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The Shock of the Fall

Written by Nathan Filer

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THE SHOCK OF THE FALL

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the girl and her doll

I should say that I am not a nice person. Sometimes I try to be, but often I'm not. So when it was my turn to cover my eyes and count to a hundred – I cheated.

I stood at the spot where you had to stand when it was your turn to count, which was beside the recycling bins, next to the shop selling disposable barbecues and spare tent pegs. And near to there is a small patch of overgrown grass, tucked away behind a water tap.

Except I don't remember standing there. Not really. You don't always remember the details like that, do you? You don't remember if you were beside the recycling bins, or further up the path near to the shower blocks, and whether actually the water tap is up there?

I can't now hear the manic cry of seagulls, or taste the salt in the air. I don't feel the heat of the afternoon sun making me sweat beneath a clean white dressing on my knee, or the itching of suncream in the cracks of my scabs. I can't make myself relive the vague sensation of having been abandoned. And neither – for

what it's worth – do I actually remember deciding to cheat, and open my eyes.

She looked about my age, with red hair and a face flecked in hundreds of freckles. Her cream dress was dusty around the hem from kneeling on the ground, and clutched to her chest was a small cloth doll, with a smudged pink face, brown woollen hair, and eyes made of shining black buttons.

The first thing she did was place her doll beside her, resting it ever so gently on the long grass. It looked comfortable, with its arms flopped to the sides and its head propped up a little. I thought it looked comfortable anyway.

We were so close I could hear the scratching and scraping, as she began to break up the dry ground with a stick. She didn't notice me though, even when she threw the stick away and it nearly landed on my toes, all exposed in my stupid plastic flip-flops. I would have been wearing my trainers but you know what my mum's like. Trainers, on a lovely day like today. Surely not. She's like that.

A wasp buzzed around my head, and usually that would be enough to get me flapping around all over the place, except I didn't let myself. I stayed totally still, not wanting to disturb the little girl, or not wanting her to know I was there. She was digging with her fingers now, pulling up the dry earth with her bare hands, until the hole was deep enough. Then she rubbed the dirt from her fingers as best she could, picked up her doll again, and kissed it twice.

That is the part I can still see most clearly – those two kisses, one on its forehead, one on the cheek.

I forgot to say, but the doll wore a coat. It was bright yellow, with a black plastic buckle at the front. This is important because the next thing she did was undo the buckle, and take this coat off. She did this very quickly, and stuffed it down the front of her dress.

Sometimes – times like now – when I think of those two kisses, it is as though I can actually feel them.

One on the forehead.

One on the cheek.

What happened next is less clear in my mind because it has merged into so many other memories, been played out in so many other ways that I can't separate the real from the imagined, or even be sure there is a difference. So I don't know exactly when she started to cry, or if she was crying already. And I don't know if she hesitated before throwing the last handful of dirt. But I do know by the time the doll was covered, and the earth patted down, she was bent over, clutching the yellow coat to her chest, and weeping.

When you're a nine-year-old boy, it's no easy thing to comfort a girl. Especially if you don't know her, or even what the matter is.

I gave it my best shot.

Intending to rest my arm lightly across her shoulders – the way Dad did to Mum when we took family walks – I shuffled forward, where in a moment of indecision I couldn't commit either to kneeling beside her or staying standing. I hovered awkwardly between the two, then overbalanced, toppling in slow motion, so the first this weeping girl was aware of me, was the entire weight

of my body, gently pushing her face into a freshly dug grave. I still don't know what I should have said to make things better, and I've thought about this a lot. But lying beside her with the tips of our noses nearly touching, I tried, 'I'm Matthew. What's your name?'

She didn't answer straight away. She tilted her head to get a better look at me, and as she did that I felt a single strand of her long hair slip quickly across the side of my tongue, leaving my mouth at the corner. 'I'm Annabelle,' she said.

Her name was Annabelle.

The girl with the red hair and a face flecked in hundreds of freckles is called Annabelle. Try and remember that if you can. Hold onto it through everything else that happens in life, through all the things that might make you want to forget – keep it safe somewhere.

