

THE SNOWMAN & THE SCARECROW

(Another Dark Comedy for Grown-Ups)

Adrian Baldwin

Also by Adrian Baldwin

BARNACLE BRAT
STANLEY McCLOUD MUST DIE!

Dark Comedy Fiction

Books: Novels and Short Stories
for Grown-Ups

Welcome to my World

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This one's for Harry, Keira and Jamie.

Acknowledgements and the usual Warning

Firstly, the warning: As it states on the cover, this is a novel aimed at *grown-ups*. The story is *not* for youngsters. Why? Because some of my characters use Adult Language; often foul, blasphemous, or sexually charged – on several occasions, *all three*. I didn't necessarily *want* them to but sometimes they insisted. That's characters for you! Some of them can be a right bunch of f***ers.

Okay, now I've got that out of the way, the acknowledgements:

I'd like to gratefully recognise the help of some very important members of my team: Harry Baldwin, who checked that teenage parlance and attitude were reasonably realistic and not just the 'down with the kids' ramblings of an old fart; and of course, Maggie Fitzpatrick-Reeves and Bronwen Burgess for their continued and indispensable assistance, wherever it was necessary, with grammar, spelling, punctuation, ideas, continuity, facts, logic, clarity and all that other good stuff where I goofed from time to time.

Oh, and Americans please note: the British English spelling of words has been used throughout.

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(Perhaps one day I'll be able to afford a proper artist!)

THE SNOWMAN & THE SCARECROW

(Another Dark Comedy for Grown-Ups)

‘Never play to the gallery. Never work for other people. It’s terribly dangerous for an artist to fulfil other people’s expectations. They generally produce their worst work that way. And if you feel safe in the area you’re working in, you’re not working in the right area. Always go a little further into the water than you feel you can cope with. Go a little bit out of your depth. And when you don’t feel that your feet are quite touching the bottom, you’re just about in the right place to do something exciting.’

- David Bowie

PROLOGUE

Setting the Scene

Picture if you will a high panoramic view of timeless countryside, verdant and rolling, crisp and cold, under a sharp, bright winter sky. And as we glide, sailing as if cloud, we hear a voice, almost godlike; resonant, pervasive and wise; an utterance that somehow makes us feel it possesses knowledge of things that we do not.

‘All over the world,’ informs the voice, ‘in rural villages and small towns off the beaten track, country folk have told tales for millennia of bygone heroes, enchantment and magic, local legends of the supernatural, strange events and mythological beings. Stories handed down through generations.’

The accent is difficult to pin down; somewhere between cool, gentle African-American, and calm, well-informed Brit; it is authoritative, reassuring and confident – with perhaps just a dash of swagger or flamboyance. If this were a film, it would surely have required a seasoned actor to narrate: Morgan Freeman or John Hurt perhaps; Alan Rickman, Sam Elliot or Samuel L. Jackson – maybe Christopher Walken or Geoffrey Rush. Imagine whoever you like, it’s all good as they say, but for best results choose someone with absolute reliability, a mellow soothing tone and genuine gravitas. Actually, as we are in Wales, perhaps we could agree to settle on Sir Anthony Hopkins . . .

‘And whatever the tale, good or bad, funny or sad,’ continues the voice, ‘it would normally find an enthusiastic audience, eager to hear more. Storytelling has a long tradition in the countryside.’

Field after field passes below: farming land; agricultural heaven – and we begin to descend, softly, by degrees.

‘Of course, not all stories are spiritually edifying, sometimes they’re simply tales of what’s been happening in the neighbourhood, and to whom. Not stories at all. Not really – not in the true sense of the word – just gossip, hearsay and tittle-tattle, and, frankly, of little interest. No, what we desire are unforgettable urban myths, hypnotic works of fiction . . . ripping yarns.’

Moving lower, ancient countryside gently rising, the land draws us in towards its crops and gorse and stationary sheep then aims us in the direction of a small, backwater market town in the near distance. We soar over trees, low stone walls and yet more fields, one of which contains a handful of static caravans where, atop one of the parked homes, caw four crows – technically enough for a murder.

‘Prepare to meet Joseph Edward Evans,’ advises the narrator, ‘son of Paul Evans, grandson of Wilfred Evans, and great-grandson of Percy Evans . . . or just Joe to his friends.’

Sweeping over the town we spot a small school and swoop down as if we were a wing-suited skydiver or stooping falcon. We skim over school grounds, breach swinging doors (the main building’s entrance), shoulder-surf a corridor, turn a corner, fly around another, then exit a high open window before finally slowing to a stop on the far side of the playground. (It would have been quicker to simply travel here directly but never mind, the scenic route is always nice.) And here we hover, ghostlike, at a height of eight-to-ten feet, above a group of kids, teenagers mostly but only just; close enough to feel their edginess, catch a rolled eye and stifled yawn, sense their growing restlessness: a heightening frustration with the one doing all the talking.

‘Joe is twelve,’ speaks the voice, ‘and like his grandfather and great-grandfather before him, Joe loves to tell stories.’

Cheeky-faced, a frizzy Fro of curly red hair and affable manner, Joe appears happy, healthy, if a tad overweight, and, though jocular by nature, sad to say, somewhat blind to rising waves of apathy. On and on he drones – something about a toad, a scorpion, and a river – addressing a crescent moon of his peers, oblivious, it seems, to their rapidly diminishing levels of attentiveness.

‘But, despite Joe’s charming nature,’ continues the narrator, ‘he’d never really grasped the true magic of storytelling. Try as he may, he just wasn’t very good at it. Shall we listen for a moment?’

‘So the frog said he would take the scorpion, on his back, over the river,’ spouts Joe, ‘but when he got halfway across, the scorpion *did* sting him. “But why?” asked the frog sinking.’ Joe mimes an amphibious drowning. ‘ “Why did you do that? Now we’ll both drown.” “I couldn’t help myself,” said the scorpion. “It’s my nature.” ’

To a chorus of disappointed grumbles the audience quickly dissolves and drifts away to classes. Joe is left shouting ineffective explanations at parting backs.

‘Don’t you get it? *His nature!*’ Fleshy fingers find chunky hips. ‘The scorpion couldn’t help himself,’ he calls. ‘It’s his nature!’

‘Like I said, not very good at it.’

‘But it’s Aesop! Aesop’s fables,’ appeals Joe. ‘Don’t any of you read?’

‘All that would soon change, though,’ narrates the voice, ‘and in a most sudden and spectacular way. I’ll meet Joe in a little while. And you will meet me.’

CHAPTER 1

Let it Snow

The room has a strong snow theme: Raymond Briggs Snowman bedding; model AT-AT (snow-walking vehicle from *The Empire Strikes Back*) on the bedside table; snowscape pictures and posters; and the remaining wall space taken up by lines of shelves: one a display shelf for a multitude of snow-globes, the rest home to several rows of books:

All of *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* novels, every *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, and the *Percy Jackson* series, to name just a few.

Had you been here a few hours ago you would have found him with his nose buried in Stephen King's *The Eyes of the Dragon*.

He's not reading now.

Joe, currently sporting a brown dressing gown over blue-and-white striped pyjamas, is playing an MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) computer war game. He's trying hard to be helpful to his teammates, offering directives or following instructions, but he keeps dying; his on-screen character suffering a variety of sudden demises: explosion, sniped from distance, machine-gunned or knifed at close-quarters, flattened by speeding Humvee, that kind of thing.

'Oh come on!' barks Joe as he's fragmented by a grenade. 'Again? Seriously?!'

'Boom!' squawks a thin, tinny voice.

'Never mind, Joe,' encourages another filtered voice through the background of laughter. 'We'll get you back at the next spawn point.'

'Joe? Joe, you there?' asks the discarded headset as the battle rages on around Joe's dismembered corpse, his mates still playing like pros despite being outnumbered by oncoming enemies.

'Shit, Joe, you've not fuckin' rage quit again, have you?' barks a third voice.

'Not having much luck, Joe?' This question posed by the grizzle-haired chap in the doorway. 'I did knock.'

'Nah, it's fine, Gramps, come in – stupid game anyway.'

Joe turns off the monitor and unplugs his headphones. He kicks off his Snowman slippers, shrugs off his dressing gown, jumps into bed and slips under the 'We're Flying Through The Air' quilt.

Joe's grandfather walks his white whiskers over to the bed, sits beside his grandson, and beams a smile as warm as his big old heart. Wilf may be late seventies, slightly bowlegged and missing a tooth or two, but he doesn't look a day over sixty-five. Not in Joe's eyes.

'Ready for a story?' asks Wilf.

A spirited nod from Joe.

'Okay, you shuffle.'

Wilf hands over a pack of cards and Joe shuffles awkwardly; for these are not the usual set of fifty-two – here there are at least a couple of hundred cards, maybe more.

'You sure you don't want to tell? It'd be good practise.'

'No, you.'

Wilf tugs an imaginary cap. 'Well, alright, sir.'

Not the smoothest of shuffles but Joe's pink and portly fingers mix well enough. Only one card spills: it lands face up on the quilt. Queen of Spades? Seven of Diamonds? No, for these are not playing cards at all; these cards contain neither suits nor values Ace through King – indeed they bear no relationship to the traditional pack everyone is familiar with. These cards contain only words; mostly nouns but some verbs and adjectives – one word per card, and each unique.

In the case of the fallen card, the word is Pitchfork.

'Okay, let's take that as our first,' smiles Wilf. 'One last shuffle, Joe, then pick the other four; no looking, mind – one discard.'

'I know, I know,' frowns Joe playfully.

'Bit old for bedtime stories, isn't he?' huffs Paul staring at the living-room ceiling.

'He's twelve,' Sally reminds him.

'Exactly; he'll be thirteen in a few weeks – a teenager.'

'This from the man who still thinks it's okay to tell him what to wear.'

'Have you seen the latest clothes in his wardrobe?'

'Of course I have, who do you think bought them?'

'He'll be a laughing stock, if he isn't already.'

'Jeez, give it a rest, Paul,' chides Sally, a warm, pretty woman with large red specs and prominent prenatal bump. 'They all wear stuff like that now, you old fuddy-duddy.'

'What next? One of those weird side-cuts?'

'Maybe. Why not?'

'No, no, I'm not having it.'

Paul jumps off the sofa and paces the room.

Sally removes her glasses and stares at her husband. Paul Evans is a short, tubby man of forty-five with thinning hair forever volumised by hairdryer and/or product: spray, gel, mousse and wax – you name it; Paul uses it.

‘I happen to think he’d look good with a side-cut,’ adds Sally. ‘And stop pacing; you know it does my head in.’

‘No, no, no, it’s all going too far. And I’m sorry, but I blame you. If you didn’t—’

‘Ooh,’ winces Sally leaning forward on the sofa.

‘What is it?’

‘Probably just junior,’ fibs Sally, a convenient white lie to shutdown her husband. Once Paul gets on a roll . . .

‘Maybe we should call a doctor. That’s the third today.’

‘I’m fine. I’ll take a fresh glass of water, though.’

‘Sure. You just relax and I’ll be right back.’

And with that Paul heads off to the kitchen.

‘No hurry,’ whispers Sally. She pops her glasses back on and returns to her book, a horror anthology of clown-based short stories. ‘Relax,’ she scoffs. ‘Not sure how I’m meant to do that with Snappy McShortfuse always up and down.’ She eyes her swollen tummy and nods as if she heard it speak. ‘That’s true,’ she responds, patting him or her. ‘And trust me; I would have a spliff if it wasn’t for you, my precious little passenger.’

‘– Coming over the horizon with his hair on fire,’ relates Wilf patting his bald spot excitedly. ‘And all the villagers followed behind him, a huge crowd of them; waving their pitchforks and shouting: “We know what you did! We know what you did!” And so that was the end of him.’

‘Wow that was awesome.’

‘Well, that’s very kind.’ Wilf collects the four word cards: CONSPIRACY, FIRE, AMBIGUOUS and PITCHFORK (currently face-up on the quilt) and returns them to the pack. ‘But I’m sure you’d have come up with something far more interesting.’

‘Not bloody likely, cobber,’ quips Joe in his best Australian accent.

‘Don’t tell me . . . cockney,’ teases Wilf.

‘Was it that good?’

‘Nailed it.’

‘Yeah, right,’ laments Joe.

‘Better than Dick Van Dyke.’

‘Who?’

‘Mary Poppins.’

‘Never read it.’

And with that, Joe is up on his knees; opening the blizzard-themed curtains to peek outside. But even as Wilf is placing the card deck on the bedside unit, Joe, disappointed, has already redrawn his curtains.

‘Nothing?’

‘Nope.’

‘Never mind.’

Joe snatches up a snow-globe and shakes it violently.

Wilf had witnessed Joe’s temper tantrums before: he takes after Paul, his dad; who certainly didn’t get it from his dad – Wilf has always been the most patient of men. No, they could thank Wilf’s wife, Joan, bless her, for any shortness in the fuse department. Lord, when she got one on her, you better watch out.

‘What are you thinking about, Gramps?’

‘I’m thinking you should stop being Mr Angry and put that down before you shake it to pieces.’

Wilf eases the globe from Joe and sets it on the bedside table.

‘Do you think it will snow for us tomorrow, Gramps?’

Joe leans and peers into the globe at close quarters, his blinking, magnified eye looming large as it scrutinises the tiny snowman caught in a maelstrom of swirling snow.

‘If we think about it hard enough, we can make anything happen. Haven’t I always told you that? Now you settle down and I’ll see you in the morning.’

Joe snuggles down, a cherub face lit by soft lamplight.

‘Merry Christmas, Gramps.’

‘Merry Christmas, Joe.’

Wilf kisses his grandson’s forehead and reaches past the framed photo; a picture of himself pulling Joe (4) on a sled (both dressed in winter clothing: Joe in a bright red anorak, Wilf in a checked cap and matching scarf). He clicks off the lamp, pads across the darkened room, and gently closes the door as Joe whispers wishfully:

‘Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.’

In Mid Wales it usually does snow at Christmas; indeed, Joe had never known it not to, but he was smart enough to know it wasn’t guaranteed.

‘Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow,’ he repeats quietly, the silvery snow of the snow-globe still to settle around the snowman.

A telescope lens, cracked and grubby, watches the jittery blue square of bedroom curtain turn dark, and from its lofty viewpoint it scopes left, down, and right, scouring the house windows for an illuminated room.

Downstairs, a man has brought a woman a drink. She (Sally) has him (Paul) set it on the coffee table then appears to send him off for something else.

