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University of Southampton

FACULTY OF ENGLISH

(Creative Writing)

School of Humanities

Day

*A Study of the Presentation of Bereavement in Novels for Secondary Level
Children*

by

Alistair Schofield

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2011

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ENGLISH

(CREATIVE WRITING)

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By Alistair Schofield

This thesis comprises critical reflection and novel. Claims for originality in the novel lie in the combination of the specific geographical location of Leeds, the 1970s setting, the narrative time frame of twenty-four hours, and the use of the mundane not as a setting from which to escape but as one in which epiphanous moments can be found. These key decisions were made early in the evolution of the novel and are discussed, along with other issues such as teenage sexuality, in the first section of the critical reflection. The novel's main character, fourteen-year-old Daniel, is grieving over the loss of his mother, and bereavement becomes the focus of the second section, which comprises the main thrust of the reflection. In response to similar research undertaken in 1985, I take forty-nine novels for ten to fourteen-year-olds written between 1997 and 2010 and analyse the presentation of bereavement therein, providing original data and opening up the novels to a scrutiny to which many have never been subjected. The previous research concludes that children's novels offered little of value for bereaved children. I question whether writers for children have a duty to do anything but entertain by engaging with critical opinion past and present, and argue that it is impossible for a writer to avoid awareness of the age of the reader, that novels can affect children, and that consequently the writer must show moral and artistic responsibility in the presentation of important themes. My research suggests that gender differences are still present but are less emphatic, and that some novels present bereavement in a sanitised, irresponsible way or fail to present it at all. I also find the resolution of grief through the use of ghosts or visions neither realistic nor helpful. In the final chapter I explore ways in which the reading impacted positively upon the writing of *Day* and conclude that not only do the best of the novels treat bereavement with wit, insight and sensitivity, but that the eclectic mix of theme, character, voice and style across the books will provide inspiration for future projects for years to come.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Alistair Schofield, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

DAY: A STUDY OF THE PRESENTATION OF BEREAVEMENT IN TEENAGE FICTION

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed:

Date:

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First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor, Rebecca Smith, for casting her expert eye repeatedly over my creative work. Her creative input has been invaluable, as has her remorseless enthusiasm and positivity.

Mary Hammond and Shelley Cobb, my two academic supervisors, are also owed a huge debt of thanks for their honesty and zeal. They have continually challenged me to take my reflection further intellectually.

Without Timothy Moore and Reet Mae's original article on bereavement in children's literature I would not have been inspired to tackle my own research and I am indebted to both. In particular, Professor Moore's emails have been encouraging and useful.

I would like to thank Chris Thomas, Senior Schools Librarian for Southampton City Council, for her advice in the formulation of the list of forty-nine bereavement novels.

I have been both grateful and surprised at the time that novelists have taken to respond to my questions and would like to thank Julia Green, Adrienne Vrettos, Anne Cassidy and Tara Altebrando for their generosity in this respect.

The original idea for the novel came following a conversation with Andrew Motion, and I will never forget the kind and supportive email that he sent me. He took forty minutes to reply, which I still find astonishing given that I only met him once and that he was at that time the Poet Laureate.

Lastly, I must thank my wife, Rebecca, for allowing me the space and time within our very busy life together to pursue this dream.

Section One

Day's Beginning

Introduction

The two sections of this critical reflection reflect the two waves of research undertaken. In May 2010 Professor Peter Middleton read through a draft of my upgrade essay and suggested that I needed to concentrate upon one key aspect of the evolution of the novel. It was immediately clear to me that bereavement, being the energy behind the novel's conception (if that does not sound too paradoxical), should become of the focus of my research, and this is discussed fully in Section Two.

This first section, then, explains the origins of the novel, bringing together the other strands of research that had an impact upon the final version, and there are claims to originality here. Day's frame narrative unfolds over twenty-four hours and this is extremely rare in novels for children or adolescents. It is also unusual for modern novels to have a very specific geographic setting (possibly because it might be viewed as off-putting to an international audience), but *Day's* location of Leeds (itself a long unfashionable city that is beginning to become more fashionable) is integral to the narrative. A further point about the setting is that, whilst it is a common narrative device to present a mundane setting in order to provide a contrast to the exciting world to which the protagonist escapes, it is much rarer to stick with the mundane for the entire story.

In the last chapter of this section I discuss the difficult issue of teenage sexuality: difficult because of the dichotomous relationship between the widespread accessibility to teenagers of graphic sexual images and texts from various mediums, and society's deep (and understandable) suspicion of anything that involves a mixture of child, adult and sex. I consider the moral and cultural choice facing children's writers and discuss the decisions taken in the writing of *Day*.

Ordinary and Mundane: the origins of *Day*

The inspiration for *Day* came in June 2002, following a conversation with the poet Andrew Motion. He had just given a reading at Saint Dunstan's College where I was teaching, and over a drink in the Prince Albert pub in Catford we talked of the deaths of our mothers. His mother went into a coma following a horse-riding accident when he was seventeen and was in that state for three years, regaining consciousness but never leaving the hospital. My own mother had died of lung cancer just before Christmas the previous year. I admired his frankness, but wondered at the energy required to read such personal poems to audiences time after time and to talk about his feelings so often. He said that the writing and discussion were an ongoing part of that bereavement process.

I came away from the conversation determined to use the unsettling, dreadful energy that is bereavement to some good effect, to create order out of chaos in the form of a novel. However, the six months following my mother's death seemed to have diminished my sense of loss very little and I felt that I was too close to the experience to retain an artistic distance: I wanted to write a novel that was readable, not a self-indulgent dirge. When I was thirteen my stepfather died, so I decided to draw on that experience, as well as using the sense of grief that was still fresh at that time, and write about a bereaved teenage boy.

I was aware that a bereavement novel was not necessarily going to appeal to a teenage audience. In what was in retrospect a mixture of arrogance and naivety, I decided that I would go one step better than *Harry Potter*: I would write a fantasy novel with a heart, a core in which the protagonist battles with magic and monsters but at the same time gradually becomes reconciled to the death of his mother. I even drew up a list of devices used successfully by Philip Pulman, J.K. Rowling and Roald Dahl; for example, I invented a very large and initially terrifying character that befriends the protagonist.¹ In the resulting 71,000 word novel, *After* or *Daniel of the*

¹ See the polar bear, Iorek Byrnison, in Pulman's *Northern Lights*, Hagrid in Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and Dahl's eponymous hero of *The BFG* (The Big Friendly Giant).

Scion, the hero is hit by a car very early on and enters an alternative world in which his mother may be alive. He never finds her, but on his journey he discovers a sense of his own worth and a place in a tribe that he can call his family.

Initially, there was a great deal of interest in this novel. Several publishers and agents liked the opening chapters and the concept. Indeed, Hannah Sheppard of Pan Macmillan wrote to say that 'the writing style is very engaging and accomplished, and your opening is incredibly strong and moving'.² However, there were two problems: firstly, publishers were being inundated with fantasy novels following J.K. Rowling's success: secondly, and more importantly, in my novel the fantasy element did not work. The voice and characterisation seemed to be fairly successful, as did the internal monologue, but the fantasy world was not convincing.

I immediately started work on a very different novel entitled *I Know What You're Thinking*, a dark comedy for younger children (aged ten to twelve) in which a brother and sister return home from school to find that their parents have moved house without telling them. I employed an unreliable, almost psychotic, first person narrator who hated children; my aim was to take Lemony Snicket further in the direction of Edgar Allen Poe. However, this novel was less well-received; my feeling is that it was a better structured and crafted piece than the first, but it lacked heart.

In early 2008 I found an old letter from an agent who had read the first, fantasy, novel. Ed Jaspers of Conville and Walsh said that the fantasy element was 'off-putting' and it was 'disappointing that the message can't be found in the everyday and mundane'.³ It is important as a writer, I think, to be selective about the advice you take; you cannot please all the people all the time. However, I had a nagging feeling that he could be right.

I decided that I would start again, but this time Daniel would not get hit by a car but would work out a resolution having spent a day in a shopping centre in Leeds in 1978. As a concept this sounds like publishing suicide: a depressing theme (bereavement) set in an unfashionable city in an unfashionable decade. Since I started the PhD, however, and as I will discuss later, the last two points have altered

² Hannah Sheppard, Pan Macmillan, letter (4 March 2004).

³ Ed Jaspers, Conville and Walsh, letter (20 March 2003).

a little: Leeds is no longer quite so unfashionable, and the Seventies are positively trendy. However, the depiction of the everyday, not as a dull setting from which to escape to another world or to an exciting adventure but as the setting of the whole novel, is still an unusual concept.

The novel is just over 30,000 words long (Louise Jordan in *How to Write for Children and Get Published* suggests 30-40,000 words as a guideline for teenage novels).⁴ Early responses are fairly encouraging. A draft was commended at the Winchester Festival in 2009, with Jude Evans of Little Tiger Press citing the 'energy and confidence' of the writing, and describing Daniel as 'a great main character'.⁵ Imogen Cooper of The Chicken House also liked the opening and the voice, but felt that the fight scene should come quicker (advice upon which I have now acted).⁶

Following a suggestion of my supervisor, Rebecca Smith, I also turned the novel into a radio play, and submitted it to the BBC in January 2010.⁷ On 16 April 2010 I received a reply from Hannah Rodgers, New Writing Co-ordinator, that declined to go ahead with this script but that included an invitation to submit a future project, guaranteeing a full read and feedback. Comments include the following: 'There's a great deal to admire in this script. The dialogue is often excellent, with a clear understanding of character, and it's full of acute observations about the assumptions you make as a teenager.'

⁴Louise Jordan, *How to Write for Children- and Get Published* (London: Piatkus, 2007), p. 52.

⁵Jude Evans, Little Tiger Press, letter (16 July 2009).

⁶Imogen Cooper, The Chicken House, email (30 October 2009).

⁷The play, which is built around dialogue taken from the novel, is included in the Appendix. This reflection concentrates upon the novel. The play is therefore discussed as part of its impact upon the evolution of the novel; for example, in the way it made me more aware of the importance of narrative drive.

Plot Synopsis

It is Leeds, November 1978. Daniel Hargreaves, fourteen years old and having recently lost his mother, is on his way to another day at his boys' grammar school, where the pupils are routinely slapped and racism and homophobia are rife, when he witnesses an horrific accident involving a cyclist and workman. In a state of shock, Daniel decides to take the day off and makes his way to the Merrion Centre.

Whilst drinking his Coke on a bench, he is set upon by two boys, Gary and Noakesy, and then saved by Shirley, the denim-clad sixteen-year-old girl from the newsagent, whom he immediately falls for. They go to a café and for the first time Daniel speaks about his mother. However, Jason Milner, Shirley's abusive boyfriend, arrives and she disappears with him.

Daniel spends the afternoon working in another newsagent run by a gay man, Trevor, whom he has met through Shirley, and for the first time Daniel really feels a part of something.

He waits for Shirley to finish her shift and Gary and Noakesy reappear. He is saved again, but this time by Jason Milner, who tells him 'You're mine now' and then leaves him in order to lounge on a bench waiting for Shirley himself.

Daniel, projecting months of anger onto the punk, decides spontaneously on a plan which is to get Jason arrested by provoking him, and walks up and slaps him around the back of the head. To his astonishment, Jason bursts into tears and runs away, and Shirley is furious with Daniel, calling him a 'stupid little boy'.

Thinking things through on the bus on the way home, Daniel decides to take a detour and arrives at a house in Adel, three miles from his own. He hasn't seen his father, who left his mother three years before, for six months, and felt let down by his non-appearance at the funeral, but learns that he did attend, sitting at the back. Daniel doesn't want to go into the house but agrees to see his father again.

Feeling that his day is over, Daniel walks home, not expecting to have been missed by his stepfather, Ronald, but he finds a police car outside the house and a distraught Ronald beside himself with worry. Daniel realises that Ronald genuinely

cares about him, unlike his father. However, he declines Ronald's invitation to visit his mother's grave the next day- it is still too early for him.

Daniel rings Trevor to take him up on his offer of a Saturday job and discovers that he will be working with a girl called Karen. With his stepbrother's greeting of 'tosser' ringing in his ears he goes to bed and, for the first time in months, falls asleep immediately.

Leeds, Tuesday 7th November, 1978

Leeds was the apotheosis of the seventies. After all it was here that the outdoor scenes of 'A Clockwork Orange', the film whose aesthetic defined the decade, were shot. The concrete stanchions and flyovers of the self-styled Motorway City of the seventies were breaking through the shell of the Victorian textile city like the skeleton of some grotesquely beautiful insect in a futuristic horror movie.⁸

Leeds has never been as glamorous as its two main Northern rivals, Manchester and Liverpool. Leeds-born writer Alan Bennett has described how the city could have been 'one of the architectural showplaces of the kingdom, a Victorian Genoa or Florence' had not the council torn down the houses and replaced them with concrete.⁹ There is a sense about Leeds that it has never fulfilled its potential.

When I chose Leeds in 1978 for the setting of my first novel, *After*, I did so for its contrast to the fantasy world into which Daniel escapes. I grew up in Leeds and more than most of my friends from the grammar school, I knew the town itself because my grandfather owned a chain of newsagents around the city centre. Every Saturday morning he would pick us up (myself, brother, sister and cousins), give us five pence each, and we would follow him as he walked around all his shops, joking with the staff, telling some off for smoking, rearranging magazine displays. When I was twelve I immediately started a Saturday job, in the main shop in the Merrion Centre, where *Day* is set.

Like Daniel, I was caught between two worlds; the world of my classmates, some of whose parents had huge houses and swimming pools, and the world of the shopping centre. I did not fit into either: we had no swimming pool and little disposable income but my mother, a single parent (fairly unusual at the time and

⁸ Don Watson, 'Psycho Mike and the Phantom Ice Rink', in *My Favourite Year: A Collection of New Football Writing*, ed. by Nick Hornby, pp. 178-206 (p. 181).

⁹ Alan Bennett, *Untold Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 501.

viewed with suspicion by some of my teachers), was a GP so we were still firmly middle class.

This sense of being between two worlds is offered in the two main settings in the novel: Daniel's house and the Merrion Centre. Daniel's house is a traditional Victorian semi, but vast and with blackened Leeds brick. The Merrion Centre is 'all square and concrete and sixties, but he could see what they were trying to do inside with the shining silver everywhere and high, glass ceilings and white pillars with the mosaic tiles. But by 1978 it looked pretty grubby...'¹⁰ One gets a sense, then, of Daniel's journey from the safe old to the dangerous new, but this is complicated by the fact that the new is already a fairly grotty, mundane place to be, whereas the old is becoming less like home, owned by Daniel's stepfather and huge and empty. This is a part of the adolescent experience of being caught between the world of the child and the adult, and I did not want either world to be safe and cosy.

I loved Leeds, but hated the late seventies, feeling that I had missed out on all the good stuff. Britain's glorious past, the World Cup win, Leeds United's glory years, all were finished by the mid-seventies and we were left with the National Front, the IRA and strikes. As Daniel reflects before he is attacked:

So here he was... stuck in a rubbish decade having missed the sixties when it was supposed to be all love and fun, supporting a team that was past its best that everyone hated and in a country that was also past its best and everyone hated.¹¹

If one were to open a newspaper on the morning of the 7th November 1978, when the narrative of *Day* opens, then you would see two main issues arising: the unions and the IRA.¹² Being a teenager in any decade is difficult, and today's climate change issues must weigh heavily on teenage minds. However, climate change has

¹⁰ *Day*, 110.

¹¹ *Day*, 152.

¹² *Guardian*, 7 November 1978, in <http://archive.Guardian.co.uk> [consulted 8 August 2009]

the benefit of being understandable and is taught in primary schools. There is more of a sense that young people can do something, and that is a part of the postmodernist psyche: think globally, act locally.¹³ The power of the internet means that the voice of the teenager is heard now in a variety of ways, for example blogs, webpages, youtube videos and tweets.

Charlotte Hardman suggests that children in the early seventies were literally 'muted' because their perspectives on society were not heard by adults. Indeed, adults occupying positions of power and authority over children often silenced them. She argues that 'children should be seen as people to be studied in their own right and not just as receptacles of adult teaching.'¹⁴ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein takes this further by suggesting that, unlike other disempowered groups like women, "Children, in culture and in history, have no such voice".¹⁵ The setting of 1978 offers opportunities to explore this sense of powerlessness and confusion that is still so much at the heart of the teenage experience.

After the first draft of the novel Rebecca Smith suggested that I add more detail in order to give more of a sense of time and place. Daniel's journey to school has now become richer in detail, with signposts and landmarks sparking off a series of internal monologues in which he remembers events associated with them.

Whether or not to make the regional accent explicit in my writing was a concern for me. On the 20th February 2010 *The Saturday Guardian* published advice from writers for writers, and Elmore Leonard says to 'Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly. Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop'.¹⁶ At that point I had not long finished taking out all the apostrophes from the radio play version of my novel,

¹³ See Peter Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London: Longman Critical Readers, 1992), p. 29: 'Increasingly, questions of this kind, about the integrity and connectedness of local and community ventures or struggles have come to command the debates on postmodernism'.

¹⁴ Charlotte Hardman, 'Can there be an anthropology of children?' *Journal of the Anthropology Society for Oxford*, 4 (1), 1973, p. 85, quoted from *Key Concepts in Childhood Studies* by Allison and Adrian James (London: Sage, 2008), p. 120.

¹⁵ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 26.

¹⁶ Elmore Leonard, in 'Ten Rules for Writing Fiction', *Guardian* (Review Section), Saturday 20th February 2010, p.

having seen that the BBC hates phonetically spelt dialogue (actors and directors would rather make up their own minds about pronunciation). I have now repeated this process in the novel as well, leaving a flavour of the dialect through words and expression rather than using phonetics, which can appear patronising.

The role of a football team upon the psyche of the population of a Northern city should not be underestimated. In *The Unforgiven* Baghi and Rogerson suggest that the anti-Leeds United feeling (some of which was due to a dislike of the Leeds manager, Don Revie), has led to a siege mentality in the city, a deep-seated mistrust of outsiders:

The whole club is built on and continues to reflect Don Revie's personality and career. That sustained success, tantalizingly elusive on so many occasions, never definitively achieved, has given the club and its supporters a certain manic edge, not lacking in confidence as such, but distinctly prone to chippy cynicism and bouts of despair.¹⁷

We feel this despair in the character of Daniel. A teenage boy with little of value going on his life can find himself looking to his football team for a feeling of self-worth. The fact that Daniel's team is in decline and widely disliked adds to the teenage sense of being persecuted (a sense that is to an extent justified given the past and current widespread mistrust of teenagers), represented in the novel through the attitude of many of the adults. As a narrative device Daniel's support of Leeds United helps to pile up the frustration which is released in his explosion against Jason Milner.

In *Day* the geography is very specific; roads are mentioned, parks given their names, the Merrion Centre is still a thriving shopping centre and so on. This is very different from, for example, Alan Gibbons's description of where Danny and his mother go to escape the terrifying Chris Kane in *The Edge*: 'He doesn't even know where they live. Somewhere up north, he's sure of that, but The North, that's a big

¹⁷Rob Bagghi and Paul Rogerson, *The Unforgiven: The Story of Don Revie's Leeds United*, (Great Britain: Aurum Press Ltd, 2002), p. 226.

place.¹⁸ Gibbons seems to offer the same view of the North as his character: the setting, Edgehill Estate, is apparently representative of any Northern estate, whether Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle or wherever. Danny, who is mixed race, therefore looks back with fondness at his life in London: 'Maybe there's a Britain I don't know... a Britain where it still matters about the colour of your skin.'¹⁹ However, even the villainous Chris Kane, Danny's terrifying semi-criminal stepfather, never makes a remark about Danny's colour, presumably because Chris is from London where racism, apparently, does not exist. The positing of 'The North' as a place of easy racism is surely racist in itself. By adding genuine geographical detail I hope to offer an authenticity that Gibbons's novel avoids.

As a last point on setting, since I began writing the novel Leeds has become a little more fashionable, due to the very successful and critically acclaimed *Red Riding Trilogy* by David Peace and the subsequent, and equally well received, television drama. The novels are set in the seventies, which have also become more fashionable, as evidenced by the popular television programme *Life on Mars*, set across the Pennines in Manchester. Peace's *The Damned United* and the subsequent successful film have also focused attention onto the reputation of the Leeds United team referred to in *Day*, and in 2010 *Revie: Revered and Reviled*²⁰ was published, the author Richard Sutcliffe feeling that a re-examination of the Leeds manager's role was needed.

I am hoping that the spotlight that has fallen upon the decade, the city and even the football team since I began the novel will help in its publication.

¹⁸ Alan Gibbons, *The Edge* (London: Dolphin Paperbacks, 2002), p. 54.

¹⁹ Gibbons, 40.

²⁰ Richard Sutcliffe, *Revie: Revered and Reviled*, (Ilkley: Great Northern Books, 2010).

Sexuality: does anything go?

The transitional nature of adolescence is what makes it so confusing and bewildering for the teenager, but also so exciting for the writer. The adolescent already has an in-built internal conflict between the two worlds already mentioned, adult and childhood, and is left to explore the space between largely unaided.

James Joyce remains hugely influential to me in this respect. In *A Portrait of the Artist* and in 'Araby' or 'An Encounter' (from *Dubliners*) he gently mocks the young protagonists' adolescent experiences. Take the main character in 'Araby', torn between lust and reverence for his friend's sister: 'her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand... my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.'²¹The presentation of the teenage boy's ambivalent attitude to girls is brilliantly evoked in the mixture of the religious and the physical imagery. When I started writing this novel for teenagers I wanted to try and capture that sense of ambivalence in a way that would mean something to a modern teenage reader. In *Day* Daniel's reaction to meeting Shirley is not reverent exactly, but there is an awe mixed with confusion and desire. He felt a 'stirring' at the sight of her 'curves and her denim and her red hair', but his feeling is summed up by the narrative voice bending towards Daniel's own voice: 'Girls. Fantastic but terrifying.'²²

I also wanted Shirley to stand out from her surroundings, to show what can spring from a grey, urban landscape. The kiosk in which she works becomes a 'plastic vase' and she is the 'flower' within it.²³ There is little colour offered elsewhere in the novel. Shirley's appearances offer flashes of brightness that Daniel often finds almost too dazzling. To try and capture that feeling of awe I later use an image of Daniel feeling that he has to continually step back from Shirley or he will run the risk of falling into her, which seems to work as an image of romantic but also sexual love.

²¹James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Robert Scholes (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p. 31.

²² *Day*, 116.

²³ *Day*, 179.

There are some decisions to be made in considering the presentation of sexuality in a teenage novel. There is a moral dilemma here (and one to which I shall return in the discussion of didacticism), not so much in whether teenagers should read graphic accounts of sexuality, but how comfortable I would be in presenting a teenage boy or girl in that light. To an extent this is answered for me by realism. There is only so much that can happen within a twenty-four hour narrative before the willing suspension of disbelief reaches breaking point and to have Daniel witness an accident, get beaten up, fall in love, become reconciled with father and stepfather *and* lose his virginity would be a stretch.

However, I could clearly go further in Daniel's attitude towards Shirley; for example, in the presentation of the images and thoughts which will flash unprovoked into the mind of an adolescent boy who is in the presence of a girl whom he finds sexually attractive.

There are, of course, plenty of novelists writing for teenagers who explore sexuality in an explicit way, and the most high profile of these is, in Britain at least, Melvin Burgess. In his novel *Lady, My Life as a Bitch*, the hero Sandra Fancy is an adolescent who loves sex and who is delighted when she becomes a dog and can have sex whenever she wants. Burgess's attitude is that sex should be celebrated: "When young people become sexual, we ought to throw them a big party, balloons, fireworks, everything."²⁴ Kimberley Reynolds compares this view to the usual portrayal of sex in adolescent fiction as described by Roberta Trites in *Disturbing the Universe*. Trites suggests that sex is used to create fear in young people in order to 'curb teenagers' libido'.²⁵ Trites's description will be familiar to anyone who has watched an educational video on sex: they are generally clinical and ugly affairs seemingly designed to put teenagers off sex rather than to prepare them for its wonders. Reynolds regards the shift towards literature that is more open about sex between young people as a positive thing in a world in which there is easy access to sexually explicit material:

²⁴ Melvin Burgess in *Radical Children's Literature* by Kimberley Reynolds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 114.

²⁵ Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 85.

It is perhaps not surprising that a generation that has grown up with online pornography, web cams that allow them to send intimate pictures of themselves into cyberspace and many of whom send and receive sexually explicit text messages is producing writers who seem uninhibited about producing sexually graphic material and posting it (albeit anonymously) for the world to read.²⁶

The key point for me is that Reynolds is discussing teenagers writing about teenagers having sex, not adults writing about teenagers having sex. For the latter involves a very real danger. Burgess's Sandra is seventeen years old. Would he have written in a similar fashion if she were fourteen? Obviously, in order to write about a fourteen-year-old having sex I would have to imagine it, and as a father and teacher that would put me in a dangerous position.

If it seems a shame that I am sacrificing artistic integrity to social mores, then I should add that I have no wish to present sexually explicit material in this or any future novel I write for teenagers. A modern, successful and brilliant novelist for teenagers, Meg Rosoff, offers the following advice: 'write fiercely. Your audience craves intensity, passion, catharsis, sex, extreme relationships'.²⁷ Her novel *How I Live Now* offers all these, but the sex between the fifteen-year-old narrator and her fourteen-year-old boyfriend is described in fairly innocent terms:

...and then we kissed again, only not quite so sweetly.

And after a little while of this my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was alive was flooded with the feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond.

And what a coincidence, that was the feeling I loved best in the world.²⁸

²⁶ Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.182.

²⁷ Meg Rosoff, 'On How to Write Crossover Fiction' in *How to write Books for Children*, ed. by Philip Oltermann, *The Guardian* (Saturday 21 September 2008), p. 8.

²⁸ Meg Rosoff, *How I Live Now* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 49-50.

This is as sexually explicit as her novel gets, and it is all that is needed. Reynolds is an admirer of Burgess's writing and defends Burgess's more explicit novel *Doing It* by saying that it 'falls well short of the sexual content of some fan fiction.'²⁹ Novelist Anne Fine, however, regards it as 'filth' and says that 'All of the publishers who have touched this novel should be deeply ashamed of themselves.' She is furious with the defence that the novel is realistic and that it will get boys to read:

It'll get boys to read, Penguin says. Well, teachers won't be handing it out, once they've got to the bit where the lad brags "I sucked Miss's tits and know what colour pubes she has". (Look for it after the bit he later describes as "me lying down staring up Miss Young's minge while she give me a blow job".)³⁰

I agree with Fine, and wonder how much of Burgess's success is down to the furore attached to his novels. For me it is Rosoff who is celebrating sex; in Burgess's novel it is far from a celebration. I wonder, too, whether teenagers' access to explicit sexual material suggests that the responsibility lying with the writer lies not in adding to the pile. Indeed, perhaps the best people to write explicitly about teenagers having sex are teenagers themselves.

²⁹ Reynolds, 182.

³⁰ Anne Fine, 'Filth, Whichever Way You Look At It', *Guardian* (Saturday 29 March 2003). www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview24 [consulted 6 April 2011].

One Day in Everyday: the twenty-four hour narrative

At the heart of the presentation of the ordinary in my novel lies the twenty-four hour time frame. I made this choice very early in the conception of the novel. The destination would have to be reached in one day in order to show that epiphanous moments spring from the most mundane situations, and that any day has the capacity to inspire.

Within this frame narrative lie opportunities for other narratives to evolve, and this was the case when I wrote the first chapter. Daniel lies in bed considering the next day at school and remembers an encounter with his Physics teacher, in which the latter tries to offer his condolences, much to Daniel's mortification. During the course of the novel Daniel reflects on a variety of subjects. This can take the form of a flashback or an internal monologue, but is usually provoked by something external, and takes place during the quieter moments of the plot, such as when he is sitting on the bench, or on the bus, for example.

When I started the novel I knew of only three novels set in one day: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I have become aware of many more since the first draft; in fact, the genre, if it can be called that, seems to have become more popular. Colin Firth won an Oscar in 2010 for his portrayal of George in *A Single Man*, Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel set in one day, and in 2003 *The Hours* (adapted from Michael Cunningham's novel of the same name, the title taken from the original working title of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, also set in a single day in June) won the best-film Oscar. Since the turn of the century other novelists such as Haruki Murakami, Alice Sebold and Anne Tyler have used the time frame with a great deal of success (in *After Dark*, *The Almost Moon* and *Breathing Lessons*).

Aside from Terry Pratchett's fantasy *The Hogfather* (his twentieth novel in the Discworld series), I have not found any novels for teenagers or children that are set in one day. Pratchett's main character is like Father Christmas, granting wishes to children on Hogswatchnight: it is very different from *Day*.

It seems unlikely that I am the first novelist for teenagers to consider this time frame. More likely is the possibility that writers have felt that the momentum in novels of this kind can, if one is not careful, become too slow. In *Breathing Lessons*, for example, Anne Tyler employs a twenty-six page flashback before continuing the narrative from the same moment it was left. This is compelling for an adult, but it does slow down the narrative drive, and narrative drive is paramount in teenage novels. Writing the radio play, in which much of the description and interior monologue became redundant, made me very aware of how limited the action was in the opening three chapters. I therefore introduced the cycling accident (based on an incident I witnessed as a schoolboy), which adds action whilst also providing Daniel with a firmer reason (he is in shock) for taking a day off school. I also decided to split the novel into three sections: morning, afternoon and evening, starting each section with the pared down dialogue from a climactic scene occurring later on. The use of time references instead of chapter numbers is important in indicating to the reader when these scenes will take place, which adds suspense as the reader anticipates an exciting moment in the narrative.

The plot involves what Christopher Booker would call 'Journey and Return' with a large slice of 'Overcoming the Monster'.³¹ In the former of these 'basic plots' Daniel is 'in some state that lays [him] open to a shattering experience':³² he is grieving. He then enters the 'New World', the Merrion Shopping Centre:³³ Daniel has been to the centre before, but not on a weekday, which creates its strangeness (the 'New World' idea is also contained within his experience of serving in the newsagent). He also, of course, meets Shirley. A shadow emerges in the form of Jason Milner, Shirley's boyfriend, who takes her away from Daniel in the café, then threatens him in the record shop, the latter being part of the 'Nightmare Stage' when Jason threatens to overwhelm him.³⁴ This is followed by his escape and journey home on the bus during which he considers how much he is changed by the experience.

³¹Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots* (London: Continuum, 2004).

³² Booker, 105.

³³ Booker, 87.

³⁴ Booker, 106.

An alternative Booker plot posits Jason as 'The Monster', and again *Day* conforms fairly well to the model, even to the extent that there is a princess to rescue. Jason wanders the earth, or at least the Merrion Centre, menacing those in his way. The next stage is the 'Holdfast',³⁵ in which the monster guards the princess in his lair; in my novel this involves Jason sitting on a bench snogging Shirley in full view of Daniel. There then follows the battle that the hero wins 'just when all seems lost'.³⁶

I read Booker having written the first draft, and was initially a little alarmed at how neatly my plot fitted into the model, feeling that I had sub-consciously re-hashed a well-worn route. However, Rebecca Smith reassured me that I should be pleased with the match, and certainly the good thing about patterns is that they can be broken. I started to build in ways of undermining the traditional plot structure. The slaying of the monster, for example, in my novel offers some relief from the obvious: Jason's tears suggest to the reader that they re-evaluate his monstrosity. Shirley's remonstrations following the tears offer a resistance to the grand narrative of boy saving girl from baddie by suggesting that the girl does not want to be saved and that perhaps the baddie was not so bad after all. The hero is then left to wonder about whether he is himself a monster in the making. It is this uncertainty that, I hope, gives the narrative a postmodernist edge; the easy assumption of what constitutes good and bad is questioned.

The journey and return plot is fairly standard, although given that the examples offered by Booker all involve magical places, there is an irony about the location of Daniel's New World. The postmodern involves an emphasis on the local, and his journey remains a very local one. My research into children's literature has made me more aware of what Thacker and Webb call 'playful subversion'.³⁷ For them, children's literature has really celebrated postmodernism, more so than adult fiction. The argument is an energetic and compelling one and they quote Peter Brooker's introduction to postmodernism (although Brooker is not writing

³⁵ Booker, 32.

³⁶ Booker, 48.

³⁷ Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1992), p. 139.

specifically about children's literature): 'It splices high and low culture, it raids and parodies past art, it questions all absolutes, it swamps reality in a culture of recycled images...'³⁸ I have no wish to attempt to be postmodern for its own sake, but it has always been important to me that there are questions to be asked at the end of the novel, that the sense of closure isn't so neat and tidy. Thus Daniel is still living with a stepbrother he cannot stand, he still has to go back to school the next day and face the same bunch of teachers and pupils, Shirley is still furious with him, and Jason Milner may seek revenge at a later date.

³⁸ Brooker, 3.

Section Two

The Invisible Blanket³⁹

³⁹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 7. Lewis describes the grief at the death of his wife as like having 'a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me'.

Introduction

Bereavement is at the heart of my novel *Day* and my own experience of bereavement inspired its conception. This section of the critical reflection will explore the presentation of bereavement in novels for children aged ten to fourteen.⁴⁰ It will offer a response to the article *Who Dies and Who Cries: Death and Bereavement in Children's Literature* by Timothy E. Moore and Reet Mae, published in *The Journal of Communication* in 1987.⁴¹ Moore and Mae analyse forty-nine novels for ten to fourteen year-olds written between 1970 and 1983 in which a death of someone close to the protagonist occurs. I have undertaken a similar study of novels written between 1997 and 2010.

The premise of Moore and Mae's study is that children reading a novel can be affected positively or negatively by the role model presented therein. I never wrote *Day* as a self-help kit; neither is it aimed solely at bereaved children, although a part of my motivation in writing the novel was the simple wish to help young people cope with bereavement. However, my 'simple' wish and Moore and Mae's premise open up an issue that has bedevilled children's literature almost as long as the notion of childhood itself has been in existence: is the role of children's literature to moralise/instruct/guide children or to entertain/delight? Further, is it even possible for children's literature *not* to be didactic in some way? Further still, does this didacticism have any impact on the child in any case? Should my aim in writing a novel be to help children and is that possible anyway?

To consider these questions it is necessary to engage with the debate, past and present, and to consider the role of reader response theory and bibliotherapy (discussed in some detail by Moore and Mae but needing now to be put into a more

⁴⁰ This is the target age group of children in Moore and Mae's study. However, clearly a novel read by a fourteen-year-old may well be read by a sixteen-year-old, and *Day's* target audience is twelve to fourteen. Discussion of the nature of adolescence is therefore relevant.

⁴¹ Timothy E. Moore and Reet Mae, 'Who Dies and Who Cries: Death and Bereavement in Children's Literature' in *Journal of Communication*, 37 (1987), 52-64.

contemporary context). This engagement is essential in establishing a critical framework that can act as a reference point for future discussion of bereavement in children's novels, but also in establishing a viewpoint from which to regard the role of *Day*. If we believe that the sole function of children's literature should be to entertain, or if a novel has no affect whatsoever on the emotional life of the reader, then Moore and Mae's findings and my hope that I can make any kind of difference to a child's well-being are based upon a false premise.

Kathryn James suggests that 'The frequency of death's appearance in books published for children has increased markedly in the period post-1970, yet academic analyses of the subject remain limited'.⁴² This then is one claim to originality: my research into more modern novels of bereavement adds to a limited field of study. Certainly, to my knowledge no comparable studies have been made since Moore and Mae, and the novels under discussion in the final section of this reflection have not come under this kind of scrutiny before.

⁴² Kathryn James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

Loss and Healing

As I have said, the loss of my mother provided the impetus to write a novel. The details of her death will be familiar to anyone who has watched someone die of cancer and do not need description here. Why write about it? There is the feeling of catharsis, certainly, but it is not only a therapeutic exercise. It is a momentous experience and an intense and bewildering emotion, and I feel like I have something to say about it. This feeling over-rides any nagging guilt at the opportunistic nature of using my mother's death as a source of inspiration. Blake Morrison defends himself from such accusations over his depiction of his parents' deaths (in *When Did You Last See Your Father* and *My Mother Never Told Me*) by saying that it was not, as some journalists claim, an act of betrayal, but 'a way of honouring, commemorating or celebrating them [his parents]'.⁴³ Morrison's novels are autobiographical, and he reveals much more about his parents than I do, but I understand his need to defend himself.

Perhaps there is also a sense that, by writing about my mother, I am keeping her alive. Julia Tugendhat says that the view used to be that detachment was needed for recovery from bereavement to take place, but 'Grieving is a long-term process during which they [children and adolescents] will revisit their grief, and in their minds and conversation construct a changing relationship with the person who has died'.⁴⁴ I read this after finishing my first draft, and it seemed relevant both to myself and to Daniel. In the first draft I very much wanted to get across the sense of loss and the difference between the romantic notions of death and the reality. Very early in the novel Daniel ponders on the word 'loss', a word he likes because of its simplicity and lack of pretension:

⁴³ Blake Morrison, in 'Blake Morrison: Interview' by Dave Calhoun, *Time Out London* <http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3562/blake-morrison-interview.html>. [consulted 11 February 2010].

⁴⁴ Julia Tugendhat, *Living with Loss and Grief* (London: Sheldon Press, 2005), p. 66.

There was no romance, no nobility, no bravery- just loss. He wasn't prepared for that. Someone who had been there who loved him more than anything and he'd loved back. And she had gone, and would never ever come back. There was just loss.⁴⁵

It seems strange, possibly, that Daniel should find comfort in such bleakness, and ironic that the transcendental signifier in which he finds comfort is one that signifies emptiness, but that is the dilemma of living in a largely secular society: when someone we love dies and we have no faith upon which to lean then in what can we find hope? For Daniel there does not seem to be any hope, but there is at least something truthful which is, for him, his mother's absence. A word as bleak as 'loss', as nihilistic as it may sound, gives Daniel strength through its truthfulness.

Teenagers, like the rest of us, can't be forced to talk about their feelings. Daniel's visit to the bereavement councillor is a disaster, as are his teacher's clumsy and half-hearted attempts to engage in conversation. However, his stepfather's approach, to wait until Daniel comes to him, is similarly unsuccessful, making Daniel think that he does not care. It is only in front of Shirley, who listens but does not demand, but who will not accept dishonesty, that Daniel feels comfortable enough to talk. This was, again, something I wanted to explore in the first draft, and it remains a key part of the novel, but I am asking questions here rather than answering them. All the adults are doing their best, but it takes the right person at the right time to allow Daniel to talk: that is no one's fault, it is just the way it is.

Tugendhat's point about internalising rather than releasing is one of several ideas that informed the second draft, as I aimed for more authenticity in Daniel's experience. The intuitive and pragmatic Shirley is trying to get Daniel to internalise the memory by asking him to describe his mother.

William Worden⁴⁶ and Tugendhat⁴⁷ argue that if young people are allowed to participate in the mourning rituals then it can help the healing process. Too often

⁴⁵ Day, 89.

⁴⁶ Worden, J. William *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 3rd edn. (UK: Tavistock, 1983), p. 161.

adults try to protect children by leaving them out of these rituals. In my second draft, Shirley describes the Catholic tradition of paying respects to the dead body as a contrast to Daniel's experience of feeling very much a spectator at the funeral of his mother. Daniel is bitter about the fact that he did not even get any sympathy cards; they were all to his stepfather. This is a common experience for bereaved children, and especially those left with stepparents.

