THE CHICKEN SOUP MURDER

for Mike

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MARIA DONOVAN

SEREN

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I

THROUGH THE DOG FLAP

The day before the murder, George Bull tried to poison me with a cheese sandwich.

Break time: he got me in a headlock in the playground, patted my face like he was being friendly, smiled for the cameras and said, 'Why don't you and me have a picnic?' George Bull: he's George to the teachers, Georgie to his dad, but to me he is just Bully. He let me nod, and breathe, and walked me off to a corner of the field.

Up on the hillside the girls were playing houses, marking out rooms on the ground with lines of cut grass left by the big mower. Janey and I used to do that, when she wasn't playing football. But she had left me behind and gone to Big School. I felt Bully's arm round my neck and remembered that I mustn't call it Big School.

He let me go and got a tea-towel out of his bag to use as a tiny tablecloth, like we were going to have a nice time. It had a scene of Dartmoor on it and I knew it was the one our neighbour Irma used to keep pinned to the wall. She was my nan's best friend, until Bully and his dad moved in with her. I hadn't been inside her kitchen for a while. I looked at the ponies and pixies and remembered what my nan said, that there ought to be a chain gang and a view of the prison.

'Right then, Nanny's boy,' said Bully. He took my lunchbox and sniffed my sausage sarnies. 'Mmm. Here…' pushing a packet of sandwiches in my face '…you have some proper food for a change.'

'What is it?'

'Cheese.'

He knows I can't eat cheese. It makes me ill. OK. I'm not allergic – I won't stop breathing: I will maybe get a bad

headache and throw up. It won't kill me. Only – last time he was punching me, Bully kept saying it was wrong to be intolerant, so I'm not using that word again.

'Get it ett,' he said and dug his dirty fingernails into my nan's homemade bread. Nan had slicked up the sandwich with mayonnaise and ketchup, the way I like it. He chewed with his gob open so I could see the mess, pink and brown, going round in his food-mixer mouth. He ripped open a packet of crisps. I love crisps but I knew he wouldn't give me any. Eating them, he made as much noise as a giant crunching bones. My tummy rumbled.

'What sort of cheese is it?' I said, opening one of the sandwiches and peering inside. 'Because I can eat sheep's cheese. Or goat's cheese. In moderation.'

'"In moderation!"' he said, exploding wet crumbs. 'You are asking for it, Harry Potter.'

I've only got the haircut (thanks, Nan!) not the glasses or the magical powers. Sometimes though I shut my eyes and wish. I wish Bully would just disappear. I dream of him and his dad leaving. I want to believe that good things are possible. Some day I will find out that life is only pretending to be shit: here is your wonderful surprise.

Even saying the word 'shit' in my mind made me feel uneasy. Nan wouldn't like it.

'I don't want to do the test tomorrow,' said Bully. 'Are you ready?'

'No.'

We have been doing SATs all week. Science next. Stuff like Interdependence and Adaptation. Even though I like science, I'm scared I'll get it all wrong.

How can you feel sick and hungry at the same time? I wished I was a Producer, like a tree, so I could feed on sunshine, air and water. But I am a Consumer. I have to eat. I wished I could eat grass. What do you always find at the start

of a food chain or web? A green plant. A cow eats grass and out comes milk. But leopards and lions don't try to suck on a cow or a goat. They just eat them up. That is an Irreversible Change.

'I said,' said Bully, 'what did you get for that third question in Maths...?'

Nan says bad things come in threes. First Janey's dad died. Then Irma's dog. And then Irma got a boyfriend. But even though that's bad, it's not like someone dying.

It was going to be a long hungry afternoon. Unless, maybe, if I wished hard enough – this time the cheese wouldn't do me any harm. I took a nibble – and felt the inside of my mouth sting.

I had a nice life before the Bulls moved in next door. I liked our little town near the sea with its magic hills. I liked where we lived in our pebble-dashed semis in a long arc. I liked our neighbours. They were our friends, our family. Irma's house was the other half of the one I shared with Nan. On the other side of Irma's was the house where Janey lived with her mum and dad and little sister. Their house was the same as ours: Irma's was like being in a mirror. Three happy homes each with a long garden. Out the front we had a big green to play on that we called The Middle because Janey's dad liked cricket.

The first thing I ever remember was being in Irma's garden, sitting close to the fence, curling my fingers through the green wire. On the other side was Janey, wispy hair and snubby nose, sitting in her garden on her padded bottom, looking back at me. She curled her fingers round mine and gripped so hard it made me shout. She grinned.

