



The Dead of Summer

There were four of us...
now there's only one

CAMILLA WAY

Camilla Way

The Dead of Summer

«HarperCollins»

Way C.

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IN ONE MOMENT THE HORROR BECOMES YOUR LIFE. IT'S NOT JUST IN THE PAPERS ANYMORE, IT'S ON YOUR HANDS. Seven years ago when she was called Anita, Kyle and DENIS were her friends. They hadn't been at first, perhaps she shouldn't have pushed it, but Denis, bespectacled in thick NHS frames and Kyle, permanently clad in his anorak – were the only takers. Let out of their south-London comprehensive they spent the long, sticky summer days smoking cigarettes, messing about in the Thames tunnels waiting for something to happen. And then something did. The Dead of Summer is a chilling and brilliant story that asks where evil lurks, and what form it takes.

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CAMILLA WAY
The Dead of Summer

HARPER

For Dave Holloway, with love. And in memory of Peter Way, my dad.

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one

Along the back streets, down to the river he took me. Through the wastelands filled with those white flowers, the ones that smell of cats' piss, of summer. Past our hideout, past the warehouses and the factories, almost to the gasworks. Into a scrapyard, not the one we used to play in. And there it was.

By the end of that summer three of us were dead. Tell me, does your pulse quicken when you see those headlines? You know the type: 'Murder Spree of Schoolgirl Loner'; 'Boy, 13, Rapes Classmate'; 'Child, 10, Stabs Pensioner'. Mine too, I've collected them all, over the years. And when you pass those gangs of half-grown ghouls that haunt the streets in the half-light, does your pace quicken just a bit? Do you walk a little faster? It's understandable. Mugging, fighting, raping, killing – kids today, they're animals.

But of all the world's mini-monsters making headlines, wreaking havoc, my friend Kyle was the most famous of all. And I was there. I loved him. Take a seat, Doctor Barton, I'll tell you everything. It's time to tell you everything.

We moved to Myre Street in 1986. I remember I was embarrassed by our crappy furniture. We were so *obviously* the skint Paki family without a pot to piss in, moving it all in by ourselves. So predictable were we with our brown flowery sofa and rubbish telly, sat there in the middle of the street. Plus I was humiliated by my dad's manky old cardi and my sisters' miniskirts and my Auntie Jam in a sari, for Christ's sake.

I knew all the neighbours were watching from their windows. *Knew* they were saying, 'Family moving into 36, dear. Asians by the looks of things. Don't think much of their sofa.' *Knew* that somewhere, behind one of those nets, someone was laughing at my hair.

I sat on the kerb behind a smashed-up car and willed my brother Push to drop our sofa on his feet while those grand-but-fucked south-London houses crowded and jeered over our row of council homes like playground bullies. I watched my family traipse back and forth with the card-board boxes that contained our lives and turned away just in time to see Kyle walk out of his gate.

No. 33 Myre Street. 'The House of Horrors'. Big black windows and peeling paint, a roll of carpet rotting amongst the weeds outside. The newspaper men must have been chuffed to bits when they first saw those pictures – the place had 'creepy' written all over it.

And what did I think of Kyle that first day? Not much. I just thought he looked stupid. It was boiling hot and he had an anorak on, zipped right up to his scrawny, birdy neck. And his trousers were too short for his legs. He didn't look at any of us as he walked off down the street but that was the first time I saw Kyle – if that's the sort of thing you're after. He walked off down the street and I didn't see him again until I started school.

The thing you have to remember here is that to everyone else this is a horror story. 'The Events'. 'The Truth Behind The Mines Murders!' But to me it was life. It was just my life. Do you know what I mean? Things happened. Things went wrong. OK, things went very, very, wrong. But at the time it was just us kids – me, Kyle and Denis – just kids knocking about. Because after the questions; after the whats, the whys, the whens, after the outrage and the disbelief, I'm just me, here, without anything I used to have.

My brother Push and I started school the following Monday. Lewisham High was pretty much just like any other shit-hole south-London comprehensive in the eighties: concrete and kids, wired glass and pissed-off teachers. A forecourt with a broken fountain full of empty crisp bags out front.

When I was introduced to my class and told to take a seat the only place left was next to this fat black kid called Denis. He was the sort of kid who sits alone for good reason. You know when you can just tell without even having to talk to someone, that they're a bit simple? He was the special needs kid, every class has got one. He had National Health glasses thick as car lights and his school uniform was spic and span, his tie too perfectly tied right up to his chin to have done it himself.

I sat down next to him and he turned around, took his specs off, and did this weird thing with his eyes. He sort of peeled the top lid over until the pink under-lid was left so it was just the bloody film. Then he grinned at me like he expected a biscuit or something. I just smiled politely and hoped he'd leave me the fuck alone.

No such luck. I was obviously the only person who had sat next to him in years. I was his new special pal. I was stuck with him. He knew it, the other kids knew it, and after my first long day with him trailing around after me like my big, fat, black retarded shadow, I knew it too. I didn't really care. I guess I thought that even Denis was better than nothing. I am not someone who makes friends easily either.

Denis wasn't much of a conversationalist. That first day's efforts pretty much went like this.

Me: 'So, Denis! What's the canteen like here?'

Him: 'Do you like the A-Team?'

Me: 'Got any brothers or sisters, Denis?'

Him: 'Have you ever stood on your head until your nose bled?'

But there's something strangely intriguing about having your every question answered by another, totally random one, and by lunchtime I was beginning to enjoy myself.

Me: 'Live near here then, Denis?'

Him: 'Have you got a dog?'

Throughout the day I'd catch glimpses of my brother Push hanging out in the canteen or drifting through corridors between classes. He was clearly throwing himself into Making New Friends. I guess it helped that he was a good-looking, charming bastard. I just thought he was a bastard. He pretended not to recognise me when Denis and I passed in the hall. I eased my way through that first day, taking in the important landmarks, noting the leaders and the losers while pretty much being shunned by both, and by the time lessons finished for the day it was crystal clear that this school was going to suck just as much as my last one had.

By home time I'd managed to get out of Denis that he lived around the corner from me in Brockley. Assuming this meant I'd be stuck with him for the entire bus journey home, I was actually pretty pissed-off when he seemed mad keen to sidle away by himself as soon as we reached the gates.

'You not catching the 53, then?' I asked, not actually caring, and trying not to sound like I cared, in case he got the wrong idea and thought that I cared. Which I didn't.

Denis shrugged his massive shoulders in his too-tight, shiny blazer, looked at his feet and for once answered my question with a proper answer. 'Gotta wait for Kyle. Gotta wait here till he comes.' Then he looked away, down the street where no one was. A big, dumb smile on his big, dumb face.

I looked down there too, not really knowing how to stick around, then said, 'Oh right. See you later then.' But I stood there for a few minutes longer, swinging my Co-op carrier with its biro sticking out of a hole in the bottom, staring at an ice lolly melting into some dog-shit by my foot. Denis didn't move a muscle or even look at me again. Finally I shrugged and trudged off by myself, not quite able to believe that Denis had any mates and more than a little put out that he didn't want me to hang out with them. Still, he was a retard and his mates were probably retards too, so what did I care? I had better things to do.

As I reached the corner I looked back and saw the skinny white kid from my street walking up to Denis. He was still wearing the anorak. Denis was flapping his arm up and down waving like a lunatic, his big plate of a face beaming like the moon.

