BRIAN CONAGHAN

COSTA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD WINNER

THE M WORD

BLOOMSBURY

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PROLOGUE

Pain

When he's jabbing the thing in and out of me, I'm like, you better speed it up here, buster, cos this is about as funny as sandpapering anal warts. There's no screaming my head off or curling my toes in ecstasy. Seriously, hurry up.

I don't swear, as I promised Mum and Anna, my counsellor, that I'd try plugging the old bog mouth, but this situ requires a top-of-the-range F word. No danger it does.

My mate Moya had gone, 'Lie back and think of Babylon.' Or was it Matalan? Can't remember. She'd done it a couple of times herself, pure expert on the matter.

Only reason I let him do it – apart from BECAUSE I WANT TO – is cos everyone else my age is doing it and I don't want to regret *not* doing it. I'll never get this time back, will I? So, I took the bull by the balls, flicked the Vs to the world and plunged in. That's not peer pressure by the way.

Nobody, and I mean nobody, tells me what to do or how to act. Well, maybe Mum does, but I make her work for the privilege.

Everyone knows the first time's horrendous; mean, are you supposed to enjoy it? Yet, some people are mad for it from the word go, aren't they? Not me. I'm shaking like kittens over a river.

Feel like a complete zoomer lying here; frizzy-haired sandbag with cheapo trainers. Eyes the size of dinner plates, sucked into the headlights.

I've blinked seven times throughout the whole shebang.

His hand cups his drill, which he guides towards me. I'm numb.

This numpty tries to start a chat halfway through as if a crap confab will take the pain or awkwardness away. I stare at ceiling stains, hoping his ink will soon run dry. I'm like, can you not see the stress I'm under here? You absolute male! Ordinarily I'm an idle chat champion, but this is a time–place issue, so let's tone down the bark and concentrate, for God's sake.

'OK, honey, that's you,' he goes, and pulls the thing away. I'm thinking, C*all me 'honey' once more and that thing's getting rammed right up your pisshole, sideways.*

Act of kindness: he wipes away the gunk that's running down my belly and fingers some Vaseline on me.

Done. Job complete. That's me all grown up. Branded. An adult. No going back.

I climb off the bed, proper mannequin-stiff in the nethers, terrified to look in case it's a complete balls-up. I count to ten, do the breathing exercise Anna told me about, then have a quick glimpse.

'What do you think?' he goes.

'Yeah, not bad,' I go. 'I like it.'

'What do you mean, "not bad"? It's class.'

He hands me a little square mirror so I can get a good gawk at my belly button area.

He's bang on – it *is* class.

'Nice,' I go.

'Nice?' Tattoo guy tuts. 'What's "MY" stand for anyway?'

MY cos you can't rely on anyone but yourself, can you? This tat's only for MY eyes. MY life. MY body. Not YOURS. Not OURS. Me myself MY.

'They're my initials,' I go.

'Oh, right.'

'Maggie. Maggie Yates.'

If I ever get a gold band on the finger it should be with someone with a Y surname. Although, I can't ever see myself and some annoyance sauntering down the aisle together, pure blinged-up. 'Love Is in the Air' blaring in the background. God, can you imagine me cutting cake? Thought of it makes me howl. Or vom. There's a ton of living to be done before I start pram-pushing around the streets. And living begins tomorrow, cos tomorrow Mags the free-school-meals scrounger gets to burn her uniform and Maggie the art-school

student will arise from those Primark skirt and blouse ashes. How cool is that?

Best not to show Mum my new tat; can't stand the aggro it'd cause.

PART ONE

Grenade

Here's the deal: I'm seventeen, but not like those teen morons on reality shows. Got to wonder about their parents. Here's another deal: I don't have parents. Well, I *do* have parents. I'm not like Jesus or anything. I just don't have parents plural.

Apparently, my dad had a PhD in Arsehole Studies with a specialist subject of hopping on anything smeared in lipstick. He phoned once to ask how I was doing, but the line soon died and so did he. Tragic … not really. By all accounts, he drank his liver into a spreadable pâté. Don't care; not as if I remember beard-rash cuddles or night-time tickles, is it?

