Broken

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Extract

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'Skunk, Skunk. Wake up, beautiful darling.'

Archie, my father, holds both my hands as he says this. I sense his words rather than hear them:

'Skunk, Skunk. Wake up, beautiful darling.'

I also sense his life now.

It seeps through his palms into my palms. It deadens the blood in my veins. My heartbeat slows. I shudder. Poor old Archie. This is the way that his life is. I see it. I feel it. I know it. Tonight, from midnight through to two in the morning, he will sit all alone in the front room and watch a video of the day I was born. Almost twelve years ago now. There I am. You can see me. A wrinkled pink sack of flesh that does little but lie on its back with tubes feeding into its nostrils. Not a lot different to now then. Here I lie, on my back, with tubes feeding into my nostrils. But tonight I will be a newborn. All that hope. All that promise. Poor old Archie. He'll sit all alone and he'll watch me. He'll drink and he'll think, how did it happen? How did it end up like this? Then he'll go to the bed that he shares with Cerys and listen to her crying. He'll cry a little himself.

Finally, he will sleep and dream that the harsh ringing sound

by his bedside is the Royal Hampshire County Hospital phoning to say I am dead. He will sit up, gasping, but it won't be his phone that is ringing, it will be his alarm clock, and it will be time to get up, go to work.

In work, Archie will sit at his desk and recoil every time the phone rings, then he'll rush here to see me.

'Skunk, Skunk. Wake up, beautiful darling. Don't you leave me. Don't you dare.'

All of this will happen. I know for sure it will happen. I know everything now. Especially about Broken Buckley. Poor old Broken Buckley. Hunched over his mother's corpse. Hands pressed to his temples. How and why? Oh how and why? His story started with Saskia Oswald: Broken loved Saskia Oswald. Had. Once. Loved. Saskia. Oswald. But Saskia Oswald never loved him. She just loved his car. She said, Hey, soldier, fancy taking me for a ride? Did he? Oh, did he. Poor old Broken Buckley. He was nineteen years old and a virgin, the sort of guy who spits when he speaks, just little flecks of saliva that hang in the air and distract you from whatever he's saying. Saskia Oswald ate him for breakfast – ate him up and then spat him out. Not enough for her though. She had to tell everyone about it, and that's when it started for him.

'Skunk, please, God, blink, just blink if you can hear me . . . we're here, darling. We're all here beside you.'

It didn't finish there though. It never does with the likes of the Oswalds. They're the family in one of the Housing Association properties on the opposite side of the square. Single parent. Lots of children. Music all hours of the night. Bin bags in the front garden. Portsmouth FC flags hanging from the windows.

Maori-style tattoos on overdeveloped biceps. This is Bob Oswald. The father.

Bob Oswald. The father.

The first time I saw him hitting someone, I was coming up ten years old.

It was summer, hot, and Rick Buckley was washing the car his father had bought him as a present for passing his driving test. Skunk Cunningham was skipping on the tarmac drive that had once been their front garden. Other than Skunk and Rick, Drummond Square was empty.

The attack happened out of nowhere. Skunk didn't hear anyone speaking. She didn't hear anyone shouting. The first thing she heard was the scream: it was high-pitched, like a horse, and before she knew what was happening, Bob Oswald had Rick Buckley in a headlock and was twisting him sideways, like wrestling a bull. The two of them staggered out of the Buckleys' front garden and into the otherwise empty square. Rick Buckley shouted, Stop it, I haven't done anything wrong.

Bob Oswald hit him. Not a punch, but a blow with the point of his elbow. It landed in the small of Rick's back. Rick collapsed to his knees.

Skunk stood frozen, hot in the sun, her small hands held up to her mouth. Bob Oswald hit Rick again, and Rick fell flat on his face. Bob Oswald kicked him in the gut then the side of the head. Skunk recoiled at the sound of the thud. Then Bob Oswald took hold of Rick's hair and lifted his head up. He made a lot of noise dredging his throat clean, then

spat into Rick's face. After that, he studied Rick closely for a moment, then pushed him back down to the ground. Rick lay very still. He was silent. Bob Oswald stepped over him and made his way back into his house. Once inside, the throb of music that had played like a soundtrack in the background rose to a deafening thud.