That summer of 1986 was hot everywhere in England. In our corner of south-east London the days rolled by in blue and gold, the sun bouncing off the dustbins and burning into windscreens. It lit up our faces, bit at our eyeballs. And when I think about that summer I think of it as like a flaming meteor tearing through empty space. As my bus lurched and heaved through New Cross that first day, my school shirt was damp with sweat and I knew it was going to be a long few months until the holidays began. I wished I had a cigarette.

Seven years ago, that was. When I was a different person. When I was thirteen and still Anita. When I didn't know Kyle.

When I was eleven my mother died suddenly of a well-kept secret. One minute she was stirring a pot of rice in our kitchen in Leeds, the next she was crumpled on the floor clutching her left arm. I'm no expert (or maybe I am), but it was a peculiar death, really. I remember at the time I felt a little embarrassed as I laughed, because it was such a strange joke for her to make, on a Monday evening at seven. 'That was rubbish,' I'd said, getting up from my homework for a better look. When it came to fake dying, my mother was clearly in need of advice.

And then I saw her face.

All the things people say about shock aren't true. Time doesn't stand still and you aren't rooted to the spot. What I did do was scream the bloody house down while running like a moron back and forth between her body and the kitchen door. When my father and brother and sisters piled in they found me kneeling, screaming still, trying to shake her awake.

Angina, my Auntie Jam said later. A ticking time-bomb that heart of hers. I wish I'd known. Wish I'd known there were only a certain amount of ticks and tocks my mother's heart had left: I'd have counted every single one.

In the months that followed, my family was laid waste. Sadness ate my dad up whole. It wrecked him, battered him, finished him. He walked around or mostly sat in a fairly convincing dad-shaped disguise but behind his staring eyes brain-eating zombies had clearly been at work. We could not reach him. He didn't want us to. Mostly he wanted to drink beer and watch telly in the dark.

And it was easy then for me, Push, Bela and Esha to lose our grip on each other. It was simpler not to hang around the house she had loved us in, her 'milk chocolate buttons', half-Yorkshire, half-Bengali. It was easy not to notice our family unravelling if we were not there to watch.

The months passed and bit by bit Mum's presence faded from the house and the absence of her filled it up. Gradually fewer and fewer envelopes addressed to her landed on the mat; somebody, I don't know who, moved her coat from the hall, her make-up from the bathroom cabinet. With no one to insist on family meals or curfews, no one to keep an eye on what we did with our time, who really noticed when the others stopped bothering to come home at all sometimes or if I forgot to go to school now and then?

Finally, our Auntie Jam made a stand. Sari swishing with disapproval, Dad was swept into the kitchen for a bollocking. She'd seen Bela coming out of a pub in town, heard rumours that Push was out drinking in the park every night, that Esha was carrying on with the man from the kebabby. As for me, did he even know where I went during the day? Because it certainly wasn't to school. Her scandalised voice hissed from under the kitchen door as I hung over the banister. Silly cow, I thought. With every outraged word, the subtext was clear. If Dad had done the decent thing and married a Bengali woman in the first place, none of this would have happened. Even in death my mother was an embarrassment and now her miserable half-white kids were dragging the family down even further. Enough was enough. Besides, she had plans for our house.

It's fair to say, by the time Dad pulled himself together sufficiently to let Auntie Jam talk him into swapping our shitty council house in Leeds for her mate's even shittier one in London, the Naidus were not winning any prizes for 'Most Together Family of the Year'.

After that first day at Lewisham High, I came home to find Push and Dad watching telly in the lounge. They were each sitting on an unpacked cardboard box eating rice crispies, last night's dinner plates and Dad's empty beer cans round their feet.

If your mansion house needs haunting just call Rentaghost, We've got spooks and ghouls and freaks and fools at Rentaghost ...

When he saw me in the doorway Push said, 'All right Nittyno-tits? Saw you with your new fella today.' He grinned into his rice crispies. 'Got yourself a catch there, haven't you?'

Hear the phantom of the opera sing a haunting melody, Remember what you see is not a mystery, but Rentaghost!

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Funny,’ I said, and went upstairs. In our room Esha and Bela were getting ready to go out. Picking my way through a fug of hairspray, over puddles of jeans and knickers, shoes and bras, I sat down on my bed to watch. ‘Mind out, Nit.’ Esha used my head to steady herself as she climbed up next to me. Her arms held out for balance, she looked at herself in the half mirror hanging opposite, giggling as Bela got up too, pretend-surfing as they wobbled about on my duvet in their white stilettos.

My older sisters are beautiful and so is Push. (‘Poor Anita,’ my Auntie Jam said once, giving me the evil eye.) Skin like Bourbon biscuits, they had black hair to their bums (I’d hacked mine off with the kitchen scissors when I was nine) and Mum’s wide, green eyes. *Desperately Seeking Susan* was their favourite film and they wore white lace fingerless gloves and black Ray-Bans and a shedload of red lipstick. Deadly, in other words: the blokes of Lewisham didn’t stand a chance.

I fiddled about with our pink radio-alarm clock, twiddling the knob between stations, listening to the static until Bela shouted at me to pack it in and I went to stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked at my face a lot back then. Not because I thought I was pretty – I knew that I was not – but because eventually, if you stare long enough, you stop recognising yourself; you lose yourself. It’s like if you say the same word over and over again – gradually it becomes just a sound. Meaningless. If you stare at yourself long enough you begin to look like someone else entirely or like no one at all. Sometimes I could pass half an hour like that, scaring myself witless with my own reflection.

My face and eyes are small and brown, the sockets dark like I’ve been punched. Two bruises that match the ones on my father’s face. I have inherited his wounds. The backs of my hands, my knees and feet are also darker than the rest of me and like I’ve said, I’ve always cut my black hair short. In bright light, my arms look quite furry, like a spider’s. I was small for my age and skinny. When I was thirteen I wore Push’s hand-me-downs rather than my sisters’, and strangers, if they thought about it at all, would assume I was a boy.

Later, when my sisters had come back drunk, and my dad had fallen asleep on the sofa and Push had gone to bed, I lay awake and listened to Bela and Esha whispering in the dark. In the few weeks we had been here they had fallen in love with their new life. They were mad about London. They never talked about Leeds or their old friends, or Mum.

They threw themselves into trying out the pubs in Deptford and New Cross, starting college and planning their escape from our dad, our crappy house, and from me. They were sixteen and sick to death of death. They didn’t want sadness anymore. Didn’t want anything to bring them down. A soppy song on the radio? ‘DePRESSing!’ They’d switch stations. A tragic movie on the telly? ‘BORing!’ They’d kick Push to turn it over. Dad sitting in the dark, drinking beer? ‘Just ignore him, silly old bat.’ They weren’t having any of it. Life was too short. Turn up the music, cheer up, have fun!

While I listened to them whisper I remembered how after Mum died I suddenly began to see her everywhere. Out of the corner of my eye I’d spot her in the strangest of places. As I wandered the streets when I should have been at school, a breathless laugh, a flash of red coat or a whiff of Anais-Anais would have me swivelling my head or snuffling up the air like a dog.

