Boy A

Jonathan Trigell

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Extract

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A is for Apple.
A Bad Apple.



He's seen noses broken over less: the fag butts on the pavement have been carelessly tossed, five drags left in them.

Jack's his name. He chose it himself. Few people choose their own names. He's seen a lot try, adopting hard or suave AKAs, but those snide-nicks never stick. Jack picked his name from a book, *The Big Book of Boys' Names*, a good place to start. Normal but cool, that's why he likes it. Jack of all trades, Jack of hearts, Jack the lad, Jack in the box, car Jack, union Jack, bowling Jack, lumber Jack, steeple Jack, Cracker Jack. Always the childish pursues him: denied his own childhood, denier of another. Also Jack the Ripper, he didn't spot that until later.

Beside him walks Terry. As they've walked together a thousand times, though always before in corridors; never in the splendour of this new unroofed world. Even with Terry there, Jack's nervous. For all the promise of the sun and the baby-blue sky, he's cold. Terry smiles at him and he can see the excitement there; he tries to look calm and happy. Maybe this is Terry's moment, not his. Terry's spent fifteen years working for this, waiting to see Jack striding down a sunny street.

Terry knew Jack when he wasn't called that. Terry knows his birth name, the name he shed. Now lying like a sloughed

snakeskin, in a file, in a cabinet, in a vinyl-tiled office in Solihull. Terry met Jack when he was called simply *A*, a letter for his name. Child *A*, a court name, to distinguish from a second child, *B*. Friend, accomplice, instigator, nemesis perhaps to Jack; now dead, no matter. Found hanged in cell, suicide presumed. 'Good Riddance', said the *Sun*, and a nation cheered. Jack felt nothing but a numbness when he heard the news. He alone now knew what had happened that day, and that even he knew less with each week that passed. But he also felt a fear that his cover was blown, and considered a spell with the fraggles, seeking sanctuary with the sick.

Jack's feet feel light in the box-fresh, bright white trainers that Terry gave him to wear. They cushion and bounce him, lift him up. Terry says that his son wears them, that they're the height of fashion. Jack's seen the new lads coming in with them for a while now, but he's still pleased with them. They've set the seal on his day. New and radiant and airy, that's how it feels; there's so much space around him. He could run in any direction in his new Nikes and nothing would stop him. He knows he could outrun Terry easily. Terry's old enough to be his dad. He looks at him: the soft smoke curls in his grey sideburns, gentle eyes, brown like his Sierra. Jack used to wish he was his dad, used to think that none of it would have happened if he had been. He could never outrun Terry, because he'd stop when called. Jack could never let Terry down.

'How're you feeling, son?' Terry asks. 'What do you think of the wide world?'

'I dunno.' He always feels childish around Terry. A chance to let down barriers and bravado. 'It's big.'

He realizes 'wide world' is not just an expression. Streets are broad, houses high, horizons unimaginably vast, even corner shops are commodious. Big dens of pop and videos, fags and beer. The trees are greener close up, the walls are

redder, the windows more see-through. He wants to tell Terry all of this, and more. He wants to tell him how great wheely bins are, how every house should have a name like the one back there did, how telephone wires drape like bunting. He wants to shake Terry's hand with thanks and hug him with excitement and have Terry hold him tight to quell the fear.

But he only says: 'It's big.'

They pass a skip painted dazzling sunflower-yellow. Jack remembers skips as full of shit and bricks, but this one's empty except for a cocoa armchair. He wonders if only Stonelee skips were full of shit; but the flies wafting above the chair must believe it's on its way.

It was Terry who suggested they walk the last few terraced streets to Jack's new home. Their driver is waiting outside, in a biro-blue Camry, with a stick-on taxi sign. The letters of its number plate spell 'PAX'. Jack thinks this is a good omen, like they used to say when they were kids. Before 'the incident', as his assigned psychologist called it. Pax meant you made up, that the past was forgotten, a truce and amnesty declared, begin afresh.

The Camry is the third car that Jack and Terry have been in today, weaving a false trail, even though apparently unfollowed. The press knows that he's being released; even the liberal papers called for a working committee. The *Sun* said 'Tell The Public Where He's Going And Let Them Sort Him Out'. Terry says they're just being sensationalist, that most people believe he's served his time. Terry reminds him that they haven't got a photo taken since puberty. That he's a special case, not going on the offenders' register, untraceable. Even Jack didn't know where he was going until an hour ago.