As far as I can remember, after Bob Oswald left him, Rick stayed on his face in the road. He was sobbing. I wanted to go and get someone to help him, but I was too frightened to move. I stood with my hands raised to my mouth and my heart beating fast in my chest. Maybe as much as half an hour later, Mr Buckley returned from the funeral parlour he managed and helped his son into their house. I sat down on the kerbside and stared at the blood on the tarmac. I don't remember if I cried. I don't remember if I was sick. If I ever asked Jed or Archie about it, I don't remember what they said. In fact, before I fell into this coma, the only thing I really remember about seeing what Bob Oswald did to Rick Buckley was trying to forget it had happened. Even though this is how it all started, I pushed the whole thing from my mind.

The police turned up three days later. The squad car stood out like a beacon as it sat on the Buckleys' front drive. Bob Oswald saw it through his kitchen window and thought about what he should do. Finally, he stepped out of his house and leaned against his jeep. From here, he watched the Buckley house until the policemen let themselves out. Then he marched over towards them.

'You,' he shouted. 'I want words with you.'

The two policemen looked at each other and sighed. The Buckleys had just told them how Bob Oswald had beaten their son up for no apparent reason, but with no known witnesses and no permanent damage done, the officers had convinced Mr and Mrs Buckley to let the matter drop: if what they'd heard about Bob Oswald was true, he was only going to deny attacking their son, and did the Buckleys really want to be involved in a drawn-out court case with someone who lived so close to them? Now Bob Oswald continued towards the two policemen. A huge man, shaven-headed, he yelled, 'I want to report a rape.'

It was his third eldest daughter who had been raped.

She was a skinny slip of a girl with lank blonde hair and an underfed gymnast's body. She never wore many clothes – hot pants, bra tops, stilettos. Her favourite expression was fucker, as in, that fucker over there's giving me the evils, or, that fucker down the road wants to watch herself or I'll do her.

Now that fucker Rick Buckley had raped her.

She told her father this just a few minutes before the fight in the square, though she never said it was rape, she only said it was sex, and she only said it was sex because he refused to believe the real reason she had contraceptives under her bed.

He said, Susan, you're thirteen years old, what the fuck do you want the pill for?

She said, I dunno.

He said, Yes, you do, you want them for having sex.

And then he got very angry.

Which made Susan very scared.

So she said that she'd nicked them.

For once, she was telling the truth. She'd nicked them off Mrs McCluskey, who'd made the fatal mistake of leaving an open handbag within reaching range of an Oswald. Mrs McCluskey never did realise they'd been stolen. She just assumed she'd lost them and got another prescription. As teachers go, she was sensible like that. As for Susan Oswald, once she'd nicked them, she didn't know what to do with them. They tasted of nothing and didn't get her going the way her old man's vodka did. What good were contraceptives? She chucked them under her bed and forgot they even existed. Bob Oswald found them six months later when he was looking for a new place to hide his drugs. He yelled, 'Susan. Get up here.'

Susan Oswald sighed. Her old man. He could be a right fucker.

'What?'

'Get your arse up here,' Bob yelled. 'Now.'

Susan climbed the stairs. 'What?'

Bob Oswald threw the contraceptives at her. 'What are these?'

'I dunno.'

'Yes, you do. They're contraceptives.'

A pregnant pause.

'Your contraceptives. I found them under your bed. Susan. You're thirteen years old. What the fuck do you want the pill for?'

'I dunno.'

'Yes, you do. You want them for having sex. Who the fuck are you having sex with?'

Susan Oswald didn't answer. She couldn't. She hadn't been having sex with anyone. Bob Oswald leaned into her face.

'Susan. Tell me. And don't try to give me no bullshit. I know you've been at it with someone. It's written all over your face.'

'Dad, it isn't, I haven't.'

'Then what are you on the pill for?'

'I'm not. Those tablets ain't mine.'

'Yeah. Right. Whose are they? Saskia's? Saraya's?'

'Nobody's.'

'Nobody's?'

'Nobody's. I nicked them. I swear.'

Bob Oswald drew a fist back. 'Nobody nicks the pill, Susan. You get it for free off the state.'

Susan stared open-mouthed at her father's fist.

'Tell me,' he told her. 'Who are you having sex with?'

'Dad –'

'Don't "Dad" me, Susan. Give me a name.'

'But, Dad –'

Bob Oswald punched the wall beside Susan's head. She screamed and fell down on the floor. Bob leaned down above her and pressed his bleeding fist into her face.

