

Henry's Tumour

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

ARSECHEESE

Arsecheese.

Well, that's what I heard. I don't know if that's what he really said because that was his first word and I don't know if he was just learning to speak then or if maybe I was learning to hear but that's what it sounded like.

Arsecheese.

I stopped what I was doing. What I was doing was reading, although I wasn't really reading, more just turning over the pages with the letters floating around like astronauts in zero gravity.

'What?'

I must have said it aloud because some of the other people in the waiting room looked round at me. A woman with big hair and a face like a collapsed lung shuffled her chair a few centimetres further away from me, like *that* was going to make a difference if I was going to turn psycho and stab her. In fact, it raised my wanting-to-stab-her score by about seventy-two per cent.

Whoever had said *arsecheese* the first time didn't say it again, and I assumed I'd imagined it. I'd been imagining a lot of things lately and that was one of the reasons I was there. Not the main reason. The main reason was that I'd

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had headaches so bad I thought the little dude from *Alien* was going to burst out of my eye socket. The first one came on while I was watching a music video, and my mum thought I was freaking out to the music, but really I was writhing around on the floor in agony. Shows how my mum's got her finger on the pulse of popular culture. That's sarcasm, by the way, but she'd take it straight, because she thinks she has.

I'd been in the clinic since nine o'clock. It was boring, but I didn't mind too much as it meant that I wasn't at school. Except that at school there'd be my friends to keep me company, and not this load of derelicts and mutants. Apart from the lung-faced lady with the big hair, there was a man who looked like a scrunched-up brown paper bag, and another with a beard that started at his eyebrows and went down to his stained crotch, and a boy with a featureless head like a balloon, and a youngish woman who looked like all her bones had been taken out and then put back in the wrong place, and a librarian type who had something similar going on with her teeth (I mean, big ones like molars at the front and small sharp pointy ones at the back, and I knew all about her teeth because she kept smiling at me, as if I was the freak here, the one in need of sympathy).

'Hector Brunty.'

'Er, yeah.'

That was me. I mean, that was a nurse in a brown nylon uniform like something you'd find adorning one of the mildly retarded - I mean 'special' - shelf-stackers in Tesco. You know, the ones who, when you ask them where the

beans are, first take you to the Thomas the Tank Engine toddler ride and then start shouting at you about cheese.

I stood up. The nurse smiled at me, and for the first time I began to understand that my life was going to become less pleasant. At the time my best estimate was about twenty-six per cent less pleasant, but I've since recalculated and it currently stands at between ninety-eight and ninety-nine per cent less pleasant (you have to allow a margin for error). Although since that first day in the clinic there have been blips taking the graph both ways, but we'll come to those later.

'Is your mother here?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

I felt that I ought to try to explain, but I didn't have the faintest idea how to do that in less than an hour, so I looked at my feet. And looking at my feet was seldom a good idea as it hammered home the fact that what was happening down there was all wrong, meaning I had on shoes made out of an elephant's foreskin, and not cool or even luke-warm trainers like everyone else. I shouldn't have said elephant's foreskin, because Mum is no more likely to buy elephant-skin products than she is to go harpooning whales. I just meant shapeless blue-grey buboes, as if something big – OK, let's stick with elephant – waddled over and shat on my feet.

I told my mum a joke once. I said, 'I went to the Wailing Wall. In Jerusalem.' Pause. 'It was rubbish.' Pause. 'I didn't harpoon a single whale.' You see it relies on the fact that 'wail' and 'whale' are homonyms, that is two words which

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sound the same but mean different things. Anyway, she looked at me with this expression of disgust on her face, as though I'd just shown her a boil with a maggot in it, because the joke bit of what I said was completely lost by the horror of the killing-whales bit, when we all should know that they are our brothers, and peace-loving Gentle Giants of the Ocean, even though nobody ever asked the krill what they thought about it.

'This way then,' the nurse said, and I followed her into an examination room that managed to be stuffy and cold at the same time. There was a window with a view over the complicated rooftop of the hospital, all pipes and vents and skewed angles. It made me feel dizzy, and for a second I thought I was going to have to puke in the sink. The sink had one of those taps with a long handle so you could turn it off and on with your elbow. Or your chin. Or you could stand backwards on a chair and do it with your arse.

But why would you want to do that?

Well, what if you had no arms?

Then you'd probably develop cleverly expressive feet, for which taps would be a piece of cake.

What if you lost your feet?

Well then you could use your knee, still much better than an arse.