The lens judders upon this scene for a moment before blurring upward, where it finds a girl on a sewing machine.

The girl is Lucy, Joe's sister. Lucy is sixteen, has wild, frizzy red hair, and a thing for fashion. She's currently dressed in a homemade 'Welsh Girls Rule' T-shirt under a fluffy candy-pink dressing gown – which she also made. Her head nods rhythmically to whatever is playing through the wires dangling from her ears as she turns a garment under the bobbing needle.

Glassing back to the ground floor, Paul, now kneeling by the coffee table, squirts foot moisturiser from a dispenser, spreads it over his fingers then rubs his wife's raised feet.

The lens, shaky but persistent, hooks to the shapely, arched feet as hairy hands work lotion into soles, the dorsal muscles, around ankles and heels, and between every toe . . .

How do you see it over there; slow and workmanlike – or intimate and sensual? Here, inside the telescope, the image sharpens, blurs, then quickly sharpens again; a sense of enthusiasm conveyed through a jerky lens and the eye of the beholder's keenness to remain zeroed in.

CHAPTER 2

Winter Wonderland

Joe's back garden is thick with snow and clunky-clanky noises ring out from the rickety old shed; a relic from World War II by the looks of it. A rusty nameplate reads WILF'S WORKSHOP. The shed roof, like the surrounding house roofs, holds several inches of snow.

'Here we are,' beams Wilf emerging from the shed with a large metal funnel, 'how about this?'

Joe offers a mittened thumbs-up and Wilf joins him by a large snowman, over six-foot and stout. The old man lifts his grandson, no mean feat, and Joe places the funnel on the snowman's head. After Joe is landed, Wilf takes a moment to straighten his aging spine, and the pair step back to admire their handiwork.

'Well done, Joe. That's finished him off nicely.'

Joe nods in agreement. 'He's cool.'

In addition to the funnel for a makeshift hat, the snowman has one of Paul's old rugby scarves tied around his neck and a pair of gardening gloves stuck on the ends of sticks for arms. He also has a pine cone nose, one and a half Oreo cookie eyes (the half eye a wink of sorts), a banana smile, and some of Lucy's buttons for . . . well, buttons.

'Is he leaning slightly?' asks Joe tilting his head.

'No, I don't think so.'

'I think he is.'

'Well, if he is, that's okay. It gives him character.'

'Agreed,' nods Joe. 'So, now we just need a name.'

Christmas Day morning had passed in the usual manner: the exchanging of presents, wrapping paper everywhere, hugs and Thank You and You're Welcomes. Joe received a Kindle Paperwhite and £100 worth of Amazon gift vouchers (redeemable for Kindle e-Books) from Wilf. Mum and Dad's present was a bike. Not the Mountain bike Joe had asked for, not the Mountain bike Paul had been instructed to buy – no, he'd unwrapped a Raleigh Chopper! Paul had always wanted one when he was a youngster but never did get one; which is why he'd thought Joe would *really* appreciate the surprise. After all, every kid and his dog ride a Mountain bike. On *this*, Joe would be special; different; stand out from the crowd – all the things Joe did *not* want. The Chopper would most likely never see the light of day, unless Paul

took it for a spin. Not if it was up to Joe. Although he was too big for his old 'kiddie' bike, Joe vowed he'd be *walking* to school rather than ride this ancient article.

'But it's a classic,' Paul declared upon seeing Joe and Sally's faces drop. 'A fully refurbished Mark One . . . padded high-back seat, ape-hanger handle bars . . . it's retro chic.'

'Never mind, Joe,' comforted Sally. 'Your dad will take it back and get it changed.'

But Paul hadn't purchased the Chopper from the local bike shop, he'd bought it at a car boot sale; so that was that – and anyway, 'tis the season to be jolly, they could talk about bikes tomorrow. Christmas Day would not be spoiled by a 'wrong' bike. Indeed, other than his dad's usual gaffe, Joe was having a wonderful day: he'd already bought half a dozen e-Books for his new Kindle, he still had the snow to look forward to – the traditional building of a snowman – and we haven't even mentioned *Lucy's* present: a handmade backpack in the style of one her brother's favourite Star Wars characters. Now that was the kind of 'special' he didn't mind.

'Wow, check this out.' And Joe had modelled the backpack using the room as a catwalk.

'Ooh, that's nice, Joe,' Sally beamed.

'Honestly, Lucy, you're a genius on that machine of yours,' Wilf had added.

And after they'd played some traditional festive games, including the annual round of family Monopoly, the Evans' had tucked into a wonderful Christmas lunch; cooked by Sally, assisted by Lucy and Wilf, and served by Joe. Everyone enjoyed it immensely. This was followed by homemade eggnog (just a tiny glass for Sally after Paul had taken charge of adding the brandy and poured in far too much) and crackers and terrible jokes and Joe asking for seconds of pudding.

'Okay, so whose turn is it this time?' asks Wilf.

'Yours,' points Joe.

'Are you sure?'

Joe nods.

'Alright,' concedes Wilf.

They consider their snowman.

'How about . . . Mr Coney.'

'Love it.'

Joe breathes into his mittens, rubs them together.

'You know, because of the pine-cone nose and the funnel being kinda cone-shaped—'

‘Yeah, yeah, I got that, Gramps,’ smiles Joe.

‘Or it could be Mr Winky,’ suggests Wilf, referring to the snowman’s one-eye-open one-eye-closed appearance; an effect enhanced by the clever addition of two short lengths of coloured string which lend a quizzical one eyebrow-up, one eyebrow-down demeanour.

‘Oh, I love that too,’ enthuses Joe. ‘Coney or Winky?’

‘Or . . .’ suggests Wilf, ‘we could combine the two.’

‘Mr *Kinky*?’ frowns Joe.

‘Hmm, I was actually thinking Mr *Wonky*,’ muses Wilf playfully, ‘but—’

‘No, no, I love it,’ fizzles Joe.

‘Then it’s settled,’ announces Wilf. ‘Mr *Wonky* it is.’

‘He has to be the tallest yet.’

‘Easily,’ agrees Wilf. ‘The twelfth white Christmas Day in a row – not bad, eh?’

‘See, I told you it would snow,’ teases Joe.

‘Why you—’ laughs Wilf.

‘Grrr,’ grumbles Joe.

‘Now what’s the matter?’

‘It’s fallen off again!’

‘Hey, what happened to not taking things too seriously?’

‘I’m not.’

Wilf raises his eyebrows. ‘We talked about this.’

‘I know – *enjoy life* – it’s just a bit annoying, that’s all.’

‘Is it though?’ asks Wilf. ‘We’re full of festive pud; it’s a lovely snowy day; we’ve got our Christmas snowman – and guess what time it is: it’s time to—’

‘Oh, this is ridiculous,’ growls Joe as Mr *Wonky*’s nose drops off again. ‘It won’t stay on!’

‘Here, let me.’ Wilf takes possession of the pine-cone.

‘Ho, ho, ho!’ chortles a voice.

Joe and Wilf turn to find Sally, materialised at the back door, head to foot in a Santa onesie and black rubber boots.

‘I said: Ho, ho, ho,’ repeats Mrs Claus in the deepest tone she can muster, rubbing her Santa belly, no padding required, ‘and a *very* Merry Christmas. I hear someone needs a photo taken.’

‘Yes,’ smiles Wilf, ‘we must keep our snowman collection going, eh, Joe? It might be unlucky to break the cycle.’ He reunites Mr *Wonky* with his nose and this time it sticks.

‘Okay, Mum, we’re ready.’

‘Good job I brought the camera, then,’ Sally grins through her fluffy Santa beard. And from the sack tied to her belt she whips out a Polaroid camera.

'Positions, Joe,' urges Wilf.

Joe claps his hands, the joy of anticipation illuminating his face. He shuffles and stands at Mr Wonky's right. Wilf takes up position on the snowman's left.

'That's good,' smiles Sally. 'Just move in a little – okay, a bit more . . .'

'Another one for the album,' enthuses Joe.

'Now say Cheese,' Sally directs.

'Cheeeeeese,' grins Joe.

'Jeez,' grimaces Wilf.

'Wilf?' barks Sally lowering the camera. 'Are you okay? What's wrong?'

Clutching his chest, Wilf collapses into the snow.

Sally rushes forward, accidentally snapping a photo; it drops from the camera and lands face up, a small fuzzy grey square upon a vastness of glittering white.

'Wilf, speak to me! What is it, your heart? Oh, Wilf.'

Joe backs away in horror, mittens to face, not knowing what to do, deaf to mother's fraught call for an ambulance on her mobile; oblivious, he sees nothing beyond the all-encompassing vision of his treasured grandfather twitching in the snow – wheezing, gasping, and sweating despite the cold, the old man never looked older. Sally, breath misty and hurried, unties the knot of Wilf's scarf and opens his coat.

'Just rest, Wilf, an ambulance is on its way,' she soothes. 'Be here soon. Joe, go inside and fetch your dad.'

But for Joe, Time has frozen, he's stuck in a vortex, not hearing anymore; what with the confusion, dread and panic, his mind has jumped and he's now in his safe place: the Ice Cave, a cathedral-like rock cavern deep underground, the silent sanctuary his mind sometimes flees to when things are too much; big things, like when his missing babysitter turned up murdered (her head in Llandudno, her body in Aberystwyth), or small things, like that time at school when someone hid his towel and every piece of clothing whilst he showered after Swim Club – to Joe, equally traumatic events in their own way. And though he isn't aware that the switch from Real world to Safe world is sometimes involuntary, sometimes sought; it happens regardless – this matters not, for in his cave he is safe, at least for a while. Whether it proves to be a temporary ill-wind blowing beyond the mouth of the cave, or is, in fact, a long-lasting shit-storm; within, the boy has a chance to gather his thoughts, have a word with himself, to re-read the countless signs stuck to the rock walls; the words of his grandfather – advice he's imparted over the years: Keep On

Keeping On, Joe; Don't Let Things Get You Down, Lad; Bounce Back; Never Give Up; Seize the Day; Anything is Possible—

'Joe,' echoes a voice. '*Joe!*'

Joe becomes vaguely aware of a sound not unlike his mother.

'*Please, Joe,*' repeats Sally, soft but firm.

With a shake Joe is jerked from his ice cave.

'Come on, Joe, snap out of it. I need you to fetch your dad.'

But Joe's manner is that of a faulty wind-up toy, his distressed feet crunching back and forth, back and forth, trampling snow as he searches for a meaningful action, a valid idea, or just a word, any word, but finds not a one – he produces nothing but a noise, guttural and heartbreaking, almost primal.

'*Joe! Go inside and fetch your dad. Do it now.*'

Again the boy fails to move toward the house. Sally senses her son has already fallen back into his ice cave.

'Paul!' she yells. '*Paul!*'

And on that plaintive cry, not wishing to appear ghoulish, let us allow Wilf, Sally, and the pacing Joe, a little privacy; let's frame out the commotion and focus instead on the still developing Polaroid . . .

Closer, please.

Closer.

Note the blurry photograph keenly; watch as it continues to develop, slowly, quietly, unaffected by the pandemonium beyond its borders – the colours taking shape, the image deepening, its definition intensifying: a section of Mr Wonky's midriff, Wilf at an acute angle aimed for snow, and Joe's hand instinctively reaching down.

Owen, a mischievous lad with a square face and a prominent jaw, peeps over the fence . . .

Blue flashing lights strobe the houses in every direction; the ambulance moves away – and at the end of the cul-de-sac it turns on its siren.

As the emphatic blare races into the distance Owen signals then clammers over the fence. He's followed by Gary and Melvin, and they've come prepared: all three are armed with buckets and spades.

The boys circle Mr Wonky.

'Look at the state of that,' sneers Owen.

'What a joke, he looks like Melvin's gran made him.'

'Is that . . . a funnel?' asks Melvin.

'Meant to be a hat,' scoffs Gary.

‘Wait, I think the votes are in,’ announces Owen stopping in his tracks. ‘Yes, they are,’ he declares, one finger on a pretend earpiece. ‘And they’ve been counted and verified . . .’

‘And?’ asks Gary.

‘And the public have decided . . .’

Melvin vocalises a dramatic drum roll.

‘It’s Death!’ decrees Owen.

Laughing maniacally, the boys demolish Mr Wonky with kicks and spades. Gary performs a flying two-footed drop kick to the body which dislodges Mr Wonky’s head and sends it rolling to the ground.

‘Down with this sort of thing!’ chants Owen in an Irish accent. A cruel reference to Joe’s known liking for Father Ted – Wilf’s favourite sitcom.

‘Yeah, death to lame snowmen!’ hisses Gary.

Melvin drop-kicks the funnel over the fence, Gary stamps on the snowman’s head, and Owen pisses on what’s left of the body. In just a few minutes there is little trace of Mr Wonky – nothing beyond a snow ‘stump’ tainted with ugly streaks of yellow.

‘Pissed on him!’ boasts Owen.

‘He got what he deserved,’ asserts Gary.

But it doesn’t end there. Now the boys begin clearing the garden to the fullest. Gary and Melvin dump bucket-load after bucket-load of snow over the fence as Owen checks the back door. Finding the door unlocked, Owen enters, and exits almost immediately with a large container of salt.

‘Hey, look,’ remarks Melvin; he’s found the Polaroid.

Gary takes possession.

‘Worst pic ever,’ he decides.

Screwed into a ball the photo is tossed over the fence.

Sprinkling salt in all directions, Owen orders his troops to the kitchen, from where they quickly reappear with buckets of steaming water. They pour this way and that, before excitedly retracing their steps for more. The snow is disappearing fast and the bucket-runs are repeated until Owen has used up every speck of salt and the garden is fully returned, in a relatively short space of time, to green grass.

‘Try building a snowman now, Joe,’ spits Owen.

If you had an aerial view, say from a high-flying drone, you’d see snow everywhere but Joe’s back garden.

When Joe returns from the hospital he is shocked to discover the snowman missing and the garden totally free of snow. He finds a pine-cone and a few buttons in the middle of the lawn, but the

rest of his accessories, the funnel hat for example, like Mr Wonky himself, is nowhere to be seen.

Joe's first thought is a ridiculous one:

It's a small town, how far could he have got?

He immediately berates himself for thinking in such a silly and childlike way. Aloud he chides:

'Jeez, grow up, Joe; you'll be thirteen next month!'