'I want a name, Susan. You're gonna give me a name. If you don't give me a name, I'm gonna count to ten, and if I've not got a name by the time I've counted to ten, I'll be punching *you*, not the fucking wall. You get me? I don't want to. You're

my daughter. I love you. I'm out to protect you. But if you don't help me protect you, I'll break every bone in your body. Now give me the dumb fucker's name.'

Susan Oswald had never been punched by her father before. Staring into his knuckles, she didn't want to be either. They were huge. His onyx rings would slice through her flesh. She sobbed and screamed that the tablets weren't hers, but Bob drew his fist back and started to count. One, he said, two, he said, three. Susan screamed for someone to help her, but her sisters were cowering on the stairs and there was nobody else who could hear. Bob's voice rose with each number, so it was four, tell me, five, tell me, six, you'd better fucking tell me, SEVEN, right into her face. Then he screamed EIGHT, I'm gonna kill you, I'll break every bone in your body. Give me the dumb fucker's name. NINE. He tensed his fist even tighter. The knuckles were dripping with blood. Seeing it before her, Susan gave up trying to reason. She had to come up with a name. But there was no name she could think of, because there was no one she had shagged. She did know, however, that Saskia, her second eldest sister, had recently shagged Rick Buckley, the weird kid from the other side of the square. Susan knew this because she'd heard Saskia talking about the size of Rick's penis. Saraya, the eldest, had yelled, 'How small? You're like totally kidding me,' then the two sisters had laughed hysterically. Now, just before Bob could scream TEN and start punching, Susan shouted up into his face:

'Rick Buckley.'

'Rick Buckley?' Bob Oswald stared, wide-eyed. 'He's – what – seven years older than you are?'

Rick was six years older. Bob didn't care much for maths.

Susan tried to make the lie convincing: 'We've been doing it in his car.'

'Fucking hell.'

Fucking hell, the two policemen thought. Rape?

They looked back at the house they'd just come from. The Buckleys seemed a nice enough family. The old man was a bit wet and the mum was a bit dull. In keeping with the parents, the boy had seemed a little bit flaky when Mrs Buckley had finally got him to come out of his bedroom and tell them who'd beaten him up for no apparent reason. But rape? He didn't look capable of sex, let alone rape.

Still. An allegation was an allegation.

They radioed it through to the Child Protection Unit, then went for a chat with Bob Oswald. As he filled them in on the details, they looked through the grimy kitchen window at a beaming Susan Oswald. She was doing dance steps with her two younger sisters in a scruffy wasteland of a garden full of swings and beaten-up toys. When one of her younger sisters got her steps wrong, Susan's beam was shattered. You stupid fucking bitch, Sunrise. You do it like this, not that. Sunset, the youngest of Bob's daughters at two years old, looked from one sister to the other, then threw her arms around both. The policemen turned away. Bob Oswald told them Susan's version of how it had happened: Rick Buckley – always a bit of a weirdo, very quiet, very, very creepy – had offered to take her for a drive in the brand-new car his old man had just bought him as a present for passing his test. He had driven her onto

the nearby Oak Tree Place development that was currently just a wasteland of unfinished houses and mudflats, held her down, and raped her.

Both of the policemen took notes.

Just over eleven miles away, in Winchester, seven officers of various rank climbed into an assortment of cars and made their way out to Hedge End. Within fifty-six minutes of the allegation being made Rick Buckley was arrested under suspicion of raping Susan Oswald. In the back of a squad car that smelled of burgers and cigarettes, a constable twice Rick's age leaned in close against him and whispered, very thickly, I hope for your sake you didn't do it. Otherwise, you're dead.

The officer on the other side of him said, She's thirteen years old, you wanker.

Back at the Oswalds' place, Susan Oswald was observed as she played with her younger sisters by two highly trained social workers and the Woman Police Constable who would be her chaperone throughout the investigation. All three women noticed the child swung from agitated to content to agitated again. The social workers took notes. The WPC asked some loaded questions. She got some loaded answers. At just after seven thirty, Susan, Bob, the social workers and the police all made their way from Hedge End to the rape suite in Winchester.

In the Buckley home, Mr and Mrs Buckley sat at their kitchen table and watched as officers carried items of Rick's clothing from the house. Mr Buckley put his head in his hands. Mrs Buckley didn't hide her tears. They ran freely down her

face and fell to the table from her chin. Upstairs, the discovery of a small collection of porn was greeted with satisfaction.