Tugendhat also describes how adolescents can feel guilty if they have been more argumentative before the parent's death.⁴⁸ This makes a lot of sense, and for Daniel his mother's death happens very much at the start of his adolescence. This also becomes a part of the conversation with Shirley, as she relates how her cousin and aunt used to fight with each other, but now the cousin is in her later teens they are closer than ever. However, I do not want to offer a paradigm for bereavement, and I was determined not to become too 'directive'.⁴⁹ Thus, that conversation ends with Shirley pointing out the problem, that of his mother dying before he has had a chance to grow up and forge a new relationship with her, but not offering any solution to it. Is there any solution? Daniel's tears of frustration are, ironically, also a sign that the healing process has begun, but I feel that this is offered rather than told to the reader.

There are, of course, numerous novels for children and teenagers in which parents die, and many are hugely successful. The first *Harry Potter*, for example, opens with an account of the deaths of Harry's parents; in the second paragraph of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* we learn that James's parents have been eaten by a rhinoceros. Both of these stories, and many more like them, use the deaths as a plot motor (rather than a core theme), and as part of a generally miserable and mundane existence from which the young protagonists long to escape. It was important to me that in *Day* the everyday is used throughout as backdrop in order to strip any sense of romance from the grief that Daniel feels, and

⁴⁷ Tugendhat, 62.

⁴⁸ Tugendhat, 59-60.

⁴⁹ Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3. Hunt says that 'It is arguably impossible for a children's book... not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism'.

in order to offer teenagers the sense that hope can be found not in some magical place but in their own lives.

The Moore and Mae Data

In their analysis of the forty-nine novels, Moore and Mae focus on the central character, the death, and the effect of the death on the central character. Their findings include the following: girls are portrayed as far more tearful and dependent than boys; in a sizeable proportion of books there is no mourning ritual whatsoever, and some burial behaviour is 'bizarre';⁵⁰ the incidence of deaths of mature adults and children is far greater than death statistics would indicate, which might give the reader unrealistic expectation of their own, or parental, demise; many of the deaths presented are 'grotesque and horrific';⁵¹ grief, when presented, is short-lived and resolved easily, and in over half the books there is no evidence of the long-term effects. They conclude that 'death- that "unmentionable" subject of contemporary culture- is portrayed for dramatic effect and often without accompanying reactions that children may experience regardless of gender... In summary, these books are more likely to increase anxiety about death than they are to facilitate its confrontation.'⁵²

The decision to respond to this research with my own came very quickly after reading the article. Here was some fascinating data on the presentation of the theme at the heart of my own novel. Reading forty-nine novels would be an excellent way to gain an appreciation of the different ways that bereavement is presented, and provide original and interesting data to compare with that of Moore and Mae. Their findings made me re-examine my own presentation of bereavement in *Day* and forced me to ask some pertinent questions of myself: in particular, should I be trying to follow some kind of bereavement paradigm in order to provide children with role models that help them to 'facilitate' the 'confrontation' of death? This was something that I felt instinctively should not be the case; helping children was important to me, but so was authenticity and entertainment, and preaching to children did not seem appropriate to the genre. I was also fairly sure that it would

⁵⁰ Moore and Mae, 59.

⁵¹ Moore and Mae, 60.

⁵² Moore and Mae, 61.

not be something that children would want to read. However, if I were rejecting a key premise of their findings, namely that the behaviour of role models in children's books can have a positive or negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of the reader, then responding with my own data was pointless. A thorough engagement with a question that has proved fundamental to children's literature became essential.

Serious brain damage: didacticism in Children's Literature

People ask me if I ever thought of writing a children's book. I say 'If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children's book', but otherwise the idea of being conscious of who you're directing the story to is anathema to me because, in my view, fiction is freedom and any restraints on that are intolerable.⁵³

Reaction to Amis's contempt for children's literature centred, naturally, on the 'brain damage' quip, but there is a serious and relevant point here about the problem Amis sees as being at the heart of writing for children: children's writers cannot escape the awareness that the reader is younger than themselves. This in itself is a controversial point and Louise Jordan in *How to Write for Children- and get Published* would disagree, as she says that 'The best children's writers are writing for themselves'.⁵⁴ However, the fact that subsequent chapters of her book explore the differences between writing for different age groups seems to contradict her statement. As Peter Hunt points out, 'I have yet to see books recommended for 40-50 year-olds'.⁵⁵ And if the writer of children's literature cannot escape the consciousness of 'who you're directing the story to', then it can be suggested that 'it is impossible for a children's book not to be educational or influential in some way' and to 'reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism'.⁵⁶

Any discussion of didacticism in children's literature can, if one is not careful, become embroiled in a debate over the very nature of children's literature itself. There is more than enough written on this subject, and I have in particular found Kimberley Reynolds, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Peter Hunt, David Rudd, Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, Charles Sarland and Jaqueline Rose useful in this

⁵³ Martin Amis, 'Martin Amis: Only Brain Injury Could Make Me Write for Children', *Guardian* (Friday 11 February 2011). www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/11/martin-amis-brain-injury-write-children [consulted 26 February 2011].

⁵⁴ Jordan, 4.

⁵⁵ Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Hunt, 3.

respect. I am also mindful that critical theory is not intended to help one write a book, and the advice of children's novelists is important.

For the sake of cohesion and concision, then, I shall concentrate on the two questions that have concerned me regarding the writing of *Day* and my response to the Moore and Mae article. Firstly, is it possible for a book written by an adult for children to avoid didacticism? A consideration of how much help I should be offering to children led to the possibility I should be offering none at all. (Should my only guide should be artistic integrity?). Secondly, is there any evidence that the child is affected by reading a novel in any case? In particular, it is important to discover whether research undertaken since Moore and Mae's 1985 article has validated or invalidated their findings.

Common sense suggests that of course it is possible to avoid didacticism; few novels written today actively preach to children. However, the dictionary definition of didactic includes the word 'improving' and there are many ways in which one can try and 'improve' a child. Lesnik-Oberstein suggests that a central question has always been and will always be the question of which books are 'best for children.'⁵⁷ For example, even if we advocate reading for entertainment over instruction we do so because we believe that entertainment is better for children. Fred Inglis said in 1981 that 'Only a monster would not want to give a child a book she will delight in and will teach her to be good. It is the ancient and proper justification of reading and teaching that it helps you to live well.'⁵⁸ The idea of being 'good' may grate with some, but this is a statement with which many would concur today. Certainly, in the English Department of the school where I work the pupils have a reading period every fortnight in which they are encouraged to read for pleasure. However, we also hand out leaflets to parents justifying the use of class time on the basis that research tells us that reading for pleasure helps the child academically across the curriculum. It is, rightly or wrongly, widely accepted that 'reading is good for your child'.

⁵⁷ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Essentials: What is Children's Literature? What is Childhood?' in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Fred Inglis, *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1981), p. 4.

Most commentators seem to agree that children's literature before the nineteenth century was, in the words of Moore and Mae 'unabashedly didactic'.⁵⁹ Romantic views of childhood changed this: 'It is often claimed that the image of the romantic child has been a key point of reference for the birth of children's literature since the beginning of the nineteenth century'.⁶⁰ The 'Golden Age' of children's literature then follows, a highlight being the arrival of Lewis Carroll and writers of the period that employ 'narrative strategies that invite dialogic 'sharing' of the storytelling process between author and reader'.⁶¹ However, David Rudd suggests that the notion that this marks a victory for 'entertainment' after a long battle with 'instruction' is but a grand narrative. Rudd questions the motives of writers who construct an implied child reader and suggests that this idea of child as 'cultural trope (standing for innocence, the natural, the primitive and so on) has led to a neglect of the child as a social being, with a voice'.⁶² Jacqueline Rose, upon whom Rudd draws, suggests that the motivation for 'building an image of the child inside the book' is to 'secure the child outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp'.⁶³ For Thacker and Webb the writers of the Golden Age 'revealed more about the way societies imagined childhood, perhaps, than about the reading experiences of actual children'.⁶⁴ They too suggest that the adult mind is more interested in itself, in seeking solace for 'the troubled adult psyche'.⁶⁵

Carroll remains a hugely influential writer in this field. Indeed, Juliet Dusinberre credits *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with inspiring Modernism: 'Radical experiments in the arts in the early modern period began in the books which Lewis Carroll and his successors wrote for children.'⁶⁶ The effect of literature

⁵⁹ Moore and Mae. 52

⁶⁰ Thacker and Webb, 13.

⁶¹ Thacker and Webb 44.

⁶² David Rudd, 'Theorising and theories: how does children's literature exist?' in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 15-29 (pp. 15-16).

⁶³ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the impossibility of children's fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 2.

⁶⁴ Thacker and Webb, 41.

⁶⁵ Thacker and Webb, 43.

⁶⁶ Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p. 5.

read as a child, and the effect of Modernism on later children's literature are subjects to which I shall return later in this chapter.

Post-World War Two the challenge was to offer 'hope for the future... one of the key functions of children's books' whilst also recognising that the war and 'the threat of nuclear annihilation... make the possibilities of a better world more difficult to imagine'.⁶⁷ This difficulty is evident in the darker side that emerges in the novels of writers of the fifties such as C.S. Lewis. As an aside, this also rings true from a personal perspective. As a teenager in the late 1970s and early 1980s there were periods when I found it very difficult to take schoolwork seriously, convinced as I was that nuclear war was imminent. This feeling finds its way into *Day* in the form of Daniel's feeling of nihilism from which he recovers (until the accident) by comparing time to a long and tangled piece of string:

And Daniel was right at the end of the piece of string. It was growing, slowly, and he was growing with it. The other weren't. Churchill, King Alfred, Julius Caesar, their time had come and gone, but Daniel was there at the end and that made him feel much more important, much more significant. Or it used to. Because what if being on the end just made you hurt, like the workman and the cyclist? And what if people you loved got left behind in the tangled bit? ⁶⁸

According to Reynolds, the Cold War years,

stimulated book makers to create books that looked outside isolationist paranoia and featured narratives about social justice, freedom of thought and how technology could be used to solve the problems of the past. In other words, children's books encouraged young readers to think optimistically

⁶⁷ Thacker and Webb, 110.

⁶⁸ *Day*, 98.

about the future and the pioneering roles they could play in improving society for all.⁶⁹

This, again, goes back to the idea of didacticism: children's literature used as a tool to improve the young and to manipulate their feelings. This represents not only Reynolds's view of the past role of children's literature, but her vision for its future:

The stories we give children are blueprints for living in culture as it exists, but they are also where *alternative* ways of living are often piloted in recognition of the fact that children will not just inherit the future, but need to participate in shaping it.⁷⁰

The title of Reynolds's work, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* indicates the range of this vision, but it is one in which children's books are, again, being treated very differently from adult books and the treatment is clearly a didactic one.

The presentation of the encroachment of darkness in the form of more challenging themes in the 1970s might have been expected to mark a decline in didacticism: instead the novels of this period have become synonymous with all that is wrong with soap-box literature:

The initiatives of the 1970s to redress the balance in the bias of children's fiction took a straightforward view about the relationship between the text and the reader. At its simplest an almost directly didactic relationship was assumed. If you wrote books with positive characteristics of, and roles for,

⁶⁹ Reynolds, 16.

⁷⁰ Reynolds, 14.

girls, ethnic minorities and the working class, then readers' attitudes would be changed and all would be well in the world.⁷¹

That these novels are generally regarded with disdain is an interesting point to note. Children's literature should, it seems, provide hope for the future, but not in a way that seems too obvious. Sarland's claim that 'the anti-racist and anti-sexist initiatives of the 1970s have virtually sunk without trace' is not an accurate one, however.⁷² Alan Gibbons's award-winning *The Edge* (2002), discussed earlier with reference to setting, is a modern version of a the kind of novel described by Sarland above. The hero, Danny, is a working class, mixed-race teenager and the son of a single mother who is being abused by her violent partner, Chris Kane. All Danny's characteristics are positive: he is very attractive, intelligent and a brilliant athlete (the latter attribute being instrumental in winning over his new classmates). That Gibbons cleverly uses the voices of the main protagonists to tell the story does not hide the fact that this is very much a theme novel. It also begs the question: what about teenagers not blessed with Danny's talents? As McCallum points out, in some books 'the image of empowered individuals capable of acting independently in the world and of making choices about their lives offers young readers a world view which for many is simply idealistic and unattainable.'⁷³

For Sarland the values of F.R. Leavis are overly influential in the field through the 1980s and into the 1990s (he particularly attacks Hunt's analysis of Arthur Ransome's work as being too dependent on Leavisite value judgements).⁷⁴ Rudd explores the 'hybrid or border country' between the constructed child, the tabula rasa, and the constructive child, who makes up words and changes sounds. He feels that writers of children's literature can never escape what Lesnik-Oberstein calls the 'didactic impulse',⁷⁵ but also suggests that any attempt to keep the children's novel

⁷¹ Charles Sarland, 'Critical Tradition and Ideological Positioning', in Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, pp. 30-49 (p. 42).

⁷² Sarland, from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, 45.

⁷³ Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 7.

⁷⁴ Sarland, from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, 36.

⁷⁵ Lesnik-Oberstein, 38.

single-voiced is doomed, and that the success of the novel depends on 'how fruitfully they [writers of children's books] negotiate this hybrid or border country.'⁷⁶

Thacker and Webb see children's literature as being at the forefront of postmodernism:

The assumption that narrative trustworthiness, authorial control, closure and determinate meaning should be defining characteristics of the less difficult experience of reading children's fiction are challenged by the work of numerous children's authors ... [who] all incorporate postmodern strategies in their work to challenge expected reader/author relationships.⁷⁷

Philip Pullman is on Thacker and Webb's list of writers using these strategies which is interesting as the writer is also quoted by Reynolds as an example of apparent conservatism. The quote is taken from Pullman's 1996 Carnegie Medal acceptance speech and is worth repeating:

[In a children's book] you can't put the plot on hold while you cut artistic capers for the amusement of your sophisticated readers, because, thank God, your readers are not sophisticated. They've got more important things in mind than your dazzling skill with wordplay. They want to know what happens next.⁷⁸

I say 'apparent' conservatism because Reynolds is suggesting that Pullman's words might be construed as being conservative and thereby back up Jacqueline Rose's conclusions more than twenty years before in the influential *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* that, as Reynolds puts it, 'children's fiction has tended to be regarded as a cultural safe-house which preserves an ideal of the innocent child dating back to Locke and Rousseau':

⁷⁶ Rudd, from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, 21-26.

⁷⁷ Thacker and Webb, 143.

⁷⁸ Philip Pulman, quoted from Reynolds, 8.

On the basis of a very limited sample of material she comes to the conclusion that because it is specifically addressed to and works to secure an audience of children, the child in children's literature (by which she means both the idea of childhood it contains and the implied notion of the child reader outside the book) plays a central role in an impossible collective fantasy about childhood.⁷⁹

The idea that this stifles creativity and has subsequently led to the 'exclusion of modernist experimentation from children's books'⁸⁰ is challenged enthusiastically by Reynolds, who draws on Dusi Berre and Humphrey Carpenter to demonstrate that writers of the twentieth century, the Modernists included, have been greatly influenced by their childhood reading. The words of Graham Greene, quoted by Reynolds from Carpenter to back up this point, are of particular interest but I shall save them for the concluding points at the end of the chapter.

This brings us neatly on to the second question of to what extent we are affected by our reading. Michael Benton calls reader-response theory (in which, as its name suggests, the focus is on the reader and the process of reading rather than text or author) the 'Loch Ness Monster of Literary Studies'.⁸¹ Traditionally bibliotherapy has advocated the writing of theme novels as a way of healing society's ills, and it has since been regarded with suspicion by some as being responsible for too much bad literature in the 1970s (Peter Hunt suggests that a cynical view of bibliotherapy was that it was used as a smokescreen by those wishing to 'exploit the market').⁸²

Moore and Mae's research does rely on a belief in bibliotherapy, and away from the world of critical theory it is making a comeback. The rise of reading groups in the UK, described by Blake Morrison in *The Guardian* as 'one of the most

⁷⁹ Reynolds, 5.

⁸⁰ Rose, 142.

⁸¹ Michael Benton, 'Readers, texts, contexts: reader-response criticism' in Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, pp. 86-102 (p. 86).

⁸² Hunt, *Introduction*, 33.

heartening phenomena of our time' would suggest that literature is again being regarded as very positive form of therapy. However, in the same article Raymond Tallis, Emeritus Professor of Geriatric Medicine at the University of Manchester is quoted as saying that most of the published work "consists of equivocal findings in fourth-rank journals... No one sends out for a poet when they are seriously ill."⁸³

Since the *Guardian* piece Jane Davis, founder of The Reader Organisation⁸⁴, published an article, 'The Art of Medicine, Enjoying and Enduring: groups reading aloud for wellbeing' in *The Lancet* (not a fourth-rank journal).⁸⁵ She offers plenty of examples of the therapeutic nature of reading and says that research is currently being carried out by the Schools of English and Medicine at the University of Liverpool, GIR and The Reader Organisation to test these thoughts, questions, claims, and hypotheses in various ways- from brain imaging to group organization and structured interviewing'.⁸⁶ More specific to bereavement, if one were to go to the websites of many charities that offer advice on how to cope with bereavement one would find a reading list.⁸⁷ Thus, whilst there is still no hard evidence in support of bibliotherapy it is at least as relevant today as it was in 1985.

This does not mean that the theme novels of the 1970s are now off the hook, by any means. Hugo Crago suggests that it is 'crude' to make too literal a connection 'between the context of the text and the reader's own problem', because reading about the actual may be too painful and because we all deal in the metaphorical.⁸⁸ This subconscious recognition of the link between oneself and something in the text is 'akin to falling in love'. Crago concludes that 'a form of healing is more likely to occur through the reader's own unconscious selection of texts', and that

⁸³ Blake Morrison, 'The Reading Cure', *Guardian* (Saturday 5 January 2008)

www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/05/fiction.scienceandnature [consulted 6 July 2010].

⁸⁴ An organisation founded by Jane Davis and referenced in Morrison's article. Now well-established in Merseyside, there are over fifty reading groups in a variety of locations, from psychiatric wards to prisons www.thereader.org.uk [consulted 26 March 2010].

⁸⁵ Jane Davis, 'The Art of Medicine, Enjoying and enduring: groups reading aloud for wellbeing', *The Lancet*, 373 (2009), 714-715.

⁸⁶ *The Lancet*, 715.

⁸⁷ See www.childbereavement.org.uk, www.butterflycounselling.com, www.cancerhelp.org.uk, www.rowanshospice.co.uk, www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk or www.winstonswish.org.uk

⁸⁸ Hugh Crago, 'Bibliotherapy and psychology', from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, pp. 180-189, (p. 185).

bibliotherapy in its current form can offer only a 'modest contribution'. He asserts that 'the reading of narratives that literally or symbolically parallel one's own condition can provide a language in which a child or adult may begin to talk about what has previously been inchoate.'⁸⁹

Charles Sarland, within his discussion of ideology, refers to Umberto Eco's model of reader response: readers either assume the ideology of the text; they miss it or ignore it or import their own (an 'aberrant' reading); or they question it. Real readers tend to be aberrant.⁹⁰ Sarland discusses research undertaken by Gemma Moss in a secondary school. Moss analyses teenage writing to show that teenagers actively reconstitute texts that they have read in order to re-negotiate problems relevant to themselves; consequently, they are not 'passive consumers of popular theory'.⁹¹ That is a behaviourist fallacy.

What do we know, then, for sure, about the effect of reading on children? We know that it can affect children just as it can affect adults. We know that this is a more complex response than was previously thought. More specifically we know that reading about a bereaved child may impact upon the reader and may aid or hinder them in their present or future bereavement. How this takes place or to what extent remains unknown. Whilst it may be that some of Moore and Mae's statements may be regarded by some as a little crude, their findings are still valid.

The number of modal verbs in this paragraph is suggestive of the vagueness of these findings. We are not machines and the research into the effects of reading was never going to be a straightforward affair.

In the absence, then, of any definite answers within this field I shall turn back to the Graham Greene quotation mentioned previously. It is from his essay 'The Lost Childhood' (1951):

Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives. In later years we admire, we are entertained, we may modify some

⁸⁹ Crago, from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, 187.

⁹⁰ Sarland, from Hunt, *Understanding*, 2005, 43.

⁹¹ Gemma Moss, *Unpopular Fictions* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 105.

views that we already hold, but we are more likely to find in books merely a confirmation of what is in our minds already... But in childhood all books are books of divination, telling us about the future, and like the fortune-teller who sees a long journey in the cards or death by water they influence the future.⁹²

I wanted to end this chapter with Greene because his words offer, for me, a resolution of a far more positive kind than those of Amis.⁹³ Writing for children is different to writing for adults. Like Hunt and Sarland I do not think that it is possible to avoid an element of didacticism when writing for children, but this can be construed as being a good thing, because writing for children involves a responsibility not appropriate within adult literature because the effects of one's writing can stay with the reader for much longer.

We do not know the nature of these effects so the nature of the writer's approach to handling this responsibility must be necessarily of a personal kind, a question of finding personal boundaries, and this must be down to the writer's own artistic and moral integrity. Recently, a sixteen-year-old student with a history of depression and self-harming told me that she had been warned by her therapist not to read books that contain self-harming as this might trigger a relapse. With Crago in mind, I replied that the effect might come more subconsciously through metaphor, and that the literal might have no effect. It was difficult to argue with her response that 'it did before'. The conversation emphasised to me the responsibility of the children's novelist, not to avoid depicting the tough stuff, but at the very least to seriously consider its implications.

⁹² Graham Greene, 'The Lost Childhood' (1951), quoted from Reynolds, p. 11.

⁹³ I find Amis's comments ironic in any case given the adolescent (and I am using the word in its pejorative sense) content of some of his novels. I stopped reading Amis after *Yellow Dog*. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, Tibor Fischer describes the novel as 'like discovering your favourite uncle masturbating'. Tibor Fischer, 'Someone needs to have a word with Amis', *The Daily Telegraph* (4 August 2003). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3594613/Someone-needs-to-have-a-word-with-Amis.html> [consulted 6 January 2011].

The Fascination with Death: making the list

With novels about leukaemia, car crashes and the afterlife topping young adult reading lists, why are teenagers so fascinated by tales of death and dying?⁹⁴

Given my previously discussed interest in the presentation of bereavement in children's literature, and my feeling that the issue is at the core of *Day*, it seemed pertinent and interesting to conduct a very similar piece of research to Moore and Mae, except taking 49 novels written between 1997 and 2010 to see to what extent the presentation of the bereavement process has changed. This would give me an up-to-date and well-rounded understanding of how bereavement is now being presented and offer a comparison with its presentation in the 1970s, when *Day* is set. It would seem logical to anticipate that, given the rise of therapy over the last three decades, grief would be handled with a greater degree of sensitivity. I also anticipated that the discrepancy between male and female responses to death would be less prevalent: female main characters now often outdo their male counterparts in terms of bravery and initiative, whilst boys are more inclined to show their feelings.

According to Tim Moore the raw data for their article has been lost.⁹⁵ I therefore used the information in the article to design a template research sheet, as below:

⁹⁴ Alison Flood, 'Teenage fiction's death wishes', *Guardian* (25 February 2010) www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/25/teenage-fiction-death [consulted 17 April 2010].

⁹⁵ Professor Timothy E. Moore, University of Toronto, email (9 June 2010).

by				
Pub. Date/ location	Publisher	Genre	Number of pages	Date Set

Main Character

Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity

Deceased Character

Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Relationship to Main Character

Cause of Death

Illness	Accident	Murder	Suicide	Other

Depiction of death

Finality	Continuity	Questioned but not Defined

Mourning ritual

Present	Absent

Changes in Lifestyle

Physical Relocation	Work, school, family, financial	Loss of Relationships	Effect of Death on Faith or Philosophy

Adjustment difficulties: Immediate

	Present	Absent
Details		

Adjustment difficulties: Long-term

	Present	Absent
Details		

Intervention

	Occurred	Did Not Occur
Details: Lay/Professional		

Grief

	Anticipatory	Immediate	Prolonged
Details (tears, guilt, withdrawal, faintness, vomiting, nightmares, shock etc)			

Categorization of Central Character's Response to Death

Tough	Autonomous	Competent	Affiliative	Dependent	Expressive
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Other Comments

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A much more time-consuming process involved the drawing up of a list of forty-nine novels. I decided early on to veer from Moore and Mae's criteria in one important aspect: I was going to include novels in which the death occurs before the beginning of the narrative, as long as there is sufficient information to fill in the research sheet. This was necessary because, of course, *Day* opens three months after the death of Daniel's mother.

I was also determined that the novels would not be solely 'issue' novels that concerned themselves with bereavement and how to deal with it. It would be possible to find fifty novels with bereavement as a central theme, but these would not, clearly, be representative of children's reading as a whole; nor would they be representative of the ways that novels deal with death: published writers will not have approached a central theme without research of their own.

Although Moore and Mae's original list is lost, I felt from reading the extracts offered in the article that they too had not restricted themselves to bereavement novels. However, Clary Tepper and Kimberley Wright Cassidy cite Moore and Mae's article, and say that 'they studied bereavement literature, which can not be considered representative of all children's literature'.⁹⁶ On contacting Professor Moore a second time I was reassured:

We did not look for 'bereavement literature', rather we looked for novels intended for kids aged (roughly) 10 - 14, in which a death (of a person) occurred. As we noted, some of the books were award winners. But they were award winners because of the quality of the writing, not because (by happenstance) there was a death in the narrative.⁹⁷

Books were subsequently discovered using the following means:
recommendations of colleagues and students; internet searches; library lists;

⁹⁶ Clary A. Tepper and Kimberley Wright Cassidy, 'Gender Differences in Emotional Language in Children's Picture Books', *Sex Roles*, 40 (1999), 265-280 (pp. 269-70).

⁹⁷ Tim Moore, email (9 October 2010).

recommendations through JISCMAIL.⁹⁸ By far the most useful in this respect has been the advice of Chris Thomas, Senior Schools Librarian for Southampton City Council. Recommendations that were rejected quickly included novels that fell out of the age band or time period. Others seemed to be suitable, but on reading it became clear that information about the death was limited, or that the death occurred far too long before the narrative. Books in which the teenage narrator dies also crop up frequently on library topic lists but are of no use to this study.

⁹⁸ 'JISCMAIL uses the world wide web and e-mail to enable groups of academics and support staff to talk to each other and to share information': www.jiscmail.ac.uk [consulted 6 June 2010].

The Study

The study was designed to provide a more up-to-date analysis of the portrayal of death and bereavement in children's literature, and a comparison with Moore and Mae's findings.

Novels under analysis were published within a thirteen year time period, between 1997 and 2010. Over half (53%) were in fact published since 2006. The novels are aimed at an audience of between ten and fourteen, although some would certainly be read by slightly older children as well. As previously stated I veer from Moore and Mae's criteria in one important aspect, in that novels in which a death occurs before the opening of the narrative are included, as long as there is sufficient information about the death itself. Often this is provided in the form of a narrative flashback. Another criteria was then added when the data was collated: the positioning of the death within the narrative.

Moore and Mae's list includes four award winners and fourteen books that appear in recommended book lists. My list also contains award winners, as well as several of the most successful children's writers of recent years: J.K. Rowling, Robert Muchamore, Anthony Horowitz, Jacqueline Wilson and Charlie Higson have all written best-selling novels. It is important to include writers of this commercial calibre if the findings are to be genuinely reflective of novels that children actually read.

Two further criteria were added to the template research sheet. At the upgrade meeting, Dr Mary Hammond suggested that, given that setting was such a crucial part of *Day*, it should be analysed. I think that a consideration of the function of the death within the plot is also important. Novels have therefore been classified in the following ways: 'Bereavement Novel' (BM) in which bereavement forms the central theme; 'Plot Motor' (PM) in which the death is used to advance the plot; 'Bereavement' (B) where bereavement is treated seriously but is not the central theme; 'Other' (O) which covers other uses.

Moore and Mae coded the data individually, then cross-referenced (finding that they were 'in near-perfect agreement on the coding of three books selected at random').⁹⁹ A third reader was then involved to code six other randomly selected books. The data now under discussion was coded by me alone, and I must therefore accept that there is more subjectivity involved in some of the findings; for example, the categorisation of grief into male or female responses is clearly open to interpretation.

The novels vary in length from 116 pages to 766, with an average length of 256 pages. As with Moore and Mae's study, most were written by women, but in my study the split is more even between the genders (61% being female as compared to 78%). Whereas in Moore and Mae's study all novels with a female main character were written by women, three of my sample were written by men.

58% of the novels are set primarily in Britain, 22% in the USA. Australia, Canada, Columbia, Ireland, Sweden, Scandinavia (unspecified country) and South Africa are also settings. There are also two fantasy worlds and an unspecified setting 6000 years ago. Of those novels set in Britain, 64% are vague as to any exact location.

71% are set in the present day and 18% in the past. Of these latter, most are set in the twentieth century: two in the 1930s, one in the 1940s, one in 1959, two in the 1960s and one in the 1980s.

The main characters in the novels vary in ages from seven to seventeen, with the majority (71%) aged twelve to fifteen. In twenty-four the main characters are female, twenty-five male.

The ages of the deceased characters vary from three to seventy-eight. Of these 29% are children, 6% young adults (aged eighteen to thirty), 57% mature adults (thirty one to sixty) and 10% the elderly (sixty plus). This compares with respective figures of 25%, 17%, 43% and 15% from the earlier study.

Illness accounts for the most deaths at 41%, with accidents next (28%), then murder (16%) and then suicide (14%).

⁹⁹ Moore and Mae, 56.

In 59% of the novels there is a funeral of some kind, varying from a full description to the briefest of mentions. There are six viewings of the body. In eighteen novels (38%) no mourning ritual is described at all, compared to thirteen in Moore and Mae's study. As with Moore and Mae's findings 'Females cried more often than males and also showed a greater variety of grief reactions'.¹⁰⁰ In 55% of the novels the main characters cry at some point. 62% of female protagonists cry compared to 48% of males. Anger is the next most frequent response: 36% of males and 41% of females feel angry. As with Moore and Mae, 16% of characters feel guilt, with almost twice the percentage (21% compared to 12%) of females feeling this response. Other female responses include anxiety, nightmares, shock, embarrassment, frustration, obsessive behaviour, tight throat and vomiting. Male reactions include shock, confusion, obsessive behaviour, bleakness, loneliness and self-harm. Male reactions are more likely to be vague: numbness, unwillingness to talk about it, 'freaking', 'empty space'.

In one novel with a female main character there is no evidence of grief at all, and a further four in which the grief is limited to anger. In three novels with a male main character there is no grief, with a further five in which it is fairly negligible (numbness, stifling of tears and so on). Thus 21% of females are presented as feeling no grief compared to 32% of males.

Grief is split into anticipatory (prior to death), immediate (at death) and prolonged (after death). I found that in 70% of novels in which anticipatory grief occurs there is a female main character, and the figure is very similar for prolonged grief. There are four novels in which all three grief responses occur and in all of these there is a female main character. In 37% of novels only one response is presented. Sixty-one per cent of these involve a male character.

In ten novels anticipatory grief is presented, in forty immediate grief is presented and in twenty-five prolonged grief is presented.

In fourteen books the death results in no visible changes to the main character (close to the fifteen books in the earlier study). In 33% the death results

¹⁰⁰ Moore and Mae, 57.

in relocation, in 47% there is a work, school, family or financial change and in 16% a relationship is affected. There is no significant difference between male and female characters in this respect.

A significant change from Moore and Mae's study is that they found that 'Professional intervention occurred disproportionately more often for females than males.'¹⁰¹ In my study 62% of instances in which intervention took place involve male characters.

In 20% of novels there is a sense of continuity (a life after death) offered. Most novels (63%) present death in a final way, with 17% questioning but not defining continuity.

Moore and Mae use six descriptors to categorise how the central character responds to death: 'Three were stereotypically male attributes- tough, autonomous, competent- and three stereotypically female attributes- affiliative, dependent, expressive.'¹⁰² In my study the grief of fifteen (31%) of the main characters is categorised as being stereotypically female, twenty-two (45%) male and twelve (24%) mixed. Of the characters with a female response 25% are male, 32% of characters with a male response are female. Mixed responses are fairly evenly split (42% female, 58% male).

Twenty of the books are categorised as bereavement novels, eight as novels in which bereavement is an important issue, seven as 'other' and twelve as those in which the death works as a plot motor. In only one of the latter thirteen is there a female main character, and in only one does the main character (a male) cry.

¹⁰¹ Moore and Mae, 58.

¹⁰² Moore and Mae, 56.

Analysis

The statistics on national setting are not particularly illuminating. Of more interest is the vagueness of the locality in novels set in Britain. In most of the novels set outside the United Kingdom, the geography is integral. However, not only are more than half of the novels set in the United Kingdom given an unspecified location (many could be any city), but in many of those in which a location is known specific detail is very limited. In only three novels set in Britain are there details presented which give a firm sense of geographical location: *The Ostrich Boys* (Cleethorpes to Scotland by train), *The Rope Ladder* (the London setting in particular) and *Where the Mermaids Sing* (set in Brighton). This is an important point with regard to *Day*: a claim for originality lies in the distinct setting of Leeds. Only 6% of novels studied offer a specific setting. None of these is a Northern city. It is also worth pointing out that none of the novels are set in the 1970s, another possible claim for originality.

The ages of the deceased characters are fairly similar to those in Moore and Mae's study, although I found slightly more children and elderly people presented as dying. Moore and Mae point out that their figures are very much at variance with statistical evidence that 'over half the deaths in any given year [in North America] are of people aged sixty-five or over'.¹⁰³ In Britain in 2009 only 4.4% of deaths occurred under the age of forty-five.¹⁰⁴ It is impossible to find a comparable figure from my data as the majority of novels do not give an exact age of the deceased adults. However, we know that 35% were under thirty and given that 50% of the overall deaths were of parents of children and many would be late thirties/early forties, the figure is likely to be anywhere between 70% and 90%. We can thus conclude, as Moore and Mae say, that 'Children who read this literature thus are provided with a much exaggerated evaluation of the likelihood of their own deaths

¹⁰³ Moore and Mae, 60.

¹⁰⁴ British Mortality Rates for 2009 on <http://spreadsheets.google.com/ccc?key=tFA5-DLo10BAItv7vzCHs6w#gid=0> [consulted 1 May 2010].

and those of their peers and parents, while the very realistic expectation that elderly people of their acquaintance will die is minimized.¹⁰⁵

Moore and Mae do not give their figures on the causes of death, but say that there were 'dramatically high rates' of accidents, suicides and murders in their study. In 2009 over 96% of deaths in Britain were caused by illness. In the novels in my study that figure is 41%. Of the (almost) half a million deaths in 2009, 205 were caused by drowning or submersion. However, there are three cases of drowning amongst this study. Drowning is exceptionally rare, and statistically negligible, yet occurs in 6% of the novels. Whether this will induce anxiety in readers is open to debate. Were the deaths reflective of the real statistics then it might be suggested that this would cause children to fear illness, which might be more rational, but would not benefit them.

The increase in the number of novels found to be lacking any mourning ritual is surprising. One might assume that the increased awareness that these rituals are important to children would be reflected in the data. However, it might well be that the increased awareness is limited to the professional community: a fairly unscientific survey of my own friends and relations suggests that most parents would still be more inclined to shield children from the mourning process. The novels may therefore only be reflecting a common experience.

It is useful to note that almost half the novels not presenting a mourning ritual were classified as PM, books in which the role of the death was primarily a plot motor. In *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, for example, the death of Percy's mother provides him with the motivation to seek revenge on the Minotaur as well giving him independence from parental constraints. A funeral would have slowed down the narrative. (In any case, his mother dissolves into a golden shower of light so a funeral would be inappropriate). Whether these novels have a responsibility to treat a subject like bereavement seriously is open to debate.

The discrepancy between female characters and male characters crying is not as great as expected and might suggest a more positive attitude towards male

¹⁰⁵ Moore and Mae, 60.

gender roles. Male tears tend to be briefer and more reluctant than female tears, but at least they are being presented. In *Fightback* Kier cries and then says ‘That’s it. No more.’¹⁰⁶ This is not always the case by any means. Moore and Mae make no mention of books that I have labelled ‘Bereavement Novels’. Fourteen per cent of their books they call ‘problem novels’, by which they presumably mean novels that Hunt refers to when he says that ‘the religious/didactic element in children’s books has been replaced by a movement to be politically correct’.¹⁰⁷ Hunt is discussing books written in the 1970s and 1980s and mentions terminal illness as a ‘problem’ amongst others such as homosexuality, racism and blindness. Although Moore and Mae suggest that death is a frequent theme in realistic fiction for children, novels for teenagers in which bereavement is a *central* issue are a relatively new breed, and there are several in the sample in which boys cry with feeling. Some are convincing and interesting, but some offer a dot-to-dot approach to bereavement that will be discussed later.

The variety of symptoms of grief are similar to those found by Moore and Mae. Again, it is interesting to note the differences between grief presented in novels classified as PM with those classified as BN. The latter include obsessive behaviour, anxiety, tears, anger, embarrassment, guilt, self-harming, physical pain, loneliness and confusion. In the former the symptoms are much more limited: anger, tears, guilt, shock and symptoms that are variations on numbness. It is clear that novels that use the death of a loved one as a plot motor generally regard bereavement as an inconvenience to be overcome in the most perfunctory manner before the protagonist sets off on an adventure. Whilst it was not as widespread as I had anticipated, the holding back of tears occurs in three novels and, needless to say, all of these involve male characters. There is still a suggestion that male tears are a sign of weakness.

It seems also that grief is presented as more sustained when there is a female character. That there is no visible change to the main character in fourteen books following the death of a person close to them is strange and, Moore and Mae would

¹⁰⁶ Steve Voake, *Fightback* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Hunt, *Introduction*, 149.

say, a cause for concern. Whether or not the death is used primarily as a plot motor, it would seem to be a flaw in the narrative if a character is unaffected by such an event. An extreme example of this comes in *Red Moon*, in which Hamish's father is stabbed to death (randomly by a psychotic woman) and Hamish's reaction is to say 'I never really got on with him anyway'.¹⁰⁸ In *Martyn Pig* the eponymous hero's father is introduced with no redeeming features at all, so that when he dies (accidentally, following a defensive push from Martyn), Martyn's lack of concern is supposed to appear convincing.

A more potentially healthy change is the shift in the percentage of males presented as being subject to intervention. This is marred by the significant dip in the number of interventions overall. Moore and Mae recorded that in twenty-nine books there was some type of immediate intervention, compared to the thirteen in my study. If we widen the net to include novels in which the main character gets the chance to express any feelings of grief to another (Moore and Mae's own criteria of what constitutes intervention are vague), then the figure goes up to twenty. I cannot account for the discrepancy.