I'm sorted about never getting to play happy families, even if Anna keeps yapping on about how destructive it is. God, Anna, don't get me started on her; that woman was born with flowers sprouting out of her chuff. Every time I see her,

she leans over, pats me on the thigh and says, 'How are we today, my lovely?' Who's the one who needs help here, people? Mum says her heart's in the right place. Anna's all right in small doses, like tiny ones.

I wouldn't say I'm Britain's Next Top Model, but I'm not exactly bin-lid material either. Loads of guys have wanted to get their mitts on me, mostly malfunctioned mind-duffers from school. Even one of Mum's sleazy ex-boyfriends told me he couldn't decide if I was a 'wee cracker' or one of those 'borderline ugly' girls. Either way he'd be 'willing to give me a punt'. Proper Prince Alarming. Thankfully Mum, who's gifted in the art of attracting pure dickheads, blew Jailbait Jimmy out after that. If you clocked any of them in town you'd seriously think they were out on day release.

Leaving school behind at the start of summer was joyous. I celebrated by tearing all my reports to shreds. Not exactly Oxbridge bound:

Maggie Often Defies or Refuses to Comply With Teachers' Requests or Rules … *Prison would've been better?*

Maggie Often Sets Out to Deliberately Annoy Peers … *I blame Moya.*

Maggie Often Blames Others for Her Mistakes or Misbehaviour … *Totally blame Moya.*

Maggie Is Often Insensitive to Classmates' Needs … *Moya would kill herself laughing at this. Totally wag her finger in my direction.*

Mum used to say I suffered from CBS: Cheeky Bastard Syndrome.

Any wonder? When I was younger, I lugged around all these crazy thoughts:

Banging my head off a kerb.

Being bundled into the back of a white transit van.

Bunging a toaster into my bath.

Every example is a cry for help; all I did is picture myself in situations where people take pity on me, fuss over me, love me. Bonkers stuff, right?

My childhood memories don't consist of play dates, cinema visits and Haribo. No, mine's much noisier. Crying sounds in competition with slamming doors still echo. Being shouted down about everything I did: spitting 'NO' or 'STOP' inches from my face. Rank breath, the lot of them. I never asked for sweets. Never asked if we could get the bus home instead of walking. An unzipped coat constantly drooped off my shoulders. That's my memory anyway.

Childhood, the reason for bad decisions made and havoc caused. God, totally irritates me. Had to be learned somewhere, hadn't it? Waving at you here, Mum. Although she's a victim too; being a semi-skint singleton would drive anyone round the twist. We're close. Well, as close as any teenage daughter and her mum can be.

When the rotten shit happens, I curse inwardly, beat myself up about it. It's like you can't help your actions, as if your mind is wired differently to everyone else's. Always

think that I'm an island: the way I dress; the music I listen to; the patter my brain discharges. Everything.

Now's the time to make something of myself though. And I'm going to. You can't be pulling that mad stuff when you're seventeen. No way. Coping becomes easier at this age, choices more considered … I think. And I am changing. I am progressing. I am surviving, Anna says so too. Important year for me; can't be like the pure piss-taker I was at school. I care about myself too much to screw up new opportunities.

Can you believe they let me into art school? Me! Mean, no job at the end of it, but being an artist isn't exactly a job, is it?

Even though it's tarnished by the big grey Moya cloud hovering over everything, I'm excited. Yeah, that girl went and chucked a grenade into the mix. Exploded us all to shit street. Jackson Pollock style.

Affected

'And how are we today, my lovely?' Anna goes, followed by three thigh taps.

'Fine,' I go.

'No, really, how are you?'

'I'm fine.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

Why does everyone ask if I 'want to talk about it'? Would having a good old natter dramatically change things? Would it separate the shit from the storm? Would it slacken the vice in my brain? The chest press?

Loads of people think I blame myself, but I don't.

I don't.

I DON'T.

I try not to.

No way I'm taking the blame for that. Look, maybe one

day I'll want to spew, but not now.

'Na, I'm good, Anna, but thanks,' I go, all sarky-arse.

'Oh, Maggie, love. I feel your pain. I feel your reticence to discuss it.'