Janey's birthday is in April and mine in October so she started school before me. Sometimes her mum looked after me, and I would curl up in an armchair on rainy afternoons and doze and dream, waiting for Janey to come back in her

uniform, smelling of pencils. I was happy when I first started school, because I knew Janey would be there. We walked there together and she didn't let anyone tease her about hanging out with a boy in the Infants. After that, because our school was so small, we were sometimes in the same class anyway, even though we weren't in the same year. When we came home we had to change and then we could eat something and play. We made an obstacle course that took in all three gardens. When we got tired of just racing each other, one of us would take a mouthful of water and try to go round the course without spitting or swallowing. The other one had to make you laugh (no tickling), mostly by pulling faces or jumping out and shouting 'Boo!' or doing a posh-voice cricket commentary, a bad impression of Henry Blofeld's: 'And there's no run!'

Irma always let us play in her garden. We could get through the fence from my side and didn't have to ask.

Once, I climbed into her apple tree and couldn't get down. I sat there on the branch until she came out and found me. When I saw her hands reaching up for me, I stopped being scared: it was funny because I could look down at her – and I thought: this is what it will be like when I'm grown up.

Irma gave us biscuits and elderflower cordial and she brewed elderflower champagne and weird fruity wine to share with Nan. They were always having what they called 'a laugh and a joke'. We were always listening, sieving out the words we would remember.

The days went on. We never thought about them stopping. There would always be a tomorrow.

And there was always someone around when we came home: Irma or Nan or Janey's mum or dad. Irma was the one who was home the most because she finished early. She had a bit of money from somewhere, Nan said, and only worked to not be too lonely. She looked after us, and Janey's dad did jobs for her and mowed the lawn. Nan would take her shopping

or use her staff discount at the DIY store where she worked to get things Irma needed for the house. Nan took over all the DIY when Janey's dad died. She tried to show Irma what to do so she could look after herself, but it was no good. Irma didn't have a clue.

Sometimes Nan would invite Irma out for a meal to say thanks for looking after me, and I'd sit between them at the table, or we'd go for an outing in the car with me sitting in the back. We used to all go round to Janey's mum and dad's for a barbecue. You could knock on anyone's door, open it, call out hello and just walk in. Sometimes I used to climb through the dog flap in Irma's kitchen door and help myself to biscuits. If she came home and found me sitting at the table she didn't mind. When the dog died she still kept the dog flap and though Janey said it was for the dog's ghost, so he could come and go, I knew it was for me.

Sometimes people were nice to me because I didn't have a mum and dad. Sometimes they were nasty, like it was my fault. When Melissa was born (Janey's little sister), they let me have a turn at holding her because I would never have a brother or a sister of my own. And Janey's dad played games with us: football in winter and cricket in summer. Janey was always better than me and I didn't mind. Her dad used to take her training in the evenings and to matches on Saturday mornings. Sometimes I went to watch. When she won a trophy, we were all there: Nan and Irma, Janey's mum and dad, Melly – and me. We were, Nan said, 'A unit.'

Then Janey's dad got tired: too tired to take her to football. And he found out he was ill. Janey said, 'My dad's got cancer.' I wanted to give her a big hug like we did when we were small, but by then she was eleven and I thought she might punch me. She looked like she wanted to punch something.

Nan said, 'Janey's dad can fight it. There are so many cures these days.'

Janey's mum said, 'Fat lot *she* knows.'

He watched Janey play a match for the last time. Her mum had to drive so Melly went too. And me. Janey tried so hard to score a goal for him. But it didn't happen that day and she came off the field with her head down. He said she could get into a better team, if that was what she wanted.

In the summer holidays, Janey's mum said, 'Can you please play quietly?' She had stopped working by then. They had made plans to have all kinds of outings: he wanted to go and see a test match – maybe at Lord's or the Oval, because he'd never been, but by then it was too much and it was too far and it was too late.

That was the summer Janey changed schools. Irma and I went to sit with Janey's dad one afternoon, while Janey's mum took her to get her new school uniform. He had been teaching me to play chess so we got out the board. He was good at explaining all the pieces and what they could do but his voice wore away like it was being sandpapered. We stopped the game when Janey got home. I felt bad because he was too tired to be interested in her new uniform.

The next day, Janey put on the uniform and he got dressed and they had a picture together. Then he put on his pyjamas again and that was the last time he wore proper clothes.

