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Opening Extract from...

Trackman

Written by Catriona Child

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Mad About the Boy

Davie dropped the orange juice.

THE SINGING ECHOES around me and bounces off the walls of the underpass like a rubber ball; I flinch as it whizzes past my face. There's a group of lads standing in the centre of the walkway. The lights in the ceiling are red and give a pink tinge to their hair and faces. One of them's got a guitar which he strums away on. Another is banging out the beat on the wall with a couple of drum sticks. He tap, tap, taps against the brickwork. Another three lads are singing, while a tall guy films them all on his mobile; he shouts directions like he's fucking Steven Spielberg or someone.

I duck as I pass by: don't want to ruin the shot.

'Cheers mate,' Spielberg gives me the thumbs up.

I nod, and carry on through the underpass.

A gutter runs along the edge of the wall; it's full of manky water, pish and dog shite. A syringe lies amongst the crisp bags and the empty cans. Graffiti slides down the anti-vandalism varnish, like trying to paint over crayon.

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Davie saw his parents at the far end of the corridor; they sat with their backs against the wall. It looked like they were waiting outside the headmaster's office.

I leave the underpass and smell freshly-made pizza as it wafts from the vents of Domino's on the corner. It smells good, but I carry on. I can't stop. Got to keep moving. Keep moving. One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg. I head along Dalry towards Haymarket station. As I get nearer I can hear the muffled voice of the tannoy, and the sound of the trains as they approach the platforms.

Hello, goodbye.

People leaving Edinburgh, people arriving.

I'm going to Australia, Davie, I don't know for how long.

The streets are busy and it's not even hit peak tourist-time yet. I get stuck behind a couple holding hands who take up the whole pavement. I walk on their shoulders, skulk right behind them, but they don't take any notice. In the end I jump down onto the road, jog past them and hop back up onto the pavement. I'm all nervous energy tonight: got to keep moving, keep moving, keep moving.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

As I near Princes Street, I can hear the piped shortbread music blaring out from the tourist shops. It's almost ten for

fuck sake; who needs towels that look like a kilt at this time of the night? Who needs them at all?

The lights are on in the castle and it hangs above everything, like someone was playing pin the castle on the city.

Then it disappeared in the mist.

It looks out of place compared to the shitty, breeze-block shops down here at street level. The shops shrink in embarrassment; faced with the castle in all its glory.

I'm not ready to stand still yet, so I take a detour onto George Street: walk round the block first. I don't know what's wrong with me tonight. Maybe I've absorbed some of Lewis's excitement. Tonight feels like a big deal all of a sudden.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

I pretend I'm Pacman as I follow the block round.

Forward, forward, forward.

Right turn.

Forward, forward, forward, eat annoying tourist.

Right turn.

Forward, forward, forward.

Back onto Princes Street and the queue from Waterstone's is already snaking round the corner and out of sight. There's still two hours to go. Two hours of standing still in a queue. One finger, one thumb.

I better go join it though; don't want to let him down.

I follow the queue round onto the cobbles of Rose Street, past the dingy pubs and the independent shops. The queue stops outside Dirty Dick's and I'm tempted to go in for a pint. I think of my promise to Lewey though and I join the queue. He's the reason I'm here after all.

There's a few folk outside the pub smoking. I can hear the murmur of conversation and the clinking of glasses from inside. A hen party walks past. They're dressed in identical pink t-shirts; a photo of the bride-to-be pulled panoramic across

their chests. The cobbled street is causing them some problems and they totter in their heels, swaying from side to side and clutching on to each other for support as they scream and laugh.

I step from one foot to the other. Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

Don't think about why you're here on your own.

Don't think about why you're here on your own.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

The queue grows as I wait. I stand on my tiptoes and strain my neck to peer over the folk behind me, but I can't see where the end is anymore. A lot of people in the queue have really made an effort: turned up in costumes and fancy dress. I feel totally out of place here. On my own. Fidgeting. Lewis would have loved it.

He should be here, not me.

Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving, one finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

In a parallel universe, Lewis is queuing up to get his own book.

There's a couple of women behind me, wearing witch costumes, who keep blowing cigarette smoke into my face. It's making me want a fag even though I quit ages ago. I want to tell them to stop being so fucking ignorant, stop exhaling in my face, but I'm enjoying the second-hand smoke and I breathe it in.

