

Each of the texts I examine in the chapters that follow is situated for the most part in the child protagonist's internal reality. I focus on the techniques each writer employed — consciously and unconsciously — to achieve these internal landscapes, their purpose for doing so and the effect on the reader. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Marianne Dreams* by Catherine Storr and *Challenger Deep* by Neil Shusterman, the writers make use of fantasy or symbolic writing. The internal reality in *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg is a fictionalised account of the writer's experience of schizophrenia as a child and adolescent.

In my reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, I find a celebration of the power of creativity and the best use of the imagination as a tool for personal growth. *Marianne Dreams* presents an unsettling scenario where there is a blurring of the boundaries between the internal and the external world. However, in *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* the reader is given an insight into the destructive power of the imagination where the internal reality has completely overwhelmed the external world, with life-threatening consequences. Each of these books challenged my understanding of creativity and the purpose of children's literature. In addition, each novel enabled me to examine my own writing technique and my creative and personal objectives in writing *Everything's Fine*.

¹⁶ This is as opposed to someone whose relationship with external reality is one of compliance, where they are being made to adapt. In this case the person experiences a sense of futility, that their life is not worth living. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 87.

Chapter One: 'Will You Join the Dance?' investigates the ways in which Lewis Carroll portrays an imagination seemingly without limits. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be read as a homage to the power of creativity and the imagination. Whilst the text is many-layered, and the work of a meticulous academic and mathematician, I found it lent itself to an exploration of the ways in which a healthy imagination can expand one's understanding of oneself and be a tool for personal growth. Referencing Winnicott's theories on the establishment of a healthy intermediate area of experience and the nature of play, I explore how play is the basis for all creative endeavour throughout our lives and therefore how writing and reading are an act of creative play. I reflect on how Carroll's agile use of language and ideas challenged and assisted me in my creative project as I strove to capture the flight of words and ideas characteristic of the manic state.

In Chapter Two: 'Why Are You Here?', I consider the shift that had taken place in children's literature in the nearly one hundred years that separate *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Marianne Dreams*. Catherine Storr's novel tells the story of Marianne who, confined to bedrest for an extended period of time, finds her dream world and waking world become increasingly interwoven and dependent on each other. As Marianne's dream world grows more real to her, so does the element of danger and potential harm. Her dreamscape is not the land of wonder from which she wakes refreshed, but an increasingly threatening landscape to which she feels compelled to return.

In this chapter I look at how Winnicott's theory of the Transitional Object lends itself to symbolic writing for children and young adults, and how writers such as Storr were influenced by and engaged in the study of child development and the pedagogic opportunities of children's literature. I look closely at how symbolic writing works to engage and address important issues with the child reader at the unconscious level and reflect on the efficacy of my novel (and in particular my character Ian's increasingly unstable psychological health), which I have written as a realist piece of fiction.

Chapter Three: 'Will you fight to live, or give up and give in?', investigates a world where a fractured mind has completely overwhelmed the young person's external reality. *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* is a fictionalised account of Joanne Greenberg's painful journey of recovery from schizophrenia to psychological health. It is also a harrowing example of how the same imagination that creates a place of escape and refuge from the external world can turn into a prison of psychological torture. Freud's writing on neurosis and psychosis offers a useful starting point for an investigation into what causes a fractured mind, the difference between creativity and madness, and an understanding of what true creativity entails. The power of words and language is central in this book. Words serve both as an escape and an imprisonment for main character Deborah and are ultimately her route back to wellness. In the second half of the chapter I compare *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* with *Challenger Deep*, a contemporary novel written for young people that similarly addresses schizophrenia, both within a hospitalised environment and the nuclear family.

These two books are closest in theme and potential readership to my own work. I discuss the similarities and differences in the texts and the techniques each writer employed which helped my writing process.

In the conclusion, I reflect on how my research advanced and altered my understanding of creativity, the process and purpose of learning, and the purpose of writing. I specifically look at the evolution of *Everything's Fine*, as a reflection of my evolving understanding of the characters, the subject matter and my aspirations for what the novel could achieve.

The journey of writing *Everything's Fine* and undertaking the associated research brought me back to that which I as a writer feel instinctively, which is that 'one of the most powerful educational tools we have is the story. Stories survive political debate and regime change. We pass on the finest stories from generation to generation because they are irreplaceable

as a form of human knowledge'.¹⁷ The knowledge I gained as a result of writing this thesis highlighted how much I needed to reframe my perceptions of the nature of meaningful learning and creativity, and their contribution to our psychological health.

¹⁷ Margaret and Michael Rustin, 'Introduction: Deep Structures in Modern Children's Fiction', *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction* (London: Karnac Books, 2001) p. 15.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Will you join the dance?’

In 1865, the Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, writing under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, published *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The book was an immediate commercial success. This popularity has only grown over the past one hundred and fifty years. Not only has it never been out of print, it has been translated into one hundred and seventy-four languages, has inspired adaptations in every art form, and from theme parks to board games and video games.¹⁸ Furthermore, the concept of Alice, as much as the story, has been referenced and interpreted by almost every corner of society — from medicine (the Alice in Wonderland syndrome, a neurological disorder), to feminists, satirists and propagandists.¹⁹ While Carroll insisted that the book was conceived simply as a story to amuse a little girl (Alice Liddell, the daughter of a family friend), Alice has become a cultural phenomenon.

More specifically in relation to this thesis, Carroll’s *Alice* stories (including *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871)) are seen by many as the most influential children’s books ever written. F. J. Harvey Darton describes them as ‘the spiritual volcano of children’s books’.²⁰

Carroll was writing at a time of cultural change and *Alice* is a product of that. Against the backdrop of heavily moralistic Victorian children’s literature, *Alice* is funny and subversive. It is superficially nonsensical. In fact, it was a profoundly innovative text, in terms of structure, style and even the point of view, as Barbara Wall argues: ‘Alice became the first child-mind,

¹⁸ "Alice's Adventures In Wonderland - Wikipedia", *En.Wikipedia.Org*, 2022

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice%27s_Adventures_in_Wonderland> [accessed 19 May 2022]

¹⁹ Peter Hunt, ‘Introduction’, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. by Peter Hunt, Oxford World’s Classics, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. vii.

²⁰ F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children’s books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, rev. Brian Alderson (3rd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 260 cited in Peter Hunt, ‘Introduction’, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, p. x.

in the history of children's fiction, to occupy the centre. No narrator of a story for children had stood so close to a child protagonist, observing nothing except that child, describing, never criticising, showing only what that child saw ... he never, until she has woken from her dream, looks away from her'.²¹

That this book, written pre-Freud and the subsequent establishment of child development theory, remains loved by child and adult readers and relevant to continued interpretation is remarkable. That it was written by an unmarried academic, a mathematician who took Holy Orders to be allowed to remain at Christ Church, Oxford for his working life seems astonishing and sometimes uncomfortable for modern readers. Much has been written about the complexity of the author, who went to great lengths to maintain a distance between his professional and writing personas. Dodgson made a habit of returning post addressed to Lewis Carroll, saying that the figure was to him 'unknown'.²² He was renowned for being remote and humourless, and delivering 'notoriously tedious' lectures.²³ Yet, he produced stories that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan declared touched on 'the most pure network of our condition of being: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real'.²⁴

One of the reasons the book remains accessible and relevant to generations of readers is that it is so heavily layered. These many strands allow room for diverse readings and interpretations, as Peter Hunt explains:

There is the conscious, personal level, using incidents, characters, and places familiar to Alice Liddell and Dodgson's immediate circle. Next there is the matrix of philosophy, mathematics, and linguistics — serious games for both child and adult readers. Then there is a wider world of references to Oxford and national personalities and politics [...] Finally, and more contentiously, there are passages

²¹ Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 100, 97-8, cited in Hunt, 'Introduction', p. xxxiv.

²² Christopher Lane (2011) 'Lewis Carroll and psychoanalysis: Why nothing adds up in wonderland', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 92:4, 1029-1045, DOI: 10.1111/j.1745-8315.2011.00404.x [accessed 13 June 2022]

²³ Jackie Wullschlager, *Inventing Wonderland: The Lives of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and A.A. Milne*, (London: Methuen, 1995) p. 35.

²⁴ Lane, p. 92.

which seem (notably in *Through the Looking Glass*) to be very personal — conscious or unconscious manifestations of Dodgson’s psyche.²⁵

Against *Alice*’s intimidating history I chose to include it in these chapters because of the influence it had on my writing of *Everything’s Fine*. Within the narrative I found what Winnicott describes as the life-enhancing properties of creativity and play, how the nature and function of playing allows for the self to be integrated and to grow throughout our lives. I was able to explore the agility and playfulness of words and language, and the seemingly endless possibilities of a healthy imagination. Specifically, with reference to *Everything’s Fine*, Carroll provided me with an approach of how to capture elements of my character Ian’s escalating manic condition.

For both the writer and the reader, creative literature for children, and in particular fantasy literature, can be categorised as playing. Donald Winnicott is perhaps best known for his research and writing on the importance of play in healthy development and well-being throughout our lives. He writes that ‘on the basis of playing is built the whole of man’s experiential existence’.²⁶ The origins of these theories on play are found in the establishment and development of the self from early infancy. It is useful to include here a brief explanation of these theories for the purposes of discussion here and in the chapters that follow.

A new-born baby’s initial experience of the world is one of virtual omnipotence. The mother is almost entirely adapted to her infant’s needs.²⁷ The infant has no awareness of a separate self (thus there is an illusion of the mother’s breast being a part of that baby, as it is under the baby’s control). As the baby grows, physically and in mental activity, the mother

²⁵ Hunt, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxvi.

²⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 86.

²⁷ Winnicott stresses that his theory of development relies on the mother or principal caregiver being ‘good enough’. Without there being good enough care to enable an infant’s illusion of omnipotence, there can be no healthy process of disillusion. The concept of the ‘good enough’ mother is further discussed in Chapter Two. However it deserves to be noted here that Winnicott includes the word ‘enough’ in an acknowledgement that a ‘perfect’ caregiver is neither realistic, nor ultimately desirable.

adjusts less to these immediate desires, and there is a gradual and increasing disillusion of the sense of omnipotence or magical control. This prompts a growing awareness in the baby of a sense of separateness to the rest of the world.

The baby finds relief from this disillusion in the comfort of 'transitional phenomena or objects'. The original Transitional Object, such as a thumb or a blanket, becomes the baby's defence against the anxiety of this process of disillusion, a tool for self-soothing. It takes on vital importance to the child but the significance is not so much the object used as the use of the object. These phenomena are not part of the baby's body, but also not yet recognised as being part of the external world. They exist in an 'intermediate area of experience'. As the child grows, the original object 'loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between "inner psychic reality" and "the external world as perceived by two persons in common"'.²⁸

At this point in development imaginative play replaces the Transitional Object within the 'intermediate area of experience'. As we grow, the nature of play changes but the area remains. In adulthood, this area is where we have access to our creativity and imagination.²⁹ In a way that is similar to the pleasure children find in playing together, as adults we can experience an overlapping of our individual intermediate experiences when we engage in cultural spheres such as the arts, philosophy or religion.

At the core of psychical well-being is the life-long task of maintaining a balance between the external world and our internal reality, or between what is 'objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of'.³⁰ When our subjective reality overwhelms us, such as in the case of a psychosis, our mental well-being is at risk (as will be examined in Chapter Three). Equally though, being estranged from our internal world robs us of access to our

²⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 7.

²⁹ However, by adulthood, the individual is expected to recognise the subjectivity of their experience, and does not demand an objective, or external acceptance of it as might be allowed to a child.

³⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 15.

creativity and to a sense of meaning in our lives. The 'intermediate area of experience' is the area of overlap between our inner reality and the outer world. It functions as a 'refuge' from the struggle between our inner reality and the external world. A healthy and expansive 'intermediate area of experience' is the source of psychological well-being because it is here that our creativity and imagination are allowed free rein, without threatening to overwhelm the balance of the internal and external. Its existence gives our lives meaning.

Sixty years prior to Winnicott, Sigmund Freud wrote on the significance of play. In his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' Freud observed that 'the opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real'.³¹ When a child is playing, 'he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him'.³² As children outgrow play, the pleasure experienced through the wish-fulfilment role of play becomes internalised. Instead of external playing, the adult constructs internal day-dreams or phantasies, her 'castles in the air'.³³ These phantasies by nature 'hover' between the present, past and future, triggered by an experience in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier occasion (usually from childhood) in which this wish was fulfilled and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish.³⁴ In this essay Freud likens the creative writer's process to children's play: 'a piece of creative writing, like a day-dream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood.'³⁵

Playing continues throughout our lives. It has a time and a place — neither 'inside', nor truly 'outside', or 'not me'. It happens in the 'intermediate area of experience'.³⁶ The

³¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', *Chapter 9 from Collected Papers*, vol 4, (London: Basic Books, Inc) pp. 419-428.
<http://www.kleal.com/AP12%20member%20area%20pd2%202013/Freud%20and%20Frye.pdf> [accessed October 2016], p. 421.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 421.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

³⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 55.

reason playing is vital to our psychical health throughout our lives is that 'it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self'.³⁷ Because playing has its own time and place, it allows for an environment in which conflicts can safely be expressed and explored, which can allow for change or growth to take place. It is important to acknowledge that growth can sometimes be uncomfortable, as Margaret and Michael Rustin examine in their book *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Literature*. They point out that this process of accessing new aspects of the self can sometimes unlock more hopeless, blocked or depressed states.³⁸ *Marianne Dreams*, discussed in the next chapter, explores the challenges that can arise when uncovering new aspects of the self. Beyond the scope of this chapter is a discussion of how psychoanalysis functions as a highly specialised form of playing.

As shall be further examined in Chapter Two, we do not discover ourselves through learning or explanation — there needs to be an experience. This experience requires a 'non-purposive state' that allows for 'a succession of ideas, thoughts, impulses, sensations that are not linked except in a way that is neurological or physiological and perhaps beyond detection'.³⁹ The result of this experience is the individual emerges with a sense that 'I AM, I am alive, I am myself'.⁴⁰ As mentioned in the Introduction, there are many theories and interpretations of concept of a 'self'. Winnicott's theory of self, as set out in his paper 'Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self' (1960), is that the self is divided into the 'True Self' and 'False Self' (or selves). The True Self is associated with creative spontaneity, a sense of authenticity and feeling real. It is not a complete and integral entity, but private and unknowable, even to oneself. 'It cannot strictly speaking be defined because it covers what is distinctive and original about each person.'⁴¹ The False Self, or the outwards-facing self,

³⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 73.

³⁸ Rustin & Rustin, p. 12.

³⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴¹ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 135.

complies with the requirements of the external world and protects the fragile True Self. The False Self functions as 'a defence against that which is unthinkable, the exploitation of the True Self, which would result in annihilation'.⁴² A definitive investigation in this aspect of Winnicott's work is beyond the scope of this chapter. Relevant to the discussion that follows is that moments of creativity and personal growth are born out of access to the True Self, and that this is achieved throughout our lives through experiential play.

