

JUST BOYS

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(Chapters 1-3)

NEW BOY #1

One minute you're gazing out the classroom window, wistful for a new friend and the next minute he's right there pointing a gun at your head. Well, OK, not the next minute, right? – but when it's happening and you're looking down the end of a rifle, it seems like that. And when you get there, there's not even time to ask yourself, *How did things turn out so wrong? Was it my fault?* You can barely form the thought, *Is this it?*

Friends can turn so weird, I know that now. That's how it got to be with Nick and Simon. But I'm rushing ahead of myself, let's get back to the beginning...

I'm twenty years old now, just dropped out of college – don't ask – and I've had time to think... and so I dug up all the bits and pieces of this story I'm about to tell you and I started putting them together. Seemed like the right time somehow.

I was twelve when Simon appeared and life changed forever. Then, when I was thirteen, Nick entered the equation and I tasted blood and the soil of a grave. I don't know what I think about the way things turned out. Even now, six years on, I still puzzle over why I got so involved with those two boys. Like, is there something fundamentally twisted about me that I went with them? But here it is, my story. I don't know what I'll do with the finished piece. Maybe I'll paste it on a blog some place, send it out to cyber space like a message in a bottle. That's what you do these days, right? Give it all away for free?

So, anyway, we're in one of the science rooms, first floor, a South London comprehensive, September 2002. We just had registration and our form teacher, Tedman, has left us to simmer a while. He's busy scratching his beard, brooding over some stupid staff letter he just picked up. Me, I'm not in the mood to talk to anybody. I got things weighing on my mind. Like flashbacks of Mum and Dad fighting in the kitchen the night before. First it was shouting – mostly Mum – then it was her slamming things and then I heard them getting physical. It's always Mum to start things. She'll throw something, kick my dad, shove him, whatever – to prove her point. For a minute I thought they were just mucking around, but

when I opened the kitchen door and I saw Mum's face red with anger, eyes locked on my dad's eyes, I knew it wasn't good.

It's kind of embarrassing too. Like you caught your parents having sex or something.

Mum's from Croatia. If she's not half crazy, you'd have to say she's passionate, emotional, kind of sad, too. She lost four people close to her in the war over there nearly 20 years ago. She doesn't hate the Serbs. In fact she has two or three really good Serbian friends here in London. It was just a big mess, she'd say of the civil war. Like a volcano that suddenly erupted. She's no explanation for what happened. She gets this heavy look like all her blood cells are running to hide in her feet when you say words like Srebrenica and Sarajevo. Having said that, she's not afraid of getting violent herself. Ironic?

She came to England nearly fifteen years ago to study photography. She met my dad, fell in love, got hitched a year later, already pregnant with me. Another kind of eruption, I guess...

My dad's kinda cooler – typical British, I used to think, when I was growing up in the States, but now I'm here I think he's more atypical. He has that rangy way of moving typical of slim English guys, he has their reserve and that uniquely English thing of not wanting to take life too seriously; but he's more open – and Mum says it too – than your average Brit. He's not prone to blowing up like my mum, but if he's prodded enough, his temper is something of a surprise for such a slim guy – fiery and muscular. And I guess I'm more like him than Mum in that regard.

So anyway, as I stepped into the kitchen, he was trying to talk her down, but she wasn't having it, she just kept coming at him – she didn't give a damn about the fact that my younger brother and I were there, no, that was *his* problem. I could see he was getting tired pushing her back and warning her to calm down and just talk, so when she went for his face with a spatula I guess he felt he didn't have much choice but to flip her over onto the floor. Even then she still she wouldn't let up, so he had to pin her down and like, "Will you please quit now?"

That's when she started crying. Swearing and crying. *Cunt, fucker, bastard, loser...*

When Mum cries it's like it's for the whole world. It really stirs me up. Like we're suddenly in a war zone. My stomach turned over with the shame of it.

My half-brother, Jay, he's only 6, was right there almost in the middle of it all, shouting, "Stop it stop it stop it!" That really got to me, too, him standing there, seeing this. So I grabbed him by the forearm and led him off to our bedroom and sat him down on our bunk bed and tried to tell him everything would be OK in an hour or so. I was supposed to be doing Math, but now the numbers were just this stupid noise on a page, so I got down on the carpet with Jay and helped him build his latest Lego spaceship.

“Why don’t they divorce?” Jay asked me, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. He can look so concerned and sensitive, but so cool and accepting at the same time. I almost envied how cool he was.

I didn’t ask Dad what had set her off. I knew already. Every ten days or so, Dad disappears for a night and comes home the next morning after stopping round a ‘friend’s place’. Like, even Jay was beginning to work that one out. I’ve heard Mum talk about divorce, shouting the ‘d’ word at him like she really means it, but then nothing happens. Maybe she thinks they can get back together like the last time they split up – New Year’s Eve, 1995, great year that was – when we were living in New York and she went off with some actor wannabe and got pregnant with Jay. I was five back then. “Dad, when’s Mummy coming back?” We’d get Mum’s voice on the phone, Mum’s handwriting on a postcard. Mum in Paris. She spent six months there with this guy, Miguel. Dad described it like she was on a long holiday/photo expedition with a ‘friend’. Soon she’d be coming home.

Strangely enough, she did come home. Only much later did I discover her lover had hanged himself. So much for the wild romance. And she was seven months pregnant with Jay. Cool move, Mom (as we called her back then).

She wasn’t asking Dad to take her back but she did want to see him now. I once came across a photo she had of Miguel. Her face lit up and she said, “Isn’t he handsome?” like he was her little boy or something. It was hard to imagine this handsome guy of thirty-two, a matinee idol beaming confidently at life, going off and hanging himself. He was an upper middle-class junkie, Dad told me years later. The son of a Mexican soap star and an American wife – and he ended up a junkie. Jay inherited some of his dad’s good looks, for sure. You should see the school mums swoon around him.

So anyway, Mum was back in New York, seven months pregnant and crashing on a friend’s sofa bed. She was too heavy to work and she was flat broke. She told my dad she might have to go back to her family in Croatia, but Dad took pity on her and started helping her out with rent and shopping and stuff. He didn’t really have to, she’d left us, remember. So anyway, they started going out together, no sleep-overs, just as friends. Then I was included and slowly the family rift knitted together again. Picture: big long scar like after heart surgery. But, amazingly, they seemed happier than before they split, really chilled – we were laughing again and it felt weird and wonderful like warm sunshine after a heavy downpour. Dad got a new job with more money and just before Jay was due we all moved in to this new place in Brooklyn. Jay was sweet – and I don’t normally like babies, but he was sweet – and for about a year things were so smooth I let myself believe everything’s going to be fine from now on.

But then Dad lost his job and things started to go wrong again. I’d hear Mum complaining about the little amount of money she was making from her photography. We

were going to lose the place in Brooklyn – where could we go? Texas. What? Go figure. It would only be for a year, Dad said. But it would get us out of debt. So we had to go.

Right from the start Mum hated the sand getting in her boots all the time. She hated the sweat on her back at 11AM. My dad tried to make the best of things but he never could get used to the sheer vastness of the place. And they pined for New York theatre and exhibitions. I was OK there. I liked the desert and cacti and the lizards scuttling about in the corner of your eye. My New York accent got flattened and rolled out by the Texan twang, but I grew to like it actually, the way you can grow to like handling guns out there. When Dad's contract ended, he took a job in LA. LA was probably a 2,000 mile step in the right direction. Less heat, a little more green, the beach and Hollywood. But Mum and Dad seemed to be getting more and more disillusioned about the States and began hankering after England again.

So one evening they gather us together round the coffee table and Dad announces: *I've been offered a job in London – at a software company, sales again, but prospects look good... So, how do you feel about moving to England?* Like we had a choice in the matter. *We think you'll have a better life in England... We'd like to bring you up with English values,* Dad said. I didn't quite know what he meant by that. He seemed reluctant to explain – I guess because he realised I already felt more American by now and didn't want to offend me – he was just very sure that I'd be happy over there. *You'll see,* he said.