So what if your legs were amputated just below where they join onto your body? In an accident with some intricate piece of farm machinery, a turnip spangler, say, or a hay thrummer, or a many-bladed pig-splayer.

Well, then you couldn't get up on the chair to use your bum, could you?

Aha! That's where the *special* chair comes into play. The special chair with a hydraulic arm that lifts up your limbless trunk, swivels it round and presents your arse to the tap.

'Hector?'

A man looking a lot like a doctor was staring at me. I had a nasty feeling that I might have been acting out being hoisted bum-first towards the tap. I'd always done a lot of that – I don't mean acting out, I mean the internal-dialogue thing. I sometimes wonder if that's got something to do with Henry, I mean how he came into being, how he was how he was.

I nodded.

'I'm Doctor Jones.'

I nodded again. He hadn't said anything yet that I felt like disagreeing with.

'As you know, this is a teaching hospital. Would you mind if some, ah, *observers* sat in?'

Before I had the chance to mind, a group of gormless-looking students began filing into the room. Not all gormless-looking. There was one exceptionally pretty girl, with the kind of straight black hair I like.

It meant I was going to get an anal probe for sure.

I felt the electric tingle of a blush as the whole scene played out before me: the pink rubberized truncheon they were going to use, the sparking electrodes at the end, the giggle from the students at the trumping noise produced as the probe was extracted, my stuttering efforts to say it wasn't me but the probe that made the noise.

'So, you've been having some problems?' said Doc Jones.

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Problems! Where did I start? My mum was a hippy, my dad was nowhere, my school was a shit heap; I was bullied by Neanderthals and ignored by the girls, and my friends were the Wretched of the Earth.

But that wasn't what Doc Jones meant.

'Headaches,' he said, looking at his clipboard. 'Blurred vision.'

'Yeah,' I said.

'Anything else?'

Should I tell him about the voices, the strange echoing effect I sometimes heard or felt, as though I were being called from another dimension?

'Been a bit tired. Get dizzy sometimes.'

'That's good, that's good,' said the doctor mysteriously. 'Why don't we have a little look at you?'

There followed ten minutes of probing, none of it anally-oriented. The doctor shone a light in my eyes and moved it around, asking me to follow it. He stood behind me and asked if I could hear his watch tick, first on one side, and then on the other. Then he tested my reflexes, which I thought only happened in films. All the students had a go, banging randomly around my knee area with a rubber hammer. Then I had to touch my nose with my finger, alternating left and right with my eyes closed. Then I had to walk in a straight line, again with my eyes closed.

All sounds easy, doesn't it? Except with all those people staring at me, and especially the pretty one, I didn't do that well in the nose-touching and straight-line-walking parts. There were more questions, more tests. Did I know who the prime minister was? Could I say the days of

the week backwards? Did I know my arse from my elbow?

Throughout it all I could feel myself getting more and more sullen-teenagery, and that's not my normal way. I couldn't think of any clever things to say.

And then it was over.

'That's just grand, Hector,' said Doc Jones. 'We'll make an appointment for a CAT scan, and sort this all out. We'll send the appointment card. Try to fit you in early next week. Or perhaps later this week. We sometimes get cancellations. And in urgent— Well, we might be lucky. OK?'

'OK.'

And although I knew what a CAT scan was, I still had this quick mental image of a sort of Star Trek TriQuarter, only shaped like a cat, and Spock with his hand up its bum, passing it over my body and detecting alien life forms in there.

CHAPTER 2

BUGNOB

So I was out of there, none the wiser. I got the bus to school, and the driver gave me the eye, thinking I was on the skive, and I started to explain that there was something up with my head, but then I couldn't be bothered.

The trouble with all this was that I got to school just in time for morning break, which you'd think was a good thing, unless you knew what my school was like. Because it's called the Body of Christ, which is what the priest says when he puts the bread in your mouth, people who don't know it think my school must be all singing nuns and good grades, but it's not like that at all. It's full of headcases, and the worst of them hang out around the school gates, smoking and sniffing butane during break, and God help anyone who has to get past them while they're on duty. The teachers don't bother them because at least they're out of the way when they're at the gates, and they might even act as a deterrent to any casual truants thinking of making a run for it.

It's a bit like migrating wildebeest on the telly, where they go trotting across the Serengeti until they come to a river. And the river is full of big hungry crocodiles. So all the wildebeest bunch up, scared shitless by the shadows in

the water – you know, *I'm not going in there, no way* – until one of them goes for it, and the first one usually makes it, so a few more have a go, and they get majorly chomped, and then the rest of the herd dives in, and most of them get through because of the safety-in-numbers thing, but then any stragglers at the end get all eaten to fuck as well, until all you can see is blood in the water, and a half-eaten head, and a slice of leftover hoof and a baby somewhere bleating for its mother.