Hold it inside me.

There are breathing exercises you can try, they should help you to relax if you find it's all becoming too much.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Breathe out.

They've got a wee lassie with them who doesn't even look old enough to be able to read. She's all dressed up in a school uniform, complete with bushy wig and magic wand. Another hen party stops when they see her.

'Aaawwww, look at the wee lassie.'

'Oh my God, she's gorgeous.'

'Hey, Annie, she should be your flower girl, imagine, eh?'

The wee girl points the plastic wand at them, makes them all laugh. I can see it in her eyes though: she's cursing them all.

'Hi, I'm Andy from the *Evening News*. Do you mind if I take a few photos for the paper?'

A guy stops in front of 'Hermione' and the chain-smoking witches. He's carrying a fancy looking camera and pulls an identity card out from underneath his jacket. The card hangs on a cord around his neck, tangled up in his camera strap. I glance at the photo on the card, hope it's not an example of his photography skills.

The witches chuck their fags away and push Hermione towards the photographer. One half-finished fag lies between two cobble stones. The end is still lit and smoke curls from the orange glow.

Loosen your clothing, then sit with your back against the wall.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

I'm about to bend down and pick it up, when someone arrives with a big fuck-off owl. Where the hell did they get that from?

Hermione looks terrified as the owl is placed on her shoulder. I watch its talons curl and clamp onto her. It would be so easy for those claws to pierce the skin; pierce the skin and

carry her off like a lamb. Those witches need to be more careful. All it takes is one bad decision. Just one mistake and you're left wishing you had a reset button.

'Okay, sweetheart? That's great. Can I get a wee smile now? Brilliant.'

Andy from the *Evening News* starts clicking away. A few of the hen party try to get in the shot, and then folk from outside Dirty Dick's hold up their phones and take photos, beckon inside for their friends to come out and see this.

The owl rises up and flaps its wings; a gust of air blows across me and the feathers brush against my face.

'Jesus.'

The owl turns its head around, like that lassie out of *The Exorcist*. It stares right at me. Huge yellow eyes. Not blinking. Staring me out.

I get the feeling it knows something I don't.

I blink and break eye contact. Can still see its eyes flashing at me when I turn away, like I've been looking directly into a light bulb. The orbs follow me and I shut my eyes. When I open them again the owl and the photographer are gone. Off to find someone else who looks daft enough to make the paper.

I shiver. Someone walking over my grave.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg, one nod of the head, keep moving, keep moving, keep moving.

Someone inside Dirty Dick's drops a glass, and a cheer goes up from the pub.

Are you going for a drink after work?

Aye, you?

Yeah.

I button up my denim jacket. The temperature's dropped since I got here. A group of lassies pass by, wearing hardly any clothes. How do they do it?

My glasses are smudged so I wipe them on my t-shirt.

Everything's a blur without them on. It's all shapes and colours, nothing has a proper outline.

Without my glasses on, I can pretend the shadow next to me is him: Lewis, waiting with me.

You know, in the 'In Bloom' video?

One arm, one leg, one nod of the head.

The folk walking by get drunker and drunker the closer it gets to midnight.

'Harry dies!' some knob-end shouts.

His friends all laugh like he's just come out with a line to rival Billy Connolly. Like he's the first one to have thought of it. His hair looks like someone filled a watering can with bleach and sprinkled it over his head: Derek Riordan, eat your heart out.

Fuck, I need to calm down.

Start by breathing out. Then breathe in.

Maybe I should ask one of the witches for a fag? One finger, one thumb.

The queue seems to be moving, but we're not going forward, just huddling closer together. The witches are taking it in turns to hold a sleeping Hermione while the other one smokes. I could ask them for a fag. Just one. Hermione's wand is lying on the ground so I pick it up and tap it against my chest.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, keep moving, keep moving, keep moving.

It hits off something inside my jacket pocket and I remember the MP3 player I've got shoved in there. I'm not sure why I've got it with me. It's not really mine and I don't know how to work it.

There's something about it though.

The One Dread Guy stopped Davie as he walked home from work.

Hey you, son, come here.

Davie had never heard the Guy speak before: softly spoken for such a grizzly man.