The 'non-purposive state' we associate with a child at play could also be a fitting description of Alice's adventure: a succession of seemingly unconnected ideas, thoughts, impulses and sensations. Alice's experiences are intricately connected, but often beyond detection by the reader. Her adventure could be read as an act of play in the fullest sense of the word. By allowing her imagination and creativity free rein, what Alice finds at the end of her adventure is an expanded sense of self.

From the moment Alice jumps up and chases after the White Rabbit, she finds herself caught up in a succession of constantly shifting scenarios. Not only is *she* changing physically, but so too is her environment. Characters appear and disappear in an instant, animals talk and in fact argue a great deal of the time, soldiers turn out to be playing cards and babies piglets. Keys and bottles and doors appear without explanation.

For all the playfulness in Alice's adventure, 'the most important, most neglected, fact about "Wonderland" is that it is not a "land of wonders", but rather "a land where one wonders"'.⁴³ The central question of the book, the question Alice asks herself repeatedly is not 'where am I?' but 'who am I?' Despite the peculiarity of her surroundings, her overriding preoccupation is with her altering sense of self. 'Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, "Who in the world am I?" Ah, that's the great puzzle!'⁴⁴

⁴² Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 133.

⁴³ Hunt, 'Introduction', p. x.

⁴⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. by Peter Hunt, Oxford World's Classics, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 18.

Alice returns to this puzzle throughout her adventure. Ironically it is the nature of her puzzling over her perceived loss of self that allows the reader an insight into 'the real Alice'. Carroll tells us that Alice enjoyed trying out different personalities: 'This curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people. "But it's no use now," thought poor Alice, "to pretend to be two people! Why there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person."⁴⁵

Her sense of detachment from the self she left behind on the river-bank is immediate and complete. When she shrinks to the point of being tiny, she considers that 'it might end, you know [...] in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?'⁴⁶ At growing so tall that she can't see her feet anymore, she tells them that they must manage without her as best they can.⁴⁷

Alice's reaction to her changing size and appearance is one of curiosity. Instead of feeling (understandable) anxiety at the prospect of 'going out altogether, like a candle', she assumes that she will continue in a new form. For Alice, this is always a game. Her advice to her feet has a distinctly maternal feel; it brings to mind how children often imitate their parents' words in their own games and imaginings.

Alice's extended dialogue is not only internal. In answer to the Caterpillar's question, 'Who are you?', it is interesting that while she cannot say who she is now, she does not consider presenting herself as the old Alice either.⁴⁸ When it occurs to her that she might have become somebody else, she knows who she does not want to be. She decides that if she were called back out of the rabbit hole, 'I shall only look up and say "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else'.⁴⁹ Alice approaches each change she undergoes much in the way

⁴⁵ Carroll, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

children play with dressing-up costumes, assessing each transformation for their desirability and discarding those they do not like.

When the Caterpillar asks Alice to recite 'You are old, Father William', she recites something quite different.

'That is not said right,' said the Caterpillar.
'Not quite right, I'm afraid,' said Alice, timidly: 'some of the words have got altered.'
'It is wrong from beginning to end,' said the Caterpillar, decidedly; and there was silence for some minutes.⁵⁰

Alice is as surprised by her recitation as the Caterpillar. Her choice of words 'got altered' implies that she feels there was a foreign force, not under her control, at work. In 'Lewis Carroll's Dream-child and Victorian Child Psychopathology', Stephanie Schatz argues that the reason Alice cannot remember her verses or her multiplication tables, geographic facts or her lessons is because she has been metamorphosed into a different person. The facts Alice forgets are replaced by questions, curious scenarios and open prompts.⁵¹

Alice considers each new predicament with curiosity rather than alarm. In my reading, it is this detachment that establishes the story as a mad, playful adventure rather than a threatening and therefore distressing nightmare, such as I encountered in *Marianne Dreams*. Whenever Alice feels uncomfortable in a situation, such as with the animals at the edge of the lake, or at the tea party, or at the trial of the stolen jam tarts, she leaves. This is evidence of a healthy imagination at play, one which is not censored but neither does it overwhelm. Therefore, however peculiar her situation becomes, Alice does not regret running after the Rabbit. 'I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole — and yet — and yet — it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life!'⁵² This is a significant line. Growing up is inevitable; one cannot help but change both physically and psychically. It is a sign of Alice's

⁵⁰ Carroll, p. 45.

⁵¹ Stephanie L. Schatz, 'Lewis Carroll's Dream-child and Victorian Child Psychopathology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 76 (2015), p. 112.

⁵² Carroll, p. 33.

healthy relationship with both her inner reality and the external world, that she chooses to evolve alongside her external changes rather than resist or fear them.

One of the reasons the text is so open to continued interpretation is that Carroll refuses to answer Alice's central dilemma. Her adventures throw up a series of 'open-ended questions, the purpose of which is to inspire curiosity, imagination, and reflection in the child reader rather than to provide her with concrete answers or closure'.⁵³ Perhaps the closest Carroll comes to any answer to Alice's question 'who am I?' comes from the Duchess, in the middle of moralising about mustard and flamingos:

'Be what you would seem to be' — or, if you'd like it put more simply — 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.'⁵⁴

It is interesting that 'be what you would seem to be' avoids any comment on an internal sense of self. If indeed this were a form of answer or comment from Carroll, he delivers it via an illogical character and effectively buries the words in the immediately following nonsensical explanation.

Carroll claimed he meant nothing more by writing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* than to amuse a little girl. He similarly dismissed *Hunting of the Snark* as nothing more than 'nonsense', however he follows on say: 'Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant.'⁵⁵

At the end of the book, during the trial over the stolen jam tarts, Carroll allows himself a last comment, this time on Alice's adventure as a whole. It could be read as a hint that if one looked at the story differently, there is a great deal more to it. Alice declares that there is not an 'atom' of meaning in the Knave's verse-letter.

⁵³ Schatz, p. 109.

⁵⁴ Carroll, p. 81.

⁵⁵ Peter Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature*, 2nd edn., (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 198.

'If there's no meaning in it,' said the King, 'that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know,' he went on, spreading out the verses on his knee and looking at them with one eye; 'I seem to see some meaning in them, after all.'⁵⁶

With the words 'And yet I don't know', Carroll gives us pause. Once again, he does not provide an answer, but creates a space in the narrative to consider the question.

This connects back to Winnicott's theory that a genuine encounter with our True Self needs to be an experience; that it can't be taught. Schatz notes that when Alice awakes at the end of the book, she tells her sister what happened to her in Wonderland, not what she had learned.⁵⁷ Carroll, a teacher by profession, steps away and allows for Alice to experience the moment rather than be told.

Spontaneous curiosity had Alice chasing after the White Rabbit, and this continues until the moment she tires of it all. "Who cares for you?" said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"⁵⁸ The moment she says this, Wonderland disintegrates.

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim explores how the unique characteristics of the fairy tale both educate and entertain the young child on a conscious as well as an unconscious level. He argues that the unrealistic nature of the fairy tale is an important device. Because the fairy tale has nothing to do with the external world and the child reader's day to day experiences, it is obviously concerned with the inner workings of the individual.⁵⁹

The fairy tale launches into fantastic events. But however big the detours [...] the process of the story does not get lost. [...] The tale returns the child to reality, in a most reassuring manner. This teaches the child what he needs most to know at this

⁵⁶ Carroll, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Schatz, p. 108.

⁵⁸ Carroll, p. 109.

⁵⁹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p. 63.

stage of his development: that permitting one's fantasy to take hold of oneself for a while is not detrimental, provided one does not remain permanently caught up in it.⁶⁰

Though not a fairy tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* nonetheless carries marked similarities in its structure. Alice's adventure bears no resemblance to her everyday life. Bettelheim's process rings true — her exploration takes many detours, but she safely returns to the river-bank, with no illusion as to the unreality of her experience.

As mentioned, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was written and published during a period of great cultural change which extended to societal attitudes to childhood and children's books. It is easy for modern readers to overlook how radical the narrative was. Five years before Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, British psychiatrist James Crichton-Brown wrote:

Impressions, created by the ever-fertile imagination of a child ... are soon believed as realities, and become a part of the child's psychical existence. They become, in fact, actual delusions. Such delusions are formed with facility, but are eradicated with difficulty, and much mental derangement in mature life, we believe, is attributable to these reveries indulged during childhood.⁶¹

Less than fifty years later, Freud would publish his theory that day-dreaming was a natural replacement of playing, a means of wish-fulfilment, practised by all adults. From the contents of Carroll's personal library it would seem that he was interested in the discussions of his day.⁶² Schatz argues that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was in fact Carroll's direct reply to concerns of his time; that he 'had no intention to allow the medical establishment to pathologise childhood imagination'.⁶³ Once again, the many layers of Carroll's narrative come under consideration.

⁶⁰ Bettelheim, p. 63.

⁶¹ Schatz, pp. 93-4.

⁶² Ibid., p. 94.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 113.

Carroll does not clarify whether Alice's Wonderland experience is a day-dream or reverie, or a dream. The reader is told only that the hot day was making Alice feel 'sleepy and stupid' and that she was considering making a daisy chain 'when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her'.⁶⁴ Although it does feel at this moment and throughout the narrative that Wonderland is happening to Alice, rather than something she conjures for herself, Carroll does not offer any further explanation. Instead he continues: 'There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself "Oh Dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural)'.⁶⁵

For all the many areas Carroll leaves open to interpretation, it is always interesting when he insists on a point. Here he seems to be at pains to establish for the reader that Alice is not frightened by the White Rabbit or the events that followed, and that although in retrospect they were surprising, they seemed quite ordinary at the time.

Throughout Alice's adventure her imagination is always a step ahead of her, presenting her with one situation after another, each more curious than the last, and Alice always the willing participant. By definition, Wonderland, which seems limitless in its possibilities, is confined within her imagination. At the same time, within the confines of Wonderland, Alice's imagination is free. The limit of Alice's imagination is more accurately the limit of Carroll's imagination, or what he might perceive to be Alice's imagination.

It is the exuberant Wonderland that makes *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* an unforgettable book, not the curious Alice. 'Wonderland is the place where everyone else is mad, playing absurd, solipsistic games'.⁶⁶

'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked.

⁶⁴ Carroll, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁶⁶ Hunt, 'Introduction', p. viii.

'Oh, you ca'n't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'
'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.
'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'
Alice didn't think that proved it at all: however, she went on: 'And how do you know that you're mad?'
'To begin with,' said the Cat, 'a dog's not mad. You grant me that?'
'I suppose so,' said Alice.
'Well, then,' the Cat went on, 'you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.'⁶⁷

Carroll's deliberate use of the word 'mad' deserves attention in the context of his many-layered text, but also my thesis as a whole. Much has been written about his critique of the strict order of Victorian society within the pages of Wonderland. In "'We're All Mad Here": Mental Illness as Social Disruption in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland',⁶⁸ Kasey Deems explores how the industrialised and capitalist Victorian social structure required that individuals adhere to their assigned roles. Related to this new vision for a productive society was the rise of asylums for the long-term internment and treatment of the disabled or those deemed to pose a danger. The question of how to define madness became a public and even a political matter. (For example, Crichton-Brown's above-mentioned view that childhood reveries, left unchecked, developed into adult derangement, which in turn might be interpreted as a direct threat to social order and productivity.)

The Cheshire Cat, along with all the other inhabitants of Wonderland are presented as liberated, subversive creatures who defy social order. Notable too is that *all* the characters are mad, not just a few. Their madness lies in their seemingly irrational behaviour driven by imaginative freedom, not a pathological condition. Their threat to Alice lies in their questioning and unpredictable contrariness — in other words, psychical challenge — rather than physical danger. In my view, Carroll stops little short of a direct critique of his contemporaries' views.

⁶⁷ Carroll, p. 58.

⁶⁸ Kasey Deems, "'We're All Mad Here": Mental Illness As Social Disruption In Alice's Adventures In Wonderland", *Scholarworks.Seattleu.Edu*, 2022
<<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=suurj>> [accessed 26 May 2022]

In contrast, in his book *What is Madness?*, Darian Leader claims that there is no such thing as mental health,⁶⁹ that ‘people can *be* mad without *going* mad’,⁷⁰ and that ‘the seemingly “healthy” person may have delusional beliefs or symptoms that generate no conflict in their lives and hence attract no attention’.⁷¹ This echoes Winnicott’s statement that ‘for many individuals external reality remains to some extent a subjective phenomenon’.⁷² Furthermore, Winnicott insists that ‘it is important for us that we find clinically *no sharp line* (Winnicott’s italics) between health and the schizoid state or even health and full-blown schizophrenia.’⁷³ We can live with any number of delusions, so long as in adulthood we do not insist that these subjective views are accepted by the objective world.

At the beginning of *Everything’s Fine*, my character Ian is at a point where his internal reality is beginning to spill over into the external. His mind seems to be a world without end; his thoughts open to endless possibility. In this state of exuberance, it feels credible to him that he might meet God on a railway station.⁷⁴ As a writer, I was initially at a loss as to how to capture this heightened, almost weightless state with words.

Andy Behrman describes his mind during a manic episode as ‘teem[ing] with rapidly changing ideas and needs; my head is cluttered with vibrant colours, wild images, bizarre thoughts, sharp details, secret codes, symbols, and foreign languages’.⁷⁵ This state, where the mind is ‘itself, only better’, is characterised by certain behaviours, such as a tendency to

⁶⁹ Darian Leader, *What Is Madness?* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) p. 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 88.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Rosie Rowell, *Everything’s Fine* (unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2022), p.41.

⁷⁵ Darian Leader, *Strictly Bipolar* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 12.

play with the meaning of words, frequent flights of words and flights of ideas, a sense of the connectedness of everything and the importance of having an audience to address.⁷⁶

It is words, ideas and the associations between them that create and shape our realities, and we rely on both the links and the inhibition of links between them to be able to think. This becomes clearest when the links between ideas come at such a pace that one cannot even slow them down or stop them. In what psychiatry terms 'flight of ideas', one thought leads to another with an irrepressible, brutal persistence.⁷⁷

Alongside the flight of ideas, Leader notes, is the significance of the 'acoustic' vibrancy of words in mania, and how a manic person will dash after the acoustic connections between words, to the point that the words can appear disconnected.⁷⁸

Carroll brings Wonderland to life through his use of language in both his descriptions and dialogue. The narrative pace is such that as the reader and Alice are left trying to make sense of one scene, Carroll is already presenting the next, seemingly unconnected, moment. Many of the tools Carroll uses in his language, such as flights of words and ideas, playing on the meaning of words and an initially undetected connectedness, are characteristic of the behaviour of the manic person.

An example of both the flight of words and ideas can be found in the Dormouse's story about the little girls who lived in a well.⁷⁹ Carroll indulges in a flight of both words and ideas in the story. The play on the words 'draw' and 'well'; the flight of ideas around treacle (they lived on treacle, they lived in a treacle well and they drew treacle); the acoustic repetition of the 'm' sound and the seemingly random flight of ideas all confuse Alice. It is

⁷⁶ This is not an exhaustive list — other characteristics include excessive spending and an increased appetite for risk taking.

⁷⁷ Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*, p. 17.

⁷⁸ All these characteristics are directly contrasted in a state of depression. It is important here to acknowledge psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's seminal concept of mania as a defence against what the individual experiences as intolerable depressive pain in their psychic reality. Winnicott drew from her work to develop his own theory, published in the paper, 'The Manic Defence'. Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 57.