The percentage of deaths presented in a final way is, as expected in a largely secular society, high. I found it interesting that all but one that offer a sense of continuity, or those that question but do not define continuity, seem to avoid mainstream Christian doctrine. The vast majority of main characters are white British. Depending on what survey you read, the amount of people in Britain who describe themselves as Christian is anywhere between 50% and 70%. As discussed, many of the novels offer the Christian rituals of mourning (albeit very brief in some cases) but not afterlife. This occurs even in the books in which Christianity is a stronger theme. In *The Pursuit of Liberty Belle*, Liberty mourns the death of her boyfriend, an Orthodox Christian from Bosnia, and there is a lengthy church scene. However, advice about the afterlife comes from a Native American. *A Swift Pure Cry* presents Catholicism as a backdrop that infuses and enriches the narrative, and Shell hears her mother's voice at times, but the afterlife to which her mother and

¹⁰⁸Rachel Anderson, *Red Moon* (London: Hodder, 2006), p. 26.

baby have gone is never defined as heaven. Afterlife is presented in the books through various means: voice, vision, meeting with the deceased, feeling of someone's presence, even in one case a computer programme (*The Reminder*). The unfashionable image of Christianity, however, may mean that publishers regard the presentation of a Christian heaven as a turn-off for teenagers. The one novel in which God and angels are mentioned is aimed, interestingly, at a younger audience. *Wenny Has Wings* employs an eleven-year-old narrator who writes letters to various people, including God.

A bigger argument here, and one which Moore and Mae do not discuss, is how healthy it is to present the bereaved as being offered evidence as to an afterlife. The vast majority of bereaved people do not see visions or hear voices or meet their dead parents and, brutal as it may sound, it seems like lazy writing to paint a romantic and fanciful picture in order to tie up the strands of the plot and achieve the resolution of the grief of the protagonist.

The absence of tears in novels in which the death works as a plot motor is worth comment. The majority of these novels are adventure stories with a male protagonist written for a male audience. It still seems ridiculous that tears are deemed out of place for a male teenage audience, even in an adventure story. In *Fightback*, the only novel of this kind in which the hero cries, he does so only briefly. Initially, he is 'numb with shock'.¹⁰⁹ Other reactions include anger, not wanting to talk about it and 'freaking'.¹¹⁰ In *Boy Kills Man* Shorty feels an 'empty space' following the murder of his best friend but he refuses to cry,¹¹¹ as does Torak in *Wolf Brother*. A book not classified as using death as a plot motor, but similar in genre and audience is the best-selling *Silverfin*. At the end of the novel the thirteen-year-old James Bond is told of the death of his uncle by Charmian, James's aunt. She has tears in her eyes but when James's voice gets hoarse with emotion, she says 'He wouldn't have wanted tears and emotion'.¹¹² There are oddities elsewhere in the sample. In *How Kirsty Jenkins Stole the Elephant* Kirsty, twelve, and her seventeen-

¹⁰⁹ Voake, 7.

¹¹⁰ Robert Muchamore, *The Recruit* (London: Hodder, 1999), p. 18.

¹¹¹ Matt Whyman, *Boy Kills Man* (London: Hodder, 2004), p. 117.

¹¹² Charlie Higson, *Silverfin* (London: Puffin, 2005), p. 365.

year-old sister, Dawn, cry several times over the death of their grandfather. Ben, the fourteen-year-old brother does not. In fact, for most of the novel he remains very upbeat.

The analysis of these books reveals a number of interesting points. *Day*, it seems, has a setting (and narrative time frame) that is original: none of the novels studied has a distinct Northern setting or is set in the 1970s. The discussion of drowning leads to the question of whether reading about a death is, as Moore and Mae suggest, likely to result in a child's fear of that death. This harkens back to the discussion of bibliotherapy and here we may have the advantage of hindsight over Moore and Mae: research undertaken since their article was published has made this suggestion look a little crude.

I would agree with Moore and Mae that those novels in which bereavement is at least an issue should not be tempted to simplify, sanitise or condense the experience for expediency's sake. Just as shielding a child from the mourning process may be detrimental in later life, so shielding them from the realities of bereavement within a novel cannot be a positive thing and may be irresponsible.

However, I cannot believe that in novels in which death is a plot motor that the reader will necessarily be affected unduly by the presentation of a condensed bereavement. The sense of 'responsibility' alluded to elsewhere in this critical reflection is important here. Within a novel in which bereavement is treated seriously a reader expects a serious response, but in an adventure novel, in which disbelief is already being extensively suspended, it is clearly inappropriate to slow the narrative down by portraying a prolonged grieving process. The inclusion of tears does not, however, slow down the narrative and the association of non-crying with bravery (even in the face of the death of a parent), as presented in some of these types of novels seems too much like the lazy presentation of stereotypical male characteristics that is both unrealistic and possibly detrimental to a young male reader. The resolution of grief through the presentation of vision, voices or images of the deceased also seems to me to be both unrealistic and unhelpful. This is discussed further, with examples, in the next chapter.

Honest and True: further discussion of the novels¹¹³

There is a crucial area not thus far discussed. It is not within Moore and Mae's remit to look at the 'literary merits' of the novels,¹¹⁴ but even so there is very little within their article that suggests that their reaction to the reading was anything but negative. Conversely, my own research was a hugely rewarding experience. Many of the novels are moving, some inspirational, a few dreadful, but I certainly feel that I have achieved my aim, which was to gain a more rounded appreciation of the genre that would impact in a positive way upon the writing of *Day*.

There are several brilliant novels on my list. Personal favourites include: *Breathing Underwater*, *Love*, *Aubrey*, *Millions*, *River Boy*, *Skin*, *Ostrich Boys*, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *The Rope Ladder*, *The Truth About Forever*, *A Swift Pure Cry*, *Boy Kills Man*, *Thursday's Child*, *Careless*, *Dustbin Baby*, *Journey to the End of the World*, *The Road*, *From Where I Stand*, *Revolver*, *Silverfin* and *The Year the Gypsies Came*. There were, inevitably, some books with which I was less impressed. In the last chapter of this reflection I shall offer a more personal analysis of a small selection of the novels making connections to *Day* where appropriate. I shall choose novels from different genres and age brackets¹¹⁵ in order to consider how different types of novels treat bereavement.

Moving On, a piece of realistic fiction aimed at twelve to fourteen-year-olds, is an excellent example of a dot-to-dot bereavement novel: it is well intentioned and well constructed but too much is being *told* to the reader to the detriment of the narrative. The main character is fourteen-year-old Martin Morgan, and his

¹¹³ Julia Green, email (16 May 2011). The message is discussed later in the chapter, but Green opens by saying of her novel, *Breathing Underwater*: 'I want to be honest and true in the writing'.

¹¹⁴ Moore and Mae, 61.

¹¹⁵ Genre will be, at times, difficult to allocate. Many of the novels might be classified as 'realistic fiction' but with comic, romantic or fantastical elements. Regarding age range, of course the novels discussed all fall within the ten to fourteen age band. However, some may be aimed at, say, a target audience of nine to twelve-year-olds, whilst others are firmly teenage. It would thus be interesting to consider how this affects the presentation of bereavement.

grandfather is introduced very early on as the only person that Martin can speak to properly because 'Martin didn't communicate with his parents much at all these days. Ask any of his friends and they would say the same thing. Their parents just weren't on the same wavelength.'¹¹⁶ Instead of showing us the lack of parental communication, the writer simply tells us about it. Martin then tells his grandfather about the girl whom he likes at school, thus quickly establishing the grandfather as the perfect relative for an adolescent boy, whilst also introducing the idea of a future relationship.

The novel continues to tick all the right boxes: Martin cries openly when his grandfather dies; there is a viewing followed by a funeral; Martin worries about life after death; he has problems at home and at school; teachers recommend a bereavement councillor but Martin speaks to a girl about his feelings. It ends with Martin becoming closer to his parents and with the full resolution of his grief.

The plot seems to have been hung around a guide to bereavement and there is not enough space for readers to make their own choices. The experience of bereavement itself is also far too obvious and clichéd. Told about the death 'he felt a pain he'd never experienced before'.¹¹⁷ His tears are 'hot' and 'angry'.¹¹⁸ His mother tries to get him involved with the preparations for the funeral but he just feels scared: 'Scared of seeing a dead body. Scared of the funeral. And on top of that he kept *crying* all the time and that scared him too'.¹¹⁹

The novel ends with Martin on his way home from school:

And as he went past Grandad's on the way home, he thought that Grandad would be pleased at how he'd got things sorted.

Then, suddenly, he felt a warm glow jockeying for position inside him dulling the edge of the pain. It felt like he was moving on at last.

¹¹⁶ Sue Vyner, *Moving On* (London: Evans Brothers, 2004), p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Vyner, 19.

¹¹⁸ Vyner, 21.

¹¹⁹ Vyner, 31.

He hurried past the bungalow. Looking forward to telling Dad all about the day. Guessing he'd be pleased. He might even tell Mum about Angela, he thought. As long as she didn't make *too* much fuss.¹²⁰

The novel has lost all credibility by this point. Fourteen-year-old boys do not behave like this, running home to tell his dad about his day and his mother about his girlfriend. Every strand of the plot comes from the experience of bereavement and the writer finds it necessary to find a full resolution to the boy's grief and in so doing fails to tick the last and perhaps most important box. The effects of real grief are long-lasting and complicated. The writer seems to have assumed that providing hope to a teenage audience means ending with every strand tied up neatly and no questions left unanswered.

Reading *Moving On* was a very useful experience because it offers a model of bereavement that I want to undermine. All great writers, it seems to me, undermine the reader's expectations, and by offering a paradigm of a conventional bereavement novel, *Moving On* allowed me to explore ways of resisting the obvious. For example, I realised that my novel mirrors Vyner's in its depiction of a male protagonist confiding in a female, in itself a well-worn trope: female as passive listener to male angst. Of course, there is every likelihood that a boy of fourteen would confide in an older girl who has shown him kindness, and it is essential for my story that he does have the chance to discuss his grief. However, I wanted to complicate the reader's reaction by undermining the obvious model provided by *Moving On*: boy is upset, he meets girl who has had the same experience, he confides and feels immediately better. Limiting the effectiveness of Shirley's advice became important here: "... there's nowt you can do. Your mam's dead so you can't make it up with her. You just got to get on with it. But what I can say is that you've to stop feeling guilty..."¹²¹ The words are not those of a consoling romantic interest, but the earthy advice of a young woman who realised a long time ago that life is not fair.

¹²⁰ Vyner, 125-126.

¹²¹ Day, 136.

Likewise, Daniel's subsequent anger is met with irritation rather than sympathy, and it is the boy rather than the girl who bursts into tears.

I was always determined to avoid the type of neat ending presented in *Moving On*. There is a sense of hope at the end of *Day*, but I have intentionally avoided any references to Daniel's mother when he goes to bed at the end of the novel. The fact that his mother is not mentioned does not mean that he is not thinking about her. Having Daniel fall asleep in the middle of his Leeds United mantra both reminds us that the grief is still there, but also suggests the beginning of a resolution. There are also plenty of questions left hanging in the air. Shirley does not want to see him again, Jason Milner is out there and may want to seek revenge and his stepbrother still hates him. He has come to understand his stepfather better, but he will not be running home to discuss his girlfriends.

Moving On, with all its box ticking, still fails in three key areas: resolution is too neat, the bereavement process is too sanitised and, most importantly, the writing is full of clichés of expression and plot. This does not mean, however, that a novel that satisfies Moore and Mae's criteria cannot do so without becoming formulaic, and *Love, Aubrey* is a good example of this.

The novel opens after the deaths (of Aubrey's father and her six-year-old sister) take place. Again, many of the criteria are fulfilled for the bereavement novel: there is a funeral; Aubrey experiences relocation of house and school in moving to her Grandmother's; she writes to Jesus asking why he took her family; and the short and long-term effect of bereavement is presented through her panic attacks, tears, vomiting, stomach cramps and nightmares. She also sees a school councillor who is very helpful.

However, it is striking from the beginning how little LaFleur tells the reader. Aubrey is the narrator and, as she is eleven years old, this makes her fairly unreliable. The novel opens,

It was fun at first, playing house.

I made all my own meals. Crackers and cheese, three times a day.

I watched whatever I wanted on TV, all day.¹²²

The opening subverts the conventional parent-free plot in which the children find themselves alone and become empowered by the experience. Here we are offered warning signs that all is not well (the adverbial phrase 'at first', the unhealthy diet, the disjointed paragraphs), but the tone is upbeat and we have a narrator who is not feeling sorry for herself. I am interested in how writers avoid sentimentality and melodrama when presenting bereavement and LaFleur largely achieves this in *Love, Aubrey*. The reader discovers the circumstances of the deaths of Aubrey's father and sister not through a flashback but from a note that Aubrey finds in her school file:

Aubrey Priestly comes to us from Virginia
Survivor of car crash that killed her father, sister in April
Neglected and abandoned by her mother
Now residing with grandmother
Sessions with school counsellor strongly recommended ¹²³

It is an unusual and inventive method of supplying the reader with this crucial information. Aubrey's response to seeing the note is to be sick in a trash can, and LaFleur does not flinch from offering the reader physical responses that prevent Aubrey from being a cute little victim. When her new friend Bridgette suggests that they play sisters Aubrey has a panic attack in which she tries to be sick but only 'streams of spit' come from her mouth.¹²⁴ She then claws at the earth to try and get back to her buried sister.

There are occasions when the writing does veer towards the sentimental, as suggested by the blurb on the front of the novel: 'She will make you cry. She will make you smile. Aubrey will stay with you forever.' Certainly, some of the letters,

¹²² Suzanne LaFleur, *Love, Aubrey* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 3.

¹²³ LaFleur, 66.

¹²⁴ LaFleur, 83.

and in particular the one to Baby Jesus, become a little cloying. This is not to my personal taste and I agree with Peter Hunt when he comments that ‘sentimentality is not a notable characteristic of childhood itself.’¹²⁵ However, LaFleur manages to get away with it, and I feel that this is partly because she does not avoid depicting the unpleasant aspects of bereavement. The ending of the novel offers a good contrast to that of *Moving On*. Aubrey writes a letter to her mother in which there is plenty of hope: her mother has recovered and is ready to take her back, Aubrey is ‘really happy’, she has an established best friend and she ends by saying that ‘Everything is going to be okay.’¹²⁶ However, she also does not want to go back to Virginia to live with her mother and repeats the phrase ‘I am not ready yet’. The resolution is therefore tempered with the weighty decision of the (now) twelve-year-old girl not to live with her mother. Aubrey also says that her grandmother is good to her, ‘even when I am being a baby’, a euphemistic reference to her grief which, unlike Martin’s in *Moving On* (but like Daniel’s), is ongoing.

Reading *Love Aubrey* forced me to reconsider the amount that I was *telling* the reader. Daniel is, of course, older than Aubrey, and capable of more mature self-expression, and the internal monologues are an integral part of *Day*. I was thus wary of cutting these down, especially when I was satisfied with their efficacy. However, I wanted to create more space for the readers to make their own decisions. Following discussion with Rebecca Smith, I decided to incorporate the Leeds United mantra. At moments of anxiety Daniel whispers to himself the names of the Leeds United FA Cup winning side of 1972. This device is used to bring out the slightly autistic side of some boys (as a teenager I, like Daniel, alphabetised both my book and cassette collection), and is less intrusive as an authorial technique than a description of his anxiety. It is also never explained to the reader, and occurs at the beginning and end of the narrative signalling, as discussed above, a sense of resolution. I also re-visited Daniel’s conversation with Ronald in the final chapter, and made one simple change. Instead of agreeing to go to his mother’s grave, Daniel now refuses, offering hope within the line ‘Maybe next week’. The hope is

¹²⁵ Hunt, *Introduction*, 18.

¹²⁶ LaFleur, 262.

important, but so too is presentation of an on-going grief, and within a twenty-four hour narrative in particular I decided that a visit to the grave might be too quick a step forward for the character.

Sentimentality features heavily in Patricia Maclachlan's *Edward's Eyes*. Here is the twelve-year-old Jake describing the moment when he is first handed his newborn baby brother:

I remember sitting very still, so scared I can't move. And then it happens. Edward opens his eyes and looks at me. His eyes are the dark mud-blue of the night sky, but there are surprising little flecks of gold in them. They stare right into my eyes. My heart begins to beat faster. I try to say something. Want to say that Edward is beautiful... the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I want to say that I love him more than anything or anyone I know. But I am only three, and when I try to talk I can't say all those words. "His eyes," I begin.¹²⁷

Edward is immediately established as the perfect fifth child in a perfect family. From an early age he loves art, music, being read to in French and, above all, baseball. He dies in a cycling accident. Jake's last words to him are 'Don't take your bike, Edward. We never fixed those brakes.'¹²⁸ However, Edward is on a mission to buy his baby sister a baseball cap and ignores Jake's warning. Following his death, Edward's eyes are donated to a baseball player. There is no music in the house for a short time until they receive a letter from the baseball player, Willie Roberts, thanking them: 'I know you must have loved the person who gave me these wonderful eyes.'¹²⁹ This helps provide a sense of resolution as the novel ends with Jake meeting Willie and seeing Edward in his eyes. The last words are 'We were home.'¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Patricia Maclachlan, *Edward's Eyes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), p. 7.

¹²⁸ Maclachlan, 77.

¹²⁹ Maclachlan, 107.

¹³⁰ Maclachlan, 116.

Moore and Mae's concluding comments on the inadequacies of many of the novels on their list suggest a sense of frustration that the writers are letting children down: "Judging from the sample evaluated here, there is no reason to suppose that currently available children's fiction provides help or guidance to children experiencing the aftermath of such a traumatic event."¹³¹ I admit to feeling a similar sense of frustration at reading *Edward's Eyes*. The experience of bereavement is not just sanitised, it is romanticised and this is unforgiveable. There seems to be no attempt to offer a realistic portrayal of grief and its aftermath, and the cornea transplant that is coincidentally to a baseball player represents the lazy resolution of a novel that offers nothing of value to bereaved children. There is a worse novel on my list (the plot of *Red Moon*, as mentioned earlier, makes no sense whatsoever), but this is the only novel with bereavement at its core that so fully abnegates any sense of responsibility towards its readership.

Bereavement is *not* romantic, and that is, I hope, clearly represented in *Day*. During the narrative flashback in the first chapter, Daniel is asked by Mr Bedford if he would like more time at home:

Daniel might have replied that more time spent at home was the last thing he needed. That at present he walked painfully slowly the long way through the park to the bus-stop, and then sat and watched the buses go past until he was so cold that he had to get on one. That he kicked leaves up and down the pavement before eventually opening his gate, and even then sometimes went around the back and sat in the garage for a while. Putting off the inevitable re-entering the house where his mother wasn't.¹³²

I try to give the sense of the grim tedium of bereavement as I remember it. There is nothing romantic about this situation: Daniel is stuck in a grey classroom with a teacher he dislikes who is grudgingly offering support and his home life is equally as bleak and lonely.

¹³¹ Moore and Mae, 61.

¹³² *Day*, 87.

Another unusual method of introducing the character's death occurs in *Millions* by Frank Cottrell Boyce, in which the two brothers, Anthony and Damien, the narrator, use the death of their mother to their advantage with comic effect. They have just gone to a new school and a bigger boy, 'Freckle Neck', takes away Damien's Pringles. Anthony tells the boy:

"You can't take his Pringles. He's got no mum."

"How can he have no mum? Everyone's got a mum. Even people who've got no dad have got a mum. I'm enjoying these, by the way."

"She's dead," said Anthony.

Freckle Neck stopped crunching and handed my Pringles back. He said his name was Barry.¹³³

Thereafter Anthony uses the line to neighbours and shopkeepers to get free gifts, which is a subtle comment on the inability of adults, including the well-meaning father, to offer real support to grieving children. In between the comedy, Cottrell Boyce skilfully allows us glimpses of the turmoil going on inside the boys' heads. When they get a takeaway in Chapter Four, Damien wants to eat on plates but his father and brother just want to use the polystyrene trays:

"You said we've got to do things properly. We've got to be excellent. You said. And now you're eating out of the trays. We didn't used to do that before." I was shouting now. "Sit at the table!"

Dad tried to calm me down. "Damian, you think you're upset, but really you're just hungry."

"I'm not hungry. I just want us to sit at the table like a proper family. And do things right."¹³⁴

¹³³ Frank Cottrell Boyce, *Millions* (London: Macmillan, 2004), p. 7.

¹³⁴ Cottrell Boyce, 34.

Like LaFleur, Cottrell Boyce does not tell us that Damien is grieving. The writer captures the feelings of confusion that children, and indeed adults, have about bereavement. I taught this novel to a Year Seven class in Spring 2010 and none of the children associated the anger Damien feels in this scene with the death of his mother. However, this does not necessarily indicate a failure of the writing. The children did get the sense of a boy who is unaccountably angry and confused, and these are key features of bereavement. The scene offered an opportunity for a class discussion of the way that people show that they are upset, and how it is not always logical.

The way in which the reader learns of the death is, as we have seen, an important choice for the writer. In *Day* this occurs very early in the story. Daniel wakes up after another nightmare and decides to go and see his mother downstairs:

Daniel looked back at the clock. His mother would still be up, working probably. He could pretend to have a question for her and that would give him an excuse to say goodnight again; a quick hug and he'd be fine. He was halfway through the door when he remembered. The only one downstairs was his stepfather watching television. His mum had been dead for three months now.¹³⁵

There are some significant changes here from an earlier draft:

Daniel looked back at the clock. It was only 10.52. His mother would still be up. He wasn't too proud to seek some comfort, to let her stroke his hair, kiss his forehead and send him back to bed reassured and relaxed. He was halfway through the door when he remembered. The only one downstairs was his stepfather watching television. Daniel's mother had died three months before.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ *Day*, 83.

¹³⁶ *Day*, draft two, 5.

As well as the informal 'mum' that is more appropriate for a teenage focaliser, I have also tried to reduce the pathos through the suggestion of a 'quick hug' rather than the kisses and stroking of the earlier draft. The inclusion of the word 'dead' feels more stark than 'died' and I wanted this to be as straightforward a statement as possible.¹³⁷ There may not be the inventiveness of *Love, Aubrey* or *Millions* here as this key piece of information is offered to the reader, but *Day* is a very different novel and this starkness is, I feel, appropriate to a novel in which the everyday is so important.

Millions, *Edward's Eyes* and *Love, Aubrey* are all aimed at the same age group, around nine to twelve-year-olds. They are roughly of the same genre: that is, the misnomer 'realistic fiction'. Whilst none are, as we have seen, aiming at gritty realism, to my mind the success (of lack of it) achieved regarding the depiction of bereavement lies in the author's ability to incorporate the grit whilst still providing hope. Hope is very important in children's literature, and more so the younger the audience. My dentist once complained that most parents tell their children that their fillings will not hurt: 'What chance does that give us?' he asked. Similarly, a novel in which the pain of bereavement is glossed over is not helpful. However, this has to be presented in a way that does not cause anxiety to the reader.

If *Day* were aimed at this younger audience I would need to make some changes regarding the presentation of bereavement. The bleakness and loneliness alluded to would need to be reconsidered, or at least represented differently. *Aubrey* is lonely and upset, but the tone of the narrative is upbeat, and she never regards herself as a victim. Likewise, in *Millions* the two brothers have a tough time, especially Damien, but the comedy and their refusal to feel sorry for themselves prevents them from becoming victims.

I have mentioned that some of the sentimentality of *Love, Aubrey* is not to my taste, and in *Millions* it is the appearance of Damien's dead mother to reassure him near the end of the novel that I find unnecessarily whimsical. Damien has seen visions before this point, but he is the only character who does so, and this can be

explained by his confused psychological state. However, the pragmatic Anthony also sees the vision of his mother, so its existence is confirmed. In Julia Green's *Breathing Underwater*, a teenage novel and thus at the older end of my list, Freya's dead brother, Joe, appears to her several times, but the sightings are fleeting and are presented ambiguously, as though they could be the product of a hopeful bereaved mind. Freya has returned to the Scilly Isles where Joe was killed in a yachting accident the year before. Later in the novel Freya goes for a midnight swim and finds herself struggling against the current and Joe appears and helps her to the shore. This could be the result of exhaustion, but the closing lines of the scene, "Finally, Joe let me go", suggest a resolution to her grief. I found myself wondering if I should be incorporating this kind of vision into *Day*. Instead of the novel ending with Daniel going to bed, he could find a vision of his mother sitting in his room, for example. It still seemed like a cheap trick, however, for the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, and in spite of my admiration for *Millions* and *Breathing Underwater*, I couldn't help feeling that the authors could have found an alternative method of resolution.

I contacted Julia Green and Frank Cottrell Boyce. I was very grateful for Julia Green's reply, which was both useful and interesting:

I do know that many people in a state of grief imagine they 'see' the person who has died. They certainly want to. I want to be honest and true in the writing.

The chapter you refer to is a pivotal scene. I wanted it to have a different feel and tone to the other chapters. It's the point where the 'real' world and the 'other' world - which might be called the imagination, or a spiritual dimension, or a projection of Freya's own need and desperation - collide... At the point of real extremity, of crisis, when Freya is exhausted far out to sea, she comes closest to understanding what happened to her brother. She's so close to him, it's as if she conjures him up in her imagination - or maybe (I allow this interpretation too) she actually does. Maybe he is there beside her in spirit. And the thought of him, feeling so close to him, brings Freya the strength she

needs to swim back to shore against the tide. The effect, afterwards, is one of release. At last, she can let him go. Or rather, he lets her go. I found this quite moving to write. Some readers (including adult readers) have told me how this chapter touched them deeply, especially those who have themselves lost someone they loved. Some teenagers read it very literally. They believe Joe is actually there. That's fine too.¹³⁸

This response suggests a writer who displays the kind of responsibility previously discussed: she has clearly thought carefully about the scene and its implications. In fact, my own research indicates that visions are not a key part of grief, and Tugendhat's point about internalising rather than releasing suggests that letting go of the memory is not necessarily either healthy or indeed possible. I do agree that the scene is very moving, and that there is an ambiguity present that allows the readers to make their own choices.

Green's novel is a beautifully written one, an example being Freya's expression of grief: 'I miss him so much it's like a physical pain running through my whole body, like mineral through rock.'¹³⁹ The plot is similar to that of *Day*, in that the grieving protagonist falls into unreciprocated love with someone older, in Freya's case, Matt. Reading Freya's descriptions of Izzy, Matt's girlfriend, made me revisit my own description of Shirley:

She has this open, smiling face and all that golden hair and she's sort of brimming over with something. Happiness? Confidence? I notice it because it's the opposite of me, right now. And because it's a shock to realise that. *This* isn't the one I used to be.¹⁴⁰

Green manages to say something about both characters within the paragraph, offering us the charismatic Izzy whilst also giving us a glimpse of the pre-

¹³⁸ Julia Green, email (16 May 2011). Cottrell Boyce did not reply.

¹³⁹ Julia Green, *Breathing Underwater* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 167.

¹⁴⁰ Green, 38.

bereavement, confident Freya. I try to incorporate a similar technique in the café as Daniel watches Shirley finish her yoghurt:

There were several faces wearing probably the same appreciative expression as him. And they weren't all men because it wasn't all a sex thing. She just seemed to glow all over like nothing could really touch her, like she could work in a kiosk or a factory or an office or wherever and she would still be free and confident and be able to gaze out of dirty windows and be filled with the pleasure of seeing rain.

Then she turned her eyes on him and the smile on the edges of her mouth told him that she had, after all, been expecting him to be looking at her and he felt confused and his face burnt.¹⁴¹

Daniel's perception of Shirley tells the reader about both characters. Shirley is more streetwise than Freya, and is aware of the effect that she has on Daniel. Her charisma shines through, but so does Daniel's naivety, and his lack of experience with girls leads him towards his ill-conceived attack on Jason Milner later on. There are no perfect characters in the novel, and no one (and certainly not Daniel) is presented as being without fault. This is certainly true of Mungo in *The Rope Ladder* by Nigel Richardson. He shouts at his mother and is rude about pretty much everyone he meets. Encouraged by his two friends, Vern and Barry, he also beats up a boy nicknamed 'The Gobber':

Let's not go into detail, but I did what Vern said. I battered the Gobber. I battered him so badly that Vern and Barry shouted at me to stop. But I didn't stop, and they grabbed hold of me to try to make me. Then a woman in a house on the far side of the canal shouted that she was calling the police and,

¹⁴¹ Day, 133.

finally, I did stop. And we scattered. Or Vern, Barry, and I did. I'm not sure how well the Gobber could walk after what I did to him.¹⁴²

That this stems from his grief at the death of his father is not spelt out and it is interesting how unappealing Richardson makes Mungo whilst still retaining the reader's sympathy. The novel is an excellent antidote for those who think that suffering necessarily turns one into a better person. I do not take Daniel as far as Richardson but it was always very important to me that he is flawed, even if his flaws stem from confusion. It would have been easy, for example, to present him as resistant to the racism and homophobia in his school, but in the pre-politically correct world of a boys' grammar school in the 1970s these issues did not seem as clear cut as they are today. Richardson's novel reassured me that you can give a character unappealing traits, and even make him commit despicable acts, as long as the reader is given glimpses of the pain that lies beneath.

In *Skin* by A.M. Vrettos, another teenage novel, the writer manages to find the voice of a twelve-year-old boy, Donnie, with remarkable accuracy. Donnie's anorexic sister, Karen, dies at the beginning of the novel, but we then go back to the two years preceding it, so that when it does take place it has become an event that we have been dreading. The characterisations are all very convincing, and at every turn the writer manages to defy another cliché. The presentation of parental rows and the accompanying familial tension are particularly effective, as is the childish lust Donnie feels for his sister's friend, Amanda, and the horrors of school life for someone who is viewed as a loser. Chapter thirty-six opens the day after Karen's death:

You still eat breakfast when someone dies, especially if they die like my sister. I think that's weird. I would have liked everything to stop. But Mom is knocking lightly on my bedroom door, telling me breakfast is on the table and

¹⁴² Nigel Richardson, *The Rope Ladder* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.

we need to be at the church by ten. Mom's voice is barely there, and she walks like someone is standing on her shoulders.

I'm up already. I'm even in my suit. I found it last night in the attic and slept in it. It smells like my sister because she wore it last, for Halloween two years ago. There's a buzzing sound in my very hot head. It's going to get me through today. If I concentrate on it and look at it with my mind, then my whole body will buzz and I won't feel anything that is happening.¹⁴³

The novel is packed with insight of this kind; there is that sense of incomprehension that the everyday details of life can continue unabated. The image of his mother's shoulders bearing the weight of another convey without melodrama her anguish, but her lack of voice also suggests a lack of communication with Donnie, who is being left to cope on his own. The fact that Donnie slept in a suit that smells of his sister shows us his own devastation. His wish for the buzzing in his head to drown out the dreadful day in front of him is a particularly childlike way of dealing with a trauma with which no one is helping him.

Donnie spends much of his time trying to keep the peace between the other members of his family, and in particular trying to pacify his father, who is prone to bouts of childishness. Following the parents' separation, the father makes an unannounced visit to the house and sulks when they are not excited by his appearance. The mother is forced to declare a 'family fun night'. She is described as 'an open wound waiting for salt', and this is metaphorically poured when the father asks why they don't have the ingredients to make sundaes.

Karen and I lock eyes. You might think he was talking about ice cream. But we know that what he just said loosely translates into: "You are a rotten wife and you deprive your family of love by not keeping sweetened dairy products ready to serve at all times."

¹⁴³ A.M. Vrettos, *Skin* (London: Egmont, 2006), p. 176.

“We did, but we don’t anymore,” Mom says. Translation: “Shut the hell up, you thankless bastard. Were you not here for the ‘family fun night’ declaration?”¹⁴⁴

The reading of *Skin* coincided with my own decision to introduce Daniel’s father into *Day* (earlier drafts did not include the character). This sprang from the feeling that there needed to be something more in the plot, that the bus journey home created too neat a circular narrative. The father is not mentioned throughout the novel, creating a narrative gap that is satisfyingly filled by his inclusion near the end, but it works not just as a plot device. I was satisfied that it was consistent with Daniel’s character that he would make this visit now, at the end of this particular day. The inclusion of a father with similar character flaws to the character in *Skin* works on several levels, giving the reader an insight into the reasons for Daniel’s parents’ divorce, and offering opportunities to show how Daniel’s experiences have given him the confidence to resist his father’s bullying and for Daniel’s own expectations and preconceptions to be undermined.

“What are you...? Christ, come in, come into the house.”

Daniel’s father pulled the door back but Daniel stayed where he was.

“No, it’s ok, Dad. I’m fine here.”

His father frowned.

“Don’t be silly. It’s freezing. Come into the house.”

“No, I’m alright here. Honest. I just want a quick chat.”

“Daniel, come into the bloody house. Now. This is ridiculous.”

Even after all these years he was still amazed at how quickly his father’s mood could change. Twenty seconds ago he was looking almost embarrassed and almost tender, now suddenly he was barking in irritation. Daniel’s first impulse was to turn around and walk back to the bus-stop, but instead he said.

¹⁴⁴ *Skin*, 66-67.

“No, I won’t. I don’t want to come into the bloody house. I’m fine here. I told you.”¹⁴⁵

Daniel’s refusal to follow his father’s order is an indication of his growing independence and maturity, perhaps even hinting at the sense of independence that the bereaved can feel following the death of a parent. The character has found a sense of agency, and is no longer the passive victim. This is recognised by his father who comments on how much he has grown, ironically creating a bond between the two: he is the only character in the novel who has known Daniel all his life. The scene also offers another opportunity to poke fun at Daniel’s preconceptions: he is, after all, a middle class boy from a private school in a provincial town. During his day of self-discovery, one of his main discoveries is that he knows ‘nowt’. He thinks that the homosexual Trevor will try and molest him, he categorises Jason as a villain, and he expects Shirley to be grateful to him for interfering in her relationship. In the scene above, Daniel has come to his father in order to vent his anger for the latter’s non-attendance at the funeral. He is startled to learn that his father did attend, but sat quietly at the back (“Our marriage may have turned to crap but I loved her too once, you know.”)¹⁴⁶ Still determined to be angry, Daniel asks if he can live with his father, confidently expecting the negative answer that would justify his hatred. When his father agrees, Daniel is left confused, realising that this is not what he actually wants. Once again, I work hard to undermine his preconceptions, and to disrupt the sense of neatness from the scene. He has come looking for closure and left with more questions than answers. Life is not neat, and anyone who has ever entered into an argument with the dialogue planned out beforehand knows that it never follows the plan.

Some of the novels thus far discussed have included fantastical elements, but what of the fantasy novel itself? Fantasy novels, like adventure novels, rely heavily on plot. However, many also explore the inner life of the protagonist, and in her *Harry Potter* series the most successful children’s novelist of recent years, J.K.

¹⁴⁵ Day, 201.

¹⁴⁶ Day, 202.

Rowling, uses a fair proportion of the narrative to share Harry's thoughts with the reader. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, our hero's godfather, Sirius Black, is murdered by the witch, Bellatrix, near the end of the novel. Within the fantasy world the usual conventions of everyday life do not necessarily follow, and there is no funeral, or any kind of mourning ritual. What separates the fantasy from most other genres is that there is the chance to create an unconventional after-life. Thus, Harry is told by a ghost, Nearly Headless Nick, that Sirius has gone somewhere, but the details are left blurred:

"He will not come back," repeated Nick. "He will have... gone on."

"What d'you mean, gone on?" said Harry quickly. "Gone on where? Listen- what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn't everyone come back? Why isn't this place full of ghosts? Why-?"

"I cannot answer," said Nick.¹⁴⁷

Fantasy offers the writer an opportunity to consider life after death scenarios that are outside mainstream religion. It was previously suggested that this may be to avoid the novel being tarred by the unfashionable brush of Christianity. Although Harry does not hear the details, it is made clear that Sirius has 'gone on', that he has not disappeared. Harry is fifteen in the novel, and the series is famously successful as crossover fiction. *The Crossing of Ingo* by Helen Dunmore is for a younger age range (ten to thirteen). Sapphire Trewhella is one of the Mer (part Mermaid), and her father is killed during a fight with the villain, Ervys, dying to protect his children. He is carried away by dolphins to Limina, a kind of underworld, although it is not made clear whether he lives on as a ghost.

I don't look back. I don't want to see that it really is Dad, lying on the sand, in his Mer body. I have the strangest feeling that he's not really there at all.

¹⁴⁷ ¹⁴⁷ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 759.

He's not in the human world and he's not in Ingo. Maybe he's somewhere out on the water, whistling as the waves slap the *Peggy Gordon's* hull. He'd like that.¹⁴⁸

In *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (Rick Riordan), the eponymous hero's mother is killed by a Minotaur:

Then, with an angry roar, the monster closed his fists around my mother's neck, and she dissolved before my eyes, melting into light, a shimmering golden form, as if she were a holographic projection. A blinding flash, and she was... simply gone.¹⁴⁹

Whereas Sirius Black and Sapphire's father are now out of reach of the protagonists, Percy later succeeds in rescuing his mother from Hades. This is a crucial difference in the consideration of bereavement. It is natural for bereaved children to think about what happens after death, and Fantasy offers the opportunity to explore different possibilities. I have made clear my objections to the appearance of visions and ghosts within otherwise realistic fiction, but different rules apply to Fantasy and in a world where, for example, Mer-people live underneath the sea, then the suggestion of an after-life is not incongruous. It is also, as we have seen, important to offer hope to children and, even in a largely secular society, the suggestion of continuity need not necessarily be disingenuous. However, I would suggest that bringing the deceased back to life is a step too far and is clearly offering hope of a kind that no religion suggests can be fulfilled.

Day's predecessor was a fantasy novel. As discussed earlier, this is not a novel that I would put up as any kind of model; indeed, the worlds presented by Rowling, Riordan and Dunmore are far superior creations. My research into bereavement came years afterwards, but as far as the concept of the novel is concerned, as a way of coping with bereavement I would stand by it. Essentially,

¹⁴⁸ Helen Dunmore, *The Crossing of Ingo* (London: Harper Collins, 2008). P. 333.

¹⁴⁹ Rick Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), p. 53.

there are two parallel worlds, one stifling, repressive and mundane, the other exciting and colourful. Each person is born at the same moment into both worlds, but their deaths are completely separate. If two people die at exactly the same split second (the chances of which are negligible), then they swap places. When this happens to Daniel he realises that his mother may be alive in this alternative world. However, it is made clear that his search is doomed, because even if he did find his mother she would be a completely different person. It is his real mother's death with which he needs to come to terms. He never does find her but the adventure gives him the opportunity to explore his feelings and come to a kind of resolution with the help of his new friends. In Fantasy, then, I would suggest that although opportunities can be taken to explore an after-life, bringing that character back to life is not helpful.

Although Fantasy affords opportunities for the exploration of an after-life, the grief itself will not, of course, be affected by the location of the fantasy world, and will be particularly human. Harry does show signs of short and long-term grief. However, these signs are very much tied to stereotypical notions of masculinity, which is a disappointment. The over-riding emotion is anger. At first he tries to revenge Sirius's death:

“SHE KILLED SIRIUS,” bellowed Harry. “SHE KILLED HIM- I’LL KILL HER.”¹⁵⁰

This anger is unabated in Harry's subsequent conversation with Dumbledore, his teacher and surrogate father:

Harry felt white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terrible emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and his empty words.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 713.

¹⁵¹ *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 723.

Harry becomes more cavalier in his attitude towards Dumbledore, shouting and being openly rude. He starts to smash Dumbledore's possessions and almost even attacks him. There is a sense of guilt in his actions, as he blames himself for Sirius's death, but even so this is an uncomplicated reaction to the death that relies heavily on emotions that further the heroic qualities of the protagonist: anger, disdain for authority, violence. The chapter ends with Dumbledore, rather than Harry, crying:

Harry looked up at him and saw a tear trickling down Dumbledore's face into his long silver beard.¹⁵²

In *The Crossing of Ingo*, Sapphire's reaction is interesting in that there is very little of it. There are no tears and she tries not to think about her father. The death seems very much in the mould of the adventure story, and is used as a plot motor (her brother kills Ervys immediately afterwards). She does express herself later to a whale, but her immediate concern is staying in Ingo rather than the death of her father.