We had one last barbecue. Usually when we were all together, people were buzzing, trying to catch whatever joke was hanging in the air. But now it seemed like it was only Janey's dad who made jokes and his voice was so breathless you had to lean in and listen hard to hear what he was saying. Janey's mum couldn't sit down. She was busy all the time, getting us drinks and food. Even when she stood still her eyes were going left and right like she was looking for something. Nan looked after the barbecue way down at the bottom of the garden because the smell of food made Janey's dad feel sick. Janey and I quietly kicked a ball between us, ready to

listen. She was serious, watchful, except when her dad looked at her and then her face opened into a big smile.

A piece of chicken and some salad appeared in front of Janey's dad as if by magic. He didn't eat it all. I ate three sausages standing in the kitchen where nobody could see me.

Sometimes I wanted to cry about it: sometimes I wanted to shout or run to break the tight feeling – but everyone else was being normal so I had to be normal too.

By the time we started back to school, Janey's dad was dead.

Maybe it was all the talk about living life while you can – anyway, Irma got a boyfriend. Nan didn't like him. She slapped herself on the forehead and said, 'But it was my fault they met!'

Nan and Irma had been saying they wanted to make the best of the time they had left (as if they hadn't been happy before). They went looking about for things they could do. First they tried amateur dramatics. Irma loved it but Nan stopped going after the first time. ('Your trouble, Zene,' said Irma, 'is that you can't forget yourself.') Then Nan wanted to take a self-defence class and Irma went along to try that, too. The instructor was this policeman: PC Shawn Bull. He took what Nan called 'a shine' to Irma. At first Nan thought it was funny. 'I saw his eyes light up when he saw you,' she said.

'Did they?' said Irma, smirking and coiling a lock of grey hair round her finger.

Nan soon decided she didn't like doing self-defence. 'It just makes you think about being attacked all the time.'

Irma went without her. 'He's got a son your age,' she said to me, excited. 'I think he's just started at your school.' I had never seen her so cheerful. But there was only one new boy in my class.

'Oh,' I said. 'You mean George Bull.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Do you know him?'

'He hits me,' I said.

'Oh, I'm sure he doesn't hate you,' said Irma, deliberately mishearing. 'I've met him. He's been through a lot, but he's a very nice little lad.'

'Not to me he isn't.'

Nan was watching Irma.

'Boys will be boys,' Irma said and laughed. 'We'll have to see if we can get the two of you to be friends.'

Nan said to me afterwards, 'Keep out of that little bully's way if you can. We don't want his dad finding out about you-know-who and you-know-what and you-know-where.'

'Bit late for that,' I said. After all, I'd been telling the others at school that my parents were International Jewel Thieves since I was five. It was the best reason I could think of for why they were in prison. I couldn't change my story now.

Shawn Bull always looked at me like I had done something wrong or was going to in a minute. Nan said he was an un-pc PC because he saw Janey in her football shorts and called her 'Sporty Spice'. One day, when we were all still trying to be friends, Irma said, 'Won't it be nice for Michael to have George in the same class? He's missed Janey since she went up to Big School.' Shawn Bull winked and said, 'That's older women for you.' And Irma, who was like a grey-haired girl with her bob and her long pink skirt, went all giggly and blushed until Nan looked like she wanted to be sick.

Nan thought there was something not quite right about the Bulls. She tried to warn Irma. 'What are you doing with a man who's ten years younger than you? Don't you see he just looks at you and sees a nice house with the mortgage paid off, someone to look after his horrible little boy, and early retirement?'

'You're jealous,' said Irma, 'which is too bad, because Shawn and George are moving in.'

After that we couldn't play in Irma's garden any more. Shawn

Bull did the DIY for Irma instead of Nan. He mowed the lawn and dug the garden and complained because Janey's mum let the brambles grow on her side and they were looping over their fence. Irma used to pick the berries – free fruit – and didn't mind. But she didn't tell PC Shawn Bull that. She stayed quiet.

Nan said we'd better try to get on with them, after all, so I let Bully come round and play at mine – only he laughed at my farmyard animals wallpaper and snatched Ted off my bed and punched him in the guts. I screamed and Nan sent Bully home.

Ted is the only thing I have that was my dad's. It was the bear Nan bought him when he was a little boy. Before he met my mum and 'went to the bad'. I'm not really sure what bad they went to. Nan won't talk about it.

She said to Irma, 'How can you let your boyfriend's son bully Michael?'

Irma said, 'Maybe it's time Michael grew out of geese and cows and donkeys on the walls.' She said Nan should use her staff discount and redecorate. But maybe Irma did say something to Bully or his dad. I don't know – Bully didn't stop hurting me. He just made sure he didn't leave any marks.