I stood up. The dressing on my knee was now a dirty brown. I started to say we were playing hide-and-seek, that she could play too if she wanted. But she interrupted. She spoke calmly, not sounding angry or upset. And what she said was, 'You're not welcome here any more, Matthew.'

'What?'

She didn't look at me, she drew herself onto her hands and knees and focused on the small pile of loose earth – patting it neat again, making it perfect. 'This is my daddy's caravan park. I live here, and you're not welcome. Go home.'

'But—'

'Get lost!'

She was upright in an instant, moving towards me with her chest puffed out, like a small animal trying to look bigger. She said it again, 'Get lost, I told you. You're not welcome.'

A seagull laughed mockingly, and Annabelle shouted, 'You've ruined everything.'

It was too late to explain. By the time I reached the footpath, she was kneeling on the ground again, the little yellow doll's coat held to her face.

The other children were shouting out, calling to be found. But I didn't look for them. Past the shower blocks, past the shop, cutting through the park – I ran as fast as I could, my flip-flops slapping on the hot tarmac. I didn't let myself stop, I didn't even let myself slow down until I was close enough to our caravan to see Mum sitting out on the deckchair. She was wearing her straw sun hat, and looking out to the sea. She smiled and waved at me, but I knew I was still in her bad books. We'd sort of fallen out a few days before. It's stupid because it was only really me who got hurt, and the scabs were nearly healed now, but my parents sometimes find it hard to let stuff go.

Mum in particular, she holds grudges.

I guess I do too.

I'll tell you what happened because it will be a good way to introduce my brother. His name's Simon. I think you're going to like him. I really do. But in a couple of pages he'll be dead. And he was never the same after that.

When we arrived at Ocean Cove Holiday Park – bored from the journey, and desperate to explore – we were told it was okay for us

to go anywhere in the site, but were forbidden from going to the beach by ourselves because of how steep and uneven the path is. And because you have to go onto the main road for a bit to get to the top of it. Our parents were the kind to worry about that sort of thing – about steep paths and main roads. I decided to go to the beach anyway. I often did things that I wasn't allowed to do, and my brother would follow. If I hadn't decided to name this part of my story **the girl and her doll** then I could have named it, **the shock of the fall and the blood on my knee** because that was important too.

There was the shock of the fall and the blood on my knee. I've never been good with pain. This is something I hate about myself. I'm a total wimp. By the time Simon caught up with me, at the twist in the path where exposed roots snare unsuspecting ankles – I was wailing like a baby.

He looked so worried it was almost funny. He had a big round face, which was forever smiling and made me think of the moon. But suddenly he looked so fucking worried.

This is what Simon did. He collected me in his arms and carried me step-by-step back up the cliff path, and the quarter of a mile or so to our caravan. He did that for me.

I think a couple of adults tried to help, but the thing you need to know about Simon is that he was a bit different from most people you might meet. He went to a special school where they were taught basic stuff like not talking to strangers, so whenever he felt unsure of himself or panicked, he would retreat to these lessons to feel safe. That's the way he worked.

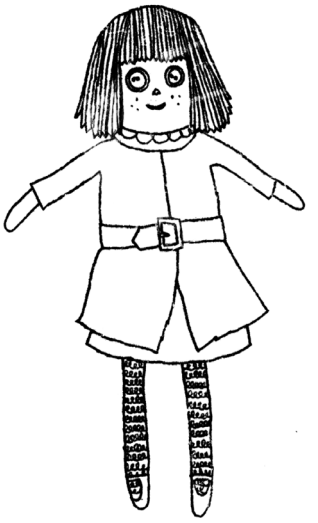
He carried me all by himself. But he wasn't strong. This was a symptom of his disorder, a weakness of the muscles. It has a name that I can't think of now, but I'll look it up if I get the chance. It meant that the walk half killed him. So when we got back to the caravan he had to spend the rest of the day in bed.

Here are the three things I remember most clearly from when Simon carried me:

1/ The way my chin banged against his shoulder as he walked. I worried that I was hurting him, but I was too wrapped up in my own pain to say anything.

2/ So I kissed his shoulder better, in the way that when you're little you believe this actually works. I don't think he noticed though, because my chin was banging against him with every step, and when I kissed him, my teeth banged instead, which, if anything, probably hurt more.