And yeah I did see: first week at the new school two black kids get stabbed outside the school gates. And I saw it. No one got killed, but it wasn't exactly aspirational. I'd never seen anything like that in LA, believe it or not. And every day you pick up a Metro from off the seats of the bus or the tube there's another kid stabbed or mugged or raped. *Yeah, English values, cool, huh.*

Although it was Dad who'd talked most about English values, it was Mum who more easily fit back in to London life. I guess it didn't help that my dad got made redundant yet again. (I know, the guy's jinxed.) Mum's photography work wasn't bringing much in either, but she had a bigger circle of friends. Mum and Dad kept urging each other to get out there and improve the situation but it was like bailing out a leaking boat with a spoon. And then we had to move again.

Losing the terrace house in Peckham was like seeing your favourite football team relegated on goal difference. We moved into an apartment in a detached house about a mile and a half from the old house so we wouldn't have to change schools. Mum hated the new place. It was damp and mouldy and the building work was shoddy. *At least the back garden's bigger,* Dad would point out to her – *huge for London,* my dad said. Jay and I had to share a room, but hopefully we'd get our own rooms again once we moved into a house when money was less tight, Dad said.

I don't think the move did any favours for Mum and Dad's marriage.

And now it's gotten so bad, they're fighting each other on the kitchen floor (about the only room big enough to have a fight in, come to think of it). Mum seems to forget Dad used to be a jujitsu blackbelt. Then again, when she's got alcohol inside her, she doesn't care. What's she trying to prove, though? Like, she knocks him down and then he'll quit seeing this other woman? I didn't know what the solution was.

So, late last night, Dad finally had a private word with me.

"You probably know what's going on..." he started off, "...but I feel I should tell you: I'm seeing another woman."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yeah. You told me you were dating other women."

"OK, yeah, I did. But now I'm like – we're like lovers. We are lovers."

"So it's, like, 'serious'?"

I felt my upper lip sneer as I said that and immediately regretted my sarcasm, made feel kinda mean.

He told me he'd tried to make things work with Mum, but the whole thing had gotten 'tired' (and, man, he looked tired when he said that word). He didn't expect me to understand just yet, but a man needs more than hugs and kisses every once in a while. So he had just had to find someone else. At 47, he wasn't getting any younger, he said. He'd got chatting with this girl on a dating site. They'd met and she'd snapped him up there and then like he'd been a bargain everyone else had overlooked. He's shown me a photo and she looks kinda sexy – not that I'm really interested. Anya, she's called. He's obviously got a thing for foreign women, cos she's from Latvia. She's only 29, whereas Mum is 38 and not as slim as she used to be – though still sexy, if you want my opinion. He hasn't talked about Jay and me meeting his lover, but maybe that'd be cool one day.

'I love Mum,' I wrote in this diary I was keeping, 'but I have to say she had it coming really. Not that I want to take sides or anything, but some days she's just totally unreasonable and there's no one who can talk any sense into her. Dad's told me about the sex, that it stopped a long time ago, even though he didn't want it to stop... she just lost interest, he says, after Jay came along, and he's found that difficult...'

"Are you going to move in with-with Anya?" I asked, after the fight had ended and he'd come in to see how we were. He shook his head. He said he'd had enough of living with women. When you move in with them, it all goes wrong somehow, so he wasn't going to do that. "But why do you want to stay here with Mum when you keep fighting all time?" I asked. He said he hoped things would gradually calm down. Maybe Mum would find a lover soon. That sounded positive, but kind of complicated too. Whatever the situation, he wasn't moving

anywhere for now because he didn't have enough money to pay for two places – or one and half, seeing as Mum was still bringing in a few hundred a month. "So we're like stuck," I said. And he just nodded and patted me on the thigh.

So yeah, the morning the new boy arrived? I had things on my mind. And as I'm brooding over our family's uncertain future, gazing out the tall sash windows at the neighbouring junior high and the recreation ground and those magnificent, tall chestnut trees lining the fence, their leaves shimmering in the September breeze, I feel myself slowly floating away from the hubbub around me.

I notice Tedman look up. I'm right in his eyeline, back row, chair by the window. Our eyes meet intimately for a moment, but he can't hold my piercing blue gaze and he looks away, scans the class as if looking for the noisiest kid to pick on. I don't think anyone's scared of him, least of all me. He loses his temper pretty easily, but when he does his voice gets all squeaky and he looks like a little boy with a beard about to wet his pants over a busted toy, it's totally pathetic.

"OK," he says raising his chin, "let's have a little less noise, thank you."

The class slowly simmers down and everyone looks to the front.

"Sullivan. Would you like to stand up and tell everyone else about your hilarious adventure?"

Sullivan freezes, mouth half open. Cocky kid, always showing off.

"No?" Tedman says. "Shame." He bounces to his feet and goes to the whiteboard and writes, 'Homework' and turns around sharply as if to catch someone talking. "All of those who did not hand in their homework – "

But he's interrupted by a knock on the door. The door opens and in comes this tall kid with the Deputy Head, Mr. Salmon. When you see Salmon in here it's usually bad news. Tedman – such a creep – he comes over all fawning and grateful whenever he sees Salmon. On account of Salmon is The Man who comes in to knock us into shape when he, Tedman, can't handle us anymore and we're just laughing at his stupid squeaky hot tempered voice. Salmon's the balls he doesn't have. But he's not here to dish out a pasting today – his sad, rectangular face is looking a tad less dour, almost cheerful. I heard Salmon used to be in the army – probably accounts for that straight back of his – and today he's pleased to be able to introduce us to a new recruit. You gotta say it, though, Salmon's embarrassing to watch when he smiles and tries to look affable and nice – he kind of twitches like one of those Thunderbird puppets. And Tedman's actually blushing, like Salmon's just brought him a sex slave for breaktime blowjobs.

I study the new boy some. His uniform is shiny and cardboardy, whereas ours is already worn in. His blazer sleeves are too short, which makes him look kind of gangly. I

feel vaguely sorry for him. Nearly forty pairs of eyes looking at you, new boy. Your nerves must be dancing on tacks.

Tedman draws breath and tucks in his chin so you know he's got an announcement to make.

"Everyone..." and then he turns to Salmon.

Salmon settles into his at-ease stance like he's at the urinals. Barely moving his letterbox mouth, he announces, in that tight monotone of his: "You have a new member in your class. His name is Simon. Simon Redburn. I hope you'll all please make him feel welcome."

As Salmon and Tedman engage in a round of embarrassed small talk, and the class begins murmuring, I take a long hard look at the new kid. I notice his eyes drifting dreamily over to exactly where my eyes always go – to the window, and that's when I think he might be OK.

When Salmon's finished chatting with Tedman, he lays an almost matey hand on Simon's shoulder and takes his leave, and, for a few seconds there I entertain the thought that Salmon might be OK, too, if you got to know him better.

The door closes. Tedman makes a note in his class register – a kindly smile on his ruddy lips, like buds in the hedge of his beard; officially, Redburn now belongs in this class.

"Would you like to find a place, Simon? There's one at the back, I think, between Mandy and Fiona..."

He has a high forehead, I note of the new kid, and a confident walk – I like that, almost a swagger, like he's naturally able to find the easiest path on an obstacle course. He looks seriously focused on that lonely, vacant chair near the back, as though it were an island of safety. Either side of the vacant chair, two plump, pale-skinned girls sit, ogling at him as though he was a Big Mac with extra fries. Their naked knees speak of advantage somehow, as if they had extra chins they could sulk at him with.

He gets settled. Tedman can let his chin down now.

"Alright, Simon?"