My mother had a lightness in her looks and in herself that spilled into Push and the twins but that ran out by the time it was my turn. I, alone, was the dark dregs of my father’s cup. And yet she loved us all and our house was a happy place, in its way. My dad, vague and quiet and usually to be found pottering with our beaten-up old Ford out front, or in our backyard’s flower beds, she loved fiercely, protectively. If she’d find him sometimes staring into space or brooding somewhere by himself she’d bustle and boss him and kiss and hug him like she would with us and he’d blink into life with a surprised, delighted smile. Sometimes I’d catch them sitting together on the sofa or at the kitchen table, my mother laughing and the big, black bruises of my father’s eyes holding her face in tender astonishment.

She was the life of our house, of us. The life, the glue, the point. Her broad Yorkshire accent, her wide lap, her laughter and her love would gently calm Push's restless energy, force my sisters to share their secret twin world with the rest of us, pull my father from his fuggy silences and forgive me, forgive me, stubbornly, determinedly, forgive me for being the person that I was.

And the rope that kept my family tethered was unbreakable, I thought. Strong. After she died I would often sneak into her wardrobe, just stand there in the dark among the coats and dresses and fill myself with her smells. The perfume mingling with the sweet-sour smell of armpits and soap powder and that perfect smell that was just hers alone. But every time I returned the smell seemed to get a little less, like one of those scent-drenched strips you get in magazines that have been opened and discarded and left to fade. Eau de Mum. Until someone packed away her clothes when I was out one day. My mother was stacked neatly, violently, quietly, in boxes in our attic and that was that.

When my sisters finally fell asleep that night I knelt on my bed and lifted the nets to smoke one of their fags through the open window. I blew rings into the orange-tinged blackness for a while and then I saw Kyle come out of No. 33. He stood on his doorstep for a few seconds and I glanced at the radio-alarm clock. It was way past two. As I watched he knelt down to put on the shoes he'd been carrying, quietly closed the front door, then disappeared off down the street.

two

New Cross Hospital. 4 September 1986. Transcription of interview between Dr C Barton and Anita Naidu. Police copy.

Kyle's dead. They're all dead. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it.

They think I'm strange no doubt, the people who live in this block. They're students, mostly. Of course I've changed my name since I was thirteen, and they don't recognise me as that little grim-faced girl with the black bar across her eyes in all the papers seven years ago. They don't recognise me in the way they would if it was Denis or Katie or Kyle (especially Kyle) who they passed in the hallway or on the stairs. For being alive – the sole 'survivor' – and still a child, I had the luxury of having my identity protected. No, my neighbours just see a skinny, short-haired boy-girl who has no visitors and won't return their smiles. In fact, except for Malcolm, I don't think I've ever said a word to a single other person living here.

I came here to Bristol not long after that summer. It was thought best, all things considered (I could hardly go back to Lewisham High, could I?). I was fostered out to a family up here, trained in dealing with people like me. And after I turned sixteen I got a factory job and just stayed.

Now and again I hear my name mentioned – my real name, I mean – and I freeze in shock. Whether it crops up in conversation with the girls in the factory, or there's a programme on TV, or the papers mention us in connection to some other case (James Bulger, for example), my reaction is always the same. A slow, creeping dread; the same sick fear that I'm going to be found out. Luckily the girls at the factory already think I'm odd, are used to my silence and my solitariness, and don't notice when I react like this.

When I first moved into this block of flats, my neighbours – the younger ones – tried to befriend me, taking me to be a student like them, I suppose. They'd bang on my door, ask to borrow a bottle-opener, invite me to their parties. It took them ages to understand I would never come. I watch them sometimes from my window when I cannot sleep, watch them returning from their raves and parties; hear them in the hallways boasting of the lads they've pulled, the girls they've had. I watch them stagger home at five, six, seven in the morning, their arms around each other's shoulders, and then I lie back on my bed and without even meaning to, I am back there, reliving that summer, wondering when it was, which particular point it might have been when I could perhaps have stopped what happened from happening.

The next day at school went pretty much the same as the first, with Denis cheerfully babbling away by my side. In the weeks that followed I grew used to having him about and even missed him when he went off to his special classes without me. He proudly told me that he had learning difficulties (no shit, I thought), and that it was in the special classes he'd first met Kyle (Kyle was different, he explained. Kyle had *behavioural* problems). And we'd see Kyle sometimes, sloping through the corridors by himself, sticking to the shadows, always staring at other people's feet. His hair was greasy, his uniform too long in the sleeves, too short in the legs. Skinny as a stick, he was the sort of kid you suspected would smell faintly of piss. The sort of kid nobody notices and you wouldn't remember if you had. Except I did, and I don't know why.

The same thing happened every afternoon. I'd walk out the gates with Denis then he'd sidle off to wait for Kyle, leaving me to go home on my own. But one day we were a little late coming out of class and Kyle was already there, waiting. This time I didn't let Denis shake me off and walked over to Kyle with him. He must have seen us coming but he kept looking at a spot just beyond us. For a while nobody spoke. Denis just stared down at his shoes as if he was about to get a bollocking off his mum. It was not going well.

‘All right?’ I said eventually. ‘I’m Anita. I live opposite you.’ Kyle stared hard at Denis, who muttered, ‘She’s in my class.’

Then Kyle nodded slowly and looked off down the street just waiting for me to go. I couldn’t believe the nerve. These were two of the biggest losers in our school and even they didn’t want to hang out with me. Still, I’m nothing if not persistent. ‘Where you going then?’ I said, like I wasn’t bothered. ‘Can I come?’

Finally he looked at me. His eyes were astonishing. A pale, flat grey, the colour of lampposts and gutters, the colour of rain, huge in his sharp, bony little face. Evidently he didn’t like what he saw. With a jerk of his head to Denis, he moved suddenly off down the street, Denis trotting after him like a big fat awkward puppy. They didn’t look back.

I stormed off to the bus thinking, wankers, wankers, wankers. Why did I mind so much? I wasn’t after friends – had always preferred, actually, knocking about on my own. I bunked off a lot, wore the wrong kinds of clothes, had a boy’s haircut and didn’t give a fuck about Duran Duran. I didn’t know what to say to the other kids nor they to me. They left me alone and that was only what I wanted.

I had got being ignored down to a fine art – and there is an art to it. It takes concentration and years of practice to ensure that you are constantly overlooked. I was a slipping-into-the-shadows sort of person, a disappearing-into-the-crowd sort of kid. Always on the periphery, a walking ‘Do not disturb’ sign. Nobody bothered me and I intended to keep it that way. I was the invisible girl. And yet. And yet. Something about Kyle tugged at me, pulled at me. I guess I must have seen something in him. I guess I saw me in him.

And at least Kyle and Denis looked like they had a purpose. They didn’t seem to give a shit about school or the other kids either. I wanted to know where they were going, what they got up to after the last bell rang, where Kyle went to at night. I just did. And I really wanted somewhere else to go other than back home.

Do I wish, now, that I’d kept away from them? Do I look back and curse the moment I first set eyes on Kyle? I just wish that he was still here. I miss him still, you see.

A few days later I got back to find Dad drinking tea with one of our neighbours. Janice was fortyish, ginger and fat, and each of her breasts was bigger than my head. Her make-up looked like she’d thrown it on with a bucket, and she wore the sort of clothes that looked good on my sisters, but kind of made you wince to see them on someone like her. My dad looked terrified, our neighbour’s Lycra-clad rolls and ear-splitting laugh seemed to flatten him against the splashback like a dribble of spilt gravy. Next to her he appeared even more vague and hopeless than usual. In fact, I had never seen him so relieved to see me.