I return to my point from the previous chapter where I suggested that it was unreasonable to expect a novel to stop its fast-paced narrative in which disbelief is being stretched to its limit in order to allow a realistic bereavement process to take place. Strange as it may seem, I would regard Rowling's novel as being more reprehensible in its treatment of grief in that she explores Harry's reaction but fails to offer anything more complicated than heroic anger and guilt. Dunmore removes bereavement as an issue and the reader concentrates on plot and action instead.

In common with Harry and Sapphire, Percy Jackson also feels anger, but there is more:

My head felt like it was splitting open. I was weak and scared and trembling with grief. I'd just seen my mother vanish. I wanted to lie down and cry, but

¹⁵² *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 744.

there was Grover, needing my help, so I managed to haul him up and stagger down into the valley, towards the lights of the farmhouse. I was crying, calling for my mother, but I held on to Grover- I wasn't going to let him go.¹⁵³

Later he says 'My mother was gone. The whole world should be bleak and cold. Nothing should look beautiful.'¹⁵⁴ In fact there is little space given over to bereavement in the novel, and again I don't find that a problem within a fast-paced narrative, but Riordan's presentation of Percy's grief, brief as it is, incorporates despair, tears, anger and desolation, and seems to me to be more complex and therefore convincing.

Silverfin and *Stormbreaker* are both adventure stories, and are both aimed at boys aged between ten and thirteen. They are also very successful novels written by very successful authors (Antony Horowitz and Charlie Higson). In *Silverfin* the young James Bond is thirteen when his Uncle Max dies of lung cancer. As in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, it is the adult who cries: in this case James's Aunt Charmian, who also tells him that Max 'wouldn't have wanted tears and a lot of fuss and nonsense.'¹⁵⁵ The limiting of tears to the adult suggests that the writer recognises that tears are necessary, but is concerned about the reader's response to a crying hero. There is a strong reaction from James, nevertheless, and he accepts the comfort of his aunt:

She hugged James and crushed his head into her neck. James put his arms round her and hugged her back. The two of them had shared so much together and Charmian was now both a mother and a best friend to him.¹⁵⁶

He then remembers Max's voice coming to him earlier in the novel, at a time when he was in great peril (swimming through a tunnel of eels).

¹⁵³ *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, 55-56.

¹⁵⁴ *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, 59.

¹⁵⁵ Charlie Higson, *Silverfin* (London: Puffin, 2005), p. 365.

¹⁵⁶ *Silverfin*, 365.

Stormbreaker opens with the police arriving following the shooting of the uncle of fourteen year-old Alex Rider. Alex lives with his uncle but the mourning process is peculiarly absent. He immediately starts to question the facts and search his uncle's office and there is no grief shown whatsoever. Of course, the death acts as a plot motor, and Alex takes over his uncle's role on a mission.

We are prepared for the lack of grief when we hear that 'it was only now Alex realized just how little he knew about the man'.¹⁵⁷ The distance between the two characters is used partly as a plot device (he discovers that his uncle was a secret agent), but also to make his reaction more believable. Immediately after the murder he is asked if he is alright:

Alex nodded. "What do you think will happen?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"To the house. To me. To you."¹⁵⁸

Again, I don't find this reprehensible, and find it difficult to believe that this would have an adverse affect on a reader, bereaved or otherwise. Better, I think, not to bother than to offer a heroic or sentimental presentation. However, for me it is the characterisation of Alex that suffers. It is not a question of integrity: it is just not very good. After all, what kind of boy would not show any emotion at the death of his guardian? Higson, however, in the space of three pages offers us a glimpse of a rounded character. James is advised not to cry, but at least that suggests that he must look as if he is going to cry. He is comforted physically by a maternal figure and I think the narrative gaps are important here. His grief is not spelt out but it is strongly suggested. Within an adventure novel, then, I would argue that it is better not to present bereavement at all than to offer a limited version. Higson shows us how a complex reaction can be suggested without getting in the way of the plot, and it is successful because it is an authentic reaction to a traumatic event.

¹⁵⁷ Anthony Horowitz, *Stormbreaker* (London: Walker Books, 2000), p. 9.

¹⁵⁸ *Stormbreaker*, 10.

Moore and Mae end their article by suggesting that 'Factual rather than fictional accounts may be better suited to helping children come to terms with death.'¹⁵⁹ An obvious problem with this recommendation is that very few children are going to read an autobiographical account of grief. However, as I hope I have made clear in this chapter, there are now novels available that treat bereavement with insight, wit and sensitivity and which leave space for young readers to make up their own minds. The research involved in the writing of this reflection has made a very positive impact on the writing of *Day*, but such is the astonishingly eclectic mix of themes and characters and styles and voices in those forty-nine novels, that only a fraction of these can be discussed here. These influences will provide inspiration for future projects for years to come.

¹⁵⁹ Moore and Mae, 61.

Day

By Alistair Schofield

MORNING

Leeds, Wednesday 8th November 1978

9.37am

Want some pop?

I said, you want some pop?

No, thanks. Ta.

*What's up with you? My pop not good enough for a
grammar boy like you?*

No, it's not that. I've got some Coke.

We'll swap you.

Um. Alright.

Have a swig then.

We sprogged in it you twat.

Now we're mates. We've swapped pop so we're mates.

I'm Gary, and this is Noakesy. Who are you?

Danny.

Alright Danny? Now, 'cos we're mates, Danny, you can lend us some money, can't you? We're both brassic.

I'm brassic as well. Honest, I'm skint.

You lying get. You're from the posh school. You've got money.

Hold on, Noakesy. He's our mate, isn't he? He wouldn't lie to us, would you Danny?

That's a nice watch, though. Give us a skeg.

Nice. Give us a wear on it.

No. I mean I can't, because it's . . .

I said, give us a wear.

You little . . . I'll kill you for that, you little . . .

He's bit me. The get's bit me. Knack him Gaz. Knack him.

12.09am

There was someone in the room. Daniel's body had been scrunched up like this for exactly thirteen minutes. He knew because his face was inches away from the digital alarm clock. His muscles hurt from the effort, and he felt the bedclothes damp underneath him. He had to move. The lamp was on the other side of the bed, and the button on the wire would be resting against the table. It would take a split second to turn it on. He counted down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 'GO!' his head screamed.

He hit the button and leapt out, hurling the duvet aside and diving for the main light by the door. He ripped open the door ready to run, turned and looked frantically around the room. No-one. He dropped to the floor and looked under the bed, then tore open the wardrobe and curtains. Still no-one. He checked on the hall and peered down the stairs. It was all quiet.

He fell back on the bed and smiled with relief. It had been that dream again. He had been trying desperately to shut the cellar door and someone was pushing from the other side, trying to get in, trying to hurt him. As usual, he had woken up convinced there had been a noise and had waited motionless, hearing breathing that must have come from himself.

He was too old for this kind of stuff. When he was younger, his mother had to reassure him night after night that no burglar

was going to climb through the window. His bedroom was four floors up, she would say, stroking his hair until he went back to sleep. There were loads of other windows lower down to get through. In any case, why would a burglar bother with them when there was nothing worth stealing? Better to go next door to Brian with his antiques and silverware.

But that didn't stop the dreams.

Daniel looked back at the clock. His mother would still be up, working probably. He could pretend to have a question for her and that would give him an excuse to say goodnight again. A quick hug and he'd be fine.

He was halfway through the door when he remembered. The only one downstairs was his stepfather watching television. His mum had been dead for three months now.

He sat on the side of the bed. He would have remembered earlier if it hadn't been for the dream. It wasn't fair the way it happened like that. You ended up getting a tough time twice, first from the person in the room trick, then when you get over that you get the big one, the big memory that doesn't go away when you turn the lights on.

Before, Daniel had sometimes played with the idea of death in his head. He had wanted to be like Tom Sawyer, who was always on the telly in the summer holidays, going fishing in the sun and having adventures with Huckleberry Finn. His favourite episode was the one where Tom fakes his own death and comes back to watch his own memorial service, and Daniel had lain in bed that night planning his own funeral. Then he

imagined the deaths of close friends and relations: how he would be brave, be noble, take people's sympathy with a courageous shrug and soldier on. There would be pain, but he would bear it.

Now he knew.

There was no romance, no nobility, no bravery- just loss. He wasn't prepared for that. Someone had been there who loved him more than anything. And she had gone, and would never ever come back.

There was just loss.

He looked at the poster on the wall of the Leeds United FA Cup winning team of 1972. He closed his eyes.

“One David Harvey, two Paul Reaney, three Paul Madeley, four Billy Bremner, five Jack Charlton, six Norman ‘Bites yer legs’ Hunter, seven Peter Lorimer, eight Allan ‘Sniffer’ Clarke, nine Mick Jones, ten Jonny Giles, eleven Eddie Gray.”

He got up slowly, turned the main light back off and got back into bed, pulling the duvet right up to his chin. The lamp was still on and he considered reading a book, but continued to stare at the ceiling.

What did he have tomorrow morning? It was Wednesday. That meant double Physics with Mr Bedford. Double agony. He spent most Physics lessons playing catch-up. There would be an explanation that he would lose in seven seconds of its opening, only to wake up from his day-dream ten minutes later to find

everyone in groups conducting some kind of experiment that, since he had stopped listening after the word 'molecular', made no sense to him at all.

Then there was Bedford. Earlier in the year, following yet another rubbish test performance, he had been kept behind to explain how he could have managed to get eleven out of thirty-eight. Refusing to believe that it was possible to have spent half an hour on a homework and get this result (he'd actually spent nearer an hour), Bedford ended the conversation by slapping Daniel sharply around the side of the face.

That wasn't why he found himself dreading the Physics teacher. He'd had slaps before and, although he resented them much more than a formal punishment (slaps often coming when a teacher was in a bad mood, not when you'd actually done something really bad), this feeling was worse than a stinging cheek and ringing ear. A week after his mother died, he'd found himself standing outside Bedford's office, following a note from his form master. There was another boy there, a hard lad who seemed to spend most of the school day outside the rooms of senior teachers. Daniel had leant against the wall, assuming that Bedford had not heard about the funeral and wanted to know what had happened to the latest homework.

'What you done?' said the other boy, not unkindly.

'Nothing,' replied Daniel.

'I burnt Stephen Telford's arm with a Bunsen burner!'

Daniel couldn't think of an answer to that, but was saved as small, grey Mr Bedford opened the door and told Daniel to come in and sit down. He did so, and waited for the precise, well-clipped voice to demand an explanation. He had already decided that he would give none. There was no way he was going to use his mother's death as an excuse for missing work. He'd take his punishment and go.

He looked up, confused by the silence. Mr Bedford was looking down at his desk, which was spotless except for one piece of graph paper, a metal ruler and a black fountain pen. Daniel suddenly realised that Mr Bedford was looking embarrassed. Oh my God, Daniel thought, he's not going to. Please God, no.

'I realise Hargreaves . . . Daniel,' began Bedford, still looking at his desk and in a tone that suggested that he too would rather be anywhere else in the world at that moment, 'that this has been a hard time for you. You know me as a Physics teacher, which of course I am, your Physics teacher, but I'm also Head of the Middle School, as you know, and as such feel that I should offer my- our- condolences to you at this time, and offer any support that we can.'

Daniel managed a nod.

'Um, right, so if there is anything you need- time off for example. You have only had a couple of days off, would you like more?'

Daniel might have replied that more time spent at home was the last thing he needed. That at present he walked

painfully slowly the long way through the park to the bus-stop, and then sat and watched the buses go past until he was so cold that he had to get on one. That he kicked leaves up and down the pavement before eventually opening his gate, and even then sometimes went around the back and sat in the garage for a while. Putting off the inevitable re-entering the house where his mother wasn't.

Instead he shook his head.

'Probably for the best. Keep going, and so on. Don't let things get on top of you. If you do get down and need someone to talk to, don't hesitate though. I'm not as bad as you think. I've been through it. It's a tough thing for a boy of your age.'

He seemed to have run out of steam, thank goodness.

Daniel dared to look up.

'Well, off you go then, and send the other one in, would you?'

'Yes sir.'

7.55am

He woke up with a jolt as the curtains on the landing, the noisiest curtains in a very large house, were ripped open one at a time. On the rare occasions that Daniel overslept his stepbrother Mark would use this method to make sure he woke up as painfully as possible.

He got out of bed and, after a brief splash, threw on his school uniform. He had to do his tie twice as he made the knot too big first time around: small, tight knots were in this term. He stopped at the door and looked back at the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. It was a pretty bare bedroom: bed, desk with cassette player (beside red plastic cassette box with cassettes in alphabetical order) and lamp, small white book-shelf (with books also in alphabetical order) and big old wardrobe. On the wall were posters of Starsky and Hutch, Morecambe and Wise (complete with autographs, as collected by Daniel's mother after a performance at Leeds Civic Theatre), the Leeds United team and a poster of cartoon proverbs he'd been given for his tenth birthday and hadn't taken down yet: "Marry in haste, repent at leisure", "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread", "A stitch in time saves nine", with pictures of angels and fools and knitting and other useful stuff to help you cope with life in Leeds.

To get to the kitchen, he had to go down two flights of stairs to the ground floor, then through two living rooms and along the hall. This was what happened when your mum married the man who owned the other half of your semi-detached, and they knocked the two, already pretty big, houses into one. More children had been expected, but didn't arrive, and now they had ten bedrooms for three people.

His stepfather, Ronald, was reading the newspaper in the first living-room. As always he was already dressed in a shirt, tie and jacket and he now looked up at Daniel over his glasses and smiled.

'Morning Daniel. Sleep well?'

'Yes, thanks. See you later.'

'Ta ta!'

This was the daily routine, the next and final words being at tea-time. Ronald was alright but had no interest in Daniel whatsoever. Which was exactly the way Daniel liked it.

He took a breath, pushed open the kitchen door, and walked in. Mark was sitting at the table eating his sausages and bacon. He had already begun to hum to show he was relaxed having heard Daniel approaching. Daniel went straight to the cupboard, took out some Frosties, poured the milk, and sat down. He could, of course, have gone to eat in one of four living-rooms, but he wasn't going to get beaten by Mark, so he sat silently eating his cereal, pretending to be fascinated by the offer on the packet of a free frisbee with a picture of a famous football star printed on it. You got to choose the footballer but

the choices never included anyone from Leeds. Ossie Ardiles , a Spurs player who'd just won the World Cup with Argentina, was the only one he'd have bothered with. If he'd wanted a frisbee with a footballer on it, that is.

This stand-off with Mark was nothing to do with his mother's death. From the time when his then nine-year-old neighbour had shouted over the garden fence, 'My dad's marrying your mum!' they'd both made a decision to hate each other's guts. Daniel was normally on the bus by this time, and so avoided these situations, but his over-sleeping made this impossible, unless he was prepared to miss breakfast, which would have meant no food until eleven fifteen.

Thankfully, Mark was on his last scrap of bacon and, swilling down his tea, he dumped the debris in the sink for his Dad to clear up and swung the door open.

"Tosser," he murmured, without looking at Daniel, then sauntered into the hall and called out "See you Dad."

"Yes, cheerio. Have a good day."

Daniel heard the front door crash and felt his body relax. He slowly finished his breakfast, giving Mark time to catch a bus ahead of him, pulled his bag over his shoulder, and opened the front door.

They lived on the main road that connected Leeds to Otley, a small town about eleven miles away. Including the cellar, the house had four floors, although you could only see three from the front, which was higher than the back. They were big floors too, with high Victorian ceilings. The rooms looked massive,

partly because they hadn't been able to afford much furniture, so they looked fairly empty. Now they had both houses it really was enormous, which was a bit daft, especially as their bedrooms were all on one side, Ronald's side. Ronald had talked about blocking up the doorways and selling the other half, but he had never got around to it. Before that was because he rather liked the idea of having a house with two gardens. Nowadays he didn't seem bothered about anything very much.

There were four people at the bus-stop and Daniel passed the time examining them in case they turned out to be criminals. Not likely in Far Headingley but you never knew and it gave him something to do.

Male, Caucasian (he'd got that from *Starsky and Hutch*), 50s, 5'7", green anorak, blue trousers, black shoes.

Female, Caucasian, 5'2", 50s, red head-scarf, horn-rimmed glasses, blue coat, dirty brown shoes. These two probably married as talking to each other, but could be a front.

Female, 9-10, 4'4", green and white school uniform, blue mac, black shoes. He could probably rule her out altogether.

Male, 30s, 5'10", tweed cap, overcoat, brown cords, black shoes, umbrella. He was the most likely criminal, although he could be Brian from next door. It was difficult to tell from behind.

Daniel turned and looked down the road beyond three workmen in yellow jackets smoking around a hole cordoned off by dirty plastic cones. Was it worth walking the five hundred yards to where Weetwood Lane met Otley Road? There'd be

more buses that way but there'd also be the chance that one would come as he was making the walk.

Daniel turned back.

The man in the tweed cap was now looking at the timetable on the bus-stop. Not much point. The buses never came when they were supposed to.

Daniel trained his eye on the bend at the top of the hill, willing a bus to sail into view. Instead a bicycle appeared, and even at that distance you could tell it was going fast. It wasn't a steep slope along that stretch but it was enough to pick up some speed if you had decent bike and the cyclist was hunched over a new red racer with white dropped handlebars. By the time he reached the bus stop he was really motoring. He was a youngish man in a blue tracksuit with short blonde hair and his upturned pink face was shining with exhilaration.

Having formed descriptions of the others at the bus-stop and having watched the cyclist's approach so carefully, it later seemed ironic that had he been asked by the police to give a statement about the accident he would have known every detail except the crucial one. Maybe the workman had been pushed by one of his mates having a laugh or maybe he'd bent over to pick up a dropped cigarette. Daniel never knew. He only saw the blur of the red and white and blue shoot past, and heard the thud and cry as cyclist hit workman.

Daniel never saw the collision but he saw what happened afterwards. The bike reared up and the cyclist left his seat and went over his dropped handlebars, over the workman and

seemed to remain floating in the air for a second before hitting the road like a bag of shopping being dumped on the kitchen floor.

The workman shouted out, then crumpled underneath the bicycle, fell back onto the road in a yellow heap and immediately broke into a fit, jerking and twitching on the tarmac. There was spittle flying from his mouth and his eyes were wide and fixed and scared. The back of his head kept hitting the road as he went down but he obviously couldn't feel anything. The eyes remained the same, as he jolted up and down like a fish on the floor of a boat.

One of the other workmen bent down over his mate and held his shoulders, then looked up and saw Daniel and grinned. He was embarrassed, Daniel could tell. He was embarrassed to be seen with a man having a fit.

“Do you live near here?”

Daniel turned. It was the horn-rimmed glasses woman.

“Come on, look lively. Do you live near here?”

“Yes,” he said and pointed. “Just up there.”

“Go and phone an ambulance. Now. Go on.”

By the time Daniel came back the workman had stopped fitting. The horn-rimmed glasses woman had put her coat underneath his head and was bending over him while the man with the tweed cap was looking after the cyclist, who was sitting up. His tracksuit was dirty, his hands were heavy with blood and one side of his face was a right mess. But he was alive. The two workmen were smoking sheepishly on the pavement.

Daniel stood behind the woman.

“The ambulance will be ten minutes they said.”

“What? Oh, good.”

“Do you mind if . . .? Can I . . .?”

“What?” she snapped over her shoulder.

“I’ve got to get to school.”

“Fine, fine, there’s nothing you can do here. Off you go.”

8.47am

Daniel sat in a double seat at the front on the top deck of the bus. Under normal circumstances he would have been well-chuffed. This was the best seat and not something that he got very often. That was one good thing about being late: there were fewer people on the buses.

Normally he would use his sleeve to wipe the misted glass so that he could see the road ahead, then sit back and relax. The bus was warm and he could watch the cars and the people and the lights and the cold all drift by whilst the rhythm of the engine rocked him to and fro.

He didn't wipe the window today though. He looked at the condensation without considering what was on the other side.

What was the point of all that? There was a young guy, all colour and energy and speed, and the next moment he was all blood and dirt and bruises. He was alive, sure, but what was the point? It was like the grey of the street was jealous. No colour allowed here, no energy allowed here. The grey had got him.

And that workman and his fit, jerking up and down. And his mate with the grin. He had looked right at Daniel as though he was trying to say 'Yes, I know he looks daft and that's why I'm grinning. In Leeds we don't stand out, we don't do stuff that makes people look at us like that. I'm with you, laughing, not with him, being laughed at'.

But Daniel hadn't found him funny. He'd never seen anything so frightening.

Why was that frightening, seeing that poor bloke moving like that? It was the way he didn't have any control over his body, like it had been taken over by something evil.

So, again, what was the point of *that*? If there is a big plan for everything where does this come in? Because it seemed planned. Whatever had made the workman step into the road, he had done so at exactly the right moment. The right moment to get hurt. A split second later and they'd both be fine.

History had used to worry him. All those things that happened and those people who made such a difference. Where did that leave him? He was a nothing, his tiny, pathetic existence wasn't going to make any impact on the world at all. You look up at the sky and you're nothing and you look back in time and you're nothing. Why did he bother?

Then suddenly it had come to him. He was more important than all of them. Churchill, King Alfred the Great, Julius Caesar, all of them. Because he was alive. If time was a long piece of string, tangled here and knotted here, then which parts of it are the most important? Which parts of the string do you need to find to use it?

The ends.

And Daniel was right at the end of the piece of string. It was growing, slowly, and he was growing with it. The other weren't. Churchill, King Alfred, Julius Caesar, their time had

come and gone, but Daniel was there at the end and that made him feel much more important, much more significant.

Or it used to. Because what if being on the end just made you hurt, like the workman and the cyclist? And what if people you loved got left behind in the tangled bit?

He closed his eyes.

“One David Harvey, two Paul Reaney, three Paul Madeley, four Billy Bremner, five Jack Charlton, six Norman ‘Bites yer legs’ Hunter, seven Peter Lorimer, eight Allan ‘Sniffer’ Clarke, nine Mick Jones, ten Jonny Giles, eleven Eddie Gray.”

Allan Clarke, diving header, 58th minute. Attendance 100,000.”

He could see the Clarendon Road traffic lights approaching, which meant his stop. He got up quickly and rang the bell, but the bus seemed to be accelerating, not stopping. He staggered down the stairs, just in time to see his stop flashing past. He turned and opened his mouth to shout to the bus driver but then shut it again.

He looked at his watch. It was 8.45. He wasn't going to make registration, and his form master, Mr Jones, was teaching him English second lesson, so he would know he had been late. Then he'd probably say something to Bedford, who'd want to know how things were.

But that didn't matter anymore. Because Daniel had had an idea and it was brilliant and clear and it made his heart beat

faster. He was going to do what Tommo and Mongey and Basic did once a week, or so they reckoned.

He was going to scive off.

EXAMPLES OF NICKNAMES.

BOYS

Surnames

Grinshaw- *Gridders*, Wilkinson- *Wilko*, Johnson- *Jock*,
Brayshaw- Donk.

Physique

Jeffreys- *Squat*. Barnes- *Ted*. Parrish- *Zits*. Kitson-
Squarehead. Derby- *Fatboy*, Gibson- *Twig*.

Behaviour

Metcalfe- *Spazzer*, Heffer- *Simple*, Prentice- *Gaylord*,
Holmes- *Dopes*.

Race

All Indian or Pakistani boys- *Pakis*.

All Jewish boys- *Yids*.

Daniel couldn't work out the race thing. He knew the country was a mess and millions of people didn't have jobs. Geoff the barber always said it was down to 'these people coming over here stealing our jobs' and that didn't seem fair, if it was true (although Rikesh Sharma in Ted's class said that was bollocks as his Dad had been invited into Britain by the government just after the war when they needed workers). On the other hand the words used at school and at the football matches were ugly and sinister. At Elland Road, where Leeds United played, Daniel had had a leaflet stabbed into his hand by

a fat, tattooed skinhead from the National Front and the stuff in it made him feel sick.

At school his hero used to be Mark Trent, a quiet, intense, good looking lad two years above him, who played full back for the rugby team like a god, and won every long distance running race going. Yet he had gone up to Chris Mudavo, one of only two black lads in the school, and called him a nigger, to his face, and told him he stank. And Chris Mudavo was huge yet he didn't do anything because it was Mark Trent.

EXAMPLES OF NICKNAMES

MASTERS

Initials

Mr Flint- *Naf*. Mr Sergeant- *Bos(ser)*. Mr Barry- *Mabel*.

First Names

Mr Marshall George- *Masher*. Mr Herbert Giles- *Herbie*. Mr Malcolm Kendrick- *Malc*.

Physique

Concord Heslop. *Diddy* Devlin. *Trog* Baraclough.

Some of the nicknames he never understood. Like the terrifying school chaplain who was about ninety and had a face like a skull was known as 'Deirdre', and a Geography teacher Daniel only knew by sight was 'Gorth'.

Then there was 'Puff Kent'. Puff Kent was the Head of Music and he was even called Puff to his face by some members

of the sixth form. When Daniel had come into the school in the first year, it had been from the Junior section and he hadn't got a clue about gays. The other boys talked about puffs 'bumming' each other, and he thought that meant rubbing their bottoms together. He always suspected that the whole gay thing might just be a Mickey-take, and they didn't really exist. He became sure it was a joke when he was warned that Puff Kent might ask him to try on a wetsuit or gas mask. He was naïve but not stupid, and that seemed about as believable as Fatboy claiming that Bedford kept porno mags in his desk.

Then one Monday afternoon near the end of his first year Puff Kent put some music on for the class to listen to and asked Daniel to come through to his office, which was next to the classroom. There, Puff Kent asked,

“Have you ever tried on a gas mask from the First World War?”

Daniel had giggled at first, but when Puff Kent had taken out the mask and given it to him, and he had seen the beads of sweat on Puff Kent's forehead and the look on his face and realised that he was serious, Daniel stopped smiling and began to cry. Puff Kent hadn't stopped him when he asked to go back to the classroom, but it didn't prevent him doing the same thing to Spazzer the following lesson.

Daniel Hargreaves had no nickname. He was just 'Hargreaves'.

9.20am

He was walking down Blenheim Walk towards town. He felt as if he should be feeling guilty, but he didn't. This was the right decision.

As he passed the multi-story car park that towered over the inner ring road, Daniel could see the yellow Morrisons sign in the distance, just behind the sign for the turn-off to the M62 and M1, and stuck to the side of the Merrion Centre.

The Merrion Centre: that was where he was headed. Whenever any of the lads talked about skiving off school, it was always to the Merrion. It had a record shop, a Woolworths, an Ainsleys Bakery and an indoor market. It was also warm and dry. He dipped into his trouser pocket and looked at his change. He had 48p. Not bad, but added to two pound notes he had in his inside blazer pocket it was a fortune. Enough for snacks, cans of pop and a few video games in the bowling alley arcade. He had his packed lunch in his bag, so he didn't even have to bother about buying sandwiches.

Daniel smiled for the first time that morning.

Bloody great.

There were various entrances to the Merrion Centre. Daniel decided to just keep walking up Woodhouse Lane and go up the ramp. He pushed open one of the glass and silver doors and felt the warm air surround him. He had never been in the

Merrion this early on a weekday, and was surprised at how empty it was.

The Merrion Centre had been built in the early sixties, according to Daniel's Grandpa, and had it had been a big deal, like getting a bit of America in Yorkshire. It might have looked like that in those days, but Daniel watched quite a lot of American television, and he'd seen their shopping malls, and he was pretty sure about one thing: they didn't look like this. He could see what they'd tried to do inside with the shining silver everywhere and high, glass ceilings and white pillars with the mosaic tiles. But by 1978 it looked really grubby, and the floor didn't help. It was a mottled colour with specks of different colour stone, presumably to stop it looking dirty: unfortunately it had the opposite effect and it just never looked clean.

The other problem was the shops. Woolworths and Morrisons were alright, but they weren't glamorous and American and their signs in the middle of all the silver and pillars looked too English.

He walked up the slope past the DIY shop and turned right by the stairs to the balcony where the Odeon Cinema used to be and from where a lad was said to have been thrown years before following a gang fight. There was a newsagent kiosk further up beside the graffitied entrance to an underground nightclub. He bought himself a can of Coke from the girl in the Newsagent, a pretty red-haired girl with a loud voice and kind eyes, and sat on the bench in front of the Heath Robinson machine.

There were various odd things about the Heath Robinson machine and the first was the machine itself, which was contained inside a large glass case, like the one that Snow White gets put into by the dwarves. It was a model of a gentleman in a flying machine with various complicated and silly stuff going on around him involving birds and dogs and eggs, all elaborately connected to making the plane fly. Every fifteen minutes a bell would ring and the contraption would start moving. It was brilliant. The odd bit was what it was doing in the middle of a shopping centre in Leeds.

The second odd thing was the fact that it wasn't actually designed by Heath Robinson. He was that Victorian inventor who did those pictures of really complicated inventions, like a machine for getting you out of bed, dressing you and making your breakfast. However, it actually said on the glass case that this was by Rowland Emett, an inventor who was still alive, but Rowland Emett wasn't as famous as Heath Robinson, unfortunately for Mr Emett, so everyone ignored the sign and called it the Heath Robinson machine instead.

He opened up his lunch box and waited for the machine to spring into action. His lunches looked very different now that Ronald was making them and not his mum. He didn't like to admit it, but they were a lot better. His mother had hated making packed lunches and it showed. She would attack a couple of pieces of bread with hard butter, stick a lump of cheese in the middle and then dump it in a see-through bag with an

apple and a Breakaway. By the time he got around to eating it, everything was covered in cheese and bits of butter.

Ronald's lunches were carefully packed in a red tin lunch-box. They were also much more interesting: chicken and lettuce, cheese and pickle, ham and mustard. There were even different types of bread on different days. The only thing that stayed the same was the Breakaway.

"Want some pop?"

Daniel looked up. There were two boys of about fifteen or sixteen standing over him. They had uniforms on, but wore their blazers around their waists, so he couldn't tell the school. It didn't matter anyway. Whatever school they went to they would hate him. The grammar boy.

"I said, you want some pop?" repeated the taller of the two pushing a can of Lilt in Daniel's face. He had cropped blonde hair and his shirt was opened so that people could see his gold chain.

"No, thanks," replied Daniel, then hastily, "ta."

"What's up with you?" the boy said. "My pop not good enough for a grammar boy like you?"

"No, it's not that. I've got some Coke."

He tried to get up but the second, a fat lad with ketchup stains on the front of his shirt, pushed him down.

"We'll swap you," he said.

"Um. Alright," said Daniel weakly. He handed over his almost full can and took the empty Lilt in return. After they'd taken turns drinking his Coke they turned back to him.

"Have a swig then," said the inky one.

Daniel did so and gagged at the warm, flat liquid that slid down his throat.

The two boys laughed.

“We sprogged in it you twat.”

Daniel tried for a second time to get up and for a second time was pushed back onto the bench.

“Now we’re mates,” said the first. “We’ve swapped pop so we’re mates.”

He sat down next to Daniel. The other boy walked around the bench and stood behind them.

“I’m Gary, and this is Noakesy. Who are you?”

“Danny,” in as tough a voice as he could find.

“Alright Danny? Now, ‘cos we’re mates, Danny, you can lend us some money, can’t you? We’re both brassic.”

“I’m brassic as well,” said Daniel. “Honest, I’m skint.”

“You lying get,” came Noakesy’s voice from behind them.

“You’re from t’ posh school. You’ve got money.”

“Hold on, Noakesy,” said Gary. “He’s our mate, isn’t he? He wouldn’t lie to us, would you Danny?”

Daniel shook his head. Gary smiled.

“That’s a nice watch, though. Give us a skeg.”

Daniel looked at his watch. His mother had bought him it for his birthday. It was a Cassio digital watch with thirty-eight functions, including stopwatch and alarm. It was water resistant to fifty metres and it lit up when you pressed the side button.

He held up his wrist to show them the watch.

“Nice. Give us a wear on it.”

Daniel took a breath.

“No,” he said. “I mean I can’t, because it’s . . .”

An arm came around his neck. The sleeves were rolled up and he saw the home-made tattoos on the forearm. Simple at school had the same crosses on his arms. His brother, a punk, had done them to him with a pin and ink from a Parker cartridge.

“I said, give us a wear,” repeated Gary.

He took hold of Daniel’s wrist with one hand and started to undo the watch-strap with the other.

Daniel still had one hand free and before he’d thought what he was doing he swung at the face beside him. He couldn’t move his shoulders, so the blow lacked power, but it was a clean punch and it hit Gary’s left eye, his head being turned towards Daniel as he concentrated on the strap.

“You little . . . I’ll kill you for that, you little . . .”

Gary leapt up off the bench, whilst Noakesy, swearing loudly in Daniel’s ear, tightened his grip on his throat. Daniel kicked out to try and protect himself. He managed to get one kick in, but then Gary was on top of him, and punched him twice in the face.

Daniel instinctively put his head downwards and found his mouth in Noakesy’s forearm. He took a bite and Noakesy pulled his arm away with a scream.

“He’s bit me. The get’s bit me. Knack him Gaz. Knack him.”

Then Gary had him by the hair and ears and pulled him from the bench to the floor, and they were both over him, kicking and punching, and Daniel scrunched up into a ball and tried to protect his head.

“Get off him! Get off him you little bastards!”

The kicks stopped and Daniel looked up through his hands. It was the girl from the newsagent. He’d noticed her when he’d got his Coke, because she was pretty with her curves and her denim and her red hair, and now she was standing over him facing his attackers.

“You touch him again and I’ll chin you misen, you hear?”

“What’s up with you, you slag,” said Gary. His eye was starting to come up in a bruise and he looked furious. “You fancy him or summat?”

“Don’t you call me a slag, Gary Clarke. Yeh, that’s right. I know who you are, and you Kevin Noakes. You best leave or I’ll tell your brother and the next tattoo you get’ll be across your forehead.”

The two boys looked at the girl in confusion. It was clear that they didn’t recognise her, but it was also clear that they were defeated.

Gary looked down at Daniel.

“We’ll be back for you, you little . . .”

“Just sod off,” the girl said.

They grabbed their bags and walked away muttering.

The girl looked down at him.

“You alright, love?”

“Yes,” said Daniel, trying to stand up. “Yes, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You don’t look fine to me,” she said, taking hold of his arm and moving him towards the bench. “Sit down there for a while, eh?”

He touched his forehead and looked at the blood on his finger-tips, and his tongue explored the swelling in his top lip.

“You stay there. Back in a sec’.”

He watched the girl swing back to the kiosk. Even in his battered state he felt something move inside him. Her red hair almost reached her waist, and her jeans clung to her front and back.

Girls. Fantastic but terrifying.

He had been in a boys’ school since he was eight years old and was rubbish with girls. Absolutely rubbish. He didn’t know what to say, what to do, whether to smile or be serious, he just hadn’t a clue.

Now she was on her way back, pausing only to tell an irritated customer that he’d have to wait a minute for his Mars Bar, and if he didn’t like it he could put it back and ‘Go to bloody Woolworths’.

“There you are,” she said. “Have a look at your face.”

She held out a small mirror. He did look a mess: lip swollen and blue, half his face covered with blood from the cut on his forehead, eye starting to swell.

“Take these as well.”

She put a can of Coke in his hand, and took a tissue from her pocket.

“Oh, thanks,” said Daniel, reaching into his pocket for some money for the Coke.

“Don’t be daft,” she said. “Anyroad, you bought one, didn’t you, and never drank it, so this one’s on the house.”

“Thanks,” said Daniel.

“Listen, I’ve a break in twenty minutes. You sit there, right, and I’ll take you to Trevor’s. He’s got the big shop by the indoor market. It’s got a sink and that. Get you cleaned up. Alright?”

“Yes, sure, thanks,” said Daniel but she had gone, swinging back to her kiosk in a beautiful red and blue blur.

10.20am

Trevor's newsagent was at the other end of the Merrion Centre, around the corner from the bowling alley and by the entrance to the indoor market. It was, as Shirley (the girl) had said, bigger than the kiosk, but not a lot bigger. There was room for three people behind the open-plan counter, and they needed all three. The position of the newsagent meant that it got the customers coming in and out of the centre as well as those headed in and out of the indoor market. It was always crowded and as they approached the shop they couldn't see the counter for people. They could hear, though, a shrill male voice that carried over the heads.

"You what? Cheaper in Tesco? Well, go to bloody Tesco then. Queue up there and see how long it takes you. You can go to Tesco al fresco for all I care!"

Pause.

"Whoopee doo! You get your husband down here. I'll get mine. See how you like that. Next? Yes, love, what can I get for you . . ."

Shirley grinned at Daniel.

"That's Trevor. He's a laugh, isn't he?"

Daniel nodded uncertainly.

"What's up? Don't you like gays?" she said, still with a grin.

"What? You mean he's a puff?" Daniel blurted out.

Shirley laughed.

“Don’t look so shocked. He’s got a sink. That’s the main thing.”

“But won’t he . . .? You know . . .”

She laughed again.

“What? Feel you up? You should be so lucky!”

Daniel looked confused. Shirley stopped and looked at him searchingly, her grin turning into a frown.

“You’re serious aren’t you? No, he won’t. Not all puffs are pervs, you know.”

Daniel looked at the floor.

“Come on,” she said, pulling him by the sleeve. She pushed her way through the crowd with a ‘Coming through! Lady with a baby!’, stopping briefly to turn to Daniel and whisper “Got that from *Grease*. Have you seen it? Brill isn’t it?”

There were three people working behind the counter: a sharp-faced woman with glasses, a round woman of about fifty, and Trevor. Trevor was tall and thin, with a drooping but tanned face, and dark hair and eyes. His jeans were fairly ordinary, but his silk shirt was open to reveal an expensive-looking gold necklace, and he also wore a gold chain on his wrist and three gold rings on his fingers. He looked like he’d be more at home in a nightclub than a newsagent.

“Alright Trevor, love. Can I have the key for the toilet?”

“Bloody hell, what’ve you got there, Shirley Temple? What have I told you about beating up your boyfriends, eh?”

“Shurrup and give us the key, will you? He needs cleaning up. Got set upon by a couple of lads near the kiosk.”

“Little sods. You alright, sunshine?” asked Trevor kindly, leaning over the counter and handing a key on a string over to Shirley.

“Yes, thanks,” said Daniel.

“Ee, talks nice, don’t he?” said Trevor.

“Leave him be. Come on, let’s sort you out.”

She took him by the sleeve again and pulled him out of the shop and down the passage towards the market.

“Where are we going?”

“Here,” she said, stopping at a dirty door to the left of the passage. She opened it up and he followed her in. It was a small, grubby space, with boxes of sweets, crisps and fizzy drinks in the corner, a plastic chair, an electric kettle, tea, coffee and biscuits, and a separate cubicle containing a toilet and sink.

Shirley shut the door behind them.

“Right, go on and get your face cleaned up. I’ll make us a cup of coffee.”

Daniel went to the sink, then stopped and turned around.

“Can I ask you something?”

Shirley was spooning out coffee from a small jar of Nescafé.