Aye, what is it? Davie replied, and dug about in his pocket for some loose change.

I have to give you something.

Eh?

Davie had never heard a homeless guy offer to give something away before. The One Dread Guy's life existed in six scabby rucksacks, but he wanted to give something away.

Come here, I've to give you him, Archie says I've got to.

Who's Archie?

Archie, my friend Archie.

Don't worry about it, eh?

The One Dread Guy pulled a pair of headphones off his head. They slid down the matted rectangle of hair hanging down his back like a paddle. His hair and shoulders were littered with flakes, a scrunched up bag of cheese and onion crisps.

Here, take it. The One Dread Guy held something in his hand.

His fingers were swollen and grubby, the knuckles all cracked and bruised. There was a rectangular scar on each palm, like he'd been burnt by something and the shape of it had melted onto his skin. He offered the MP3 player to Davie.

I don't want it, you keep it.

No, Archie told me.

The Guy took a step towards Davie. Davie held his breath against the stale, unwashed smell of him.

Yours now, the Guy said and pushed the MP3 player into Davie's chest. The Guy's breath was warm and sticky; it coated Davie's face with a layer of slime.

What is it? Davie asked.

You'll find out, the Guy replied.

Davie watched as the Guy swung rucksack after rucksack onto his back and shuffled away, muttering to himself.

Davie wiped the player on his jeans. It was covered in greasy fingerprints and looked broken. The screen was blank and there was a crack down one side.

Davie was about to leave the MP3 player lying on the pavement when something stopped him. A voice in his head.

You'll regret it if you leave it. You'll only come back for it later.

It felt valuable. Davie couldn't leave it in the same way he couldn't leave his wallet, his keys, his phone.

Not only that, he had a sudden urge to put the headphones on.

I take the player out of my pocket and turn it over and over in my hands. The headphones are jammed inside the player and won't come out. They've got hinges on them so they can fold up. The hinges are stiff and covered in rust. I slide them backwards and forwards. Open. Closed. Open. Closed. Open. Closed.

The player doesn't have any buttons on it: no volume control, no power switch, no Play button. It's weird.

Maybe the One Dread Guy just used it to keep his ears warm out on the street? I've been carrying it around with me ever since he gave me it. I don't know why.

There's just something about it.

I'm still looking at it when the countdown begins. It starts in front of me, but then dominoes back along the rest of the queue.

'10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, **3, 2, 1!**'

Everyone cheers as midnight strikes, and I hear a few watch and phone alarms going off. I'm an imposter. It shouldn't be me who's here. I don't deserve to be part of this. It's like I'm at a gig and the lead singer has just stopped singing in the middle of a song. He's held his microphone out

so the crowd can sing for him, and I'm the only one there who doesn't know the words.

I just stand in silence, while everyone around me joins in the shared moment.

One arm, one leg, one nod of the head, keep moving, keep moving.

The countdown turns out to be a bit of an anti-climax, as the queue remains motionless and it's two in the morning before I finally make it to the till with Lewis's copy of the book. It's way too late to go and see him now. He'll have to wait.

A lassie hands me a helium balloon as I leave Waterstone's.

I head home up Lothian Road, a Jekyll and Hyde part of Edinburgh: office workers by day, sleazy clubbers by night. 'Saunas' and lap-dancing clubs squeeze out from where they've been hiding between the sandwich shops.

We only come out at night.

I'm Mario in a platform game now. I let old-school Gameboy tunes play in my head as I manoeuvre my feet home.

Dodge drunk man.

Leap pile of sick.

Duck seagull carrying chip.

Leap more sick.

Head-butt block and collect mushroom.

'Hey, can I have that balloon?' a drunken lassie grabs my arm as I walk past her.

I ignore her and continue walking.

'I asked you a question.'

She follows me along the pavement, then swats the balloon with her handbag. It hits off the side of my head and makes that deep, echoey noise that only helium balloons can make.

'Get your own.'

Keep moving, keep moving. One finger, one thumb.

'Please, it's my birthday,' she says as she stumbles against a shop window.

I stop and look at her as she slides down the glass.

'Aye, alright.' I give her the balloon and leave her sitting on the pavement with it as I continue on home.

One finger, one thumb, one arm, one leg.