⁷⁹ Carroll, pp. 65-67.

Alice's constant interrupting that prompts many of the Dormouse's absurd replies. This calls to mind another characteristic of the manic condition — the 'unquenchable thirst for an addressee'.⁸⁰ Leader explains it as such: 'mood is elevated because they are able to speak, rather than vice versa. It's not the mood that allows them to speak, but the speaking that liberates the mood'.⁸¹

A final point with regard to Alice's encounter with the Dormouse that is striking is her exit. When the Dormouse mentions drawings of 'muchnesses' Alice decides she has had enough and walks off. The Dormouse falls asleep instantly, 'and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her'.⁸² The madness of the tea party, or one might say one's imagination, can be exhausting from a logical or analytical point of view, but it remains undeniably seductive. As Adam Phillips puts it, 'the sane don't have any memorable lines'.⁸³ When the logical and sane Alice finds she has been completely forgotten, she decries it as the 'stupidest tea party I ever was at in my life!'.⁸⁴

As mentioned in the introduction, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* provided me with techniques on how to write my character Ian. I took inspiration from Carroll's flights of words and ideas in a scene I wrote in Angus' kitchen.⁸⁵ Ian arrives home and finds Coco and Angus in the kitchen — his addressees. Encouraged by the responses of Coco in particular, Ian's attention (his flight of ideas) moves in quick succession from choosing a better name for Angus to a box of eggs, to declaring Angus should have been called Benedict, to juggling the eggs and then allowing them to break over him. Ian's mood is elevated as he speaks. I used this technique again in the scene where Ian visits Angus' class.⁸⁶ Spurred on by the

⁸⁰ Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*, p. 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸² Carroll, p. 67.

⁸³ Adam Phillips, *Going Sane* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 19.

⁸⁴ Carroll, p. 68.

⁸⁵ Rowell, pp. 37-39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

audience of an ex-teacher and the room full of students, Ian misinterprets the sniggers at his outlandish behaviour for encouragement as he talks about his book on the universe and love, and ends up humiliating his brother and Coco.

I use Ian's 'book' — his collection of writing — as a way of communicating his internal reality to both the reader and characters (Angus, Coco and Coco's mum). It works as a narrative tool, in terms of spurring Coco (and her mum) into action, and revealing Angus' romantic interest in Coco.

The extracts are a useful way of illuminating some of the characteristics of Ian's increasingly manic mood — such as his inflated sense of self and purpose: 'The universe has opened itself to me / I stand in its core / It lives in me / I am it.'⁸⁷

In other instances, I employ the concepts of a flight of words and their acoustic vibrancy: 'Hollow eyes, echoes. Diluted. Dissipated. Cut. Tapered.'⁸⁸ The effect of writing these extracts, in the first person, was that I identified closely with Ian's sense of purpose, urgency and alarm:

I am the light watchman.
Do not close your eyes. Darkness tears through your veins.
Stay in the light. Light = e = infinity.
light = e^{∞} = me = me^{∞}
The night is long and full of terror.⁸⁹

At the same time, I felt the alarm that Angus, Coco and her mother would experience reading the words.

There are many loved examples of Carroll's playfulness — his 'nonsense' verses not least of them, or Alice's encounter with the Mock Turtle.⁹⁰ The glee the reader feels when Carroll lets

⁸⁷ Rowell, p. 97.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

⁹⁰ Peter Hunt makes the point that whatever else they may be; they can hardly be called nonsense, 'if nonsense is defined as occurring when the mind is unable to make an association'. The verses are heavy with associations.

us 'in on the game' is one of the subversive characteristics of his writing. Rustin & Rustin point out that children are especially responsive to the 'surprise and amusement inherent in the use of language, since they are experiencing it with the freshness of first-time learners. For children, the boundary between internal and external reality is more fragile and permeable than it is for most adults.'⁹¹ Because the boundary between the imaginary and the real is so much more fluid for the child, the play-like quality of words links the child reader's internal and external experience.

One of the pleasures of re-reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as an adult lies in examining Carroll's layers and structure. The underlying shape of the adventure is that Alice is effectively chasing after the White Rabbit who is in a terrible rush to get to the Queen's croquet match.

At the bottom of the rabbit hole Alice finds herself in a long corridor, lined with doors all of which she is unable to open apart from the tiny door which leads to the 'loveliest garden you ever saw'.⁹² Alice wants to explore the garden, but she is frustrated by being too big or too small. At this point she is distracted, one could say, by a flight of ideas, but eventually finds herself back in the long hall halfway through her adventure. This time she has worked out how to use her changing size to her advantage, and finally gets into the garden.⁹³

Carroll uses the characters as connecting features, most notably the White Rabbit, whom she is following, and the Cheshire Cat. The Cat acts as a rather unconventional guide to Alice in her adventure and to the reader as to Alice's train of thought.

Hunt, 'Introduction', p. xxxvii.

⁹¹ Rustin & Rustin, p. 18.

⁹² Carroll, p. 13.

⁹³ Christopher Lane discusses Jaques Lacan's 1966 tribute to Lewis Carroll and in particular Lacan's observation that 'one only ever passes through a door one's own size'. Lane interprets this as a statement that 'an answer can emerge only after one has discovered the question attached to it.' Lane, p. 92.

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' [asked Alice].
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.
'I don't much care where —' said Alice.
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.
'— so long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation.
'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'⁹⁴

The characters she meets along the way — the Lizard, the March Hare, the Hatter, the Dormouse, guinea pigs, the Duchess and the Duchess' cook — all reappear at the croquet match and at the trial. Wonderland, which appears curiously and curiously, is actually a rather contained world. In a similar way, early researchers into mania showed that the characteristic flight of words followed a hidden logic. Mania was never a purely random flow of words, but had a real coherence and structure, yet one that was usually not obvious unless one listened very carefully.⁹⁵ Leader describes the flight of ideas and words in mania as a 'vast join-the-dots puzzle', which when completed reveals 'a figure no one had noticed until then'.⁹⁶

Just as the initial stages of a mania can be experienced in terms of ever-expanding possibility, so Wonderland appears to be limitless. However, no mania is sustainable. At some point the euphoria tips over into a downwards spiral towards its opposite. Alice steps back from that edge by denouncing Wonderland as nothing but a dream, thus limiting it to her imagination and containing her imagination within her inner subjective reality.

In addition to being one of the most beloved and influential books written for children, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* provides us with an example of the power of a healthy imagination, in all its richness and vibrant creativity. Because of the existence of a healthy and expansive transitional space between Alice's internal reality and the external world, her imagination and creativity can contribute to her growth and development without

⁹⁴ Carroll, p. 57.

⁹⁵ Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*, pp. 19-20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

overpowering her awareness of the subjectivity of her inner reality. Alice allows herself to experience the adventure with her whole personality, and leaves Wonderland with a deeper and richer sense of self.

An examination of a book such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* shows us how the imagination adds richness to the experience of being alive. It is essential to our personal growth. In *Readers In Wonderland: The Liberating Worlds of Fantasy Fiction*, Deborah O'Keefe writes: 'children and adults alike who engage in symbolic play and imaginative story telling navigate more comfortably in the transitional land between self and other'.⁹⁷ Through the life-long act of playing, which includes both creative writing and reading, we access what Winnicott calls our True Self within our 'transitional area of experience', and unlock our creativity. Reading stories facilitates this and enriches us on both a conscious and unconscious level.

⁹⁷ Deborah O'Keefe, *Readers in Wonderland: The Liberating Worlds of Fantasy Fiction*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), p. 35.

CHAPTER TWO

Why are you here?

Marianne Dreams (1958), published almost a hundred years after *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, presents a very different adventure for the child reader. While both stories are set in fantastical dreamscapes, Alice's adventure is one uninterrupted, although convoluted, daydream. When she wakes, refreshed, on the riverbank, Alice has no doubt that her experience belonged to her internal world. She runs off, thinking what a wonderful dream it has been.⁹⁸

In contrast, Marianne returns repeatedly to the same dreamscape. As the title of the book suggests, Marianne's dreams are where the majority of the narrative action takes place. As Marianne's disquieting dream-life takes on greater significance to her than her waking hours, the balance between her internal and external realities is destabilised.

The contrast between these two novels and their representations of childhood offer a useful background to this chapter, in which I focus on elements of *Marianne Dreams* that embody the objectives of many creative writers and professionals in the 1960s and 1970s, the ongoing debate around the pedagogical role of children's literature, and the personal challenges I experienced reading and researching this book.

At the outset it is interesting to note the similarities in Alice and Marianne's stories. Both books were written with specific children in mind — Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to 'amuse and entertain' Alice Liddell; Catherine Storr's inspiration for her books came from her own children and later grandchildren. Like Alice, Marianne is from a stable, it can be assumed loving, middle-class environment (or, as Winnicott would have it, an environment 'good enough' for healthy child development). Alice and Marianne are also of a similar age (Marianne has just turned ten years old at the start of the story).

⁹⁸ Carroll, p. 110.

On a cultural and social level, both books were written at, and are considered to represent, pivotal moments in the development of children's literature. Typically, such times allow authors greater room for experimentation and a readership that is receptive to these changes. Carroll's *Alice* books heralded the beginning of the First Golden Age of children's literature in the late nineteenth century, which featured a dramatic shift away from the hitherto largely instructive nature of children's writing, towards a Romantic focus and ideation of the imagination, play and the pleasure of childhood. Storr's work is considered to belong to the group of writers working in the 1960s and 1970s who represent a Second Golden Age, a time of which Kimberley Reynolds writes: 'there was a strong sense of children's literature as *literature*, and in the many ways children's books were supporting professionals working with children as well as enriching children's lives'.⁹⁹

In the ninety-three years that separate the publications of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Marianne Dreams*, Western society had undergone a profound psychological shift — beginning with the work of Freud and the birth of psychoanalysis, and the interpretation and expansion of these theories by the likes of Carl Jung, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott. Understanding the child psyche and the requirements for healthy psychological development was a focus shared by writers, teachers and psychologists in the 1960s and 1970s. This focus extended to the importance of literature in education and an expectation that children's literature should aid the child's social and psychological development as well as entertain the reader. The first academic children's literature conference in the UK, titled 'Recent Children's Fiction and its Role in Education', was held in Exeter in 1969. At this conference Catherine Storr gave a keynote lecture, which she tellingly called 'Fear and Evil in Children's Books'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Kimberley Reynolds, "I Write To Frighten Myself": Catherine Storr and the Development of Children's Literature in Britain.' *Children's Literature in Education*, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-017-9339-1>. [accessed 03 October 2018], p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books.", *Children's Literature in Education* 1, no. 1 (March 1970): 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01140654>. [accessed 31 July 2018]

The Second Golden Age in some ways pushed back against the imaginative and playful focus and ideals of the First Golden Age and returned in parts to the historical focus of using children's narratives as an educational tool. Now the instruction and learning was focused on the child's psychical growth and health, rather than warning them against physical danger or preparing them for their expected roles in society. Currently, a little over fifty years since the Exeter Conference, Reynolds notes 'the potential for books to edify and heal that was so widely accepted in 1969 by those from a range of professional backgrounds has largely dissipated in response to current scholarly, educational and government agendas.'¹⁰¹ To this I would add that the many forms of digital entertainment that currently compete for children's attention has placed further pressure on the children's publishing industry. In my view, there is a danger that in seeking out the most commercially attractive new fiction, publishers run the risk of choosing entertainment over substance.

Catherine Storr was first published in 1940, but it was not until the 1950s that her books became popular as a result of her 'Clever Polly' series for younger children (the first of which, *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf*, was published in 1955), and in 1958 the publication of *Marianne Dreams*. Storr trained in medicine and practised as a psychotherapist. She was married for a period of time to Jungian analyst Anthony Storr. Like many of her contemporaries, she was interested in Donald Winnicott's work. At one point, she approached him with a view to being analysed by him, but this did not happen.¹⁰² Winnicott was particularly influential at this time — not only as a psycho-analytical theorist and paediatrician, but in the wider British society. 'Consciously or not, Winnicott's ideas about the means by which children seek to unite their inner realities and the outer world — play, (day-)dreaming, drawing and what Winnicott termed Transitional Objects — are particularly evident in Storr's fiction.'¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Reynolds, "I Write To Frighten Myself", p. 14.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 6.

As mentioned, Storr's inspiration for her stories often came from the desire to address particular fears or difficulties her own children faced. Her insights as a mother and psychotherapist are ever-present in the nature and tone of her story-telling. Throughout *Marianne Dreams* one feels the presence of Storr as the narrator. Her narrative tone is careful and conscious. Marianne's dream-world is limited to a house and a garden situated within an unwelcoming prairie (until she and Mark make their escape to the lighthouse). This contrasts with the seemingly limitless Wonderland Alice explores, each scenario more improbable than the last.

Despite her interests and training, and the inspiration for her books she found in her children, Storr maintained that her writing was not consciously trying to 'do' anything for children. In her keynote address at the Exeter Conference, Storr said: 'I am writing, I suppose, to get rid of my own fears but it is mostly to discover what I feel and to discover some childish part of myself or to let air in on these bits of myself.'¹⁰⁴ As a mother, I have experienced how stages of one's children's development can trigger strong emotions and reactions in oneself, directly related to one's own childhood. Storr maintained that 'real' children's literature was a dialogue between the adult writer and the child they once were. It is 'understood from the child's position, written for the child within the author, not the child whom the author observes.'¹⁰⁵ Writer and academic Katherine Rundell echoes this sentiment in her essay 'Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise':

When I write, I write for two people: myself, age twelve, and myself, now, and the book has to satisfy two distinct but connected appetites. My twelve-year-old self wanted autonomy, peril, justice, food, and above all a kind of density of atmosphere into which I could step and be engulfed. My adult self wants all those things, and also: acknowledgements of fear, love, failure; of the rat that lives within the human heart.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books", p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Reynolds, "I Write To Frighten Myself", p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Katherine Rundell, *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), pp. 3-4.

I experienced the sense of ‘writing for the child within me’ as I explored the sense of the unfairness of being overshadowed or invisible next to someone you hold in high esteem. Both Angus and Coco struggle with this — Coco in terms of her best friend Bish, and Angus in relation to Ian. The scenes I wrote for them, and the emotions they found difficult to process, came directly from my own experiences at their age. In the process of writing these scenes, I was ‘letting the air in’ on those emotions that I found I still carried, but with my adult self and insights sitting alongside these emotions.

If as writers we are conversing with our child self, rather than a more distant child audience, that self will not be satisfied with anything less than the truth.