Simon nods gravely in the direction of the teacher – poor eye contact, though – a crumpled look to his face as though he's just been rudely woken up.

The brief classroom silence has succumbed to an infection of muttering along the rows.

Tedman asks Simon for his surname – he's already forgotten it. (Tedman can't remember shit, unless it's IC fucking T).

"Redburn... sir."

Interesting: that 'sir' came a bit late. Cool. He's got a muddy voice and it comes from the back of the throat. It's the kind of voice that irritates teachers because it's naturally arched, but lacks projection.

Tedman nods once, formally dispensing with the inauguration. He detaches his vaguely beneficent gaze from him and, lifting his chin, angling his eyes down his nose, awaits the attention of the rest of the class. He hasn't got mine, though. I'm still sneaking a look at Simon every so often. He seems to be in a dream of his own, his long fingers playing obsessively with his bushy curls. There's something about his posture – the slight slump to it, maybe – that tells me he couldn't care less where he is, or whom he's with. I kind of like that, cos I'm also not from around here. There are just 7 white kids in this class: me, Dave, Mandy, Fiona, Sam, Paul and Kenny. Now we got Simon that makes 8 out of 39 in the class. Not that I give a shit about colour, OK, but you could say I'm maybe a little more curious about this kid than if he was brown or black, just cos I don't have a white friend yet – all the white kids I know are nerds or stupid.

"Where's he from?" The boy next to me whispers in my ear.

"I dunno. Why d'you ask me?" I whisper back, pretending I'm not that interested. (I've noticed a lot of people in this school seem to figure because I'm originally from the States I have like advanced information about new people who arrive at this school – it's pretty dumb, if you ask me.)

Tedman has just announced we're having a spelling test. Spelling test?! How random. Aren't we too old for spelling tests? Like, who cares about spelling anyway, now that people are texting and emailing all the time. The class lets out a collective groan. Sheets of paper are being handed out, passed along and, as always with a test, I look at those sheets of white paper feeling I'm about to be asked to make out my final will and testament. It's not so much the fact it's a test, it's more that all of a sudden everyone turns so deadly serious and cold toward his or her neighbour. The clever ones use their arms and shoulders and cupped hands to shield their papers in anticipation of the first word being given out. Who taught them that? It seems mean to me; I don't care who copies my stuff. I turn round to see Simon has just woken up to the fact that he's also expected to participate. My guess is he won't cover up any more than I do.

I'm above average at spelling. It doesn't worry me like a Math test would. Which is probably why I'm wagging my pen about as the teacher calls out the words we have to spell.

"Intelligent."

"That's funny coming from him," I can't help whispering to the boy next to me. And we suppress a giggle. Then I wonder if this new boy is intelligent or just average. It's hard to tell by looking at him. He seems to be concentrating quite well. That's usually a good sign.

But do I go up to him at the end of the lesson and say, 'Hey'? He's a bit weird looking to end up being my friend, but I feel I should try him out at least.

As we hand in our papers, class-talk bubbles up. The bell goes and the scraping legs of chairs bury Tedman's announcement about what comes next after break and we all bundle out of the room pretending to be dumb as cows.

First break. Five more bells to go.

Simon doesn't know where to go. He looks as if he must have said to himself, many times over already: *I wish I never had to come here.*

I keep thinking about his curls. I don't tend to hit it off at all with curly-haired boys. They look so precious about themselves. They tend to be the types who think they're great with the girls – sometimes they are, which makes it even more annoying. Things'd be easier if this new boy had hair like mine: wavy and rebellious. I don't like the cute way he blinks: it reminds me of dolls. I used to hate kids who played with dolls: you couldn't trust them; they'd always squeal if you hurt them in some game or other... It was his stride, though, that made the difference: he had the confident stride of a gunfighter. He might be OK, I decided.

I was probably the only person Simon had any real chat with that first day he joined our school. His eyes found mine as we were filing out of the classroom. I nodded and said who I was before my reserve could hold me back and we fell into conversation with oily ease, it was almost weird. He had a deep voice for his age and the extra resonance, which kind of threw me for a minute or two, suggested a level of experience most of my friends lacked. I figured he'd have a few interesting stories to tell at some point.

I forget the name of his home town, but it was in Hampshire some place.

"What was your school like?" I asked.

"Totally modern," he said. "We had state of the art science labs and a really good gym. We had an indoor swimming pool as well. It was cool."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

I was a little taken aback by his pride; it wasn't often I met anyone who had much praise for their school, past or current.

"The school had a brilliant academic record. And our sports teams always did well," he went on. "They won loads of cups. The hallway cabinets were full of 'em."

Fuck. I couldn't think of any cups we had for doing anything. And if we did have any, chances were, they'd been locked away so as the school assholes couldn't swipe them. By the time Simon was through I was wishing almost bitterly that I could transfer to where he'd been right that very minute.

"I'm afraid this place is fairly rubbishy compared to yours," I said. I was sorry to have to disappoint him, but I reckoned he wouldn't thank me later if I started off with bullshit.

"Why did you move?" I asked.

His nose and naturally pouty mouth scrunched up, and he said his dad had had to change jobs and so they'd had to move. I said the same had happened to me. And as I gave him the windy twisty journey of my first twelve years in life, it struck me I'd had several lives already and I wasn't even a man yet. "I just get to make friends and then I have to start all over," I said. "So that kinda sucks."

He gave me this appraising look and said he'd only ever heard American kids on TV and up close it was kind of strange – it was like I wasn't really American, he said, I was just putting on this accent for a performance or something. He didn't like the American accent for the most part, but he liked my accent, he said. He liked the way I said 'sucks', for instance. And he went on saying it, mimicking my accent, like he was trying out a new pair of sneakers or something.

I asked him about his family. His dad was a sales rep, always traveling and stuff. "So is your dad getting more money now, in the new job?" He got straight to the point alright.

"Not really. It's like him and some guys he knows setting up this new software sales firm... He works all the time, but we're still kinda broke... How about yours?"

"Yeah, he does OK," he said confidently. The second he reeled out the figures I hoped we could get off the subject of money, on account of my dad had been made redundant within a year of moving to London and the last time he'd talked to me about money he said he'd made £1,100 in four months. But I wasn't going to tell Simon this so early on in our acquaintance.

"D'you like your new house?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's OK. I preferred the old one, though." He turned lugubrious all of a sudden. Hey, at least he *had* a house, not just an apartment.

"How d'you like this place?"

He shrugged, not even encouraged by my hospitable tone of voice. I was deliberating whether to give him a piece of my Curly Wurly. If I didn't take it out of my pocket soon, it was going to melt.

"Yeah, wouldn't say no," he said.

I twisted the end bit to the toffee chocolate stick round and round, like you do to break a wet branch. I handed him a piece and licked my chocolaty fingers. He munched loudly. His loud chewing began to spoil my own pleasure, but I didn't feel I could ask him to keep his mouth closed. Lucky for me, I'd only given him a small piece, about a quarter, which meant, by the time he'd finished, I had half a length left and I could eat that in peace.

"What're you doing on the weekend?" I asked. I almost choked on my last bit of Curly Wurly when he said Sunday School. "You're not religious, are you?!"

He wasn't sure. Maybe. Anyway, his Mum was. Put it this way, her dad was a deacon.

"A deacon?" Sounded like something out of a movie about Henry VIII. "D'you have to pray and stuff?"

He did, yeah.

Fuck, that was a blow. Kind of freaked me out even more than some of the kids here who were Moslems. Religion depressed me. Makes people paranoid. I just had to hope he went to Sunday School to please his mum.

"Do you believe in an after-life?" I asked him, kind of tensing up, afraid this was all going horribly wrong.

"Sure."

"OK, so... tell me this, how you gonna *live* in this afterlife without a body? Tell me that. Seems pointless to me anyway. You won't be able to DO anything."

"I'll have my soul."