She spotted me before I had a chance to back out. ‘You must be Anita!’ she shrieked, thrilled. I started edging my way out the door, but Dad lassoed me with his panic.

‘Anita, this is our neighbour, Janice.’ He stood there nodding desperately, like someone with Alzheimer’s and clutching his can of Tennent’s.

‘Don’t mind me, babes, come and sit down.’ She beamed and patted the chair next to her. I sat in the one nearest the door. ‘Thought I’d come and be neighbourly,’ she said in the south-London whine I’d soon grow to hate. Her teeth were very small and yellow in her big, pink mouth. ‘Been having a lovely chat with your dad,’ she said. ‘He’s been telling me all about you.’ I stared at my dad who started examining one of the buttons on his cardi.

Janice hugged her cup of tea to her cleavage, her piggy, mascara-clogged eyes suddenly brimming with compassion. ‘Terrible what he’s been through, bringing you all up on his own.’ She looked at me like it was *my* fault Mum had dropped dead.

At last Janice cottoned on that I was the sort of silent, staring child who makes adults like her nervous and shut up. We both looked at my dad, who looked at his can. Luckily for Janice, at this point, Push came in.

My brother had never been one to shy away from a good cleavage and once the introductions had been made sat down with the air of a fifteen-year-old who has just found out he lives next door to Samantha Fox. 'I'll have to pop round for sugar sometime,' he said with a wink, and Janice giggled and patted her hair. Cocky, handsome, big-mouthed Push. Not for the first time Dad and I stared at him in amazement. Where did he come from? we silently asked each other.

After three minutes of Push banging on about himself, I was ready to make my escape. But I froze at the door when Janice said, 'Lewisham High, is it? So you must know that Kyle Kite.'

It was the first time I'd heard his full name but I knew instantly who she meant. Funny to think now, I suppose, how notorious that name has become, how synonymous it is with something I could barely comprehend back then. At the time though I merely turned back from the door, my curiosity pricked, to see her suck her cheeks in, raise her eyebrows and look at Dad as if to say 'WELL!'

'Kyle?' I asked, 'Kyle who lives opposite?'

'That's the one! No. 33.' She shook her head as if she was going to start welling up again. 'Such a sad business.'

'What was?' I wanted to strangle the words out of her.

'His little sister was Katie Kite!' She said the name triumphantly. Expectantly. Me, my dad and Push looked at each other, the penny almost but not quite dropping. The name vaguely but not really ringing a bell. We looked back at Janice, shaking our heads. Sorry, who?

'Little Katie Kite!' said Janice in exasperation. 'God almighty, don't you lot read the papers?'

Janice sighed and filled us in. One morning a year ago Kyle's mum ('nice lady, but a bit, you know ...') went to wake up little Katie, only she wasn't there. Five years old she was, gorgeous little thing. Vanished. No trace of her anywhere. 'Surely you remember? Front-page news!' We did, then. We remembered the headlines, the pictures of the little girl, the appeals for information. We remembered, but not clearly – our own nightmare was filling our thoughts back then.

'They never found her.' Janice cupped her tea closer. 'Just disappeared and nobody had a clue who did it.' She shuddered. 'Enough to drive anyone mad, wondering about it. Her mum never went out again. Poor Kyle does all their shopping. And his lovely granddad goes round too.'

Even Push was impressed. 'What, did someone have her away then?'

'That's just it, love. No one knows. The police were crawling around here for ages. No signs of a break-in. Couldn't find a thing. Total cock-up by the sounds of it. Hauling in half the neighbourhood, accusing all sorts. Even dragged the ex-husband back from God-knows-where but not a dicky bird. Poor little thing just disappeared and Christ only knows what became of her.'

Janice looked at each of our gaping faces with immense satisfaction and finished her tea.

The weeks before the end of term dragged on. Denis and I stuck together during the day and sometimes we'd catch glimpses of Kyle around school but he always ignored us. Often he'd turn up to meet Denis after he'd clearly been bunking off all day. I'd managed to break Denis's habit of answering my every question with his own retarded ones, but on the subject of Kyle he was unforthcoming. It was mind-bendingly frustrating. If I'd been interested in Kyle before, now I was fascinated. Imagine knowing someone whose sister had vanished?

I once asked Denis if he ever went round to Kyle's. He looked a bit shifty and tried to turn the conversation back to dinosaurs or Curly Wurlys or whatever the fuck he'd been talking about. But after I went on at him he said, 'Yeh, well no, not really. Mostly we go out and do stuff.'

I asked him what sort of stuff.

'Just mucking about sort of stuff. Down by the river.'

I looked at him with my 'Don't be a dickhead' face.

'Looking for caves,' he said.

Caves? Looking for what caves? But Denis escaped into his sodding Home Economics class to learn how to make shepherd's pie, and that was that.

The days slouched on, dragging their heels towards the end of term, each one much like the last until suddenly one morning something a bit weird happened. By then I'd got into the swing of things at Lewisham High. My teachers were so relieved that I was the sort of kid who kept her head down and her mouth shut that they pretty much left me to my own devices. That particular day I was in Maths with Denis. We were both in the bottom class – him for obvious reasons, me because it was easier to play dumb and coast along with the retards rather than have to get involved and take part with the few kids in that place who actually gave a shit. The teachers were far too busy trying to keep World War III from breaking out to bother with the likes of me.

So after Maths, Denis and I came out of our classroom to find Kyle right outside. He was just standing there in the corridor really still, his fists clenched, his eyes on the floor, but he was doing this thing, the thing I do too, of pretending that he wasn't really there. I recognised it straightaway, that haziness; the inaccuracy of him, like, even though you were looking directly at him, it was really like you were only seeing him from the corner of your eye. Shadowy. There's a certain knack to that.

He was with three other kids and they were taking the piss out of him, laughing at him, and he had his back to the wall like he was trying to blend into it. They were saying stuff like, 'Fucking tramp', that sort of thing. 'Weirdo.' Just the sort of thing kids like us got all the time. You just ignored it. But then one of them, a tall lanky girl said, 'Where's your kid sister then?' and she started laughing, you know that Ahahahahaha high-pitched sort of fake laughing kids do when they know they're not really being funny.

That's when it happened. Kyle looked up then, straight at the girl who had said it, and it was like suddenly all of him that he'd been hiding, pretending wasn't there, zoomed back into him with such brute force that all of him and his anger and hatred for those kids suddenly concentrated, focused into his eyes with the speed of a bullet. And the girl stopped laughing like she'd been slapped. Her face just dropped, just went completely blank with shock. Then Kyle went for her, just sort of lunged at her. And she ran, then. She ran as fast as she could but Kyle just threw himself off down the corridor after her.

By this time a bit of a crowd had gathered so we all chased after them, the other kids yelling, 'Fight! Fight! Fight!' We chased them down the corridors and up the stairs and when we reached the top there they were: Kyle and the girl. He had her by the throat. She was half-bent backwards over the banister, half-hanging over the stairwell – quite high up they were, Kyle's thumbs pressed into her windpipe, her eyes all bulging and red. All the other kids just went really quiet.

A teacher came and broke it up, yanked Kyle by the elbow away from the girl and marched him off to the headmaster's office and that was that. And I remember thinking then that I would do practically anything to be friends with Kyle.

