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Black Swan Green

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Extract

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January Man

Do not *set foot in my office.* That's Dad's rule. But the phone'd rung twenty-five times. Normal people give up after ten or eleven, unless it's a matter of life or death. Don't they? Dad's got an answering machine like James Garner's in *The Rockford Files* with big reels of tape. But he's stopped leaving it switched on recently. Thirty rings, the phone got to. Julia couldn't hear it up in her converted attic 'cause 'Don't You Want Me?' by Human League was thumping out dead loud. *Forty* rings. Mum couldn't hear 'cause the washing machine was on berserk cycle *and* she was hoovering the living room. *Fifty* rings. That's just not normal. S'pose Dad'd been mangled by a juggernaut on the M5 and the police only had this office number 'cause all his other ID'd got incinerated? We could lose our final chance to see our charred father in the terminal ward.

So I went in, thinking of the bride going into Bluebeard's chamber after being told not to. (Bluebeard, mind, was waiting for that to happen.) Dad's office smells of pound notes, papery but metallic too. The blinds were down so it felt like evening, not ten in the morning. There's a serious clock on the wall, exactly the same make as the serious clocks on the walls at school. There's a photo of Dad shaking hands with Craig Salt when Dad got made regional sales director for Greenland (Greenland the supermarket chain, not Greenland the country). Dad's IBM computer sits on the steel desk. *Thousands* of pounds, IBMs cost. The office phone's red like a nuclear hotline and it's got buttons you push, not the dial you get on normal phones.

So anyway, I took a deep breath, picked up the receiver and

said our number. I can say that without stammering, at least. Usually.

But the person on the other end didn't answer.

'Hello?' I said. 'Hello?'

They breathed in like they'd cut themselves on paper.

'Can you hear me? I can't hear you.'

Very faint, I recognized the *Sesame Street* music.

'If you can hear me,' I remembered a Children's Film Foundation film where this happened, 'tap the phone, once.'

There was no tap, just more *Sesame Street*.

'You might have the wrong number,' I said, wondering.

A baby began wailing and the receiver was slammed down.

When people listen they make a listening noise.

I'd heard *it*, so they'd heard *me*.

'May as well be hanged for a sheep as hanged for a handkerchief.' Miss Throckmorton taught us that *aeons* ago. 'Cause I'd sort of had a reason to come into the forbidden chamber, I peered through Dad's razor-sharp blind, over the Glebe, past the cockerel tree, over more fields, up to the Malvern Hills. Pale morning, icy sky, frosted crusts on the hills but no sign of sticking snow, worse luck. Dad's swivelly chair's a lot like the *Millennium Falcon*'s laser tower. I blasted away at the skyful of Russian MiGs streaming over the Malverns. Soon tens of thousands of people between here and Cardiff owed me their lives. The Glebe was littered with mangled fuselages and blackened wings. I'd shoot the Soviet airmen with tranquillizer darts as they pressed their ejector seats. Our marines'd mop them up. I'd refuse all medals. 'Thanks, but no thanks,' I'd tell Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan when Mum invited them in, 'I was just doing my job.'

Dad's got this fab pencil-sharpener clamped to his desk. It makes pencils sharp enough to puncture body armour. H pencils're sharpest, they're Dad's faves. I prefer 2Bs.

The doorbell went. I put the blind back to how it was, checked I'd left no other traces of my incursion, slipped out and flew downstairs to see who it was. The last six steps I took in one death-defying bound.

Moron, grinny-zitty as ever. His bumfluff's getting thicker, mind. 'You'll *never* guess what!'

'What?'

'You know the lake in the woods?'

'What about it?'

'It's only,' Moron checked we weren't being overheard, 'gone and froze *solid*! Half the kids in the village're there, right now. *Ace* doss or what?'

'Jason!' Mum appeared from the kitchen. 'You're letting the cold in! Either invite Dean in*side* – hel*lo*, Dean – or shut the door.'

'Um . . . just going out for a bit, Mum.'

'*Um* . . . where?'

'Just for some healthy fresh air.'

That was a strategic mistake. 'What are you up to?'

I wanted to say 'Nothing' but Hangman decided not to let me. 'Why would I be up to anything?' I avoided her stare as I put on my navy duffel coat.