'Right.'

'I want you to know I'm here for you.'

'Great.'

'To talk about …' *DO NOT MENTION THE M WORD!* 'The stuff in here.' Anna leans forward, taps my left boob. I think she's trying to find if anything's beating. My *MY* tat's throbbing, battering my belly. Probably should've done it after our meeting. Too late. Don't even know why I'm here anyway.

'What stuff?' I go.

'The important stuff.'

'Right.'

'How are things at home?'

'In what way?'

'Well, how's Mum doing, for example?'

Why does she care about Mum?

'Hunky dory.'

'Are you able to talk things through with her?'

'With Mum?'

'Yes.'

I struggle not to burst out laughing.

'It's important to let people in, Maggie.' Anna's tongue scrolls her top lip as if she's just invented the theory: 'Penetrating the Great Barrier Grief'.

'I hardly let her into my room,' I go, 'never mind …'

'It's not easy being a single parent, Maggie.'

Anna says grief can manifest itself cos of a 'lack of parental cohesion' (cheers, Dad) and 'parental disconnect' (cheers, Mum). Prattling on about how it induces stress and anxiety; now she's sniffing info about Mum, like a pure gossipmonger.

And what's with all the single-parent shit?

'Being a parent to me, you mean?' I clench my eyes.

'That's not what I meant at all,' she goes.

'Maybe she needs a man – she needs intercourse from time to time, is that what you're saying?'

'Maggie!'

'I'm joking, Anna.'

I'm sabotaging; that's what I do. It's like something inside egging me on. *Go on, Maggie, fuck this up.*

She folds her legs and straightens her old-lady skirt. I've noticed she does this when new thoughts enter her mind.

'Is there anyone in her life?' she goes.

'Who, Mum's?'

'Yes.'

'Like a man?'

'Yes.'

'No.'

Then I cross my legs and straighten my knackered skirt. The pause *is* good for thinking.

‘Maybe it is what she needs right enough,’ I go. ‘Some rich guy to come along and sweep her off her feet. He can buy my acceptance in Topshop.’

Anna smirks. She agrees, I think.

But I’m serious; if any guy waltzes in then he’d better have deep pockets. I have issues, remember. Honestly, it’s exhausting being me all the time.

‘Good company provides positive energy for the soul,’ Anna goes.

And … I switch off.

All that soul and energy tripe gets right up my hooter.

‘Positive energy connects us to happiness.’

‘Yeah, so does having loads of money,’ I go.

She purses her lips as if she’s watching puppies being carpet-bombed.

Perks up her boobs.

Smiles.

She’s so delighted with her tits; always doing something with them.

Stands up.

Goes to the window, looks at the sky.

All very dramatic and Anna-esque.

‘You know, Maggie, it’s important to discuss what happened with Moya.’

‘Is it?’

‘And how your grief makes you feel.’

‘Na, you’re all right.’

‘You do know that the time frame and pattern of grief is down to the individual?’

‘Meaning?’

‘It affects each individual differently – it’s debilitating to shut down your emotions from it.’

I’m not a liar by trade, but sometimes needs must.

‘I really don’t want to talk about it, Anna.’

‘It won’t help if you run from it, love.’

God, my belly is stinging the life out of me, or is it this sesh?

‘Who’s running?’ I go.

‘Well, this is the reason we’re here, Maggie, is it not?’

Honestly, my belly is pure pulsating; maybe we can blab about it next time.

Or the next.

Or the next.

‘Yeah,’ I go. ‘Suppose it is.’

Anna’s patience is ten times that of all the apostles combined. She earns her crust. But sometimes she’s like the CEO of the Stupid Question Society. Mean, of course all this bloody affects me. Course it does. Try living inside my head for an hour and you’ll see.

Spaghetti

On the way home I'm thinking about it: grief counsellor? Really? She totally has the opposite effect on me. I'm feeling the need to gush the grief out of me by star-jumping in front of a bus.

I saunter past the chippy, triggering mad pangs of pickled eggs and grease; is there a better smell in this world? Mum's promised a special dinner before my first day so I don't even look in the spitting fryers as I pass. Hope she's got her *MasterChef* hat on.