Nevertheless, he still checks over the back fence to see if his snowman is out there. (Late evening now but a full moon and so much reflective snow produce an intensely bright vista.) But of course Mr Wonky is long gone. Joe's investigation does, however, confirm one thing: that the snow, as you already know, hasn't disappeared from anywhere except his back garden.

Totally weird, thinks Joe, sitting atop the wooden picnic table (normally situated outside the patio doors, relegated to the back fence in winter). Then he notices the back gate, off the catch, swing slightly open.

What the—?

Joe discovers four white postcards pinned to the gate's rear; handwritten, they read:

LARDY . . . SAD . . . WEIRD . . . and LOSER.

Three are torn up by the time Sally approaches from the house. Joe quickly folds and stuffs the last into a pocket.

'Well, this is strange,' observes Sally picking up Paul's old rugby scarf from the middle of a bush.

'Where did all the snow go?' asks Joe.

'It's a weird one alright.'

'And where's *Mr Wonky*?'

'It's a small town, he can't have gone far,' smiles Sally.

'Mum . . . what a stupid thing to say.'

'Sorry, Joe, just trying to—'

'How can you joke with Gramps lying in hospital?'

'Because I have a dark sense of humour, okay? Because that's how I cope with shit, okay? Trust me, I haven't forgotten.'

'Sorry, mum.' Joe hugs his mother.

'It's fine. I'm sorry too.'

'Besides, he's not dead, right? And he *will* get better.'

'Of course he will; strong as an ox that one.'

They hug a little tighter then Sally has an idea:

'Hey, wanna rebuild Mr Wonky?'

'Make another?' brightens Joe. 'Can we do that?'

'Why not? It's still Christmas Day.'

'Yeah, it'd still count.'

'We can take a photo and show Gramps,' suggests Sally.

‘Yay, he’d like that.’ Joe’s face drops. ‘Except we haven’t got any snow.’

‘We can get snow from the road, there’s plenty there; apart from our car and the ambulance no-one’s been out.’

‘Yeah, but knowing my luck, it’ll probably melt or something before we get there.’

‘Don’t talk daft, there’s tons of it – come on.’

Carrying buckets, Joe and Sally take the path around the side of the house and walk onto the driveway.

Hearing a loud vehicle approaching, they stop.

A snowplough gritter, its orange strobe lights flashing, passes on the road and a shower of rock salt lands near their boots. The driver waves then swings a practised one-eighty sweep and heads back down the cul-de-sac.

‘That’s a shame,’ remarks Sally evenly.

Joe drops his bucket.

‘They work on Christmas Day?’ he grumbles.

Sally shrugs. ‘Must do.’

The duo stare silently at the aftermath: every trace of snow obliterated from their road, the pavements heaped with wet, filthy slush. Only when the noisy vehicle has grown quiet and the strobing orange lights have finally disappeared, does Joe turn to his mother.

See, I told you, reads the message in his eyes. *With my luck—*

‘Don’t be silly. With the stuff left here (she indicates their small front garden), the shed roof, and the side of the drive, we’ll still have enough.’

‘Mr Wonky was big, mum; *biig* – the biggest yet.’

‘And I still say it’ll be plenty. Come on, you, shake a leg.’

And they move off back the way they came.

‘If there isn’t enough,’ advances Joe. ‘I suppose we could take it from a *neighbour’s* garden.’

‘Joe!’ barks Sally. ‘That’s a great idea.’

As Joe compacts yet another load of snow into Mr Wonky’s body, Sally shapes a massive snowball for his head. It’s late now but not as cold as it had been.

‘Wasn’t,’ repeats Joe.

‘Was too.’

‘Wasn’t.’

‘Was.’

‘No, it wasn’t,’ he maintains.

‘Course it was funny,’ she contends.

‘Mum!’

Sally gives her son a playful nudge.

‘Go on, then,’ challenges Joe. ‘*What* was funny about it?’

‘The timing, silly; I mean what are the odds of a snowplough gritter just when you don’t need one – and on Christmas Day of all days.’

Another nudge: still playful but a touch firmer this time – insistent. Joe says nothing.

‘Go on, tell me that *wasn’t* comical.’

‘Hmm, okay . . . I guess it was kinda farcical.’

‘See, I told you. Here help me lift his head.’

Once Mr Wonky’s head is in place, the resurrection complete bar the adding of a few facial features and one or two sartorial whimsies, Joe steps back to assess.

‘Not sure he looks as wonky as before,’ he muses.

But Joe’s train of thought is lost when Sally sprinkles snow in his Fro. He quickly scoops a handful of snow from the last bucket-load, shapes a tiny snowball and aims.

‘Not in the stomach,’ quips Sally turning away.

Joe’s snowball hits her in the backside.

‘Now, that was a good shot,’ quips Sally.

‘I could hardly miss,’ teases Joe.

‘Hey! What are you trying to say?’ she protests playfully.

Joe laughs, then, despite protestations, Sally tickles him. He’s super ticklish and it’s as much an ordeal as it is fun.

‘What are you two giggling about?’

Paul’s at the kitchen door.

‘Nothing you’d understand,’ mutters Sally.

‘Mum,’ chastises Joe.

‘What? Your dad has no sense of humour,’ she whispers. ‘It’s a recognised scientific fact.’

‘I know but—’

‘Luckily, you take after me,’ she adds a touch louder.

‘Have you been at the eggnog?’ asks Paul.

‘Just ignore him. He knows I can’t drink in my condition – more’s the pity. What do you reckon?’ she adds softly. ‘Think if we’re vewy vewy quiet he might go away?’

Joe smiles – he knows an Elmer Fudd impression when he hears one – but then he smells tobacco. ‘Dad!’

‘What?’

‘Oh, Paul, are you smoking again?’

‘Just one. After the day I’ve had—’

‘After the day *you’ve* had!’ barks Sally.

‘After the day *we’ve all had,*’ offers Paul.

'Well, keep it away from me,' Sally warns.

'I am.'

Sally fumes a moment, then turns and punches Mr Wonky in the face, drills the fist into his cheek, moulding a cheekbone with her knuckles, then she left-hooks the other cheek before again screwing her fist into the packed snow.

'Mum . . .'

'What, sweetie?' bristles Sally through gritted teeth.

'What are you doing?'

Sally thumps the snowman twice in his gut then knees him where his snowballs would be if he had any.

'Stop, please,' appeals Joe.

'No, Joe, let her work it out of her system,' advises Paul. 'Better him than me,' he mutters.

'Actually, Paul,' carps Sally, 'why don't you make yourself useful and fetch Wilf's camera; y'know, if it's not too much trouble.'

'No trouble,' replies Paul, smiling unconvincingly. 'Give me a minute,' he adds in a sarcastic tone, 'and I'll *fetch* it.'

'Couldn't you do it now?'

'I'm finishing this.'

'Fine, finish it then!'

Sally returns to punching Mr Wonky – *hard*.

'Mum,' petitions Joe. 'Mum!'

He pulls on Sally's arm, gains her attention, then sucks in his cheeks and wobbles his head, eyes bulging.

'What are you doing?' frowns Sally.

'Wonky's supposed to look like a jolly snowman,' contends Joe. 'Not an injured skeleton.'

'He's got a point,' nods Paul blowing a cloud of smoke.

'Joe, tell your father to shut up, or *so help me—*'

'We're going to show Gramps the photo,' Joe quickly tells his dad. 'We thought it might cheer him up.'

'*Cheer him up?*' scoffs Paul. 'He's had a bloody heart attack.'

'Yeah, I know,' rebuffs Joe sharply, 'but he doesn't like hospitals.'

'No-one does.' Paul drags on his cigarette. 'Why don't you just wait till he gets home?'

'Because it might have melted by then,' rasps Sally.

Joe spins to face her.

'I'm sorry, Joe,' explains Sally, 'but Gramps might not be home for a while.'

'If at all.'

'Paul!'

‘Sorry, just saying,’ retorts Paul. ‘Keeping it real. We have to be prepared for the worst.’

‘Jesus, what are you like?’ snarls Sally. ‘Come on, Joe; help me rebuild Mr Wonky’s head – I seem to have messed up his face.’

Paul blows another plume of smoke. ‘Do you need any more snow?’ he asks in a conciliatory tone.

‘No, you finish your fag, Paul. If we need more, we know where it is.’

‘I’m done; I was just having a few blasts.’

Paul flicks the burning end from the cigarette and returns what’s left to his packet.

‘Right, well if you’re done you can get the camera, then,’ bids Sally. ‘We’re nearly ready, aren’t we, Joe?’

‘Is it still Christmas Day?’ yawns Joe.

Sally checks the time on her mobile. ‘For another fifteen minutes it is. Come on, let’s get cracking.’

By the time Paul returns, the snowman is finished; Sally applying the final touches: Paul’s rugby scarf and the funnel ‘hat’ – found dumped in the wheelie bin. She’s also recreated Mr Wonky’s face as per her son’s instructions. Joe himself is fast asleep on the garden bench, a travel blanket from Wilf’s Workshop laid over him.

‘Is he done?’ asks Paul.

‘Who? Joe or Mr Wonky?’

‘The snow—’

‘Yes, he’s done.’ Sally tweaks the snowman’s pine-cone nose. ‘Where’s the camera?’

Paul’s reaction tells her he forgot.

‘Useless,’ she grunts. ‘One thing, that’s all you had to do.’

‘Jesus, woman, calm down,’ huffs Paul. ‘I’ll get it.’ He turns to leave. ‘I don’t know why you encouraged him to rebuild the snowman anyway.’

‘To take his mind off things, Paul,’ snaps Sally.

Paul pauses at the back door. ‘And did it help?’

‘Well, I’m sure he hasn’t forgotten that his granddad’s in hospital, if that’s what you mean,’ states Sally pointedly. ‘But I think it did help, actually. Their snowman’s important to him.’

‘Good, I’m glad – That’s what I was checking – One camera coming up.’

‘Wait,’ calls Sally. ‘Take Joe with you.’

‘What; *carry* him?’

‘Well, I can’t do it, can I? I’m carrying number three, if you hadn’t noticed. Pregnant *again* – thanks to you.’

‘No, I mean, why not wake him and let him walk?’ proposes Paul. ‘You know I’ve got a bad back.’

‘Jesus,’ rasps Sally setting off. ‘I’ll carry him myself.’

‘No, no, I’ll do it,’ carps Paul. ‘I’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.’

‘Gently,’ urges Sally as Joe is fork-lifted into Paul’s arms.

‘Sally, he’s not a baby,’ grunts Paul.

‘Put him in bed. He can sleep in his clothes.’

‘Okay if I take his shoes off, is it?’

‘And leave his night-light on.’

‘I know, I know.’

‘Then come back with the camera.’

Paul stops. ‘Hang on, where are you off?’ he asks as Sally heads inside.

‘I’m going to bed. It’s been a long day.’

‘So, you want *me* to take the photo?’

‘Think you can manage that?’ she asks over a shoulder.

‘Oh, good one,’ puffs Paul.

On the move again, the straining dad has a suggestion for the sleeping son: ‘How about a cake- and pudding-free diet in the New Year, Joe?’ wheezes Paul. ‘Just a thought.’

‘Only if you give up smoking,’ mutters Joe in his sleep.

Paul pauses. ‘Okay, that’s just spooky,’ he decides.

The Evans’ living room curtains open to a low winter sun and a Boxing Day morning washed out with rain. Sally is the first to notice Mr Wonky Mark II melted to a sad, icy grey stump in the middle of the lawn. Indeed, apart from the snowman’s stubby base and shrunken head there isn’t a scrap of snow to be seen anywhere: neighbour’s roofs are now clear, as are the trees – even the surrounding hills are no longer the pretty Christmas card backdrop they were just last night.

Joe’s voice from upstairs: ‘Noooo!’

His feet thump across the ceiling and down the stairs.

‘Have you seen?’ he barks entering the room.

‘Never mind, Joe.’

‘That’s *twice*.’

Joe’s forehead thunks against the patio doors, his breath instantly misting the glass door.

‘It never rains but it pours,’ sighs Sally joining him.

The pair stare out:

Wilf’s Workshop, previously a snow-capped frosty-windowed mini ski lodge slash Santa’s Grotto is now just a plain old wet corrugated metal shed with featureless grey felt and dripping

eaves. But even worse, the combination of increased temperature and persistent rain has worn the snowman's head down to a grapefruit-sized ball of watery ice. At the present rate of precipitation Mr Wonky's *stumpy base* might last until mid-afternoon but his *shrinking noggin?* – An hour or two, tops.

'Is life always this hard, or is it just when you're a kid?'

'Always like this,' replies Sally in her best French accent.

Leon, the Professional may be a 15 certificate but Sally let Joe watch the film because he'd been asking to see it for ages. She doesn't think it's that bad, and well, he's nearly thirteen. They'd watched it together when Paul was away fishing. He wouldn't have approved but what he doesn't know can't hurt him. On this, Sally, Joe and Lucy are invariably united.

'What are you two talking about?' asks Paul.

He tightens his dressing gown and wipes sleep from an eye. Not at the same time, obviously.

'Mr Wonky's gone.'

'Oh, is that all?'

'Paul!' chides Sally.

'See, he doesn't care,' whines Joe.

'Of course he does. That's why he took the photo for you last night. Isn't it, Paul?'

'Did you, Dad?' Joe's been let down too many times before to count on one of his father's promises.

'Now before you lose it,' ventures Paul, 'let me explain—'

'Oh no,' groans Sally. 'Please tell me you didn't forget.'

'I knew it!' Joe buries his head in a sofa cushion. 'He always does this!'

'Bit dramatic,' frowns Paul.

'It was the *only* thing you had to do,' gripes Sally.

'Hey, it's not my fault there was no film in the camera. Someone must have used the last one.'

'So why didn't you put a new one in?'

'Everywhere's closed; it's Christmas – or have you forgotten?'

Sally marches to the cupboard, opens a door and points to several boxes of Polaroid film.

'Whoa, when did we get those?'

'Jesus, you are fucking useless,' moans Sally. 'Excuse my French, Lucy.'

'No problem.' Lucy, just entered, looks to the sofa where Joe remains curled up. 'What's with him?'

'Ask your father.'

‘Jesus, it’s just a snowman,’ gripes Paul, ‘it’s not the end of the world. I’m more worried about my dad being in hospital, to be honest.’