'What's your new black parka done to offend you, may I ask?'

I still couldn't say 'Nothing'. (Truth is, black means you fancy yourself as a hard-knock. Adults can't be expected to understand.) 'My duffel's a bit warmer, that's all. It's parky out.'

'Lunch is one o'clock *sharp*.' Mum went back to changing the Hoover bag. 'Dad's coming home to eat. Put on a woolly hat or your head'll freeze.'

Woolly hats're gay but I could stuff it in my pocket later.

'Goodbye, then, Mrs Taylor,' said Moron.

'Goodbye, Dean,' said Mum.
Mum's never liked Moron.

Moron's my height and he's okay but *Jesus* he pongs of gravy. Moron wears ankle-flappers from charity shops and lives down Drugger's End in a brick cottage that pongs of gravy too. His real name's Dean Moran (rhymes with 'warren') but our PE teacher Mr Carver started calling him 'Moron' in our first week and it's stuck. I call him 'Dean' if we're on our own but names aren't just names. Kids who're really popular get called by their first names, so Nick Yew's always just 'Nick'. Kids who're a bit popular like Gilbert Swinyard have sort of respectful nicknames like 'Yardy'. Next down are kids like me who call each other by our surnames. Below us are kids with piss-take nicknames like Moran Moron or Nicholas Briar who's Knickerless Bra. It's all ranks, being a boy, like the army. If I called Gilbert Swinyard, just 'Swinyard' he'd kick my face in. Or if I called Moron 'Dean' in front of everyone, it'd damage my own standing. So you've got to watch out.

Girls don't do this so much, 'cept for Dawn Madden, who's a boy gone wrong in some experiment. Girls don't scrap so much as boys either. (That said, just before we broke up for Christmas, Dawn Madden and Andrea Bozard started yelling 'Bitch!' and 'Slag!' in the bus queues after school. Punching tits and pulling hair and everything, they were.) Wish I'd been born a girl, sometimes. They're generally loads more civilized. But if I ever admitted that out loud I'd get BUMHOLE PLUMBER scrawled on my locker. That happened to Floyd Chaceley for admitting he liked Johann Sebastian Bach. Mind you, if they knew Eliot Bolivar who gets poems printed in the Black Swan Green parish magazine was *me*, they'd gouge me to death behind the tennis courts with blunt woodwork tools and spray the Sex Pistols logo on my gravestone.

So anyway, as Moron and I walked to the lake he told me

about the Scalectrix he'd got for Christmas. On Boxing Day its transformer blew up and nearly wiped out his entire family. 'Yeah, sure,' I said. But Moron swore it on his nan's grave. So I told him he should write to *That's Life* on the BBC and get Esther Rantzen to make the manufacturer pay compensation. Moron thought that might be difficult 'cause his dad'd bought it off a Brummie at Tewkesbury Market on Christmas Eve. I didn't dare ask what a 'Brummie' was in case it's the same as 'bummer' or 'bumboy', which means homo. 'Yeah,' I said, 'see what you mean.' Moron asked me what I'd got for Christmas. I'd actually got £13.50 in book tokens and a poster of Middle Earth, but books're gay so I talked about the Game of Life which I'd got from Uncle Brian and Aunt Alice. It's a board game you win by getting your little car to the end of the road of life first, and with most money. We crossed the crossroads by the Black Swan and went into the woods. Wished I'd rubbed Vaseline into my lips 'cause they get chapped when it's this cold.

Soon we heard kids through the trees, shouting and screaming. 'Last one to the lake's a *spaz*!' yelled Moron, haring off before I was ready. Straight off he tripped over a frozen tyre rut, went flying and landed on his arse. Trust Moran. 'I think I might've got concussion,' he said.

'Concussion's if you hit your head. Unless your brain's up your arse.' What a line. Pity nobody who matters was around to hear it.