I'm starving. Feet are sore.

I blast in. Beyond excited. I'd be happy with fish fingers and chips, but she's all about doing a Jamie Oliver thing. Maybe she'll let me have a glass of wine. Then again, I'd rather drink my own stomach acid. It'll be pasta; that's all Oliver's good for.

I can't smell food from the hallway. I hear a drawer being yanked open; the crash of knives and forks. Sounds as if she's trying to kick shit out of the cutlery, or vice versa. What have I done this time? Some dinner this is going to be. Totally blaming that twat Oliver.

I leave it a sec before going in. Ready to get the sparring gloves on.

Pot of water is on the boil, steam flying off. Stacks of dead teabags sit on top of dirty plates. Manky cups everywhere. What's she been doing? Hosting a junkies' tea party? I expected her to be stirring or chopping. Where is she? I want to brutalise something, show my annoyance. If you say you're going to cook up a storm, then cook up a storm. Don't create one. Don't bullshit. Mean, this was her idea; put a bloody effort in, woman. Stick some flowers out, flap on a tablecloth, crack open the fine tableware; don't have the gaff looking like a ransacked homeless hostel. FFS.

There's pasta in the water; at least she hasn't forgotten completely. It'll be overdone. Thankfully we're not feasting on something she's brought in from school dinners. Totally had my fill of gloopy, stodgy, flavourless leftovers. Pure rank. Even though it says on the pasta packet to boil for eleven minutes, Mum always gives it thirteen 'to be sure'. Spaghetti doesn't even twirl on the fork after thirteen minutes. Calls herself a dinner lady.

She's standing at the door, looking into the garden, puffing

away. Taking these big, long drags; following the smoke as it dissolves into the sky.

She's obviously in a mood so I don't say hello or anything; don't care. Place reeks of fags. Food's bound to be delicious. She flicks the butt far into the grass. Stuff the environment, eh, Mum? Think she's secretly raging I'm off to art school and not trying to find a job in Monsoon or Tesco, fuming that I'm not contributing to the household float. See, she thinks I'm going to be spending the next four years colouring by numbers. Belter of a celebration this is.

She turns to come back inside the kitchen.

'Maggie, Jesus, you gave me a fright,' she goes.

'What's for dinner?'

'That.' She nods to the hob.

'Boiled pasta?' I go. 'Magic!'

'Don't start, Maggie. I'm in no humour for you today.'

'Eh?' I go, cos this is what Mum does at times; she says something that riles me and when I'm riled we battle and suddenly I'm to blame. Mean, I could go off on one about munching fag-infused spaghetti or the state of her misery chops, but I don't.

'What're you on about?' I go. 'This was your idea, to celebrate …'

'Just sit down and wait for your food.'

'Sake.'

I tut. I sit.

'I don't have the energy for this tonight, Maggie.'

‘Energy for what?’

‘Just –’ she opens her palms as if submitting – ‘let’s eat in peace.’

I pick up my fork, think about ramming it straight into her eye. When she’s not looking, I jab the four prongs into my palm. Sore. But, honestly, not sore enough.

Mum sits across from me, rests her head on the tips of her fingers. The sound of boiling pasta doesn’t muffle the huffing coming out of her mouth though. I watch it boil. Why is she such a total whinge bag?

‘Mum.’

‘What?’

‘The pot.’

She dives up. Turns off the hob. Screams the word ‘fuck’ really loud, then fires the whole lot into the sink. Kitchen’s full of steam, rising from the sink. Wish a genie would appear.

‘You mental?’ I go. ‘What’re you doing?’

‘I forgot to put a sauce on. It’s ruined.’

‘Tomorrow’s a big day for me, in case you forgot.’

‘Oh, please shut up for once, Maggie. Not everything’s about your needs.’

‘All right, chill. Sake.’

‘And please do not tell me to chill. If I want to be unchilled, I’ll bloody be unchilled, OK?’

‘Whatever.’

I’m not joking, the desire to pick up a chair is strong. I stand up like I’m about to thrust this fork up her nose. I hurl

it into the steam, watch it flip around. Makes that noise. Soundtrack of my youth.