"You won't be able to eat Curly Wurly anymore."

"How do you know?"

I laughed. "Because you won't have a mouth, will you, dumbass?"

"Maybe you don't need a mouth."

I laughed louder.

"Anyway," he said sulkily, "I'll be able to do other things."

"Like what?"

He didn't know. How could he tell me? He wasn't dead yet.

I trained a witheringly sceptical eye on him, but that didn't seem to change anything. Clearly he was more under the influence of his parents than I was. Matter of fact I was just giving some serious thought to abandoning the idea of getting to know him better when the bell went for the next lesson and I postponed making a decision.

"So what do you do after Sunday School... normally?" I asked as we headed back inside. He didn't seem to realise I was about to propose hanging out later that day. Tells me he's going to see his Gran, and when he gets home from hers, he's going to watch TV. He didn't bother to ask me what *I* was up to. Maybe he had stuff on his mind, but I didn't care for being made to feel like *I* was needing a friend, lol – as I saw it *he* was the one without one. He was either pretty cool or stuck up.

I was just curious enough to find out which.

At lunch break he sees me queuing for dinner and walks over to join me, jumping the queue. Unluckily for him, he's just stepped in front one of the toughest kids in our year, black guy Jason B – and Jason doesn't like this new addition to his waiting time.

"Oi," Jason says, pushing Simon out of the line, grinning like he'd welcome a punch up. Simon looks to me for support, but I hesitate.

"He was keeping my place," Simon says pointing at me.

"Get to the end of the queue, man," Jason insists, not interested.

But Simon slips back in. Jason pokes him. What's your problem? Simon keeps saying. Jason prods harder – it's easier for him than speaking. I don't want to fall out with Jason – he's dangerous – but this poking thing is beginning to really got on my tits and so I speak up.

"Jase, come on, man," I say.

He ignores me. So I say it again. He snaps at me like a dog, baring his protruding teeth. That's how it is with these guys, they can switch focus just like that, and without even asking for it, you get exclusive rights to their next finger poke. Or who knows, a fucking knifing after school.

"He your queer friend or what!?" he spits at me. "Look at this sissy. Wha'chew sticking up for him for?"

"All I'm saying, I just think there's no reason to pick a fight here, OK? He's new here. I was gonna show him the system."

"The fucking system is queuing up like everyone else, Yank."

"I'm also British, as a matter of fact," I correct him.

"Also? Can't you make up your mind then?"

"You don't have to be so hostile, that's all I'm saying. He's new here."

"Hostel?! You calling me a hostel?! I'm a four star hotel, motherfucker!" Wow, he's even more LA than I am, bro...

"All I'm saying – " I start up, raising my hands.

"I hear' jew, and I don't care if he's new – he's taking my place and I don't like it. Get it?"

He comes up close, bringing his stink of crisps and chewing gum into my face, his chin tilted at me, eyes popping mad – theatrical but real all the same. I'm tensing up expecting him to go for it when Simon grabs my arm and pulls me away and takes us to the end of the line. Jason rejoices and grins at everyone who might be watching, like they're all supposed to cheer now.

"What's his problem?" Simon says.

"He's a psycho, so stay out of his way. "

Inching further down the line he asks me something about myself for a change. He tells me he's got relatives in Toronto, and from there we get to talking about travel with an expansive feeling in our chests. Coming up to the serving counter, though, and the rank smell of overcooked vegetables and stew, we fall into a bucket of mushy silence.

Getting my legs under one of the tables, I notice he has long, big feet and wears sandals whereas I wear lace-ups. We sit opposite each other. My usual friends are on the adjacent table and cast suspicious glances at us every so often as if we'd just farted. I do my best to ignore them.

Simon plays with his food, turning over the potatoes again and again as if he expects to find worms and caterpillars under there; (wouldn't have been the first time). He chews from side to side like a cow – not his normal way, I figure, must be his way of dealing with tasteless food.

"I suppose the food at your old school was better than this, huh?"

He doesn't seem to hear me. It's weird, but I feel vaguely embarrassed like *I'm* responsible for this food. "You never got soggy cabbage or watery potatoes at my old school," he says a minute or so later. "And the food was hot, not half cold like this stuff."

I sympathize. I tell him that I'm thinking of giving up school dinners and bringing sandwiches or salad instead.

At this point Simon was spitting something out onto his plate. He keeps on at it, too, as if he might go on spitting indiscriminately at everything around him. Heads begin to turn. I'm less disgusted than alarmed on his behalf – one of the dinner time staff might come over and pull him up hard.

Then – can you believe this – he stops spitting and asks me, "D'you want any of mine?" shoving his plate across to me.

"Are you kidding?" I was laughing to hide my disgust.

Incredibly he repeats the question and tells me: "This bit might be OK."

I push the plate back to him. He shrugs and licks his greasy lips but doesn't wipe them. He looks about, chewing miserably and abstractedly again. I feel bad having got him to buy a whole bunch of dinner vouchers, but he shouldn't ask such stupid questions.

"Simon?" He seems beyond hearing me, absorbed in a morbid study of the remains of his meal, prodding it with his knife.

"Hey, wait up, where you going?"

He was off, making directly for the reject bin. I watch as he scrapes his plate with a theatrical display of disgust – pulling such a face you'd think the bin was buzzing with flies eating dog shit.

I look at my plate. My stomach is still half empty. But the emptiness of the seat opposite feels more uncomfortable. I don't want him going off and getting friendly with

someone else. So I make my own dash for the reject bin. He's right. How could I eat this crap?

I find Simon sitting on a sunny patch of asphalt in the playground, his back against the brick wall, his knees up to his chest. I sit next to him and tell him the dinners aren't always that bad. "Sometimes a lot worse," I add but he doesn't even smile. *Lighten up, could ya?*

"They need a proper chef here."

"I get it, you had one at your other school."

"Yeah, we did."

He takes out his vouchers and flips through them as if he's about to do a card trick. "D'you think the school'd buy them back from us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I guess they'd feel insulted."

"You could always change vouchers at my school."

I was already expecting him to say that.

The sky's turned the colour of one of the bruised potatoes I scraped into the reject bin.

"I guess you feel it's bad luck ending up here," I say, hoping he doesn't feel that way just yet. I look around the playground, the perimeter fences – it's the first time in months I've viewed school as a kind of prison.

Weighing up our joint disappointment, I fly twenty minutes back in time when we were standing in line, engrossed in our chat about traveling the world, and I remember I'd somehow kidded myself that we were going to be served up something tasty and hot. Even when I saw the mush being dumped onto my plate, I had no idea that today I'd resolve never to have another school dinner again in my life. Simon's protest has brought that about. And I'd only just got to know him.

"I'll sell them to someone else," he says. He stuffs the vouchers back in his pocket, confident he'll be able to do business with other kids.

"I tried that once, it's not easy," I say. "People seem to think it's not allowed. Either that, or there's something kind of rotten about second-hand vouchers."

Simon tells me – kind of cocky about it – that he's a good salesman. His dad's a rep, remember?

"So you gonna take sandwiches?" I say hopefully.

"Maybe," he says ruminatively. "I dunno if my mum'll be happy about it, though. She might think sandwiches aren't enough."

"You can put meat in them. You can take some fruit as well, I guess."

"Maybe I'll go home for lunch."

My heart sank. He didn't appear to be aware that the whole point of sandwiches was that we'd have each other's company during lunch break. I didn't want to point this out, though. Not immediately anyway. Then again, if I didn't say now, he might shortly come to an irrevocable decision to go home for lunch.

"I'll ask my mum about it," he says. "She does good sandwiches, actually." He seems proud of his Mum as well as his posh school. It could get boring. At least we can agree on the sandwich idea.

He takes out a roll of liquorice. "Want some?"