The lake in the woods was *epic*. Tiny bubbles were trapped in the ice like in Fox's Glacier Mints. Neal Brose had proper Olympic ice-skates he hired out for 5p a go, though Pete Redmarley was allowed to use them for free so other kids'd see him speed-skating around and want a go too. Just staying up on the ice is hard enough. I fell over loads before I got the knack of sliding in my trainers. Ross Wilcox turned up with his cousin Gary Drake *and* Dawn Madden. All three're pretty good skaters. Drake and

Wilcox're taller than me too now. (They'd cut the fingers off of their gloves to show the scars they'd got playing Scabby Queen. Mum'd *murder* me.) Squelch sat on the humpy island in the middle of the lake where the ducks normally live shouting '*Arse over tit! Arse over tit!*' at whoever fell over. Squelch's funny in the head 'cause he was born too early so nobody ever thumps him one. Not hard, anyway. Grant Burch rode his servant Philip Phelps's Raleigh Chopper actually on the ice. He kept his balance for a few seconds, but when he pulled a wheelie the bike went flying. After it landed it looked like Uri Geller'd tortured it to death. Phelps grinned sicklily. Bet he was wondering what he'd tell his dad. Then Pete Redmarley and Grant Burch decided the frozen lake'd be perfect for British Bulldogs. Nick Yew said, 'Okay, I'm on for that,' so it was decided. I *hate* British Bulldogs. When Miss Throckmorton banned it at our primary school after Lee Biggs lost three teeth playing it, I was *dead* relieved. But this morning any kid who denied loving British Bulldogs'd've looked a total ponce. Specially kids from up Kingfisher Meadows like me.

About twenty or twenty-five of us boys, plus Dawn Madden, stood in a bunch to be picked like slaves in a slave market. Grant Burch and Nick Yew were joint captains of one team. Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard were the captains of the other. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake both got picked before me by Pete Redmarley, but I got picked by Grant Burch on the sixth pass, which wasn't embarrassingly late. Moron and Squelch were the last two left. Grant Burch and Pete Redmarley joked, 'No, you can have 'em both, we want to *win*!' and Moron and Squelch had to laugh like they thought it was funny too. Maybe Squelch really did. (Moron didn't. When everyone looked away, he had the same face as that time after we all told him we were playing hide and seek and sent him off to hide. It took an hour for him to work out nobody was looking for him.) Nick Yew won the toss so us lot were the Runners first and Pete Redmarley's team were

the Bulldogs. Unimportant kids' coats were put at either end of the lake as goalmouths to reach through and to defend. Girls, apart from Dawn Madden, and titches were cleared off the ice. Redmarley's Bulldogs formed a pack in the middle and us Runners slid to our starting goal. My heart was drumming now. Bulldogs and Runners crouched like sprinters. The captains led the chant.

'British Bulldogs! One Two *Three*!'

Screaming like kamikazes, we charged. I slipped over (accidentally on purpose) just before the front wave of Runners smashed into the Bulldogs. This'd tie up most of the hardest Bulldogs in fights with our front Runners. (Bulldogs have to pin down both shoulders of Runners on to the ice for long enough to shout 'British Bulldogs One Two Three'.) With luck, my strategy'd clear some spaces to dodge through and on to our home goalposts. My plan worked pretty well at first. The Tookey brothers and Gary Drake all crashed into Nick Yew. A flying leg kicked my shin but I got past them without coming a cropper. But then Ross Wilcox came homing in on me. I tried to wriggle past but Wilcox got a firm grip on my wrist and tried to pull me down. But instead of trying to struggle free I got a firmer grip on *his* wrist and flung him off me straight into Ant Little and Darren Croome. Ace in the *face* or what? Games and sports aren't about taking part or even about winning. Games and sports're really about humiliating your enemies. Lee Biggs tried a poxy rugby tackle on me but I shook him free *no* sweat. He's too worried about the teeth he's got left to be a decent Bulldog. I was the fourth Runner home. Grant Burch shouted, 'Nice work, *Jacey*-boy!' Nick Yew'd fought free of the Tookeys and Gary Drake and got home too. About a third of the Runners got captured and turned into Bulldogs for the next pass. I hate that about British Bulldogs. It forces you to be a traitor.