I glare at Mum.

'I'm hungry,' I belt at her.

'See what's in there,' she goes, pointing to the fridge. Her voice calmer. Good job.

Just as I expected, piss all in there to get excited about. Feel like scooping out some of her Philadelphia (Lidl brand) with my finger and shovelling it into my gob; see how she likes that. Actually, feel like salvaging the spaghetti from the sink. I smash the fridge closed.

'God, what's the matter with you tonight?' I go.

I can tell she's at a stage of loopy far beyond her usual level. She sits, does this massive sigh. Cups her mouth. And mouth-cupping isn't good, is it? I know that. She might even be shaking.

I sit again.

'Mum, what's wrong?'

Her hand shifts from mouth to eyes; she kind of pinches them.

'What happened?'

She looks at me. No tears. That's something at least. More sighing.

'That's me done, Maggie,' she goes.

'Done what?'

'With work.'

'Eh?'

'I knew it was coming. I knew. We all knew it was coming. Cowards. They could've at least told us at the end of last year, given us time to find something else.'

'Mum, seriously, what happened?'

She throws her head back.

'I got paid off today.'

'At the school?'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean, "paid off"?'

'There's no more work for me, Maggie. They don't need me.'

'How's there no work for you? You're a dinner lady, not a coalminer. Schools always need dinners.'

'Council. They've cut back on everything. If it's not cost-effective it's cut. And I'm one of the cut ones.'

'So, what does that mean now?' I feel like a complete moron for asking.

'Means I've no job is what it means.'

'Just get another.'

She sniggers, pulls a fag out of the pack and heads for the door again.

'Yeah, I'll just get another job, Maggie. I'll nip out tomorrow and get one, that's what I'll do.'

Sarky cow!

I hear it in my head. I hear it: *What about me? What about art school? Who'll buy me new clothes and supplies? What about me, Mum?* Obviously I don't say that; I'm not a complete selfish psycho. Can't ruin her big spotlight moment, can I?

I go to the sink, fish out the slithers of spaghetti. Lob in salt and pepper, a grating of cheese and it can't taste that bad, can it?

'What are you doing?' Mum goes.

'I'm starving,' I go.

'You can't eat that, Maggie.'

'There's nothing else.'

'I think there's some soup up there.' She nods to the cupboard above my head.

'This is fine.'

Her eyes surrender; she looks sad and broken. Nothing a cigarette won't fix.

'I'm sorry,' she goes, blowing some of her fag smoke into the kitchen. 'I shouldn't have done that.'

Yeah, well, you did. So, too late. But I'll give you a pass for tonight.

'That's OK,' I go.

But it's not OK, is it? I thought we'd be laughing and chatting about how buzzed I am; I secretly hoped that she'd have bought me a little gift: new jeans or a pair of trainers. Mean, a job's a job – you just get another – but you'll never be able to recreate this moment. Totally tarnished.

It's minging, like spaghetti seasoned with dust. After two sucks I bin it.

'I'm going to my room,' I go.

'Fine.'

On the way out I dip into the fridge and take the whole tub

of Lidl-brand Philadelphia. Low fat, so I don't feel too bad.

Cutbacks?

Fucking council.

Just when I thought things were looking up, Mum plunges us deeper into poverty. It's not her fault, but still. Looks like I'll be wearing the same tattered gear all year then. I'll have to stay away from bars, unable to get a round in. I can deal with people thinking I'm a bit poor (not really), but I can't have them thinking I'm tighter than a flawed facelift.

Plumes of smoke waft up past my room window. She must be pure chain-smoking her lungs black. God, imagine snogging that. I don't put any tunes on cos I need to hear every sound. I know she's too upset to come to me, probably wants to avoid a ding-dong anyway. No, she'll stay puffing the night away, slugging wine and watching dross TV. She'll do her thing; I'll do mine.

Why does life have to be so hostile all the time?

When you snap a Bic, you're basically creating a shard of glass: razor sharp and durable. I've a choice of colours; pluck for the red one. I crack that plastic in two and press hard on my arm until a tiny trickle of blood worms out.