In the rape suite, Susan was put in a room with a PlayStation and some dolls and pens and paper and jigsaws and brightly coloured walls. The WPC who would be her chaperone sat with her to make sure she was OK. It was at this stage that Susan began to suspect she had done something wrong: people were never this nice to her, and no one ever let her use their stuff for nothing. She said, What's all this about?

The WPC said, Nothing.

Susan was not fooled.

'Is it about what I told my old man about Rick Buckley?'

The WPC said, There's no need to look frightened, honey. You haven't done anything wrong.

Susan Oswald thought, Shit.

It was then that the police doctor came in. She was a very tall, very thin woman who tried her best to disguise the fact she hated children.

'Hello, Susan. How are you?'

Susan said, 'What's it gotta do with you?' She looked from the WPC to the doctor then down at the PlayStation control in her hands. She thought, Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

The WPC said, 'This is Dr Mortimer, Susan. Her first name's Susan too.'

'Big fucking deal.'

The WPC smiled. 'She just needs to look at you a moment. Examine you. Make sure you're OK. There's nothing for you to be afraid of. I can stay with you, if you like.'

'Whatever.' Susan stared at the doctor. The doctor stared

at Susan. Then she took a step forward. With the curtains drawn and the door shut, it took a matter of minutes to determine Susan Oswald was a virgin. The doctor stood back and took her gloves off.

She said, 'I'd best go and speak to DS Westbury.'

The police questioned Dr Mortimer for a further half an hour. They said, Even if Susan Oswald is a virgin, couldn't she have been interfered with? Couldn't the act of sexual intercourse have been simulated? Shouldn't we ask her to describe Rick Buckley's penis? The doctor said, For Christ's sake, the child's lying. It's written all over her face.

Bob Oswald had to be restrained when this was put to him. My Susan's many things, but she ain't no fucking liar. Bob Oswald was many things, and he was a fucking liar. Susan lied to him all the time. She got it from her father. He folded his arms and said, That man's been at my daughter. My little baby girl. She's only thirteen years old. How the hell do I get her through this? He took a deep breath. There were tears in his eyes. I want him charged. I want him strung up by his bollocks. Pervert. Fucking creep. If you don't kill him, I will. He's ruined my poor baby's life.

Detective Sergeant Westbury ran his hands through his thick brown hair.

'Look, Mr Oswald. If Rick Buckley has been sniffing around your little girl, I want him off the streets as much as you do. But try to see this from my point of view. I've got your daughter saying she's been raped, and I've got a doctor saying she's a virgin.'

'Then get a second opinion.'

'Well. I'm not so keen to put your daughter through another internal examination. How about we bring her in here and have a little chat with her? Just see if we can clarify things a little?'

Bob Oswald raised his eyes up towards the ceiling.

Fifteen minutes later Susan turned on him and yelled, 'I never said he raped me. I said we had sex. And I only said we had sex cos you made me, cos you wouldn't bloody believe me. I don't even know Rick bloody Buckley. I told you those tablets weren't mine.'

She put her head in her hands and because she knew she was really in trouble this time, Susan Oswald wept.

The adults in the room were silent. Then DS Westbury leaned forward.

'Susan. I want you to listen to me. I want you to listen very carefully. I don't want you to be scared. I don't want you to be frightened. If Rick Buckley's done something, said something, been anywhere near you or exposed himself to you in any sort of way – or even if he hasn't, even if he's just done something to make you feel vulnerable, or threatened, or maybe just suspicious even – I want you to know you can tell us, and whatever Rick Buckley has said to you, or whatever he might have threatened you with, or whatever he might have done to you in the past . . . well, we won't let it happen again. We're all on your side here, Susan. All of us. So feel free to tell us what happened.'

'Nothing, you silly fucker. Nothing bloody happened. Jesus. Jesus Christ.'

Bob Oswald shook his head. He cleared his throat. 'Something must have happened,' he yelled at everyone who was staring at him. 'Look at her. She's terrified. He must have threatened her somehow. She's lying to cover his back.'

The WPC cuddled Susan. She whispered, It's OK, sweetie. You don't have to cry. Susan Oswald cried harder. DS Westbury stood up.

'OK,' he said. 'I suggest a comfort break. Susan. Would you like a game of Sonic the Hedgehog? WPC Davies can get up to level eight.'