Suddenly it was the end of term. Seven whole weeks with no school stretching ahead of me and I didn't have a thing to do. Some mornings I'd just sit on our steps in the sunshine, watching the people go by. Push got a summer job and my sisters hung out in the nearby park with their new college mates, taking it in turns to buy cider and fags. Sometimes I'd see Denis come and knock for Kyle. He'd turn and wave at me if he saw me hanging about, but Kyle never looked back when they went off down the street together. Occasionally I'd see an old man letting himself into No. 33, but I never saw any sign of Kyle's mum. I tried to imagine what their house was like inside, but the curtains were always drawn and I could only picture dark empty rooms behind them.

The day that everything changed was a Saturday. I was bored shitless of hanging around the house while Dad watched cartoons so I decided to go into Lewisham.

The streets of our bit of Brockley were wide and long with tall skinny houses that felt like they were leaning forward, like they were about to fall down on you with their pointy roofs and their big bay windows like gaping mouths. The pavements were lined with trees so big their roots had started to push up through the tarmac like trapped arms. I tripped over them a hundred times in those first few weeks.

I walked until I got to the hill that goes down to Lewisham, the slopes of Crystal Palace and Forest Hill behind me, Deptford and Greenwich spread out below. You could see the masts of the *Cutty Sark* from there, the river twisting behind it. Buses thundered past me as I walked down the hill. Soul music blasted from open doors and the primary-coloured Caribbean shop fronts jingle-jangled in the dust between the crumbly bricked houses, black and white stickers peeling off their dirty windows that said 'CND' and 'Ban The Bomb'. I kept my eyes on my flip-flops as they picked their way along the dips and hollows of the dried-up pavements.

Packed, Lewisham was. When I reached the high street I was overwhelmed suddenly by the mobs of Saturday morning shoppers; teenagers with pushchairs, tramps with their cans, religious nuts shouting into loud speakers, cars blaring music. A 180 bus stopped and not caring where it was going, I got on.

It wasn't until I'd sat down on the top deck that I realised Kyle and Denis were sitting on the seat across from me. They didn't notice me at first. Kyle was sitting neat and compact, his scrawny white neck rigid as he stared at a fat girl eating a burger in front of him. Denis, taking up most of the seat, was jiggling his knees up and down, whistling the same long thin note between his teeth. I watched Kyle watch the fat girl, noticed his disgust at the way she gnawed at her food, fat globs of mayonnaise and relish dripping onto her hands. The bus chugged, unbearably hot, towards Greenwich.

Then, suddenly, from the smoke-fogged seats at the back came, 'There's those fucking gypos from school.'

Kyle kept looking straight ahead, but Denis and I both turned, our eyes meeting briefly, knowing instantly what this meant. At the back of the bus sat Mike Hunt and his mates Lee and Marco. I had been at Lewisham High long enough to know that this was seriously bad news. I was surprised they'd had time to notice Kyle and Denis long enough to recognise them, busy as they usually were setting fire to each other or getting shitfaced on glue in the toilets. They were in my brother's year, and they were grade-A psychos. Mike was so hard nobody even ever took the piss out of him for having a name that basically sounded like 'my cunt'. His older brother was in prison for stabbing some bloke and you got the feeling Mike wasn't far behind him. It was said he'd been expelled from his last school for sexually assaulting one of his teachers. Most of the time Mike and his friends were in Lewisham High's off-site and optimistically titled 'Improvement Centre', but otherwise they terrorised the corridors and playing fields, looking for someone's day to ruin. And they were making their way towards us.

The fat girl got up and Mike and Marco fell into her empty seat, Lee next to me. Mike was so blond and pale you could see the veins of his face behind his thin white skin. 'What's this then?' he said. 'Spastics' day out?'

Denis looked anxiously at Kyle.

'Oi!' Mike's voice was suddenly so loud every passenger on the packed bus swivelled their heads towards him. 'I asked you a fucking question.' His laugh was ear-splitting, shrill as a girl's. 'You seen what they're wearing?' he asked Lee. Marco, his face grey and greasy as uncooked hamburger, spat dismissively at Denis's head. Conversation from the other passengers petered out.

I saw Denis glance down guiltily at his and Kyle's outfits.

He was wearing a too-small T-shirt with a picture of Inspector Clouseau on the front, the words, 'Where's that rinky-dink panther?' written in curly pink writing underneath. Kyle was dressed with his customary disregard for either fashion or temperature in tweed trousers two sizes too big and a nasty brown nylon jumper. His bony elbows poked through little holes in the sleeves. To be fair they did look like a couple of gypos. But Kyle was still looking straight ahead, as if he hadn't noticed them yet.

Marco turned to Mike and pointed proudly at his top. 'Kappa, this is. Thirty-eight quid right? My dad got it from this shop up West, yeh?'

Mike snorted. 'Fucking shit that is.' He pointed at his lime-green sweatshirt. 'Lacoste. Forty-three quid down Romford, so fuck off.' They turned their attention back to Kyle and Denis. 'Where you going then, girls?'

Kyle sighed, stood up, and with a flick of his head to Denis, signalled for him to get up too. A sudden recklessness made me slip past Lee to join them. The three lads got up to bar our way. 'Off somewhere, wanker?' Marco asked Kyle softly. Mike noticed me for the first time. 'All right, Paki. Want some too do you?' He turned to his mates and laughed. 'Seen the state of these cunts?'

Lee shoved his face in Denis's. 'Give us a fiver and you can go.' Denis looked like he was going to shit himself.

When Kyle finally spoke, it was with the gravely sympathetic air of a doctor imparting very bad news. 'Mike,' he began sadly, as the other passengers craned forward to listen. 'Your mum's a lesbian, your sister's on the game and your dad sucks cock. Now let me off the fucking bus. Please.'

There was a moment of silence, then an eruption of shocked laughter from a crowd of black kids at the front and suddenly the rest of the bus were shaking their heads and smiling in disbelief too. Mike looked like someone had thrown a brick in his face. 'Hah?' he said.

One of the black kids shouted, 'Let them off the fucking bus, batty-boy.'

A fat girl with braids got up and made shooing motions with her hand. 'Get out of the man's way, you pasty little shit.' Her boyfriend, big and menacing, kissed his teeth at Mike. 'Let them through, man, or shall I kick ya bony ass?' His friends started laughing, waving their right hands till their fingers clicked, shouting 'Shaaaaaaaame!' and 'Buuuuuuuuurn!' while the girl, creasing up, said, 'Bwoy! Mama's a lesbian!' She wiped pretend tears from her eyes and shook her head slowly. 'Oh my gosh, that's harsh, man.'

Mike's only option was to feign indifference. Shrugging, he moved aside to let us pass. Me and Denis followed Kyle downstairs. The bus kept level with us for a while as we walked in silence. As it finally veered off to the right, a window slid open and Mike's face appeared in the little square gap. He gobbled at each of us, three wet balls of spit landing expertly on our heads.

three

We make telephones at the factory where I work. I've been there for four years. Every day for four years I have been responsible for sticking the manufacturer's logo onto the bottom of the handset. Millions and millions of sticky labels I have attached, each one identical to the last. I am a good worker, Doctor Barton. I am quiet, steady and fast and I always beat my targets. At first the other workers resented me for it, but once they realised I was oblivious to their remarks and dirty looks they gave up and now I am to them like part of the bench I sit on every day.