3/ Shhh, shhh. It'll be okay. That's what he said as he placed me down outside our caravan, before running in to get Mum. I might not have been clear enough – Simon really wasn't strong. Carrying me like that was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but still he tried to reassure me. Shhh, shhh. It'll be okay. He sounded so grown-up, so gentle and certain. For the first time in my life it truly felt like I had a big brother. In the few short seconds whilst I waited for Mum to come out, as I cradled my knee, stared at the dirt and grit in the skin, convinced myself I could see the bone, in those few short seconds – I felt totally safe.



Mum cleaned and dressed the wound, then she shouted at me for putting Simon in such a horrible position. Dad shouted at me too. At one point they were both shouting together, so that I wasn't even sure who to look at. This was the way it worked. Even though my brother was three years older, it was always me who was responsible for everything. I often resented him for that. But not this time. This time he was my hero.

So that's my story to introduce Simon. And it's also the reason I was still in Mum's bad books as I arrived, breathless, at our caravan, trying to make sense of what had happened with the small girl and her cloth doll.

'Sweetheart, you're ashen.'

She's always calling me ashen, my mum. These days she calls me it all the time. But I forgot she said it way back then too. I completely forgot that she's always called me ashen.

'I'm sorry about the other day, Mum.' And I was sorry. I'd been thinking about it a lot. About how Simon had to carry me, and how worried he had looked.

'It's okay, sweetheart. We're on holiday. Try and enjoy yourself. Your dad went down to the beach with Simon, they've taken the kite. Shall we join them?'

'I think I'm going to stay in for a bit. It's hot out. I think I'm going to watch some telly.'

'On a lovely day like today? Honestly, Matthew. What are we going to do with you?'

She sort of asked that in a friendly way, as though she didn't really feel a need to do anything with me. She could be nice like

that. She could definitely be nice like that.

'I don't know Mum. Sorry about the other day. Sorry about everything.'

'It's forgotten sweetheart, really.'

'Promise?'

'I promise. Let's go and fly that kite, shall we?'

'I don't feel like it.'

'You're not watching telly, Matt.'

'I'm in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek.'

'You're hiding?'

'No. I'm seeking. I should do that really.'

But the other children had got bored of waiting to be found, and had broken off into smaller groups, and other games. I didn't feel like playing anyway. So I wandered around for a bit, and I found myself back at the place where the girl had been. Only she wasn't there any more. There was just the small mound of earth, now carefully decorated with a few picked buttercups and daisies, and – to mark the spot – two sticks, placed neatly in a cross.

I felt very sad. And I feel a bit sad even thinking about it. Anyway, I have to go. Jeanette from Art Group's doing her nervous bird impression; fluttering around at the top of the corridor, trying to catch my attention.

That paper-mache won't make itself.

I have to go.

family portraits

The next thing I knew Mum was turning up the volume of the radio, so I wouldn't hear her crying.

It was stupid. I could hear her. I was sitting right behind her in the car and she was crying really loudly. So was Dad for that matter. He was crying and driving at the same time. I honestly didn't know if I was crying too, but I figured that I probably was. It seemed like I should be anyway. So I touched my cheeks, but it turned out they were dry. I wasn't crying at all.

This is what people mean when they talk about being numb, isn't it? I was too numb to cry, you sometimes hear people say on the TV. Like on daytime chat shows or whatever. I couldn't even feel anything, they explain. I was just completely numb. And the people in the audience nod sympathetically, like they've all been there, they all know exactly how this feels. I reckon it was like that, but at the time I felt very guilty about it. I buried my head in my hands, so that if Mum or Dad turned around, they would think I was crying with them.

They didn't turn around. I never felt the reassuring squeeze



of a hand on my leg, they never said it would be okay. Nobody whispered, Shhh, shhh.

I knew then – I was totally alone.

It was a strange thing to find out that way.

On the radio the DJ was introducing some new song in this really chipper voice, like it was the best song ever recorded and it made his life complete to be able to introduce it. But none of this made any sense to me. I couldn't understand why the DJ was so happy when something so terrible had happened. That was my first proper thought. It was the thing that I remember thinking as I sort of woke up. And this is the best way that I can describe it, even though I hadn't really been asleep.