He's got enough to strangle one of the fat-necked canteen ladies with. He pulls off a piece for me. We suck and chew, and the dark spicy taste adds potency to the germs of our new alliance.

Under my tacit encouragement Simon continued to reminisce over the good things he was missing from the old school he was at. "And they did real French fries," he said, meaning ours were phony. "They were always crisp and dry. We could have juicy hamburgers or German Frankfurters. And with cheese if you wanted it..." Fuck, I was beginning to smell the best cheeseburger imaginable coming off the asphalt straight in front of us.

During the afternoon break Simon and I compared marks for the spelling test. He'd got 25 out of 40, I'd got 30. He seemed disgusted with his mark, but then he said: "Spelling's shit, anyway. It doesn't make sense. All the rules keep changing."

His sneer hinted at a bad loser's streak and warned me not to reveal I enjoyed the trickiness of English spelling – he'd probably have thought I was a creep – so I groaned sympathetically and changed the subject.

Some of my friends were drifting over to take a closer look at my new friend. He welcomed the opportunity to make contact – in fact he dumped me like a stale sandwich and threw himself into their circle like a new stand-up comedian desperate for a signing. My friends shot glances my way, as if to say, *You're like – with this guy?* Simon worked hard to keep his audience – gesticulations and effects noises punctuating everything he hoped to wow them with. I remained the distant spectator. At just that point when I thought they'd walk off without a word of explanation – they were good at that – he would make everyone laugh. But then he got loud again and began touching people – a nudge, a tap, a tug on someone's arm – he didn't seem to notice he was doing it. A lot. When the circle dispersed, he was left jabbering on to himself for about five seconds as if rehearsing in front of a mirror for his next show.

He looked around and saw me there. Distant but dependable.

I guess you could say, Simon didn't possess much charm.

He was pretty raw in fact. But I liked that. To a degree.

At 3.45 PM, the last bell went and we split. I'd made a new friend. I couldn't believe I'd only known him for one day. It seemed more like Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday all rolled into one. It was a bit of a downer to wake up the next day to discover there were still three days to go till the weekend. I took out my timetable and stared hatefully at the days I thought I'd put behind me. The only good thing about Wednesdays was soccer practice. I wondered if Simon could kick straight.

BLUE

That Thursday I get home with a stinging cut on my knee from soccer practice to find Mum and Dad for once laughing together in the kitchen. Dad even starts massaging her shoulders as he says,

“Hey, what’s up?” My dad’s got this kind of mid Atlantic accent from having spent ten years in the States.

“Yeah, I’m good. What’s funny?”

Mum turns and smiles, then looks back at Dad waiting for him to tell me.

“I got some work.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah. Except it’s not here, not London. It’s in New York. You remember my friend Louis, Greek guy?”

I nod.

“Friend of his wants me to work on a new project for them. Three months. I don’t really want to leave you guys, but we need the money, right?”

“What about this new firm of yours?”

“It’s on hold.”

“When would you go?” I ask.

“Monday. I start Monday.”

“Monday?! *This* Monday?”

“Yep. I fly out Sunday afternoon.”

“Wow. Can we visit you?”

“Uh, probably not. Any money I make we really need to save it ... sorry about that. But we’ll see. We might be able to squeeze it in.”

Somehow I don’t think so.

Later, my dad has a private word with me in my room. I ask him, what if he likes it over there and he wants to stay, would we all go back with him? He doesn’t think that’ll happen, but we’ll see. What about your, er, lover? I ask him (I’m not that comfortable yet calling her by her name). Won’t she miss you? She’s going to visit for a while, he says. I’m glad he’ll have some company, but the thought of not having him around is already beginning to hurt like a bruise in my chest. He seems to recognise that and pats me on the

thigh and reminds me we need the money. He's always stressing the money, I get fucking tired of hearing about the stuff, but I guess he's right. I try to imagine Mum being a little less stressed out with Dad not here. Maybe life will be simpler for a while.

So we all drive out to Heathrow to say goodbye to Dad. I hate good-byes, really fuck me up with all those tears rolling around unable to come out. Mum was tearful too. She gazed into his eyes as if she totally adored him – now that he was leaving – it was kind of embarrassing to watch, so I looked away. Jay was snickering and quietly going *Ugh* behind his little hand. He was still young enough not to realise how long three months could be.

The house seemed cold and lonely when we got back, even when we put the heating on.

"Just think of the money," Jay reminded me as we lay in our bunk beds, and I laughed, because he was so young and sounded exactly like Dad.

First thing the next day I come across Simon trying unsuccessfully to sell his dinner vouchers. When I ask him about sandwiches, he's rude and runs off after Snell, a fat kid who's taken a passing interest in his trade. When Snell refuses to pay the asking price, Simon gets abusive and kicks at some litter lying by his feet.

"I told you," I tell him, when he drifts back to me.

He takes out his bunch of vouchers and tears them up and tosses the bits in the air. I take out my last three and do the same. He looks surprised and laughs as if he'd tricked me into doing it. I tell him I already got permission to take sandwiches. "Me too," he says and we shake hands.

"D'you like soccer?" I ask, second break. He does, good. A little nervously I ask which team he supports.

"What about you?"

"Chelsea," I reply, looking him right in the eye.

"Snap."

"Really?! I thought you came from Hampshire."

"So. You come from America, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I've been here two years already – and my dad supports Chelsea. And they're nearly my local team, but Hampshire?"

I seem to have pissed him off.

"Have you ever seen them play?" I ask him.

"No, only on tele."

"Yeah, me too. Sucks."

I tell him my dad's always promising to take me, but he's never gotten round to it. And now he's back in New York so it's unlikely to happen for at least another season. He says his dad's more into golf.

"Oh, man, boring."

I'm surprised when he disagrees. Shit, he even looks offended. I might like it if I tried playing it, he says, like he's just teed off his interest in me to the other side of the fence and into a bunker.

"How about we go see a match together?" I propose a minute later.

Yeah, he's into that. Why not. We get all excited about the idea. He asks his parents and I ask my mum – but we both get a no; we're still too young.

"That's crap." Simon said.

"She told me I'd have to wait till I'm about fourteen. That's no good, Zola'll've left by then."

Simon had nothing to add, except, ruffling his hair, "I think I've got dandruff. Look."

He was strange alright.

Simon, I soon found out, was most often either a compulsive chatterbox or moodily silent – and he could flip from one state to the next in a blink of an eye. Which I suppose was a bit like my mum, if I think about it. During school breaks I was always looking to find the Simon in between the moody and that chatty but I rarely found him till after the last bell when fields and woods and alleyways seemed to even out his tendency to exaggerate and proclaim.

He became my admirer. I'd never figured on that. He copied me in class, he adopted my interests, he consulted me on almost every single matter. When we switched to sandwiches, he brought white bread, and I brought brown. By the end of the week he'd changed to brown. You couldn't point this out, or he'd stuff your face with fat denials. Often, after a period of being moody, he'd turn up with presents – biscuits and cans of Coke – which sometimes he'd paid for, sometimes not. When I was in favour he'd monopolise my time during recess. I'd look at the playground floor and find my shadow being scribbled upon by Simon's gesticulating hands and I'd wonder whether my friendship with this new boy was worth pissing off my regular friends. I'd look up and there they'd be, standing in a huddle like co-conspirators, eyeing us both suspiciously, plotting trouble. I'd go over and say hello to them to prove I wasn't siding with anyone, but then Simon would sulk because I wasn't hanging with him. Come the final break, he'd jump me in the playground, laughing like an excitable curly-haired dog let off its lead in the park, and I'd look into his moist, chestnut brown eyes and want to play again.

His eyes reminded me of Mum's (except hers were wider and had a prettier shape) when she was happy, (which wasn't often enough).