“Blimey! He says more than ‘Yes, fine, thanks’! Go on, what’s up?”

“Why are you doing all this for me?”

She looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

“Well, it’s not ‘cos I fancy young lads with blood all over their faces, if that’s what you think.”

“No, really, why?”

Putting down the spoon, she put her hands on her hips and looked at him with a smile and a shake of the head.

“Why? Why do you think? Because you needed some help, that’s why. I’d’ve done same thing for anyone.”

“Right, thanks.”

Daniel turned back to the sink.

“Don’t sound all narky. You are quite cute as well, you know? Just a bit young for me, like.”

The water stung a little, but the blood came off fairly easily. He looked at the mirror. On the top it said ‘The Daily Mirror’ and on the bottom ‘Look in the Mirror. You’ll like what you see’. His face didn’t look too bad now. A fringe of brown hair covered his forehead so the only visible injury was a swollen lip. He felt a bit disappointed. He’d looked quite tough for once in his life.

“Let’s have a look at you then. That’s better. You don’t look like one of them zombies in them Hammer House horror films! Do you take milk or sugar?”

“Just a bit of milk, please.”

He sat down on a crate of Seven Up, pretended to sip his coffee without letting the hot cup touch his cut lip, and tried hard to think of something to say.

“So what school did you go to, Shirley?” he managed at last.

“Me? Our Lady. Left in the summer.”

Our Lady was down the road from Daniel’s school. The boys in his class said that it was full of slags, but that’s what they said about every girls’ school. Shirley didn’t look like a slag.

“Are you Catholic then?”

“Yeh. Me family’s Irish. Not me mum, but me grandparents, like. Come over here after the war.”

“What about your dad?”

“What about him?”

“Is he Irish as well?”

“No, he’s just a bastard. Haven’t seen him since I were seven. Good riddance. Anyway, nousey, what about your parents, eh? Don’t tell me. I bet you’re all lovey-dovey, aren’t you? Living in a nice family house like the blooming Waltons.”

Daniel said nothing.

“Oh bloody hell? Have I said summat wrong? What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“No, go on love. Tell me.”

Daniel took a big breath.

“Well, my mum died a couple of months ago, that’s . . .”

He stopped. That was only the second time he’d actually said it. Ronald had told his family, and his form master had told the class while he was at the funeral, so he’d only had to tell one person. It made him feel sick saying it again.

“That’s what, love?”

“Nothing. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Yes, you do, or you wouldn’t have said ‘owt. I bet you miss her a lot, don’t you?”

The question made his head go tight. Yes, he missed her. It was still there, all right- that nagging feeling that he had forgotten to do something. It’s not true when people say in films that they think about someone every minute of every day. You get doing something else, like playing football or watching telly or getting beaten up or whatever, and you don’t think about it. But then you wonder what it is that you’ve forgotten to do, and then you remember. And you feel guilty because you forgot for a while.

Nothing he did felt very real any more, and he knew why. It was because he wanted to tell his mum about stuff. Daft stuff like his marks in a Maths test, or coming second in a swimming race. He needed her to listen, otherwise it may as well have not happened. Without her listening it all crumbled away like a dry leaf.

That was why he wasn’t at school, and why he’d been doing so badly in tests. It just didn’t matter to him any more if he couldn’t tell his mum about it.

What was the point? What was the point of any of it?

It was that word again: *loss*. He actually liked it because it was so simple, and didn’t sound all emotional and dramatic. He was reaching for something that wasn’t there.

‘Yes,’ he said to Shirley, “I do.’

‘What was she like? Was she nice?’

He looked at her suspiciously, but the look he got back was honest and straightforward, the eyebrows again raised above the green eyes. If he wanted to answer, he could, if not they could talk about *Grease* or Trevor or Mars Bars or something else.

He hadn't talked about his mother to anyone since his trip to the bereavement councillor. It had been his aunt's idea, and so three weeks after the funeral he had sat facing a large woman in a room set aside at his local GP's. She wore a smile she seemed to think was spiritual and reassuring, but Daniel found immediately irritating and smug. After the preliminary questions (name, age and so on), she put her notes down, placed her hands in her lap and looked searchingly at Daniel. There was an uncomfortable silence, until Daniel eventually spoke up.

'I'm sorry, I've never done this sort of thing before. I'm not really sure what's supposed to happen now.'

'Well,' said the woman, putting her smile back on, 'What do you *want* to happen now?'

Daniel had walked out.

Looking back, it wasn't her fault. She had been trying her best, and it couldn't be the easiest job in the world. She was just the wrong person at the wrong time.

"What was my mum like?" he said at last to Shirley. "Well, she wasn't perfect, you know."

"No one ever is, love."

"She had a quick temper."

"Oh aye?"

“Yeah, she used to go mad in the car, swearing and shouting at other drivers.”

“Yeh?”

“And she was rubbish at making sandwiches and she used to make stupid comments all the way through telly programmes, like she thought it was really funny to call ‘Starsky and Hutch’ ‘Starkers and Crotch’, which was a crap joke and really irritating.”

He stopped.

“Anything else?”

“We argued a lot, before she, you know, died. We didn’t used to, but we started a year or so before she died. Before we even knew she was ill.”

“What about?”

“Stupid stuff, like doing homework and that. I got sick of her telling me what to do, and she always wanted to know how my day went, and all I wanted to do was come home and watch telly.”

“‘course you did. You’re fourteen, right? That’s what all fourteen year olds are like. You’re not feeling guilty about it, are you?”

“Well, yes, a bit.’

“Well, you shouldn’t. All lads of your age are like that. You’re just unlucky ‘cos you didn’t get the chance to make it up to her later on.”

“How do you mean?”

“Oh, bloody hell. I’ve just seen the time. I’ve to get back to the kiosk. Barbara’ll kill me.”

She grabbed her coat.

“What are you up to now?” she said to Daniel.

“Um, I don’t know. I, er . . . Maybe go to the bowling alley and play Asteroids.”

“You what?”

“Asteroids. It’s a video game.”

“Oh, aye, yeh. I’ve heard of it. Well, I’ve lunch at twelve thirty. If you come to the kiosk we can get summat together if you fancy it.”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“Right, then, get your jacket. I’m late.”

11.22am

Asteroids wasn't the most popular video game at his school- that was probably Space Invaders- but it was his favourite.

It was pretty simple. You had this space ship in the middle of the screen and asteroids of different sizes were flying around all over the place. You could avoid them by moving around (which he didn't like doing as it was difficult to control the speed and you usually went into an oncoming asteroid) or destroy them by rotating the ship and hitting the shoot button. You had to watch out, though, because the bigger ones split into lots of smaller rocks and they could all hit you. That meant you had to keep shooting until all the pieces were destroyed. That was the best part about the game, splitting a large asteroid into smaller and smaller ones until it disappeared altogether. It was like when you were in the bath with a water pistol firing at the tiles on the wall, and every time you hit a drop of water you made ten more drops of water and you had to hit all of them before they got down to the bottom of the wall.

The other thing to watch out for with Asteroids was when the screen cleared and you thought you'd done pretty well and cleared the universe of every asteroid, and then suddenly they all appeared at once with a cluster going straight for you. Then you either had to do some serious shooting or you could try hitting the hyperspace button that would send you off

somewhere else on the screen. The problem with that was that you might appear in front of a different asteroid without the chance to move out of the way. It was exciting, though, pressing the button, and not knowing where you were going to end up.

It'd be great to have a button like that. You press it and come up somewhere else. In 'The Tomorrow People' on ITV they hitched their thumbs into their belts and they could get transported to different places.

He had five straight games, then went and got a Coke from the machine. He wasn't doing very well. He'd only made the top ten list once, and that was at number eight. He felt pretty distracted today, though.

He swigged his Coke and looked at the screen, watching the automatic game being played out as the sign flashed telling him to put in more money.

What a day. He'd missed school for the first time ever, been beaten up, and met a beautiful girl and a gay man. And it wasn't even lunchtime yet!

"You going to play on this or what?"

Daniel turned his head to find a tall, spotty punk looking down at him. He had black spiked hair like Jonny Rotten, a dog collar and a black leather jacket with badges all over it. He didn't have a safety pin through his cheek, though, so he couldn't be a really hard-core punk, more like a student. He still looked hard enough for Daniel to take a hasty step to one side though.

"No, no, I've finished. Sorry," he said.

The lad shoved a ten pence piece in the slot and started to play. Daniel watched him for a minute, until the punk turned and swore at him, then he walked off.

Were all towns like this? In Leeds you always seemed to be one step away from getting chinned.

You're walking down the street and you see two figures walking towards you. What do you think? Are they male or female? If they're female, you're probably alright, but if they're male, how old are they? Are they adults or lads, and if they're lads are they older than me? Are they from my school? If not, are they big? Are they friendly looking? Are they punks or mods or skinheads or casuals?

Are they going to hurt me?

Daft, really, when you think about it. And then there was the way that the adults treated him, like a threat, like he was going to mug them. And Daniel knew he didn't look that threatening. After his twelfth birthday, he'd been to a store in Headingley to spend his five pounds present, and had picked up a toy car, not because he wanted to buy it, but because it had a button that said 'press here' through the plastic. He'd pressed it and nothing happened. Nothing, that is, except that the manager came over and picked the car up, examined it, and muttered loudly, 'Bloody hooligan'.

It was crap being a kid sometimes.

Not today, though, he reminded himself. When was he meeting Shirley? Thirty-five minutes. He breathed in sharply.

He threw his Coke can in a bin and sat down on a chair watching a middle-aged man with bushy sideburns bowl down the middle lane. His wife was scoring. The man kept turning to her after he shot and she looked encouraging, but when he turned back to the lane she looked bored.

Shirley. It wasn't a name he'd have liked if it wasn't attached to her. She made it attractive. Shirley.

Shirley Hargreaves. Sounded good.

He didn't want to get carried away. He knew that she didn't fancy him. She said that he was 'cute'. The little he knew about girls told him that being 'cute' probably qualified you to be a friend or a younger brother type, but nothing more.

That was ok, though. Just being with her was enough. Being with her made him feel warm all over, like the Ready Brek kid in the adverts, the one who has a bowl of Ready Brek on a cold winter's morning and then spends the rest of the day with a luminous glow around him because it's 'Central Heating for Kids'. Except that he only really felt the glow when he was with her, which is where he wanted to be now. And except that he'd got his mum to buy Ready Brek and it tasted horrible.

But the daft thing was he always found himself leaning backwards when he spoke to her, like he was on the edge of a cliff and he was afraid he'd get sucked over. Even when he was sitting on the crate of Seven-Up, he couldn't even look her in the eye properly because he felt he'd fall forward if he did.

He'd always liked being with girls. It was rubbish being sent to a boys' school. At his Primary School, he'd had a crush

on a girl, Annette Plummer. They'd played kiss-catch, but when he caught her, even though he wanted to kiss her, he couldn't, so he took the other option that the playground rules allowed and kicked her up the bum instead. He was fourteen now and how much had he actually progressed since then?

There were no girls or women in his life at all. He spent all day with boys and men and then went home to a boy and a man.

He froze for a moment.

He'd forgotten again. Why was he here? Why was he in town in the first place? Because his mum was dead, and he couldn't cope with school, that's why. And he forgot all about her, and started having a good time thinking about this girl, this girl he'd only just met and who didn't fancy him and was too old for him and who probably had a boyfriend anyway.

Would his mum have liked her? Difficult to tell. When she was alive he'd never had a girlfriend, never knew any girls at all, really, since she sent him to that bloody school.

Bushy sideburns was lining up to try and get the two pins he'd missed from his first shot. He spent a good twenty seconds looking at them before he stepped forward and sent his ball spinning off the lane. He swung around in disgust and swore, whilst his wife wrote down his score on the card.

Daniel got up.

AFTERNOON

4.37pm

*WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU DOING? ARE YOU
SOME KIND OF NUTTER OR WHAT?*

COME ON. LET'S HEAR IT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I thought. I thought he'd . . .

WHAT? WHAT DID Y' THINK, YOU DAFT GET? WHAT?

This is all wrong. It isn't meant to happen like this.

12.44am

Daniel sat in the café at Circle House and waited for Shirley to come back from the counter with her sandwiches. Her kiosk and Trevor's newsagent were part of a local chain, she had told him on the way there. The owner had started off with a café, inherited from his mother in the 1920s, and Circle House was now the headquarters of the business, with a newsagent attached and stairs leading to offices in the basement.

The café was filling up fast: workmen lounged in the corner, plastic hats in front of them and sausage sandwiches in their hands; older folk sat with big mugs of tea and newspapers; a group of women, surrounded by plastic shopping bags, discussed the latest episode of 'Crossroads'. There was a swing door leading to the newsagent, and near this door was a staff table where he guessed Shirley would normally be sitting.

The place was full of smoke, but it was clean and warm, almost like being back on the bus. Daniel had expected to feel out of place but no one seemed to notice him, and he liked that. He pulled off his tie and stuck it in his blazer, and rolled his sleeves up to look more like Gary and Noakesy.

"There you are, one cup of coffee and one Mars Bar."

"But I said I . . ."

"I know, I know, you said you didn't want 'owt, but you look as if you need building up. You could be a bonny lad, you

could, but you're all skin and bone. It's good for you isn't it? Mars a day helps you work, rest and play an' that. Anyroad, you can't sit in here with nowt to eat or you're taking up space."

"Thanks."

He picked up his coffee, took a sip, and winced. He'd forgotten about his lip.

Shirley laughed.

"Aye, they make 'em hot here, don't they? I'd eat your Mars Bar first if I were you."

Daniel looked down at her lunch. She had a white ham roll, an apple, a Lilt and a packet of Quavers. She also had a small carton full of a white substance she began to eat with a tea-spoon.

"Is that cream?" Daniel asked her.

"You what?"

"That, in the carton. Is it cream?"

She made a face of disgust.

"Cream? You think I'd sit and eat cream? It's yoghurt, you doylem. They don't sell it here, but Peggy lets me keep a stock in the fridge. It's lovely. You want to try some?"

She held out the spoon.

"No. I'm fine, thanks."

"Suit yourself."

The spoon disappeared into her mouth and she turned her head to watch the rain. Daniel opened up his Mars Bar and took a bite. He tried to concentrate on the people around him, but his eyes kept coming back to Shirley's face, while she stared out of

the window. With her attention so completely elsewhere, he felt safe to take her in more completely.

The red hair, the white skin, the blue denim, the curve of her breasts; the combination of these he found so magnetic and compelling that his breathing almost stopped. It seemed impossible that she could be unaware of the effect she had on those around her. He pulled his eyes away from her face and looked around the room. His were not the only eyes gravitating towards Shirley. There were several faces wearing probably the same appreciative expression as him. And they weren't all men because it wasn't all a sex thing. She just seemed to glow all over like nothing could really touch her, like she could work in a kiosk or a factory or an office or wherever and she would still be free and confident and be able to gaze out of dirty window and be filled with the pleasure of seeing rain.

Then she turned her eyes on him and the smile of the edges of her mouth told him that she had, after all, been expecting him to be looking at her and he felt confused and his face burnt. He really did know nothing about girls.

She scraped out the last few drops of yoghurt, gave the spoon one more lick and said,

“Right, so where were we? You were saying that you'd been having lots of rows with your Mum before she died, right?”

“Well, yes,” he said, surprised at how quickly her attention switched, from yoghurt to rain to his mother's death.

“And you felt dead guilty about it, and I was saying that all lads went through that. Yeh?”

He nodded.

“Right well- you alright talking about this? You look a bit weird, like?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Sure? Right, then, you know that we all argue with our parents? I mean, you must know that, right?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, looking down at his Mars Bar. ‘I know that, but what was that you were saying about not having a chance to make it up later?’”

“I’m coming to that.”

She picked up her roll and took a small bite.

“When I were your age . . .” she smiled suddenly. ‘Sounds daft that. Sounds like I’m some old codger.’” She put on a gruff voice. “When I were your age.”

Daniel smiled politely.

“Anyroad, when I were fourteen I used to have massive bust-ups with my mam, screaming and shouting at each other, like.”

“What about?”

“All sorts. Lads, clothes, music, going to church. Don’t get me wrong. I love my mam now and I loved her then, but we didn’t half have a go at each other. Then, one Sunday, I were at my Gran’s house for Sunday dinner, and my cousin Sheryl were there. She must have been about my age now, maybe a bit older, seventeen. I hadn’t seen her for a while, like, and I couldn’t believe it. Her and my Auntie Maureen were there, and they were, like, having a laugh and acting like they were best mates.

“But you see the last time I’d seen her they were at each other’s throats. Sheryl were shouting “Why can’t you just leave me alone!” and Auntie Maureen was going “I’ll have your blooming guts for garters if you talk to me like that again,” and the rest of us were just keeping our heads down and trying to eat our dinner.

“So, like I says, this time they’re all lovey-dovey, so after dinner she’s sitting reading the News of the World magazine and I ask her about it and she said that all that shouting and stuff, you need it to show them you’re not a kid anymore and to find your independence. Then, once you’ve shown them, you get on better than ever because you can be mates. They’re still your parents, but they’re your mate as well.

“That’s what’s happened with me and all. Me and my mam, we’re dead close now. I’d do anything for her, I really would.”

Shirley had finished her roll and, after carefully wiping away the crumbs with a napkin, she opened up her Quavers and offered Daniel one. He shook his head.

“No, thanks. So what you’re saying is . . . um . . . what?”

“I were thinking about that before lunch when I were in me kiosk and how that relates to you. Now, you can tell me to bog off and I don’t mind. It’s none of my business, but as you’ve asked, I reckon that your mum dying now is the worst time it could be. ‘Cos you’ve started to argue, and fallen out and that, but you don’t have the chance to make up.”

“So what do I do?”

“You what?”

“What do I do?”

“Well, there’s nowt you can do, is there? Your mam’s dead, so you can’t make it up with her. You just got to get on with it. But one thing I can say is you’ve to stop feeling guilty, because it’s not your fault you were arguing, as I said. Hold on a sec’.”

A cross-eyed woman with thick black glasses was calling her from the staff table, and Shirley went over to speak to her.

Daniel picked up his coffee and looked out of the window. It was still raining, but not hard. ‘Spitting down’ they called it. Charming expression when you thought about it. He watched an old lady struggle up the opposite pavement with two Morrisons bags. She was trying to walk quickly, perhaps to catch a bus. The bus station was at the top of the road.

“That was Debbie. She’s, I dunno, the overall manager or something. Anyway, she’s right nosey- wanted to know why I weren’t sitting on the staff table. You have to watch it with her. If you get on the wrong side of her you’ve had it.”

He said nothing.

“What’s up? You’re looking all narky again.”

“So is that it then?”

“What? What you on about?”

“Is that your dead good advice that I’ve been waiting for? I should just get over it, just forget about my mum because I’ll never be able to make it up with her?”

This was coming out and he couldn’t stop it. It didn’t matter that it was Shirley and that she was beautiful.

“I never said that, did I?”

“You did.”

“I never said you were to forget about her. Eh, listen you, I’m not a blooming psychiatrist. I’ve said what I thought, and if you don’t like it I’m sorry, but I were just trying to help. Bloody hell, that’s what you get for helping someone. Oh, eh, don’t start crying, love.”

Daniel put his head right down and tried to shield his face with his hand, but the tears came through.

Shirley leaned forward and whispered quickly.

“Listen, I would give you a hug, but we’ll just start getting comments and everyone’ll see that you’re crying, so I’ll just sit here, normal like, and say nowt, and when you’re ready you just let me know. No one’s watching, love, so you just take your time, alright?”

He had no choice. The tears kept coming and there was nothing he could do about them. Eventually, he was able to pause and take a breath, and he muttered.

“Back in a minute.”

He stumbled to the gents and headed for the sink. The water was icy, and for the second time that day he looked at his face in a small, dirty, unfamiliar mirror. He grabbed some toilet paper, blew his nose, took a few big breaths and went back to the table.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You should be, you big girl’s blouse!”

“What?”

But Shirley was smiling at him and he couldn't help smiling back.

"That's better," she said. "Now listen, I've a bit of time left before I've to be back. Why don't you tell me a bit about your mam?"

"I've told you already."

"It's up to you. They say it's good to talk about stuff, don't they? And I bet you've not talked about it much, have you?"

Daniel shook his head.

"What did she die of, your mum?"

"Lung cancer."

"And were you there at the end, like?"

Daniel nodded. He was there at the end alright. He'd seen his mum with bloated face and oxygen mask and grey skin gasping for air and trying to say goodbye. There were things he wanted to talk about, but that wasn't one. Not yet anyway. Maybe never.

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about that."

"Ok. What about after? At the funeral. Did you do a reading or 'owt?"

"No, I didn't do anything."

"Well that's a shame."

"Why?"

"It's good to get involved an' that. Otherwise it doesn't seem like it's happened, like it's sorted in your head. That's what my mam said after my gran died. We had to go and see her in the coffin, and-

“What? You’re kidding.”

“I’m not going to kid about summat like that, am I? That’s part of being a Catholic, paying your respects to the body. I couldn’t believe it when my mam said. I were terrified. But it’s not as bad as you think, and it sort of helps. Makes it feel real.”

She crunched another Quaver thoughtfully, then said,

“What about at the Wake. Did you have lot of family around?”

“Some, but they didn’t pay much attention to me. It was Ronald they cared about.”

“Ronald? Who’s that, like?”

“My stepfather. He got the sympathy cards. House was full of cards to him, and letters, all people saying how sorry they are. What did I get? Nothing.”

His anger surprised him but he carried on.

“Not one card. But she was my mum. He’d only known her five minutes, and he can get another wife, can’t he? But I can’t get another mum, and everyone’s feeling dead sorry for him and no one says anything to me.”

“Careful of your coffee, love.”

“Just like what happened in the funeral service. The vicar’s telling us all about Mum, as if he knew her. He can’t have met her more than half a dozen times. And he says what a good wife she was to Ronald, and how great her life had been since she met him. Like it was rubbish before that. And he never mentioned that she was a lawyer, like it’s not important. It’s more important that she’s a wife, I suppose?”

“Do you get on with your stepfather?”

“Not really. I mean, no, not at all.”

“What, is he a drinker?”

Daniel had been concentrating on tearing his Mars Bar wrapper into as small pieces as possible while he was speaking. He stopped and looked up at Shirley.

“A drinker? No. Well, sometimes.”

“Oh aye, how much then?”

“Well, I don’t know. I think he has a whisky or two sometimes after we’ve gone to bed.”

For the first time, Shirley looked impatient.

“Have you ever seen him drunk?”

“Drunk? Ronald? No, never.”

“Well, he’s no drinker then. Is he bad-tempered, like. Does he ever hit you?”

“Hit me? He hardly ever tells me off, never mind hits me.”

“Lazy git then. Never does ‘owt for you, just for himself.”

Daniel shook his head.

“No, he’s not like that. He makes my lunches for me, and all the meals. He’s a good cook. Better than my mum, to be honest.”

“Oh, right.”

“It’s not that. I’m not saying he’s a bad bloke, it’s just . . .”

“Ey up, it’s little Shirley Temple and her battered toyboy. Alright? Mind if I join you, or is three a crowd, like?”

Before either could say anything, Trevor had plonked his plate of ham sandwiches on the table and sat down on the free

seat beside Shirley. His tan and silk shirt were even more out of place in the café, but at this close range it was his eyes that Daniel noticed first. Or rather, the bags underneath them. They looked like Fatboy's did when he was pretending to be the creature inside the Daleks. You could spend all the money you liked on jewellery and silk shirts, but you'd never be able to get rid of those bags. Even so, the eyes above them were lively and kind.

"So, how you feeling then young Daniel? Any better?"

"Yes, th . . . ta." He was trying to stop saying 'thanks'.

"You hear that, Shirley Temple? Ten minutes with you and he stops talking posh!"

"Bog off!" replied Shirley.

"Anyway, listen, I'm glad you're feeling better because I need an extra pair of hands in the shop. Barbara's had to go off home. She says it's the flu, but I reckon she's on summat. Heroine, probably."

"Really?" said Daniel, wide-eyed.

"Course not," said Shirley with a snort of laughter.

"Barbara's nearly sixty. Leave off, Trevor."

"Anyroad, you fancy doing a couple of hours this afternoon?"

"What, in a shop?"

"Aye, a shop. What's up, Little Lord Fauntleroy? Too good for us are you?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that. It's just, I've never done it before, I don't know what to do."

“It’s not that blooming difficult. Can’t be, or Shirley here wouldn’t have lasted five minutes. You can add stuff up in your head, can’t you? What’s sixteen plus seven plus forty-two?”

“Um, sixty-three. No sixty-five.”

“You got there in the end. Well then. I’ll give you one pound an hour. How much is that for two hours’ work?”

“Two pounds? Really?”

Two pounds bought a lot of games of Asteroids.

“Alright. What time do you want me to start?”

“He’s keen, isn’t he? Let me finish my sarnies and we’ll go up together.”

“You take care of him, Trevor, and keep your hands to yourself,” said Shirley, winking at Daniel.

“He’s too young for me, love, and for you tha knows. Oh ‘eck, look who it isn’t.”

Daniel turned his head. It was the punk, the one from the bowling alley. He was standing in the doorway of the café glaring in their direction.

“Oh blooming ‘eck. He’s not supposed to come in here,” said Shirley, jumping up and rushing over to him.

She grabbed the punk’s arm and half pushed him backwards out of the café. He let himself be pushed, but kept glaring back at Trevor and Daniel. Once outside, he grabbed Shirley and snogged her in full view of everyone in the café. Shirley pulled away, her face flushed. They both looked back at the table, Shirley in embarrassment, and the punk in triumph, then walked off, his arm looped around her neck.

Trevor shook his head.

“She deserves better than that little gob-shite, I tell you that. Pardon my language.”

Daniel was still staring in horror through the window.

“I thought so,” said Trevor. “You’ve fallen for her, haven’t you? I could tell before, when you came the shop. You’d only known her five minutes but I could still tell. Daft world, isn’t it? You’ve fallen for her, but she’s too old, she’s fallen for him, but he’s a . . . I won’t say it again. And who’s he fallen for? Nobbut hisself.”

“Who is he?”

“*That* is Jason Milner. Right waste of space is Jason Milner. He’s not allowed in here, because he come in one day drunk and started swearing at Shirley and so Mr Frank, that’s the owner, he come upstairs and told him to get out and not come back. Mr Frank’s in his seventies, but he’s as tough as old boots, and he’s like most bullies is Jason Milner, a great nancy underneath. That were last month. Didn’t think we’d see him again.”

Daniel looked down at the ripped up Mars Bar wrapper on the table. He picked up a piece absently and rubbed it between his fingers.

“Why does she like him?”

“Good question, sunshine. You want to know what I reckon? Has she told you about her Dad?”

“Um . . . She said she didn’t like him. What’s that got to do with it?”

“Hear me out. Talk of gob-shites, Jason Milner’s got nowt on her old man. Used to go out boozing and come home and belt her mum. If Shirley got in the way, he’d belt her an’ all.”

“That’s . . . that’s horrible.”

“Aye, it is. But who does she end up going for? A no-good wazzock what’s not far off her old man. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Daniel frowned at him.

“Not really, no.”

“It’s in the genes, isn’t it? Her mother goes for lads like that, and so does she? She can’t help it?”

“What? Do you mean he hits her? That Jason Milner hits Shirley?”

“Now hold your horses. I didn’t say that. He hasn’t hit her, I’m sure of that. Not yet, anyroad. He’s on probation he told me, so one wrong move and he’d be in jail.”

“And if he did, she’d hit him back. She’s tough as well, isn’t she?”

Trevor smiled wryly.

“Ee, you posh lads, you know nowt, do you? She’s not tough, she’s as soft as butter. That’s why she’s took care of you and that’s why she’s chosen him, ‘cos she’s soft and she wants to look after him, to mend him. Maybe that’s why her mum picked her Dad. Problem is, with some blokes you just can’t mend them. They’re wronguns inside and out.”

Daniel picked up another piece of Mars Bar wrapper.

“Poor lad, you’ve learnt more than you bargained for today, haven’t you?”

He stood up.

“Well, come on then. Let’s get cracking. Sweets, fags and pop don’t just sell themselves you know.”

1.32pm

Daniel and Trevor didn't speak as they walked up past the bus station onto Vicar Lane and then went through the Grand Arcade. He hadn't been this way for years. It was great for kids, the Grand Arcade. For a start it had a clock high up with two men with axes standing on either side of it and 'Time and tide wait for no man' written underneath. Every half hour or so other men from different countries would come out of two little doors and clonk a bell. It also had a trophy shop where he'd always thought that he could save up and buy the best trophy and have *Daniel Hargreaves, Footballer of the Year* engraved on it and put it in his bedroom. Best of all, there was a pet shop with a troop of little puppies in the window wagging their tails like mad every time someone came near.

Trevor was right though. The world was daft.

And unfair.

Take Leeds United. They'd been brilliant when he was hardly old enough to notice. Second Division Championship, two First Division Championships, the FA Cup, the Fairs Cup (twice), the League Cup and the Charity shield. And they would have had another League championship in 1971 and the European Cup in 1975 but for dodgy referees.

They weren't brilliant any more, though. They'd drawn with Liverpool the previous Saturday at Anfield (goal from John

Hawley), which was a good result, but they were mid-table overall and they'd finished mid-table the year before. Harvey, Madeley, Gray and Lorimer were still playing, just, but they'd sold their best young player, Joe Jordan, to Manchester United. To make things worse, they'd recently got themselves a great manager again, Jock Stein from Celtic, but he'd left after only 45 days in charge to manage Scotland, and now they had Jimmy Adamson, who Daniel had never heard of.

And Pearson at school, who was a Chelsea fan, said everyone hated Leeds because they used to be a dirty team. And Connolly said when he went back to Ireland in the holidays everyone took the Mickey because he had an English accent and they all hated England because of the way the English used to be when they ruled the world and how they'd been during the Potato Famine.

So here he was, stuck in a rubbish decade having missed the sixties when it was supposed to be all love and fun, supporting a team that was past its best that everyone hated and in a country that was also past its best and everyone hated.

Triffic.

But all that didn't matter any more. Because there was a bigger question, bigger than unfairness and Leeds and accidents and death and puppies and all the other stuff.

What was he going to do about Jason Milner?

2.23pm

“There. Bloody hell. Them ones, there. JPS. No, not red, the black ones. No, ten, not twenty. King size. The ones above. That’s right. About bloody time.”

JPS stood for John Player Special. But there were dozens of other kinds of cigarettes. There were Benson and Hedges, Peter Stuyvesant, Rothmans, Dunhill, Gold Leaf, Silk Cut, St Moritz, Lambert and Butler, Consulate, Capstan, Number Six, Craven A . . .

But that wasn’t all, because even if he got the brand right then he’d probably got the wrong size or colour or strength. The toughest was Embassy. There was Embassy Regal, Embassy Regal King Size, Embassy Number One, Embassy Number One Extra Mild, Embassy Gold, Embassy Mild, Embassy Extra Mild, Embassy Extra Mild King Size.

That was difficult enough to get his head around, but then the customers didn’t always give the name on the packet. They might just say ‘Embassy’ and leave him to ask which one and then look really irritated that he didn’t know. Or they might have their own names for their special brand. So Benson and Hedges could be “B and H”, or “Bensons”, or “Golds” or even “Bedges”. As far as they were concerned, they’d be buying them for years and it was up to him to work it out.

Daniel seemed to spend most of the afternoon staring at a wall of cigarettes, without a clue what he was looking for. Then

the pointing started. “There. There. Come on. I’ve a bus to catch.”

“It’s like a red rag to a bull, having a young lad on the counter,” Trevor said. “They love it, some of ‘em. They have crap lives so they take it out on someone else. Don’t let it get to you, just keep smiling. Just remember, for every bugger there’s ten nice folk.”

Some of the customers were genuinely in a hurry, but some just seemed to enjoy making him feel embarrassed and almost looked disappointed if he managed to find the cigarettes they wanted. So they made up for it with the money. Stick a five pound note on the counter, say, and then tell you how much change they should be getting (“They can’t add up nowadays. It’s all done wi’ calculators.”), counting out the change in their hands in front of you “Just to make sure.”

Putting the money on the counter, ignoring his outstretched hand, that was pretty irritating, especially if it was a pile of copper. And no please or thank you at the end of it.

And of course he did get the change wrong sometimes. If there were four or five things to add up, and he wasn’t sure of the prices, and the customer was muttering, and other customers were waiting, he couldn’t help it. So he apologised but they always reckoned he’d done it on purpose. “Thought you’d get some more pocket money, didn’t you?” Treated him like a thief. As if he’d be trying to con an old man out of seven pence.

One even tried to con him, a small bloke with red hair and bad acne. He insisted that he'd given Daniel a ten pound note, not the five pounds Daniel had given him change for. Daniel was pretty sure it had been a fiver, but the man started shouting, so Daniel apologised and started getting the extra change together. Trevor took over.

"A tenner?" he said to the man. "When have you had a tenner?"

"I give him a tenner, and I want my change."

"I tell you what, when I've cashed up I'll see if we're ten quid up. You come and see me tomorrow morning and I'll give it you then. Alright?"

After the customer had gone away muttering, Trevor turned to Daniel.

"If you get a note, put it on top of the drawer, here, then give the change out. Don't put it straight in, otherwise toe-rags like him'll try and take you for a ride. And just to be on the safe side, when they give you a note, hold it up to them and say 'That's five pound you've give me'. If they still make a fuss, tell 'em to come back after you've cashed up. They never do."

There were some nice ones too, of course. They'd wait patiently while he fumbled the change or tried to find the right packet of cigarettes, and just say 'No hurry, son. Take tha time.' Or the middle-aged woman who took one look at him and said to Trevor, 'Oo, where did you get this one? He's lovely! Can I take him home with me?"

He loved the till. You had to press down these metal levers with prices on, and then the tray shot out. There was a trick to it, and you had to press them all down at the same time or it would stick. So, if something was 57 pence, you pushed down the 50p lever and the 7p lever. But it was best if someone spent, say, £1.46 1/2p . Then you had to press down the £1, the 40p, the 6p and the 1/2p at the same time. There was something really satisfying about pushing all the metal levers down at the same time to make the tray clang and shoot out.

The shop was always packed, and Trevor had put him straight on to serving. “It’s the best way to learn. That’s what Mr Frank says.”

There were so many people, but it was weird the way you ended up looking at people’s hands, getting money or giving money back. There were grubby hands (there were plenty of them), small white hands, wrinkled hands, tattooed hands, hands with nicotine-yellowed finger nails (plenty of those as well), rough hands, hands covered with rings, blotchy hands, scarred hands, hairy hands, fat hands . . .

And it didn’t always fit when you first saw a customer what their hands would be like. One skinhead in a black donkey jacket had neat, clean little hands, that looked as though he’d only just washed them, then this sharp looking businessman with an expensive camel hair overcoat had ‘love’ and ‘hate’ tattooed on his knuckles.

“Nowt queerer than folk,” said Trevor when he pointed it out, “and I should know.”

He had a feeling Trevor had made that joke before.

After an hour and a half Trevor took him off the counter and sent him to the store-room for a break.

“Hold up,” said the sharp-faced Theresa who was working beside them. “How come he gets a break so blooming soon?”

“O shurrup,” replied Trevor. “Look at him. He doesn’t know what day it is, does he? Five minutes, alright?”

Daniel nodded, caught the key that was chucked at him, and staggered off to the store room.

He sat down on the plastic chair and took a deep breath. Trevor was right, he was knackered. It’d been a right laugh, though. He felt a buzzing all over his body, really alive. Some of the people had been ‘right buggers’ as his mother would have said, but there’d been so many of them, and he’d had to move and think so quickly that the hour and a half had torn by.

And he felt part of something. There was Trevor telling him prices out of one side of his mouth whilst making jokes to customers out of the other. He was amazing. He could hold a conversation, give Daniel instructions, and add up five or six different packets of sweets, a magazine and a packet of cigarettes all at the same time. And Theresa, who had really podgy arms that looked as though they’d been inflated, and who was a bit sharp, but who’d stuck up for him when one customer was giving him a hard time about finding his Marlboro Light.

And he liked the fact that the customers obviously thought he was one of them, just a lad working in a shop. Not the

grammar boy, not the bereaved boy, not the lonely boy, but just some lad working in a shop.

He took a cup, rinsed it out in the sink, had a couple of gulps of water, and then went back to the shop.

“Ey up, it’s the Sundance Kid! Five minutes, I said!”

“But I was . . .”

“Never mind, take these and get stacking.”

Trevor stuck a box of Marathons in his hands.

“The rest of the boxes are up there,” he said, pointing to a shelf above the counter.

Daniel was about to ask him what ‘stacking’ was, but Trevor had already got into a conversation with an old woman about the price of Fisherman’s Friend.

It couldn’t be that difficult, anyway, surely.

He looked at where the Marathons were stacked on the counter. There were three piles of them next to three piles of Mars Bars and three piles of Kit Kats. And they were in the best position. Best sellers in the best position. Made sense.

He leant over the counter and started to put the Marathons in, one by one.

“By heck, get a move on, Sundance! You’ll be there all blooming day! Yes, love? Forty-eight pence, ta . . .”

He didn’t know why he was suddenly Sundance, but he liked the name. The film had been on telly the Christmas before and he’d watched it with his mum, who’d said that she quite fancied Robert Redford, but not so much Paul Newman as he was a bit too pretty. His mum preferred men who were not too

pretty. "Girls don't like boys being too perfect," she once told him when he complained about having spots. "It makes them feel insecure."

Was that true about all girls or just about his mum? How would he know? He didn't know any girls. What he knew about them he picked up from books and songs. There were boys in his class who said they'd snogged girls, but he didn't know whether it was true. There were lads in the year above who definitely had, though, as Jock had been on the skiing trip the year before, and he'd seen some fourth and fifth years snogging these French girls.

Daniel had looked at these boys with new eyes when he'd heard. He watched them in the corridor and the dining hall and the playground, but they seemed just the same. But how could they go about their normal day when they'd been with a girl like that? Surely all that stuff, the Maths, the English, the rugby, all of that, surely it didn't mean anything any more. They'd touched a girl, held a girl, kissed a girl, everything else must seem pointless.

"I think we're alright for Marathons now, Sundance."

Daniel blinked. He'd been miles away, and the Marathons were now towering over the other sweets.

"Sorry," he muttered, and grabbed back a handful.

"Listen, love," said Theresa, looking a bit less sharp than usual. "You go round the front and shout out what we need, and I'll pass you the boxes, alright?"

“Oh, right, ta,” he replied and went around the counter. He looked for the gaps between the sweets.

“Er . . . Texans, Opal Fruits, Bounties, Rolos and Flakes.”

The boxes came over.

“Owt else?”

“Um, we could do with some Aeros and Toffos.”

Over they came.

“Wharrabout chewing gum?”

“Um, we need some Juicy Fruit and some Stimorol.”

Stimorol had been his mum’s favourite after she’d stopped smoking. She used to take a whole box of the stuff when they went on holiday. It hadn’t worked, though, because when they’d got back he’d found ten Benson and Hedges in her sheepskin coat pocket when he was looking for some change.

He finished the sweets and started on the pop. He had to go to the store-room and get the crates of Coca-cola, Lilt, Seven-up and Fanta.

“You should be here in the summer,” said Theresa, seeing him struggle. “When it’s hot, we’re filling up that freezer every five minutes. Everyone wants pop then.”