So, yeah, it's a bit like that, but with less eating and more taunting, crocs being superb killing machines, but not naturals on the old repartee front. You can imagine them: *'Hey, you, er, aw, what's that word for a boy wildebeest that likes other boy wildebeests more than he likes girl wildebeests? Oil! Come back, I've not finished taunting you yet. Ah, shit, Ralf, I've lost another one. Any chance of sharing? C'mon, man, a hoof's all I'm askin'. Yeah, up yours too.'*

Small brains, you see, crocodiles. A guy came to our school once, talking about them. He had a skin and a skull. I mean, belonging to a crocodile. Of course the man had a skin and a skull too, or he'd have looked pretty stupid, not to mention dead. We all filed up to feel them. The crocodile's bits and bobs, that is. There was a tiny little hole at the back of the skull. The man said it was the brain cavity. A snug fit for your thumb. Or something else. In fact I had a little fantasy while he was talking to the class, in which I was left in charge of the thing, and I got horny and as no one was around (in the fantasy, maybe a fire alarm or something), I gave it a quickie, but then the man and the

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class all came in again, and I turned round with my knob in this crocodile skull, wearing it like a Gothic codpiece.

OK, so I'm back from the Serengeti, and I've shaken off the crocodile underpants, and I'm praying that I'm too insignificant to attract the attention of the sentries, or maybe that they've got themselves a really good vintage paint stripper to inhale. (*'Well, Cecil, I detect citrus tones, undercurrents of leaf mould, juniper and MELT-YOUR-HEAD HYDROCHLORIC ACID.'*)

So I walked around the social club next to the school, my insides beyond the jelly stage, and I see straight away that something a bit weird's going on. There's normally about ten of the morons slouching about, tangled up like they've just been puked out by a tumble-drier, but now they're all staring in the same direction, their mouths hanging open. At first I thought they were looking at me, and that made me begin to initiate the countdown to shitting my pants, but then I realized that it wasn't me but the wall of the social club they were staring at.

Now this wall was the main outlet for the creative urges not just for our budding artists, but for all the local vandals, and it was regularly daubed with witless graffiti and crude drawings, generally of genitalia. Sometimes inadvertent poetry would result. There was a brutal PE teacher called Truelove, and the two-metre-high letters spelling '*tRuELove is a wANkER*' achieved a pleasing kind of bittersweet resonance.

Every couple of months the school or the council or someone would paint over the graffiti, but that just left a clean and tempting canvas, and a day later the same stuff

would be back again, with maybe the obscenity ratcheted up a notch. So they'd finally covered it up with some kind of special coating that, in theory at least, you couldn't paint on, and the wall had been blank for a couple of months.

I turned and looked at it. At first I couldn't see anything. Then I began to make out the faint outline of a sinuous form emerging from the pale grey coating. It really did seem as though the *thing*, whatever it was, was somehow working its way through to the surface. And it certainly wasn't any of the usual stuff: you could see that right away. Even though I couldn't tell what it was, I could see the elegance of the form, the beauty of the line. It looked like a real work of art, like something in a gallery or a book.

Bugnob.

'Huh?'

There it was again. The voice. This time I stopped myself from looking round. This time I knew it didn't come from outside.

I didn't like it.

But at least it snapped me out of the strange trance thing I was falling into, looking at the whatever-it-was emerging from the wall. I quickly slipped past the guard of honour, who were all still staring like zombies.

CHAPTER 3

THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

I walked along the red-gra pitch. There were a couple of soccer matches going on, but none of my mates were playing. No surprise there. As I suggested earlier, they weren't exactly natural athletes on the whole.

Scattered here and there were clumps of girls in microskirts, pink legs whipped by the cold wind. They reminded me of flamingos, and anyone who thinks flamingos are pretty, frankly just hasn't looked at them, with their upside-downy heads and mad eyes. It must be a pink thing, I mean why people think they're pretty. But there's nothing so great about pink. Lots of pink things are ugly – you only have to find a porn mag on the back of the bus to realize *that*.

There was one girl standing on her own, not part of a group, but even more flamingoish than the others. She was tall and gangly and she had long, straight, strawberry-blonde hair. She also had a port-wine birthmark in the shape of Africa on her face, and it was hard not to stare at it, especially if she put on make-up to try to hide it, which she sometimes did and sometimes didn't – the worst of all worlds, if you ask me. Her name was Amanda something. For a second our eyes met, and I thought that she might

have smiled, and I looked behind me, thinking there was someone there, and when I looked back, Amanda Something was looking down, and for no good reason I felt like a heel.