'It's a city,' is all Terry would let on. 'Plenty of new faces around, specially with all the students, no one'll notice you, and no one'd think to look anyway.'

Terry explained there may have been better situations

than this one, more controlled environments for Jack to move into. But they went for anonymity, and for speed. If Jack had stayed in prison while extended plans and preparations went on, there might have been a change of heart, a change of Home Secretary. He could easily have ended up inside for another ten years.

The car is outside tan-bricked number 10. Two suitcases in its boot contain a manufactured life. The life belonging to Jack Burridge. Jack Burridge has just finished the last of several short stints for taking and driving away. His Uncle Terry has found him a room and a job. Jack Burridge has no connection to the fuss in the papers. Jack Burridge feels like a caterpillar, about to embark upon a second life, a phase he didn't know, didn't even dare hope, existed.

The driver is a policeman, special protection squad. He's a professional; if he's disgusted his thoughts don't show. He nods granite-faced to Terry, who leads Jack up to the door with a broad-leafed hand on his back. Jack feels like his legs will collapse but for the strength pouring into him from those fingers. Terry is his parole contact, his only true friend, and now his uncle. He might just as well be God. Once, as a boy, though he can't now remember it, Jack thought that he might be. Terry's hand is the hand of redemption certainly, the hand that reached out to save a drowning child, the hand that raps three times on a door that's painted a garish granny-smith green.

'Hiya,' says Terry with artificial exuberance to the woman that opens the door. 'This is my nephew, Jack. Jack, this is Mrs Whalley.' He pronounces it like 'Wall'.

She says, 'Kelly,' as she shakes Jack's hand, her own a little too slim for her fullish form. Legacy perhaps of a slighter youth. Not that she's old, somewhere in a make-up blur of thirties, two to five. Her eyes, blue themselves, are shadowed in a brighter tone, so that the blue inside them looks like green. They flick unconsciously to Jack's crotch as she asks them in.

'You must excuse the mess,' she says, though none is in evidence. 'I'm working nights this week, I've only just got up, really.'

The lounge they sit in is small but seemly: pink walls, pine polished floor, framed pictures of parents and holidays; and a large print of a famously obscure couple kissing in Paris.

'Cup of tea, Jack?' Kelly asks.

He looks hesitant.

'Lovely,' Terry answers for them both.

Kelly gets busy in an interconnected kitchen while Jack and Terry get the cases from the car. The policeman-taxi drives away. Two more are watching from the windows of a guesthouse over the road. Terry will also stay there tonight. Just in case. Though Jack has a panic button, state of the art, disguised as a pager, that goes straight through to Terry at any time. Cuts to the protection squad if Terry doesn't take it. He should never be out of reach of safety.

Kelly knows none of this, only that she has a new lodger. She probably thinks he looks young for the twenty-two she's been told, though really he is two years older. His skin is doughish pale, and she'd be right if she thinks there's a kind of awe and innocence in the way he looks around him.

She moves her uniform from the back of the sofa to let Terry sit down. It is a sensible nurse navy, not the short curvy white worn by strippers and schoolboy fantasies.

'Thank you,' says Jack, as he takes the tea from her. Not a trace of the broad accent of his youth remains. Long years spent trying to fit in at Brentwood then Feltham have removed every taint. He sounds more rough South East than anything. Jack Burridge comes from Luton.

The tea is too sweet, which makes it extravagant somehow, and Jack savours it.

'Which hospital do you work at?' asks Terry.

Kelly's reply vaguely washes over Jack's ears, but he watches her face: round, kind, wilful, helpful.

Then she asks him a question, something about the weather or the journey. It takes a moment for the words to achieve significance in a mind still reeling in new sensation. Sensing his stumbling, she redirects it to Terry.

A cat slides easily through the kitchen flap, and saunters into the room, while the three of them are still engaged in this two-way conversation. It's a slate-grey tabby which, with narrowed eyes, selects Jack for its favours: rubbing against his leg, before settling on his lap to cajole a tickle. Its bones feel frail like chicken, but the fur is warm and soft, and it purrs pleasure.