So anyway, we all chanted, 'British Bulldogs One Two

THREE!' and charged like last time but this time I had no chance. Ross Wilcox *and* Gary Drake *and* Dawn Madden targeted me from the start. No matter how I tried to dodge through the fray it was hopeless. I hadn't got halfway across the lake before they got me. Ross Wilcox went for my legs, Gary Drake toppled me and Dawn Madden sat on my chest and pinned my shoulders down with her knees. I just lay there and let them convert me into a Bulldog. In my heart I'd always be a Runner. Gary Drake gave me a dead leg, which might or might not've been on purpose. Dawn Madden's got cruel eyes like a Chinese empress and sometimes one glimpse at school makes me think about her all day. Ross Wilcox jumped up and punched the air like he'd scored at Old Trafford. The spazzo. 'Yeah, yeah, Wilcox,' I said, 'three against one, well done.' Wilcox flashed me a V-sign and slid off for another battle. Grant Burch and Nick Yew came windmilling at a thick pocket of Bulldogs and half of them went flying.

Then Gilbert Swinyard yelled at the top of his lungs, '*PIIIIIILE-ONNNNNN!*' That was the signal for every Runner and every Bulldog on the lake to throw themselves on to a wriggling, groaning, growing pyramid of kids. The game itself was sort of forgotten. I held back, pretending to limp a bit from my dead leg. Then we heard the sound of a chainsaw in the woods, flying down the track, straight towards us.

The chainsaw wasn't a chainsaw. It was Tom Yew on his purple Suzuki 150cc scrambler. Pluto Noak was clinging to the back, without a helmet. British Bulldogs was aborted 'cause Tom Yew's a minor legend in Black Swan Green. Tom Yew serves in the Royal Navy on a frigate called HMS *Coventry*. Tom Yew's got every Led Zep album ever made *and* can play the guitar introduction to 'Stairway To Heaven'. Tom Yew's actually shaken hands with Peter Shilton, the England goalkeeper. Pluto Noak's a less shiny legend. He left school without even taking his

CSEs last year. Now he works in the pork scratchings factory in Upton upon Severn. (There's rumours Pluto Noak's smoked cannabis but obviously it wasn't the type that cauliflowerizes your brain and makes you jump off roofs on to railings.) Tom Yew parked his Suzuki by the bench at the narrow end of the lake and sat on it, side-saddle. Pluto Noak thumped his back to say thanks and went to speak to Colette Turbot, who, according to Moron's sister Kelly, he's had sexual intercourse with. The older kids sat on the bench facing him, like Jesus's disciples, and passed round fags. (Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake smoke now. Worse still, Ross Wilcox asked Tom Yew something about Suzuki silencers and Tom Yew answered him like Ross Wilcox was eighteen too.) Grant Burch told his servant Phelps to run and get him a peanut Yorkie and a can of Top Deck from Rhydd's shop, yelling after him, '*Run*, I told yer!' to impress Tom Yew. Us middle-rank kids sat round the bench on the frosty ground. The older kids started talking about the best things on TV over Christmas and New Year. Tom Yew started saying he'd seen *The Great Escape* and everyone agreed everything else'd been crap compared to *The Great Escape*, specially the bit where Steve McQueen gets caught by Nazis on the barbed wire. But then Tom Yew said he thought it'd gone on a bit long and everyone agreed that though the film was classic it'd dragged on for *ages*. (I didn't see it 'cause Mum and Dad watched *The Two Ronnies Christmas Special*. But I paid close attention so I can pretend to've watched it when school starts next Monday.)

The talk'd shifted, for some reason, to the worst way to die.

'Gettin' bit by a green mamba,' Gilbert Swinyard reckoned. 'Deadliest snake in the world. Yer organs burst so yer piss mixes with yer blood. *Agony*.'

'Agony, sure,' sniffed Grant Burch, 'but you're dead pretty quick. Havin' yer skin unpeeled off yer like a sock, that's worse. Apache Indians do that to yer. The best ones can make it last the whole night.'

Pete Redmarley said he'd heard of this Vietcong execution. 'They strips yer, ties yer up, then rams Philadelphia cheese up yer jax. *Then* they locks yer in a coffin with a pipe goin' in. *Then* they send starving rats down the pipe. The rats eats through the cheese, then carry on chewin', into *you*.'