He came to my place quite a lot when we first got to know each other. He'd invite me to his, but then there'd be a reason why I couldn't go and we'd postpone. It was kind of boring but I didn't complain about it. He said he liked my place because I had a bigger garden and there was a canal not far from the bottom of it and it was fun to hang out by the water's edge. It was good to have a friend who had no hang-ups about coming round; most of my friends were afraid of meeting my parents and stepping into a garden that was bigger than their own. Simon really enjoyed the walk home to my place – across playing fields, through gaps in hedges, through small woods and backstreets, me and him kicking a football about, being a menace to passing cars.

Those early days were near perfect. I was 12, Simon was already 13 – 13 in September – and sporting a 'bum-fluff' moustache (of which he was growing increasingly proud). Like a lot of kids that age, outside of class, soccer was our world. About the only major thing I lacked in life – speaking realistically – was an authentic Chelsea football kit. Once I had that, I'd be dynamite.

"You mean your Mum just went out and bought you the whole kit!" I screamed. I wanted a mother transfer right away.

"Why don't you tell her you need the Chelsea kit for PE? You've got the white socks and some boots with a blue stripe on them. All you need now is the shorts and shirt."

Encouraged by Simon's I-deserve-it attitude, I went home convinced that I had a right to my gorgeous blue Chelsea kit. I'd never liked the other blues – the light, insipid blues of Manchester City and Coventry, for instance – I'd always identified with that warm, deep navy blue; I reckoned my own character had a dark blue colour. Maybe it's no coincidence that my Mum had nicknamed me Blue when I was a baby, on account of she was so taken by my dark blue eyes, she said.

"I can't afford the whole kit. We just bought you a PE kit."

"Yeah but Mum, that's for school and it's boring."

"Well if you want another kid, why don't you get a Saturday job and use your own money if you want to be a Chelsea player so badly?"

That didn't seem fair; Simon didn't have to work for his. Besides, I had a warped wheel and my saddle kept falling off.

"Well you'd better ask your dad – write him an email – and see what he says. I still haven't had a cheque from him yet."

I reckon this was Mum's sneaky way of reminding my dad to send some money ASAP.

That weekend we both had the full kit and Mum had money in her wallet. Simon and I were evens. We discussed what numbers we should choose to wear. We both wanted to be Zola, so Simon tossed a coin. He won. So I went for Lampard.

The whole of fall – I mean autumn, I still can't get used to this word – while Dad was in NY, we were feverish with soccer. Even in thunder and lightning, we were out there, often just the two of us, two blue boys, with a pitch all to ourselves, a goal post (without a net), a leather World Cup football and buckets of energy.

Simon used to liven things up giving us a running commentary as he dribbled through my dad's dying rose bushes. "...Lampard to Le Saux, to Bridge, across to Hasselbaink, who crosses to Zola, and it's Zola..." Fuck, his boot had come off and hit me in the eye. "Oh, and the keeper's down, holding his eye..."

"...You dickhead! Why don't you tie your laces properly!"

Simon bends over to see why I'm down and smothers me with these big hands of his. It's hardly the treatment I need and I push him away and whack the ball at him. He ducks. I think I hear the crack of glass. A couple minutes later my mum comes out stamping her foot like a wicked witch and flashing us both the red card. "No more football! Think of something else to do! Fuck!"

"Your Mum swears a fair bit, doesn't she," Simon says, once she's gone back inside.

"My dad's worse. But at least he doesn't shout."

For a time after that, whenever he came to my place when my Mum was out, if we could get enough cardboard boxes, planks and stuff, we used to set up obstacle courses. Simon provided the stopwatch. He was really into it, but I tended to win. With a string of defeats against him, he'd get in a huff and start to cheat and demand a change in the rules or the layout of the course. Even then I won. Truth is, I had a better control of the ball than he did. His biggest handicap was that he got too immersed in his own footwork and ambition, he also failed to look up enough to see where he was going. I did my best to coach him, taking care not to rub him up the wrong way, balancing criticism with praise. I wasn't a bad coach, I think. I was very patient and encouraging. I got Simon to believe in himself, in me and us as a team. And he was by no means an easy student. He had perfectionism like some people have rashes. He couldn't laugh at himself unless you could be comical as you were poking fun at him. He had a wild, incoherent temper. My relative cool infuriated him as much as it appeased him and kept us united. "Is that better?" he would ask coming up to me, out of breath and almost out of his mind with an unbearable sense of never being able to get it just clean, just right. "Well," I'd say, having to grimace, "...nearly." I wasn't a sadist. I simply hated my best friends to have a false measure of their true capabilities.

Simon was better on a real soccer pitch and in a match. He saw himself as a born centre forward, but he was far better suited to playing in a midfield position. He had great stamina, and he drove himself much harder than most kids. That said, whenever his side fell 2 or more behind, his motor would kind of cut out, and he'd stand around in a daydream and sulk. He was one of the tallest on the pitch and he was fearless in the air, often cracking heads with the opposition. He had long sinewy legs, knobby knees and big boots and his dangerous tackling soon got him a reputation. As did his shirt tugging. Pulled up for a foul, he'd often dispute the decision. He hated referees worse than teachers.

"Let's have a bit more teamwork," our PE teacher would say at half time as he came to Simon on his round of admonishments. "Don't keep the ball to yourself, Simon, get it passed on – down the wing or something – instead of running with it for twenty yards, dribbling past one man (the PE teacher was acting out Simon's dribbling skills) and then another, turning – and then losing it." Simon would argue back, making excuses, accusing others of not doing enough to support him. Any other teacher but a PE teacher would have verbally whacked him one. But this was football, and there was some unspoken rule that it was OK to speak your mind at half time in the middle of the pitch while sucking on a quarter of an orange; anywhere else, even on the touchline, he'd have been sent to the changing room.

"Simon!" My hand in the air, screaming from my wing position. But he's gone for goal, ploughing headlong down the centre of the field. As usual he's kicked the ball too far ahead of him. Will he do it? I stop and watch as he scrambles through a line of defenders. He has only the keeper to beat. The keeper is coming out to block him. Simon gets round the keeper and he's all but there, but he gets too much toe under the ball and boots it miles over the crossbar. We can't believe it. No, we can believe it. Because it's Simon. He throws his hands up to his face and, letting out a great cry of shame, falls to his knees and bangs the turf with his fists like a grief-stricken Moslem. I shake my head in despair, but I'm more amused than I am critical because his run had so much tragedy and comedy about it at the same time.

He'd soon be up again, though, running back to help defend, almost tottering over with exhaustion, swinging his arms to propel his body beyond limits, his jaw loose, an animal's wetness about the corners of his eyes, his mouth, his ruddy nose.

Just when everyone'd be thinking it was a wasted ball to pass to Simon, cos he'd only run off and lose it, he'd start to make some incredibly penetrating balls from midfield and create a goal. And we'd find ourselves going up to him after the game and ruffling his curly hair declaring him Man of the Match.

Man of Extremes.

A PAIR OF PANTIES YOU'LL NEVER FORGET

Dad's contract was over and he was coming home for Christmas. He didn't wait for Christmas day to unpack a bunch of presents he had for us: some pretty cool PlayStation games for me, a Lego spaceship for Jay. On Christmas Mum opened a little neat white box that contained a silver necklace from Tiffany's. She was genuinely surprised and I think also a little overcome with emotion, because it was romantic, I guess, and they weren't romantic anymore – he was still with Anya.

I was hoping to see Simon during the holiday but he completely went underground, didn't even answer his email. I sent him a couple of texts, but he ignored them as well. Maybe he'd gone away and just hadn't told me. Some people can be pretty weird sometimes. Just when you think you know them they pull a stunt like that.