Susan was led away. She was given a cup of hot chocolate. She was allowed to play Sonic the Hedgehog. Her tears dried. Her mood brightened. She had learned a valuable lesson: sex was good. It got you attention. It got you affection. It was a good way to get on in life.

And if these things came from just saying she'd done it, she couldn't wait to start doing it for real.

The two Oswalds were dropped off by a squad car at three o'clock the next morning. Caught between charging them with wasting police time and Bob's blind insistence that something had gone on between Rick Buckley and his daughter, the police decided to do nothing. No caution. No slap on the wrist. Free to go.

The same was now true of Rick Buckley. The charges against him were dropped and, as they hadn't been sent to the lab yet, the clothes he had been wearing when he'd been arrested were handed back in a clear plastic bag. In a cold room with bright white lighting, Rick hurriedly dressed in front of two

male constables and a female nurse who watched his shrivelled penis bob as he stepped into light blue Y-fronts and then pulled up his trousers. Despite his total humiliation, Rick Buckley did not cry: he finished getting dressed, he put his watch on, he signed for the loose change that had been in his pockets. One of the officers marched him down a darkly lit corridor and out into early morning. It was just after 7 a.m.

No one had told Mr and Mrs Buckley their son was being released without charge. Rick stood in a dreary drizzle and, as he had hardly any money and hadn't had his mobile phone on him when he'd been arrested, started the eleven-mile walk to Hedge End. Rain saturated his wavy hair and thin summer cotton T-shirt. He walked with his arms wrapped around himself. He walked with his head down. He talked as he walked.

On each first step he said, I.

On each second step he said, feel.

On each third step he said, dirty.

He said these words over and over.

I feel dirty. I feel dirty. I feel dirty.

He said them all the way home.

It was 11 a.m. by the time he got back to Drummond Square. I don't remember seeing him hurry round the corner and disappear down the Buckleys' side alley, but I do remember Mr Buckley coming over to our house later that evening. I was pretending to be asleep in Archie's lap. He had his hands in my hair. I could hear the depth of his voice through the itch of his polyester shirt. Mr Buckley's voice was distant in contrast.

'The police were utterly useless. They ignored what we said

about Bob Oswald, then took every word he said on oath. You know, after they dragged my son down the station, they stripped him naked and took loads of swabs.'

'They couldn't have done that without his permission.'

'He didn't know what he was agreeing to. Since he took that beating, he doesn't seem to know if he's coming or going.'

'You should have phoned me,' Archie said. 'I really wish you'd phoned me.'

'It all happened so quickly. We didn't know what we should do.'

I looked over at Mr Buckley. I didn't really know him, but I couldn't imagine Mrs Buckley not knowing what she should do. After my father, she was the cleverest person in the square. Sometimes, when she was out in her front garden, I'd go over and ask her about multiplication or spelling and she always knew the right answers. How could she not have known to call my father? She must have known he was a solicitor. I'd told her about loads of his trials.

'That bloody Bob Oswald,' Mr Buckley continued. 'He's reduced my son to a nervous wreck and got away without even a caution.'

'You need to go back to the police, Dave.' Archie's voice rumbled from deep inside his stomach. 'A vicious attack on a nineteen-year-old boy . . . no matter what Bob Oswald thought he'd been up to . . . they have to do something about that.'

Mr Buckley laughed in a way I found scary. 'What like? An ASBO? A caution?'

'It's GBH at least,' Archie said after a moment. 'Bob should be facing prison.'

Mr Buckley's voice was high and shaky where my father's was soft and deep. 'You know better than I do he'll be facing no more than community service. What'll probably happen is the police'll decide to charge me with wasting their time. It's been an eye-opener, this has. A real bloody shock.'

A long silence followed. Finally, Archie broke it.

'How's the boy, anyway?'

Mr Buckley's voice went from shaky to jumpy. 'Broken,' he said. 'Utterly broken. He reckons he's never leaving the house again.'

Another silence followed. I was very nearly asleep. It was way, way past my bedtime. Only Archie's voice kept me awake.

'He just needs time,' he said to Mr Buckley. 'Don't worry. He'll be OK.'

But Archie was wrong. Mr Buckley's son was not OK. Just as he'd said to his father, he stayed inside the house. The car he had been cleaning the day Bob Oswald attacked him stood unused on the drive. The curtains to his room stayed shut.