Our children know what it is to be ruthless and cruel. They may not know it consciously, but they know it inside. What we have to try and do is tell the children, ‘Yes, these feelings exist in us as well as in you and this is how in our society you should try to express them.’ We have to discover how to tell the child about this without either horrifying him or misleading him.¹⁰⁷

Storr’s statement represents to me what she and her contemporaries saw as the pedagogical potential of children’s literature and the distance they had travelled from the ideation of childhood and innocence expressed in the late nineteenth century. For Storr, fantasy writing was the most powerful context within which to explore these topics. In her keynote address at the Exeter conference, she said:

When you move between the world of reality and the world of imagination, you acquire overtones, you can suggest much more than you ever actually have to say [...] Children move between the practical and the imaginative with no difficulty at all; not because they don’t see them as separate things but because they can hold both concepts in their minds at once, without the one spoiling the other.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Storr, “Fear and Evil in Children’s Books.” p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Being able to 'suggest much more than you every actually have to say' is a key concept in what Storr and her contemporaries believed children's literature could and should be doing for children. Bruno Bettelheim expanded on this concept: 'For a story to enrich a child's life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; to give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.'¹⁰⁹ For Bettelheim, stories aimed simply at developing the child's conscious mind fail in the most important function of literature: 'The worst features of these children's books is that they cheat the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful to him at his stage of development.'¹¹⁰ With this in mind, it is useful to examine the text of *Marianne Dreams*.

At the outset of the novel Storr establishes Marianne as a healthy child, who crosses easily between her imagination and the external world. Ahead of her birthday riding lesson, Marianne imagines it in a hundred different ways, creating scenarios where she shines as heroic or adored.¹¹¹ While she understands that these scenarios were half nonsense, she 'half believed and hoped that something of the sort would happen'.¹¹²

It is after the riding lesson that Marianne falls ill. Although we are not told what the illness is, it is severe enough to necessitate a long period of recuperation. Marianne is able to articulate for herself the strangeness of her situation: 'Somehow the feeling really ill had made a gap between the person she had been then, and the person she felt herself to be now, just as the six weeks which were to come [...] seemed to separate her from the person she would have been if none of this had happened.'¹¹³ It is as if Marianne has found herself caught in a 'holding zone' of time and place. There are echoes here of Alice's feeling of

¹⁰⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹¹ Catherine Storr, *Marianne Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

displacement when she finds herself down the rabbit hole — her sense that although she didn't know who she was becoming, she was no longer the person she had been. The question for Marianne is which new version of herself will emerge as a result of this experience?

Storr's use of the word 'gap' is meaningful because it appears to echo Winnicott's belief that psychological ill health has origins in the breaks in continuity in a child's early development. These gaps, caused by the 'intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes of childhood', pose a threat to the child when they are something the child cannot make sense of, because in such a situation they find a place for that experience in themselves.¹¹⁴ As a result, for the infant or child, 'the only real thing is the gap, that is to say, the death or the absence of the amnesia'.¹¹⁵

Winnicott also believed these 'gaps' presented potential spaces for the imagination. He was preoccupied 'by the idea of gaps, those "spaces between" where there was room for the play of speculation'.¹¹⁶ His focus was not on closing the gaps, but investigating them. It is also true that children and adults alike require gaps of time and space to be able to play and create and dream, such as the gap of time and space Alice experienced as she dozed on a riverbank. Many stories, especially stories for children, begin with a gap, often unexpected, such as space away from authority figures, or a break in the normal routine.

The gap Marianne is confronted with as she recovers from her illness is challenging in that it is imposed seemingly without warning, and for an uncertain amount of time. Perhaps more upsetting, as it would be for any child, is the fact that she is confined to her bed.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ Marianne's story follows the Bildungsroman structure in that she experiences a loss, which inspires a journey, conflict and psychological growth and ultimately maturity. While (in my reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) Alice experiences personal growth, it is not triggered by an initial loss that characterises the Bildungsroman genre.

As Marianne looks for ways fill her time, she finds the pencil. The pencil has immediate importance for her, initially for its historical significance. She finds it in a workbox that once belonged to her great-grandmother, which has ‘all sorts of treasures that Marianne’s great-grandmother and grandmother and mother had somehow collected’.¹¹⁸ She decides that ‘it is one of those pencils that are simply asking to be written or drawn with’.¹¹⁹

Storr uses the pencil in different ways in the narrative. It functions as a protagonist of sorts, driving the narrative forward. It also acts as the portal into Marianne’s dream world. It functions as Marianne’s ‘Transitional Object’.¹²⁰

In Chapter One I explored Winnicott’s theory of how a healthy and expansive ‘intermediate area of experience’, the area of overlap between the individual’s internal and external worlds, acts as a reprieve from the life-long task of maintaining a healthy balance between the two potentially conflicting realities. The ‘intermediate area of experience’ develops out of and replaces the infant’s initial attachment to a Transitional Object.

The Transitional Object initially acts as a substitute for the mother figure, a means of soothing the anxiety the mother’s absence causes the infant. Whether a blanket, a toy or doll, the object is something the child chooses and endows with meaning. It is ‘special and unshareable’¹²¹ and under the child’s control. Winnicott stresses that it is not the object itself that is important, but the importance the child assigns to it.¹²² Similarly, an object cannot be given to the child as a Transitional Object — only the child can choose to turn it into one. ‘It

¹¹⁸ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹²⁰ In light of Storr’s choice of a pencil as a Transitional Object in her story, and her interest in Winnicott’s work, it is worth mentioning Winnicott’s ‘Squiggle game’. It was a therapeutic game, using pencil and paper, which he devised for working with child patients. He and the child alternated in adding simple lines to create a drawing. The associations and interpretation the child attached to the drawings allowed access to their unconscious emotions.

¹²¹ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 114.

¹²² Winnicott identifies several qualities in the relationship of the child to the Transitional Object: the infant assumes rights over the object; it is cuddled and loved as well as mutilated; the object must never change, unless changed by the infant; it must survive instinctual loving, and also hating, and sometimes pure aggression; but it must give warmth or move or show somehow that it has a vitality or reality of its own; it comes from outside of our point of view, but not so that of the infant. Equally, it is not a hallucination. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 7.

is understood that both these things are true: the infant created and the world provided it'.¹²³

Ultimately the role of the object is key in the infant's attempt to balance their internal and external realities, to bridge for the child what might appear to be two incompatible worlds.¹²⁴

Transitional Objects are well known to ourselves and children we know, and feature in many ways in children's literature and popular culture, for example John Hegley's picture book *Stanley's Stick*, or Linus' blanket in Schulz's 'Peanuts' cartoons. Winnicott's theory of Transitional Objects applies to very small children but Reynolds observes that in Storr's fiction objects that function as Transitional Objects are used by older children at times of anxiety or transition. This may be in part because Storr's books for the older child reader 'recognise adolescence as a second phase of individuation during which many of the anxieties and frustrations of infancy return in new guises, and in them Transitional Objects, dreams and supernatural events are used to explore fears more obliquely and disturbingly'.¹²⁵

Marianne's first drawing with the pencil is of a house, surrounded by a fence and a path leading to the front door. She adds flowers, long scribbly grass, and a few large rough-looking stones. It is the archetypal child's drawing, but Marianne is disappointed with it. In her dream that night she finds herself in the countryside of her drawing and comes across the house that she drew. She doesn't like the house in her dream either, 'with its blank staring windows and its bare front door', but she likes the prairie around it even less.¹²⁶ When she asks the 'empty world around her' why there is no one in the house, the silent answer comes back: 'Put someone there.'¹²⁷

Two days later, as she is told that she will be spending a long time recovering in bed, she makes the connection between the house in the dream and her drawing. The pencil has

¹²³ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 117.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹²⁵ Reynolds, "I Write To Frighten Myself", p. 9.

¹²⁶ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 13.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

become the bridge between Marianne's waking and dreaming world. As her external reality shrinks, her internal world grows and assumes more significance. Sitting in bed, she feels her knuckles ache as she remembers hammering on the front door in her dream.¹²⁸ At the same time, the pencil takes on more of its own identity: 'She felt that it was a pencil of character, a pencil which could draw if only she, Marianne, would let it.'¹²⁹ This holds with Winnicott's theory that the Transitional Object takes on a vitality or reality of its own.

This independent reality of the pencil evolves as the story progresses. As Marianne adds more to her drawing, she discovers that she can't rub out the marks made by the pencil, she can only add to the picture she had already drawn.¹³⁰ She assigns the pencil independent power and it assumes more significance. When Marianne uses a different pencil to draw a girl in her picture, that girl does not appear in the dream because she was not drawn with *the* pencil.

The pencil becomes Marianne's tool for acting on her anger and feelings of jealousy towards Mark, a boy she hears about from her home tutor Miss Chesterfield. Mark, too, is unwell and confined to his bed and receives tuition from the same tutor. When Marianne's carefully planned present of birthday roses for Miss Chesterfield is spoiled by Mark's bigger and better bunch of flowers, Marianne gets very angry. She wants to 'smash something, to kick or bite or scratch, to hurt something terribly to show just how much she had been hurt'.¹³¹ Instead, she picks up the pencil and starts drawing thick lines across the windows of the drawing, 'she scribbled viciously over the face in her picture, and felt as if it really was Mark she was destroying'.¹³² She turns the house into a prison, makes the fence thicker and higher and turns the stones into 'gaolers'. When she returns to the house in her dreams, the windows of the house are barred up. Thus, the independent authority of the pencil expands: 'I've got a sort of feeling that I couldn't draw things that weren't right to be here — I mean as

¹²⁸ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 16.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

if things that wouldn't fit in properly just wouldn't get drawn or would turn out looking like something else.'¹³³

Marianne also uses the pencil in a nurturing, positive way. She provides Mark with a bed, food and entertainment. She helps him recover physically by drawing him a bicycle. By drawing the path to the hills and the lighthouse with its sweeping beam of light, she and Mark are able to escape the house and the threatening stones.

In the end, Marianne needs to surrender her authority over the pencil in order for her and Mark to be rescued. Mark suggests that Marianne draws a helicopter to rescue them from the lighthouse but Marianne isn't able to. She initially resists Mark's suggestion that she give him the pencil. Despite this conscious resistance, when she adds pencils to her drawing, she realises that she has drawn *the* pencil. By doing so, Mark is able to draw the helicopter that saves them both. Marianne no longer needs the pencil. Her priorities have shifted. For Winnicott, in the case of healthy development, the Transitional Object is 'not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. [...] The Transitional Object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned.' Transitional Objects are exactly as their name suggests, a tool for the purpose of growth or development. They lose meaning because they have 'become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between "inner psychic reality" and "the external world as perceived by two persons in common".'¹³⁴

The pencil is one example of the metaphoric writing Storr believed made fantasy both a rich and economic way of writing for children.¹³⁵ As Rustin & Rustin describe it, fantasy provides 'symbolic equivalents or containers for states of feeling, often [...] not just unnoticed but truly

¹³³ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 57.

¹³⁴ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 116.

¹³⁵ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books", p. 29.

unconscious states [...] and it is these which connect the stories, at the deepest level, with the inner lives of their readers'.¹³⁶

Marianne's illness comes at a time when she is on the cusp of adolescence and therefore vulnerable to the anxieties associated with the 'second phase of individuation'. Her confused feelings towards Mark are another focus of the novel. She finds Mark annoying, condescending, amusing, infuriating and impressive. She wants to destroy him and to nurture him. These overwhelming feelings are common to our first experience of sexual attraction.

But, as mentioned, Mark also represents an undeveloped aspect of herself — the masculine, rational, capable side, or in terms of Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious', Mark is the animus or male inner personality to Marianne's anima, or archetypal female aspect. The narrative arc of this element of the story is that Marianne needs to 'learn how to create a balanced and reciprocal relationship between different aspects of herself'.¹³⁷

Although Marianne creates Mark by adding him to her drawing, she doesn't consciously set out to create a boy, it is simply easier to draw a boy's head than a girl's head. It is not an easy relationship. To complicate her feelings, Marianne starts to confuse the real-life boy Mark whom she hears about from her tutor Miss Chesterfield with the Mark in her dreams. The rage she feels towards real-life Mark when he upstages her present is absolute: 'I hate him, I hate him, I hate him. He's a beast, and he's spoiled my present. I hate him more than anyone else in the world and I wish he was dead.'¹³⁸ This reaction is true to both the intensity of adolescent feeling and the challenge her emerging animus personality presents to other aspects of herself.

Dream-life Mark challenges her authority: 'You seem to think the world belongs to you and that everything that happens here happens because you've made it. I don't believe it, anyway. [...] You're only a little girl. You aren't all that clever [...] You can't do anything

¹³⁶ Rustin & Rustin, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Reynolds, "I Write To Frighten Myself", p. 11.

¹³⁸ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 45.

about it now you are here — you can't get us out of here and you can't make it light again.¹³⁹ His words enrage her so much that she threatens to rub him out, 'so I'll never have to see you again', to scribble over the house so that it's dark, 'and then I'll stop dreaming about you and you'll die! You'll be dead if I won't dream about you and I won't! There won't be a house and there won't be any you and then perhaps you'll believe me'.¹⁴⁰ To her frustration, she finds that she cannot rub Mark out. She can only add to the drawing, not take away from it. Marianne's rage at Mark, or at this newly discovered aspect of herself, rings true to the experience of adolescence. Many of the changes that take place are overwhelming and painful to navigate, even undesired, but one cannot reverse or ignore them.

Marianne's acknowledgement of her animus side is irrevocable and her attempts to destroy it only place her in greater danger. She has to learn that the only way she can escape the increasing danger of the watching stones is to nurture Mark — with food and a bicycle to build up his physical strength. By ultimately accepting his assistance and handing over the pencil, she is acknowledging his importance, the importance of her inner animus. Mark's capabilities are different to her own; they present Marianne with additional skills rather than pose a threat.

Coming to terms with emerging aspects of the self — physical, emotional and sexual — is a fundamental preoccupation of the adolescent experience, and therefore a theme commonly investigated in writing for older children and young adults. In *Everything's Fine*, Coco's initial 'attraction' to Ian is based on a long-standing crush based on his appearance, a competitiveness with her friend Bish who had 'claimed' Ian, and her misconception that Ian is attracted to her. In contrast to Ian, physically and socially, Angus is not the 'right' person to be attracted to. Her emotional development in the novel allows her to acknowledge at the end that it is Angus she has true feelings for.

¹³⁹ Storr, *Marianne Dreams*, p. 57.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Angus' physical and sexual attraction to Coco is immediate. However, he has to confront challenges in his emotional self and allow Coco access to this self in order for a relationship with her to be possible. I found Storr's handling of the complex and conflicting emotions in both Marianne and Mark helpful as I worked to show complexities in my own characters, such as jealousy or unacknowledged emotions.

To continue on the theme of 'symbolic equivalents or containers for states of feeling',¹⁴¹ the house which Marianne draws and then dreams represents her inner self, how she imagines herself to be. The house is isolated, in an uninviting sinister landscape.

Initially, Marianne is unable to get inside because the door has no handle. When she does gain access, it is disconcertingly empty apart from the presence of Mark. She explores the rooms in her dream life, and in her waking life begins to fill them with (symbolically charged) items such as the clock, which she finds reassuring, the bed for Mark, games and books. But as she does so, the menacing threat from the watching stones increases, and the house becomes a prison rather than a refuge. She needs to leave behind this version of herself in order to be 'free'.

In my initial reading of *Marianne Dreams*, I interpreted Marianne's dream world as an exploration of her own 'intermediate area of experience' between her internal world and the external reality, where Marianne experienced change and ultimately growth. Reynolds' article on Catherine Storr pointed out that the house also stands for Marianne herself, and that Mark represents the unexplored animus aspect of herself, as discussed. This additional interpretation changed the way I related to the book and my appreciation of metaphoric writing. My initial reaction surprised me: I felt defensive that I had not grasped that the house represents an unexplored aspect of Marianne. If that had escaped me as an adult reader, how would the child reader benefit from it? This was a point of departure in my research, the

¹⁴¹ Rustin & Rustin, p. 3.

result of which was a new insight into myself, the value of symbolism and the nature of experiential learning.