Memories were falling away, like a dream when we first open our eyes. It was a lot like that. I could only make out the edges – night-time, running, the police were there somewhere.

And Simon was dead.

My brother was dead.

I couldn't hold onto any of it though. I wouldn't get to hold it again for a very long time.

I can't talk about it yet either. I have one chance to get this right. I need to be careful. To unfold everything neatly, so that I know how to fold it away again if it all gets too much. And everyone knows, the best way to fold something neatly is to follow the folds that are already there.

*

My grandmother (Mum's mum, the one we call Nanny Noo) reads books by Danielle Steel and Catherine Cookson, and whenever she gets a new one the first thing she does is flip straight to the back to read the last page.

She always does that.

I went to stay with her for a bit. Just for the first week or so. It was a very sad week, and probably the most lonely of my life. I don't think it is even possible to feel more lonely, even if you didn't have your granddad and your Nanny Noo to keep you company.

You've probably never met my granddad, but if you have then you will know that he is a keen gardener. Only he doesn't have a garden. That's kind of funny if you think about it. But it isn't that funny because he rents a small allotment a short drive from their flat, where he is able to grow vegetables and a few herbs like rosemary and some others that I always forget.

That week we spent ages there. Sometimes I would help with the weeding, or sometimes I would sit at the edge of his patch of allotment and play Donkey Kong on my Game Boy Color, so long as I kept the volume turned down. Mostly though, I would just wander about lifting stones to look at insects. I liked ants the best. Simon and I always used to look for ants' nests in our own garden. He thought they were brilliant, and he pleaded with our mum to let him have an Ant Farm in his room. He usually got his way. But not that time.

Granddad helped me lift the bigger paving slabs so I could see the nests. The moment a slab was lifted the ants would go mental, scurrying around passing secret messages to each other and

carrying their tiny white and yellow eggs underground to safety.

Within a couple of minutes the surface would be completely deserted, except for maybe a few woodlice wandering clumsily through to see what all the fuss was about. Occasionally I'd poke a twig down one of the little holes, and in an instant a dozen soldier ants would be back out on the offensive, prepared to give their lives for the colony. Not that I ever hurt them. I only wanted to watch.

After Granddad had finished weeding or pulling up vegetables or planting new ones, we'd carefully place back the slab and head home for our tea. I don't remember us ever talking. I know we must have done. But what words we shared have escaped from my memory completely, like ants down a hole.

Nanny Noo made nice food. She is one of those people who tries to feed you the moment you walk through the door, and doesn't stop trying to feed you until the moment you leave. She might even make you a quick ham sandwich for your journey.

It is a nice way to be. I think people who are generous with food have a goodness about them. But that week or so that I stayed with them was very difficult because I had no appetite. I felt sick a lot of the time, and once or twice I actually was sick. This was difficult for Nanny Noo too, because if she couldn't solve a problem through the stomach – like with a bowl of soup or a roasted chicken or a slice of Battenberg – she felt out of her depth. One time I spied her standing in the kitchen, hunched over the untouched dishes and sobbing.

Bedtimes were hardest. I was staying in the spare room, which never gets properly dark because there is a street lamp outside

the window and the curtains are thin. I would lie awake each night for ages and ages, staring through the gloom, wishing that I could just go home, and wondering if I ever would.

'Can I sleep in here tonight, Nanny?'

She didn't stir, so I walked in slowly and lifted the corner of her quilt. Nanny Noo has one of those electric blankets on account of her cold bones. It was a warm night though, so it wasn't plugged in, and next thing I knew I was letting out a quiet yelp as my bare foot pressed down onto the upturned plug.

'Sweetheart?'

'Are you awake, Nanny?'

'Shhh, you'll wake up Granddad.'

She lifted the quilt and I climbed in beside her, 'I stood on the plug,' I said. 'I hurt my foot a bit.'

I could feel the warmth of Nanny's breath against my ear. I could hear Granddad's rhythmic snoring.

'I can't remember anything,' I said at last. 'I don't know what happened. I don't know what I did.'