I found my gang hunkered down by the fence. All three of them.

'Where you bin?' asked Phil Tester. We called him Gonad, because gonad means testicle, and 'Tester' is like the first part of that, and Phil rhymes with the last part and, all in all, that's enough, we reckoned. Gonad was a gentle giant type with short fair hair and ears that looked like they belonged on some other, much smaller creature, a vole or something.

'Hospital.'

'What's up with you?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh.'

'What did I miss?'

'Double maths, single RE. We did quadratic equations.'

Numbers were my thing, or one of my things. My mum didn't approve. She'd have preferred it if I'd been good at almost anything else. She thought numbers were evil and stifled your creativity and she tried to make me learn the piano and the bassoon and write poetry.

There was one time when she thought she'd cracked it. In our house nothing works, and one of the things that doesn't work is the bathroom door. If you don't slam it shut, it kind of bangs all night in a random, rhythmless way that drives me mad. I told Mum every night to make sure it was shut, but she never did, because she's in a dream world.

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So I stuck a note on the door, with writing in black felt tip.
It said:

*If you go in the night for a wee or a poo,
Close the door properly, please, when you're through,
Because if you don't it'll rattle and shake,
And keep hypersensitive Hector awake.*

It did the trick, door-wise, which tells you something about the Power of Poetry, but I didn't write any more of it, because my other problems were the kind that no amount of poetry could fix and there was always a chance that someone at school might find out and punch me in the head for it.

All of the gang had a thing. Gonad's thing was history. He knew everything that had ever happened. Not just from watching the History Channel – he'd read everything in the library. Shout out any date and he'd tell you what happened then.

'Seven ninety-three.'

'Easy: raid by Vikings on Lindisfarne.'

'Seventeen fifty-nine.'

'English defeat French at Quebec in the Seven Years War.'

'Nineteen sixty-three.'

'The end of the *Chatterley* ban and The Beatles' first LP.
That kind of thing.

Although he knew everything that ever happened, Gonad wasn't, in other ways, very bright, so you often found yourself explaining things to him, like what some

joke meant, or what you have to carry in a long division, or which shoe went on what foot.

Stanislaw's thing was chess. We called him Stan. His granddad was Polish. He was like the exact opposite of Gonad: little and dark, quick in his movements, his eyes always darting about, looking for danger. And there usually *was* danger, and I don't mean from a Queen-and-Bishop pincer movement.

Simon Murphy, usually called Smurf for obvious reasons, was best at English. He was always having to read his work out in class, which tended to get him hated above and beyond what you'd expect for a swot and a nerd. Smurf was normal in everything except for his lips, which were fleshy and protuberant, and which therefore earned him another widely used name of Rubber Lips. This hurt him a lot, for he was a sensitive soul. If you were to rank us all in order of niceness, then Smurf would be top.

As well as our special things, we had other stuff we were all more or less equally good at. Or not good at. We knew about computers. We knew about getting our heads kicked-in by the Neanderthals. We didn't know anything about girls, and we were rubbish at sport. I suppose you could say we were a bit like the Justice League, that glittering superhero collective spawned by the wondrous DC comic empire in the 1950s and more recently given new life in a surprisingly authentic cartoon.

What, this bunch of hapless nerds like the Justice League? How, exactly?

You know, the way that each has a special skill, but then they can all do other stuff as well. The Flash can run really

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quickly; Green Lantern has his power ring; J'Onn J'Onzz, aka Martian Manhunter, can dematerialize; Batman has his Batgadgets; Superman can fly; Wonder Woman has her indestructible steel bracelets and her lovely legs; and Hawkgirl her electro-hammer-bashing-thing. But then they can all fight and think and generally open a whole can of kickass as well. Except maybe The Flash, where the running-really-quickly thing just about exhausts his special powers, but that's why everyone likes him best, because he's a bit of a screw up.

God, now I've begun on the Justice League I see I'm not going to be able to stop. I don't normally like kids' stuff, but for some reason the Justice League really gets me. You see it's all these superheroes fighting together to save us, but there are all sorts of tensions working away beneath the surface. Batman and Superman don't like each other; Green Lantern wants everyone to obey him, and practise and improve efficiency, but nobody else wants to, and he's also in love with Hawkgirl, and she might love him back, and I'm not sure how I feel about it because I secretly hope that there's a future for me and Hawkgirl (her beautiful feathery wings close around me, I take off the hawk mask and kiss her soft, superheroine lips . . .); and The Flash really fancies Wonder Woman, but she thinks he's a lightweight, and he is, but she's too stuck up, which is her problem, and she actually has a soft spot for Batman. And the whole thing hovers always on the edge of tragedy and defeat, but still you know they're there for you.