Another example of my defences blocking my understanding was my reaction to Winnicott's phrase 'the good enough mother'. It produced in me anxiety and defensiveness in equal measure. I became preoccupied with searching Winnicott's writing for an indication as to whether I was a 'good enough mother', how much harm I may have done my children and my mother me. Equally, I rejected this term (and to a degree, Winnicott himself) as out-of-date and sexist. It was only when I heard a woman discussing Winnicott's work on the radio, his support of the mother figure, how liberating and affirming his concept of the 'good enough mother' was in terms of acknowledging that the care-giver's imperfections are not only natural but also important in the child developing their own resilience, that I questioned my response. In his paper 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', Winnicott writes: 'the mother's main task (next to providing opportunity for illusion) is disillusionment'.¹⁴² I had read the words many times without absorbing them. Up until that moment of understanding, I had not been able to see past my own defensive anxiety.

To what degree a text can influence a reader is a central question to my thesis. Reader response theory focuses on how the reader responds to a text rather than on the actual text or the author's intentions for it. Psychoanalytic literary critic Norman Holland argues that because we bring the same pattern of psychological conflicts and coping mechanisms (our 'identity theme') from everyday life to our reading experience, that which would trigger reaction from us in life does so in the texts we read. In order to restore our balance, we interpret the texts to suit the belief structure of our fears, defences, needs and desires, and therefore limit the opportunities literature may present us with for personal growth or

¹⁴² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 17.

transformation.¹⁴³ This was my initial reaction to Winnicott's work. Applied to my experience as a writer (as I discuss in greater detail in the Conclusion), my nervousness that I might fail to present Ian's illness with appropriate sensitivity made me unwilling to allow for his negative qualities to feature in the narrative. As a result, for a long time, Ian, I and the novel were stuck. Only when I could recognise how my defensiveness was limiting the potential of the narrative, was I able to move forward.

Marshall Alcorn challenges Holland's view that literature does not pressure the reader to move beyond their particular identity theme.¹⁴⁴ He argues that not only does the text in itself withstand our individual interpretations, the experience of reading can sharpen our awareness and sensitivity to concepts previously only vaguely felt. At other times, it makes us more tolerant and resilient in unfamiliar or traumatic situations.

Within my writing I instinctively employed this transformative potential of texts at a point in *Everything's Fine* where I wanted Coco to be convinced that her concerns over Ian's mental well-being were justified. I wanted her conviction to be felt both consciously and unconsciously. While writing Ian's character, I was often reminded of Virginia Woolf's skill in creating the character Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is for me one of the most affecting portrayals of a mind in disorder. The scene I wrote for Coco began with her listening to an audiobook edition of *Mrs Dalloway*, and being so moved by Septimus' story that it triggered a conscious connection between the sorrow she felt for Septimus and the fear she had for Ian's safety, a connection strong enough to override her natural hesitation to act.

¹⁴³ Nasrullah Mambrol, 'Psychological Reader-response Theory' in *Literary Theory and Criticism* <https://literariness.org/2016/11/18/psychological-reader%E2%80%91response-theory/> [accessed 10 May 2021]

¹⁴⁴ Marshall W Alcorn Jr. and Mark Bracher, "Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction for Reader-Response Theory." *PMLA*, 100, 3, 1985, www.jstor.org/stable/462087, pp. 342–354 (p. 344).

Bruno Bettelheim argues for the suitability of fairy tales in helping the child come to terms with their anxieties and 'turmoil' in a way that is appropriate for their age and life experiences.¹⁴⁵ The fact that fairy tales are so far removed from the child's everyday life experiences is an important device because 'it makes obvious that the fairy tale's concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual'.¹⁴⁶ As the child acts out, rearranges or day dreams about story elements, they are fitting unconscious content into conscious fantasies. The most important aspect of this is that the child remains unaware of the symbolic nature of the fairy tale: 'A child who is made aware of what the figures in fairy tales stand for in his own psychology will be robbed of a much-needed outlet, and devastated by having to realise the desires, anxieties and vengeful feelings that are ravaging him.'¹⁴⁷

Applied to *Marianne Dreams*, Marianne should not be aware that the house she draws represents her internal world or that Mark symbolises her emerging animus side and neither should the child reader. Storr explains: 'If you translate [these situations] into everyday life you would be bound to lose intensity; or you would be too distressing; and, although it sounds paradoxical, I think it is only through fantasy that these vital fights can be made real enough.'¹⁴⁸

It is interesting therefore to briefly compare *Marianne Dreams* with *Marianne and Mark*¹⁴⁹, which was published two years later, because Storr does not use fantasy in the same way to develop her narrative.

The story is set five years after the end of *Marianne Dreams*, in Brighton, where Marianne's family had been for their summer holiday at the end of her illness. Although Storr does not delve into a fantasy landscape, the Brighton Marianne now finds herself in is an

¹⁴⁵ Bettelheim, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁴⁸ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books.", p. 31.

¹⁴⁹ Catherine Storr, *Marianne and Mark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960)

unknown land — to her mind unfamiliar and unlovely. Any comfort in terms of the familiarity and structure of home is further cast aside by her uncle (she is staying with her aunt and uncle), a psychoanalyst, who insists on imposing an adult-like freedom on her. As the story progresses, Marianne reinterprets her landscape according to events and her moods with an intensity and immediacy common to the adolescent experience, but also heightened by the fact that she is allowing her internal reality to spill over into her experience of the external world. Perhaps this is because, for Marianne, the intensity of her internal disquiet is not adequately expressed in the indifferent reality of Brighton. But the core of her crisis is the fear, triggered by the comments of two local girls, that there is something wrong with her because she has no romantic interest in boys.

Storr said that in *Marianne and Mark*, she wanted to explore the Macbeth theme, that if you are told something is going to happen to you, you make it happen.¹⁵⁰ Thus, when Marianne hears about a fortune teller, she is drawn to the possibility of finding some resolution or relief from her loneliness and insecurity. Marianne's desire for Madame Atlanta's foretelling to come true clouds her reason with embarrassing and unhappy consequences.

Mark, whom she meets by chance on the Brighton pier, helps Marianne to re-establish a sense of balance, by challenging her emotional thinking. In that way, his role is similar to that he plays in *Marianne Dreams*, where he represents practical, logic-based thinking.

In the question and answer section after Storr's speech at the Exeter Conference, Ian Mulligan commented that Storr seemed to find herself in difficulties with the degree of realism in *Marianne and Mark*, that she didn't seem quite so happy with the realistic evocation of the girls who work in Woolworth's as she was with the more inner world of *Marianne Dreams*.¹⁵¹ (Storr's reply was that she didn't feel unhappy with it but that perhaps it

¹⁵⁰ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books.", p. 36.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

hadn't come off as well.) There are times in *Marianne and Mark* where Storr's story-telling does feel self-conscious. Her authorial voice can become invasive, particularly in the way she uses Mark's character. At other times Storr slips into poking fun at Uncle Stephen's psycho-analytical pronouncements and jargon, which feels too mature for an adolescent reader: '[Marianne] sank, at length, into a sort of lethargy, through which only a few of Uncle Stephen's phrases penetrated her consciousness. "More aggressive, less infantile dependence," she heard. [...] "Taking your place in the adult world. Realizing your femininity. Real object relations at last."' ¹⁵²

Feeling miserable, lonely, or out of your depth in a relationship are anxieties as common to the adolescent experience today as they were in 1960 and the subject of many current adolescent and young adult novels, yet somehow *Marianne and Mark* comes across as dated in a way that *Marianne Dreams* doesn't. It is not simply the dialogue and social situations that feel outdated, and in that way act as a form of barrier to the modern reader. It seems that what is missing in *Marianne and Mark* is the intensity of *Marianne Dreams*, the sense of threat and menace, the 'vital fight' in the narrative that remains with you; the vital fight that in *Marianne Dreams* is achieved through the force of the unconscious fantasy at play.

Storr claimed that fantasy 'explores a child's experience at all levels. You're calling on its unconscious as well as its conscious mind, and you can engage its interests with the events of the plot and at the same time you are meeting its not understood difficulties, you're sounding echoes of uncomprehended conflicts'. ¹⁵³ I have come to appreciate, as a writer and reader, that there are different ways of knowing and understanding. Learning happens at different levels of consciousness. The intense response, or 'feeling of recognition' we

¹⁵² Storr, *Marianne and Mark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) p. 223.

¹⁵³ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books", p. 32.

have to certain books, or art, or music, without understanding why, is a step in understanding another part of ourselves.¹⁵⁴

Built into the seemingly cyclical debate attached to children's literature as to where the balance should be struck between education and entertainment, is the fact that as adults we find it difficult to acknowledge that our children (or our own child self) suffer(ed) fears and anxiety. It raises our defences because it upsets our view of what childhood ought to be: a mad, happy adventure (although it is also true that many children find *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* frightening) or because it reminds us of our own less-than-happy childhood experiences. Similarly, Winnicott's theories are upsetting, because they remind us that there is no way of surviving childhood without exposure to 'intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes'. The difference between the version of childhood presented in writing of the late nineteenth century and that produced by Storr and her colleagues, is that the latter insist on us looking childhood straight in the eye, and respecting the full experience of childhood. But by means of symbolic and fantasy writing, they present both the problem and potential solutions to children in a manner appropriate and meaningful to them.

¹⁵⁴ Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books, p. 32.

CHAPTER 3

Will you fight to live, or give in, and give up?

The books discussed in the previous two chapters have been narratives built around essentially psychically healthy children. In this chapter I turn to *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* (hereafter *Rose Garden*) by Joanne Greenberg. Published in 1964 (initially under the pen name Hannah Green to protect her family members), it is a fictionalised account of Joanne Greenberg's childhood experience of schizophrenia and her slow and painful three-year treatment in the late 1940s at Chestnut Lodge Hospital in Maryland where she was under the care of Dr Fromm-Reichmann. Dr Fromm-Reichmann was renowned at the time for treating schizophrenia with psychoanalytically-orientated talking therapy (as opposed to other treatments such as electroshock therapy which were common before medicating mental health conditions became mainstream.) To date, Greenberg has published twelve novels and four collections of short stories since her first book *The King's Persons* in 1955.

There are some obvious differences between *Rose Garden* and the previous two books I have discussed: the main character Deborah Blau is sixteen years old when the novel opens, and the narrative takes place almost exclusively within the hospital where she is receiving treatment. The older readership and more serious setting situates the book more closely with the likes of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (published a year before *Rose Garden*), *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen, *It's Kind Of A Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, and *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman (which I examine later in the chapter). *Rose Garden* left a lasting impression on me when I read it as an adolescent. Returning to it thirty years later, I found it as affecting but for different reasons. It helped me in many ways when it came to writing my novel *Everything's Fine*. It is also a useful reference point to continue the discussion of depictions of mental health in children's literature.

As with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Marianne Dreams*, a large portion of *Rose Garden's* narrative takes place in sixteen-year-old Deborah's internal world although,

unlike Alice's uninterrupted dreamscape adventure, or Marianne's dreamlife blurring with her external world, Deborah's 'Kingdom of Yr' is an internal reality she creates as an escape from the anti-Semitism and cruelty of her teachers and peers, as well as unresolved early childhood trauma. Initially Yr is a land of plains and golden meadows.¹⁵⁵ Its gods — Anterrabae 'the falling god', Lactameaon and Idat, The Dissembler — start out as Deborah's secret companions. As Deborah feels more estranged from the external world, Yr expands: 'Yr had grown wider and wider for her as the solitude deepened. Its gods were laughing, golden personages whom she would wander away to meet, like guardian spirits.'¹⁵⁶

But this refuge does not last: 'Something changed, and Yr was transformed from a source of beauty and guardianship to one of fear and pain. Slowly Deborah was forced to assuage and placate, to spin from the queen-ship of a bright and comforting Yr to prison in its darker places.'¹⁵⁷

The original gods are joined by the 'Collect of others' — her teachers, family members and school friends, who stand 'eternally in secret judgement and giving their endless curses'¹⁵⁸ and a Censor, who appeared after Deborah let slip her Yri name at school, to guard Yr's secrecy.

Now [Deborah] was also forced to endure the dizzying changes between worlds, to bear the world's hatred voiced in the changing curses of the Collect, to be subject and slave to the Censor, who had been given the task of keeping the world of Yr from blowing its secret seeds to ground on Earth, where they would spring up wide open to flowering lunacy for all the world to see and recoil from in horror.¹⁵⁹

From its origins as a secret refuge, Yr becomes Deborah's life-threatening psychical prison.

¹⁵⁵ Greenberg, *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2009), p. 8.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Rose Garden opens as Deborah's parents deliver her to the hospital where she will remain for three years as an in-patient, and tells the story of her treatment with Dr Clara Fried, her recovery, and tentative steps back into society. Throughout the narrative the reader experiences both the confinements of the hospital's B and D wards, and Deborah's vast and complex Kingdom of Yr. In this way, the reader understands a great deal more than Dr Fried or the nurses treating Deborah, or Deborah's family. At the same time, the omniscient narration also allows for the points of view of Deborah's family members and, importantly, those of Dr Fried. For example, there comes a moment when Deborah lets slip a secret Yri word to the doctor:

'What did you say?' the doctor was asking, but Deborah had fled, terrified, into Yr, so that it closed over her head like water and left no mark of where she had entered. The surface was smooth and she was gone. Looking at her, drawn away from words or reasons or comforts, Dr. Fried thought: The sick are all so afraid of their own uncontrollable power! Somehow they cannot believe that they are only people, holding only a human-sized anger!¹⁶⁰

This shifting and unstable narration parallels Deborah's slipping between her internal and external reality. It also allows the reader to appreciate Deborah's internal agonies at the same time as building empathy for those trying to care for her.

Rose Garden is in essence about the battle for Deborah's sanity. The opposing forces are the internal world she has created — the Kingdom of Yr and the gods that rule it — and her psychiatrist Dr Fried, who represents the external world and a healthy, balanced mind. It also seems to be a dialogue Deborah is having with herself, in advance of a decision she will inevitably have to make: whether to fight to live, or to give in and give up.

As a society, we speak more openly and with increasing empathy about mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression. More complex disorders such as Deborah experienced, where there is an obvious rejection of our accepted external reality, are far

¹⁶⁰ Greenberg, p. 42.

more challenging and therefore susceptible to being both demonised and sensationalised in popular culture. For example, as films such as *Psycho* (1960) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) show, the horror film genre has a long history of associating mental illness with extreme violence and danger.¹⁶¹ The 2013 Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, aimed at an adolescent and young adult viewership, was widely accused of sensationalising teenage suicide.¹⁶²

As discussed in Chapter One, we do not pathologise or even discourage childhood delusions and phantasying. It is even possible for adults to live with life-long delusions as long as they do not clash with society's accepted reality. This chapter does not attempt to discuss in detail or with authority the complexities of psychosis or schizophrenia, however Freud's essays on 'Neurosis and Psychosis' and 'The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis' provide a useful explanation of the conditions that can lead to a fractured mind. I include a comment on them as they transformed how I related to *Rose Garden* and what I learned from it.