Sally and Lucy roll their eyes, shake their heads sadly in unison, then sigh and pfft together. He’s *always* playing the pity card but this is a new low even for him. Paul didn’t even want Wilf moving in to begin with. Even though his dad had spent years unselfishly looking after Paul’s Alzheimer’s stricken mother in their one bedroom flat in Manchester. It was Sally who’d said he should see out however many years he had left in the countryside of Wales. They had a spare bedroom. He’d be able to spend more time with Joe, who he adored. Lucy, too, but he and Joe had always had a special bond.

‘Hey, Joe.’ Lucy nudges the sofa with a knee. ‘Come on don’t be like Dad.’

‘Whaddaya mean?’

‘He just played the pity card again.’

‘Not true, Joe,’ contests Paul. ‘Don’t listen to her.’

‘Oh, so you won’t mind if we visit him again later, then?’ suggests Sally.

‘What, today?’ Paul grumbles.

‘Are you for real?’

‘No, I just mean – will they *have* visiting on Boxing Day?’

‘Right, right, because they didn’t admit him yesterday; what with it being Christmas Day. Oh, hang on a minute, they did, didn’t they? Y’know, because *he’d had a fucking heart attack.*’

‘Ok, fine. I just thought you wanted to visit your sister.’

‘We can still do that; after we’ve been to the hospital – if that’s alright with you?’

‘Yep, great, whatever you like,’ agrees Paul.

‘Well then, good!’

Sally pauses, focuses on remaining calm. All this stress isn’t good for her passenger.

‘So, do you want your coffee now?’ asks Paul.

Paul is the master of changing the subject. He also knows making Sally a cup of her favourite brew is the quickest and easiest way to slide back into her good books: his wife’s a sucker for a frothy cappuccino. The question is actually: Want your one and only *real* coffee now? For, in her condition, Sally is limited to just one ‘real’ cup per day; all others must be decaf – doctor’s orders.

‘Yes . . . thank you,’ breathes Sally. ‘But make mine first.’ By which she means: *Don’t go stirring it with your sugary spoon again.* Paul takes three heaped spoonfuls in his cuppas; Sally is

currently 'off' sugar and has come to hate even a trace of its nauseating sweetness.

'Sir, yes, sir,' quips Paul.

No-one laughs because he isn't funny. Not in content. Not in delivery. It's been that way forever.

With a shake of her head, Sally exits the room.

Lucy pokes Joe with a sofa cushion.

'So, what's up with you, little bro?'

Joe elevates a pointed finger, aims it at the back garden.

Lucy peers through the window.

'What? I don't see anything.'

'Exactly,' grumbles Joe.

From its elevated vantage point, the same cracked telescope lens is once again scanning the rear windows of the Evans' home. Its circular view drops briefly, inspects the insignificant lump of ice melting on the lawn, then quickly rises back to the house.

The man, now outside the back door, is having a crafty smoke.

The woman sitting at the kitchen table lifts a cup to her lips and blows.

The girl in the window appears to be talking to herself.

As the owner of the telescope continues to gaze down from Finger Hill, here's a little local geography to establish the surroundings:

Finger Hill (so called because it's shaped like a finger; well, duh) points north, towards the medieval market town of Llanidloes, with its chapels and pubs, shops, homes and school.

If we were to meet on the summit of Finger Hill (sometimes referred to as Scarecrow Hill) – on the first 'knuckle', so to speak – and survey the area, we wouldn't see the *centre* of Llanidloes – not clearly, anyway – due to the large copse of trees that covers the hill's 'fingernail'.

Turn though, and look: in the valley to the west, where scores of modern houses squat. Amongst them, the Evans' place.

And below, in the eastern lowland, sits Tall Trees Trailer Park and its twenty-odd static caravan homes. Do you see?

Then, over in the northwest: another hill, Bryn Crow (Bryn being the Welsh word for Hill), a patchwork of sprawling sloped fields dotted with grazing cattle and wandering sheep, and in the middle, roughly speaking, a large farmhouse replete with outbuildings and barns: the Jenkins' place.

And finally, completing this somewhat sketchy map: to our northeast, covered with bracken, brush and thickets – Poacher's Hill.

CHAPTER 3

Back to School

Mr Schneider, Joe's craggy-faced English teacher is fifties, balding, thin as a rake, and German.

'Are you sure you want to do zis?' he asks Joe quietly.

Mr Schneider's Germanic-accented English is perfect, probably a damn sight better than a lot of Brits!

Joe nods and hands over five cards selected from the open Word Box; a simple yet elegant wooden box with a hinged lid containing hundreds of cards that stand in one long row, each behind the other; packed tight enough to hide their faces, but loose enough to allow for extraction. Size-wise, imagine an elongated shoe-box designed to accommodate a pair of clown shoes; and now picture it devoid of footwear and loaded instead with filing cards.

Joe waits, standing before the class, as Mr Schneider places the cards, face out, on the easel beside them; an easel that appears specifically designed for this exact purpose. Perhaps it was. The wood certainly matches that of the word box – walnut.

RIFLE says the first card.

'Rifle,' announces Mr Schneider. ARROGANCE and BALLOON follow, then SARDINES, the teacher confirming each word aloud. 'Und your final vurd is . . . King.'

Despite being a teacher of English in Britain for the last twenty-five years, there's that strong German accent again. (As you might expect, Mr Schneider also teaches German.)

'Okay, Joe, you have a few seconds to determine vich vurd to discard.'

As Joe reflects, classmates make various suggestions, each in favour of losing a different word, it seems.

'Quiet please, allow Joe to make his own selection,' insists Mr Schneider. 'Danke.'

'Balloon,' elects Joe. 'No, Sardines. Definitely Sardines.'

'Sardines it is.'

The teacher removes the rejected word card from the easel then steps behind the countdown clock on his desk. The timer is currently set at thirty seconds.

'Okay, ve all know ze rules. Joe, you have thirty seconds thinking time und zen you must begin your story.'

Someone mutters somewhere and a snigger ripples around the class; a dig at him or Joe, perhaps.

‘Absolut ruhe, bitte!’ bellows Mr Schneider.

(The class has heard the instruction enough times to know it means: *Silence, you little shits!* Something like that, anyway.)

Joe focuses intently on the cards. Important to use these precious few extra seconds before the ‘official’ allocated thirty begins. Make a connection between the words. Come up with an idea. Come up with *any* idea.

‘Rifle, Arrogant, Balloon und King,’ repeats Mr Schneider. ‘Remember, you must include all four vurds,’ he cautions Joe. ‘Und your time starts . . . Now.’

Mr Schneider slaps the timer:

[00:30] changes to [00:29]

[00:28] . . .

[00:27] . . .

RIFLE. ARROGANCE. BALLOON. KING.

All attention falls on Joe as he studies the cards. He can feel their cynical, unhelpful laser beam eyes. Ignore them, ignore them. It only takes a few seconds – and he has thirty, well, twenty-five now – an idea will come. Yes, once the dots are joined, so to speak, a story will ping into his mind – and it’ll be awesome; he’ll show these—someone coughs; trying to put him off, no doubt. Probably Owen, the mean bastard – but Joe won’t be distracted. Any second now . . .

[00:19] . . .

[00:18] . . .

[00:17] . . .

As the beats tick by, Joe mouths the words. Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King. Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King. *Jesus!* No, don’t panic, don’t panic! . . . Perspiration trickles down his forehead and rolls between his eyes. The would-be storyteller has taken on the appearance of the proverbial fish out of water – a fish that’s been asked to forge a narrative link between Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon and King, and doesn’t have a clue. Should he have kept Sardines? Joe asks himself. *Too late now*—Stop! Focus! Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King. Oh, why is he so bad at this when it matters? Surely there’s something reasonably obvious there. Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King. He should be able to come up with *something*; he’s definitely smarter than the rest of these dopes. But nope, he’s got nothing; nothing yet, anyway – how long left?

[00:13] . . .

[00:12] . . .

[00:11] . . .

Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King. *Rifle, Arrogance, Balloon, King!* Something should be sparking by now. Maybe try the words in a different order? But his head feels like a swamp. And he's in there, or rather, on it, sitting on one of those flat-bottomed airboats, the propeller spinning but the rudder or accelerator or engine or whatever it is, stuck – and the alligators are circling. Joe's never fainted but he imagines this is what it must feel like when you're about to; that moment, a split second before you drop to the whirling ground. And on that thought his mind jumps back to Christmas and Wilf's collapse.

Aberystwyth hospital had been full of sights and smells Joe didn't care for: squeaky corridors; antiseptic whiffs; nurses on the move; chatting medical teams; Wilf's bed surrounded by drips and monitors, and other sick people in beds or on seats or shuffling around. He'd assumed Gramps would have his own room, they always seemed to in films and TV shows, but no, Wilf was on a ward.

The Evans' stayed late on Christmas Day (worst Christmas ever!) and as there were no specific visiting times, returned to the hospital on Boxing Day morning. At some point, a doctor updated Joe's parents; told them that Wilf remained 'in a stable condition' – not improved but no worse. Gramps was half asleep or woozy from medication, Joe wasn't sure which. The family lingered until lunch then left; they'd quickly felt in the way once patients were being fed or roused to that end. Besides, Wilf needed rest and recuperation. The doctor said that, too.

The afternoon was spent at Auntie Jean's house; Jean is Sally's sister. When they arrived, the twins, Amy and May, were upstairs breezing through Halo 4: the same game Joe had been playing so badly the other night. Was it Christmas Eve; only two nights ago? It felt like an eternity to Joe.

'You got this?' asked Amy. (Or it might have been May; Joe could never tell them apart.)

'Uh-huh,' nodded Joe.

'Great, isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

'We love it.'

'Bit surprised you're allowed to play it, though.'

'We're ten.'

'Nearly as old as you.'

'And anyway, it's not *that* violent.'

As the adults talked downstairs, amongst the festive decorations, Joe looked on as the twins, equally expert on their

controllers, easily destroyed wave after wave of enemies. Ducking and diving in the midst of explosions and zipping tracer bullets, they utilised pistols, grenades, shotguns, assault weapons, laser cannons, rail guns and rocket launchers; switching back and forth between weapons like pros. Joe was envious of the girls' gaming skills but tried not to show it.

'You can play if you like.'

'No, no, I'm good,' replied Joe. 'I play enough at home.'

'We've not really got the hang of it yet,' said the girls in unison, their little hands intuitively manipulating the controller buttons; thumbs and fingers a blur, tap-tap-tapping at lightning pace.

'We only got it yesterday.'

'For Christmas.'

'Boom!'

'Oh, nice one, sis.'

'Whoa, you hear that?'

'Yeah, sniper; quick, down.'

The girls ducked behind a wall. Well, their characters did.

'Storm him?' asked May.

'Deffo,' replied Amy. 'No-one likes a camper.'

'Okay, ready?' prompted May. 'Three, two . . .'

Back in the classroom, the clock is down to [00:02].

Then [00:01] . . .

BZZZZZZZ, rings the timer.

'Okay, Joe,' cues Mr Schneider. 'Off you go.'

'Er, okay, so there was this, er, King . . . and he, er . . . this was back in The Dark Ages, by the way . . .'

As the class look on, amused and bewildered by Joe's faltering start, someone asks:

'Did they have balloons in the dark ages, sir?'

'Quiet!' barks Mr Schneider. 'No interruptions. Sorry, Joe, please continue.'

'And his jester . . . an arrogant little man . . . who danced with an inflated pig-bladder tied to a stick . . .'

'Ja, good,' encourages the teacher softly. 'Keep going.'

'No, not a stick, a rifle . . . and it wasn't in the dark ages . . . this happened in the 1800s when they *did* have rifles . . .'

Gary snorts and pulls the universally recognised *How dumb is he?* face.

Joe mutters a line about the king being tired of pig-bladders, mumbles something to do with the jester being in love with the queen, then, red-faced, flustered, and appearing out of breath, he

suddenly goes blank; yep, dried up good and proper – and he appears not in the least bit likely to recover.

Mr Schneider steps in to quell the growing sniggers.

‘Never mind, Joe, never mind,’ he soothes. ‘Nice try. I zink you vur a little unlucky, ja? Some very tricky vurdz zer. Come on, give him a hand, zat’s it. You can’t vin zem all.’

Pity applause accompanies Joe’s walk of shame.

‘Right, who is next to try?’

Mr Schneider reinserts Joe’s cards into the box then moves a few sections around, a shuffle of sorts.

‘Remember, practice makes perfect und Storytell finals come round quicker than you think,’ he reminds the class.

Owen stands, takes a bow, and then, looking far too cocky, swaggers to the front.

‘Let’s hope ve can give you a bit more of a challenge zis time, eh, Owen,’ smiles Mr Schneider.

The teacher steps aside and waves a hand at the box.

‘If you’d like to pick your five vurdz.’

Owen steps up and casually runs a finger along the top edges of the cards as if he hasn’t a care in the world.

‘Don’t feel bad, Joe,’ comforts Mr Schneider quietly as he passes Joe’s desk. ‘Ve all understand you had ze vurst Christmas imaginable.’

Joe is waiting outside the school gates, not far from Owen, Gary and Melvin, who hang around in a loose cluster. Glancing at Joe, they exchange remarks and giggle inanely.

‘Never mind, Joe,’ calls Owen.

‘Could happen to anyone,’ grins Gary.

‘Yeah,’ agrees Melvin. ‘I’m useless at words, too.’

‘I’m not *useless at words*, Melvin,’ retorts Joe, ‘I’ve just got things on my mind, okay?’

‘And how is your granddad, Joe?’ asks Owen.

Noticing the hint of a sneer, Joe gives Owen the stink-eye. ‘Oh, piss off, Owen,’ he hisses.

‘Oooh, get you,’ chorus the boys, raising invisible handbags to their chins in high camp mode.

‘And for your information, just saying Piss off isn’t necessarily having a hissy fit.’

‘Yeah, you’re right, Joe,’ nods Owen. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘We was only playing,’ explains Melvin with an empty-headed chuckle.

‘We *were* only playing,’ Joe points out.

‘Exactly,’ chortles Melvin.

Joe instantly feels cruel for correcting the big dope; it isn't his fault he—

'By the way, almost forgot: nice backpack, mate,' grins Gary, a reference to Lucy's handmade Christmas present: the backpack forged of fabric and filling; Master Yoda, in Jedi robe, riding Joe's back.

'Oh, thanks,' acknowledges Joe somewhat begrudgingly.