Everyone looked at Tom Yew for the answer. 'I get this dream.' He took a drag on his cigarette that lasted an age. 'I'm with the last bunch of survivors, after an atomic war. We're walking up a motorway. No cars, just weeds. Every time I look behind me, there're fewer of us. One by one, you see, the radiation's getting them.' He glanced at his brother Nick, then over the frozen lake. 'It's not that I'll die that bothers me. It's that I'll be the last one.'

Nobody said a lot for a bit.

Ross Wilcox swivelled our way. He took a drag on his cigarette that lasted an age, the poser. 'If it wasn't for Winston Churchill *you* lot'd all be speakin' German now.'

Sure, like Ross Wilcox would've evaded capture and headed a resistance cell. I was *dying* to tell that prat that *actually*, if the Japanese hadn't bombed Pearl Harbor, America'd never've come into the war, Britain'd've been starved into surrender and Winston Churchill'd've been executed as a war criminal. But I knew I couldn't. There were swarms of stammer-words in there and Hangman's bloody merciless this January. So I said I was busting for a waz, stood up and went down the path to the village a bit. Gary Drake shouted, 'Hey, Taylor! Shake your dong more than twice, you're *playing* with it!', which got fat laughs from Neal Brose and Ross Wilcox. I flashed them a V-sign over my shoulder. That stuff about shaking your dong's a craze at the moment. There's no one I can trust to ask what it means.

Trees're always a relief, after people. Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox might've been slagging me off, but the fainter the voices became, the less I wanted to go back. I *loathed* myself for not

putting Ross Wilcox in his place about speaking German, but it'd've been *death* to've started stammering back there. The cladding of frost on thorny branches was thawing and fat drops drip-drip-dripping. It soothed me, a bit. In little pits where the sun couldn't reach there was still some gravelly snow left, but not enough to make a snowball. (Nero used to kill his guests by making them eat glass food, just for a laugh.) A robin, I saw, a woodpecker, a magpie, a blackbird and far off I *think* I heard a nightingale, though I'm not sure you get them in January. Then, where the faint path from the House in the Woods meets the main path to the lake, I heard a boy, gasping for breath, pounding this way. Between a pair of wishbone pines I squeezed myself out of sight. Phelps dashed by, clutching his master's peanut Yorkie and a can of Tizer. (Rhydd's must be out of Top Deck.) Behind the pines a possible path led up the slant. I know *all* the paths in this part of the woods, I thought. But not this one. Pete Redmarley and Grant Burch'd start up British Bulldogs again when Tom Yew left. That wasn't much of a reason to go back. Just to see where the path might go, I followed it.

There's only one house in the woods so that's what we call it, the House in the Woods. An old woman was s'posed to live there, but I didn't know her name and I'd never seen her. The house's got four windows and a chimney, same as a little kid's drawing of a house. A brick wall as tall as me surrounds it and wild bushes grow higher. Our war games in the woods steered clear of the building. Not 'cause there're any ghost stories about it or anything. It's just that part of the woods isn't good.

But this morning the house looked so hunkered down and locked up, I doubted anyone was still living there. Plus, my bladder was about to split, and that makes you less cautious. So I peed up against the frosted wall. I'd just finished signing my autograph in steamy yellow when a rusty gate opened up with a

tiny shriek and there stood a sour aunt from black-and-white times. Just standing there, staring at me.

My pee ran dry.

'God! Sorry!' I zipped up my fly, expecting an *utter* bollocking. Mum'd flay any kid she found pissing against *our* fence alive, then feed his body to the compost bin. Including me. 'I didn't know anyone was living . . . here.'

The sour aunt carried on looking at me.

Pee dribbles blotted my underpants.

'My brother and I were born in this house,' she said, finally. Her throat was saggy like a lizard's. 'We have no intention of moving away.'

'Oh . . .' I still wasn't sure if she was about to open fire on me. 'Good.'

'How noisy you youngsters are!'

'Sorry.'

'It was very careless of you to wake my brother.'

My mouth'd glued up. 'It wasn't me making all the noise. Honestly.'

'There are days,' the sour aunt never blinked, 'when my brother loves youngsters. But on days like these, my oh my, you give him the furies.'

'Like I said, I'm sorry.'