He tried to make friends with Janey. She didn't want to know. He tried making fun of her. She ignored him. He saw us playing football and said to me, 'Have you done her yet?'

I was going to say, 'Done her what?' when Janey jumped in.

She said, 'Michael's not my boyfriend.'

No. I was not her boyfriend. I wasn't even the boy next door: I was just the boy next door but one.

By going home time my nose was blocked up, my head thumping. I felt sick and the inside of my mouth was sore; nasty trickles of salty mucus kept sliding down the back of my throat. I just wanted to get home, draw the curtains and lie down on my own bed. Most days I tried to get home fast but that day the headache slowed me down.

I was almost in sight of The Middle when I heard Bully galumphing up behind me. His arm snaked round my throat and all the weight of him fell on my back, pushing me down so that my head went bang bang bang and I thought I'd throw up over my own shoes. Suddenly there was a *'Boof'* sound and a grunt from Bully and I could breathe again. I scrambled up and put my hand over my mouth to stop from being sick, and there was Bully rubbing the back of his head and Janey strolling up to collect her ball.

'So sorry,' she said. 'I was just practising free kicks.'

'You're rubbish, Hunt,' said Bully, half-heartedly. Some of the boys liked to say 'Hunt' as if they were clearing their throats, but he didn't even try.

She gave him half a smile and lifted the ball with her foot so that it popped up into her hands and stuck there. She pushed the ball at his face but didn't let go. He flinched and put up his hand. I rolled my eyes at her: it's me that will get it tomorrow.

Janey and I walked to her house, Bully lagging behind. I could feel him throwing daggers. They stuck in my back and trembled there. I thought of him climbing up this ladder of knives, the thin steel bending under his weight, the terrible pain in my back, the vertebrae pinging out of my spine. Oh why, Janey? Why did you have to make things worse?

'So. You OK?' said Janey.

'I ate some cheese,' I said, glumly.

'That was silly of you.'

'I didn't *want* to.'

We reached her house. Bully was still right behind us. 'Come in a minute,' said Janey. 'Mum can give you one of her horrible herbals.' We went in. We heard Bully kicking Irma's gate open.

In the living room of Janey's house, Melly was sucking her thumb, cuddled up against her mum and watching a cartoon

with the sound off. She crinkled her eyes at me. Janey's mum was folding washing with one hand and listening to *Test Match Special*.

'Hi, Smelly,' said Janey, messing her sister's hair.

'Football again?' said Janey's mum. 'It's summer, Janey. Why aren't you playing cricket?' She was wearing the same dark blue silk wrapper with big orange flowers she'd had on since the funeral. Dirty clothes lay rumpled on the floor and piles of clean stuff covered the chairs. She was careful with some things: up on a shelf next to a photo of Janey's dad was the chessboard, just as we had left it when we were playing our last game. Janey's mum had put it there so the pieces wouldn't get knocked over, but it was getting all dusty.

Janey perched on the arm of the sofa. I just stood there, first on one leg, then the other. Janey's mum is very pretty. She has dark hair that curls round her face even when she doesn't brush it, and very dark eyes. She looks good even when she doesn't wear make up. Even when her eyes are red. 'Well,' said Janey's mum. 'How was school?'

'OK,' we both muttered.

I see Janey is checking her mum for stains, although they don't show much on the dark material.

'How are they doing?' I said. I hadn't heard the cricket score all day.

'West Indies are batting,' said Janey's mum. 'Chanderpaul's in, but they're missing Chris Gayle.'

'*You're* missing Chris Gayle,' said Janey. Teasing her mum was one of her tactics; she said she wanted her mum to know it was OK to like someone (especially a tall international cricketer like Chris Gayle, who wasn't likely to come round their house). Nan said it was hard to know sometimes who was the mother and who was the daughter. 'Twelve going on twenty-one,' is what she said about Janey.

A deep West Indian voice flowed out of the radio. There's

no Sky Sports here any more. 'Oh,' said Janey's mum. 'Ssh. That's Viv Richards, summarising. Sir Vivian.' She sighed. 'I could listen to him all day.' We listened. Viv Richards has a wheezy laugh. It made Janey's mum smile.

'Mum,' said Janey. 'What if we could get tickets. We could go on Saturday.'

'Oh no, it's far too expensive!' said Janey's mum.

'No it isn't. It's like, instead of a holiday or something.'

'Anyway, you've got homework.' She seemed to see me properly then. 'You'll be going up to Big School next year, won't you, Michael? Are you all right? You look quite pale.'