Here's me thinking that it's only rich chicks, the lonely and depressed models who do crap like this.

I'm scarily close to doing a proper five- to ten-centimetre slice. It's unreal trying not to, but I just about manage it.

Rough time.

It isn't sore; weird, cos my pain threshold is a level below pussy drawers. Weirder still: I quite like it.

In blood I finger-write *MOYA* on my forearm. Rub her out. Draw *M* ♥ *M*. Erase. Christ on a bike, Maggie, people at art school will flip their shit if they ever get wind of this. Who wants to be associated with a whack head?

I imagine that Mum isn't wrapped up in her own melodrama for two minutes, and we're having a confab about it:

'It's nothing, just a tiny cut,' I'd go.

'It's more than a tiny cut. Looks deep. What happened?' she'd go.

'Caught it on a rusty nail.'

'What's going through your mind?'

'Nothing.'

'Why didn't you come to me? Talk to me?'

'About what?'

'You being truthful?'

'With?'

'The nail thing?'

'It's the God's honest.'

'You know, you're doing really well, Maggie,' she'd go. 'Really well.'

'It was an accident. The pissing nail was sticking out of the gate frame, snared my arm. Next thing I know, blood everywhere. Nightmare,' I'd go.

She'd give me the I-don't-believe-you eyes.

BIG, MINGING ELEPHANT-IN-THE-ROOM ALERT!

OK, here it is:

Hello, my name's Maggie, and I dabble in the dark art of harming oneself.

There.

Said it.

Whisper it.

Conceal it.

Hide it.

But, please, never mention it.

Especially not to her …

Moya

Try giving Moya shit and you'd have known all about it. No joke, pure trigger-tongue that one. Like my protective big sister, even though I'm two months older and could probably beat her in a scrap. Our school had resources for students like us: anger-management sessions, padded cells, water fountains, breathing apparatus. We made teachers struggle.

We sort of became pals on the first day of big school. Girl was a mad riot from the moment we met.

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When: School, day one.
What: Science class.
Where: Up the back.
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'That's my seat.' Moya stormed right up to me, bold as brass.

‘No it’s not,’ I went.

‘Pure is.’

‘Pure isn’t.’

‘Off or else,’ Moya went, doing this mental hard-nut stance, hand on hip.

I did my own nutter pose. The state of us standing there trying to make the other think we’re psycho. Hilarious when I think back.

‘Else what?’ I went.

‘Else you’re getting it.’

‘Get me it.’ I stepped forward, hoisted up my chest.

‘I will.’

‘Do it then.’

Fist clenched, heart bouncing; this cheeky little slaphead was about to know all about it.

‘Cow,’ she chucked at me.

‘Bitch,’ I chucked back.

‘Slut.’

‘Whore.’

‘F …’

‘YOU THERE.’ Shout from the teacher.

Moya turned.

‘Me, sir?’ she went, as if butter wouldn’t have melted in her arse.

‘Yes, you. What’s your name, young lady?’

‘Moya.’

‘Moya what?’

'Burns.'

'Well, Moya Burns, I suggest you find yourself another seat.'

'But …'

'No buts, Miss Burns. There, now!' The teacher flashed a finger towards the seat directly in front of mine. Moya plonked herself down. Face like a road accident. Pure raging. I was like, *YES, one–nil Maggie Yates*.

Then, tidying up at the end, I'm minding my biz, thinking how boring science is, shoving things into my bag, when she aims her daggers at me.

'Want a picture?' she went.

'*You* want a picture?' I went. 'What you looking at?'

'You, why?'

'Well, don't.'

'Or what?' she went, puffing out her bee-sting chest.

I was thinking, *What's this fruit's issue? Is she like proper mental or something?*

I tried to stand tall again.

'Else I'll …'

'Do what?'

Everyone's staring at this stage; boys majorly salivating that two girls might have a ding-dong, knickers flashing everywhere.

And that was it.

I'd had enough.