And the days and weeks dissolve into each other, they dissolve. I measure out each one carefully, inch by inch, fraction by fraction, until it is night and I can go home and wait for Malcolm.

Malcolm is nineteen, six months younger than me, and he lives with his mum in my block. He washes up in the kitchen of a Mexican restaurant called Speedy Gonzales. I knew there was something different about him right away. I mean, I knew there was something different about how I felt about him. I wasn't afraid of him. I didn't want to duck my head and run into my bedsit whenever I passed him. I usually avoid people's eyes and so does he, but after I had been here for a year we just gently, bit by bit, started letting ourselves *not* look away, whenever we passed on the stairs or in the corridor. We didn't smile or anything, didn't speak, but we started to let our eyes rest awhile on each other's. Which is a lot, an awful lot, for people like me and Malcolm.

Denis, Kyle and I had got off the bus in the middle of Greenwich, the market place and cafes spewing tourists come to buy cheap antiques or second-hand jeans. We started walking towards the river and the high masts of the *Cutty Sark*. When we reached the boat I stopped. Denis looked at me questioningly. 'You coming then?'

I glanced at Kyle, who was squinting up at the sun and fiddling with a cigarette butt he'd pulled from his pocket. He shrugged and nodded. The three of us walked on.

The day had the kind of hyper-real, orange-hued brightness that engraves itself in memories, the sky so blue I felt I could reach up and tear chunks from it. At the river we stopped to watch some tourists get on the pleasure boat. A woman handed out ice creams to her kids as her husband took pictures from the jetty. Kyle stared across the river at the scrappy brown wastelands of the Isle of Dogs then looked pointedly at the brick and glass-domed entrance to the Thames' foot tunnel. Denis shook his head. 'I'm not going down there,' he said. It was clearly a familiar request. He shuddered and turned to me. 'Don't like being underground.' Kyle shrugged and we turned towards the cool shaded walkway that follows the Thames' bank in the direction of Woolwich.

We fell into single file, Kyle leading the way. We didn't speak, each of us dragging a hand along the black iron railings, our faces turned towards the river, scenting out like dogs the water's warm, yeasty whiff as it lapped gently below. To our right was the cold white stone of the Royal Naval College, looming and magnificent in the midday heat.

On we walked, past laughing, beery pubs, down cobbled lanes then out again to the deserted narrow streets of east Greenwich. We were alone suddenly, no tourists or weekend shoppers there. Just little rows of black-bricked houses in the shadow of an enormous power station in a perpetual sullen stand-off. Tiny pubs on corners, an air of recent violent brawls, in the dark cracks we glimpsed lone old men with fag-butts for fingers staring at their pints.

We joined the river again and made our way to the grassy wastelands that scorched and browned between some warehouses. On a steel girder in an empty boat-yard we smoked the cigarettes I'd stolen from my sisters' stash. The air was thick with river smells and hazy with heat. Distant clankings from the scrapyards mixed with shouts of laughter from a nearby beer garden while the Thames lapped below us like the sea-shore. A whiff of molasses from the animal feed factory drifted and mingled with the sounds and light like liquid, the sun scorching the tops of our heads and the backs of our

hands. I watched the river turn and tug and thought that somewhere it must join up with the sea, somewhere very far away I'd never been.

'Did you know,' said Kyle eventually, 'that if two people were to hold hands for like, years and years and years, never letting go I mean – like eating and going to school and that, just holding hands all the time – that their skin would eventually grow over each other's and they'd be joined up?'

Denis gazed at him with silent respect for a while before eventually asking, 'What if they weren't in the same class, though?'

Seven years have passed since that summer. Here in my little room in Bristol I look out over the quiet Clifton streets and the distant fields and hills, but what I see are the banks of the river Thames. That day was the start of it all, see – the start of me, Denis and Kyle. And despite everything, despite what was to come, I smile when I think of the three of us then. The truth is, those first few weeks we spent together were the best of my life. You look a little shocked, Doctor Barton. But just listen. Listen to me.

That first day Kyle and I didn't talk much. The few times I did speak to him it was like dropping a stone down a very deep well. He'd look at me with vacant eyes until whatever I'd said finally hit the bottom of him and you could almost hear the 'plop', then he'd blink and either answer, or not. Mostly I kept quiet as we smoked and listened to one of Denis's rambling stories and threw sticks into the river, but my eyes kept returning to Kyle's face; that guarded, always-thinking face like one of those rodent, bug-eyed cats. But his eyes were as grey as stones, as grey as the river. A face that could utterly shock you with its rare half-smiles like a sudden crack of light in a dark room.

I got the feeling that he wasn't mad keen on me being there, and while he was used to Denis's constant chatter and questions, I was merely being put up with for that one brief day.

'Are we going to look for caves?' Denis asked Kyle when we'd been sitting there a while. The look Kyle shot back said it all. I was not to be trusted.

We watched boats pass; flash yuppies' speed boats, the slow glide of the rowers' club and once a police boat ripping through the grey stillness, scattering swans and driftwood and the gently bobbing plastic bottles. To our right the mangled iron mountains of the scrap heaps loomed pink and blue in front of a gaggle of orange cranes. As the sun started to sink, we trailed slowly back along the river, walking in silence through the backstreets of Greenwich.

Kyle saw them first.

I had become lost in watching my feet walk, hypnotised by the steady pace of my flip-flops: one-two-left-right-click-clack-flip-flop, and hadn't noticed that Kyle had stopped until I was nearly on his heels. I looked up when I heard Denis whimper in panic. When I followed Kyle's gaze I thought, simply, 'They're going to kick our heads in,' and I felt the blood rush to my ears.

Mike, Lee and Marco were about 100 yards away, and had been joined by four other lads. They were outside a shop at the end of the street, kicking empty beer cans at each other or leaning on cars, boredom and cigarette smoke rising from their huddle into the darkening sky. We were too far down the street now to turn back unnoticed and without saying a word Kyle grabbed Denis's arm and we started pegging it back the way we came. As we ran we heard Mike shouting out ecstatically to his mates.

Back at the boat-yard we ducked down behind a low wall. We heard seven pairs of Nikes slapping on tarmac then come to a stop just metres from where we hid. Seconds dripped by like years. I looked at Denis, goggle-eyed and quivering beside me. He reminded me of a beaten dog crouched miserably there, waiting to be told what to do. 'Let's go to our *place*, Kyle,' he said desperately. 'We could hide there.'

But Kyle held up his hand to silence him. The lads were arguing about where we could have gone and Kyle pointed to a gap in some railings fifty yards away. 'Those steps go down to the river,' his whisper was barely more than a wheeze. 'If the tide is out, we can cut along the edge and back to Greenwich.'

Denis and I nodded. We heard the lads move off to check out the parking lot opposite. The three of us, keeping low behind the wall, made a break for the steps. Just as we reached them we heard Mike shout out. We had been seen.

We almost free-fell down those steps, skidding and slipping on the slimy moss. I prayed please God, please God, please God, let the tide be out now. At the bottom there was about two feet of silty, green muck to run along, the stinking river nibbling at our feet. I could barely see or hear now, and just ran blindly after Kyle. My head started to throb with the effort of running, and I felt each footfall like a punch in the throat. I looked over my shoulder. Denis, his chin jutting out, his eyes white and his lips pulled back, was flailing along like a demented elephant a few metres back. Behind him the lads were almost sauntering down the steps.