He shrugs the pack and the diminutive Jedi comes alive: his green, pointy-eared head snatching a peek over Joe's shoulder before quickly resettling; his stubby arms and legs (attached to the straps) maintaining their grip throughout.

'Who made it for you?' smirks Gary. 'Your momma?'

Before Joe can respond, his sister cycles through the gates; she's dressed in a modern-take on a Mao Tse-Tung outfit: homemade trousers, long jacket and beaded cap.

(Although sixth-formers do not have to wear school uniform, perhaps a Chinese Zhongshan tunic suit, traditionally considered 'male attire', isn't what the school had in mind as 'own clothes'. But as Lucy is studying Fashion she gets away with it. She's also taking A-levels in Business Studies, Music and Sociology.)

Lucy pulls up beside Joe and lets out a 'Hey, you.'

'Hey,' Joe replies flatly.

'You okay?'

'Yep.'

'Those idiots bothering you?'

'Nope.'

Lucy studies the boys for a moment.

'Want me to wait with you?'

'Oh yes, please,' grovels Joe mockingly. 'That'll make having to wait for dad so much *less* embarrassing.'

Lucy raises an eyebrow. 'You could always—'

'I'm not riding an ancient Chopper, Luce. You saw it: big wheel, small wheel – the bike's not safe.'

Lucy nods as if she understands, pauses, then:

'But if you did—'

'I'm not riding an ancient Chopper.'

'Yeah, but if you—'

'I'm not riding an ancient Chopper.'

'Fine,' puffs Lucy. 'Have it your way.'

Owen, Gary and Melvin cackle and snicker.

Lucy turns to them. 'Do you lot want a beating?' she asks. 'And don't think I won't.'

'Hey Lucy, I thought you were studying *Fashion*,' quips Owen. 'Not *Fascism*.'

‘It’s Communism, you idiot.’

‘What?’

‘In China,’ explains Lucy. ‘It’s a communist state.’

‘But growing more capitalist by the day,’ mutters Joe. Unlike Owen, Joe actually listens in classes.

‘Big girly swot,’ mocks Gary.

‘Hey, less of the “girly”,’ protests Lucy.

‘Oh yeah?’ braves Owen. ‘And what are you gonna do about it if we don’t?’

With a loud war-cry, Lucy charges the obnoxious trio with her bike and the boys scatter, shouting back insults about her clothes as they flee.

‘Perfect,’ sighs Joe.

Maxine, Lucy’s best friend and fellow sixth-former, cycles out: a stunning sight in her inky attire and layers of dark make-up; everything black apart from a streak of maroon in her long dark hair. Today she’s wearing a military jacket over a charcoal crystal-organza skirt, a neck choker, over-knee socks and platform ankle boots adorned with batman insignias. Max likes to play around with a variety of Goth looks and it would be fair to say that Joe is – how shall we put it – a fan.

‘Hi, Max,’ he grins.

‘Hello, bright eyes,’ she winks. ‘You know, you really should let me do something with those; a touch of guyliner and you’d have the girls queuing up.’

Maxine is studying Art, Psychology, Drama and English Literature. If they’d offered a course on Period make-up she’d have definitely signed up. Today hers is moody Seventies Punk. Like Lucy, Maxine is also into Fashion: she loves anything, Victorian, Emo, Steampunk and regular Punk; everything to do with Vampires, skulls or bats – and, of course, Goth. She’s as bad as Lucy for ‘out-of-the-ordinary’ outfits; mixing styles and time-frames, and flaunting the results. The friends always attract attention around town. Not all of it positive but they don’t care.

‘Nice bike, Max,’ grins Joe.

‘Still the same one, Joe,’ smiles Maxine; extra pretty when she does. Joe remains focused on her even when Lucy returns, red in the face.

‘There,’ she puffs. ‘They shouldn’t bother you again for a while.’

‘I can handle them, sis, thanks,’ scoffs Joe. ‘I’ve done judo, remember.’

Lucy rolls her eyes. It was dad’s idea. Joe only stuck it out for a couple of months. He’s a thinker not a fighter.

'Judo,' echoes Maxine. 'Impressive. So, what belt are you?'

'Yellow,' beams Joe.

'Yellow, eh . . . is that good?'

'Put it this way, if I put a hold on you, you'd find it hard to shake me off.'

'Really?' laughs Maxine.

Joe nods eagerly, no doubt imagining that very scenario.

'O—kay,' drawls Lucy, awkwardly reminded of Joe's crush on her BFF. 'Right, Joe, do not wander off.'

'Yeah, yeah,' snips Joe. 'Jeez, I'm not a kid.'

As he continues to gaze at Max, now riding away with Lucy, Joe's mobile rings.

'Hello? . . . What? . . . No, I don't. And stop calling me!'

Joe disconnects the call with a growl.

The funnel-shaped entrance to Tall Trees Trailer Park has a bench on one side, a faded sign on the other. The lot, a small field ringed by several trees (none of which are especially tall) and a low wall, contains two dozen or so shabby, lime-green static caravans.

Puffing his cheeks, Joe drops his backpack on the bench and flops beside it. Eyes shut, his mind draws a carefree picture of Maxine on her Mountain bike and he beside her, also riding a Mountain bike; then their separate transports morph into a single Hells Angels style Harley-Davidson, him driving and Max holding on, her ringed fingers laced tightly around his muscular six-pack. He pictures the wrist and ankle tattoos she had planned for her 18th birthday, and thinks, not for the first time, about the *extra* tattoo Lucy had told him about: a Moth, Skull and Ram's Head theme, designed by Max herself – for under her boobs!

'Penny for them,' whispers a voice in his ear.

Joe's eyes pop open and he's startled to see, sitting beside him, a man: late-sixties to early-seventies and of scruffy appearance, borderline tramp and yet, somehow . . . 'of the stage'. Had Joe been making up a story, he might have used the phrase 'theatrical drifter' or 'unkempt thespian hobo' and he'd be spot on, for the man did indeed have the air of the proverbial trained actor reduced to the status of a bum; once-famous, now homeless – from his well-worn campfire boots to his foppish brown hat worn at a jaunty angle.

'Jeez, where did you come from?'

'Worry not, Joe, we come in peace,' bids the man. 'I just need to take the weight off my aching feet for a moment.'

The accent is grand and cultured but ambiguous; part Anglo-Saxon, part African or Jamaican perhaps? Joe isn't sure;

polyethnic, possibly. And that colour: a wonderful baked-in tan? – Perhaps from a lot of time spent outdoors, drifting and foraging, at one with the world. Or is his lustrous glow simply the gift of natural pigmentation?

The man removes his hat and places it on the bench.

Joe notes the dense, wiry hair; greying throughout his curly high top and frizzy beard; the strong pronounced jawline, broad nose, high cheekbones and deep set, brown eyes; and for all its lines and weathering, or perhaps because of them, Joe finds it a fine and noble face – he feels certain the man has a cool heritage, a fascinating past, and surely an amusing story or two to tell.

The man removes a worn boot and the grubby sock it contained then sets to rubbing an inflamed foot.

Joe's mobile rings and he answers it.

'Hello? . . . What? No, I told you before! – It wasn't you? Well, where are you all getting my number? What? Yes, I *am* sure. Now piss off and stop calling me!' Joe turns off his phone and pockets it. 'Sorry about that.'

The man shrugs. 'They call me Trevor, by the way.'

'Who does?'

'Friends, associates – people I have known.'

Trying not to be too obvious about it, Joe continues to study the newcomer's face.

'Do I know you from somewhere?' he asks at last. 'You seem familiar.'

Trevor looks the boy over.

'Perhaps you do,' he smiles. 'And I must say, Joe, it is most rewarding, to discover you here, waiting to greet me like this.'

'It's the least we could do,' quips Joe. 'I'm afraid you missed the musicians.'

Trevor feigns disappointment.

'They didn't sound very good to be honest. Good movers though; a marching band.' He cocks an ear. 'I can't hear them anymore; they're probably miles away by now.'

'That's quite the imagination you've got there, Joe.'

'It helps in this town, Trevor.'

Trevor guffaws, a deep, booming rattle. Joe thinks the laugh wonderful and can't help but warm to the stranger.

'I don't think I've ever met a Trevor before,' he muses.

'At least, not one like me, eh, Joe, I'll wager.'

At the risk of appearing rude, Joe again looks the man over. Despite the untidy and grungy, down-and-out vagrant appearance, Joe senses something much-travelled and wise about Trevor. He likes the voice too: articulate and engaging. Yes, an

educated man, Joe feels sure; well-read, well-spoken, and learned.

‘Are you wondering how I knew your name?’ poses Trevor.

With raised eyebrows, Joe points at the name inked on the top of his Yoda backpack. ‘Good try,’ he acknowledges.

‘There is nothing either good or bad,’ cites Trevor, ‘but thinking makes it so.’

Joe’s eyebrows drop; a frown now – he appears baffled.

‘Tis a quote,’ explains Trevor. ‘From Shakespeare – You must know The Bard, surely? He was very big at one time.’

‘Size matters not,’ retorts Joe. ‘Look at me. Judge me by my size, do you?’

It’s Trevor’s turn to appear puzzled.

‘Tis a quote,’ mimics Joe. ‘From Star Wars. Oh but you *must* know Star Wars, surely? Yoda? Little guy, funny teeth.’ Joe mimes funny teeth (screwed up face, parted lips) then holds up his backpack and makes Yoda’s head bounce.

‘Yoda – yes, of course,’ nods Trevor. ‘Though I’m more of a theatre person, to be honest.’

‘I thought so. Are you part of a theatre troupe?’

‘No. I used to be part of a repertory company, a small ensemble of fellow performers, but my performances tend toward the solitary these days. A one-man show, if you will.’

Trevor replaces his sock and the boot that goes with it.

‘A travelling show?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ booms Trevor. ‘I go wherever I feel my magnificent presence will best be appreciated.’

Although overly theatrical, Joe recognises the tone as tongue-in-cheek rather than boastful. Could the thespian’s distinctive skin colour be the result of a lifetime of vaudevillian make-up on the amateur stage? – Maybe not so much ‘mixed-race’ as ‘mixed reviews’? Not that it matters one iota to Joe.

‘So, is your magnificent presence staying in Llani?’ he teases. ‘Or is it just passing through?’

‘That remains to be seen, dear boy. I’m not yet sure.’

‘There are some cheap bed-and-breakfasts in town.’

‘Is that so?’

Trevor ties the lace on his boot; the lace short from where it has snapped at both ends. Joe also notes the worn heel and an Oreo-sized hole in the sole. The hole reports a partial headline, stuffed as it is with newspaper inside.

‘You’re not . . . sleeping rough, are you?’ asks Joe.

‘Under a canopy of stars? No, I have a roof; a little ramshackle, perhaps, less than I’m used to, you understand but I dare say it will suffice – and rest assured, it is *not* a sheet of tarpaulin.’

‘I could let you have a pound.’ Joe roots a pocket. ‘It’s all I’ve got on me but—’

‘Most kind, but I assure you, there is no need.’

Trevor now takes something from a pocket. A small object flashes silver as he passes it from hand to hand.

‘You wouldn’t have to pay it back or anything.’

‘Thank you, dear boy, but I have already acquired a bed for the evening – and for the foreseeable future; at least, as far as I can tell at this moment in time.’

‘Right, so, it’s definitely not this bench, then?’

Trevor’s laugh rumbles vibrantly.

‘No. If you’d care to look yonder –’

They swivel their heads toward the shabby, grubby, disgustingly green caravans; each as crummy and miserable as the next.

‘– That one there is my current abode. Like the colour? Somewhere between Lime and Puce, I’d hazard a guess. They don’t make them like that anymore.’

‘Just as well.’

‘Oh, it may look gloomy on the outside,’ shares Trevor, ‘but I assure you the interior is *far* more lugubrious.’

Joe laughs, for his diction is rather remarkable (some might say annoyingly so) for a soon-to-be thirteen-year-old.

Lugubrious: Adjective. Synonyms: Dismal, Doleful, Dreary, Melancholy, Morose, Mournful, Sad, Sombre, Sorrowful, Woebegone, and Woeful – he knows them all. Joe is one of those so-called ‘sad kids’ who, when he isn’t reading books by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens or Alexander Dumas, actually enjoys scouring a dictionary or thesaurus; even if Owen and Gary do take the piss when they ‘catch’ him in the library indulging his love of words. Not that they’re in the library often.

Again, Trevor’s mystery object passes from hand to hand, red and black as well as silver if Joe isn’t mistaken; a toy of some kind, perhaps.

‘Whatcha got there, Trev?’ asks Joe.

‘What, this?’

Trevor reveals a tiny robot, some ten centimetres high.

‘I collect them,’ he announces proudly. ‘Meet Mr Atomic, smaller than most but all the more transportable for it.’

‘Yeah, he’s . . . cool.’

Trevor cups Mr Atomic in both hands then blows.

When he opens them, the robot has gone.
The old man and the young boy exchange a look.
Trevor cups his hands again.
He opens them and the robot is back.
'Ta-da!' sings Trevor.
But Joe seems unmoved.
'I'm a bit long in the tooth for magic tricks,' he sighs.
'*Long in the tooth*, eh? That's quite an *old* expression for someone so—'
'I'm thirteen,' retorts Joe.
'Thirteen, eh?'
'Well, nearly.'
'Fair enough; pay it no heed – 'tis just a silly hobby.'
Mr Atomic disappears once more, this time back into Trevor's pocket. 'But if you ask me,' hails the old man, 'I do not believe anyone is ever too old for magic; it never fails to impress the hell out of me. Especially *real* magic,' he winks.
'If you say so,' laughs Joe.
'I do say so.'
Joe mimics the trick: cups a hand. 'And like that . . .'
Joe blows on his fist, springs open his fingers.
'He's gone.'
Neither speaks for a couple of beats.
'Well, I suppose I really should be trotting along,' grunts Trevor rising.
'*The Usual Suspects*,' explains Joe. 'Kevin Spacey.'
'Ah Spacey, a fine actor. I met him once at a gala.' Trevor dusts off his gabardine trousers and resets his hat. 'So,' he sighs, 'time and tide waits for no man and all that.'
Joe fears he has upset his new acquaintance.
'I collect snow-globes,' he blurts, standing.
'Is that right?' Trevor fishes a silk hankie from a pocket and coughs into it.
'Yeah, I've got loads.' Joe shrugs on his backpack.
'How interesting,' Trevor remarks. 'I have a snow-globe back in the caravan. Would you like to see?'
'Er . . . No, that's okay. I'd better be getting home.'
'Okay, Joe. Well, nice to meet you. And if you change your mind, you know where I am.'