For a time, he was a topic of fascination to me: Has he come out yet, Daddy? Never you mind. What's he doing in there, Daddy? Never you mind. Do you think we should go round and see him? Keep your bloody nose out of other people's business, for Christ's sake, I won't tell you again. Leave the poor Buckleys alone.

Jed was fascinated as well. Why would anyone want to stay in their bedroom when there were so many things to be done? He, being older, got a little more sense out of our father, who told him Mr Buckley's son had suffered a breakdown, and people who suffered breakdowns did things differently to everyone else.

Jed still didn't understand though. Why had he suffered a breakdown? Archie shrugged. Some people just do.

This fuelled our fascination. A breakdown? What, like a car? Would a man from the AA come round and jump-start Mr Buckley's son, or tow him away in a tow truck? Eager to see how it ended, we sat on the kerb outside our house. Here, we watched the Buckley place for further developments. As we didn't know Mr Buckley's son's name, we started calling him Broken, as in, any sign of Broken Buckley yet? Nope. Oh. OK. After about an hour of watching, we got bored of just sitting, so we played football while we watched, then rode our scooters up and down the pavement, honking our horns at each other.

'You kids shut that row up,' Bob Oswald yelled as he stepped out into the sunshine. And then, seeing Mr Buckley on his knees in his garden, 'Hey, fuckwit, how's your rapist son healing up?' When he didn't get an answer, he spat in Mr Buckley's direction, then got in his jeep and sped off. The deep thud of bass music echoed in his wake.

Mr Buckley stood with a small trowel in his hand and stared off into the distance. He stood there for a long time, then dropped the trowel and went inside. The slam of the door seemed final, but ten or so minutes later Mrs Buckley came out and picked the trowel up. The Buckleys were tidy like that.

Later, when Bob Oswald pulled up in his jeep, Mr Buckley came out of his house as if he'd been waiting. 'You,' he shouted. 'Yes. You.' Bob Oswald got out of his jeep and turned towards Mr Buckley. 'Yes, you,' Mr Buckley repeated. 'I want words with you.'

Bob Oswald raised his eyebrows. He put on a voice that wasn't

his own. 'You talkin' to me?' He was smiling, but he didn't look happy.

Mr Buckley kept right on towards him. 'I don't know how you can live with yourself. My son. He hasn't done anything to you or your family. Now look at him. Your big mouth and your lying bitch of a daughter. You've made him a nervous wreck. You're a wanker. You're complete fucking scum.'

Beside me, Jed sucked his breath in. Even Bob Oswald straightened a little.

'You want to come over here and say that? Or do you want to call the police like last time?'

Mr Buckley kept walking towards him. 'It wasn't my son who shouted rape, was it? Why did you have to go picking on him? Why does it always have to be violence with you? If you had your suspicions, why didn't you just call the police like a civilised human being?' Mr Buckley was in front of Bob Oswald now. Bob Oswald was looking down on him. He had his hands on his hips. His thick black Maori-style tattoos stood out on his arms and his shoulders. Mr Buckley continued. 'My son was just minding his own business. Now he won't even leave his bedroom. All because of your fists and your bitch of a daughter's lies. I don't know –'

Mr Buckley stopped talking when Bob Oswald kneed him between the legs. Mr Buckley cried out and fell down in a heap. Bob Oswald bent low and patted Mr Buckley on the shoulder. Then he made his way back into his house. Drawn out by the sound of raised voices, all five of his daughters were lined up on the front doorstep. They greeted Bob Oswald like he had just done something clever:

Good one, Dad.

That showed him.

The fucker.

Bob Oswald ushered them all inside. As Susan Oswald turned away, she looked over at Jed and smiled. Jed looked down at the ground. I looked at Mr Buckley. He was dragging himself away from the Oswald house, half standing, half on his knees. I felt sorry for him. He looked silly. He looked sad. I shouted, Hello, Mr Buckley, hot today, isn't it? But he ignored me. He went inside.