So anyway, school starts up again and for some reason I can't fathom Simon's not talking to me. Like, what did I do? I fucking hate moody people. So I decided to ignore him too. Until it gets to Friday and I just have to go over there and say, What's up? And all of a sudden he's happy to see me. He hugs me, makes a fuss of me, tells me he's bought me a present and when am I coming round to his place to get it? Totally freaked me out. But I felt better afterwards. It was like I'd woken him up from a deep slumber and he was alive again – to me, anyway. (I already had the PlayStation game he'd bought me, but I didn't tell him; I could swap it at school when he wasn't around.)

It was a bright, early February afternoon and this was my third or fourth visit to Simon's house, down in a more well-to-do part of suburban South London. We were kicking an old tennis ball to each other as we took the road home. The ball kept landing in puddles and soaking our trousers and shoes, but we didn't care, that was part of the fun. The road he'd taken me down was still a little foreign to me and I was wary of running into kids from a neighbouring school with a reputation for kids with lock knives. I was beginning to wonder what it would be like when we got to Simon's house. I liked his mum. She was more than OK to look at – young (for a mum) – and she was easy-going, light as a cheese soufflé. Plus, she didn't talk down to you like a lot of mums I'd met, so that was cool. Even his older sister, Chloë, was more likeable than most girls I knew. She was in the year above

us. First time we saw each other, her eyes had lingered on mine and I got this warm sensation all over like the sun had come out and a butterfly had settled on me in the same moment. I wasn't so good at smiling at girls, but I couldn't help smiling then. I think I kind of frowned, too, not meaning to or anything, and maybe that scared her off, but I think she liked me OK.

So, anyway, I was looking forward to this visit. Simon had said earlier he'd told his mum to cook us one of her homemade burgers. We'd have real fries – not these soggy things you get at school, Simon had said – with a fresh bap around the burger and a salad with real French dressing. It made a change to have a friend who invited me to his place as often as I invited him to mine. Most of my friends seemed really cagey about inviting me to theirs, like I'd get there and straight away criticize their parents or something. Or the make of their furniture or their mum's cooking. With Simon it was different. He didn't seem to care one way or the other what I thought of his house and garden. As for his mum's cooking, I'd have to be weird not to love it.

We'd finished school a bit late that day on account of 30 minutes' detention. So it must have been around 4.30 when Simon told me to follow him round the back of his boxy, made in the sixties detached house. He asked me to take my shoes off before coming in. Entering the utility room – a narrow space cluttered with soaps, old newspapers, the family's outdoor shoes, mops and stuff – I was hit by this huge rattle and whirring coming from a washing machine on its final burst of a spin dry. As I moved off the mat, my socks slid in something wet. Now I noticed there was a thin puddle on the floor and it seemed to be coming from the creaky old washing machine. I was about to say something, but Simon had kicked his shoes off and walked through and I didn't want to start off my stay by making a complaint, so I jumped over the puddle and went to see where he'd got to.

He was in the kitchen and he was leaning over talking to someone – on the floor. As I moved round the table I saw it was his mum. It looked kind of funny at first as if he'd run into her and knocked her clean out, but the look on his face told you that was probably not the case. He was asking her if she was alright, telling her to wake up. Simon's back was toward me. He seemed to have forgotten all about me. I didn't know whether to hang back, disappear or get involved. She didn't look drunk or anything; she looked far out, not a good colour at all. I decided to step further into the room so he could see me and maybe I could help in some way. Finally he looked at me. His face was like watery with emotion and he gawked at me like he didn't even know who I was.

“She won't wake up.”

The washing machine next door was squeaking and whistling to a climax. Simon was on his knees now, his ear against his mum's chest. He shook her gently again. The mother of a friend of mine in LA was always dopey when we went round. She had this

permanent dreamy smile – her large firm breasts always seemed more awake than she was – and always asked if I wanted hash browns or cereal the minute I turned up. My friend and I found her on the living room carpet one time. With a T-shirt on, but no knickers. It was embarrassing. But at least she'd woken up when my friend started saying her name. He said she had to have sleeping pills because she had a nervous condition, and that was all he said about it as we were going upstairs to his bedroom to play a computer game. But that was David Kravitz's mom. Simon's mum wasn't getting up. I figured she was seriously unconscious, possibly in a coma.

Simon glowered at me now as if I were the enemy. As if I'd brought a curse with me.

"She's not waking up! What do I do?!"

A gurgle came from the knackered washing machine. Then it kind of hummed with satisfaction from that last violent spin.

I suggested a glass of water. He said don't be stupid, she might choke, but then he got up and went to the sink and poured a glass and tried to get a little of the water in her mouth but it mostly spilled down her neck. Her eyes were slightly open, glistening like the backs of beetles in a slither of light.

Simon began to panic. Like I thought he would. I don't like panicky people. He insisted we had to move her, get her onto a sofa where she'd be more comfortable.

I took the feet. They had nothing on. They had a nice shape and felt smooth but cold as stone in my hands. We lifted. She was quite light. Her hands hung limply. As we got into the hallway, her skirt ran up to her middle and I could see her panties. They were a very plain grey for such an attractive woman and stained pale red around her crotch, old blood, I thought. Even though I knew Simon must have noticed I was looking there, it was difficult to tear my eyes away. Our socks kept slipping over the varnished floor and we nearly dropped her. I might have laughed, except Simon looked so cut-up, I held everything in. It was a relief when we got to the fitted carpet of the living room.

The sofa was to the left, against the wall, facing a gas fireplace. I remember thinking, *It's much colder in here than our living room at this time of day.* Simon began stuffing cushions around her. He mumbled something about a blanket and rushed from the room.

I stood in the middle of the room, thinking, *Damn, we probably won't be having that cheeseburger tonight.*

I could hear his footsteps above. I went to take a closer look at his mum. I bent right over and lay my head against her breast. It still felt warm. I caught the faint whiff of her perfume or maybe it was a face cream, 'the scent of apples with a hint of something like a rose,' I put in my diary later. Strange mixture and quite strong, like she'd put it on for someone special, that's why I remembered it. I couldn't hear a beat, though, however hard I pressed my ear to her chest. I was just thinking of taking a peek at her breasts when I

heard Simon rushing down the stairs. I stepped back as he entered the room with a big furry blanket.

“Did she move?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He laid the blanket over her, tucking it in hurriedly.

“I’m gonna call my dad.”

“What about the hospital?”

We were interrupted by the sound of a door closing. It was the back door. Simon rushed from the room: “Chloë, something’s wrong with Mum!”

“What’s all this water on the floor?!”

Simon said something about the washing machine needing to be fixed. And she said, “Where’s Mum?” I heard mumbling, then: “Chloë I need you to come in now!” The words still ringing in the air I heard him say much more quietly, almost tenderly – I guess so I couldn’t hear – “I think she might be dead.”

There was a deep silence and then a girl’s giggle. I had to pinch myself not to start off myself.

Simon entered the room, then Chloë. Chloë glanced at me, almost alarmed, but said nothing. She looked at her mum, drinking in her stillness.

“I can’t get her heartbeat,” Simon said. “Can you-you to try.”

Chloë knelt in the same spot I’d been in not ten minutes before. She laid her head on her mum’s chest, her face in my direction, totally calm, her eyes gazing at the opposite arm of the sofa. When she lifted her head, she shook her head and said, “I can’t either.”

Simon said: “I’m gonna call Dad,” and left the room.

Chloë got to her feet and ran after him calling his name.

It felt weird being so invisible. Like a ghost.

I heard Simon in the hallway leaving a message for his dad – probably his dad’s mobile. Chloë told him to call work. He asked to speak to Chris Redburn and said it was urgent. There was a cold, watery silence like a heavy drop hanging from a tap. He said a croaky thank you and hung up. I heard Simon and Chloë speculating quietly as to where their dad might be. “He could be anywhere,” Simon insisted, fed up. “He could be in Wales for all I know!”

Chloë said he should call the hospital.

Simon stomped upstairs – I guess because he didn’t want me to overhear him make the call. I heard his feet above. Chloë shouted up to him.