'You'll be *sorrier*,' she looked disgusted, 'if my brother gets a hold of you.'

Quiet things were too loud and loud things couldn't be heard.

'Is he . . . uh, around? Now? Your brother, I mean?'

'His room's just as he left it.'

'Is he ill?'

She acted like she hadn't heard me.

'I've got to go home now.'

'You'll be *sorrier*,' she did that spitty chomp old people do to not dribble, 'when the ice cracks.'

'The ice? On the lake? It's as solid as anything.'

'You *always* say so. Ralph Bredon said so.'

'Who's he?'

'Ralph Bredon. The butcher's boy.'

It didn't feel at all right. 'I've got to go home now.'

Lunch at 9 Kingfisher Meadows, Black Swan Green, Worcestershire, was Findus ham'n'cheese Crispy Pancakes, crinkle-cut oven chips and sprouts. Sprouts taste of fresh puke but Mum said I had to eat *five* without making a song and dance about it, or there'd be no butterscotch Angel Delight for pudding. Mum says she won't let the dining table be used as a venue for 'adolescent discontent'. Before Christmas I asked what not liking the taste of sprouts had to do with 'adolescent discontent'. Mum warned me to stop being a Clever Little Schoolboy. I should've shut up but I pointed out that Dad never makes her eat melon (which *she* hates) and Mum never makes Dad eat garlic (which *he* hates). She went *ape* and sent me to my room. When Dad got back I got a lecture about arrogance.

No pocket money that week, either.

So anyway, this lunch-time I cut my sprouts up into tiny pieces and glolloped tomato ketchup over them. 'Dad?'

'*Jas*on?'

'If you drown, what happens to your body?'

Julia rolled her eyes like Jesus on his cross.

'Bit of a morbid topic for the dinner table.' Dad chewed his forkful of crispy pancake. 'Why do you ask?'

It was best not to mention the frozen-up pond. 'Well, in this book *Arctic Adventure* these two brothers Hal and Roger Hunt're being chased by a baddie called Kaggs who falls into the—'

Dad held up his hand to say *Enough!* 'Well, in *my* opinion, Mr Kaggs gets eaten by fish. Picked clean.'

'Do they have piranhas in the Arctic?'

'Fish'll eat anything once it's soft enough. Mind you, if he fell into the Thames, his body'd wash up before long. The Thames always gives up its dead, the Thames does.'

My misdirection was complete. 'How about if he fell through ice, into a lake, say? What'd happen to him then? Would he sort of stay . . . deep frozen?'

'*Thing*,' Julia mewled, 'is being gro*tesque* while we're eating, Mum.'

Mum rolled up her napkin. 'Lorenzo Hussingtree's has a new range of tiles in, Michael.' (My abortion of a sister flashed me a victorious grin.) 'Michael?'

'Yes, Helena?'

'I thought we could drop by Lorenzo Hussingtree's showroom on our way to Worcester. New tiles. They're ex*quisite*.'

'No doubt Lorenzo Hussingtree charges exquisite prices, to match?'

'We're having workmen in anyway, so why not make a proper job of it? The kitchen's getting embarrassing.'

'Helena, why—'

Julia sees arguments coming even before Mum and Dad sometimes. 'Can I get down now?'

'*Darling*,' Mum looked really hurt, 'it's butterscotch Angel Delight.'

'Yummy, but could I have mine tonight? Got to get back to Robert Peel and the Enlightened Whigs. Anyway, Thing has ruined my appetite.'

'Pigging on Cadbury's Roses with Kate Alfrick,' I counter-attacked, 'is what's ruined *your* appetite.'

'So where did the Terry's Chocolate Orange go, Thing?'

'Julia,' Mum sighed, 'I *do* wish you wouldn't call Jason that. You've only got one brother.'

Julia said, 'One too many,' and got up.

Dad remembered something. 'Have either of you been into my office?'

'Not me, Dad.' Julia hovered in the doorway, scenting blood. 'Must've been my honest, charming, obedient, younger sibling.'

How did he know?

'It's a simple enough question.' Dad had hard evidence. The only adult I know who bluffs kids is Mr Nixon, our headmaster.