If Mr Buckley ever tried to have a punch-up with Bob Oswald again, I wasn't there to see it. Come to think of it, the only time I really saw Mr Buckley for a long time after that was whenever he came round to see Archie. I don't think he and my father were friends, exactly, but they were the same age and both supported Southampton, so at least they had that in common. Three or four times a year Mr Buckley would come over with a four-pack of Carlsberg and the two men would swear at the widescreen. Jed would watch as well, so even though I hated football I'd often drift in to join them. As an aside, once Southampton had been beaten, Archie would ask after Mr Buckley's son, who he never referred to by name. How's the boy? Or, how's he doing? Or, any news? But, finally, Archie stopped asking, and I can't really blame him. It's not like he ever got a straight answer. Mr Buckley would shrug and say something like, oh, you know, or, no change, or, same as ever, really. The last time I ever heard Archie ask him, Mr Buckley said nothing. He put his hands over his face and shook his head. When

Mr Buckley's shoulders started to shake, Archie gave me and Jed a tenner to go and buy chips for our tea. As far as I can tell, neither of them mentioned Mr Buckley's son after that. It was as if he no longer existed. He did though, in his bedroom, and one day he would come out.

It wouldn't be for more than a year, though.

This year was long and hard for the Buckleys. Although all charges had been dropped, and although everyone outside of the Oswalds' accepted Susan had been lying, her accusations somehow stuck. This was mostly due to the other Oswald girls, who would scream *rapist* across the street every time they saw a Buckley moving about in broad daylight. Once in a while, minor acts of vandalism occurred – Broken's car had its tyres slashed, and some eggs were thrown at the house that Halloween. Rubbish was tossed into their garden, and cigarettes were stubbed out on their UPVC window frames. Nothing to call the police for. Just enough to make life unpleasant.

If Bob Oswald ever saw Mr Buckley in the street, he would always shout something, but Mr Buckley would never respond. One time, Archie Cunningham intervened on Mr Buckley's behalf. He had just taken Jed and Skunk to see *Revenge of the Sith* at the Odeon in Port Solent, and Mr Buckley was carrying some shopping into his house. Bob Oswald was standing on his doorstep with his huge hands cupped around his huge mouth. 'How's your prick of a son doing, Buckley? Still touching up the kiddies?' Mr Buckley hurried into his house and slammed the door behind him.

Archie said, 'Stay in the car,' then got out and walked to

the edge of the drive. Jed and Skunk wound down the windows so they could hear what the adults were saying.

'Hey, Bob,' Archie shouted. 'You up to speed on your libel laws?'

Bob Oswald turned his gaze from the Buckley house to Archie Cunningham.

'What the fuck's it gotta do with you?'

'Well, if Dave or his son wanted me to represent them, I'd be happy to do it for free. Open-and-shut case, considering the police dropped all charges. Like taking candy off a kid, taking money off you.'

Bob Oswald stared at Archie Cunningham. 'Answer me one question, Cunningham. You let your kids go over the Buckleys'?'

'More often than I let them go over yours.'

Bob Oswald said nothing.

Archie took a steady step forward. 'You watch your big mouth in future. And if you ever want legal aid again don't come running to my firm. Get me?' He stared at Bob Oswald, then turned and ordered Skunk and Jed inside. 'I don't want you playing with the Oswalds any more,' he said as they took their coats off. Skunk and Jed raised their eyebrows: like they ever played with the Oswalds. All of the Oswalds were mental. But so, too, was Broken Buckley: he crouched down by his bedroom window and watched his father scurry away from Bob Oswald, then watched Archie Cunningham shout Bob Oswald down in the street. Fearing Bob Oswald might look up and see him, Broken moved away from the curtains and sat down on the edge of his bed. Hunching his shoulders forwards, he tormented

himself with memories of the day Bob Oswald attacked him. Then he remembered the policemen coming to get him after Susan Oswald accused him of rape. These memories were nothing compared to the day Saskia Oswald came on to him and then laughed at the size of his penis. Why did she have to go and do that? Why did she do that to him? Broken didn't know. He couldn't understand. Still, though, he went through it over and over, hidden away in his box room, curled on his side on his bed. Sometimes, he stared through a gap in the curtains. If he ever saw Bob Oswald, he relived the day of his beating. If he ever saw Saskia Oswald, he stepped quickly away from the window and paced up and down his small room. Outside of his bedroom, the world continued without him. Time passed without him emerging: days and weeks and months. He didn't just refuse to come out – he refused to open the windows or the curtains or even the bedroom door. He went to the toilet in a bucket and brought it out when Mr Buckley was at work and Mrs Buckley was out shopping. For the rest of the time he lived in a strange world of curtains, shadows and dread. His parents were despairing. Mrs Buckley, on the landing:

'Rick. Rick. Are you in there, Rick? Can you hear me? Can I come in? Love? Please? Love? Please?'