Finally we saw the next set of stairs ahead. With one more spurt of effort I caught up with Kyle and together we climbed the dank, green stone. We turned to look for Denis. ‘Den, for fuck’s sake, come on,’ Kyle shouted. ‘Come ON!’

Whimpering and gasping, his eyes on Kyle, Denis finally made it to the top.

Once up on the walkway we steamed our way through the tourists and at last rounded the corner to the *Cutty Sark*. We had, probably, twenty seconds left of being completely out of Mike’s sight. There was nowhere for us to hide in that open space. Kyle looked towards the entrance to the foot tunnel. So out of breath he could barely speak, he gripped Denis by the elbow. ‘Look. Den. We. Have. To. Go. Down. There.’

Panic-stricken, Denis looked from Kyle, to the tunnel’s entrance, to the corner where he knew Mike and the others were going to appear any second. ‘I can’t, Kyle. I just can’t. I don’t want to.’

‘Denis, listen to me. They’re going to kick our heads in. Come. Fucking. On.’ Then Kyle ran towards the red and glass dome. A split second later me and Denis followed him.

To get down to the foot tunnel you can either walk down a load of spiral steps or take an ancient, creaky lift. We made the lift just as the operator slid the metal doors closed. Falling inside the wood-panelled cube, we let it slowly drop us below the Thames, the blue-uniformed man and a couple of German tourists watching us nonplussed as we gasped bug-eyed on the bench.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been down the Greenwich foot tunnel, but it’s a pretty spooky place. You feel like you’re in the icy, slimy intestines of an enormous snake. When you get out of the lift the temperature drops twenty degrees, and the tunnel dips away from you, the end nowhere in sight. The Thames drips through the roof into dank puddles that glimmer and flicker in the yellow light. It’s on a slight slant and once you start running you can’t seem to stop, but the craziest thing are the echoes; every noise returning amplified and monstrous to smack you in the face. We legged it through the tunnel until we got to the middle, the sounds of our footsteps bouncing off the tiles. Finally we slowed to a halt. We had lost them. There was no way Mike could catch us now. I laughed and clapped my hands, and it sounded like thunder down there. Even Kyle let out a short, sharp bark of pleasure. Denis, his head down and fists clenched with fear, saved his relief until we were safely out the other side.

But we had escaped Mike, and we had done it together, and I felt that it somehow meant something. That it meant I was a part of things then.

There’s no way back to Greenwich from the Isle of Dogs other than that tunnel. It took us ages to get home. As we wandered through those wasted docklands, that no-man’s land of lonely estates and random forgotten terraces, we could see signs of the regeneration, the glory that was to come. A lone digger, a crane, an air of quiet flux and expectation. Like a battered housewife who’s suddenly been promised the stars but has been beaten down too much to believe it. Yet still an air of grudging hope. A place wanting to believe it was on the brink of something big. Like we were, like we were.

We finally found a bus to take us home and Denis and I went over and over what had happened, laughing at our cunning and luck. We shared a fag at the back of the top deck, each taking a puff

then passing it on, our feet hanging over the seats in front of us. I will always remember that bus ride, how happy I felt just to be there with them.

Eventually Denis turned to look admiringly at Kyle. 'I can't believe you told Mike his dad sucks cock,' he said, his voice hushed with awe. Kyle shrugged and looked out the window, but he definitely smiled.

When Denis got off a couple of stops before us, he waved from the stairs and said, 'See you later, yeh?' and me and Kyle nodded, and said, 'Yeh.'

But as we made our way up Myre Street a silence fell between us. Suddenly Kyle's face was tight and closed again, his head bent almost to his chest, and when we got to my house he barely seemed to notice when I said goodbye. I watched from my step as he walked up to his front door, saw how his scrawny shoulder blades tightened under his thin jumper. As he stood there a man with white hair appeared and after saying a few words, ushered him in, the heavy front door slamming closed behind them, the light in their hall snapping instantly off.

four

New Cross Hospital. 4 September 1986. Transcription of interview between Dr C Barton and Anita Naidu. Police copy.

He shut me down there with them, pulled the boards and the girders across so I couldn't get out. I don't know why he did that. Why would he do that? Why would he keep me down there with the other two dead? They're saying he was a psycho, that's what the police are all saying but he was my best friend. I sat there for hours. I had my arms wrapped around my knees and my eyes closed tight because I didn't want to see how black it was and I didn't want to touch anything or anything to touch me. And I didn't know what was worse, the whole time I was down there, I couldn't make up my mind which would be worse: being left down there, or him coming back.

By eight o'clock the next morning I was up, dressed, and staring out the window like a dog needing a walk. Had Denis said 'See you tomorrow' when he got off the bus last night? Or had it just been 'See you later'? Had he meant that he'd be seeing both of us later, or just Kyle? What if yesterday had been a one-off? Eventually I left my spot behind the front-room curtains and wandered irritably back upstairs.

My sisters were lying in bed, chatting about the night before. Esha, a cigarette in one hand, a can of Coke in the other, was blowing smoke rings at the ceiling while Bela painted her toenails pink. They both had yesterday's eyeliner on their cheeks and matching Care Bears on their pillows and they were deep in conversation.

Esha was saying, 'So then he goes to me, "Was your mum and dad retarded?"'

Bela looked up from her foot. 'Cheeky git! Why'd he want to know that?'

'That's what I said,' replied Esha. 'So he goes, "Cos, my sweetheart, there's something really special about you!"'

Bela cocked her head for a moment to consider this, the nail varnish brush poised in mid air. 'Aw! So what did you say?'

'I said, "In that case I'll have a Martini and lemonade, ta very much."' My sisters both cackled appreciatively.

'So then,' Esha shot me a glance and lowered her voice. 'So then he goes, "Do you want to come outside and look at my motor?"'

'Nah!'

'Yeh! So I goes, "Not bloody likely, you're old enough to be my dad, you!"'

'As if!' agreed Bela.

Esha stared thoughtfully at her cigarette for a moment. 'But I did, like. In the end.'

'Yeh,' said Bela, squinting at her toes.

'Well,' said Esha. 'He *had* bought me six Martinis and lemonades after all.'

'Aw,' said Bela. 'Well, that's nice then, innit?'

'For God's sake, Nit,' Esha suddenly shouted. 'Will you please just pack that in?'

'Pack what in?' I asked, continuing to bash out the 'Match Of The Day' theme tune on the window with a cigarette lighter.

'That!' She threw her pillow at my head and I went back downstairs.

The possibility of seven empty weeks filled with bollocks-all to do finally forced me first onto our front step and then to the kerb outside No. 33, where I sat with my feet between two parked cars, looking down the street for Denis.

Two hours later and I was still there. I had brought Push's PacMan out with me and eventually became so caught up in beating his highest score that I didn't even hear the door behind me open. I looked up to see the old man from the night before staring down at me, Kyle hovering just behind him and clearly not thrilled to see me sat there, like a fag butt in the gutter.

‘Hello,’ I said.

Kyle nodded briefly. The old man was staring at me in surprise. ‘Hello, dear,’ he said. ‘Was it Kyle you were waiting for?’ His voice was gentle, a bit Scottish or something. He was buttoned up in a smart tweed jacket as if he was going somewhere special.

I shrugged and looked at Kyle. ‘You and Denis coming out today?’