Couldn't be arsed with all that 'or what' and 'want a picture' crap so I smashed my bag on the floor and threw this mad eppie rant about how I was going to stamp all over her

head and send her to A & E. Moya shat a brick. Me too. My insides clattering like a knackered washing machine. I'd never dream of stamping on anyone's head so I was totally relieved when she backed down. See, thing about me is that I'm all bullshit and bluster. Mum's said many times that I'm a mouth-first-think-later girl.

After we retreated, everything went majorly bonkers; in our next class we were dumped beside each other. Brilliant. Teacher was this man giant in Geox shoes; looked like life loathed him.

'Pens out!' he bawled.

Moya put two pens on the desk. Probably nicked from the bookies. I couldn't find mine. I rummaged around in my bag, face deep in its mouth. Panicked. Must've fallen out when I slammed my bag on the floor.

'IN SILENCE,' Mr Geox shoes blasted.

I wanted to stick my schoolbag over my head and disappear into the darkness. I could tell that the little head-wrecker beside me was dying to piss herself laughing. I pinged her my glance, ready to sever her smile with my tongue, but Moya wasn't sniggering, she was pointing one of the pens towards me. An ink gun.

'Here,' she whispered.

'Really?'

'He'll kill you if you don't have one.'

I took the pen from her hand. 'Ta!'

From that day, that class, we became inseparable gal pals.

Crazy to think how some friendships can be created through war, isn't it? Take note, Middle East!

Moya wouldn't let anyone act superior around us. Girl knew the score; our situations mirrored each other's. In shops she'd go ape if she caught the workers following us, thinking we were about to fire a bomber jacket or pair of liquid leggings into our schoolbags. We tortured ourselves with stuff we couldn't afford. I might be many things, but shoplifter I'm not. Still, we screamed penniless so eyes were constantly on us. I'd hide into myself, concentrate on the fashion, shift suspicion away from me, but the bold Moya challenged everything head on; ambushed them with a rant about their clothes, hair, make-up or anything she could find to hack them down with, pouncing on any defect.

'You gawking at?' she went.

'Erm … nothing … I wasn't gawking.'

'Think we're not good enough for your shop?'

'Can I … ?'

'Think we're here to blag stuff, is that it?'

'Can I help you with something?'

'Yeah, you can keep your eyes and tiny tits pointed in that direction, OK?'

They usually did. Didn't matter if it was teenagers or people Mum's age, everyone got tongue-swiped by her. Except hot guys.

Moya made me feel secure and worthy.

I sort of needed her, especially at that excuse of a school.

Place was full of immature wind-up merchants; where cruelty came on tap.

Insults were lobbed at us all the time; harmless ones like 'tinker trainers' and 'Poundland girls' to more aggressive ones like 'scabby welfare-spongers' and 'smelly rug-munchers'. I stuck a finger in front of their faces; she always voiced up:

'Know something?' she went.

'What?' some prick went.

'I'm sure we saw your mum on a porn site the other night.'

'What're you on about?'

'What was it called again, Mags?' Moya was the only one who got away with calling me Mags. I shrugged. Did loads of shrugging at Moya's improv.

'That's it,' she went, 'Glasgow MILFs. Your old dear's got some major talent going on. Anyway, can't stand around chatting all day.'

Always drew laughter.

She (we) always won.

As we grew into our teenage selves, she loved spilling the goss about her experiences with guys. I was murder in that department, totally clueless. I wouldn't have known anything if it wasn't for her. Still don't by the way.

One time she took my favourite cuddly toy, little Larry the lamb, and splayed him in a crucifix position on my bed.

'What're you doing?' I went.

'It's time we had the birds and bees chat,' she went.

'With a cuddly toy?'

We looked down at poor Larry.

'Right, Mags, point to where a guy has touched you.'

Nearly died we howled so much.

It was important she gave any guy I fancied the thumbs up. Her opinion mattered. Told her I thought Matt Lenton from our French class was kind of interesting.

'Yeah, he's a pure ride,' she went.

'Think so?'

'Totally gash-foam material. If he chatted me up in a dark corner I'd definitely let him finger me.'

'Sake, Moya!'

This was her pal compliment; that's the way I took it.

Lenton turned out to be a dick, like the rest.

God, I miss the howling we did.