CHAPTER 4

Blow and Make a Wish

The turnout to Joe's birthday bash might best be described as pitiful, pathetic, or both; this despite Joe telling everyone at school *and* advertising his party on a card in the newsagent's window.

And cruellest of all: Wilf was still in hospital.

Brian, the boy from next door, *he* came. Brian has a boss-eye, large lower face and no friends to speak of. Joe plays 'penalties' with him from time to time in Brian's garden. Fancies himself as a goalkeeper does Brian; has his own football gloves, plastic-frame goal and bags of enthusiasm – he just isn't very good – hopeless, in fact. Always dives the wrong way, even when Joe tips him off, and insists on playing in his glasses even though he has to find or reset them after every lunge.

Katie turned up, of course. Katie lives up the road. She's in Joe's class and has always been kind to him. Joe considers her a good friend. Katie hopes she'll be considered more than a friend by the time they leave school; she fully expects her ugly duckling looks to have swanned by then. Her mum had been just the same when *she* was young (Katie's seen photos) and now look at her, 'a stunner', as all her older brother's male friends will testify; so surely Katie will be pretty too – one day.

(Actually, Rhydian's mates – Rhydian being Katie's brother – sometimes rib him that his mum is a MILF – this usually in the privacy of Rhydian's room, unaware that Katie has a terrible habit of pressing an ear against his door. Katie once Googled the term, decided she didn't like its vulgar description, and assigned the acronym a *new* definition: *Mum Is Looking Fabulous!*)

Katie had arrived early and helped lay out the massive buffet Sally had amassed: sausage rolls, a variety of sandwiches, crisps, pork pies, quiche, a selection of cheeses; enough for a houseful. But by the time the cake appeared, it was clear that the four people currently present – Joe, Sally, Brian and Katie – would be it. Paul was out all day, he'd had to attend a large fallen tree blocking a B road into Cwmbelan (Joe's dad works for the Welsh Forestry Commission, and well, an emergency is an emergency), Lucy was away on a school trip for London Fashion Week, and Maxine had thanked Joe for the invitation but explained that she'd be in Cardiff at the time, spending a week with her dad. (Maxine's parents are separated and she lives with her mum.)

As Katie had been so helpful, filling party bags and blowing up balloons and the like, Sally agreed to let her carry in Joe's R2D2-shaped cake.

When Joe had blown out all thirteen candles, after a rousing chorus of 'Happy Birthday To You', he'd sneakily made *two* birthday wishes: one, that Wilf would get better soon – very soon – and that two, he, Joe, would improve at 'storyfying' (as Wilf called it), computer gaming, sports, diving and well, everything, really.

Yes, it was the saddest party ever.

But then came the phone call – from the hospital. The birthday boy was so excited: Wilf finally well enough to sit up in bed and unselfishly ask a nurse for a phone? Yes, to ring and wish his favourite grandson a Happy 13th Birthday! Finally: a light at the end of what had been a very long and extremely dark tunnel. Wilf would soon be coming home! The best birthday present ever? You betcha!

But no, it wasn't Gramps – it was a doctor – with news of Wilf's passing. A second massive heart attack had finally seen off the old man.

Bonnie scans the street as Clara scours a local newspaper.

'Can't say I'm surprised,' huffs Bonnie, 'all the inbreeding going on in that town.'

'A cesspit of swingers, I heard,' rasps Clara.

With the return of Bonnie from the window, the counter once again resumes its complement of two middle-aged spinsters; neither of whom attempts to hide the ugly, gossipy air floating around them. Not even when Gas & Graze (petrol station cum grocery store) is busy; which, as per usual, it currently isn't – unless you count Noah, hovering by the snacks stand, in a world of his own, gently bumping crumpet packs together close to his left ear.

'Now, you be careful with those, Noah,' warns Bonnie. 'You'll have to pay for anything you damage.'

Noah may have unruly hair and twitch occasionally but he's 'special', everyone says so – and totally harmless. Any holidaymaker who dares refer to him as the village idiot are given short shrift and sent on their way with a flea in their lughole. Noah gets by perfectly well, thank you. He might be pushing thirty and find falling leaves fascinating, but he has talents to astound visitors: his woodcarvings are highly prized and earn him a living wage throughout the season. In summer months you'll find Noah under the stilted market hall in the centre of town with

his blocks of wood, wonky workbench, three-legged stool and set of whittling chisels.

‘How’s Bronwen, Noah?’ asks Clara. Bronwen is Noah’s half-sister and carer. He lives at her place, and she looks after his post office savings account.

‘Good,’ grins Noah, his angled head nodding.

Ping! – And in swings the door.

‘Ta-da!’ announces the customer.

‘Oh hello, Trevor,’ beams Clara. ‘How are we today?’

‘A wretched soul, bruised with adversity, we bid be quiet when we hear it cry; but were we burdened with like weight of pain, as much or more we should ourselves complain.’

‘Wonderful,’ froths Clara. She pauses a moment then asks: ‘Whassat mean, then?’

‘One mustn’t grumble, must one?’

‘Oh, very good,’ fizzes Bonnie, handing Trevor a copy of *The Stage*.

‘Any news about Hamlet?’ asks Clara.

‘No, still waiting, I’m afraid.’

‘Noah!’ clucks Bonnie. ‘What *are* you doing?’

Noah is leaning against a tall fridge listening to the rhythm of its faulty stop-and-go buzzing. This makes Trevor smile.



Joe is on his bed, back to the wall, staring across the landing, through his open door, to his granddad’s bedroom, full of his old possessions: all Wilf’s books, the clothes in his wardrobe, the radio next to his bed. (Gramps used to like to listen to smooth jazz on low when he read.) Yes, a room crammed with so many things, but oh so empty.

Joe has been sitting like this for over an hour, totally unaware of the passing time, his unfocused eyes not really looking ahead at all, rather, looking back, replaying memories in random sequences: catch and throw in the park, time spent fishing by the river, snowman building, walks through the woods . . .

‘Joe!’ shouts Sally from downstairs. ‘Are you alright?!’

No reply.

‘Joe!’

‘What?!’

‘Are you alright?!’

‘Yes!’

‘Are you coming down for supper?!’

‘In a minute!’

'Okay!' calls Sally.

Joe had been subconsciously fiddling with a snow-globe for however long it had been; he couldn't even recall picking it up. Scores to choose from and at some point he must have picked this particular one off the shelf. He studies it for the first time in a long time.

In the years Joe had been collecting snow-globes (which is as long as he can remember) he would always buy as many as he could find; at least, until his saved pocket money ran out. He'd buy them on family holidays, school trips, or days out with Gramps; though on these latter excursions, Wilf would *always* pay – he insisted on it. Joe also bagged any snow-globe that turned up in the town's charity shops, sometimes visiting all three as many as five or six times a week. (Bought so many, the various shop staff began saving them for him; often charging as little as twenty-pence per shaker.)

The one presently in his hand – a car pulling a white caravan – he'd bought in Cornwall. Must have been over three years ago now. Yes, summer 2009: they'd hired a 4-berth caravan for a fortnight, hitched it to their 4x4 and toured all the natural wonders of the Cornish coast: Perranporth, Penzance, Polperro, Mevagissey, Land's End – stayed at every place, a different view of the sea every two or three days. They took a boat trip out of Falmouth, had a jaunt to Tintagel Castle, enjoyed outings to St. Ives and The Eden Project; Hurlers Stone Circles and King Arthur's Great Halls. And on the way back, the touring Evans' called at Cheddar Gorge in Somerset; they explored huge caverns filled with stalactites and stalagmites and gained fascinating insights into our prehistoric ancestors. In the gift shop, Wilf bought Joe yet another snow-globe: a stone-age man sitting on a rock by a wood fire outside the mouth of a cave.

Fire and snow, Joe hears Wilf say. *Unusual in a shaker*.

Joe nods and glances to a middle shelf next to the window; four snow-globes in from the right – he knew exactly where.

Aw, happy times, Wilf's voice sighs.

Again, Joe nods.

Go on, give us a shake, prompts Wilf.

Joe peers into the 'saloon car towing a caravan' snow-globe (back in 2009 he hadn't been able to find a globe with a 4x4 but this one sufficed, it was close enough). He shakes, and the snow immediately swirls around within the domed scene: a twirling snowstorm circling the vehicles, individual flakes bumping on the outside of the caravan as if wishing to be let in. Joe watches for a

minute, until all the artificial snow has settled in drifts against the miniature diorama.

You know, you should visit him if you want to, suggests Wilf insightfully.

‘Who?’

Trevor, of course.

Joe eyes Wilf’s photo. ‘He’s a bit . . . odd.’

Aren’t we all, laughs Wilf.

‘Hmm.’

Just go with your instinct, Joe.

‘Maybe.’

In the meantime, why don’t you have another go at the trick. Or should I say: the magic.

‘I tried,’ grumbles Joe. ‘You know how that turned out.’

Well, I suggest you try again, Joe. Only this time, let go your conscious self and act on instinct.

Joe laughs. ‘Are you channelling Obi-Wan now?’

Yes, I am, laughs Wilf. *Glad you noticed. But seriously, remember, you can do anything if you put your mind to it.*

Joe pauses then blurts: ‘Okay.’

And he scans the room before selecting a 7cm-high plastic Star Wars figure: Wicket, an Ewok from the forest moon of Endor.

Good choice, commends Wilf. *That’ll do nicely.*

Sitting back on the bed, Joe takes a deep breath then cups the bear-like figure in both hands and concentrates.

Stretch out with your feelings.

Joe focuses deeply, closes his eyes tight; so intense in his single-mindedness that he starts rocking, willing the Ewok to disappear.

Good, good, encourages Wilf.

Extreme concentration and silent determination; swaying back and forth – had Wilf actually been there in person he might have expected his grandson to burst into a Shamanic chant at any second.

‘Come on, come on,’ intones Joe.

Do it, Joe, do it. You can do it.

The would-be sorcerer’s eyes pop open, wide and pink.

Excellent, Joe! Wilf praises. *Now open your eyes.*

‘They are open, Gramps.’

Okay, so open your hands; look and check – what are you waiting for?

Joe regards his hands – unfurls them slowly – and finds nothing! Nothing but a plastic Star Wars figure! *Wicket*, with his stupid ripped hood and annoyingly hairy face!

Your eyes can deceive, warns Wilf. Don't trust them.

But Joe isn't listening anymore. He's already up off the bed and furiously set, as if to angrily hurl the stubbornly-still-present, bothersome little Wicket against the wall. In the end though, he switches position and gently flings the tiny Ewok onto the bedding. Wicket takes a small, soft bounce and finally disappears – into the little gap between the top of Joe's quilt and the bottom of his pillow.

Joe had stood near the entrance to Tall Trees Trailer Park for a long twenty-seven minutes before finally approaching.

The static caravan appeared to grow filthier with every step. A sane person would have turned back. But Joe wasn't for turning, he'd definitely made his mind up – of this he was reasonably certain.

All the same, by the time Joe was a bus-length away, the weathered and grubby, twenty-foot trailer had taken on an almost sinister appearance in February's dusky late-afternoon light and he'd stopped. He had stared at the dull brightness within, uncertain if the small gas lamps illuminating the inside magnified the caravan's creepy appearance or lent it a homely glow – it was a fine line between the two, he'd decided.

Now, after this long bout of indecisiveness, Yoda looks over Joe's shoulder.

Always with you it cannot be done, he sighs.

'Talking to a perfect stranger on a bench is one thing,' counters Joe. 'This is totally different.'

No! Not different! In your mind, only different.

'And if he turns out to be a homicidal axe-wielding child-murderer?'

Fear is the path to the dark side, reminds Yoda. And, if once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny; consume you it will, as it did—

'Okay, seriously, enough with the film quotes already,' berates Joe. 'Besides, I'm not afraid.'

Yoda cocks his head: *Aren't you?*

'I'd say more . . . *apprehensive – hesitant.*'

Yoda huffs and rolls his eyes.

'But reluctant or not, *I have to try.*'

Bit dramatic, sniffs Yoda.

'What's dramatic about saying I have to try?'

No! Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.

'Again? Really?'

Last one; promise – you were saying.

‘Er . . .’

Something about the trailer?

‘Yeah – do you think it looks a bit, y’know – hazardous?’

Hazardous?

‘Exactly,’ affirms Joe. ‘Unpredictable. Risky. Uncertain.’

Yoda shakes his head. *Always the words with this one.*

Remember what I said, Joe, reminds Wilf’s voice. Your eyes can deceive you. Don’t trust them.

‘I know, Granddad, but—’

Joe stops; Trevor is definitely home. Or at least someone is. A shadow just cut across the dim luminosity inside the caravan. And again there, drifting back, floating like a spectre from one grungy window to another; their cruddy frames of muck-caked glass bookended with tatty curtains.

‘Maybe this is a bad idea,’ sighs Joe. ‘Wilf?’

I said before and I’ll say it again: Let go your conscious self and act on instinct. Tell him, Yoda.

Hmm. Difficult to see. Always in motion the future is.

‘Shush,’ hushes Joe gently. ‘I need to decide for myself.’

Yes, quiet, Yoda, let the boy think.

But you just—Right, not another word will I say, puffs Yoda.

Joe looks around – he’d always assumed that all these trailers and caravans (he wasn’t sure of the difference between trailer and caravan, if indeed there was one) were only populated in the summer by holidaymakers, but no, at least a quarter had signs of life: lights on, vehicles parked at the side, or in the case of the one next door to Trevor’s, a woman cleaning the inside of her windows. Joe immediately recognises her as Becki and Chloe’s mum.

Alison spots him and peers over, perhaps wondering what this suspicious boy is up to. *Does he look suspicious? Joe asks himself. Hasn’t she recognised him? Should he wave? Will she realise it’s him if he does?*

Joe waves.

Alison raises a hand but doesn’t really wave back, just watches, as if curious.

Right, forget her; it’s now or never, thinks Joe. And he attempts to tune in to his instincts as Wilf instructed.

Reluctant? – Yes. Afraid? – Maybe a little. Or perhaps it’s just nerves, or excitement, or both – either feeling would be perfectly natural.

Okay, so, are we bailing out, abandoning this iffy venture and going home? – Definitely not. On then? – Yes!