'There, I knew you were all right, Jack,' his new landlady winks. 'He's a good judge of character, is Marble. Aren't you, Marble?'

She gets up to give the cat's back a quick tousle, and Jack can smell her hair. Vigorous, green-meadowed Alberto Balsam adverts.

'Marble, this is Jack. He's our new lodger.'

She addresses the cat as if it's a child, not a baby, but one that starts to be a companion.

The small-talk continues, though it's not small for Jack. Terry nods a smile with anything that Jack utters. He chose Manchester, he found the house and Kelly; and against any and all the doubters, he is sure that this boy, his boy, will make good. The fact that Mrs Whalley, whom he likes, so clearly likes Jack, confirms to him that he is right to like them both.

Even Terry can need reminding that it's OK to like Jack.

Kelly shows them around her home with enjoyable pride. She gives operating instructions on the washing machine and dishwasher, and the other white wonders of the kitchen. Jack is impressed with his room. Terry had deliberately talked it down so he would be. It's a box-room, small, with a low sloping roof, but recently decorated. The wardrobe and desk share a flat-pack freshness that the allan-key on the

window sill confirms. Clean newness seems to reverberate. The exception is a slightly battered portable telly, which sits on the desk's corner, so that it's watchable from in bed.

'It'll not get ITV for some reason, Jack,' Kelly says, 'but there's nothing but rot on that channel anyway. Try not to have it on too loud if I'm on nights. House rules here are just common sense and courtesy. I can see that you've plenty of both, so I'm sure there'll not be any bother.'

After another cup of tea Kelly confides that she has promised to eat with a friend before they both start work. The daylight has already dimmed through the lace curtains. She comes back down the stairs wearing her uniform, and with it an equally functional black cardigan. She offers to let Terry stay the night, and when he refuses, begs a promise to come back soon. She shouts final friendly commands as she leaves the doorway.

'I've left a key in the pot on the kitchen table, but it's the spare I usually leave with the neighbour, so I'll have to get one cut as soon as I can. I'll not be back till the morning, so make yourselves at home. There's plenty of videos if there's nothing on the box, and any amount of fast food places at the end of the road. You'll have seen them as you came. But if you just want a sandwich or something then help yourself to the fridge. There's not much in there, I'm afraid. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow, Jack. Bye Terry, see you soon.'

And the door slams to a still house.

'She can't half talk, heh?'

'She's nice, Terry. Thank you.'

'Ah, c'mon.' Terry must have noticed the tear in Jack's eye.

But it's quickly blinked away. Terry probably wishes he hadn't seen it, hadn't said anything. Though it doesn't matter and he's seen far worse.

Later they kick back in the spiced-fat comfort of a doner kebab. Chilli sauce burning into cans of apple Tango, almost

too slippery to hold. Jack has never had a kebab, which one of his cellmates professed to miss more than his family. The Styrofoam box reminds him of something. He stares at it, pooled juices already congealing into waxy solid. It is McDonalds, only they used to come in these boxes. McDonalds was the stuff of childhood treats, another good omen. Jack is a great believer in omens. The mundanity of prison focuses the mind, tuning recognition of pattern and difference. A black grain in puffed rice at breakfast can mean a bad day, seven matchsticks left a good one. Primitive societies set great store by these things. Prison is primitive.

Together they study the Sunday night football round-up. Terry tests on players and form. Jack Burridge supports Luton Town of course: 'Luton Airport who are you?', 'The Hatters, the Hatters and we're all fucking nutters'. The odds of finding a fellow fan up here are remote, but he must demonstrate a knowledge of his team. Actually Jack has never had any real interest in football, but he can talk a good game. He's shared a cell with a Celtic Casual, a Chelsea Headhunter and a middle-aged Notts County trainspotter called Trevor who was doing five months for getting his thirteen-year-old girlfriend pregnant.

When Terry leaves, Jack prowls the house, tentatively opening drawers and doors. He feels the weight of the pans, and touches the contents of the fridge, reading sauce bottles like books. He takes the dry blast of the airing cupboard on his face. The deep hall rug between bare toes, with its well-worn trough connecting the lounge and the front door. Eventually, when he has sniffed and stroked his way to some intimacy with this dark and strange new house, he curls foetal beneath the duvet in his small box-room. And despite the unfamiliarity of everything around him, Jack feels safe, because he knows he is the apple of his uncle's eye.