Silence. Chloë and I standing there, gazing up at the stairs as if the empty space were a painting. I glanced at her, she glanced at me. I couldn’t tell whether she appreciated my being there or not. We heard Simon’s voice upstairs, behind a closed door. A couple

minutes later, he padded down the stairs and stopped half way and sat down. "They're coming."

"Who?" Chloë asked.

"The ambulance."

"When?"

"Dunno. Soon, I suppose."

Chloë sighed.

I thought this might be the time I said goodbye and went home, but I was worried they'd think I didn't care, so I stayed.

"I don't understand what can have happened," Simon said. He seemed simply puzzled now, like a reliable PC had unaccountably quit working all of a sudden.

They were totally mystified that there was no blood and the sheer mystery of their mother's condition seemed to make them vaguely sanguine now.

I didn't want to be blamed later for having said the wrong thing, so I opened my mouth... and said nothing.

The phone was ringing. It was Simon's father.

"Dad, Mum's not well. We found her on the kitchen floor, kind of knocked out..." There was a pause. "She's got no pulse..."

He told me later, that at that point, with the phone to his ear, his eyes on the frosted glass of the front door, it was as if he'd just emerged from an intriguing waking dream. He was prepared to accept the fact that his mother had died, and yet he was calmly searching for the faint thread of a possibility that her heart might be made to pump again; either way, everything would be OK again. And then his dad's voice pricked the bubble and he came back to earth with a bump and his chest filled with dread.

Simon's dad must have thought his son had made a mistake. Kids do.

Simon didn't feel he had any right to tell his father his mother was definitely dead, this was something his father was supposed to confirm for himself, but he couldn't of course, because he wasn't here yet. Simon kept saying, "I've done that," and then "I don't know." And then, "But when're you coming home?!"

I thought of my dad who'd gone back to New York on a renewed contract, and I wished to hell I was over there, 3,000 miles away, right this very moment. "Can you please drive as fast as you can!" Simon cried.

"Where is he?" Chloë asked.

"Fucking Brighton."

"Shit. What's he doing there?"

"Working, I s'pose."

Simon hung his head, and his fingers played listlessly with his curls. Chloë gazed at the wall in the opposite direction from me. I picked at the skin around the side of my nails until they bled, listening to this new sound I'd never heard before that you might call the echo of someone passing away. Chloë still hadn't said a word to me and that bothered me, though I took no offence in the circumstances. I think we all felt as though their mum had just played an elaborate and spooky hoax on us all.

When I next looked up, Chloë was gone. I thought I heard her crying in the kitchen. It was a beautiful sound, like tender piano music, quite different from the babyish noises I was used to hearing girls make at school. Simon finally quit twirling his curls around and around and returned to the living room.

I thought maybe I shouldn't go in there.

"Simon?" Chloë had come back into the hallway and tried to find her brother with her teary eyes, but he wasn't there, only I was and I knew I was of little use, so I pointed to the living room. I left them a while. Murmuring. I just wished they'd tell me what they wanted me to do.

Finally Simon called to me. I entered the room. I found them seated on the carpet by the sofa.

"Do you have a cigarette?" Simon asked me. What a weird question. No, I didn't. He asked me if I'd go and get some if he gave me the money.

"They won't serve him," Chloë said, "don't be stupid."

Simon let it go with a sulky face.

Chloë was about to talk to me when their fluffy white cat appeared in the room and distracted her. We all became absorbed by the cat's quiet, even pacing until she jumped onto the sofa to lie with their mother, whereupon Simon and Chloë sprung into life and shooed the cat away. Her voice firmer now Chloë said to me, explaining her action: "She knows she's not supposed to go on the sofa. She's always molting... She's just taking advantage."

I nodded sympathetically.

She sniffed and seemed to have drawn strength from her and Simon's shooing away of the cat and she asked me if I'd like a drink. She left the room and came back with three cans of Fanta. It felt kind of wrong having sweet orange bubbles dance a Tango on your tongue with a dead, or nearly dead, person in the room.

Finally the sound of a motor and wheels out front. A flashing light rotated around the walls and ceiling and for a few seconds I imagined the effect might bring Susan Redburn to life again. The doorbell sounded. A silly *bing bong*. The ambulance men in their big floppy coats, with their chunky walkie talkies and bags of medical supplies and strong

forearms made for a welcome invasion to the stony silence that had descended on us following the cat's expulsion from the room.

Simon said I'd better go home now. He'd see me tomorrow at school. I said, "Sure" and slipped round the front door like a cat.

My mother greeted me with a warm smile and was full of questions about what I'd been up to, what I'd had for supper and stuff. I didn't know where to start. I said I didn't eat yet. There'd been a problem. We'd found Simon's mum on the kitchen floor. She didn't seem to be breathing. She was probably dead. My mother froze as she was taking things out of the fridge. "No," I said, "I'm serious – like, really dead," I told her. As she asked me questions and I did my best to answer them, her face filled up with emotion and she took out a bottle of white wine and poured herself a glass. She said what a terrible thing for Simon and his sister and for me, too. She gave me a big hug as though she'd nearly lost me too. "But perhaps she'll be alright," she said hopefully. "Sometimes the heartbeat can go very – you know – faint and then it comes back!" I looked at her as if she was my stupid little sister and I said I didn't think so.

You must be very hungry, she said, and instead of groaning about having to cook when she'd not expected to have to cook, she dove into the fridge like she was on a mission to rebuild my depleted emotions with wholesome food.

I said: "Mum, I know it's dinner time, but do you mind if I have cereal for once?"

Normally she'd have said, No, cereal was for breakfast, I had to have some meat and vegetables or I'd get a cold or something. But it wasn't everyday you find a friend's mum on the kitchen floor, not breathing, so I got to have some cereal – "with some banana," she added, "so at least you get some fruit today."

"She was such a lively woman, wasn't she," Mum said thoughtfully, later that evening as I was getting ready for bed. Her face suddenly changed as she realised she'd used the past tense and she said, "Oh, I hope not."

Jay was bouncing around and kept interrupting us, excited to hear that someone I knew had died. He wanted the entire pathology report. It seemed a shame to have to shut him up, but we would have felt too uncomfortable sharing his glee on hearing of a real life death.

"Shower, Jay," we both said at once.

"And she's quite attractive, too," Mum said, reverting to the present tense.

"Not bad," I conceded belatedly and instantly felt bad that I'd not been more generous. Maybe I was a little afraid that Mum would work out that I actually fancied Simon's mum. I still couldn't get that image of her crotch and her panties out of my mind; it was really

bothering me – it's not like I fancy dead people or anything, or had this, like, fetish for girl's underwear; it must have been this combination of sex and death that had gotten under my skin... I also wondered why Mum had remarked on Simon's mum's looks – as if this should make any difference, and yet it did somehow, just as you feel sorrier when you see pretty flowers squashed than you do when you see a stinging nettle with its neck broken.

"She can't be more than thirty-five," my mother said, awestruck, because that was even younger than she was. "Tell him he must come see us, won't you? Hopefully she's OK," she kept saying. "We must do everything we can to make the shock less for him." And with that she seemed to shake off the pity she'd felt so deeply a moment ago and found something to be optimistic about. I liked the sentiment, but personally, as usual with Mum, I thought she was being a tad naive. She hadn't seen Simon when he got down.

Simon wasn't at the school the next day, nor was Chloë. Mr. Walker, the head teacher, stood up in front of the school and said he had some very tragic news. I wondered if he knew I'd been there and seen it all. I hadn't told anyone. An awesome murmur traveled along the rows as if it was Simon's mum's last breath.

I was hoping for – and dreading – an invitation to the funeral, but I never got one.

It wasn't until the next week that I saw Simon. He was different. Like some worm had wrapped around his heart. I really wasn't sure I could find that worm before it made too many holes in him and turned him rotten – but I had to try.