Kyle barely glanced at me. ‘Nah,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Right.’

I looked up at Kyle’s granddad who was smiling now like something was funny. But he had a nice face. I looked at his white, bushy brows for a bit. Finally, to fill the silence, I said, ‘I’m Anita.’

I saw Kyle roll his eyes. The old man held out his hand. ‘Very nice to meet you, Anita. I’m Patrick.’

‘I live opposite,’ I muttered, jerking my head towards the other side of the road. The old man nodded and looked politely across at our tatty little house, put there to fill a hole a bomb had left once, the bins spilling beer cans and Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes onto our steps. I blushed, aware of how crappy it looked compared to theirs and the other big old-fashioned ones in the street.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘And were you waiting for my grandson here?’

I looked at Kyle and said pathetically, ‘Wondered what you and Denis were doing today.’

Kyle glanced at me. An expression in his eyes that made the hopeful feeling that had been bobbing around behind my ribs all morning sink to my feet and seep out of my toenails.

‘It’s Sunday,’ he told me. ‘Denis will be at church.’ I didn’t know what to say to that. Denis was a God-botherer? It was news to me.

The old man said, ‘Well now,’ and, doing a little bow like old gents do in films, put his hand on Kyle’s shoulder and they walked off down the street. Great, I thought. Fanfuckingtastic. ‘Bollocks,’ I said to no one, to myself.

That night I lay awake listening to our neighbours arguing. A steady crescendo of pissed-up rage from the burly, beardy bloke from No. 34, his stringy, mean-eyed wife bitching, goading, crowing, their voices entwining to seep through our flimsy walls, bubbling behind our wallpaper like water from a leaky pipe until at last a sudden bellow, a crash, then silence. I got up to smoke a cigarette.

Sticking my head out of the bedroom window I watched the foxes and drunks weave and stagger up Myre Street. At half-one I saw Kyle creep out of his front door then slope off into the night again. ‘Where do you go?’ I asked him silently. ‘Where do you go to at night?’

I smoked my cigarette and thought about Katie Kite. I pictured a little blonde girl with Kyle’s big grey eyes and wondered who had taken her and where. I gazed at the still, dark house opposite and tried to imagine what had happened there a year ago. I wondered if she was dead or not, and whether the person who broke into people’s houses to snatch kids would be coming back to Myre Street any time soon. Eventually I threw the fag butt out the window, lay back down on my bed, and tried not to think about anything at all.

A few empty, tedious days passed. There was no sign of Kyle or Denis and my family were driving me round the bend. When Push was in, he was as bored as I was and if we ever found ourselves in the same room together it was only a matter of minutes before we wanted to rip each other’s throats out. Dad was either parked in front of the telly with his beer, or he was listening to Janice talk bollocks in the kitchen.

One morning when Push was out I wandered into his bedroom to look for his PacMan. Esha and Bela were still in bed, watching telly on the black and white next door. I liked it in Push’s room, its cool blue walls and uncluttered calm were lovely to me after the stuffy, hairspray-stinking chaos of our bedroom. His room didn’t get the sun like ours did, and I lay back on his bed in the chilly stillness, idly listening to the telly next door and Janice shrieking with laughter in the kitchen below (she had to be the only person alive who still found my dad that amusing). I was enjoying the fact

that Push would go spastic if he knew I was in there. I rolled on my side to face the open window, and felt something hard beneath the duvet.

I'd seen porn mags before of course, on the top shelves in shops, but this was the first time I'd ever looked inside one. There was no one there to see me but still I felt my cheeks burn as I leafed through its pages. I stared at the centre spread of three women, their breasts enormous, their legs spread, their expressions varying from comatosed to surprised.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

I jumped to my feet and the magazine fell onto the floor, flopping open to a picture of a girl sucking her own nipple, her fingers spreading herself down below. Push was standing in the doorway, his green eyes cold and furious.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I—' Push looked from me to the magazine and sprinted across the room. 'You little bitch,' he said. 'You dirty little bitch! Having a good look, were you?' His face was red with shame.

'I was looking for the PacMan,' I said feebly. I couldn't look at him and felt almost as if it was I who was naked in the pictures of the magazine.

I can see now how it must have been for Push back then. Not easy to get laid when you looked like him. All those blonde, big-titted Lewisham High girls who wouldn't be seen dead going out with 'an Asian', how they'd kick themselves now if they could see the man he was to grow into – if they could see the beauty that was to come. But there in that room I didn't think any of that, of course. I was innocent for my age I expect, but those pictures were a smack in the face; a rude awakening.

'Leave me alone,' I said. 'I wasn't doing anything.'

'Keep the fuck out of my room,' he ranted. 'Look at you. Dressed like a bloke and staring at girls' knockers. You a fucking lezzer or what?' And suddenly my left ear was ringing and burning where he'd slapped it. We stared at each other for a couple of seconds then I ran from the room, down the stairs and out the front door, where I fell smack bang into Denis who was about to ring the bell.

Denis trotted beside me while I gradually calmed down. Out of the corner of my eye I could see his flab jump about. Eventually we stopped at a railway bridge and hung over the wall, looking down at the train tracks below us. The bridge was covered in graffiti and I recognised one of the tags. I'd seen that same word sprayed in various colours and sizes on every wall, lamppost and bridge in south-east London. 'Enrol', it said, and whoever he was he'd been a busy lad. As I stood there with Denis I found myself wondering about this Enrol person; why he felt the need to announce himself like that in foot-high letters wherever he went. Maybe he just wanted to prove he was there, I thought. Show the world he existed. As I stood there that morning looking at his name repeated fifty times on the bricks, I thought that that was a strange thing to want to do. But I wonder what ever happened to him? I wonder where he is now? I guess his plan worked: I didn't forget him, did I?

'You seen Kyle?' asked Denis eventually.

I turned to look at him and felt my mood lift a bit. It was good to see him even if he did stink of BO that day. 'Nah,' I said.

He pulled a Mars bar from his pocket and began to munch. 'Me neither.'

We walked on, towards Deptford.

'Where do you think he is?' I asked.

'Dunno,' said Denis. 'He said something about going to Point Hill.'

I didn't know where Point Hill was, and didn't much care if we found Kyle or not. It was just good to be out of the house and going somewhere. Denis started telling me a long and complicated story about his Uncle Richard who lived in Broadstairs and had once met Big Daddy and we got on the bus up to Blackheath. From there we walked over the common towards Greenwich Park but instead of heading towards the donkey rides and ice cream vans, Denis led me to a little side park – a field at the top of Blackheath Hill from which you could see all of London stretched out below. Denis pointed to someone sitting on a bench. Kyle.

When we reached him he didn't seem particularly surprised to see us and barely glanced up. He looked tired, his eyes dull and sunken in his scrawny face. We sat in silence for a while, listening to Denis get his breath back and looking down on the city below us. The river flickered green and silver through the mangled, scrambled, silent mess of streets and parks and cranes and buildings, a billion windows blinking back up at us. Denis went off to buy ice lollies and we lay on our fronts on the scratchy yellow grass to eat them.

'There's a cave underneath this hill,' said Kyle, finally.

'I know,' said Denis, sucking the big toe off his Funny Foot.

'I wasn't talking to you,' said Kyle.

A sharp bite of pleasure. 'A cave?' I said.

'It's called Jack Cade's Cavern.' He began carefully squashing ants with his lolly stick.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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