'He ate some cheese,' said Janey. 'And you said, "Big School".'

'Do you want one of my remedies?' Janey's mum put the clothes she'd folded on top of one of the piles. She didn't put it on straight. I knew it would soon fall over and the clothes would slide to the floor and get mixed up with all the dirty ones, and trodden on and dusty, until she picked them up and washed them again. I'd seen it happen before, but there was nothing I could do about it. Janey pretended not to notice.

'I'm all right,' I said. 'I'd better go home. Bye, Melly.' Melly frowned at me and took her thumb out of her mouth as if she was going to tell me off for something, then thought better of it and stuck the thumb back in. She rubbed her cheek against her mum's arm: it was one of her not-speaking days. Make the most of it, said Janey's eyebrows.

Janey walked me to my own gate. Bully was lurking in the bushes but he pulled back because there was Irma coming home. We met her by the For Sale sign sticking out of her front garden. She was wearing her pink cardigan with ruffles and a pink hair band to match, a wide skirt almost down to her ankles in grey the same colour as her hair. When she saw Janey and me she hunched up her whole body in delight and squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't see Bully. She did a little dance right

there on the pavement, sticking out her elbows, and burst out singing: '"Hallo! Hallo! Who's your lady friend? Who's the little girlie by your side?"' She saw our faces and stopped. 'Oh Janey,' she said, looking concerned. 'How's your mum?'

'She's fine,' said Janey. Irma didn't know that Janey was cross with her for saying her mum had gone 'a bit Miss Havisham' – because of the dressing gown. I only told Janey because I didn't know what it meant. I wished I hadn't said anything.

'Of course she is,' said Irma, all sympathetic. 'Or – she will be...' I could hear Janey's teeth grinding. Then Irma added, brightly. 'Well. I've just heard from the estate agent. The Sold sign will be going up tomorrow.' She seemed really happy about it.

'Sorry,' I said.

Her face fell. 'Oh, it's not your fault, Michael.'

'No, I mean, sorry, I've got to go. I feel funny.'

Irma was going to make a joke and then Janey said, '*Some*-body made him eat cheese.'

'Oh dear, dear,' said Irma, looking nervous. 'Is your grandmother not home? No?' She tutted. 'Well, you just come round to see me if you need anything.'

'Why would he do that?' said Janey, pushing open the gate.

'Manners, young lady!' said Irma.

'Pish,' said Janey. 'Manners?! I suppose it's good manners to make someone eat stuff that's bad for them?!'

'What do you mean?'

'Ask that nice little boy who lives with you now.'

Irma looked guilty, but she tossed her head like a bull, throwing Janey's words over her shoulder. 'You are being very rude, young lady, and there's no need for it. I shall speak to your mother.'

'Go on then,' said Janey. 'Like I care.'

'Don't care was made to care!' snapped Irma, red in the face.

Janey rolled her eyes and marched me down the path to my own door. 'Do you want me to stay?' she said. 'Are you going to throw up?'

'Err, thanks,' I said. 'I'll be all right.'

'OK,' she said.

When she'd gone I locked the door and got the bucket and went up to my room to close the curtains and lie down with a cold damp flannel on my forehead and a towel over my chest. Nan always puts Dettol in the bottom of the bucket and the smell of it is like being ill: you *will* throw up. Sometimes the best thing is to lie still and hope the hammering stops. A while later I heard Nan calling, 'Woo-hoo! Michael!'

I didn't call back. It would have hurt too much and anyway I wanted her to come and find me. I heard her unpacking shopping in the kitchen. Then the front doorbell and Irma in the hallway asking, 'Is Michael all right?' and Nan saying, 'Fine. You had any more nasty bangs lately?'

I listened hard.

'Only he didn't look so well when he came home,' Irma was saying.

'Thank you so much for your concern.'

'There's no need to be sarcastic, Zene.'

'I'm not. I always sound sarcastic. You know that.'

'Oh. Well. Anyway.'

After that I couldn't hear them because they went into the kitchen. I listened but their voices just went wow-wow-wow.

When Irma started going out with PC Bull she was always asking Nan's advice. Nan even said it was OK for Irma to have 'a bit of fun'. She got Irma laughing. Irma said if Shawn Bull were a toy boy he'd have to be Action Man. Nan said with his bald head and fat neck try the Hood from *Thunderbirds*. One minute they were screaming with laughter and then they were just screaming. Irma didn't like Nan's jokes any more. She said Nan ought to

respect her choices. For ages they were careful how they spoke to each other: polite, with long silences. Nan told Irma she was in danger and a fool; Irma said Nan was jealous.