It is under Terry's careful gaze that the events of the next two

weeks will unfold. An orientation time for Jack. An opportunity to adjust before he starts his job. A fortnight only, to try and lose the bewilderment with which he looks at this world.

They will visit parks, restaurants, pubs, an art museum, an airport. Jack will open a bank account, fills in forms, make his name more real with each one. He is going to stand in a crowd at a Saturday morning market, shaking with fear at first, immobile while strangers' faces file around him. They will walk on a moor, where the silence is absolute, no noise but the sound of their own feet brushing the bracken. They will ride there in Terry's car, which Jack has only ever watched from afar. Has never before felt the vinyl seats under his fingertips. Heard the radio on its one working speaker. They are going to laugh when, in town one day, a rottweiler bangs its face against a van window, desperate to get at a cat. They will buy the *Big Issue*, from a guy who says he was ready to give up until Terry came along. And Jack will say that he knows how this feels.

Each day for fifteen, Terry is going to pick Jack up at 7:30 am, the time he will soon be picked up for work, and show him another alien angle on life. And every night Jack is going to close his eyes and not believe this is happening to him.

Every hour, whether with Terry or alone, he will practise his story. Learn his legend. Focus on the things he needs to do to make himself a little less a fish on the riverbank, a little more the man a different boy might have become.

B

B is for Boy.
A Boy named B.

Child *B* was exactly the kind of boy that your mother told you not to play with. Probably his mother would have too, had she been there. Had she given a fuck. He had shoulder-length hair that fell naturally into tight scouse curls, and even at nine a faint bum-fluff moustache on his upper lip. He looked like a juvenile, scanky, Bobby Ball. But he was too thick to be funny. Stupid not through lack of native wit but from a determined resolution to remain ignorant. Ignorance was his armour. He walked with a swagger, advertising a readiness to fight that was ridiculous for his size. Legs spread wide, feet splayed outwards, fists balled. A strut adopted from his older brother. A brother known around town as a man not to be messed with. Who none the less messed with *B*.

He was a loner, child *B*. Not like some, because of natural inclination. He was a loner because he carried an aura, something beyond even his walk and his constant spitting. Something that kept other children at bay like wolfsbane or garlic might ward off monsters. Children can be monsters too. We know that now. But once children were just children.

★

Child *A*, before he even knew *B*, knew more than most what poisons might be concealed inside angelic frames. Of course he was to see, in glorious Technicolor, the depths to which a child could fall. But he'd already had inklings. He had experienced first-hand some of the cruel possibilities. Growing up in a run-down mining town, where the pits were everywhere.

Once *A* had walked home with one shoe. Ripped junior Y-fronts stuffed into the pocket of the trousers that he'd managed to rescue. His other shoe was still thickly lodged in a tree; impervious to sticks and stones and names and all the other things that *A* felt so deeply. He trudged with a sock sodden from the pavement, and a lopsided swaying like the plastic boy on the Barnados boxes would walk, his legs imprisoned in torturous iron callipers.

It was long dark when he made it home, shivering from the tear-cloaking drizzle. Aching from rabbit punches and dead legs and hours of futile efforts to rescue his shoe. His mother hugged him before she started shouting.

'We've been worried near enough to death. Where the bloody hell have you been?'

He'd rehearsed the story in his mind. He couldn't tell them the truth. Some bitter shame locked it in him. He knew with cockeyed childish intuition that they wouldn't understand, couldn't comprehend the depths of his anguish. He firmly believed that his tormentors would increase his suffering if he went to adults. Maybe they would have.

'I was playing football with my friends,' the word made him wince. 'The ball got caught in a tree and we all threw our shoes to get it down. But mine got stuck, and that's where I've been, trying to get it down.'

His mother stroked his hair, and this kindness was almost more than his body could take. His lip began to waver, but he caught his father's eye and managed to check it.

'Come on,' his dad said. 'Let's go and get the bloody thing

before it really starts pissing it down.' He broke off to get his keys. But in that instant of eye contact, when he had been about to cry, *A* had seen his father's disgust.