For Freud, both neurosis and psychosis are the result of a failure in the functioning of the ego, the realistic part of the mind. The ego's role is to mediate between the super-ego, our moral consciousness, and the id, our instinctual or primitive drives. In both neuroses and psychoses, the ego is unable to reconcile these conflicting demands. In the case of a neurosis, the ego suppresses part of the id in favour of reality, and a loss of reality is avoided. In a psychosis, the ego, dominated by the id, withdraws from a part of reality. The id draws the ego away from reality and creates a new reality to replace the old.

¹⁶¹ Arwa Haider, "How Cinema Stigmatises Mental Health", BBC, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180828-how-cinema-stigmatises-mental-illness> [accessed 29 January 2023]

¹⁶² Denis Campbell, "Netflix show Condemned for 'Romanticising' Teenager's Suicide", *The Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/apr/21/netflix-13-reasons-why-condemned-for-romanticising-suicide> [accessed 30 January 2023]

In a psychosis, the transforming of reality is carried out upon the psychical precipitates of former relations to it — that is, upon the memory-traces, ideas and judgements which have been previously derived from reality and by which reality was presented in the mind. But this relation was never a closed one; it was continually being enriched and altered by fresh perceptions.¹⁶³

The noun precipitate — a solid substance that is produced from a liquid during a chemical process — is useful. Psychosis is the solid substance made of memory traces, ideas and judgements, continually being enriched and altered by fresh perceptions. It also has to secure for itself ‘perceptions of a kind which shall correspond to the new reality.’¹⁶⁴ It does this by means of hallucinations and delusions.

The role of phantasy (the world of imaginative wish fulfilment) is important within the psychosis. It is the ‘store-house from which the materials or the pattern for building the new reality are derived’.¹⁶⁵ Psychosis is a creation of the unconscious, but is fed and reaffirmed by conscious phantasying. This process carries its own trauma. Freud believed that the fact that these hallucinations and delusions are often very distressing is a sign that the remodelling of reality is ‘carried through against forces that oppose it violently.’

Deborah’s experiences with her teachers, companions and family convinced her that she could not trust her external world. Her internal Kingdom of Yr was her defence. When she found that even this was not enough, she created further internal barriers (such as the Censor) to protect her against what she experienced as an intolerable reality.

Freud continues: ‘Both neurosis and psychosis are thus the expression of a rebellion on the part of the id against the external world, of its unwillingness — or if one prefers, its incapacity — to adapt itself to the exigencies of reality.’¹⁶⁶ Seen in this light, the popular associations we have of psychosis and madness being something chaotic and out of control

¹⁶³ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995), pp. 181-188 (p. 185).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

seem far removed from the survival tactics the id is attempting to apply in circumstances the individual experiences as unendurable.

As *Rose Garden*'s narrative progresses, the reader learns more about Deborah's childhood and the origins of her flight from reality. We learn of the anti-Semitism experienced by her parents and immigrant grandparents, as well as Deborah's own experiences of racism she faced at school and summer camp. Added to this is the lasting physical and mental trauma of having a tumour removed at the age of five and the complicated feelings she had over the birth of her younger sister.

Yr is a kingdom born out of Deborah's trauma — her experience of anti-Semitism, her upbringing in the post-World War Two years, and her family and cultural inheritance of being the target of violence and hatred. Her pathological defence (rather than falling into a depression), is an act of rebellion against the external world. She renounces and withdraws from the reality she finds intolerable. However, as Freud explains, the psychosis or transformed reality is made of 'memory-traces, ideas and judgements which have been previously derived from reality', 'fed and reaffirmed by conscious phantasying' and it is therefore inevitable that the Kingdom of Yr becomes a place of suffering.

Deborah's story ends positively but not without great personal cost. She has to accept that she cannot live in both Yr and the external world — she has to commit to the challenges of living in the external world, 'no matter what'.¹⁶⁷

Words are at the centre of Deborah's story — they are instrumental both in solidifying Deborah's isolation and the key to her recovery. The kingdom of Yr 'reveals itself' to nine-year-old Deborah initially as a voice, a 'sweet, dark sound', with the words, '*You are not of them. You are of us.* She looked for the voice but it was part of the mosaic of leaves and sunlight. *Fight their lies no longer. You are not of them.*'¹⁶⁸ The next time she hears the voice

¹⁶⁷ Greenberg, p. 278.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

is 'in a night of stars, inaudible to the others walking with her, the same rich voice saying like a poem, *You can be our bird, free in wind. You can be our wild horse who shakes his head and is not ashamed*'.¹⁶⁹ This voice is the portal to her escape.

Deborah builds her kingdom with words. Yr has its own calendar, incantations and poetry. As part of the rejection of the world, she creates a secret Yri language, which is 'far superior' to English. 'The language of Yr was a deep secret, kept always more rigidly away from people as it crept toward greater control of the inner voice'.¹⁷⁰ She tells Dr Fried: 'English is for the world — for getting disappointed by and hated in. Yri is for saying what is to be said.'¹⁷¹ For Deborah, Yri is a language of rebellion against the hateful English words that have been spoken to her. But while the Yri 'saying what is to be said' words are initially of beauty and freedom, they become words of torment. The Yri language becomes an internalised version of the words spoken to her by the external word, to reinforce her fears that she is in fact deserving of punishment.

Greenberg highlights the estrangement Deborah feels from her external world by the contrast of language she uses to describe the two realities as she slips between them. An example of this technique is the description of Deborah and her parents approaching the hospital at the beginning of the novel:

From freedom, Deborah Blau smashed headlong into the collision of the two worlds. As always before it was a weirdly silent shattering. In the world where she was most alive, the sun split in the sky, the earth erupted, her body was torn to pieces, her teeth and bones crazed and broken to fragments. In the other place, where the ghosts and shadows lived, a car turned into a side drive and down a road to where the old redbrick building stood.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Greenberg, p. 59.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

The words used to describe Yr — shattering, split, erupted, torn to pieces — are violently alive, as opposed to the haunted and desolate external world. At the same time, Greenberg describes Deborah’s internal reality without sensationalism. I found that the more economic her descriptions, the greater the impact they had. ‘[Dr Fried] had told her that sanity had to do with challenge and choice, but challenge as Deborah knew it was the shock-challenge that Yr created for her in snakes dropping from the walls, people and places appearing and disappearing, and the awful jolt of the collision of worlds.’¹⁷³ Unembellished descriptions such as ‘snakes dropping from the walls’ make a powerful impact because they are telling the reader ‘what is’. In Chapter Two I referred to the influence Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* had on my own creative writing, in particular her descriptions of Septimus’ internal reality. There is a scene where Septimus is sitting on a bench in Regents Park: ‘A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words’ and later, ‘There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look’.¹⁷⁴ Again, the power of the description lies in the technique of simply describing ‘what is’ for the character. This was very helpful to me as I attempted to capture Ian’s increasingly unstable moods and racing thoughts in *Everything’s Fine*. My own words and phrases felt heavy and inept. I felt that I was trying too hard, and that my descriptions exposed my ignorance and distance from Ian. The more I stripped back my language, the closer I came to Ian and allowing his words to surface. As an example, towards the end of the narrative, in a dialogue between Angus and Ian about Evie’s visit, Angus attempts to argue logically with him:

‘You seemed happy to talk to her, and heal her apparently, all the way through the night.’

‘It was all lost on her, little brother. She isn’t intelligent, or *tall*, enough to understand what I was talking about.’

‘Scientifically speaking, you can’t claim that short—’

¹⁷³ Greenberg, p. 126.

¹⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 24.

'I'm bigger than science.'¹⁷⁵

Ian's short reply 'I'm bigger than science' felt to me the most powerful way of communicating his reality.

Deborah's tentative and gradual recovery comes of talking, of allowing Dr Fried access to her internal reality. However, each time she reveals a Yri word to Dr Fried, she suffers an acute internal counterattack. For example, early in her treatment she explains the Yri metaphor 'locked eyes' to Dr Fried: 'The exchange was making her terribly frightened. Because of it the walls began to thrum a little, vibrating like a great, blood-pumping heart. Anterrabae was reciting an incantation in Yri, but she couldn't understand his words.'¹⁷⁶ In this moment of 'betrayal', Deborah is locked out of the language she has created.

Dr Fried matches the intensity of Yr's hold over Deborah with the language of battle in their therapy sessions. She tells Deborah: 'I want you to go back and tell those gods and Collect and Censor that I will not be cowed by them and that neither of us is going to stop working because of their power.'¹⁷⁷

Dr Fried is slowly preparing Deborah for the eventual choice only she can make. Each step Deborah takes toward recovery is met with internal punishment. At one point, she retreats to her bed for three months, getting up only to go to the bathroom or see Dr Fried. 'The darkness seemed complete. Phases of Yr came and went, the Collect met and dispersed, but outside the sessions with Dr Fried she did not fight any of it'.¹⁷⁸ However, Dr Fried sees glimmers of hope: 'At least the battle was being fought in earnest now. The old apathy was gone. She began to feel in herself a rising hope and with it an excitement.'¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Rowell, p. 167.

¹⁷⁶ Greenberg, p. 45.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

One of the most profound aspects of Dr Fried's therapy seems simply to be that she believed in the reality of Deborah's internal world. At one point in Deborah's treatment, Dr Fried is absent for a period of time. Her replacement focuses on proving to Deborah that the Yri language was her own construction and not a gift from the gods. His efforts to deconstruct her world, to show it up as nothing more than her imagination, are disastrous for Deborah, who regresses into a profound silence: 'Her surface became as dead as the moon.'¹⁸⁰

Out of this silence builds the rage that will become the 'battle' Dr Fried has been preparing Deborah for — the eventual confrontation between the powers of Yr and the external world, or Deborah's rejection of reality as opposed to her wish to live and be well, is fought with physical ferocity. Greenberg describes it as a volcano erupting, an eruption that neither English nor Yri words could describe. 'Too much of what Deborah said could not wait even for the Yri logic and frame of words, and went sailing off into gibberish with only an Yri word here and there to let Deborah know what she was saying'.¹⁸¹ The eruption 'kept hurling her from one side of the room to the other; walls and floors pounded her head and hands and body. Now her lack of inner control matched the anarchic world with an Yr gone newly mad itself'.¹⁸² This eruption lasts for months, with Deborah needing daily restraint, however when it recedes, she begins to see colours again, her 'stoniness of expression' has vanished, and she realises that she is going to live.

Along with body 'language', words are the connective tissue that bridges our internal and external realities. We have all felt the warmth and relief of having someone express deeply-felt emotions exactly. In times of heightened emotion, it is common to look to poets or song writers to give expression to that for which one feels one 'doesn't have the words'. Such is

¹⁸⁰ Greenberg, p. 168.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

our reliance on words that when they cease to work in our service, the effect can be devastating.

In her memoir *Lost In Translation*, Eve Hoffman writes of her experience of arriving in Canada as an adolescent Polish immigrant. It was a helpful text to read alongside my study of *Rose Garden* as Hoffman writes of the displacement she feels in her adopted country, as well as the impact of living with her parents' trauma of the Holocaust and leaving Communist Poland. Of particular interest to me was her description of the impact that learning English, a new language, had on her sense of self:

I have no interior language, and without it, interior images — those images through which we assimilate the external world, through which we take it in, love it, make it our own, become blurred too. [...] I am not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist.¹⁸³

The direct line that connects a sense of self, interior images and an interior language is striking. Without the language there are no images, and without images we are 'dark and empty'. When you do not feel 'at home' in your interior language, it is as if you don't exist. Hoffman describes how she becomes obsessed with acquiring new words, of swallowing them down. 'If I can take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and body'.¹⁸⁴ Hoffman decides to rebuild herself with words.

In contrast to this, Deborah chooses to renounce the language and words of her family and her external world and replace them with her own, and with that her own interior images.

As a writer, I have experienced something akin to the dark and empty state, and the sense of not having access to my interior language and images in periods of 'writer's block'. In these moments, it has been the 'memory of fullness' that has been the most difficult to endure. Applied to mental health in general, perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of

¹⁸³ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 108.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

periods of depression, and in particular the depressive periods that inevitably follow a manic episode, is the memory of the richness and fluidity of words and thought that has been replaced with emptiness.

Neal Shusterman explores the unreliability of words in his novel *Challenger Deep*. This book also takes the reader into the heart of schizophrenic experience and shares a number of similarities with *Rose Garden*. Both narratives show glimpses of the main character's family and home life, and their admittance and treatment on a psychiatric ward. Both take the reader into the character's internal reality, which are complex and complete creations. Where Deborah created the Kingdom of Yr, the main character of *Challenger Deep*, fifteen-year-old Caden Bosch, is a deckhand on a pirate ship which is on a voyage to find the Challenger Deep — the deepest known point in the ocean.

Shusterman wrote *Challenger Deep* with the consent of his son, whose own experiences of illness and hospitalisation inspired the story. Thus the book is both the writing of a parent who has watched their child's behaviour alter as he withdraws deeper into his internal world, and a writer, imagining up a world that is, as Rustin & Rustin have pointed out, a symbolic equivalent or container for a state of feeling,¹⁸⁵ and in this case, a state of being.

It is at first easy to miss the overlaps and connections Shusterman has woven through *Challenger Deep*. Caden's bewildering world slowly begins to make sense as the reader progresses through the novel. This mirrors both Caden's internal experience and builds empathy for those trying to understand what is happening to him. His internal reality is already pushing at its limits as the narrative opens: 'I can't remember when this journey began. It's like I've always been here, except that I couldn't have been, because there was a before, just last week or last month or last year.'¹⁸⁶ As elements in Caden's external world becomes less reliable, he feels less sure of it. 'I sit with my friends for lunch. And yet I don't.

¹⁸⁵ Rustin & Rustin, p. 3.

¹⁸⁶ Neal Shusterman, *Challenger Deep* (New York: HarperTeen, 2015), p. 4.

That is to say, I'm among them, but I don't feel *with* them.¹⁸⁷ In contrast, the pirate ship and the characters aboard present a more stable reality.

Shusterman allows the reader to experience the unreliability of Caden's external world by scrupulously staying in his point of view. For example, in a scene where Caden's parents are taking him to hospital (which calls to mind the same situation in *Rose Garden*), Caden begins the journey in the family car, but his parents' voices are jumbled, and they begin to move further away. He is also in the back of a limousine, where someone is trying to suck out all his oxygen. Panicked, he tries to get out, but the doors are locked. 'You curse and scream, and say the most horrible things. [...] Your father can barely drive the car with the commotion you're causing'.¹⁸⁸ The inclusion of this simple sentence shows how fragmented Caden's reality is. Shusterman also gives us a glimpse of the external drama — the anguish Caden's parents must be experiencing — simultaneously playing out. However, we are immediately back in Caden's head. The limousine becomes a padded elevator, 'and you're going down the diagonal slope of the black pyramid, into its hidden depths — deep, deep underground.' The following paragraph begins: 'The vehicle moves into a parking lot at the bottom of a hill.'¹⁸⁹ The reader is left with the same sense of bewilderment as Caden — trying to keep up, wondering what is real and what can be trusted. Another example of this unreliable world is when Caden is on the ward:

You empty your lunch plate mindlessly. When you stare at the empty plate, for just a few moments you're in the Olympics. You're the discus thrower. You spin round and round, fighting the chemically-induced thickness of the air, and hurl the plate, certain you're about to win a gold medal. It hits the wall but doesn't shatter because its plastic. Then you realise you're not in the Olympics at all. How disappointing. The pastels are there on either side of you in an instant, certain that you've just had another violent outburst, and want to prevent another one.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Shusterman, p. 48.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

The words 'How disappointing' add humour but also show Caden's detachment from the scene. Shusterman uses short and simple sentences in much the same way that Greenberg does, where the most powerful descriptions come out of simply describing 'what is'. For Caden, nothing can be relied on. 'You know you can make that pirate ship as real as anything else, because there's no difference anymore between thought and reality'.¹⁹¹ At times Caden seems to be experiencing the realities simultaneously, such as when his family is visiting him in hospital. They are attempting to build a house of cards.