“You should do sandwiches as well.”

“You what?”

“Sandwiches,” repeated Daniel. “You should sell sandwiches. I bet they’d sell out quick as well. There’s always a queue at Ainsleys at lunchtime.”

Theresa folded her podgy arms and shook her head.

“Ey up, he’s been here five minutes and he’s telling us how to run the shop. What do you reckon Trevor?”

Trevor was serving a very old lady with a shopping cart on wheels, and he was leaning right over the counter to give her change.

“There you are, love, that’s twenty-eight, thirty, forty, fifty pence, one pound. You alright with that cart or do you want me to help you put your magazines in there for you?”

When he’d finished he turned to them.

“Aye, I’ve mentioned that about sarnies to Mr Frank. Do you know what he says? He says ‘Ainsleys don’t sell our sweets, we’re not going to sell their sandwiches.’”

Theresa nodded her head approvingly.

“You hear that? ‘Ainsleys don’t sell our sweets, we’re not going to sell their sandwiches’. He’s a proper gentleman is Mr Frank.”

The look she gave Daniel suggested that he was *not* a proper gentleman for having the idea in the first place.

“When you’ve done that,” she said pointing to the last crate of Lilt, “you can fill up the crisps.”

The crisps were lighter at least, and he felt like a strongman, balancing three boxes on top of each other. They had the Walkers crisps in the usual flavours: cheese and onion, smokey bacon, salt and vinegar and all that. They also had Prawn Cocktail Skips, his favourites, Hula Hoops and Quavers, but there were no Outer Spacers or Ringos or Chipsticks. “None of that fancy new rubbish,” said Trevor.

Time was getting on. It was past half three, but Trevor didn't seem to have noticed, and Ronald certainly wouldn't notice either if Daniel came back a bit late. He didn't want to go yet. He hadn't seen Shirley again since the café and there was always stuff going on he was stacking.

While he was doing the crisps he watched a tall, balding man put a copy of 'Penthouse' furtively on the counter but before Trevor could take his money, Theresa had snatched up the magazine and was waving it over her head.

"Eh, Daniel love, could you check the price on this mucky mag? It's Penthouse, love. That's right. PENTHOUSE. This gentleman here want to buy it and I need to know the price. Have a look on the rack."

The man almost ran out of the shop in embarrassment.

"What have I told you about doing that, eh?" Trevor snapped at her. "He's a paying customer, he is."

"Oh, give over," replied Theresa scornfully. "Them blokes make me sick with their mucky books. Sorry Daniel, love, I were only doing it to make a point. You don't have to look on the shelf."

"Unless you want to, eh Sundance?"

They were both looking at him and Daniel blushed and turned back to the crisps. He'd noticed the magazines, of course, sitting rudely on the top shelf. And he'd looked at one before. Fatboy had brought some on a school trip to Edinburgh, and they'd got passed around the train. Every time Mr Crouch had wandered back from the smoking section to check on their

behaviour, Simple had shouted “Watch out, lads, it’s Mr Crouch. Put away the porno mags!” It’d been a brilliant double bluff.

He’d watched the other boys looking at the magazines before one was passed to him, saw the mixture of astonishment and delight and confusion, then felt the same thing when it was his turn.

Listening to Trevor banter was a laugh as well. He never stopped talking, and a lot of the time he seemed to be deflecting comments about his high prices. It did seem expensive there. Shouldn’t the prices in all the shops in a chain be the same? He said the same to Theresa and she just raised her eyebrows and muttered, “Aye, that’s Trevor for you.”

“But doesn’t Mr Frank mind?”

“What’s to mind? The customers love him, and the shop’s always busy, so Mr Frank just lets him get on with it. Tight so-and-so is Trevor, though. Ask him about his electricity.”

“His what?”

“Ask him how his electric’s so cheap.”

Daniel looked over at Trevor who was leaning over the counter talking to a dark-haired man in his twenties with a silver earring.

“Maybe later,” he said to Theresa.

“I’ll do it. Eh, Trevor! Daniel wants to know about your electricity, how do you get it so cheap?”

Trevor looked back at them and grinned.

“Got it wired up to the street lamp outside my house.”

Daniel looked at him disbelievingly.

“It’s true,” he continued. “Mate of mine works for the council. He come over and wired it up. Not all, mind, or they’d suspect summat. But most of it. That’s twenty-eight pence, love, ta. I can give you his number if you like.”

At four o’clock Trevor opened up the till and took out three one pound notes.

“That were over two hours in the end, weren’t it?”

He handed the notes to Daniel. They were grubby, crumpled and fantastic. Daniel folded them carefully and slid them into his back pocket.

“Well done, Sundance. You’ve done alright. Now then, do you fancy working on Saturday? We’ve a young lass just left so we need someone pronto. Nine till five thirty, £1.50 an hour. What do you think?”

“Um. . . I dunno . . . I’ll have to ask my stepfather. He’s-”

“Okey-cokey. You ask your stepdad an’ give us a call.”

He took a biro from a cup by the till, scribbled on a paper bag and gave it to Daniel.

“That’s my home number, so if you call make sure it’s the evenings. Any time until one a.m. I’m a night-owl me. I hate sleeping. It’s boring.

“Right, then, off you go, and remember, if you ever need a hand . . . there’s one on t’ end of your arm!”

Daniel smiled and turned to go, then stopped.

“Um, I thought I’d better say goodbye to Shirley. Do you know when she’s got her break?”

He tried to make the question sound casual, but it didn't work. Trevor glanced at Theresa then said,

“Debbie's coming up from Circle House to do her break, 'cos Barbara's gone home. She can't make it 'til four thirty, so you've a half hour or so to kill. But Shirley doesn't need a break to say goodbye, does she?”

“No, it's just . . . I wanted to ask her about something . . .” He picked up his blazer, smiled an embarrassed goodbye to Theresa, and headed off towards the kiosk.

He felt a little light-headed, which was no good if he was going to sort out what to do now. He looked around for somewhere to pass half an hour and to think, and headed over to Bostick's, the record shop near the Heath Robinson machine. He liked records, although he felt more comfortable in book shops, where you weren't judged on what you were wearing.

4.07pm

It was pretty bare, Bostick's, not like the HMV down on Brigade. There were three racks of albums in roughly alphabetical order with another section by the wall for singles. The shop was empty of customers, and behind the counter a lad who looked like a roadie with black clothes and hair and pale skin glanced up as he entered before looking back down at his copy of NME.

He looked at the racks of records. Which to go for. The cool ones would be The Clash or The Jam or The Sex Pistols, but he felt a fraud looking at their stuff. He wasn't a mod or a rocker or a punk, and if a real one came in and saw him looking at their records he might end up getting another chinning.

He liked Darts, especially 'Daddy Cool' and 'Come Back My Love', but he didn't want to look like a complete geek. Their lead singer was balding and the average age of the band must have been about fifty or something. Same with *Grease*. You had to pretend not to like that kind of music, especially in front of Tommo and Brathers, who seemed to hate any song that had a tune you could hum and words you could hear.

Daniel had the whole of 'Grease' on tape now, anyway. He'd borrowed the album from Martin down the road, and taped it on his Phillips cassette player. It was brilliant for taping things, his cassette player. You just waited until everyone was out, put it near the record player, pressed the record and play

buttons at the same time, started the album off and tip-toed out of the room. Dead simple.

He settled for looking at the Bruce Springsteen section. Irish Connolly at school had been going on about him the week before and had played a couple of his songs on Stan's cassette player. He sounded like a cowboy, Bruce Springsteen and looking at the cover of the album 'Born to Run' he looked a bit like a cowboy as well. Well, a city cowboy, at least. He didn't look like he came from round here, anyway.

He pulled the sleeve from the cover and looked at the lyrics to the songs. There were so many words. It was like Connolly had said, 'His songs are all stories'. 'Crap stories for puffs,' Tommo had said, but he'd walked away pretty quickly when Connolly had stood up and turned to him. He was quiet, Connolly, and he didn't throw his weight about, but his Dad had boxed for Ireland in the Olympics and he had a boxing ball and bag in his garage, and he wasn't going to take any lip from Tommo, who had all the punk gear and was always making sarcy comments, but who got picked up at the school gates by his jeweller Dad in a Mercedes and taken back to his big house in Alwoodley.

The screen door slams, Mary's dress waves

*Like a vision she dances across the porch as the radio
plays*

Roy Orbison singing for the lonely

Hey that's me and I want you only

*Don't turn me home again
I just can't face myself alone again
Don't run back inside, darling you know just what I'm here
for
So you're scared and you're thinking that maybe we ain't
that young anymore
Show a little faith, there's magic in the night
You ain't a beauty, but hey you're alright
Oh and that's alright with me*

That was just the first verse of one of the songs Connolly had played. Magic and loneliness and being ok not to be beautiful mixed with stuff like screen doors and porches and Roy Orbison, things you didn't get in Leeds, or he'd never heard of anyway. He'd love to go to America. Maybe when he was older . . .

'When you're older.' He hated that expression. It signified all the power that adults had to stop you doing stuff you wanted to do. When *he* was older, if he ever made it that far, he was never going to say expressions like that to his kids.

The main reason he hated the thought of growing older was that he'd be different from how he was now.

He was really different from how he was six months before, so when he was older he'd change almost beyond recognition. That was obvious, wasn't it? You saw adults, or even lads in their late teens, and they must be really different

from how they were when they were his age. Look at Mr Bedford, say. He can't have been like that when he was fourteen, obviously.

So did that mean that the him that was thinking now would be dead when he was an adult? Maybe ten per cent would be dead in six months, twenty in a year and so on until he got to, say, forty, and only a tiny bit would be left.

So 'when you're older' basically meant 'when you're dead'. That was a pretty depressing thought.

"Bruce Springsteen. Rubbish, that is. What d' you think Noakesy?"

"Aye, shite."

They were on either side of him again. Daniel looked at Gary. He had quite a bonny face with his clear skin, square nose and green eyes (although one was swollen up from Daniel's punch), but there was a hatred there now which made him ugly, and it wasn't helped by the smell of cigarettes mixed with chocolate.

"You didn't think we'd forgotten about you, did you, eh posh lad?"

Daniel looked over at the roadie at the counter. He was still absorbed by his NME. If they attacked him in the shop he'd have to do something, even if it was just shouting for help. Either way, Daniel would still be safer in the shop than if they got him outside.

"Listen, you've given me a kicking. You've won, alright. Can't you just leave me alone?"

“A kicking? That were nowt, that were. We’re going to give you a proper hiding now.”

“What for? What have I done to you?”

“You’ve bit Noakesy for a start, hasn’t he, Noakesy?”

“Aye, you wanker.”

“And you’ve give me this. You only got saved by some slag. But you’ve had it now, you twat.”

Daniel looked at the door. He could run for it. He was quite a quick runner. Or he could do what Simple’s brother did, according to Simple, anyway. If he was in a pub and another lad started looking at him, he’d go straight up to him, hit him, then run out as quickly as possible. It was logical when you thought about it. If he stayed after punching him, the other lad might kill him. If he just ran, he might get chased. This way, he could get out while the other lad was picking himself up.

Like most things that Simple said, it sounded better in theory. His best bet was to stay in the record shop.

Gary seemed to sense this.

“You can’t stay in here all day, posh boy. Anyroad, we can just sit on that bench over there and wait for you. And the longer we wait, the more pissed off we’re going to be. You’d be best coming out now.”

Looking into Gary’s face Daniel suddenly realised something. He wasn’t scared. He’d been beaten up once and it wasn’t so bad, no worse than being at the bottom of a ruck with your face in a cold puddle. And these two in front of him, they weren’t any bigger than some of the lads he’d brought down on

the rugby pitch. They'd beaten him before, but that was when one had him around the neck from behind. See how they did in a proper stand-up fight.

In any case, if he stayed in the shop, he'd miss Shirley, and he had to see her again. He could see the shop from the window, but the counter was facing the other way, so she wouldn't be able to help him out this time. That was ok, though, he was going to face this himself.

"Alright, let's go."

Gary frowned and looked at Noakesy. They were both confused at Daniel's change in tone, but before they could speak each felt a hand on their shoulder.

"You alright there, son?"

It was Jason Milner.

Jason Milner drew the two boys together so that they were both looking up at him from underneath his long arms.

"Who are you?"

"I wasn't talking to you, you little tosser," he replied, without looking at Gary. "You alright, Danny-boy?"

Daniel said nothing.

"Course he's alright," said Gary. "We're mates, us and Danny, aren't we? We was just . . ."

Before Gary could finish Jason Milner moved his hands from their shoulders to the sides of their heads, then banged the heads together quickly. Daniel had seen this done before. Mr

Jakovitch, a Chemistry teacher, Jehovah's Witness, and owner of the sweatiest armpits in the school, had done the same thing to Spazzer and Fatboy when they were bent over an illegal experiment at the back of the lab. Fatboy said he had seen stars for the rest of the lesson.

Gary and Noakesy certainly looked like they were seeing stars. In fact, they looked dangerously as if they were going to topple over, but before they could, Jason Milner had them by their lapels and was speaking to them quietly and viciously.

"Now listen to me, you little gets. You touch one hair on his head and I'll find you and I'm not pissing about, I'll give you stripes down your faces that'll make you look like a packet of bleedin' Pacers. You understand?"

The two nodded as best they could.

"Now apologise. Go on. Tell him you're sorry."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, sorry."

"Now piss off. And if I see either of you in the Merrion again, you're dead."

He dragged them to the door and pushed them out. They stumbled away, and Daniel could see blood emerging from the top of Gary's blonde head.

The lad at the counter of the record shop had got up and looked as if he thought he should do something, but Jason Milner glared at him and he sat down again quickly and concentrated hard on his magazine.

"Aren't you going to say thank you then, Danny-boy?"

Jason Milner was smiling, but it wasn't a pleasant smile, and Daniel had the feeling that he'd rather be facing Gary and Noakesy. At least he knew what they were about.

"Thank you."

"No problem, sunshine. Anything for one of Shirley's little pals. I were asking her about you, you see? Saw you with her in the café, and I were asking, you know, what she were doing with a young lad like you. She said she'd saved you from a kicking. I didn't believe her, but looks like she were telling the truth."

"Why didn't you believe her?"

"You what?"

"Why didn't you believe her?"

Jason Milner bent down so that his face was only a few inches away from Daniel's, and Daniel could smell the same cigarette smoke as on Gary's breath, but this time mixed with beer and something else he couldn't place. Daniel had been wrong about him when he'd seen him in the bowling alley. He may not have had pins through him, or tattoos, but he was no soft student. There was something too desperate about him. He had very pale skin, more Sid Vicious than Jonny Rotten, and some angry looking spots, and his eyes were pink and bloodshot.

"Because she's a tart, that's why, and you can't trust any of them. Got to keep your eyes on them all the time or they'll be off with someone else, even a little pipsqueak like you."

"Don't call her a tart."

He could hear himself speaking, but he didn't feel as if he was making the sounds. It wasn't exactly one of those out-of-

body things they had on Panorama-type programmes. He wasn't looking down at himself or anything daft like that. He felt as if he were still looking up at Jason Milner, but someone else was doing the talking.

Jason Milner gritted his teeth, then relaxed and smiled down at him. He put his hand on Daniel's head and ruffled his hair.

"You don't know them, do you sunshine? Bet you've never had a bird in your life, have you? Well, I'll give you an education you won't get at your posh school. They're all bitches, you hear? All of them. That's your first lesson. The second is, you owe me. I've saved you, and you're mine now. Alright?"

Daniel moved his head backwards out of reach of the hand that had been resting on his head. Jason Milner kept it in the air in front of him for a moment, then let it drop.

"Now, I'm going to wait on that bench for my tart. You stay here and look at your little records, boy. 'Cos that's all you are to her, you know, and to me. A little boy."

"She's not a tart."

"So you said, son. So you said."

Jason Milner gave Daniel a pat on the cheek and left him, glaring, in the record shop. Daniel watched him saunter over to the bench, reach into the side pocket of his leather jacket, and bring out a packet of Embassy King Size. Then he took a cheap plastic lighter from his jeans, lit up, inhaled, stretched his long arms along the top of the bench, rested his head back and blew the smoke up towards the balcony.

Daniel felt helpless with hatred. He could hardly breathe. Not for Gary or Noakesy or Jakovitch or Bedford or Puff Kent or Mark or the bereavement councillor or the bus driver or even death itself had he felt this intensity of hatred. It was like all that anger that had been building up was aimed at this one target. All that anger plus more, much more. Jason Milner had insulted Shirley, had insulted his mother, had insulted him. He had the same power that the teachers had, the power of knowing that you couldn't do anything back to him, because you were a kid, a pupil, too small, whatever it was. He had the power of the coward.

On top of that, he was stopping Daniel seeing Shirley. Daniel had been prepared to take another beating to see Shirley, and here he was, immobilised by this, this punk, this Jason Milner. Even the name had started to taste bad in his mouth, thinking it gave him a throbbing feeling in his forehead.

And there he was, Jason bloody Milner, leaning back and smoking, knowing he'd won, that he could stop him from seeing Shirley, and there was nothing that Daniel could do.

And he needed to speak to Shirley, Shirley whose name tasted sweet and whose face cleared the mist in his head and made him think more clearly. There were things he needed to say to her. He'd been through so much today, but it would be for nothing if he couldn't speak to her again.

He took a deep breath. He had to focus. It was four twenty-five and Shirley would be on her break soon.

What was it his mum used to say? If you've got a problem, try to think of the end result you want to achieve before you do anything. Like when Grady had been teasing him on the bus to Games. Grady was his pal for a while in the second year, but when there were other people about he'd take the Mickey and Daniel hated it. He told his mum that he wasn't going to speak to Grady again, and she asked if that was what he really wanted, and he thought about it and it wasn't. He liked Grady, who was funny and clever, but he just didn't want him to tease him in front of other people.

So his mum had said that he either had to accept that as part of Grady's character, because no one was perfect and if you liked eighty per cent of someone then that was pretty good, or he had to do something that would make Grady stop it. She said he should speak to Grady and tell him to stop it. That wasn't the kind of thing you did at his school, but he tried it anyway. He told Grady that he didn't like being teased in front of other people and asked him to stop it and Grady called him a puff and told everyone and the teasing got worse for a while.

So that wasn't a good example.

But he could see that concentrating on the end result was a good principle to follow, that it made sense.

His instinct here was to attack Jason Milner and he would do it even if he knew he'd lose, but what would the end result be? He would get hurt and maybe get a bit of sympathy from Shirley, but he'd done the attacking so she'd think he was stupid, especially when Jason Milner told her that he'd saved

Daniel from Gary and Noakesy. And anyway did he really want her sympathy? She'd given him that already, and more of it would just confirm that he was just a kid and worth pity but not much else.

Think straight. In an ideal world what did he really, really want?

He wanted Shirley to stop seeing Jason Milner, and to go out with him instead.

Ok, so that last part was unrealistic, but he did want them to split up because . . . What?

Because she was worth much more than Jason Milner, and she could get hurt being with him.

But how could he do that, especially when Trevor said she had fallen for him? And even if he did convince her, somehow, to split up with him, what would Jason Milner do? He wouldn't just let her go, just slap Daniel on the back and say 'Nice one, son'. He'd go absolutely berserk.

In which case his ideal end result was to have them split up *and* Jason Milner to be unable to get back at either of them.

How was he going to do that? The only way he could achieve that would be if he hurt Jason Milner so badly he'd be out of action permanently. But he wasn't big enough to do it with his fists so he'd have to use something else.

A stick? A baseball bat?

A knife?

This was ridiculous. He'd only just punched someone for the first time in his life and now he was thinking about using a lethal weapon.

He could pay someone else to do it. Another rubbish idea. He was a fourteen year-old from Headingley, not Al Capone. Anyway, he didn't know anyone who'd have a chance against Jason Milner and, again, even if he did, was he really the kind of person who paid to get people hurt? Besides, he only had £12.48 in his small, square safe with the combination lock, and that was probably not enough to get anyone's little finger broken.

Jason Milner had finished his cigarette now, and was sitting, head back, on the bench, waiting for Shirley.

And there she was. His heart turned at the sight of her. She looked more tired now, walking out of the newsagent's, but she was still astonishing, like a flower, he thought, bursting out of a ugly plastic vase.

She headed towards Trevor's, her red hair bouncing like one of those shampoo adverts, and then stopped and turned towards Jason Milner, who must have shouted something to her. She looked surprised to see him, and not pleased, Daniel thought. But she walked over to him anyway. She didn't sit down immediately, but he leant up and grabbed her jacket and pulled her down to him so that she was sitting on his lap, then took her hair in his right fist, pulled her face towards his and kissed her crudely on the mouth.

Jason Milner knew Daniel was watching. This was a show for his benefit, he was sure of it.

He wanted to scream and shout and hit, but he did nothing. He just stood there watching. He'd watched as his mother died and he was watching now. Doing nothing because there was nothing he could do.

God, he was crap.

Jason Milner was smoking again now. He obviously planned to sit there for a few minutes to really rub it in. There were quite a few people around now, many with full shopping bags, headed for the car park or the bus stop. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, aside from Jason Milner. And a policeman who was looking through the window of a clothes shop near the Heath Robinson machine.

Maybe he could . . .

Wait.

Maybe he could get him arrested.

What was that Trevor had said? Jason Milner couldn't go into Circle House because he was banned, but also because he was on probation, and if he got into any more trouble he'd be arrested.

And what was Daniel's end result? If Jason Milner was in prison he wouldn't be able to get back at anyone. Until he was out, of course, but then . . . But then Shirley could come and live at their house for a while. They had plenty of room and Ronald wouldn't mind.

But how to get him arrested . . . He needed to act quickly, to do something now, while the copper was there and he had the opportunity and the sheer guts to do it. For once in his life he needed to do something.

But what?

It came to him in a moment. Go up to him now. Provoke him, then wait for the beating, and the copper would step in and there'd be no more Jason Milner.

No more thinking.

Do it.

He was out of the shop now and walking towards the two on the bench.

Seconds later he was standing behind Jason Milner.

Daniel looked down at the spike of black hair that shone like plastic in the fluorescent lighting of the shopping centre.

Then Daniel did something that he'd seen done countless times at school by teachers and occasionally by pupils, something that he had seen so often that it seemed to come as naturally as kicking a football.

He slapped Jason Milner hard around the back of the head.

In the two fights that Daniel had been involved in, as well as the several he had seen in the playground or the boys' toilets (a popular venue for fights), what always surprised him was how quick they were. There was lots of shouting and pushing to begin with, but then there were usually just a few punches

before they got into a hold of some kind and that was pretty much it.

When Simple had had a fight with Dibson it was even quicker, but that was because Simple put three Duracell batteries inside his right glove and his first punch knocked two of Dibson's teeth out. Daniel hadn't actually seen the fight, but he'd seen Dibson in the dentist the following week, so he knew it was true. Dibson's father had tried to sue Simple's family, but it turned out that Dibson had said something about Simple's mother, so the whole thing got dropped.

It wasn't like the cowboy films he used to watch after Sunday dinner with his Grandpa. In those they started punching in the saloon, bashed each other over the heads with chairs, fell through the window and then started again in the street. All the punches gave a satisfying thudding sound, and however many times the goodie got hit, he'd always bounce back.

In real life it was all much quicker and that's what Daniel had been banking on. It had been a very hasty plan but to him it had seemed pretty logical. The idea of actually slapping Jason Milner had come to him at the time. Now he had to wait for the attack, followed by the arrest. It was a simple and logical plan.

But it didn't work.

The immediate effect was the expected one. Jason Milner leapt off the bench with a roar of pain.

But instead of launching himself at Daniel and smashing him to the ground and punching and kicking his way out of

Shirley's life and into prison, Jason Milner, punk, bully, future wife-beater and alcoholic, began to cry.

4.36pm and 52 seconds

Everything seemed to go really slowly for a while then, like when Daniel used to go the matinees at the Lounge cinema and one time something went wrong with the projector and the Double Decker gang started to move really slowly and Brains' voice went all deep while he was talking to Doughnut.

Jason Milner was holding his ear and looking at Daniel in hurt and confusion. He was rocking back and forward on his Doc Martin boots and every time he rocked forward Daniel expected a punch or a kick, but it never came. Jason Milner just kept rocking backwards and forwards.

And Shirley, who had leapt up as well, was looking at one boy and then the other in astonishment, her right hand raised as if she was about to do something but didn't know what the something was.

And Daniel was just standing and staring at what he'd done.

Then, as with the Double Decker gang, everything suddenly went back to normal, except it wasn't the projectionist fixing the reel, it was Shirley using her right hand to touch Jason Milner on the shoulder.

When she touched him it was like a switch and he stopped rocking, turned to her, opened his mouth to say something, then he was gone. He just turned around and half-walked half-ran up

towards Morrisons and around the corner to the kiosk exit and disappeared.

If Jason Milner's groan had been a bit like Brains' slowed-down voice, then that was the only sound that had taken place over this time period. The other shoppers and the policeman had all just stopped and stared. So when Shirley started to shout it sounded twice as loud.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU DOING? ARE YOU SOME KIND OF NUTTER OR WHAT?"

But Daniel couldn't find his voice.

Shirley walked up to him eyes blazing.

"COME ON. LET'S HEAR IT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"I thought. I thought he'd-

"WHAT? WHAT DID YOU THINK, YOU DAFT GET? WHAT?"

She had hold of the front of his shirt now and was shaking him.

"WHAT? COME ON, WHAT?"

Daniel shook himself free and found his voice.

"This is all wrong. It isn't meant to happen like this. I thought he'd hit me back. I thought he'd hit me and then he'd get arrested and then you'd be free of him. That's what you want, isn't it, to be free of him? Then, if he was in prison you wouldn't have to worry about him any more and he wouldn't be able to hit you. Even if he doesn't now, he probably will in the future."

Shirley took a step backwards.

“And I know what you’re thinking. When he’s out of prison he’ll come looking for you. But that’s ok because you can come and live in our house. Not like boyfriend girlfriend, but just because we’ve got loads of rooms and he won’t know where you are and you’ll be fine.”

The plan that had sounded so logical sounded stupid and childish and silly now and Shirley’s face told him that she thought the same, but he had to carry on.

“And I didn’t realise that he was going to cry, but even so, you can still come and stay at ours for a while if you want. My stepfather won’t mind, I’m sure. He probably won’t even notice and you can do what you want and you needn’t see Jason Milner ever again.

“Well, what do you think?”

Daniel thought that she was going to slap him at first but instead she took hold of his shirt again and shook him, and on each shake she spat out a word in fury.

“You. Stupid. Little. Bastard. You. Stupid. Stupid. Little. Bastard.”

“What? What’s the matter? I was just trying to help.”

She stopped shaking him but kept hold of his shirt.

“Are you completely off your trolley or what? What? You thought I’d come and live in your house? With you?”

“Well, yes.”

“But I’ve only known you for two minutes. Why would I want to live with you?”

“But he knows where you live, doesn’t he? Jason Milner. If you live with me he won’t be able to find you.”

“But I want him to find me you stupid pillock, he’s my boyfriend.”

“But he’s . . . well . . . he’s going to-”

“What? Hit me?”

“Yes.”

“He’s never hit me, and if he did I’d be out of the door in two seconds flat. He knows that because I’ve told him enough times. But that’s none of your bloody business is it?”

“But I thought . . . He seems really-”

“What?”

“Well, he says bad things about women, and he wants to control you, and he gets really jealous-”

“Just listen to yourself. You know what you know? Nowt. Sod all. Less than nowt. I bet you’ve never even kissed a lass, have you? Aye, I thought not. And you’re standing there telling me about my boyfriend. And you wanted to get him arrested? Why did you think he’d get arrested if he chinned you after you’d smacked him around the head?”

“He’s on probation, isn’t he?”

“Probation? He’s not on blooming probation.”

“But he told Trevor that.”

“Course he did. He says all sorts, but it means nowt. He does it to sound tough, that’s all.”

“But I thought-”

“So you keep saying. You thought this and you thought that. Shall I tell you what I think? I think you’re a little boy who’s way out of his depth.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be blooming sorry. He’s in a right state because of you.”

“Why did he . . . you know . . . start crying?”

“I don’t know, Daniel, I don’t know. Maybe because you did to him what all the other buggers have done to him all his life- his dad, his mum, his uncles, his teachers. But, as I say, I don’t know for sure because- you know what? I haven’t asked him yet and I talk to people before I make assumptions about them.”

“I’m sorry. I was only trying to help. I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t know. You don’t know anything about him or about me. As I said, you know nowt.”

“Will you keep your voice down young lady. The whole shopping centre doesn’t want to listen to you, you know.”

It was the policeman. He was large and annoyed.

“It’s him you want to talk to, not me,” said Shirley. “It’s not me what’s smacking people about the head. Or do you not tell off posh lads?”

The policeman turned to the small group of people who were watching the argument.

“Alright, alright. It’s all finished here. Off you go now, back to your shopping.”

Then he turned back to Daniel.

“I didn’t see you hit him, but I saw him crying. Blooming punk rockers. They think they’re tough but they’re a bunch of girls’ blouses. Don’t want that sort in the Merrion, do we now?”

“Oh aye, what sort’s that then?” said Shirley, furious.

“Don’t you start with me, young lady, unless you want a trip down the station.”

Shirley glared at him but kept quiet.

“Now, the pair of you, keep it down. This is a shopping centre, not blooming Coronation Street.”

Daniel waited until he was out of earshot and then turned back to Shirley.

“Look, I’m really, really sorry. I wanted to do something for you because you helped me. I’ve never spoken about my mum to anyone else, and I was really grateful. And I didn’t know he was going to be hurt. Honest. I thought he was going to smash my face in.”

For a second Shirley’s face softened slightly and then she was back at him.

“Well, here’s a lesson they won’t teach you at your posh school. Don’t mess about with other people’s lives. Alright?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“I can see you are, and I can see you thought you might get hurt so it were brave of you to do that, but can’t you see, Daniel, you’re just as bad as the worst of them.”

“Who?”

“The blokes what want to control lasses. Want to manipulate them and make them do what they want.”

Daniel was staggered. He shook his head in confusion.

“What are you talking about? I’m not like that at all.”

“I hope not, Daniel. ‘Cos from where I’m standing you’ve just tried to break up my relationship, have my boyfriend arrested, and put me in a position where I have to live in your house where you can keep an eye on me and where I have to be grateful to you.”

“No, no, that wasn’t it.”

“Right, I think my break’s over. I’m going back to work. And I don’t want to see you hanging around here again. Alright?”

“What about Jason Milner?”

“He’s had worse than that, much worse. He’ll need to be on his own for a while. Probably gone down to play some video game. That’s what he normally does when he gets upset. He’ll come and see me later.”

“Right, well, I’m really sorry. I . . .”

But she was on her way back to the kiosk. The flower back in its plastic vase again.

EVENING

7.18pm

Hello Daniel.

Hello.

Um . . . Hold on.

David!

What?

Someone to see you.

Oh, bloody hell. Alright. Hold on.

Everything ok?

Yes. Thank you.

Do you want to come in?

No. Thank you.

He likes you.

How do you know?

*He normally hides from strangers. He must realise that
you're family.*

What are you talking about, Ginny? Who is it?

Jesus! Daniel!

5.46pm

Daniel was sitting on the bus.

He was in the same seat as that morning. Might even have been the same bus. No, that wasn't right. That morning he'd caught a 36, this was a 28. To get home he could take a 1, 4, 28, 33 or 36, but the 28 forked off Otley Road onto Weetwood Lane towards Adel. He would then have to walk along Glen Road past the Yorkshire Post playing fields. This was a huge patch of land with cricket nets and football pitches, but only for the use of employees of the local newspaper.

How many times had he been chased off those playing fields? It was just too tempting to use them even though they were private, with Meanwood Park a run down the hill but a miserable trudge back up it. Meanwood park was rubbish for ball games anyway. It wasn't flat and the ball kept ending up in the beck.

So pretty much every evening he used to climb over the fence with a few other lads and play football or cricket. Mostly they would just get ignored, but sometimes one of the men from the pavilion would take a break from drinking beer and make a run for them and the race was on. The fence was high but really easy to get over from the inside because there were strips to put your feet on and it was muddy on the other side so the drop wasn't so bad.

Then they'd scatter, making sure they didn't go back into their own gardens in case they were seen.

One day they really nearly got caught. Daniel was bowling to little Martin when Martin's wide eyes made Daniel turn around. A man in a blue tracksuit was sprinting towards them. Daniel threw the cricket ball over the fence and nipped over just behind Martin. Then they hid in a bush in Brian's garden listening to the threats of the man in the blue tracksuit as he searched up and down the lane.

It had been a shock and while he was hiding Daniel made a promise to himself never to go in there again if he didn't get discovered this time. Except if his cousins came around, of course, because they'd expect to go.

Then, two days later, a couple of boys came knocking and he told them he couldn't go into the Yorkshire Post field unless his cousins came round because he'd made a promise. So Tim suggested he add on 'except if Tim and Mick came round' onto the promise.

He went on adding names to it all that summer.

It was dark but it had stopped drizzling.

Daniel used his sleeve to wipe the mist away from the window, even though he still couldn't see much.

What a day.

What. A. Day.

He felt like 'taking stock', as his mother used to call it. To spend a few minutes thinking about how he felt physically and mentally.

Physically he felt . . . well, pretty good, considering. He touched the cut on his forehead. It stung a little but felt almost disappointingly small considering the blood that had come from it. Likewise, his eye seemed to have gone down already. The swelling on his lip felt enormous to the explorations of his tongue, but that was always the way, he knew, with stuff in your mouth. Like when you're a kid and your teeth start wobbling and feel huge and then they come out and they're tiny.

He looked down at his body. It had been cold waiting at the bus stop, so he'd put his blazer back on, but his sleeves were still rolled up. He took the three pound notes from the back pocket of his trousers and transferred them to the inside pocket of the blazer where they could be zipped safely up.

He looked at his hands. They were dirty, mostly from the money, a kind of rusty red colour. "Nowt dirtier than money," Trevor had said. "Everyone's had their mucky paws on it already."

He turned his hands over. There was a cut on his left knuckle he hadn't noticed. He didn't know where that had come from.

Everything else seemed fine. There was a coffee stain on the top one of his shoes, but that was about it.

He was famished, though. He hadn't eaten anything since the Mars Bar at lunchtime. He took his lunch box out of his bag

and opened it up. There was still one sandwich left, chicken and lettuce, and he took a large bite. Ronald always made a good chicken sandwich. 'The secret,' he said, 'is to put a bit of salt on the chicken. It brings out the flavour.'

He could make out the students sitting on the steps of the university. They looked a mess as usual, the boys all long hair and side-burns and both girls and boys wearing those daft flairs that Daniel's mother had bought him once but he'd refused to wear.

Ok, so physically pretty good, although pretty tired.

Mentally?

He needed to sit really still for that one, so he waited until he'd finished his sandwich. He'd got the sitting still thing from Biology. He had Mr Medlay for Biology. He was sharp, Mr Medlay. One day Fatboy had put his hand up and said,

"Sir, you know when a woman's having a baby, right, and she's pushing an' pushing to get it out? Well, what if, right, she's pushing and instead of having a baby she has a shit?"

And quick as a flash, Medlay said,

"Well in your case, Derby, she did."

That had shut Fatboy up. It was a pretty daft question in any case. They had been doing photosynthesis in plants at the time.

Anyway, one lesson Medlay said that when your brain sent messages to part of your body to move, it required energy.

Pretty obvious, really, but it made Daniel think. In that case, if you wanted to give your brain a rest you needed to be absolutely

still. So he tried it and it worked. He felt really relaxed. So he did it sometimes to feel relaxed, and he did it other times if he wanted to check out how he was feeling, and that's what he did now.

At first there were so many ideas and thoughts and feelings jostling for attention that he couldn't make any sense of them, but they calmed down, and he took a breath and asked himself how he felt, just generally.

Good. He felt good. Tired but really good.

That was a surprise somehow. It hadn't been a good end to the day, all that stuff with Jason Milner and Shirley.

So how could he feel good?

He thought about it, and the thoughts seemed clear somehow, everything seemed clearer. All the fuzziness in his brain that had been there for ages seemed to have gone and he could think really clearly.

Start with Shirley. No. Start at the beginning. Think the day through.

He'd missed his stop and decided to have a day off school. Why had he done that? Because he was going to be late and he couldn't take the questions, and because he didn't care like he used to any more. Because things that mattered before his mum died didn't matter now because he wasn't disappointing anyone.

That's right.

So he went into town and into the Merrion, and he bought his Coke from Shirley but he hardly looked at her even though she had smiled at him. He'd just muttered 'thank you' even

though she was all curvy and colourful, because he was too busy thinking about his own stuff, and anyway why would she be interested in him? She wouldn't have been if it hadn't been for the fight with Noakesy and Gary.

And he'd got beaten because there were two of them, but he'd hit Gary in the eye, that was something. That was the first time he'd hit someone in the face. His mum had always told him to walk away from fights, unlike his Grandpa, who said never to start a fight but "if someone hits you first, hit him back twice as hard". Daniel reckoned that his response was somewhere in the middle. He would have walked away if he'd had the chance, and he didn't start the fight, but at least he got a punch in, that was something.

Then there was Shirley, really Shirley, shouting at the two lads and bending over him and asking him if he was ok.

He closed his eyes and let her face fill his head. Even like that he felt like he was falling towards her. What was it about her? It was everything. It was every bloody thing about her, her skin and eyes and denim and hair and colours and curves and the way her voice was so loud and cutting with Gary and Noakesy and then so gentle with him and the way she walked and held her head and the way she let him talk about his mum and the way she corners of her mouth turned up so that she looked as though she was about to laugh all the time.

The bus was undertaking the traffic on Woodhouse Lane now. Bus lanes were great when you were on a bus. He looked over Woodhouse Moor. It must have been a real moor years

before, wild and scary, and on the very outskirts of the town. Concord Heslop had told them that it was the site of something to do with the Civil War, and one side had gathered together before taking Leeds from the other side, but he couldn't remember whether it was the Royalists who'd gathered there or the other lot. Anyway, it was still called a moor but now it was stuck between the university and the traffic lights at Hyde Park Corner.

It could still be wild and scary, though, at times. When Daniel was younger his mother hadn't let him walk across it to get to and from school, even though it was quicker than walking on the road. "There are some nasty people around," she said. He'd had stuff chucked at him by the lads from the local boys' Catholic school, but the nastiest person he'd met there was a student who'd threatened to lock him up in a box because Daniel's football had knocked over the stick thing he was using for some Geography experiment. Then again, he'd also had some of the best games of football, snowball fights and ice creams ever, so he wasn't complaining.

The wildness of the Moor meant that you never quite knew what you were going to meet next. Some lads said they'd seen students sunbathing topless and Fatboy swore blind that he'd seen a couple having sex near the bowling green. And even though it was Fatboy, if it was on the Moor you believed him because it was the Moor and anything could happen.

So did that make him feel better, talking about his mum? Of course it did, a bit anyway. It made sense that it would. He

wasn't stupid, he knew that talking about her would help, but he had needed the right person to talk to, and there hadn't been anyone.

What happened then? He met Trevor and spent time working at the shop, and that was mental. He rubbed his blazer where the pocket was and felt the pound notes rustling against each other. It was the first money he'd ever earnt, aside from a ten pence here and there for washing Ronald's car. And all those people, and all that stuff, and working with Trevor was such a laugh, and not feeling out of place, feeling like he was a real Leeds lad. It was mental.