Joe nods in agreement with himself; encouraged – he *has* to do this. He shrugs his Yoda backpack and sets off, up the steps and onto the porch, just a single stride from the caravan door – only a rush of heartbeats between him and the portal – and that’s when he trips, lurches, and nose-dives into the scuzzy Welcome mat.

‘*Man down!*’ squawks Joe, an involuntary reaction to too many hours spent gaming on his computer.

Swiftly up again he dusts off his school trousers and growls at the jagged rip in the knee. Then, as he finally sets to knock on the door’s frosted window, the door opens.

Trevor stands in the doorway, a face like he’d been expecting this visit for some time.

Joe can’t help but notice Trevor’s bare, wet feet. Knobbly, wrinkled and leathery, they are the extremities of someone who has clearly walked many miles, thinks Joe somewhat randomly.

Trevor sucks on a long, black cigarette-holder and the mauve-coloured cigarette stuck in the end burns crisply.

‘How lovely to see you, Joe,’ he grins exhaling a plume of smoke. ‘Come in, do.’

With Joe in, Trevor looks around then closes the door.

As Trevor is quietly removing the TO LET sign from the window, Joe notices the shelved, almost-full, glass display cabinet and its housed collection: lots of miniatures, several medium-sized, and one larger robot.

‘Nice little collection.’

‘Brew?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I’m making tea. Would you like a cup?’

The boiling kettle clicks off.

‘No, I’m good, thanks.’

‘I have an Irn Bru in the refrigerator—’

‘There’s one missing,’ notes Joe indicating a gap in a line of shelved medium-sized robots.

‘But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,’ recites Trevor, ‘all losses are restored and sorrows end.’

‘O—kay,’ responds Joe.

‘These aren’t the droids you’re looking for,’ pipes up the larger robot.

‘Wow, that one talks.’

‘I never have the slightest idea what he’s jabbering about but I’m afraid I can’t find the Off Switch. Pay him no heed.’

‘It’s Star Wars. *A New Hope*.’

'Ah,' Trevor adopts his best thespian stance. 'That's no planet,' he delivers in his best Sir Alec Guinness voice. 'It's a space station.'

Joe laughs.

Pfft, scoffs Yoda. *Planet*.

'Something wrong, boy?' booms Trevor playfully. He sucks on his cigarette-holder and puffs out a smoky cloud.

'It's *moon*,' coughs Joe. 'Not *planet*.'

Not one to accept a fluffed line easily, Trevor frowns.

'Are you quite sure?'

'Yep, pretty sure,' smiles Joe. 'That's no moon,' he quotes. 'It's a space station.'

'Then I stand corrected,' bows Trevor.

Joe's mobile rings but he ignores it.

'Aren't you getting that?'

'Nah, I'm good.'

'But what if it's important?'

'It won't be.'

'All the same—'

'Fine,' huffs Joe impatiently.

He pulls the phone from his pocket.

'Hello?' Joe's tone is pessimistic and flat.

After listening a moment he abruptly ends the call.

'Yeah, I'm just going to leave it switched off. Sorry, do you mind if I open a window? It's very smoky in here.'

'By all means.' Trevor indicates the window next to the dining table. 'And please, make yourself comfortable. Best seats in the house.'

Joe notices a bowl of soapy water under the table. He sits on the 'free' side and Trevor sits opposite, sliding his feet back into the bowl as Joe opens the window.

'You know, those things are really bad for you. *And me*.'

'Yes, you're quite right, dear boy. It is a filthy habit. *Ziganov Colours*: strong Russian tobacco. Sadly, I am but a helpless slave to the pernicious weed. However, from this day hence, I vow never to smoke in your presence again.'

Trevor removes the brightly-coloured, gold foil filtered cigarette from the holder, stubs it out then leans back and deposits the ashtray on the kitchen counter behind him.

'Pernicious: good word.'

'Thank you, my boy. Oh, and I see you've discovered my shaker; the globe I believe I mentioned when first we met.'

'Well, yes, it was right here on the table.'

Joe shakes the small ornament.

'I thought you'd like it.'

'Who doesn't like a snow-globe?'

'Philistines,' suggests Trevor.

'Do you collect these, too?' Joe looks around for others.

'No, I just liked that one because of the robot. See.'

Joe peers inside.

'I would imagine snow is bad for robots,' he muses.

'Keep it,' offers Trevor. 'Add him to *your* collection.'

Joe glances at the old man then slowly places the shaker back on the table.

'Problem?'

'I'm not sure it would be a good idea.'

'But why ever not, dear boy? It is merely a gift; an offering to mark our newfound friendship.'

'I know, but I'm not even sure if I should really be here.'

'You're right, I should keep it.'

Trevor takes possession of the globe, shakes it, and then sets it to one side.

Joe eyes the shaker intently.

'Shame, though,' he laments. 'It is a nice one. And I haven't got a *robot* snow-globe.'

'What if we were to make a trade?' proposes Trevor. 'A noble exchange. Quid pro quo.'

'A swap?' replies Joe. 'I suppose. But I haven't really got anything on me.'

'You must have something. Boys always have something interesting in their pockets. How about we trade for whatever you have in there.'

Joe roots his pockets but finds only a piece of paper – and he knows what it is.

'Let me see.' Trevor sticks out a liver-spotted hand.

Joe obliges: he fishes out the note and surrenders it.

'*Loser*,' reads Trevor. 'So, have you lost something?'

'Lost something?' laughs Joe sadly. 'You could say that.'

Trevor folds the note. 'I imagine Loser is not referring to the loss of your grandfather, then.'

'Heard about that on the grapevine, did you?' sighs Joe.

After four folds Trevor cups his large hands around the small paper square.

'What are you doing?' Joe frowns. 'Another trick?'

'No, I'm doing what you should have done when you first found it.'

'But how do you—?'

Trevor throws his hands in the air and there's an eruption of tiny pieces of paper, hundreds of them; they burst out and rain down on Joe's shoulders and head.

'Ta-da!' exclaims Trevor.

Joe exhales loudly then sticks out his bottom lip and blows away bits of confetti caught in his Fro's fringe curls.

'Not impressed?'

Joe shakes his head gently; another sprinkle of teeny paper scraps flutters to the table.

'I don't believe in magic, Trevor. Not anymore.'

'Not even when the magic is clearly real?'

'I'm not a kid.'

'That's a shame,' sighs Trevor touching Joe's hand.

Joe withdraws his hand and stands.

'I think I should be going.'

Joe heads for the caravan park exit trailing an occasional piece of confetti. Trevor watches him go.

'Come back any time,' he calls.

Alison, noticing Joe's departure, rubbernecks behind her window.

Joe paces in front of the school, periodically hooking the top button of his shirt and blowing cold air down inside.

The man in the parked burger van leans on the counter watching intently, a curious, some might say creepy, look on his face.

Joe's pacing (and blowing) stops as Lucy and Max, wheeling their bikes beside them, exit through the gates. Lucy's in platform boots and a shortened red Sari pinched at the waist by a large yellow belt; a kind of East meets Westwood. She's also rocking a Bindi (forehead dot), jewelled nose ring, and, on the back of one hand, a red-and-blue henna tattoo: the iconic Aladdin Sane lightning bolt. Max's look today is perhaps best described as Bride of Dracula meets steampunk ass-kicker: buckled corset; short, ruffled black lace skirt over a ruched, crimson petticoat; ripped stockings under knee boots, that kind of thing – plus the usual bold make-up.

'Hi, Max,' beams Joe. 'You look amazing.'

'Aw, thanks,' smiles Maxine.

'And what am I?' quips Lucy. 'Chopped liver?'

'Nice bike,' Joe continues.

Maxine raises her eyebrows. 'Still the same one, Joe.'

'About time you got on yours,' suggests Lucy.

Joe ignores his sister's gibe and sticks to grinning at Max; he knows it's getting weird but just can't stop.

'Are you hot?' asks Maxine at last.

No, but you are, Joe almost blurts. 'Er, no, why?'

'Your face.'

'What about it?'

'It's all red,' remarks Lucy matter-of-factly.

'So's his belly!' calls an approaching voice.

Joe's heart slumps: Owen with Gary and Melvin in tow, cackling like simpletons.

'He belly-flopped in swimming,' crows Gary.

'From the high board,' guffaws Melvin.

'Ooh,' frowns Maxine sympathetically. 'Sounds painful.'

'Nah,' Joe bats away any concerns with a dismissive hand, 'it's fine,' he assures her.

'Fine?' snorts Owen. 'Well, it was better than our last football practise, Joe, I'll give you that much.'

'Yeah, why don't ya tell Maxine all about it,' goads Gary.

'I don't know why,' sneers Owen, 'but I *always* score when Joe's in goal.'

'Which is, like, every game,' adds Gary. 'Coz he can't play anywhere else.'

'Haven't you lot got homes to go to?' asks Lucy sharply.

But Owen isn't for home quite yet:

'Chill out, Luce,' smirks Gary, 'it's just laddish banter.'

'Is it, Gary?' seethes Lucy. 'Is it really?'

'Not everyone's into sports, Owen, you dickhead,' bristles Maxine.

'That's true,' acknowledges Owen. 'I mean to be fair, he is good at storytelling. Oh no, wait – he's not good at that either, is he?'

'Jeez, what is your problem?' Maxine wants to know.

'You wanna drop out of the Storytell comp, mate,' urges Gary, 'before you embarrass yourself anymore than you already have.'

'Right, piss off,' warns Lucy. Maxine holds Lucy's bike as she shoos the trio. 'Go on, do one, before I lose my shit.'

'We were going anyway,' bleats Gary backing up.

'Good. So, go.'

'And Joe's way smarter than any of you dumb-asses,' rasps Max. 'He'll slaughter you in Storytell, you just see if he doesn't.'

'Oh yeah,' splutters Melvin, 'well, for someone who read the dictionary – if he really did – how come he can't— y'know – how come he can't—' Melvin is unable to formulate his puerile thoughts into meaningful words and the sentence tapers away unfinished.

‘Go on keep going,’ orders Lucy arms wide, shepherding.

‘I believe what Melvin’s trying to say is, and correct me if I’m wrong here, Melvin.’ Owen’s retreating face bobs behind Lucy’s head, from one shoulder to the other. ‘How it sure is funny, that for someone who supposedly reads a lot of stories, he can’t make one up!’

‘Yeah, that was it,’ grunts Melvin.

‘Especially when,’ another head bob, ‘it’s just so, what’s the word,’ another shoulder switch, ‘so fucking easy!’

‘Right, that’s enough!’ warns Lucy sternly.

‘Alright, alright,’ protests Owen as Joe’s sister attempts to shove them beyond the van. ‘We’re getting burgers.’

‘Fine, get your shit in a bun and piss off.’

‘Yes, Miss,’ mocks Gary after Lucy has headed back.

Owen can’t resist one final taunt either:

‘Hey, Joe, maybe you could steal a story from one of your books!’ he hollers. ‘We wouldn’t tell anyone, would we, boys?’

‘Yeah, maybe an Aesop’s fucking Fable,’ shouts Gary.

Melvin guffaws at that, though, in truth, he doesn’t know why. No matter, he has a hotdog to look forward to.

‘No need to cheat to beat you, Owen!’ barks Joe at last.

‘You okay?’ Lucy asks, returned.

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?’

‘Don’t let that lot bother you.’

‘They don’t.’

‘Good.’ Lucy repossesses her bike. ‘Right then, I’m off.’

‘So, go then.’

Remounted Lucy cautions her brother:

‘And don’t wander off this time.’

Joe rolls his eyes as Lucy rides away.

‘See you later!’ she calls back.

‘Bye, Luce!’ exclaims Maxine, lifting a leg over the bike frame.

‘If they give you any more trouble, Joe,’ she nods at the boys, ‘just let us know and we’ll sort them out for you.’

‘Er, martial arts; remember?’

Joe pantomimes a leg throw, or shoulder throw, or whatever that weird move he just performed was.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ smiles Maxine, ‘judo. I was forgetting.’

She winks and pedals off, Joe attentively scrutinising her departure up the road. *Poetry in motion*, he thinks; a cliché perhaps but so apt, he feels. He’d been having adolescent stirrings, wanton thoughts, about Max for a while now. Not that she’d ever be interested in being his girlfriend, not really; he was far too young for her – and what girl in her right mind would be

interested in his uncool awkwardness and lardy arse. Still, he could look, he could imagine, he could fantasise. And it wasn't just Max's stunning face (those smoky eyes!), magnetic presence and bewitching manner he daydreamed about – it was more earthy than that: it was her girlish well-proportioned shape, her nimble trimness – in essence, *all* her curves.

Much to learn you still have, my young padawan, sniffs Yoda. *This is just the beginning*, he warns.

'Quiet, you.'

Attachment leads to jealousy, the shadow of—

'Hey Max!' Joe bellows.

'What?!' Maxine will disappear behind the burger van any second.

'Do you like magic?!'

Joe fails to hear Maxine's response, if indeed there was one. Instead, all he hears is Owen, Gary and Melvin. Clucking loudly they parrot: 'Do you like magic?' as if he'd just asked the most pathetic question ever.

CHAPTER 5

Storytelling

'I didn't forget,' insists Paul sternly. 'And I wasn't late. He just wasn't there.'

'Okay, okay,' groans Sally with impatience. 'I'm sure he's fine. He's probably just with friends.'

Sally, her bump far more prominent now, places the Turn And Face The Strange mug (one of a set bought by Lucy) on the table in front of Paul then leans back on the kitchen counter.

'Sugar in this?' checks Paul.

Sally rolls her eyes. 'Think I know how you take your tea, Paul. You should be the one making me a drink.'

'You don't have to make coconut water. Just pour it.'

'Still, it'd be nice if you actually offered for once.'

'Well, speak of the devil,' Paul interrupts.

Joe is passing the open door, carrying a box marked Wilf's Things through the hall.

'And where the hell have you been?'

'What do you care?'

'Hey! I won't be spoken to like that.'

Sally's demeanour sighs: Here we go again.

'So, where were you?' grills Paul.

'What? I was upstairs.' Joe stares intently. 'Okay?'

'I'm talking about after school,' barks Paul. 'And why was your phone switched off?'

Joe shrugs.

'Hasn't got a clue,' mutters Paul.

'Paul,' chides Sally.

'Well, look at him, carrying that box everywhere. What's that all about? It's morbid. Been months now, he should get over it. *I've* had to.'

'Jesus, Paul, it's been four months,' fumes Sally. 'Are you over it?'