'Oh well,' says Mum.
'It's a tough thing to do, even when the sea is calm,' I point out.
Mum and Dad simultaneously try to change the subject again, but Mackenzie won't let them. 'What sea?' she asks.
'What sea, what?' I say.
'You said the sea was calm.'
'Did I?'¹⁹²

The reader comes to realise that the pirate ship is populated by the same characters as in Caden's external world, some of whom retain the same names and characteristics. Onboard the pirate ship the two main characters — the captain and the parrot — are symbolic. The parrot represents Caden's doctor, Dr Poirot. The captain represents the disease Schizophrenia itself.

While hospitalised Caden becomes increasingly disintegrated, the Caden on the pirate ship is coherent and logical, trying to navigate his way and stay alive. It is the captain (or the illness), who is illogical and unreliable. The central tension on the ship is between the parrot and the captain, as each competes for Caden's loyalty and tries to convince Caden to do away with the other.

'He's a special one,' the captain says.
'That he is, that he is,' says the parrot.
The two of them playact with each other, pretending to be cordial, but only so it will make the final betrayal sweeter. Even though I trust neither of them, I know that eventually I'll have to choose a side.

¹⁹¹ Shusterman, p. 132.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 226.

'Be my second eye,' the captain says, 'and you shall have riches and grand adventures beyond imagining.'
'Be *my* second eye,' says the parrot, 'and I will offer you something the captain never will. A way off this ship.'¹⁹³

This is obviously the real battle that is taking place in Caden's external reality, the doctor (and by extension, sanity) versus the disease (as it is in *Rose Garden*).

The ship's voyage is to the deepest part of the ocean, where the captain wants Caden to descend to the bottom of the Challenger Deep. Caden does make the trip to the bottom of the ocean — by 'cheeking' his medication on the hospital ward (thereby choosing to give in to his psychosis) and on the pirate ship by doing away with the parrot. When he arrives at the bottom of the ocean, he sees the ghost or remains of the parrot and prepares to gloat at his achievement. 'But the bottom gets deeper with each trip, you know that, don't you?'¹⁹⁴ is the parrot's chilling reply.

As mentioned, the elusive nature of words is a feature for Caden. 'The things I feel cannot be put into words, or if they can, the words are in no language anyone can ever understand. My emotions are talking in tongues.'¹⁹⁵ Words are the product of coherent thought, of an integrated and reliable mind and reality. Caden's inability to find words to fit his feelings brings to mind the displacement Eva Hoffman feels when she loses her 'interior language', or the feeling of having no access to words when experiencing writer's block.

Caden forms a friendship with another patient called Hal. "I wrote myself a chaos language," Hal tells me. "Full of symbols and signals and sigils and cymbals. But due to its chaotic nature, I can't remember it".¹⁹⁶

In Caden's external world, Hal spends his days examining atlases and maps, drawing lines between different locations, looking for connections: 'Gotta break up the

¹⁹³ Shusterman, pp. 158-159.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

known pattern to see what's really there.¹⁹⁷ Hal's habit of playing with rhyming words is given to the captain on the pirate ship, along with the captain's illogical thinking, such as: 'Burn your bridges, [...] Preferably before you cross them.'¹⁹⁸

Another tool Shusterman uses to illustrate Caden's disintegrated experience is by way of the narration alternating between first and second person point of view. The story opens in the second person: 'There are two things you know. One: You were there. Two: You couldn't have been there.'¹⁹⁹

As the story progresses, it becomes apparent that Caden is not addressing an external reader in the second person point of view, but himself. When the writing shifts to second person it is an indication that Caden is feeling most disintegrated. 'You can't get in your own head sometimes. You can pace around it, you can bang it against walls, but you can't get inside.'²⁰⁰ This is a particularly powerful description of the degree of separation Caden experiences from his 'own head' or one might argue his true self. He is aware of it, but is locked out of it. It has become something physically separate to him.

Slowly, as Caden adjusts to life on the ward and his medication starts to take effect, that feeling of being outside his head diminishes, as does the need for the second person narration:

You're back inside the vessel of your body.
Just one. Just you. Just an individual.
Me.
I don't quite know when it happens.²⁰¹

A striking difference between *Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* which must be acknowledged, is the role of pharmaceuticals in the treatment of schizophrenia. Whereas current-day treatments rely on chemical restraint, when Deborah is hospitalised in 1949,

¹⁹⁷ Shusterman, p. 155.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

there are no antipsychotic drugs available. The restraint was mechanical, such as the 'cold packs' that Deborah was placed in when she was most at risk to herself or others. Of the use of pharmaceuticals in modern-day treatment, Joanne Greenberg has said: 'I am not against the use of psychotropic medication, but only as a way to mute the runaway interior voices enough so that a therapeutic interaction can be begun.'²⁰² This therapeutic interaction is too often the casualty of overburdened medical facilities and budget restrictions. It is encouraging to see reports that the health service is looking to address this, but whether this change in policy becomes a reality remains to be seen.²⁰³

The role and depiction of the parents in *Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* was very helpful to me as I worked on *Everything's Fine*. Both Deborah and Caden have strong family support, with loving parents who want to see their children well and happy. In both cases the parents could afford or had access to high-quality professional help when they required it. Perhaps because I am a parent myself, the image in both books of the parents delivering their children to their hospitals and entrusting their care into the hands of professionals is particularly affecting. In both books I had a clear impression of the parents trying to understand but being at a loss in the face of their child's illness. It brought to mind my unkind and dismissive reactions to all of my parents' attempts to understand my suffering when I was in the grip of an eating disorder as a teenager.

As adults, we look back on our parents' role in our upbringing and psychical development, and as parents we are simultaneously framing our own children's lives with our own histories and psychic make up. Too often our children's crises coincide with (or are exacerbated by) our own busy lives and personal pressures.

²⁰² Greenberg, p. 289.

²⁰³ "NHS To Give Therapy For Depression Before Medication Under New Guidelines", *The Guardian*, 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/23/nhs-to-give-therapy-for-depression-before-medication-under-new-guidelines>> [accessed 25 November 2021]

Both narratives also include a glimpse of the effects of the illness on the siblings and wider family members. In each case it was clear how the parents were at times torn between the demands of their unwell child and trying to support the other sibling (in both books the protagonists have a younger sister). In my own family, my official diagnosis of Anorexia had profound effects on my siblings. My younger sister (the youngest of four daughters) resorted to humour as a method of coping with the stress it put on my parents. She referred to the centre where I received in-patient care by the name of the local ballroom dancing school. My older sister was very angry that, 'protected' by my diagnosis, I was able to confront issues with my parents within family therapy sessions that she, not being medically unwell, felt unable to address.

I was sure from the beginning of my creative project that I wanted to tell the story of the sibling of a young person struggling with an illness. I often found it more challenging to get to the truth of how younger brother Angus felt in the face of Ian's increasingly manic behaviour, than to describe Ian. Angus was caught between conflicting demands — a sixteen-year-old boy trying to be both a carer and protector of his brother amidst his own bewilderment and fear, at the same time as falling in love with Coco.

I was also clear from the beginning of the project that the central tensions of the narrative would take place outside the influence of parents. While much has changed in the shaping of the story, that principle remained important to me, partly because it is written for a young adult readership — a time when parental significance fades as friends and contemporaries take centre stage, and partly in a nod to the tradition of children's literature, where the narratives often take place outside the parental sphere of influence. This gap creates a freedom, both for the characters and in terms of narrative potential. However, I also wanted to show the frustration at the lack of licence so often felt in late adolescence, when one is both child and adult, and also neither. Ultimately, despite his best efforts, Angus has to accept that he cannot save his brother on his own, just as Coco has to turn to her mother for help.

Because of my wish to tell the story of Angus, Ian and Coco away from their parents, I struggled with the role and portrayal of the parents in my book. Both Angus and Ian's, and Coco's families are similar and somewhat traditional in that the fathers are the bread-winners and preoccupied with that responsibility. (In fact, there are strong similarities with Deborah and Caden's family set-ups.) Initially I had Angus' mother absent because she was addressing her own mental health crisis, but that seemed to take away from Ian's story so I changed it so that she is nursing her dying mother in Australia. I tried to create loving and supportive parents who are appalled at the thought of their children suffering, but who are also busy and have their own crises because I believe that this is true to life, and one of the most difficult aspects of caring for those who are suffering with mental health issues.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that Greenberg and Shusterman are themselves parents. In both books I felt there was both an empathy for the parents as well as a holding to account. I admired the authors' ability to allow for both simultaneously and attempted to replicate that in my own story.

In an interview Claudia Cragg conducted with Joanne Greenberg in 2009, she says that in her romanticised view, Greenberg's period of illness appears to be a treasure trove [of creativity]. Cragg asks Greenberg: 'Are you saying it wasn't a treasure trove? Are you saying it was flat and desolate?' Joanne Greenberg replies: 'Only flat and desolate. All that time. It had moments or minutes but basically going nowhere.'²⁰⁴

Cragg's question gives voice to the well-trodden subject of creativity and madness. I include it here because, on re-reading *Rose Garden* as a creative writer, I was initially struck by the seeming familiarity of Yr — its descriptions and details brought to mind fantasy writers such as Le Guin or Tolkien, but also characteristics of more recent dystopian writing that is abidingly popular in young adult fiction. (It is perhaps interesting how closely these 'escapist'

²⁰⁴ Claudia Cragg, *A Conversation With Joanne Greenberg – 'I Never Promised You A Rose Garden'* <https://ccragg123.libsyn.com/a-conversation-with-joanne-greenberg-i-never-promised-you-a-rose-garden-> [accessed 07/12/2020]

fantasies resemble pathological delusion.) Yr, created as Deborah's Utopian refuge, is a world that has turned on itself. If, as Freud hypothesised, psychosis is a product of the unconscious, and fed by phantasying and delusions, how is that not an act of the mind's (cruel) creativity? This, by extension, brings to mind the hypothesis that creative genius is in some way inextricably linked to madness.

Kay Redfield Jamison addresses this in her 2017 book on the creative life of poet Robert Lowell, *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire*. Lowell suffered from bipolar disorder throughout his adult life. At several points his mania spilled over into psychosis. '[Lowell's] psychosis, although beyond his control, was beholden to the specifics of his life and to the intricate minuet of his brain; when he recovered, he would change and chisel the poetry he had written when he was manic. Parts were unsalvageable, others radically original'.²⁰⁵ In an interview about the book, Jamison says she believes Lowell was a great poet in spite of his mental illness. It was as much his character — his ferocious discipline when he was sane and determination to recover after every period of ill-health — as his startlingly original ideas that made his poetry extraordinary.²⁰⁶

I return briefly to Winnicott's theories of the preconditions for a healthy, integrated, creative self: he believed that psychological health in adulthood relies on the infant being in an environment that allows for an unbroken line of development, each step relying on and building from the previous. (For example, an infant must first experience omnipotence in order to accept the reality principle.) 'In an environment that holds the baby well enough [...] the result is a continuity of existence that becomes a sense of existing, a sense of self, and eventually results in autonomy'.²⁰⁷ The integrated self experiences as many negative feelings as positive and is able to tolerate periods of psychological ill-health. The point is that 'the

²⁰⁵ Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell: Setting The River On Fire. A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 292.

²⁰⁶ "Kay Redfield Jamison On Madness, Creativity And Character", WYPR, 2022
<<https://www.wypr.org/show/on-the-record/2017-04-12/kay-redfield-jamison-on-madness-creativity-and-character>> [accessed 12 August 2021]

²⁰⁷ D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From* (London, Penguin: 1986), p. 28.

man or woman feels he or she is living his or her own life, taking responsibility for action or inaction, and able to take credit for success and blame for failure.²⁰⁸ When an individual's continuity of existence is broken as a result of trauma, the risk is that integration is not achieved. As discussed in Chapter Two, when the child cannot make sense of the trauma, they find a place for that experience in themselves.²⁰⁹ The child Deborah could not make sense of having the tumour removed, or of her complex feelings around the birth of her sister, or of the racism and hatred she suffered, and therefore absorbed those traumas into herself.

Schizoid disorders are characterised by a passivity or withdrawal from external reality. Joanne Greenberg says of her own experience: 'From the age of six to seventeen, I was for all intents and purposes elsewhere.'²¹⁰ But that withdrawal is in fact a 'pathological organisation of defences to give warning of disintegration. It is not a regression, but a sophisticated arrangement of defences to prevent a repetition of disintegration'.²¹¹

As discussed in Chapter One, a precondition for creativity is the ability of the self to tolerate a state of unintegration (the ability to let the self recede). For Winnicott, much of the pleasure we experience in an art form is the nearness to unintegration to which the artist safely leads the viewer or audience. However, unintegration requires a trust in the continuity of the self. This process cannot occur when there is an organised defence against disintegration. This defence 'robs the individual of the precondition for the creative impulse and therefore prevents creative living'.²¹²

Therefore, from a Winnicottian perspective, the excitement we feel when we are at our most creative, when we can tap into a seemingly endless supply of ideas and energy, when everything seems interconnected and we feel most startlingly alive, is the product of a healthy, integrated, balanced mind. Of her experience, Greenberg has said:

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.27.

²⁰⁹ Phillips, *Winnicott*, p. 2.

²¹⁰ Cragg, *A Conversation With Joanne Greenberg*

²¹¹ Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From*, p. 28.

²¹² Ibid., p. 29.

I wrote [*I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*] as a way of describing mental illness without the romanticisation that it underwent in the sixties and seventies when people were taking LSD to simulate what they thought was a liberating experience. During those days, people often confused creativity with insanity. There is no creativity in madness; madness is the opposite of creativity, although people may be creative *in spite* of being mentally ill.²¹³

Greenberg's experience of psychosis was terrifying and life-threatening. It is a horrible reality for many people that the liberated thought patterns and enhanced productivity associated with elevated moods are ultimately not divorced from mental anguish the likes of which poet Robert Lowell experienced. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the spectrum of psychical ill-health is vast and there are many people who would claim that they are at their most creative when they psychically 'unwell' and value these periods. My feeling is that each of our experience of mental health and ill-health is individual and unique, as is our capacity to tolerate an 'unquiet' mind.