They both sat in silence with their shame, as they drove to the field by *A*'s school. Water pooled with the cement dust in the back of the battered pick-up, a ladder looming over the windscreen. *A* felt like a condemned witch when he climbed it, a broom in hand, and a big hangman's bough above him. The rungs were treacherous, slippery even in his dry trainers. Lightning flashed like a cheap horror gimmick. And *A* knew, what his father forgot or ignored, that up a wet ladder under a tall sycamore was a harmful place. A route that belonged to the storm. His dad held the ladder steady, as if in a half-hearted suicide pact. And *A* worried, more even than death, that his father would see the ripped pants still bulging in his trouser pocket.

It went on for months like this. Years, in child time. A small boy being bullied by a group of such diversity and size that he seemed to have no moments of freedom. No respite save at home, where he tried desperately to hide his engrossing unhappiness. He lay awake much of most nights, plagued with anxiety. Sometimes he fell asleep in class.

His teacher, Mrs Johnston, née Grey, disillusioned and going through divorce, thought him lazy like his left eye. She noticed that he always seemed to be dirty, and looked like he'd been fighting. Other children told on him, even some of her nicest girls. There could be no smoke without fire. Besides, he had the same startling blue irises as her filthy, philandering fuck of a husband. Though she neglected to mention this last point at the trial.

After a while *A* ceased even to protest while he was punished for imagined misdemeanours. He bore all with a stoical silence. Soon he just stopped going to school.

The alternative was dull, but painless. Wandering the streets

of an old coal town. Mostly *A* could stay out of the way of the few other primary kids that bunked. Stonelee was a hard hilly culture, cold and mindless, mineless. Under-employed or unemployed, the positions available. *A*'s father, an occasional demolition foreman, was firmly middle class. The Eveready battery factory floundered and failed. Other punier attempts at rejuvenation died outright, or lived briefly like the summer stingers on the slag heaps. Even the pound shop struggled. Tumbleweed Kwik Save crisp packets blew down the empty market street. Alternate Thursdays the fruit and veg stall still came. The butcher, famed for his pork sandwiches, was closed by E. coli. When *A* read this in the *Northern Echo* he thought E. coli was a bailiff. Bailiffs flourished.

'How d'you get five hundred cows in a shed?' said a boy that *A* vaguely recognized.

From his seat on the gravestone, *A* looked at him. He was from the year below, rough. His eyes were staring, burning. *A,* not sure if it was a trap, spun around, poised to flee. But curiosity kept his buttocks on the cold, grey slab.

'How d'you get five hundred cows in a shed?' the boy asked again. His voice was deep, though of course unbroken. *A* wondered if he was putting it on.

'I don't know. How?' *A* said slowly, earnestly, hopefully. He wanted this to be a real joke, not a trick or an excuse to punch him.

'Put up a Bingo sign.' The boy laughed, much more than the joke merited. *A* laughed as well, as hard as he could.

The boy kicked at a stone cross with the flat of his foot. It rocked slightly in its foundation hole. He kicked it again but it moved the same little way and no more. Looking around, as if for some new way to impress, the boy saw a brown glass bottle, left by the churchyard's night-time clientele. He picked it up, and *A* knew that he would smash it; but the boy wished to demonstrate an abandon far beyond that. He

sailed the bottle grenade-like, through the trees and over the church wall, towards an unseen road. Before it had even landed *A* felt the attraction of this abandon, the exhilaration that it could offer him. He could just hear the pop of the bottle as it exploded, then the brakes of a car and a crunch, and more broken glass. Then came horns and slamming doors. But they were already running.

The boy ran like he walked: fists balled, arms nearly straight in his ripped green bomber. He led *A* onwards, inwards, through the church's doorway, left open for the poor and the needy.

It was cool in the church, an escape from the closeness outside. *A* remembered the big brass sanctuary knocker on Durham Cathedral, with its devilish eyeless face. Churches had always been a place of safety for criminals. Not that he was a criminal, but he was beginning to feel the appeal of crime.