And he could do it again and again if he wanted to because Trevor had offered him a job. Except he'd have to think about that after what happened with Shirley and Jason Milner. What if . . . ?

No, finish the day. Keep going.

Then he'd met Gary and Noakesy again, and he was going to go outside with them, and he'd have got more than just a punch in this time, but Jason Milner had turned up.

Then it got weird.

Had he got it all wrong then? Had Jason Milner really been helping him against Gary and Noakesy and Daniel had repaid him with a slap? But that couldn't be right. He'd said that all girls were bitches, that Daniel was a little boy and he'd smashed Gary and Noakesy's heads together.

So Daniel had hit him, around the back of the head. That was a really crap thing to do to someone, and Daniel should know. So why had he done it?

And more importantly, why did he feel good thinking about it now, because he did feel good. Maybe Shirley was right, then, and he was worse than Jason Milner.

Go back.

Hitting him had been automatic, he'd been hit so many times that it just happened. That sounded like a rubbish excuse but he couldn't explain it further than that. And anyway it wasn't the hitting that made him feel good. When Jason Milner had started crying Daniel had felt terrible, like sinking into the floor.

Well, that's not quite true. He'd felt shock, then tried to defend himself against Shirley, then after that he'd felt terrible.

So it wasn't causing pain that made him feel good, which was a relief.

It was doing something, not having stuff done to him. Standing up for himself, not just watching from the stands as he felt he had done for so long, but actually getting stuck into life even if he knew he was going to get hurt in the process. That had required guts and he felt good about it.

And if that made him a bad person, then fuck it.

The bus was speeding up now it was past the St Anne's Road lights and out of the traffic, speeding up towards St Chad's Church, except it wouldn't get as far as that, because it would

fork off onto Meanwood Lane past Bryan's, which sold the best fish and chips in Britain, better than Harry Ramsden even, whatever Fatboy said.

Then they'd go past the newsagent with the grumpy owner who was like Basil Fawlty and up the hill and Daniel would hit the bell and try and get down the stairs whilst the bus driver picked up speed to gain momentum before the hill started.

Except this time he wouldn't hit the bell. This time he would stay on the bus. There was one more thing he needed to do before he went home.

He closed his eyes and sat very still.

7.16pm

The house was one of those red-bricked 1930s semi-detached jobs, nothing like as big and dark as his house, but the garden around the back would be twice the size. Daniel hadn't been sure if it was the right one, as he'd only been there once, but he recognised the car outside, a green Volvo.

That was the only thing he did recognise though. Once the bus had gone past the Hollies and over the ring-road he was out of his territory. He knew the name of the road, but it had been impossible to see it in the dark from the bus, so he ended up getting off a stop late and it had taken him twenty-five minutes to find the house.

But now he was there he'd rather have faced an army of Gary and Noakesys than knock on the door.

But he did. Because that's what this day was about, he knew now, and if he didn't do this kind of stuff now he might never do it, and the thing needed to be done, so he did it.

Except there wasn't a knocker, of course, but a tinny electric bell, which made a tinny electric noise.

The door opened and a woman stood there holding a baby. She looked irritated first, then surprised, then said,

“Hello Daniel.”

“Hello.”

“Um . . . Hold on.”

She turned her head and called out,

“David!”

“What?”

“Someone to see you.”

“Oh, bloody hell. Alright. Hold on.”

She turned back to Daniel.

“Everything ok?”

“Yes,” said Daniel. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to come in?”

“No. Thank you.”

Daniel looked at the baby. He couldn't remember how old he was. Old enough to sit up in his mother's arms but that was about it. What did that make it? A year? No, it was probably a bit less than that.

He had blonde hair but brown eyes, which is what Daniel used to have, his mother had said, although his hair had turned dark brown by the time he was seven.

“He likes you,” the mother said. How could she tell? Daniel wondered. Or was that just one of those things mothers said to make you like their baby? Or was she just embarrassed and trying to think of something to say? Probably a bit of both.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“He normally hides from strangers. He must realise that you're family.”

“What are you talking about, Ginny? Who is it?”

The woman stood aside and a man appeared. He was tall and dark, wore glasses with thick black frames and had greying

stubble. He had a screw-driver in one hand and a box of rawl plugs in the other.

“Jesus! Daniel!”

“Hello Dad.”

Daniel looked at the familiar face, with its large, broken but still handsome nose, the ruddy cheeks, the thick brown hair pushed back with brylcreem. There had been posters up outside the Cottage Road cinema the year before advertising “Taxi Driver” with an American actor, Robert de Nero. Daniel hadn’t seen it because it was an X (and anyway it looked a bit weird), but he’d thought of his Dad looking at de Nero, and there was a likeness. Maybe his ancestors were all Italians way back, although Hargreaves didn’t sound anything but English, to be fair.

“What are you doing here? Christ, come in, come into the house.”

Daniel’s father pulled the door back but Daniel stayed where he was.

“No, it’s ok, Dad. I’m fine here.”

His father frowned.

“Don’t be silly. It’s freezing. Come into the house.”

“No, I’m alright here. Honest. I just want a quick chat.”

“Daniel, come into the bloody house. Now. This is ridiculous.”

Even after all these years he was still amazed at how quickly his father's mood could change. Twenty seconds ago he was looking embarrassed and almost affectionate, and now suddenly he was barking in irritation.

Daniel's first impulse was to turn around and walk back to the bus-stop, but instead he said.

"No, I won't. I don't want to come into the bloody house. I'm fine here. I told you."

His father took a step forward, and Daniel almost expected a slap around the side of the face. His father had only hit him like that once, when he was eleven, but he wouldn't forget it. They didn't realise that, adults. You never forgot stuff like that.

But he didn't hit him. Daniel's father's face cleared and he looked embarrassed again, second time in minutes.

"Sure, yes, sure. Sorry. We can talk here. Sure. Jesus, you've grown up, haven't you?"

Daniel had always liked the way he sometimes said 'sure' instead of 'yes'. It was an American thing. Daniel's father had been to New York and Florida and San Francisco and had worked with a lot of Americans, and he admired them, admired the way they thought and did business. He'd told Daniel that story about an American guy and an English bloke who see a Limousine and a Rolls Royce go past. The American guy thinks "In a year's time I'm going to have a car like that", and the English guy thinks "In a year's time I'm going to make sure he doesn't have that Rolls anymore."

“So, how are things? I haven’t seen you for a while. How have you been?”

“Why didn’t you come to the funeral?”

It hadn’t meant to come out like that, but there it was. He’d said it.

“What? What did you say?”

“Why didn’t you come to the funeral?”

“But, what are you talking about? I did come to the funeral.”

“No you didn’t. I didn’t see you.”

“Jesus, is that what this is about? Is that why you haven’t called me up for ages and now you’ve turned up and you won’t come into my house? I did come to the funeral, Daniel. You didn’t see me beforehand because you came in with your head down and sat at the front, and you didn’t see me afterwards because I left as quickly as I could.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think? You might have wanted me there, but no one else did. You think Ronald wanted me there? Or your Auntie Pat? Or anyone else in that damn family?”

“So you were there?”

“Yes, I’ve told you, I was there. I saw the whole thing. Pat’s reading, the eulogy by the vicar from which my name was rubbed out even though I was married to your mother for twelve years, the whole thing. Of course I was there. Our marriage may have turned to crap but I loved her too once, you know. How could you think I wouldn’t go?”

The anger was there again, but it was a sad anger this time and at least, Daniel thought, a genuine one. Not one because you forgot to close the cereal box or because you didn't finish your vegetables.

First Shirley, then Jason, now his Dad. How many times was he going to get it wrong today?

"Are you going to come in now?"

"No, I wanted to . . . There was something else."

"Go on then, spit it out."

"Can I come and live with you?"

Even as he said it, Daniel knew not only that his father would say 'no', but also that he didn't want to live there anyway. But he wanted to hear it.

"Christ, Daniel, I don't know. It's difficult, you see, with the baby and . . . Isn't Ronald treating you ok? Because if he isn't-

"No, it's not that. He's fine."

"What then?"

"He's just not my Dad, is he?"

"No, he's bloody well not. Listen, if we're going to have to talk outside, I'm getting a coat. I'm bloody freezing."

He disappeared inside. Daniel looked up at the sky. It was clearer now and the moon was directly above him, almost full.

Inside he could hear a hushed conversation taking place and a moment later his father appeared wearing the sheepskin jacket he had bought from a department store in Harrogate just before Christmas, 1976.

“That’s better,” he began. “My teeth have stopped chattering. Now, listen . . .”

“No, Dad. It’s alright. I understand.”

“No, let me finish. Please. We’ve not that much space here, and I think you’d be more comfortable with Ronald, though I hate to say it. But . . .”

He paused and pulled the door to, then he continued more quietly.

“But, if you really want to come and stay here, I’d make room for you. I’m not sure how, and I don’t think I’ll be very popular for saying so, but we’ll make do.”

It wasn’t the best offer he’d ever had, but it was more than he’d expected.

His father put a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. He’d always liked his father’s hands. They were large and usually battered and grubby from working on the car. They were hands that said everything would be alright.

“Ok buster?”

Daniel managed a smile. He hadn’t been called that for years.

“Yeah, I’m ok.”

“You coming in now?”

“No. I’d better get back.”

“Give me a ring, ok? Whatever you decide. But think about it first. You’ve got a big house there. You’re going to need that space now you’re a teenager. But if you really want, I’ll always make room for you here.”

The words were reassuring, but there was a finality about the tone that made Daniel suspect that his father had had enough of the conversation and wanted to get back to his DIY.

“You’re my lad, aren’t you?” his father said, ruffling Daniel’s hair in that way adults, especially men, did.

“Yes. See you Dad.”

Daniel turned around and walked away, his head spinning a little. His father didn’t do hugs and he certainly didn’t do kisses. That hand was as close as he got, and the ‘You’re my lad’ was as near to ‘I love you’ as he got as well.

He looked at his watch. He had no idea how regularly the buses came along here. How long would it take him to walk? Forty-five minutes? An hour? That was fine. There was no hurry.

He hadn’t seen his father for four months. Hadn’t spoken to him until two days before the funeral, when he’d called to tell him about his mother’s death. (That’d been hard. “Alright, Daniel? How’s things?” “Fine. Well not fine. I’ve just called because . . . Mum died yesterday.” It was the first time he’d said it and it’d sounded really weird, the two words, Mum and died, together like that in the sentence). Then, when he thought his father hadn’t turned up, he stopped calling.

And he’d come now to tell him that. To say that he could have done this thing for him at least, could have come to the funeral to show support if nothing else. Then, when that hadn’t gone as planned, he’d kept going, pressed him with something

he'd never agree to, so that at least he knew that his Dad wasn't worth it, at least that was clear and he could leave him behind.

Was that really why he'd come? He realised now, walking down towards the ring-road that marked the cut-off point between familiar and foreign territory, he realised now that he just wanted to be with someone who he loved. He didn't want to live with him- that would be a disaster- but he wanted to make contact. And he loved his father, for all his faults, and his father, for all Daniel's faults, loved him back.

Maybe that's why people had kids, he suddenly thought. To fill up the spaces left by people who've died who loved them.

8.37pm

He didn't see the police car until he was virtually at the front door.

That was because the route back from his father's took him to the house from around the back, up the 'bumpy road' that led to the run-down garages that the owners of the houses on their stretch used.

Daniel had felt better once across the ring-road, and he walked briskly down Weetwood Lane, partly because he was cold, but mostly because the hunger he felt was now pretty sharp, and he knew that there was a new pack of Garibaldis ('squashed fly biscuits') in the rainbow tin. Half a pack of those, then maybe a bowl of Frosties and he'd be fine.

He half jogged going past the Hollies, the wooded park that led down to the beck, where there were no street lamps or houses, but felt safer when he could see the Mertons' house on the corner. Simon Merton was older than Daniel, a fat boy with a vicious streak. A natural bully. Outside their house they had a huge chestnut tree and the local kids would circle it every September and bombard it with sticks. Except, if you threw your stick into the Mertons' garden, forget it. Their wall was high and they had an Alsatian, not to mention Simon Merton himself.

Then you'd have to trudge down to Meanwood Park to find another stick. They were rare and valuable commodities in autumn, sticks.

Good sticks, that is. Some looked good, but you'd pick them up and they'd be too light to make an impact, or too heavy to throw high. Or too short, or too long. Some were just the right weight and length, but there'd be a knot or catch at one end that would scratch your hand when you threw it, and the other end would be pointy or difficult to get hold of.

Then, when you got the right stick, chances are it would get stuck in the tree third throw and you'd spend the rest of the afternoon chucking rubbish sticks up to get it back.

The year before Daniel had found the best one ever. It was flat and made of iron. At first he thought it'd be too heavy, but it wasn't. He couldn't reach the really high conkers, but he could get to the rest, and the weight and shape meant that it didn't get stuck in the tree.

Mark, Daniel's stepbrother, jealous, had said that it wasn't fair using metal and then, when that hadn't worked, he'd said that it was dangerous. Daniel ignored him.

One evening, when most of the other kids had gone home, Daniel tried once again to hit the monster of a conker he just hadn't been able to reach. He pointed carefully with his left hand, took a breath, gritted his teeth and threw his metal stick as hard as he could.

And he got it. The shell and conker came clattering down. Daniel followed the conkering rules and made sure he knew

where the conker was lying (and it was a beauty), but waited for the stick to come down before he moved to get it.

But this time the stick didn't come down.

"It's gone. Aaaaarrggghhh! Skit! Lost yer stick! Lost yer stick! Aaaaarrggghhh!"

Daniel lowered his eyes from the branches to Mark, who was on the other side of the tree doing a dance like a monkey.

Daniel looked back up and glimpsed something start to move in the tree. At the same time, Mark set off to continue his dance in front of Daniel.

It was like watching a slow motion replay on Match of the Day, or one of those films where everything's slowed down as the hero shouts "Noooooooooooo" and the heroine is shot.

Daniel watched in horror as the stick and Mark travelled slowly together and met with a soft thud.

Mark had to go to hospital and had eight stitches in his scalp. He never let Daniel forget it.

So he only saw the police car when he got to the top of the back steps, but he didn't pay much attention to it. Something to do with the neighbours, or someone getting stopped for speeding. He was too hungry to worry about that.

He let himself in and closed the door quietly. As he'd thought, he hadn't been missed. He could hear the television, and Ronald would now be sat half doing the crossword, and waiting for the nine o'clock news.

He went into the kitchen and headed straight for the cupboard by the window where the rainbow tin was kept.

“If you’re after a biscuit I’ve got them.”

He swung around. It was the policeman from the Merrion Centre. He had a cigarette in one hand, and Ronald’s big, tartan tea mug in the other. In front of him was the biscuit tin.

“You’ve showed up then, have you? Aye, I thought you would. I told him as much.”

Daniel found his voice after a few seconds.

“Where is he?”

“Your stepdad?”

“Yes, and what are . . . ? I mean . . . why are you here?”

The policeman leant forward and stubbed out the cigarette on the glass ash-tray that Ronald sometimes used when he was smoking a cigar. Then, again slowly and deliberately, he picked up the tartan mug and finished off his tea.

If he had looked large in the Merrion Centre he looked enormous with his legs wedged beneath the kitchen table. Still without speaking he got up, stretched and picked up his helmet.

“I’ll tell you where he is, son. He’s where he’s been most of the evening. In his car looking for you, that’s where. He’s been up and down Otley blooming Road a dozen times.”

“But . . . but . . . why are you here?”

“I’m here, sunshine, because I got back the station, and I took the call for a missing lad. He’d already called three times, your stepdad, they said. Anyhow, he gives me a description and I realise it were the same lad I’d seen in town getting into fights

with punk rockers, so I said I'd come round and see what I could do. But he just couldn't sit still. Insisted he go looking for you while I stayed here."

"Oh God, sorry."

"Where've you been, son?"

"I went . . . I went to see my Dad."

"Oh aye, and does he not have a phone, your Dad? In fact, aren't there phones in the Merrion?"

"Um . . . yes, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well I . . . didn't think he'd be bothered."

The policeman put his helmet back down on the table and folded his arms. The radio in his pocket started buzzing and talking. He waited for it to finish before he started.

"Listen, son. I've seen plenty of dads, not stepdads mind, but real dads, who couldn't give two hoots where their kids were. I've brought back lads younger than you that I've found wandering about, smashed on this that or t'other, and I've taken them back and their folks hadn't even noticed they were missing. Too smashed themselves, most of them. But your stepdad. Well, that's a different matter."

"What . . . Ronald?"

"Aye, lad, Ronald. I'll ask you a question. Where were you three week ago last Tuesday at 4.35pm?"

"Wh . . . What?"

"You heard me?"

"I don't know. Here, probably."

“No you weren’t. You were in a bus stuck in the traffic because of an accident on Shaw Lane.”

Daniel remembered now. There had been an accident. One of those daft bubble cars. His mother had always said they were dangerous. It had been hit by a Landrover and toppled over, blocking the traffic and causing a queue right back to Hyde Park Corner. Daniel had eventually got off and walked.

“But, how did you-?”

“I knew that because I asked your stepdad if you were ever late, and he said you’d been a bit later recently, but you were only really late on Tuesdays. He’s got Games on Tuesdays, he said, so he’s sometimes held up getting changed, but Wednesdays he’s always back by 4.30, except once, he said, when the bus got held up in an accident on Shaw Lane, then you were back at 5.15. He were close to ringing the police then, he said, but he thought he’d leave it ‘til five-thirty.”

Daniel’s surprise was turning to astonishment. He opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Aye, and I know what your thinking now, and all. You never thought he gave a damn about you. Your mam died, right? I know all about it. He told me that and all. Your mam died and he’s been trying to give you some space, wait ‘til you want to have a chat, and that. He were worried that you’d think he didn’t care about you, but he thought it best to let you think things through for a while. He’s a good bloke, your stepdad.”

The policeman picked up his helmet again.

“One last thing, son. I’m sorry about your mam, but I’ve got better things to do than this. Next time you waste police time, I’ll take you down the station. Have some respect for your elders and use the bloody phone in future.”

When he’d gone, Daniel slowly opened up the tin, put six Garibaldis on a plate, poured some Robinson’s orange cordial into a pint glass, filled it with water, and sat down at the table. He took a bite out of one of the biscuits. It felt dry in his mouth and his throat felt tight. He took a swig of orange juice to wash it down and then rubbed his forehead which had started to throb.

“One David Harvey, two Paul Reaney, three Paul Madeley, four Billy Bremner, five Jack Charlton, six Norman ‘Bites yer legs’ Hunter, seven Peter Lorimer, eight Allan ‘Sniffer’ Clarke, nine Mick Jones, ten Jonny Giles, eleven Eddie Gray.”

What was the matter with him? He could cope with people not caring about him. It wasn’t very nice but he could cope. But if they did care, well that was another matter . . .

He took a deep breath to stop himself from crying.

Ronald? He couldn’t take this in. He would have bet his entire collection of Leeds United programmes that Ronald wouldn’t have had any idea what time he got home.

He thought back to when he’d been late because of the bubble car accident. He’d walked in, as usual, and Ronald had been sitting by the phone in the hall, and he’d said “Afternoon, Daniel. Nice day?” or something like that.

Sitting by the phone . . .

He took another deep breath and looked down at his plate.

Ten minutes later he heard Ronald's key in the front door, and his voice calling as soon as the door was open.

Daniel answered and waited in his chair for Ronald to come into the kitchen. He was wearing his tweed jacket, but his tie was crooked and his shoes were dirty. He looked like someone who was trying very hard to keep calm.

"Daniel. Where have you been? Are you alright?"

Daniel stood up.

"I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

He couldn't stop the tears and suddenly he was in Ronald's arms and his face was in his chest and Daniel could smell pipe tobacco and mints and he kept crying until his eyes and nose were filled up and then he pulled back and Ronald gave him the handkerchief from his top pocket.

Ronald took his shoulders and gently seated him back down, then pulled up a chair opposite.

"Alright?"

Daniel nodded.

"Don't look embarrassed. Do you think I don't cry?"

"What, you? Why?" Daniel sniffed.

"Because I miss your mum, Daniel," said Ronald quietly. "I miss her every day. I miss her in the mornings when I wake up, and at breakfast, and when I can't get a clue in the crossword and when the phone rings and . . . you know."

“Yes,” said Daniel. “I do.”

“But if I’ve got you, I’ve still got a part of her. I know I’m not your dad, but I do care about you Daniel, and I’m very sorry that I haven’t shown it enough in the past.”

Ronald paused and took off his glasses, reaching into his top pocket automatically for the handkerchief to clean the lenses. Realising his mistake, he breathed on them, rubbed them against his sleeve and continued.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by giving you time to think things through, to make sense of everything. That seemed like the right thing to do, but I was wrong. You hated the cards, didn’t you?”

“What?” said Daniel, startled.

“The sympathy cards. It’s alright. I saw you looking at them. I’m sorry about that too. You hardly got a mention, did you, and you she loved you long before I came along, didn’t she?”

So that was why he’d taken them down so quickly. Daniel had thought it was because he wanted to move on.

“I’ll make some supper eh? You hungry?”

“Yes,” nodded Daniel. “Very.”

Ronald put his hand on Daniel’s shoulder. It was a different hand to his father’s, cleaner and pinker, but the grip was firm and the eyes that now looked at him through the thick lenses were full of concern and honesty.

“Two more things before I do. Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask about your face. You can tell me some other time. Two

general things. First, you won't scare me like that again, will you? I'm an old bugger, Daniel. I can't take it."

"No, I promise."

"If you're going to be late, give me a ring. Second, how about me and you visit your mum's grave tomorrow after school? I normally go lunchtimes for a chat, but I'm happy to go twice. You haven't seen it since the funeral, have you?"

"No."

"What do you say then? We can walk down together. But only if you're ready. Are you?"

Daniel looked down at his hands. They were still filthy from the money. He had to wash them before supper.

"No. Sorry. I'm not."

"Don't worry," said Ronald. He was smiling but he looked disappointed. "When you're ready."

"Maybe next week."

"Fine. When you're ready."

Ronald squeezed his shoulder and then turned to the grill.

"Now then, the Evening Post is on the bench in the hall. You grab it and let me know me if anything's happening with United. I'll make some fish fingers."

10.46pm

Daniel lay in bed. In his hand was the crumpled up paper bag with Trevor's phone number on it.

"Any time until midnight," Trevor had said. "I'm a night-owl me. I hate sleeping. It's boring."

Daniel looked at the clock.

He made up his mind. He reached for the light, swung out of bed, opened the door and walked quietly down the two flights of stairs to the phone in the hall. He could hear the television in the living room. What was Ronald doing? Puffing on his pipe, doing his crossword as Daniel would have thought the night before? Or was he sitting with his head in his hands?

Things were never as simple as they looked. He'd learnt that today.

He picked up the phone and dialled the number. Trevor sounded wide-awake.

"Now then, it's the Sundance Kid. You joining us on Saturday, then?"

"Yes, if that's still ok with you."

"Eh? Speak up, there's a bit of noise this end."

It sounded as if Trevor was in the middle of a pub. There was music and singing and lots of different voices.

"I said, if that's still ok with you."

“Aye, it’s okey-cokey with me, Sundance. Get here for nine o’clock sharp. Finish at five thirty. You’ll be working with Karen.”

“Karen?”

“Aye, Karen. See you Saturday.”

Daniel put the phone down and stood staring at it for a moment. When he looked up Mark was standing at the kitchen door looking at him. He was holding a glass of water and wearing his blue pyjamas.

Daniel smiled absently.

“Alright?”

“Tosser,” said Mark, walking past him and up the stairs.

It was good to be home.

He climbed the thirty-six stairs (nineteen to the first floor, seventeen to the top) and got back into bed.

He checked the alarm, turned over and looked at the ceiling.

He didn’t feel tired now. Too much stuff going on his head.

“One David Harvey, two Paul Reaney, three Paul Madeley, four Billy Bremner, five Jack Charlton, six . . . six . . . ”

Appendix

Day

**A Radio Play
by Alistair Schofield**

Characters

Daniel

Mr Bedford

Ronald

Mark

Bus Driver

Passenger

Gary

Noakesy

Shirley

Customer

Trevor

Theresa

Jason Milner

Customer

Policeman

Leeds, Tuesday 9th November 1978

Scene 1 Daniel's bedroom

INSIDE DANIEL'S HEAD: There's someone in the room. I know there is.

Looking at me, waiting for me to move.

(Pause) It's alright. I'm fine. I've just had a bad dream, that's all. I'm fi. . . What was that? Oh, Christ, what was that? *(Pause)* It was just the house, this bloody huge old house making noises all night. I'm fine.

(Pause) If I'm fine, why can't I move?

Because there is someone in the room. I can feel him. I've been like this for eight minutes now, clock says. Eight minutes without moving, hardly breathing. I'm going to have to do something, I can't stay like this for much longer.

Right, come on. Do the usual. Count down, then out of bed hit the light switch, open the door ready to run. If you're not attacked,

check under the bed, curtains, but keep near
the door just in case.

Right, come on. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, oh
Christ, 1, GO! (*Pause*) Come on, you've got
to move. Try again. Quicker. 10, 9, 8, 6, 5, 4,
3, 2, 1, GO!

*Sound of Daniel tearing the covers off, hitting the light switch,
opening the door, checking the room.*

Then sits down on the bed with a deep breath.

DANIEL (*Aloud*): Thank God for that. (*Another deep breath*).
11.23. I wonder if Mum's up. I'll go and see. .
. (*Pause*)
No. No. Can't. Do. That.

Turns off the light and settles back in the bed.

INSIDE DANIEL'S HEAD:What have we got tomorrow? Wednesday.

Wednesday. Latin, Maths, Divinity, English
and, what's in the afternoon? Oh no, double

Physics. Double-bloody-Physics. That means
double-bloody-Bedford. Christ Almighty.

Scene 2 Outside Mr BEDFORD's Office

Corridor noises.

BOY: Is this Bedford's office?

DANIEL: Yes.

BOY: What you here for then?

DANIEL: Not sure. Had a note from my form master. I
think it's because I got a crap score in a
Physics test.

BOY: (*Proudly*) I burnt Cuboid Jonson's arm with a
Bunsen burner.

BEDFORD'S VOICE: Come in, Hargreaves.

BOY: Good luck. Watch his right hand. He nearly
burst my ear drum last term.

Daniel goes into Bedford's office.

BEDFORD: Come here, Hargreaves. That's right. Do you want to sit down?

DANIEL: Sit down sir?

BEDFORD: Yes, sit down. Do you want to sit down?

DANIEL: No sir. Thank you.

BEDFORD: Right. Fine. That's fine.

Pause

INSIDE DANIEL'S HEAD: Why's he looking like that. He won't look me in the eye. Why's he. . .? Oh no. Oh God. Please. No.

BEDFORD: I realise Hargreaves- Daniel- that this has been a hard time for you. You know me as a Physics teacher, which of course I am, your Physics teacher, but I'm also Head of the Middle School, as you know, and as such feel that I should offer my- our- condolences to you at this time, and offer any support that we can.

INSIDE DANIEL'S HEAD: Please make him stop. Please. God. Make him stop.

BEDFORD: We've all been through this, you know. Well, not all of us, obviously. And not at as young an age as you. But still. I lost my own mother just last year. Different circumstances, but I know how you feel. Um, right, so if there is anything you need- time off for example? You have only had a couple of days, would you like more?

DANIEL: No. Sir.

BEDFORD: Right, well, off you go then, and send the other lad in.

Oh, and Hargreaves.

DANIEL: Yes sir.

BEDFORD: That doesn't mean I'm going to put up with scores of 32%. Next time you're going to get a thick ear. Understand?

DANIEL: Yes sir.

Scene 3 Kitchen

Mark and Ronald are finishing their breakfast. Daniel comes in.

RONALD: Morning Daniel. Sleep any better?

DANIEL: No. Well, a bit.

RONALD: Good, good. Mark, don't leave your bowl there, there's a good chap.

MARK: Sorry Dad. Got to go or I'll be late. (*Quietly to Daniel*) Like you, you tosser. See you Dad.

Mark leaves.

RONALD: I've got to hurry up as well, Daniel, I'm afraid, so I'll leave you to it. Weetabix is on the table. You've got your bus fare, haven't you?

DANIEL: Yes, thanks.

RONALD: Good. Right, well have a good day.

DANIEL: Ok. See you Ronald.

Scene 4 Bus stop

Bus pulls up. Doors open

DANIEL: Five please.

BUS DRIVER: Where you going?

DANIEL: Clarendon Road.

BUS DRIVER: Where's that?

DANIEL: What?

BUS DRIVER: Don't you know where you're going?

DANIEL: Yes, I do it's. . .

BUS DRIVER: You go to your posh school with your posh uniform and you don't know where you're going.

DANIEL: I do. It's just before the university.

BUS DRIVER: Oh aye, in that case, why are you giving me five pence? It's seven that, now.

DANIEL: But it was five yesterday.

BUS DRIVER: That were yesterday. And don't be so bloody cheeky or you'll be walking.

DANIEL: Sorry. There's another two.

Sound of ticket machine and bus pulls off.

Ten minutes later and Daniel is asleep in his seat.

PASSENGER: Excuse me, love.

DANIEL: What? What?

PASSENGER: Isn't this your stop? I heard you telling him
it were Clarendon Road.

DANIEL: Oh yes, thanks.

PASSENGER: Ring the bell, love.

Daniel rings the bell.

PASSENGER: He's not slowing down, is he love? Ee, he's a
so-and-so this one. He saw you and all. I
could see him in t' mirror. You're going to
have a long walk now, aren't you? T' next
stops way down t' road. You'll be for it when
you get to school, being this late. Ta ra,
anyway, love.

DANIEL: *(Big sigh)*

Scene 5 The Merrion Centre

Shopping centre noises.

Daniel approaches the newsagent.

SHIRLEY: That's one pound ninety. Ta.

Sound of old-fashioned cash register being rung.

SHIRLEY: Yes, love.

DANIEL: Just this, please.

SHIRLEY: Can of Coke? That's fifteen pence, love.

DANIEL: Thank you.

SHIRLEY: Ta.

Cash register rings

SHIRLEY: Don't forget your change.

DANIEL: Oh, thanks.

SHIRLEY: Who's next? Two Texans? That's twenty-two pence, love.

Daniel sits on a bench nearby. Sound of him opening his can of Coke and taking a drink.

GARY: Want some pop? I said, you want some pop?

DANIEL: No, thanks. Ta.

GARY: What's up with you? My pop not good enough for a grammar boy like you?

DANIEL: No, it's not that. I've got some Coke.

GARY: We'll swap you.

DANIEL: *(Pause, then weakly).* Alright.

GARY: Have a swig then.

Daniel drinks then gags. The two boys laugh.

NOAKESY: We sprogged in it.

GARY: Now we're mates. We've swapped pop so we're mates.

GARY: I'm Gary, and this is Noakesy. Who are you?

DANIEL: Dan. . . Danny.

GARY: Alright Danny? You don't mind me sitting here next to you do you, Danny?

DANIEL: No.

GARY: You missing school and all then, are you? Big, tough lad missing school?

DANIEL: Sort of, yes.

GARY: Now, 'cos we're mates, Danny, you can lend us some money, can't you? We're both brassic.

DANIEL: I'm brassic as well. Honest, I'm skint.

NOAKESY: You lying get. You're from t' grammar school. You've got money.

GARY: Hold on, Noakesy. He's our mate, isn't he? He wouldn't lie to us, would you Danny? That's a nice watch, though. Give us a skeg.

Pause as Daniel shows his watch to Gary

GARY: Nice. Give us a wear on it.

DANIEL: (Takes a breath) No, I mean I can't, because it's...

GARY: I said, give us a wear.

Scuffle is heard followed by a thud as Daniel, desperate to get away, hits Gary in the face with his elbow.

GARY: You little . . . I'll kill you for that, you little . . .

More thuds followed by a shriek from Noakesy.

NOAKESY: He's bit me. The get's bit me. Knack him
Gaz.

Daniel is thrown to the ground and the kicks begin.

SHIRLEY: Get off him! Get off him you little so and sos!
You touch him again and I'll chin you misen,
you hear?

GARY: What's up with you, you slag. You fancy him
or summat?

SHIRLEY: Don't you call me a slag, Gary Clarke. Yes,
that's right. I know who you are, and you
Kevin Noakes. You best leave or I'll tell your
brother and the next tattoo you get'll be
across your forehead.

GARY: We'll be back for you, you little. . .

SHIRLEY: Just sod off.

The two boys exit, muttering.

SHIRLEY: You alright, love?

DANIEL: Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Thanks.

SHIRLEY: You don't look fine to me. Sit down there for a while, eh? You stay there. Back in a sec'.

***SHIRLEY** nips back to the newsagent to find an irritated customer waiting.*

CUSTOMER: Oh, you're back are you? I've been waiting to pay for this Kit Kat.

SHIRLEY: Alright, alright, keep your hair on. It's only a blooming Kit Kat.

CUSTOMER: Don't you be so cheeky.

SHIRLEY: Well, I'm going as fast as I can, aren't I? Who do you think I am? Kevin Keegan? That's twelve pence, love.

CUSTOMER: About time too.

SHIRLEY: Aye, and you have a nice day, an' all.

Back with Daniel.

SHIRLEY: There you are. Have a look at your face. Take these as well.

DANIEL: Oh, thanks.

SHIRLEY: Don't be daft, I don't want your money. Anyroad, you bought one, didn't you, and never drank it, so this one's on the house.

DANIEL: Thanks.

SHIRLEY: Listen, I've a break in twenty minutes. You sit there, right, and I'll take you to Trevor's. He's got the big shop by the indoor market. It's got a sink and that. Get you cleaned up. Alright?

DANIEL: Yes, sure, thanks.

She goes back to the kiosk.

Scene Six TREVOR's Newsagent

Being right next to the indoor market it is always noisy and crowded, but above the noise a shrill male voice is heard.

TREVOR: You what? Cheaper in Tesco? Well, go to blooming Tesco then. Queue up there and see how long it takes you. You can go to Tesco al fresco for all I care! Whoopee doo! You get your husband down here. I'll get mine. See how you like that. Next? Yes, love, what can I get for you. . .

SHIRLEY: That's Trevor. He's a laugh, isn't he?

DANIEL: Yes.

SHIRLEY: What's up? Don't you like gays?

DANIEL: What? You mean he's a puff?

SHIRLEY: (laughs) Don't look so shocked. He's got a toilet with a sink. That's the main thing.

DANIEL: But won't he . . .? You know. . .

SHIRLEY: What? Feel you up? You should be so lucky! You're serious aren't you? No, he won't. Not all puffs are pervs, you know.

SHIRLEY *fights her way through the customers.*

SHIRLEY: Come on! Coming through! Lady with a baby! Got that from *Grease*. Have you seen it? Brill isn't it? (*Singing*) You're the one that I want, ooh ooh ooh! Alright Trevor, love. Can I have the key for the toilet?

TREVOR: Bloody hell, what've you got there, Shirley Temple? What have I told you about beating up your boyfriends, eh?

SHIRLEY: Shurrup and give us the key, will you? He needs cleaning up. Got set upon by a couple of lads near the kiosk.

TREVOR: Little sods. You alright, sunshine?

DANIEL: Yes, thanks.

TREVOR: Ee, talks nice, don't he?

SHIRLEY Leave him be. Come on, let's sort you out.

Noise of the newsagent recedes as Shirley takes him towards the indoor market.

DANIEL: Where are we going?

SHIRLEY: Here.

Shirley unlocks a side door to the store-room/washroom/tea room of the Newsagent.

SHIRLEY: Right, go on and get your face cleaned up. I'll make us a cup of coffee.

Daniel goes to the wash-basin, Shirley starts to make the coffee.

DANIEL: Can I ask you something?

SHIRLEY: Blimey! He says more than 'Yes, fine, thanks'! Go on, what's up?

DANIEL: Why are you doing all this for me?

SHIRLEY: Well, it's not 'cos I fancy young lads with blood all over their faces, if that's what you think.

DANIEL: No, really, why?

SHIRLEY: Why? Why do you think? Because you needed some help, that's why. I'd've done same thing for anyone.

DANIEL: Right, thanks.

SHIRLEY: Don't sound all narky. You are quite cute as well, you know? Just a bit young for me, like.

Daniel runs the tap. Slight gasp as the water hits the cuts on his lip.

SHIRLEY: Let's have a look at you then. That's better. You don't look like one of them zombies in them Hammer House horror films! Do you take milk or sugar?

DANIEL: Just a bit of milk, please.

Pause

DANIEL: So what school did you go to, Shirley?

SHIRLEY: Me? Our Lady. Left in t' summer.

DANIEL: Are you Catholic then?

SHIRLEY: Yeh. Me family's Irish. Not me mum, but me grandparents, like. Came over here after the war.

DANIEL: What about your dad?

SHIRLEY: What about him?

DANIEL: Is he Irish as well?

SHIRLEY: No, he's just a . . . Won't say it. Haven't seen him since I were seven. Good riddance. Anyway, nosey, what about your parents,

eh? Don't tell me. I bet you're all lovey-dovey, aren't you? Living in a nice family house like the blooming Waltons. (*Pause*) Oh heck? Have I said summat wrong? What's up?

DANIEL: Nothing.

SHIRLEY: No, go on love. Tell me.

DANIEL: Well, my mum died a couple of months ago, that's. . .

SHIRLEY: That's what?

DANIEL: Nothing. I don't really want to talk about it.

SHIRLEY: Yes, you do, or you wouldn't have said 'owt. (*Pause*) I bet you miss her a lot, don't you?

DANIEL: Yes, I do.

SHIRLEY: What was she like? Was she nice?

DANIEL: What was my mum like? (*Pause*) Well, she wasn't perfect, you know.

SHIRLEY: No one ever is, love.

DANIEL: She had a quick temper and she used to go mad in the car, swearing and shouting at other drivers, and she was rubbish at making sandwiches and she use to make stupid comments all the way through telly

programmes, like she thought it was really funny to call 'Starsky and Hutch' 'Starkers and Crotch', which was just irritating.

Pause

SHIRLEY: Anything else?

DANIEL: We argued a lot, before she, you know, died. We didn't used to, but we started a year or so before she died. Before we even knew she was ill.

SHIRLEY: What about?

DANIEL: Stupid stuff, like doing homework and that. I got sick of her telling me what to do, and she always wanted to know how my day went, and all I wanted to do was come home and watch telly.

SHIRLEY: 'course you did. You're fourteen, right? That's what all fourteen year-olds are like. You're not feeling guilty about it, are you?

DANIEL: Well, yes, a bit.

SHIRLEY: Well, you shouldn't. All lads of your age are like that. You're just unlucky 'cos you didn't get the chance to make it up to her later on.

DANIEL: How do you mean?

SHIRLEY: Oh, heck, I've just seen the time. I've to get back to the kiosk. Barbara'll kill me.

She grabs her coat.

SHIRLEY: What you up to now?

DANIEL: Um, I don't know. Maybe go to the bowling alley and play Asteroids.

SHIRLEY: You what?

DANIEL: Asteroids. It's a video game.

SHIRLEY: Oh, aye, I've heard of it. Well, I've lunch at twelve thirty. If you come to t' kiosk we can get summat together if you fancy it.

DANIEL: Yes. Thanks.

SHIRLEY: Right, then, get your blazer. I'm late.