Both *Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* have hopeful endings, in that Deborah and Caden experience a sustained recovery, but even their recoveries are conditional. At the end of *Challenger Deep*, Caden acknowledges that the captain or the disease 'will always be waiting. [...] He will never go away.'²¹⁴ A stark reminder of this is Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind Of A Funny Story*, a book about a teenage boy's struggle with depression and anxiety, based on Vizzini's own experiences. The book is funny and hopeful, despite its serious subject matter. Tragically Vizzini lost his own battle with depression and took his own life seven years after publishing the book. Of her illness, Joanne Greenberg has said, 'I don't know what caused my illness — not really; or how, exactly, it was cured. I do know what helped, and who was there to help.'²¹⁵

²¹³ "Joanne Greenberg | NARPA", Narpa.Org, 2022 <<http://www.narpa.org/bios/greenberg>> [accessed 7 November 2020]

²¹⁴ Shusterman, p. 308.

²¹⁵ Greenberg, p. 291.

Books such as *Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* are there to help. As adults and parents and especially as writers, we can be there to help.

CONCLUSION

Those who write for children are trying to arm them for the life ahead with everything we can find that is true. And perhaps, also, secretly, to arm adults against those necessary compromises and necessary heartbreaks that life involves: to remind them that there are and always will be great, sustaining truths to which we can return.²¹⁶

The purpose of this thesis was to interrogate the theory behind something that I, as a creative writer, believe to be true — that reading to children and as children has a powerfully positive influence on the child's psychological development and well-being. In a way, I am following in the footsteps of those who met at the first children's literature conference in Exeter in 1969, and writers such as Catherine Storr, whose natural curiosity with regard to the workings of young peoples' minds equalled her love for telling stories and belief in their power.

To proceed with my investigation, I required a basic understanding of the theory of child development and what constitutes psychological health throughout our lives.

Winnicott's 'genre of simplicity' effectively granted me access to a highly specialised conversation and the ability to explore the questions that preoccupied me within that conversation, namely how the imagination and creativity positively impact our psychological health.

Perhaps the most helpful initial concept gained from my research into Donald Winnicott's writing was an understanding of, and a vocabulary for, the individual's internal and external reality, and the intermediate area of experience, an area of overlap between these two realities within which our creativity exists and can develop. Understanding that an expansive but bounded internal reality is the result of a succession of developmental steps from early infancy, each building on and reliant on the last, gave me an appreciation of how important childhood is to our adult well-being.

²¹⁶ Rundell, pp. 4-5.

The significance of childhood is the area of overlap between psychoanalysts and child psychologists, teachers and creative writers. While the formal study of childhood may be relatively recent, the instinct to protect and educate our young is primal, and the use of stories as a means of passing on information is an ancient practice.

With the evolution of urban, structured societies, the focus of these stories shifted away from the potential physical danger children might encounter towards the internal threats and concerns of children. That story-telling has evolved but endured as a means of education speaks of its unique qualities. It is also a constant reminder of how we as a species best learn and grow.

One of the unique qualities of reading or listening to stories, and by extension children's literature, is that it is an act of play. As has been explored in the preceding chapters, the act of play in the Winnicottian sense is both a source of comfort and a tool for growth. When engaged in play, the self finds respite from the competing demands of our internal and external realities. The experience of play gives the self opportunity for meaningful learning. It evolves out of the infant finding and creating the Transitional Object and remains with us throughout our lives when we engage our whole selves in creative endeavours.

In Chapter One, I used my reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a basis for exploring the possibilities of play, the power of the imagination to add richness and meaning to our lives and our creative potential to bring about personal growth. In Chapter Two I examined the nature of learning through play and how this is achieved in literature written for children. I explored why symbolic writing for children is especially suited to this end, such as Catherine Storr employs in *Marianne Dreams*. Storr uses symbolic writing to address some of the more challenging aspects of childhood, such as the fear that is felt in times of change, changing attitudes to oneself as one approaches adolescence and the emergence of sexual desire within a deceptively simple storyline. In Chapter Three I examined two books about young people who are completely overwhelmed by their internal realities. In their illness, the creative power of their imagination is causing them harm. The insight into the lives of others

and the reality of mental suffering that both books present illuminate a different aspect of play. Through our experience of reading we expand our understanding and empathy and therefore grow as individuals.

Creative writing too is an act of play, an act that involves the whole self. It is therefore an act of meaningful learning and growth. Our motivation to write creatively can be complex and unclear, but one could argue that it involves an impulse to learn something more about oneself. We write for ourselves, be it past, present or future. Often, we write to 'let air in' on our own childish preoccupations, as Catherine Storr claimed.²¹⁷ I also believe that as writers of children's literature, we instinctively write with the child reader in mind, that it answers an impulse to pass on knowledge and understanding. Every children's writer is taking on the role of an adult guide, consciously or unconsciously, by nature of the reader's unequal life experience to our own. However, the writer's role is not to instruct but to illuminate scenarios for the young person to consider, both on a conscious and unconscious level. As discussed in Chapter One, Carroll presents *Alice with Wonderland* for her to examine. Throughout the text, he poses scenarios for Alice to experience and questions for her to consider without allowing himself to answer them. My mother came across my daughter when she was very little, staring into a puddle of rainwater on a track. When my mother asked her what she was looking at, my daughter replied, 'I'm just looking'. Children have an innate ability to look. Furthermore, they have the ability to look at both the real and that imagined, and switch between these worlds without self-consciousness,²¹⁸ a quality that we let go of with experience and formal education.

Bettelheim characterises the fairy tale as a story in which the child journeys away from the protection of the home, encounters difficulties and dangers which they must overcome, after which they can return to safety, having acquired knowledge through experience. The writer offers their piece of literature as a safe environment within which the

²¹⁷ Catherine Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books", p. 38.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

child can explore aspects of being alive. One could also say that the adult writer is creating a gap for the child to explore, or within which to play.

The gap or the story may introduce the child reader to situations that are challenging. Learning and psychical growth can be uncomfortable (for example Catherine Storr believed that children need to know that fear and evil exist, both internally and externally).²¹⁹ But as Bettelheim argues, these issues need to be presented in a manner that does not horrify or overwhelm the child reader.²²⁰ I believe that part of the pedagogic role that the adult writer assumes is to accept responsibility for the care of the child within the confines of their story. Therefore, the shadow text (that which the writer is unable or unwilling to communicate directly to the child reader) is not only something that differentiates children's from adult fiction, it is the whole point of children's literature.

One of the aspects of Winnicott's extensive writing I appreciated most was his ease with theoretical complexities. He not only created a gap within which these complexities could exist, but incorporated them into his reasoning. For example, within his theory of Transitional Objects, he insisted on the paradox that the infant both finds and creates the object in question.

My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved. By flight to split-off intellectual functioning it is possible to resolve the paradox, but the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself.²²¹

To place a higher value on the existence of the paradox than neat intellectual resolution indicates a confidence in one's findings, but also a commitment to the integrity of the subject matter. It is on this basis that I propose that it is not possible to measure the positive impact that children's literature can have on young people's mental health. There are obviously

²¹⁹ Catherine Storr, "Fear and Evil in Children's Books", p. 32.

²²⁰ Bettelheim, p. 58.

²²¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. xvi.

tangible methods of measuring the success and robustness of the narrative, such as reviews, literary awards, sales and public library loans figures, but the most important indicator, the relationship that the child reader will have to and with a piece of literature remains out of reach. This is because meaningful learning happens through absorbing, questioning and experiencing — positive and negative feelings, conscious and unconscious. The challenge to our results-focused educational system is that this form of learning needs to be ‘accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved.’

In the introduction to this critical analysis, I quoted Kenneth Kidd on the close relationship between psychoanalysis and children’s literature; that while the fairy tale and golden age children’s story have been incorporated into psychoanalysis, the picture book and the adolescent novel have been ‘fashioned from the start as psychological’.²²² The psychological transition from child to adult that begins with puberty, the individual’s ‘coming of age’, is indeed the theme most associated with the adolescent novel. For Winnicott, the adolescent experience is, even in the best circumstances, necessarily turbulent. He states: ‘in the unconscious fantasy, growing up is an inherently an aggressive act.’ In this second stage of individuation ‘there is to be found death and personal triumph as something inherent in the process of maturation and in the acquisition of adult status’.²²³ The ‘vital fights’ Storr identifies in children’s literature are more urgent and keenly felt.

The continued popularity and success of fantasy and dystopian writing aimed at the young adult is therefore unsurprising. Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses* series is an example of the powerful way one can explore issues of racial discrimination in a dystopian setting. Similarly, *The Maze Runner* series by James Dashner explores the nature of identity and the challenges of growing up in a dramatic setting that is removed from the reader’s real-life experience but goes some way to connecting to the unconscious battles at play. Both *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* and *Challenger Deep* present a very real ‘life or

²²² Kidd, p. xxv.

²²³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 196.

death' battle with a combination of the real (the family environment or the hospital ward) and the imagined (the internal world). Neil Shusterman creates Caden's pirate ship to explore the schizophrenic experience. In Joanne Greenberg's fictionalised autobiography, Deborah's frightening internal reality, a world that has turned on itself, feels very much like a dystopian fantasy.

Realist novels written with an adolescent readership in mind face a challenge in terms of reflecting the intensity of the adolescent experience, without either boring or horrifying the reader, and at the same time satisfying the sensitivities and taste of the adult publisher. To some degree realist adolescent novels are accused of being the very thing they were 'fashioned' to be — psychological. Narratives that address adolescent-focused struggles are in danger of being termed 'issue' books, which is in my opinion reductive, both to the format of writing and the experience of adolescence.

Nonetheless, one of the central tensions I felt whilst writing *Everything's Fine* and in particular writing Ian's escalating mania and breakdown, was striking the balance between staying true to the 'real life' experience, maintaining interest and narrative tension, and not sensationalising an illness for the sake of dramatic tension. In a creative writing course I attended many years ago, I was taught that fiction is about picking a real-life experience and pushing it to its extreme. I felt an ethical discomfort with regard to pushing a character's mental suffering to the extreme for the sake of narrative drama. I worried that I was at risk of sensationalising mental illness in front of a young readership. Perhaps if I had personal experience of this form of mental breakdown I would not have felt the same reticence. Nonetheless, I experienced a self-consciousness writing this novel that I did not feel writing my previous two novels. Both *Leopold Blue* and *Almost Grace* are set in my native South Africa and are far more autobiographical in place and theme.

When embarking on *Everything's Fine* I set myself a number of goals which initially heightened my self-consciousness as the writer: I chose to set the narrative in London, in

the recent past. Therefore, as an outsider to the experience, I felt constantly in danger of 'getting things wrong'. Added to this, I wanted to write the narrative partly from an adolescent male point of view, something I had not attempted before. Perhaps what made me most cautious was the research I carried out prior to and alongside my creative writing. Because of my reading into the nature of mental illness, especially mania, I found myself editing my creative ideas in order to stay true to the characteristics of the illness. This was not always an inhibiting factor. Much of Ian's vitality and playfulness is a result of the research I carried out and the influence of Carroll's writing style in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

From the outset, I wanted to write the story from Angus and Coco's points of view. This was perhaps associated with my initial shyness around Ian's increasingly unwell state. However, Ian quickly transformed into the easiest character for me to write because of his uninhibited, erratic behaviour.

I felt the most self-conscious writing Angus' character. The distance of age, gender and life experience played a part and perhaps I created an artificial distance by seeing his voice as one of my writing goals. I felt myself too present in all his scenes. Early readers' feedback highlighted a passivity and lack of internal processing in his character. As discussed in Chapter Three, I felt I did not have the words to express him. A breakthrough came when I connected my feelings towards a close relative's battle with alcohol and drug addiction, with Angus' situation. While there are many obvious differences in the two scenarios, my experience of the false and temporary solace of denial of the situation, the growing fear for their safety, a sense of being let down, embarrassment and anger, all provided me with a vocabulary with which to capture Angus more closely on the page. My own experience gave me the words to describe the core of Angus' struggle.

Coco was my way into the story, perhaps as she was the character I most related to. In both my previous novels, the main character was a late-adolescent girl, so it felt familiar. The first chapter I wrote was in Coco's voice. However, as soon as I got Ian 'right', Coco's role in the story became unclear. In order to keep Coco relevant and interesting, I gave her a

number of narrative false starts, such as her relationship with her mother, an interest in feminism, her friendship with Bish and up until the final draft, her attraction to a character called Jake. I sat on the completed manuscript for a year, during which time I sent it out to potential agents but without success. I was not happy with the manuscript but could not see a way around it. Much of the feedback I received questioned Coco's role and the necessity of her voice. Her narrative arc was of less interest and therefore diluted the impact of the novel. If, in fiction, every paragraph and description needs to fight to be there, Coco's character and narrative arc seemed superfluous to the heart of the novel. Yet I was unwilling to let her go.

A solution was suggested to me early on in the editing process but for a long time I was unwilling to explore it. It was already in the narrative, but my self-consciousness around Ian prevented me from acknowledging it. The character Jake (whom Coco is attracted to at the start of the novel and who sexually assaults her) is in fact Ian. This creates a love triangle between Angus, Ian and Coco. It brings Coco into the core of the dramatic tension. It allows for Ian to be a more complicated, less than perfect character. Because I (like Coco) was so enamoured with the character Ian who appeared at the beginning of the writing process, I created a separate character to represent Ian's unattractive qualities because I did not want him to be knowingly cruel and self-centred. But the change made narrative and common sense. It allowed Ian to be more complicated and it fitted with behavioural characteristics common to mania. It made Ian's small betrayals of Angus more upsetting. I came to the realisation that at a point one has to put the research and self-consciousness aside and write the story that wants to be written, the characters whose stories persisted in my head, despite the doubts I felt. Without allowing oneself the expansiveness of creative freedom, or giving oneself permission to 'play', to venture into dangerous territory, the story will not have breath and life.

I have included my reflections on the three main characters of the novel because the narrative was from the start character-led, as is often the case in realist young adult novels.

For a long time my research into the suitability of symbolic writing in children's literature made me question the efficacy of realist writing in tackling the unconscious 'life and death' fights that characterise the adolescent period. However, as a parent of three teenage daughters, it is also impossible to ignore the fact that everyday relationships are a powerful preoccupation in this this period of maturation. Social standing and friendships, betrayal, perceived slights and humiliations, infatuations and the many forms of love, are felt with an intensity most adolescents would unselfconsciously describe as 'life and death'. The reports on the potentially harmful effects of social media on teenagers' mental health is testament to this.

On the value of fairy tales, Bettelheim wrote that the child needed to hear the story many times to believe it. 'Only with repeated hearings [...] will a child's free associations to the story yield the tale's most personal meaning to him, and thus help him to cope with problems that oppress him.'²²⁴ Perhaps this can be related to the realist adolescent novel. In the retellings of the same themes that dominate this genre — the search for identity, love and betrayal, facing one's mortality — the adolescent reader gets to absorb the most personal meanings. At a time in life when role models present a potent influence, for the reader to find characters whom they can admire and aspire to emulate in the pages of a book is a powerful opportunity. Adolescence is necessarily turbulent; as writers of realist novels we can offer a gap, we can illuminate and offer companions to make the journey easier.

²²⁴ Bettelheim, p. 58.

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