The pencil! When Dean Moran rang the doorbell I must've left the pencil in the sharpener. *Damn* Moron. 'Your phone was ringing for *yonks*, like four or five minutes, *honestly*, so—'

'What's the rule,' Dad didn't care, 'about not going into my office?'

'But I thought it might be an emergency so I picked it up and there was' – Hangman blocked 'someone' – 'a person on the other end but—'

'I believe,' now Dad's palm said *HALT!*, 'I just asked you a question.'

'Yes, but—'

'*What* question did I just ask you?'

' "What's the rule about not going into my office?" '

'So I did.' Dad's a pair of scissors at times. *Snip* snip *snip* snip. 'Now, why don't you *answer* this question?'

Then Julia did a strange move. 'That's funny.'

'I don't see anyone laughing.'

'No, Dad, on Boxing Day when you and Mum took Thing to Worcester, the phone in your office went. Honestly, it went on for *aeons*. I couldn't concentrate on my revision. The more I told myself it wasn't a desperate ambulanceman or something, the likelier it seemed it was. In the end it was driving me crazy. I had no choice. I said "Hello" but the person on the other end didn't say anything. So I hung up, in case it was a pervert.'

Dad'd gone quiet but the danger wasn't past.

'That was just like me,' I ventured. 'But I didn't hang up straight away 'cause I thought maybe they couldn't hear me. Was there a baby in the background, Julia?'

'Ok*ay*, you two, enough of the private eye bizz. If some joker *is*

making nuisance calls then I don't want *either* of you answering, no matter what. If it happens again, just unplug the socket. Understand?'

Mum was just sitting there. It didn't feel at all right.

Dad's 'DID YOU *HEAR* ME?' was like a brick through a window. Julia and me jumped. 'Yes, Dad.'

Mum, me and Dad ate our butterscotch Angel Delight without a word. I didn't dare even look at my parents. *I* couldn't ask to get down early too 'cause Julia'd already used that card. Why *I* was in the doghouse was clear enough, but God knows why Mum and Dad were giving each other the silent treatment. After the last spoonful of Angel Delight Dad said, 'Lovely, Helena, thank you. Jason and I'll do the washing-up, won't we, Jason?'

Mum just made this nothing-sound and went upstairs.

Dad washed up humming a nothing-song. I put the dirty dishes in the hatch, then went into the kitchen to dry. I should've just shut up, but I thought I could make the day turn safely normal if I just said the right thing. 'Do you get' (Hangman *loves* giving me grief over this word) 'nightingales in January, Dad? I might've heard one this morning. In the woods.'

Dad was Brillo-padding a pan. 'How should I know?'

I pushed on. Usually Dad likes talking about nature and stuff. 'But that bird at Granddad's hospice. You said it was a nightingale.'

'Huh. Fancy you remembering that.' Dad stared over the back lawn at the icicles on the summer house. Then this noise came out of Dad like he'd entered the World's Miserablest Man of 1982 Competition. 'Just concentrate on those glasses, Jason, before you drop one.' He switched on Radio 2 for the weather forecast, then began cutting up the 1981 *Highway Code* with scissors. Dad bought the updated 1982 *Highway Code* the day it came out. Tonight most of the British Isles will see temperatures plunging well below zero. Motorists in Scotland and the North

should be careful of black ice on the roads, and the Midlands should anticipate widespread patches of freezing fog.

Up in my room I played the Game of Life but being two players at once is no fun. Julia's friend Kate Alfrick called for Julia to revise. But they were just gossiping about who's going out with who in the sixth form, and playing singles by the Police. My billion problems kept bobbing up like corpses in a flooded city. Mum and Dad at lunch. Hangman colonizing the alphabet. At this rate I'm going to have to learn sign language. Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox. They've never exactly been my best mates but today they'd ganged up against me. Neal Brose was in on it too. Last, the sour aunt in the woods worried me. How come?

Wished there was a crack to slip through and leave all this stuff behind. Next week I'm thirteen but thirteen looks way worse than twelve. Julia moans non-stop about being eighteen but eighteen's *epic*, from where *I*'m standing. No official bedtime, twice my pocket money, and for Julia's eighteenth she went to Tanya's Night Club in Worcester with her thousand and one friends. Tanya's's got the *only* xenon disco laser light in *Europe*! How ace is *that*?