And I also know there's something fascist in the idea of looking to these demi-gods for salvation, when really you

should be looking inside yourself, but sometimes when you look inside yourself there's nothing there, or what there is is no good, and that's why you need the Justice League.

Yeah, well *now* you know why they call us the nerds.

'Whistle!'

The cry came a second before the searing pain. Of course I knew who and what it was.

'Whistle!'

I blew frantically. But when someone grabs hold of your nipple and squeezes it like a vice, the one thing you can't do is whistle. You blow and blow, but all that comes out is air. I tried to wrestle him off, but the little bastard was like a monkey and I couldn't get a grip.

Explanation.

This was Flaherty. Flaherty wasn't really part of our gang, wasn't really a nerd at all. What he was was a nutter, but not one of the evil ones, just a nutter plain and simple. He was a spiky-haired perpetual-motion machine, always fidgeting, spinning, jerking, chattering. Free-floating, independent, of no party but his own; the biggest pain in the arse known to mankind. His dad was a notorious local criminal, but his dad didn't live with his mum, and everyone said Flaherty was more like his uncle, who'd been a musician, but had died some squalid death in London. He hadn't, as far as you could tell, inherited any of Uncle Flaherty's musical talent, although he was pretty nifty on the old acoustic catarrh. But anyway, the reputation of the dad meant that nobody touched him, however irritating he might be, and that was handy, because he was as likely to get up the noses of the school hard cases as annoy us. What

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I'm saying is, he was mad but funny, sort of. And now he was on my back, squeezing my tit.

'You know how to do it,' he whispered, like a guy from ground control trying to talk down a rookie pilot with the instruments all shot to pieces and zero visibility. 'Keep calm, two deep breaths, take it easy and WHISTLE.'

And it was true. That was the only way. I tried to forget the pain, forget the panic, block out the laughter of the others (they laughed partly because they'd all been whistled too, in their time, and because Flaherty wasn't really dangerous, just a pain). I blew again, and a low, barely audible whistle came out.

It was enough. Flaherty jumped off my back.

'You little tosser,' I said, rubbing my bruised tit, but laughing. You just couldn't be mad at Flaherty. Might as well be mad at the grass for giving me hay fever.

Flaherty's tie was halfway round the side of his neck, and his shirt was out and his trousers were all over the place, but there was still something cool about him, despite looking like he'd just fallen out of a tree.

'Got a joke,' he said. 'Biology joke; did it for homework.'

That was typical Flaherty - biology homework was supposed to be memorizing the carbon cycle, and instead he had made a joke.

'How do you make a hormone?'

'Don't know,' we all chorused back except Gonad, who tutted.

'Don't pay her.'

'Heard it before,' said Gonad.

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Flaherty looked crestfallen for all of two seconds, and then he was away, flitting through the playground like a sprite or a spirit, or a really annoying kid who you couldn't hate even if you wanted to.

'Nutter,' said Stan, and we all concurred, smiling. And pretty soon the bell went and then it was school as usual, except for me worrying a bit about the *arsecheese* and the *bugnob*, and a lot about whatever else was happening in my head that made Doc Jones want to look in there with his CAT scan.

CHAPTER 4

THE KICK INSIDE

When I got home that afternoon I was feeling more tired than I'd ever felt before. It was as if I could sense the weight of the air on me, which is quite something given that every square centimetre of your body has a kilogram of air pressing down on it, and the only reason you don't get squashed like chewing gum on the street is that you have the same pressure pushing out from the inside, and that's why you explode if you go out in space without a spacesuit, because the pressure inside has no balancing pressure outside, so *boom!*

Mum was in the kitchen doing something with mung beans or aduki beans or some other bean you've never heard of. She was wearing one of her floaty dresses made from string and dandelion clocks. Her hair was down. It looked like a salt-and-pepper waterfall. I'd told her already that old people with long hair look like bunny-boilers, but it didn't sink in. I suppose she had some kind of mental image of how she looked which had probably stayed the same since she was twenty, and nothing was going to shift it.

She lifted her face from the pot of beans and smiled her dazed smile. Strands of hair fell down across her eyes and she tried to blow them away. A last few beams of