At least I wanted to say that. It was all I could think about, and I desperately wanted to say it, but that isn't the same thing. I could feel Nanny's breath against my ear. 'You stood on the plug, my poor angel. You hurt your foot.'

When I went home it was just Mum and Dad and me. On our first evening together the three of us sank onto the big green couch, which is how it always was because Simon preferred to sit cross-legged on the carpet – his face right up close to the television.

That was sort of our family portrait. It's not the kind of thing you think you would miss. Maybe you don't even notice it all those thousands of times, sitting between your mum and dad on the big green couch with your big brother on the carpet getting in the way of the telly. Maybe you don't even notice that.

But you notice it when he isn't there any more. You notice so many of the places where he isn't, and you hear so many of the things he doesn't say.

I do.

I hear them all the time.

Mum switched on the television for the start of EastEnders. This was like a ritual. We even videoed it if we weren't going to be home. It was funny because Simon had a huge crush on Bianca. We all used to tease him about it and tell him that Ricky would beat him up. It was only for fun. He used to laugh out loud, rolling about on the carpet. He had the sort of laugh people call infectious. Whenever he laughed it made everything that bit better.

I don't know if you watch EastEnders, or even if you do, I don't suppose you'll remember an episode from so long ago. But this one stayed with me. I remember sitting on the couch and watching as all the lies and deceit about Bianca sleeping with her mum's boyfriend and a whole load of other stuff finally came to its bitter conclusion. This was the episode when Bianca left Walford.

We didn't speak for a long time after that. We didn't even move. Other programmes started and ended well into the night. This was our new family portrait – the three of us, sitting side by side, staring at the space where Simon used to be.

PLEASE STOP READING OVER MY SHOULDER

She keeps reading over my shoulder. It is hard enough to concentrate in this place without people reading over your shoulder.

I had to put that in big letters to drive the message home. It worked, but now I feel bad about it. It was the student social worker who was looking over my shoulder, the young one with the minty breath and big gold earrings. She's really nice.

Anyway, now she's skipped away down the corridor, acting bright and breezy. But I know that I've embarrassed her because people only skip like that, and act all bright and breezy, when they're embarrassed. We don't need to skip when we're not embarrassed – we can just walk.

It's good to be able to use this computer though. I had a teaching session on it with the occupational therapist. His name's Steve, and I don't suppose I'll mention him again. But he was satisfied I knew not to try to eat the keyboard, or whatever it is they worry about. So he said it's okay for me to use it for my writing. Except he still didn't give me a password, so I have to ask each time, and

we only get forty minutes. It's like that here, forty minutes for this, and ten minutes for that. But I am sorry about embarrassing that student social worker. I really am. I hate stuff like that.

kicking and wailing

I had no right to attend my brother's funeral. But I did attend. I wore a white polyester shirt that itched like mad around the collar, and a black clip-on tie. The church echoed whenever anyone coughed. And afterwards there were scones with cream and jam. And that is all I can remember.

But now I should slow down a bit. I tend to rush when I'm nervous. I do it when I'm speaking too, which is weird because you tend to think it's just those small tightly wound men who speak quickly. I'm about six feet tall and might even still be growing. I'm nineteen, so maybe not. I'm definitely growing outwards though. I'm way fatter than I should be. We can blame the medication for that – it's a common side effect.

Anyway, I speak too quickly. I rush through words I find uncomfortable, and I'm doing that now.

I need to slow down because I want to explain how my world slowed down. I also need to talk about how life has a shape and a size, and how it can be made to fit into something small – like a house.

But the first thing I want to say is how quiet everything got. That was the first thing I noticed. It was as though somebody had come along and turned the volume to just above mute, and now everyone felt a need to talk in whispers. Not just Mum and Dad, but people who came to visit us too – like something terrible was asleep in the corner of the room and nobody dared be the one to wake it.

I'm talking about relatives here, people like my aunties and grandparents. My parents were never the sort to have loads of friends. I had a few. But they were at school. That was the other thing that happened. I think I might be rushing again, but I'll just tell you quickly about how I stopped going to school, because it's important, and because it is an actual thing that happened. Most of life isn't anything. Most of life is just the passing of time, and we're even asleep for a fair chunk of that.