Scene 7 The café at Circle House

SHIRLEY: There you are, one cup of coffee and one Mars Bar.

DANIEL: But I said I . . .

SHIRLEY: I know, I know, you said you didn't want 'owt, but you look as if you need building up. You could be a bonny lad, you could, but you're all skin and bone. It's good for you, isn't it? Mars a day helps you work, rest and play and that. Anyroad, you can't sit in here with nowt to eat or you're taking up space.

DANIEL: Thanks.

He picks up his coffee and takes a sip.

SHIRLEY: (*Laughing*) Aye, they make 'em hot here, don't they? I'd eat your Mars Bar first if I were you.

DANIEL: Is that cream?

SHIRLEY: You what?

DANIEL: That, in the carton. Is it cream?

SHIRLEY: Cream? You think I'd sit and eat cream? It's yoghurt, you doylem. They don't sell it here, but Peggy lets me keep a stock in t' fridge. It's lovely. You want to try some?

DANIEL: No. I'm fine, thanks.

SHIRLEY: Suit yourself.

Pause while they tuck into their snacks

SHIRLEY: Right, so where were we? You were saying that you'd been having lots of rows with your mum before she died, right?

DANIEL: Well, yes.

SHIRLEY: And you felt dead guilty about it, and I was saying that all lads went through that. Yeh?

DANIEL: Yes.

SHIRLEY: Right well- you alright talking about this? You look a bit weird, like?

DANIEL: No, go on.

SHIRLEY: Sure? Right, then, you know that all teenagers argue with their parents? I mean, you must know that, right?

DANIEL:

Yes. I know that, but what was that you were saying about not having a chance to make it up later?

SHIRLEY:

I'm coming to that. When I were your age. Sounds daft that. Sounds like I'm some old codger. (*She puts on a gruff voice*). 'When I were your age'. Anyroad, when I were fourteen I used to have massive bust-ups with me mam, screaming and shouting at each other, like.

DANIEL:

What about?

SHIRLEY:

All sorts. Lads, clothes, music, going to church. Don't get me wrong. I love my mam now and I loved her then, but we didn't half have a go at each other. Then, one Sunday, I were at my Gran's house for Sunday dinner, and my cousin Sheryl were there. She must have been about my age now, maybe a bit older, seventeen. I hadn't seen her for a while, like, and I couldn't believe it. Her and my Auntie Maureen were there, and they were, like, having a laugh and acting like they were best mates. But you see the last

time I'd seen her they were at each other's throats. Sheryl were shouting "Why can't you just leave me alone!" and Auntie Maureen was going "I'll 'ave your blooming guts for garters if you talk to me like that again," and the rest of us were just keeping our heads down and trying to eat our Yorkshire pudding. So, like I says, this time they're all lovey-dovey, so after dinner she's sitting reading the News of the World magazine and I ask her about it and she said that all that shouting and stuff, you need it to show them you're not a kid anymore and to find your independence. Then, once you've shown them, you get on better than ever 'cos you can be mates. They're still your parents, but they're your mate as well. That's what's happened with me an' all. Me and me mam, we're really close now. I'd do anything for her, I really would.

Opens her packet of Quavers.

Want a Quaver?

DANIEL:

No, thanks. So what you're saying is. . . um. .
. what?

SHIRLEY:

I were thinking about that before lunch when
I were in me kiosk. Now, you can tell me to
bog off and I don't mind. It's none of my
business, but as you've asked, I reckon that
your mum dying now is the worst time it
could be. 'Cos you've started to argue, and
fallen out and that, but you don't have the
chance to make up.

DANIEL:

So what do I do?

SHIRLEY:

You what?

DANIEL:

What do I do?

SHIRLEY:

Well, there's nowt you can do, is there? Your
mam's dead, so you can't make it up with her.
You just got to get on with it. But one thing I
can say is you've to stop feeling guilty, 'cos
it's not your fault you were arguing, as I said.
Hold on a sec'. That's Debbie signalling to
me. Back in a minute.

Pause while she goes to speak to Debbie.

SHIRLEY: That was Debbie. She's, I dunno, the overall manager or something. Anyway, she's right nosey- wanted to know why I weren't sitting on the staff table. You have to watch it with her. If you get on the wrong side of her you've had it. What's up? You're looking all narky again.

DANIEL: So is that it then?

SHIRLEY: What? What you on about?

DANIEL: Is that your dead good advice that I've been waiting for? I should just get over it, just forget about my mum because I'll never be able to make it up with her?

SHIRLEY: I never said that, did I?

DANIEL: You did.

SHIRLEY: I never said you were to forget about her. Eh, listen you, I'm not a blooming psychiatrist. I've said what I thought, and if you don't like it I'm sorry, but I were just trying to help. Blimey, that's what you get for helping someone. Oh, eh, don't start crying, love.

Daniel crying, almost soundlessly.

Listen, I would give you a hug, but we'll just start getting comments and everyone'll see that you're crying, so I'll just sit here, normal like, and say nowt, and when you're ready you just let me know. No one's watching, love, so you just take your time, alright?

DANIEL: Back in a minute.

In the Gents. Spashes water on his face. Blows his nose.

Returns.

DANIEL: Sorry.

SHIRLEY: You should be, you big girl's blouse!

DANIEL: What? Oh. (*Manages a chuckle*).

SHIRLEY: That's better. Now listen, I've a bit of time left before I've to be back. Why don't you tell me a bit about your mam?

DANIEL: I've told you already.

SHIRLEY: It's up to you. They say it's good to talk about stuff, don't they? And I bet you've not talked about it much, have you?

DANIEL: No. Well, there was a bereavement councillor. That was my aunt's idea. But it didn't work out very well.

SHIRLEY: Why, what happened?

DANIEL: I walked out after ten minutes. I couldn't stand the way she was smiling at me.

They laugh.

SHIRLEY: What did she die of, your mum?

DANIEL: Lung cancer.

SHIRLEY: And were you there at the end, like?

DANIEL: Yes, but I don't want to talk about that.

SHIRLEY: Ok. What about after? At the funeral. Did you do a reading or 'owt?

DANIEL: No, I didn't do anything.

SHIRLEY: Well that's a shame.

DANIEL: Why?

SHIRLEY: It's good to get involved and that. Otherwise it doesn't seem like it's happened, like it's sorted in your head. That's what my mam said after my Gran died. We had to go and see her in the coffin, and. . .

DANIEL:

What? You're kidding?

SHIRLEY:

Eh, I'm not going to kid about summat like that, am I? That's part of being a Catholic, paying your respects to the body. I couldn't believe it when my mam said, but it's not as bad as you think, and it's kind of comforting in a weird way. It makes it feel real. What about at the wake? Did you have lot of family around?

DANIEL:

Some, but they didn't pay much attention to me. It was Ronald they cared about.

SHIRLEY:

Ronald? Who's that, like?

DANIEL:

My stepfather. He got the sympathy cards. House was full of cards to him, and letters, all people saying how sorry they are. What did I get? Nothing. Not one card. But she was my mum. He'd only known her five minutes, and he can get another wife, can't he? But I can't get another mum, and everyone's feeling dead sorry for him and no one says anything to me.

SHIRLEY:

Careful of your coffee, love.

DANIEL: Just like what happened in the funeral service. The vicar's telling us all about Mum, as if he knew her. He can't have met her more than half a dozen times. And he says what a good wife she was to Ronald, and how great her life had been since she met him. Like it was rubbish before that. And he never mentioned that she was a lawyer, like it's not important. It's more important that she's a wife, I suppose?

SHIRLEY: Do you get on with your stepfather?

DANIEL: Not really. I mean, no, not at all.

SHIRLEY: What, is he a drinker?

DANIEL: A drinker? No. Well, sometimes.

SHIRLEY: Oh aye, how much then?

DANIEL: Well, I don't know. I think he has a whisky or two sometimes after we've gone to bed.

SHIRLEY: Have you ever seen him drunk?

DANIEL: Drunk? Ronald? No, never.

SHIRLEY: Well, he's no drinker then. Is he bad-tempered, like. Does he ever hit you?

DANIEL: Hit me? He hardly ever tells me off, never mind hits me.

SHIRLEY: Lazy git then. Never does 'owt for you, just for himself.

DANIEL: No, he's not like that. He makes my lunches for me, and all the meals. He's a good cook. Better than my mum, to be honest.

SHIRLEY: Oh, right.

DANIEL: It's not that. I'm not saying he's a bad bloke, it's just. . .

TREVOR: Ey up, it's little Shirley Temple and her battered toyboy. Alright? Mind if I join you, or is three a crowd, like?

Trevor plonks his plate of ham sandwiches on the table and sits down on the free seat beside Shirley.

TREVOR: So, how you feeling then young Daniel? Any better?

DANIEL: Yes, th. . . ta.

TREVOR: You hear that, Shirley Temple? Ten minutes with you and he stops talking nice!

SHIRLEY: Bog off!

TREVOR: Listen, I'm glad you're feeling better because I need an extra pair of hands in t' shop.

Barbara's had to go off home. She says it's the flu, but I reckon she's on summat.

Heroine probably.

DANIEL: Really?

SHIRLEY: (*Laughing*) 'Course not. Barbara's nearly sixty. Give over, Trevor.

TREVOR: Anyroad, you fancy doing a couple of hours this afternoon?

DANIEL: What, in a shop?

TREVOR: Aye, a shop. What's up, Little Lord Fauntleroy? Too good for us are you?

DANIEL: No, I didn't mean it like that. It's just, I've never done it before, I don't know what to do.

TREVOR: It's not that blooming difficult. Can't be, or Shirley here wouldn't have lasted five minutes. You can add stuff up in your head, can't you? What's sixteen plus seven plus forty-two?

DANIEL: Um, sixty-three. No sixty-five.

TREVOR: You got there in the end. Well then. I'll give you one pound an hour. How much is that for two hours' work?

DANIEL: Two pounds? Really? Alright. What time do you want me to start?

TREVOR: He's keen, isn't he? Let me finish my sarnies and we'll go up together.

SHIRLEY: You take care of him, Trevor, and keep your hands off him.

TREVOR: He's too young for me, love, and for you tha knows. Oh heck, look who it isn't.

Jason Milner appears at the doorway.

JASON MILNER: Shirley! Oi, Shirley. Come here. Now.

SHIRLEY: Oh blooming heck. He's not supposed to be in here.

SHIRLEY grabs her coat and drags Jason out of the café.

TREVOR: She deserves better than that little toe-rag, I tell you that. Pardon my language. I thought so. You've fallen for her, haven't you? I could tell before, when you came t' shop. Daft world, isn't it? You've fallen for her, but she's too old, she's fallen for him, but

he's a . . . I won't say it again. And who's he fallen for? Nobbut hisself.

DANIEL:

Who is he?

TREVOR:

That is Jason Milner. Right waste of space is Jason Milner. He's not allowed in here, because he come in one day drunk and started swearing at Shirley and so Mr Frank, that's the owner, he come upstairs and told him to get out and not come back. Mr Frank's in his seventies, but he's as tough as old boots, and he's like most bullies is Jason, a great nancy underneath. That were last month. Didn't think we'd see him again.

DANIEL:

Why does she like him?

TREVOR:

Good question, sunshine. You want to know what I reckon? Has she told you about her Dad?

DANIEL:

She said she didn't like him. What's that got to do with it?

TREVOR:

Hear me out. Talk of toe-rags, Jason Milner's got nowt on her old man. Used to go out boozing and come home and belt her mum. If Shirley got in t' way, he'd belt her and all.

DANIEL:

That's. . . that's horrible.

TREVOR:

Ay, it is. But who does she end up going for?
A no good wazzock what's not far off her old
man. D'you understand what I'm saying?

DANIEL:

Not really, no.

TREVOR:

It's in t' genes, isn't it? Her mother goes for
lads like that, and so does she? She can't
help it?

DANIEL:

What? Do you mean he hits her? That Jason
Milner hits Shirley?

TREVOR:

Now hold your horses. I didn't say that. He
hasn't hit her, I'm sure of that. Not yet,
anyroad. He's on probation he told me, so one
wrong move and he'd be in t' jail.

DANIEL:

And if he did, she'd hit him back. She's tough
as well, isn't she?

TREVOR:

Ee, you posh lads, you know nowt, do you?
She's not tough, she's as soft as butter.
That's why she's took care of you and that's
why she's chosen him, 'cos she's soft and she
wants to look after him, to mend him. Maybe
that's why her mum picked her Dad.
Problem is, with some blokes you just can't

mend them. They're wronguns inside and out.

Poor lad, you've learnt more than you bargained for today, haven't you?

Well, come on then. Let's get cracking.

Scene 8 Trevor's Newsagent

CUSTOMER:

There. Them ones, there. JPS. No, not red, the black ones. No, ten, not twenty. King size. The ones above. That's right. About blooming time. There. There. Come on. I've a bus to catch.

Cash register ringing

Hold up. I give you a tenner, you've just give me change for a five.

DANIEL:

But it was a fiver. I'm sure.

CUSTOMER:

Don't give me that son. Do they not pay you enough or summat? You trying to earn a few quid on the side?

DANIEL: No, it's just I thought you'd given me a fiver.

CUSTOMER: Aye, well you know now, so give me another fiver and we're even.

TREVOR: Hold on, when have you ever had a tenner?

CUSTOMER: I give him a tenner and I want my change.

TREVOR: I tell you what. Come back in the morning. I'll be cashing up later and if we're five pound up I'll put it to one side for you. Alright?

CUSTOMER: Alright, but don't think I'll forget.

Customer exits.

TREVOR: It's like a red rag to a bull, having a young lad on t' counter. They love it, some of them. They have rubbish lives so they take it out on someone else. Don't let it get to you, just keep smiling. Just remember, for every so-and-so there's ten nice folk.

DANIEL: Right. Sorry. I'm sure he gave me a five pound note, though.

TREVOR: So why were you about to give him his extra fiver?

DANIEL: Well, he seemed so sure.

TREVOR:

Course he did. They always do. Listen, if you get a note, put it on top of the drawer, here, then give the change out. Don't put it straight in, otherwise toe-rags like him'll try and take you for a ride. And just to be on t' safe side, when they give you a note, hold it up to them and say 'That's five pound you've give me'. If they still make a fuss, tell them to come back after you've cashed up. They never do. Ely up, it's Theresa. You took your time didn't you?

THERESA:

Oo, where did you get this one? He's lovely! Can I take him home with me?

TREVOR:

No, you can't, he's coming home with me. Only joking, Sundance. That's a good name for you. Sundance. Anyways, Sundance, you take a break from serving for half an hour and help Theresa stack the shelves.

THERESA:

Hold up. Let me get me coat off first. Right, you go round t' front and shout out what we need, and I'll pass you the boxes, alright? Then you get stacking and I'll help Trevor.

When you've done give us a shout and I'll send over some more.

DANIEL: Oh, right, er. . . Texans, Opal Fruits, Bounties, Rolos and Flakes.

THERESA: 'Owt else?

DANIEL: We could do with some Aeros and Toffos.

THERESA: What about chewing gum?

DANIEL: We need some Juicy Fruit and some Stimorol.

THERESA: Right, that'll keep you going. Who's next, please.

DANIEL: You should do sandwiches as well.

THERESA: You what?

DANIEL: Sandwiches. You should sell sandwiches. I bet they'd sell out quick as well. There's always a queue at Ainsleys at lunchtime.

THERESA: Ey up, he's been here five minutes and he's telling us how to run the shop. What do you reckon Trevor?

TREVOR: There you are, love, that's twenty-eight, thirty, forty, fifty pence, one pound. You alright with that cart or do you want me to help you put your magazines in there for you?

Aye, I've mentioned that about sarnies to Mr Frank. Do you know what he says? He says 'Ainsleys don't sell our sweets, we're not going to sell their sandwiches'.

THERESA:

He's a proper gentleman is Mr Frank. Now keep your ideas to yourself and get on with the stacking.

Later on. Radio DJ announcing the news at 4pm

CUSTOMER:

Just that, please.

THERESA:

Eh, Daniel love, could you check the price on this mucky mag? It's Penthouse, love. Have a look on t' rack.

DANIEL:

Sorry?

THERESA:

This gentleman wants a copy of Penthouse. Yes, this gentleman here. Could you check the price for us?

CUSTOMER:

Oh, blooming heck. Forget it.

The customer leaves

TREVOR: What have I told you about doing that, eh?
He's a paying customer, he is.

THERESA: Oh, give over. Them blokes make me sick
with their mucky books. Sorry Daniel, love, I
were only doing it to make a point. You don't
have to look on t' shelf.

TREVOR: Unless you want to, eh Sundance?

THERESA: OO, he's blushing. Poor lad.

Pause

DANIEL: Theresa, can I ask you something?

THERESA: What, about mucky mags? I were only
pulling your leg.

DANIEL: No, no, not that. It's just. . . these newsagents
are run by the same owner, right?

THERESA: Aye.

DANIEL: So why aren't the prices the same? It's
fifteen for a Coke at Shirley's, but it's
eighteen here.

THERESA: Aye, that's Trevor for you.

DANIEL: But doesn't Mr Frank mind?

THERESA: What's to mind? The customers love Trevor, most of them anyway, and t' shop's always busy, so Mr Frank just lets him get on with it. Tight so-and-so is Trevor, though. Ask him about his electricity.

DANIEL: His what?

THERESA: Ask him how his electric's so cheap.

DANIEL: Maybe later.

THERESA: I'll do it. Eh, Trevor! Daniel wants to know about your electricity, how do you get it so cheap?

TREVOR: Got it wired up to the street lamp outside my house. It's true. Mate of mine works for t' council. He come over and wired it up. Not all, mind, or they'd suspect summat. But most of it. That's twenty-eight pence, love, ta. I can give you his number if you like. Hold up, is that the time? You'd best get off home. That were three hours in the end, weren't it?

DANIEL: Well, two and a half.

TREVOR: Let's call it three, as you've done us a favour.

Cash register rings

There you are, three pounds. Have you enjoyed it?

DANIEL: Thanks, yes I have. Really.

TREVOR: Good lad. You've done alright. Now then, do you fancy working on Saturdays? We've a young lass leaving at the end of the month. Nine till five thirty, £1.50 an hour. Start first Saturday of December. What do you think?

DANIEL: I'd love to, but I'll have to ask my stepfather. He's-

TREVOR: Okey-cokey. You ask you stepdad and give us a call. That's me home number, so if you call make sure it's the evenings. Any time until midnight. I'm a night-owl me. I hate sleeping. It's boring.

Right, then, off you go, and remember, if you ever need a hand. . .

DANIEL AND TREVOR: There's one on the end of your arm!

TREVOR: Good lad.

DANIEL: Right, see you then. See you Theresa.

THERESA: See you love.

Pause

DANIEL: Um, I thought I'd better say goodbye to Shirley. Do you know when she's got her break?

TREVOR: Debbie's coming up from Circle House to do her break, 'cos Barbara's gone home. She can't make it 'til four thirty, so you've a half hour or so to kill. But Shirley doesn't need a break to say goodbye, does she?

DANIEL: No, it's just. . . I wanted to ask her about something. I wanted to buy a record anyway, so I'll probably hang around and wait for her.

TREVOR: Right, ok, see you.

THERESA: Yes, ta ra, love.

Scene 8: Record Shop

Clash song is playing. Daniel is looking through the records.

GARY: Bruce Springsteen. Rubbish, that is. What d' you think Noakesy?

NOAKESY: Aye, rubbish.

GARY: What's up? You didn't think we'd forgotten about you, did you, eh posh lad?

DANIEL: Listen, you've given me a kicking. You've won, alright. Can't you just leave me alone now?

GARY: A kicking? That were nowt, that were. We're going to give you a proper hiding now.

DANIEL: What for? What have I done to you?

GARY: You've bit Noakesy for a start, hasn't he, Noakesy?

NOAKESY: Aye.

GARY: And you've give me this. You only got saved by some slag. But your luck's run out now. You can't stay in here all day, posh boy. Anyroad, we can just sit on that bench over there and wait for you. And the longer we

wait, the more wazzed off we're going to be.
You'd be best coming out now.

DANIEL: *(Pause)* Alright, let's go.

GARY: You what?

JASON MILNER: You alright there, son?

GARY: Who are you?

JASON MILNER: I wasn't talking to you. You alright, Danny-boy?

GARY: 'Course he's alright. We're mates, us and
Danny, aren't we? We was just-

Jason Milner cracks Gary and Noakesy's heads together. They gasp with pain.

JASON MILNER: Now listen to me, you little gets. You touch one hair on his head and I'll find you and I'm not messing about, I'll give you stripes down your faces that'll make you look like a packet of Pacers. You understand? Now apologise. Go on. Tell him you're sorry.

GARY: Sorry.

NOAKESY: Yeah, sorry.

JASON MILNER:

Now get out. And if I see either of you in the Merrion again, you're dead.

They go.

Aren't you going to say thank you then,
Danny-boy?

DANIEL:

Thank you.

JASON MILNER:

No problem, son. Anything for one of Shirley's little pals. I were asking her about you, you see? Saw you with her in t' café, and I were asking, y' know, what she were doing with a young lad like you. She said she'd saved you from a kicking. I didn't believe her, but looks like she were telling t' truth.

DANIEL:

Why didn't you believe her?

JASON MILNER:

You what?

DANIEL:

Why didn't you believe her?

JASON MILNER:

Because she's a tart, that's why, and you can't trust any of them. Got to keep your eyes on them all the time or they'll be off with

someone else, even a little pip-squeak like you.

DANIEL:

Don't call her a tart.

JASON MILNER:

You don't know them, do you son? Bet you've never had a bird in your life, have you? Well, I'll give you an education you won't get at your posh school. They're all the same, you hear? All of them. That's your first lesson. The second is, you owe me. I've saved you, and you're mine now. Alright? Now, I'm going to wait on that bench for my tart. You stay here and look at your little records, little boy. 'Cos that's all you are to her, you know, and to me. A little boy.

DANIEL:

She's not a tart.

JASON MILNER:

So you said, son. So you said.

He goes.

Voices in Daniel's head:

TREVOR:

He hasn't hit her, I'm sure of that. Not yet, anyroad. He's on probation he told me, so one wrong move and he'd be in t' jail.

BEDFORD: Next time you're going to get a thick ear.

BOY: He nearly burst my ear drum last term.

SHIRLEY: You miss your mum a lot, don't you?

BUS DRIVER: You don't know where you're going.

JASON MILNER: Because she's a tart, that's why. They're all
the same.

The voices grow louder and overlap until they are pared down to one single voice, that of TREVOR saying "one wrong move and he'll be in jail". Sound of record shop recedes as Daniel leaves it, walks up behind Jason Milner and slaps him around the back of the head. There is a pause, then Jason Milner bursts into tears and runs away.

SHIRLEY: WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU DOING?
ARE YOU SOME KIND OF NUTTER OR
WHAT?
COME ON. LET'S HEAR IT. WHAT ARE YOU
DOING?

DANIEL: I thought. I thought he'd-

SHIRLEY:

WHAT? WHAT DID YOU THINK, YOU DAFT
GET? WHAT?

WHAT? COME ON, WHAT?

DANIEL:

This is all wrong. It isn't meant to happen like this. I thought he'd hit me back. I thought he'd hit me and then he'd get arrested and then you'd be free of him. That's what you want, isn't it, to be free of him? Then, if he was in prison you'd be wouldn't have to worry about him any more and he wouldn't be able to hit you. Even if he doesn't now, he probably will in the future. And I know what you're thinking. When he's out of prison he'll come looking for you. But that's ok because you can come and live in our house. Not like boyfriend girlfriend, but just because we've got loads of rooms and he won't know where you are and you'll be fine. And I didn't realise that he was going to cry, but even so, you can still come and stay at ours for a while if you want. My stepfather won't mind, I'm sure. He probably won't

even notice and you can do what you want
and you needn't see Jason Milner ever again.

Well, what do you think?

SHIRLEY: You. Stupid. Little.

DANIEL: What? What's the matter? I was just trying
to help.

SHIRLEY: Are you completely off your trolley or what?
What? You thought I'd come and live in your
house? With you?

DANIEL: Well, yes.

SHIRLEY: But I've only known you for two minutes.
Why would I want to live with you?

DANIEL: But he knows where you live, doesn't he?
Jason Milner. If you live with me he won't be
able to find you.

SHIRLEY: But I want him to find me you stupid
wazzock, he's my boyfriend.

DANIEL: But he's. . . Well, he's going to-

SHIRLEY: What? Hit me?

DANIEL: Yes.

SHIRLEY: He's never hit me, and if he did I'd be out of
the door in two seconds flat. He knows that

because I've told him enough times. But that's none of your bloody business is it?

DANIEL:

But I thought. . . He seems really-

SHIRLEY:

What?

DANIEL:

Well, he says bad things about women, and he wants to control you, and he gets really jealous-

SHIRLEY:

Just listen to yourself. You know what you know? Nowt. Sod all. Less than nowt. I bet you've never even kissed a lass, have you? Aye, I thought not. And you're standing there telling me about my boyfriend. And you wanted to get him arrested? Why did you think he'd get arrested if he chinned you after you'd smacked him around the head?

DANIEL:

He's on probation, isn't he?

SHIRLEY:

Probation? He's not on blooming probation.

DANIEL:

But he told Trevor-

SHIRLEY:

'Course he did. He says all sorts, but it means nowt. He does it to sound tough, that's all.

DANIEL:

But I thought-

SHIRLEY:

So you keep saying. You thought this and you thought that. Shall I tell you what I

think? I think you're a little boy who's way out of his depth.

DANIEL: I'm sorry.

SHIRLEY: You should be blooming sorry. He's in a right state because of you.

DANIEL: Why did he . . . you know . . . start crying?

SHIRLEY: Because you did to him what all the other so-and-sos have done to him all his life- his dad, his mum, his uncles, his teachers- you smacked him around the back of the head. He's lost the hearing in one of his ears because of it.

DANIEL: I'm sorry. I was only trying to help. I didn't know.

SHIRLEY: Of course you didn't know. You don't know anything about him or about me. As I said, you know nowt.

POLICEMAN: Will you keep your voice down young lady. T' whole shopping centre doesn't want to listen to you, you know.

SHIRLEY: It's him you want to talk to, not me. It's not me what's smacking people about the head. Or do you not tell off posh lads?

POLICEMAN:

(To onlookers) Alright, alright. It's all finished here. Off you go now, back to your shopping.

(To Daniel) I didn't see you hit him, but I saw him crying. Blooming punk rockers. They think they're tough but they're a bunch of girls' blouses. Don't want that sort in t' Merrion, do we now?

SHIRLEY:

Oh aye, what sort's that then?

POLICEMAN:

Don't you start with me, young lady, unless you want a trip down t' station.

Now, the pair of you, pipe down. This is a shopping centre, not blooming Coronation Street.

He goes.

DANIEL:

Look, I'm really, really sorry. I wanted to do something for you because you helped me. I've never spoken about my mum to anyone else, and I was really grateful. And I didn't know he was going to be hurt. Honest. I thought he was going to smash my face in.

SHIRLEY: Well, here's a lesson for you. Don't mess about with other people's lives. Alright?

DANIEL: Yes, I'm sorry.

SHIRLEY: I can see you are, and I can see you thought you might get hurt so it were brave of you to do that, but can't you see, Daniel, you're just as bad as the worst of them.

DANIEL: Who?

SHIRLEY: The blokes what want to control lasses. Want to manipulate them and make them do what they want.

DANIEL: What are you talking about? I'm not like that at all.

SHIRLEY: I hope not, Daniel. 'Cos from where I'm standing you've just tried to break up my relationship, have my boyfriend arrested, and put me in a position where I have to live in your house where you can keep an eye on me and where I have to be grateful to you.

DANIEL: No, no, that wasn't it.

SHIRLEY: As I say I hope not. But don't ever become that kind of person, Daniel. Don't ever get like that.

DANIEL: I won't. I'm not. I . . .

SHIRLEY: Right, I think my break's over. I'm going back to work. And I don't want to see you hanging around here again. Alright?

DANIEL: What about Jason Milner?

SHIRLEY: He's had worse than that, much worse. He'll need to be on his own for a while. Probably gone down to play some daft video game. That's what he normally does when he gets upset. I'm sure he'll come and see me later.

DANIEL: Right, well, I'm really sorry. I . . .

She leaves him.

Scene 9 Bus stop

A bus pulls up. Doors open.

DANIEL: Seven please. No. Hold on. How much is it to Adel?

BUS DRIVER: Whereabouts in Adel?

DANIEL: I'm not sure. Just over the ring-road.

BUS DRIVER: Just over the ring-road? That's nine, son,
please.

DANIEL: Ta.

BUS DRIVER: Ta.

The bus pulls off.

Scene 10 Daniel's Father's House

Night-time. Quiet. Daniel walks up to a house and presses the bell. A woman with a baby opens the door.

WOMAN: (Pause) Hello Daniel.

DANIEL: Hello.

WOMAN: Um. . . Hold on.
(*Calling into the house*) David!

MAN'S VOICE: What?

WOMAN: Someone to see you.

MAN'S VOICE: Oh, bloody hell. Alright. Hold on.

WOMAN: Everything ok?

DANIEL: Yes. Thank you.

WOMAN: Do you want to come in?

DANIEL: No. Thank you.

The baby chuckles.

WOMAN: He likes you.

DANIEL: How can you tell?

WOMAN: He normally hides from strangers. He must realise that you're family.

MAN'S VOICE: What are you talking about, Ginny? Who is it?

Jesus! Daniel!

DANIEL: Hello Dad.

DANIEL'S DAD: What are you. . .? Christ, come in, come into the house.

DANIEL: No, it's ok, Dad. I'm fine here.

DANIEL'S DAD: Don't be silly. It's freezing. Come into the house.

DANIEL: No, I'm alright here. Honest. I just want a quick chat.

DANIEL'S DAD: Daniel, come into the bloody house. Now. This is ridiculous.

DANIEL: No, I won't. I don't want to come into the bloody house. I'm fine here. I told you.

DANIEL'S DAD: (Pause) Sure, yes, sure. Sorry. We can talk here. Sure. Jesus, you've grown up, haven't you?

So, how are things? I haven't seen you for a while. How have you been?

DANIEL: Why didn't you come to the funeral?

DANIEL'S DAD: What? What did you say?

DANIEL: Why didn't you come to the funeral?

DANIEL'S DAD: But, what are you talking about? I did come to the funeral.

DANIEL: No you didn't. I didn't see you.

DANIEL'S DAD: Is that what this is about? Is that why you haven't called me up for ages and now you've turned up and you won't come into my house? I did come to the funeral, Daniel. You didn't see me beforehand because you came in with your head down and sat at the front, and you didn't see me afterwards because I left as quickly as I could.

DANIEL: Why?

DANIEL'S DAD:

Why do you think? You might have wanted me there, but no one else did. You think Ronald wanted me there? Or your Auntie Pat? Or anyone else in that damn family?

DANIEL:

So you were there?

DANIEL'S DAD:

Yes, I've told you, I was there. I saw the whole thing. Pat's reading, the eulogy by the vicar from which my name was rubbed out even though I was married to your mother for twelve years, the whole thing. Of course I was there. Our marriage may have turned to rubbish but I loved her too once, you know. How could you think I wouldn't go? Are you going to come in now?

DANIEL:

No, I wanted to. . . There was something else.

DANIEL'S DAD:

Go on then, spit it out.

DANIEL:

Can I come and live with you?

DANIEL'S DAD:

What? Christ, Daniel, I don't know. It's difficult, you see, with the baby and. . . Isn't Ronald treating you ok? Because if he isn't-

DANIEL:

No, it's not that. He's fine.

DANIEL'S DAD:

What then?

DANIEL:

He's just not my Dad, is he?

DANIEL'S DAD: No, he's bloody well not. Listen, if we're going to have to talk outside, I'm getting a coat. I'm bloody freezing.

He goes inside. We can hear a whispered conversation.

DANIEL'S DAD: That's better. My teeth have stopped chattering. Now, listen. . .

DANIEL: No, Dad. It's alright. I understand.

DANIEL'S DAD: No, let me finish. Please. We've not that much space here, and I think you'd be more comfortable with Ronald, though I hate to say it. But. . .

He pauses and pulls the door to, then continues more quietly.

DANIEL'S DAD: But, if you really want to come and stay here, I'd make room for you. I'm not sure how, and I don't think I'll be very popular for saying so, but we'll make do.

Alright buster?

DANIEL: Yeah, I'm ok.

DANIEL'S DAD: You coming in now?

DANIEL: No. I'd better get back.

DANIEL'S DAD: Give me a ring, ok? Whatever you decide.
But think about it first. You've got a big house there. You're going to need that space now you're a teenager. But if you really want, I'll always make room for you here.
You're my lad, aren't you?

DANIEL: Yes. See you Dad.

Scene 10 Daniel's house

Daniel opens his front door with his key and walks in.

DANIEL: Ronald?

He walks down the hall and into the kitchen.

Sorry I'm late. I went to. . .

POLICEMAN: You don't mind me smoking, do you son? He said it were alright.
You've showed up then, have you? Aye, I thought you would. I told him as much.

DANIEL: (Faintly) Where is he?

POLICEMAN: Your stepdad?

DANIEL: Yes, and what are. . .? I mean. . . Why are you here?

Pause while the policeman takes a long last drag of his cigarette, then stubs it out. His radio briefly crackles.

POLICEMAN: I'll tell you where he is, son. He's where he's been most of the evening. In his car looking for you, that's where. He's been up and down Otley blooming Road a dozen times.

DANIEL: But. . . but. . . why are you here?

POLICEMAN: I'm here, sunshine, because I got back t' station, and I took the call for a missing lad. He'd already called three times, your stepdad, they said. Anyhow, he gives me a description and I realise it were the same lad I'd seen in town, so I said I'd come round and see what I could do. But he just couldn't sit still. Insisted he go looking for you while I stayed here.

DANIEL: Oh God, sorry.

POLICEMAN: Where've you been, son?

DANIEL: I went. . . I went to see my Dad.

POLICEMAN: Oh aye, and does he not have a phone, your Dad? In fact, aren't there phones in the Merrion?

DANIEL: Um. . . yes, but. . .

POLICEMAN: But what?

DANIEL: Well I. . . didn't think he'd be bothered.

The policeman stands and picks up his helmet before answering.

POLICEMAN: Listen, son. I've seen plenty of dads, not stepdads mind, but real dads, who couldn't give two hoots where their kids were. I've brought back lads younger than you that I've found wandering about, smashed on this that or t' other, and I've taken them back and their folks hadn't even noticed they were missing. Too smashed themselves, most of them. But your stepdad. Well, that's a different matter.

DANIEL: What. . . Ronald?

POLICEMAN:

Aye, lad, Ronald. I'll ask you a question.

Where were you three week ago last Tuesday
at 4.35pm?

DANIEL:

Wh. . . what?

POLICEMAN:

You heard me?

DANIEL:

I don't know. Here, probably.

POLICEMAN:

No you weren't. You were in a bus stuck in t'
traffic because of an accident on Shaw Lane.

DANIEL:

Was I? Oh, yes, I was. But, how did you. . . ?

POLICEMAN:

I knew that because I asked your stepdad if
you were ever late, and he said you'd been a
bit later recently, but you were only really
late on Tuesdays. He's got Games on
Tuesdays, he said, so he's sometimes held up
getting changed, but Wednesdays he's always
back by 4.30, except once, he said, when t'
bus got held up in an accident on Shaw Lane,
then you were back at 5. He were close to
ringing t' police then, he said, but he thought
he'd leave it 'til five-thirty.

Aye, and I know what you're thinking now,
and all. You never thought he gave a damn
about you. Your mam died, right? I know all

about it. He told me that and all. Your mam died and he's been trying to give you some space, wait 'til you want to have a chat, and that. He were worried that you'd think he didn't care about you, but he thought it best to let you think things through for a while. He's a good bloke, your stepdad. One last thing, son. I'm sorry about your mam, but I've got better things to do than this. Next time you waste police time, I'll take you down t' station. Have some respect for you elders and use the phone in future. I'll see myself out.

The policeman exits. As he opens the front door we hear

Ronald's voice.

RONALD: I couldn't find him anywhere. Is he back, officer. Is he back?

POLICEMAN: Aye, he's back, Mr Crawford. He's in t' kitchen.

RONALD: Oh, thank God for that.

POLICEMAN: I'll be off then, Mr Crawford.

RONALD: Thank you, officer. Thank you very much indeed.

POLICEMAN: Goodnight, sir.

RONALD: Goodnight, goodnight.

He shuts the front door and goes straight into the kitchen.

RONALD: Daniel. Daniel. Where have you been? Are you alright?

DANIEL: I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry.

Daniel is in tears and Ronald holds him. Eventually:

RONALD: Alright? Don't look embarrassed. Do you think I don't cry?

DANIEL: What, you? Why?

RONALD: Because I miss your mum, Daniel. I miss her every day. I miss her in the mornings when I wake up and she's not there, and at breakfast, and when I can't get a clue in the crossword and when the phone rings and . . . you know.

DANIEL: Yes. I do.

RONALD:

But if I've got you, I've still got a part of her. I know I'm not your dad, but I do care about you Daniel, and I'm very sorry that I haven't shown it enough in the past. I thought I was doing the right thing by giving you time to think things through, to make sense of everything. That seemed like the right thing to do, but I was wrong. You hated the cards, didn't you?

DANIEL:

What?

RONALD:

The sympathy cards. It's alright. I saw you looking at them. I'm sorry about that too. You hardly got a mention, did you, and you she loved you long before I came along, didn't she?

I'll make some supper eh? You hungry?

DANIEL:

Yes. Very.

RONALD:

Two more things before I do. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask about your face. You can tell me some other time. Two general things. First, you won't scare me like that again, will you? I'm too old, Daniel. I can't take it.

DANIEL:

No, I promise.

RONALD: If you're going to be late, give me a ring.
Second, how about me and you visit your mum's grave tomorrow after school. I normally go lunchtimes for a chat, but I'm happy to go twice. You haven't seen it yet, have you?

DANIEL: No.

RONALD: What do you say then? We can walk down together. But only if you're ready. Are you?

DANIEL: Yes. I am ready. Yes.

RONALD: Good, that's settled. Now then, the Evening Post is on the bench in the hall. You grab it and let me know me if anything's happening with Leeds United. I'll get cracking with the fish fingers.

Scene 11 The Hall in Daniel's House

Daniel dials Trevor number.

TREVOR: Ey up, Tony, I thought you'd never call.

DANIEL: No, it's me, Daniel.

TREVOR: Now then, it's the Sundance Kid. You joining us, then?

DANIEL: Yes, if that's still ok with you.

TREVOR: Aye, it's okey-cokey with me, Sundance. First Saturday in December. Get here for 9 o'clock sharp. Finish at 5.30. You'll be working with Karen.

DANIEL: Karen?

TREVOR: Aye, Karen.

Anyhow, get some sleep, Sundance, you've had quite a day.

DANIEL: Yes, I have. . .

Line goes dead

. . .had quite a day.

RONALD'S VOICE: What are you doing up, Mark.

MARK: Just getting a drink, Dad.

DANIEL: Alright, Mark?

MARK: Tossler.

Scene 12 Daniel's Bedroom

INSIDE DANIEL'S HEAD:What a day. (*Yawns*) I wonder what . . .

(*Yawns again*) I wonder what. . . (*Deep breathing. He is asleep*).

END

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