Silence. A chair wedged under the handle. If Mrs Buckley listened, she could hear him, breathing. If she came home unexpectedly, she could hear his footsteps, scurrying, up the stairs. Late at night or in the small hours of the morning, she could hear him moving about in the kitchen, making himself something to eat. She would nudge Mr Buckley awake.

'David,' she'd say. 'David. Wake up. Quickly. He's down there. Listen. He's downstairs. He's moving about.'

Mr Buckley wouldn't answer, though he hadn't been asleep. He had been listening too. And thinking. And trying not to cry. In the daytime, he tended dead bodies at the funeral parlour he managed. He sat and watched the bereaved deal with death. He held out tissues. He powdered dry cheeks. He lifted the limbs of virgins and put the corpses of babies in boxes. He applied make-up where coroners cut. And at night-time, in the dark times, he lay on his back and he listened to the ghost of his son scrape around in the kitchen.

His wife said, 'We have to do something.'

'I know. But what can we do?'

'I don't know. But we have to do something.'

'I know. But what can we do?'

Mr Buckley knew what he had to do. He just didn't want to do it. He didn't want to go to the doctor. He didn't want to sit down before a man who was two years younger than he was, a man he remembered from school as a corn-sheaf of a child who would sit at the back of the assembly with a stupid blank expression all over his dim empty face. He didn't want to say, my one son is mad.

My one son is mad.

He never actually said this.

What he said was:

'It's Rick. He's having some problems.'

Dr Carter sat back in his chair and looked at the undertaker with dry biscuit eyes through lashes of dust. He thought about his golf swing.

'Uh-huh.'

Mr Buckley nodded. 'He's not acting himself.'

'Uh-huh.'

Mr Buckley did not say any more.

Dr Carter stared at him. Finally, he relented. 'In what way has he not been acting himself?'

Mr Buckley cleared his throat. Then he shut his eyes. As he talked, he thought of Rick sitting on a swing on an autumn day that had never existed. On this autumn day that had never existed, Mr Buckley was pushing Rick – who was five – higher and higher and higher. Rick was clinging to the thin grey metal chains that held the swing to its rusty old frame. A sharp, dry breeze was blowing leaves into a sandpit and the rest of the playground was empty. *Faster, Daddy, faster.* The sound of laughter. The scrape of leaves. The glint of sunshine through a darkness that hadn't quite fallen. Mr Buckley said, 'He won't leave his room. He won't eat any food that we cook him. He compulsively washes his body. He isn't acting himself.'

Dr Carter shrugged. 'Why don't you tell him to pop down? I'll have a chat.'

'He won't leave his room, let alone the house.'

'Is he being aggressive towards you?'

'No.'

'Then tell him to pop down. I'll have a chat.'

'Doctor. He won't leave his room. Let alone the house.'

Dr Carter shrugged. 'If he's not being aggressive towards you, I can't come out to see him. He's a grown man, Mr Buckley. He has to come here of his own accord.'

Mr Buckley sighed. 'Look,' he said. 'Doctor. We've asked

him to come down and see you, but he won't listen to us. Can't you please come out and see him?'

'Only if he's posing a danger to himself or the general public.'

Mr Buckley rubbed his eyes. 'Doctor. I'm not sure I'm making myself clear here. This is a situation I really struggle to talk about. But my son, Rick, who you've treated all his life, has been through a hard time lately. Ten months ago, he was beaten senseless by a total nutter and then falsely accused and arrested for rape. Since these events have happened, he's hardly left his bedroom, let alone the house. He's lost his job. He's lost contact with his friends. He's become moody and uncommunicative with his mother and myself. I'm worried about his mental health and his physical safety. I've asked him to come and see you, but, as I've already mentioned, he won't leave his room, let alone the house. So, clearly, he's suffering some form of mental illness. So, please, won't you come out and see him?'

Dr Carter blinked. 'I'm sorry, Mr Buckley, but I can't go out and see your son on your say-so unless he's being aggressive or posing a danger. Is he being aggressive or posing a danger?'

Mr Buckley said, 'No.'

'Then I'm afraid I can't come out and see him. You'll have to get him to come here.'

Mr Buckley said, 'Christ.'

Dr Carter blinked. 'There's no need to be aggressive.'

Mr Buckley left.

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