When I'm heavily medicated I sleep for up to eighteen hours a day. During these times I am far more interested in my dreams than in reality, because they take up so much more of my time. If I'm having nice dreams, I consider life to be pretty good. When the medication isn't working properly – or if I decide not to take it – I spend more time awake. But then my dreams have a way of following me.

It's like we each have a wall that separates our dreams from reality, but mine has cracks in it. The dreams can wriggle and squeeze their way through, until it's hard to know the difference.

Sometimes

the

wall

breaks

completely.

It's then

that

the

nightmares come.

But now I'm getting distracted.

I'm forever getting distracted. I need to concentrate, because there is a lot I want to write about – like this stuff about my school. Summer was over. September was edging to a close, and I still hadn't been back to the classroom. So a decision had to be made.

The headmaster phoned and I listened to Mum's half of the conversation from **the watching stair**. It wasn't much of a conversation though. Basically she just said thank you a load of times. Then she called me to the telephone for my turn.

It was weird, because I never really talked to my headmaster at school. I mean, you really only talk to your teachers. I can't say for sure that I had ever once spoken to my headmaster, and now here he was on the end of the telephone saying, 'Hello Matthew, it's Mr Rogers.'

'Hello sir,' I managed. My voice sounded very small all of a sudden. I waited for him to say something else, and Mum squeezed my shoulder.

'I've just been speaking with your mum, but I wanted to talk to you too. Is that okay?'

'Yes.'

'I know this is a very difficult and sad time for you. I can only imagine how hard it must be.'

I didn't say anything because I didn't know what there was to say, so there was a really long silence. Then I started to agree that it was hard, but Mr Rogers started talking again at the same time, repeating that it was sad. So then we both stopped to let the other one talk, and neither of us said anything. Mum rubbed at the top of my back. I've never been any good on the phone.

'Matthew, I won't keep you because I know this is hard. But I wanted to tell you that everyone is thinking of you, that we miss you. And however long this takes, however long you need, you'll be welcomed back warmly. So you mustn't be afraid.'

That was a strange thing for him to say because I don't think I was afraid until then. I felt a lot of things – a lot that I didn't properly understand – but not afraid. Except when he said that, I suddenly was. So I just said thank you a few times too, and Mum gave me a weak smile that didn't reach her eyes. 'Do you want to speak to my mum again?'

'I think we're done for now,' Mr Rogers said. 'I'd just wanted to say a few words to you. We'll see you soon, okay?'

I let the phone drop into its cradle with a loud *clunk*.

He didn't see me soon. I didn't go back to school for a long time, and never to that school. I don't know how these decisions were made. That's the thing when you are nine years old; you don't really get told anything. Like if you are taken out of school nobody has to tell you why. People don't have to tell you anything. I think,

though, most of the things we do, are driven by fear. I think my mum was very frightened of losing me. I think that is what it was. But I don't want to put thoughts in your head.

If you're a parent you can stop your children going to school, and sit them at the kitchen table with a workbook instead. Just write a letter to the head, and that is it. You don't even need to be a teacher, although Mum was. Sort of. I should tell you about my mum, because you probably have never met her.

She is thin and pale, with cold hands. She has a broad chin that she is very self-conscious about. She sniffs the milk before she drinks it. She loves me. And she is mad. That will do for now.

I say that she was sort of a teacher because once upon a time she was going to be. This was when she was trying to get pregnant, but there were some complications and the doctors said that she might not be able to conceive. I know this stuff, without any recollection of being told it. I think she decided to become a teacher to give her life a meaning, or to distract her. I don't suppose there is much difference.

So she enrolled at university and did the course. Then she got pregnant with Simon, and her meaning came kicking and wailing the regular way.

But she got to be my teacher. Each and every weekday, after Dad had set off for work, our school day would begin. First we would clear the breakfast table together, stacking plates and bowls by the sink for Mum to wash whilst I made a start on the pile of Key Stage exercise books. I was a clever child back then. I think that took Mum by surprise.