Nan was upset about it, but what could she do? Irma just wouldn't believe that her new boyfriend was trying to kill her.

When the Bulls moved in next door and Irma decided she didn't need Nan's help, she said, 'Zena, I've got a man to do things for me now.'

Irma looked taller and she smiled a lot. Even when she started having little accidents, she told Nan about them with a laugh. A light bulb Shawn Bull had changed for her fell out of its socket and smashed into her breakfast cereal. The stepladder collapsed when she was cleaning windows.

'I thought you had a man to do things for you,' Nan said.

'Oh, I can still clean a window!' said Irma. 'Shawn's retiling the kitchen.' She said come and have a look. We both went.

'Very nice,' said Nan. 'But that socket looks dodgy. It's just hanging off the wall.'

'It's fine,' said Irma. 'Shawn knows what he's doing.'

One day Irma went to take the lid off the pot she had simmering on the stove and Bang! She got an electric shock. Turns out the wires in the socket were touching and the cooker wasn't earthed. Irma was still laughing about it. 'I said to Shawn, "You're trying to bump me off!"'

Nan is a First Aider at work. She said, 'Irma. It could have been serious. It could have stopped your breathing or your heart or...'

'I did feel a flutter,' said Irma, 'but that's all.'

'If it had made your heart fibrillate...'

'What's fibrillate?' I asked.

Nan said that it's when the heart goes haywire, all the cells contracting at different times. Instead of pumping blood, Irma's heart would be useless, shaking like a jelly.

Irma said, 'Oh pish. It was nothing.' She showed her hands: not even a bruise or a burn. Nothing to show – though I wondered if some of her nerve-endings had been fried. Nan kept saying she wasn't quite the same old Irma.

'You've had a lucky escape,' said Nan. 'I wouldn't use that cooker again if I were you. Are you sure he didn't leave it like that on purpose?'

'I wish I hadn't told you now,' said Irma. 'Please stop going on about it.'

Still, Nan couldn't help being worried about her friend. She even spoke to Shawn Bull and told him to be more careful.

He said, 'You're the one who should be careful. I know all about you.'

Irma was there when he said it. She did look shifty.

Another time, Nan said, 'I would never have thought that a woman could be so blind and change so much just because she has a new man in her bed.'

After that there was hardly ever a laugh and a joke between them; they looked at each other with narrowed eyes.

Nan said, 'Michael, if you ever hear screaming coming from next door, don't go round: just dial 999 and ask for an ambulance.'

Not long after that, Irma put her house up for sale.

From up in my room I heard them go into the hallway again. Nan said, 'I wish you hadn't, Irma. All these years. I thought you knew how to keep a secret. I never thought you'd do that to me.'

'When you're with someone, Zena,' said Irma, 'really *with* someone, it's hard to have secrets. And anyway, like Shawn says: if you haven't done anything wrong there's nothing to worry about, nothing to hide.'

'So – when are you moving?'

'It won't be for a few weeks yet. I'm still here if you need any help.'

'Same to you,' said Nan.

'With Michael, I mean,' said Irma. 'I'm free tomorrow. Got to use up all those holidays before I leave work.' She laughed but Nan didn't join in.

Irma left and Nan came upstairs. Gently, she pushed open my door. I shut my eyes. 'Michael?' she said, softly.

'Mmm?'

'Are you all right? What's brought this on?'

'Dunno.'

If I said anything about the cheese she'd go next door and make a fuss. I wouldn't be able to stop her.

She sat on the edge of my bed. 'Was it that boy again?'

I rubbed the bridge of my blocked-up nose. It didn't help.

She sighed.

'Shall I put some Dettol in that bucket?'

'Uh! No.' Neither of us said anything for a bit, then I asked her: 'Are they really going?'

'Looks like it,' said Nan. She bit her lip. Even though she was angry with Irma for liking Shawn Bull better, she still cared. And if Irma moved away Nan wouldn't be able to keep an eye on her.

'How far?' I asked.

'I think he'll get a transfer.'

I wanted to ask her what she'd told Irma all those years ago. But then she'd know I'd been listening.

'We'll miss her,' said Nan. But she was thinking of the old Irma, the one who'd already gone.

As for me, I'd been wishing hard that Bully would move somewhere so far away he wouldn't be able to come back to our school and then I would never have to see him again. Maybe my wish was going to come true – and there was nothing I could do about it.