Dad drove off up Kingfisher Meadows, alone.

Mum must still be in her room. She's there more and more recently.

To cheer myself up I put on my granddad's Omega. Dad called me into his office on Boxing Day and said he had something very important to give me, from my grandfather. Dad'd been keeping it till I was mature enough to look after it myself. It was a watch. An Omega Seamaster de Ville. Granddad bought it off a real live Arab in a port called Aden in 1949. Aden's in Arabia and once it was British. He'd worn it every day of his life, even the moment he died. That fact makes the Omega more special, not scary. The Omega's face is silver and wide as a 50p but as thin as a tiddlywink. 'A sign of an excellent watch,' Dad said, grave as

grave, 'is its thinness. Not like these plastic tubs teenagers strap to their wrist these days to strut about in.'

Where I hid my Omega is a work of genius and second in security only to my OXO tin under the loose floorboard. Using a Stanley knife I hollowed out a crappy-looking book called *Woodcraft for Boys*. *Woodcraft for Boys*'s on my shelf between real books. Julia often snoops in my room, but she's never discovered this hiding place. I'd know 'cause I keep a ½ p coin balanced on it at the back. Plus, if Julia'd found it she'd've copied my ace idea for sure. I've checked *her* bookshelf for false spines and there aren't any.

Outside I heard an unfamiliar car. A sky-blue VW Jetta was crawling along the kerb, as if its driver was searching for a house number. At the end of our cul-de-sac the driver, a woman, did a three-point turn, stalled once, and drove off up Kingfisher Meadows. I should've memorized the number plate in case it's on *Police 999*.

Granddad was the last grandparent to die, and the only one I have any memories of. Not many. Chalking roads for my Corgi cars down his garden path. Watching *Thunderbirds* at his bungalow in Grange-over-Sands and drinking pop called Dandelion and Burdock.

I wound the stopped Omega up and set the time to a fraction after three.

Unborn Twin murmured, *Go to the lake.*

The stump of an elm guards a bottleneck in the path through the woods. Sat on the stump was Squelch. Squelch's real name's Mervyn Hill but one time we were changing for PE, he pulled down his trousers and we saw he had a nappy on. About nine, he'd've been. Grant Burch started the Squelch nickname and it's been years since anyone's called him Mervyn. It's easier to change your eyeballs than to change your nickname.

So anyway, Squelch was stroking something furry and moon-grey in the crook of his elbow. 'Finders keepers, losers weepers.'

'All right, Squelch. What you got there, then?'

Squelch's got stained teeth. 'Ain't showin'!'

'Go on. You can show *us*.'

Squelch mumbled, 'KitKat.'

'A KitKat? A chocolate bar?'

Squelch showed me the head of a sleeping kitten. 'Kitty cat! Finders keepers, losers weepers.'

'Wow. A cat. Where'd you find her?'

'By the lake. Crack o'dawn, b'fore anyone else got to the lake. I hided her while we did British Bulldogs. Hided her in a box.'

'Why didn't you show it to anyone?'

'Burch and Swinyard and Redmarley and them *bastards*'d've tooked her away's why! Finders keepers, losers weepers. I hided her. Now I come back.'

You never know with Squelch. 'She's quiet, isn't she?'

Squelch just petted her.

'Could I hold her, Merv?'

'If you don't breathe a *word* to no one,' Squelch eyed me dubiously, 'you can stroke her. But take them gloves off. They're nobbly.'

So I took off my goalie gloves and reached out to touch the kitten.

Squelch lobbed the kitten at me. 'It's *yours* now!'

Taken by surprise, I'd caught the kitten.

'Yours!' Squelch ran off laughing back to the village. '*Yours!*'

The kitten was cold and stiff as a pack of meat from the fridge. Only now did I realize it was dead. I dropped it. It thudded.

'Finders,' Squelch's voice died off, 'keepers!'

Using two sticks, I lifted the kitten into a clump of nervy snowdrops.

So still, so dignified. Died in the frost last night, I s'pose.

Dead things show you what you'll be too one day.

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