Like Stonelee, the church was old and ill kept. Hanging steel lamps showed paint flaking off the walls like dead skin. A mural of Mary prayed handless, where the cement had fallen. The two boys, breathless and silent, walked around, looking for somewhere to hide. Stepping over the names of benefactors and bishops, almost erased by the shoes of centuries. They took a seat in a small side chapel, joining a plaster saint. His eyes were half-closed, like he was sleepy or stoned, and he held a coil of rosaries long enough to tie someone up.

They grinned at each other with excitement when they heard the people come in. The footsteps sounded gruff and out of place in the emptiness. But the noises soon faded, leaving them undiscovered in their private chapel. *A*'s newest and only friend, a boy named *B*, stole a hymn book, while they sat waiting for the feeling that it was safe to leave. *A* gazed at the roof, painted a passionate blue with golden stars, looking somehow more real than the sky outside had

been. It was supported by pillars, thick as God's thighs, and near their tops more anonymous saints stared down. Most bore the means of their martyrdom, some ghoulishly held their own heads.

They shared the remains of the day. Outlaws, confirmed in petty shoplifts and pointless vandalism. Acts that nonetheless bonded them, blended them. Separation from the world brought them to each other. People who saw them, while they walked homewards, would swear they were a pair. They fitted together those two boys, with letters where their names should be. *A* and *B,* united by their difference, intrinsically linked, like pen and paper, salt and pepper, accident and emergency.

But events flowed on, as steady and dirty as the Stonelee Byrne, and at the end of the road stood three figures. *A* recognized them as boys from his class, junior demons.

A had become used to long cuts: double-backs and dirt-tracks. Somehow *B*'s abandon had lured him into unaccustomed bravery.

'Let's go this way,' he said, trying to pull his friend down a side-street.

But *B* didn't recognize the urgency in his voice. 'Naw, it's much longer.' He offered *A* an Opal Fruit instead.

And then it was too late anyway. The three boys had spotted them, and were already sidling forwards.

'Haven't seen you in school recently,' one of them said.

A felt the hopelessness building inside him. These false pleasantries would slide into an attack. Sudden or slow, the pain was inevitable. All the worse because he had enjoyed the day. Now *B* would despise him, or even join in against him.

'Anyone would think you've been avoiding us. Aren't we your friends any more?'

'No look, he's got a new friend, haven't you, you little shit.'

'What's your friend called, spastic, or can't he afford a name?' The inquisitors laughed with childish brutality.

A would have run for it, but already his classmates had penned them in. Trapping them against the wall of a house.

B looked at these older boys. His neck stretched out like a weasel's as he stared slowly into each of their faces. Maybe then they suspected they had picked the wrong kid.

'All right, you, just piss off,' said one. 'It's him we want.'

There were none of the preliminaries that usually marked fights in the under-tens freestyle event. No pushing or grabbing or wrestling. *B* punched the speaker hard in the face. A proper punch with his weight behind it. Like his brother taught and used. The boy crumpled, and as he did *B* hit him again on the back of the head. The second boy started to raise his arm to thump, but before his blow was prepared, *B* had smacked him too. In the eye and then the throat and then the eye again. The boy shrieked like a baby and stumbled away backwards. The third one had already run off. *B* kicked the boy who was on the floor. Lashing at him, showering him with blows. *A* joined him, savouring his abandon, feeling its shelter. The boy on the floor sobbed and begged them to stop.

Eventually they did.

None of the passing cars did.

A was happier that night. His mum commented on it. For once he slept well. And when he woke it was with nervous excitement, at the prospect of meeting up with *B* again.

When *B* went to bed, he retrieved the stolen hymn book. He tried to read it, but most of the words frustrated him. He was barely beyond his abc. Could just write his own name, and recognize a few common expressions. 'Dog' was one of the first words he had learned, and in that book he found its opposite. Not cat but God.

That night *B* went through the hymn book, scribbling out God and painstakingly writing his own name above each reference. *B* did not believe in God. His brother had told him that God did not exist, one night while *B* had

pleaded for His help. And that He did not help seemed to prove his brother's case. Perhaps, though, there remained a trace belief, or else who was he offending with his tightly gripped black Berrol? Maybe *B* too felt the heart-pounding exuberance. The power of his own abandon. Some fraction of the thrill of that fiery first rebel. Or maybe he was just trying to dare God into showing Himself.