When Simon was alive he could be a bit of a sponge, soaking up the attention. He didn't mean to or anything, but that is what special needs do – they demand more of the things around them. I seemed to go unnoticed. But sitting at the kitchen table, Mum did notice me. It might have been easier for her if I had been stupid. I only just thought that now as I wrote it, but it might be true. There were these tests at the end of each chapter of the Key Stage Science, Maths and French workbooks, and whenever I got everything right she would go quiet for ages. But if I only got nearly everything right, she would be encouraging, and gently talk me through my mistakes. That was weird. So I started making mistakes on purpose.

We never went out, and we never talked about anything except school work. That was strange too, because it wasn't as if Mum acted like a teacher. Sometimes she would kiss me on the forehead or stroke my hair or whatever. But we just didn't talk about anything except what was in the books. And that is exactly how the days unfolded for a long time, though I couldn't tell you exactly how long in terms of weeks or months. It merged into one extended moment, with me sitting at the kitchen table doing my tests, and Mum talking me through my deliberate mistakes.

That is what I mean by my world slowing down, but it is hard to explain because it only takes a couple of pages to say how it was day after day. But it is the day-after-day that takes so long.

When my work was done I would watch cartoons or play some Nintendo. Or sometimes I would go upstairs and gently press my ear against Simon's bedroom door, listening. Sometimes I would kill a bit of time doing that. We never talked about that either. Mum

would make tea, and we would wait for my dad to get home. I should tell you about my dad, because you probably have never met him.

He is tall and broad, and stoops a little. He wears a leather jacket because he used to ride a motorbike. He calls me mon ami. And he loves me. That will do for now.

I said my mother is mad. I said that. But you might not see it. I mean, you might not think that anything I've told you proves she is mad. But there are different kinds of madness. Some madness doesn't act mad to begin with, sometimes it will knock politely at the door, and when you let it in, it'll simply sit in the corner without a fuss – and grow. Then one day, maybe many months after your decision to take your son out of school and isolate him in a house for reasons that got lost in your grief, one day that madness will stir in the chair, and it will say to him, 'You look pale.'

'What?'

'You look pale. You don't look well at all sweetheart. Are you feeling okay?'

'I'm fine, I think. I have a bit of a sore throat.'

'Let me feel you.' She put the back of her hand against my forehead. 'Oh, darling. You feel hot. You're burning up.'

'Really? I feel okay.'

'You've been looking pale for a few days now. I don't think you get enough sunshine.'

'We never go out!' I said that angrily. I didn't mean to, but that's the way it came out. It wasn't fair of me either because we did go out sometimes. I wasn't a prisoner or anything.

We didn't go out much, though. And never without Dad taking us. I suppose that's what I mean by saying how life can shrink into a house. I suppose I'm just ungrateful. Mum must have thought so, because she suddenly looked at me like I'd spat on her or something. But then she said very sweetly, 'Shall we go for a walk? We could pop in to see Dr Marlow, he can look at your throat.'

It wasn't cold, but she took my orange winter coat from the hook, and she zipped it right to the top with the hood pulled up. Then we stepped outside.

To get to the local GP surgery from our house, you had to walk past my school. Or rather, what used to be my school. Mum held my hand as we crossed the main road, and as we rounded the corner I could hear distant shouts and laughter drifting over from the playground. I must have resisted. I don't remember doing so on purpose, but I must have done because as we got closer Mum's grip on me tightened, taking hold of my wrist and pulling me along.

'Let's go back, Mum.'

We didn't go back. We walked right up to the school, and along the whole length of the fence so that I was practically being dragged, with my stupid hood right over my eyes.

'Is that you, Matthew? Hello Mrs Homes. Hello Matthew.'

I can't think of her name now. Gemma, or something. It doesn't matter anyway.

'Hey, it's Matthew!'

The thing is, I was even popular. The group of children who gathered at the fence did so because they liked me. They were my classmates and would have been shaken up by what had happened,

and my sudden exit from their lives. But I didn't talk to them. I can't explain it. I looked straight ahead, hiding behind my hood, whilst Mum said, 'Matthew isn't very well today. Go back and play.'

Dr Marlow asked me to open wide. He looked inside my mouth, breathing his warm breath into me, smelling of coffee. There was nothing wrong with my throat that a few lozenges and some Lemsip couldn't fix. He said I should get some rest. So that was that. Only it wasn't.

It was just the start.