'And why is he wearing that silly backpack all the time?'

'Lucy made it for him,' objects Sally. 'And it's not silly.'

'Can I go now?' huffs Joe. 'This is heavy.'

'You do understand we had to clear Wilf's old room, right, love?' asks Sally softly. 'Make it up for the baby. You're okay with that?'

Joe gazes into the box for several heartbeats and eventually produces a small nod.

'Yep,' he sighs.

'We'll have to pull that shed down too at some point.' Paul blows his tea. 'Before it *falls* down, rickety old thing.'

'What?!' barks Joe.

'Joe, it's becoming a hazard,' asserts Paul.

'No!' And with that Joe rushes away, the box's contents rattling ahead of him.

'Where does he think he's going now?'

Paul indicates the kitchen clock.

'It's Friday, Paul,' chides Sally. 'No school in the morning. Let him be.'

Inside *Wilf's Workshop*, between the junk, Chopper bike and giant animal paw on a stick, sits Joe, cross-legged on the floor. Speckles of dust flicker around the sooty bulb hanging from the shed's ceiling. The dull light casts a tawny glow of barely-perceptible warmth over Joe's head. He's sitting next to Granddad's old trunk: an antique piece of luggage; something, according to Wilf, an old buccaneer once owned. Probably just Granddad storifying but it certainly has an ancient swashbuckling sea-faring look to it – at least Joe has always thought so – with its brass studs, leather straps and brass lock.

From the box of *Wilf's Things* Joe retrieves a framed photo, a picture of Joe and Wilf wrapped in winter clothing and surrounded by fir trees, smiling in the snow. After studying it for a moment he stands it front and centre on the trunk.

Next out of the box, an award: a Storytell trophy won by Wilf back in the day. Hard to imagine Wilf at school, young and in uniform, but the trophy is testament to his attendance – as well as his storytelling skills.

There are four trophies in the box, won in succession from 1947 to 1950, each engraved *Wilf Evans, Freestyle Storytell Champion* followed by the year that particular trophy was won. They are clearly based on the 'Oscar' statuettes handed out at the Academy Awards: picture the same gold-coloured chap atop a circular base, but open hands rather than holding a sword – as if telling a story.

Joe sets the trophies in a row on the back of the trunk's lid. Then a second framed photo is lifted from the box: an 'official' snap taken at one of the award presentations: Wilf in blazer, cap and sharp-creased trousers, smiling and waving all happy and proud, yet modest at the same time.

Joe's thoughts drift to school caps and how relieved he is no-one has to wear them anymore; they look so corny and old-

fashioned, not cool like baseball caps. It is at this point that the bulb fizzes briefly and a sharp pop puts the shed in complete darkness.

The sound of rummaging, not in Wilf's box but the drawers of his workbench: metal objects scrape against wood and each other, chisels, screwdrivers, tins of screws or nuts and bolts, drill bits, work gloves, string, wire . . . (Wilf had all the odds and ends you'd expect to find in any shed worthy of the name – and some you wouldn't).

The foraging falls silent then there's a click: a torch beam, brown it's so dull. Scarcely illuminating the interior, the weak shaft of light picks out floating dust particles, mere specks, too airy and lightweight to descend, as it throws ghostly shadows all around.

So much dust, thinks Joe. And what is dust? – Barely detectable fragments of plant pollen, textile fibres, animal hairs and human skin cells. Joe wonders what infinitesimally small percentage of this floating lint was once a part of granddad – what amount of his DNA, a piece of this powdery cloud of microscopic snowflakes. A fleck catches the back of Joe's throat and his subsequent barking cough causes the sooty haze to rush and dance.

Once Joe has recovered and the dust has settled somewhat, Wilf's cap makes an appearance from the box. The headpiece is followed by its matching scarf and together with a couple of Wilf's favourite 'pulp' paperbacks, the items are laid gently on the trunk lid, the scarf made to snake softly between trophies and framed photos.

The torch beam stutters and dulls to less than useless.

'Seriously?' Joe sighs.

The scrape of a drawer, more rummaging, another drawer, yet another rummage, a rattle, then a final scrape before a match finally lights a stubby candle. Shadows warp and waver as Joe sets the candle gently in the middle of Wilf's possessions, careful to make sure there's no danger of scarf or cap catching fire.

Joe isn't religious but a feeling of spirituality suddenly washes over him. Perhaps it's the kneeling, the display: it has all the hallmarks of one of those small roadside shrines he saw dotted around when they took a trip to Ireland. He brought back a keepsake that he felt caught the holiday's flavour, even if it was a bit cliché: a snow-globe with a river-dancing leprechaun; four-leaf clover in one hand, pint of Guinness in the other.

Wilf had bought it for him. (It was the first summer after Joan had passed; Wilf came along after Sally insisted he needed a

holiday. Joan, who was older than Wilf, had suffered a long time with dementia, and Wilf, despite arthritis, diabetes, and his own increasing age, had been her main carer.) And yet, in spite of all this, Wilf had always found time for Joe.

Joe pulls the leprechaun snow-globe from his pocket, shakes it, and adds it to the trunk's display.

It's a shame we couldn't find a Father Ted snow-globe like we'd wanted, Joe hears his granddad say.

'I don't think they make them, Gramps,' smiles Joe.

Father Jack was my favourite. Arse! Drink! Girls!

Joe laughs. Everyone loves Father Ted. And everyone loved Wilf. Look at him there in the photo, bless him, all fresh-faced and smiley, a young lad himself, clutching one of his storytelling prizes; the *actual* trophy – *all* his trophies – over sixty years later, now glinting in the candle light.

Joe gazes at the Storytell 'Oscars', marvels at how, relocated from the past, they flicker and glimmer before him – and his imagination flits; transports him to a different time and place . . .

The school hall is much the same as it ever was. No different to present day as far as Joe can tell – except that it's in black and white for some reason. The school teachers seem strange somehow, though; different, sterner, less friendly, more formal – strict, even.

The stuffy headmaster, a pigeon-chested galoot, calls up the young Wilf. Applause rings out as the boy approaches the stage, the audience made up of smartly uniformed school children, row upon row of them clapping politely. Joe pictures Wilf as he is in the award photo, thirteen probably, the same age Joe is now. (Joe would look exactly like him, if only he could lose a little weight.) Young Wilf climbs the three wooden steps at the side of the stage and walks the boards toward the musty, self-important headmaster.

'Well done, Wilfred.'

During the formal handshake and the handing over of the trophy there are several flashes as a suited photographer snaps the moment for posterity and the local newspaper. Young Wilf holds up the award for all to see and there's a resurgence of applause from the hall, cheers from a group of close friends, one or two jocular thumbs-down from the losers, and another round of camera flashes.

In the background, behind Wilf and the headmaster, on the old, familiar easel, are four word cards:

REFLECTION. JESTER. CROW. STREAM.

There's a long pause, after which, a familiar voice reminds:
Going to look at the other photographs, you were, hmm?
'Hmm?' wonders Joe absentmindedly.

Yoda prods Joe with his cane.

The other photographs, Yoda sighs.

'Oh, yes – the snowman album.'

Yoda nods at the box.

Put it in with Wilf's things, you did, hmm?

Joe reaches in and produces a white A4-sized photo album with a picture of a snowman on the front. He rests it on his lap and turns the cover. After a title page: **The Snowman Chronicles**, and a blank page 2, each further white page contains a single glued-in Polaroid above Joe's handwritten notes and doodles.

The first photograph, taken at the turn of the millennium, has an annotation that reads:

Christmas Day 2000. Mr Zero, my first ever snowman. Granddad Wilf (65), Joan (68), Mum (26), Lucy (4), Dad (31) and me (0). Not much snow but enough for my inaugural snowman. The whole thing was Granddad's idea but Lucy picked the name.

In the photo, the snowman is tiny, maybe a foot tall, as wee as the baby held in Paul's arms. Sally and Lucy are holding hands and Wilf is knelt beside the snowman, arms outstretched towards Mr Zero as if he were a fantastic prize to be won on a Christmas game show.

With each slow, deliberate page turn, the snowmen grow larger and more fabulous, the family a year older.

Mr Nippy.

Mr Sparkles.

Mrs Freezy.

Noel.

Monsieur Shivers.

On some, Joe appears on Wilf's knee, in others at least one person from the family is missing (perhaps taking the photo); nonetheless, all the snaps capture a sense of joy.

In Joan's final appearance, with Mr Melt, she appears sick and grey and lost. She had passed by the time Mr Abominable appeared in the winter of 2007.

The pages continue to turn at a leisurely pace . . .

Mr Eight.

Little Miss Blizzard.

Brrrronwen.

And the final Polaroid, dated Christmas 2011:

Mr Frosty.

Twelve photographs in total.

With the next turn, the page is blank; there's no photo for 2012 – no Joe, no Wilf, no family, no snow. And Mr Wonky is conspicuous by his absence.

Joe stares at the empty page for the longest time.

It is Yoda who eventually breaks the silence:

Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose.

'Fear to lose?' echoes Joe sadly. 'I've already lost that.'

Good point, sniffs Yoda. Then something else you must.

'What; Mr Wonky? – I never had *him* to start with.'

No! Yoda smacks Joe on the head with his cane.

The snow-globe, he barks.

'Huh?' Joe rubs his head.

The one in your pocket; no trace of it there must be.

Yoda taps Joe's pocket with the cane.

'Sorry, what are you asking me to do? Get rid of a snow-globe – are you mental?'

Yoda rolls his eyes. *Not rid of. Make it disappear. Vanish. Dematerialise.* He shakes his head, closes his eyes and sighs heavily. *Lose it, he drawls dramatically.*

'Oh okay, I get it,' Joe catches on. He fishes the snow-globe from his pocket; the one inhabited by a robot, gifted from Trevor in exchange for Joe's 'Loser' note.

Maxine, impressed she'll be, hmm?

'Yeah, ya think?' smirks Joe.

Yoda nods. *Big time.*

Joe likes the idea of Max being dazzled; *he'd* thought she'd be fascinated, too. He shakes the globe, sets it on a palm then looks to Yoda.

'Right, let's give it a try.'

Try?! barks Yoda.

'I mean . . . *do*. Let's do it.'

Good. Yoda points his cane at the snow-globe. *So, do.*

'Where did you get the cane, by the way?' asks Joe.

Focus!

'Ow!'

Sorry about that. Hand slipped.

'Uh-huh.'

Yoda aims a sharp nod at the globe.

'Fine.' After rubbing his head, Joe takes a long deep breath and lets it out real slow. He closes his eyes, concentrates and centres himself, but then, whilst trying to clear his mind in order to attain ultimate zenness, he accidentally pictures Max, riding away on her bike, pedals rising and falling in slow motion; wheels turning – her tight little bum on the saddle—

Yoda whacks Joe with the cane.

Control, control, you must learn control.

‘Ow! – and shush. I was just – gathering my thoughts.’

Younglings, sighs Yoda.

‘Okay, I’m ready. Here we go.’

Finally, mutters Yoda.

‘I need you to believe in me, Max,’ practises Joe. ‘Do you believe? *Really* believe? You do? Cool, watch carefully.’

Good, good, encourages Yoda.

Joe cups the snow-globe and closes his hands around it.

‘Keep watching, Max; stay with me . . .’

Yoda closes his eyes and nods keenly.

‘And now be amazed as I magically—’

Joe opens his hands:

The snow-globe is as present as it ever was.

Yoda’s eyes blink open but as he moves to see, Joe swiftly and slyly re-cups his hands.

Come on, you can do it, urges Wilf’s disembodied voice.

‘Can I, Gramps?’ sighs Joe.

If we think hard enough we can make anything happen.

Already know you that which you need, adds Yoda.

‘Fine, one more try—I mean, go.’

One is all you’ll need, Joe.

Use the Force, young padawan.

Joe shuts his eyes, squeezes them as tight as his hands, and growls, his whole body shaking with steely determination. This goes on for several seconds, then:

Yoda raises an expectant eyebrow.

‘Yeah! You feel that?!’ squeals Joe.

He opens his hands to reveal . . . a circular impression where the base has pressed into fleshy palm. The mark, though deep and pink, will shortly disappear – unlike the globe, which stubbornly remains in the physical realm.

‘Oh, come on!’

Joe is up on his feet, angrily pacing within the confined space and looking for somewhere to throw the globe, preferably into something soft: he doesn’t want to break it.

‘I don’t know what I’m doing!’ he snarls. ‘We’re just wasting our time!’

Having not found anything soft enough to launch the globe into, Joe settles instead for harshly shoving it back into his pocket with a frustrated grunt. Yoda sighs.

Teach him I cannot. No patience the boy has.

He will learn patience, insists Wilf.

Much anger in him . . . Like his father.

Was I any different when—?

‘Jeez, could you two knock it off?’ gripes Joe.

Silence for a long beat then Yoda muses: *Hmm, so storm out of the shed now you must, yes?*

‘Yep,’ grunts Joe. And he does.

On the easel: COWBOY, SWAMP, STAR, and MONEY.

Owen is addressing his amused classmates, hardly able to finish his story for laughing. Only Joe and Mr Schneider appear unimpressed. The teacher was distracted several minutes ago by a group of girls on the sports field engaging in some early practise for the Morris dancing team’s sheep-bladder tossing competition ahead of the upcoming summer Eisteddfod. Joe, stony-faced, is rolling the robot snow-globe in his hands as if it were a grenade.

‘But the Marshal had passed out in the saloon,’ snorts Owen. ‘And the Sheriff *couldn’t* follow,’ he wraps up, ‘because of what happened to his horse.’

All the students, apart from Joe, laugh hysterically. Owen bows, soaks up their applause and whistles. Joe shakes his head. Melvin, on his feet, congratulates Owen as he returns to his seat.

‘Now *that’s* how it’s done, young Jedi,’ winks Owen.

Joe’s story had not gone well. At first the cards looked promising: MIRROR, DENIAL, OGRE, and TIME. But Joe’s attempt to string them together in an interesting and amusing narrative had spluttered, stalled, and then fizzled out to a weak, baffling, and unfunny punch-line – a complete and utter fail.

As Owen bullishly attempts to stoke the now fading praise, Mr Schneider finally moves away from the window and its athletic distractions.

‘Right, settle down, class,’ he orders. ‘Now remember, the chance to enter this year’s competition closes at the end of this week. All entrants must declare themselves on the notice board by 4 p.m. Friday. Okay, so does anyone else want a practise run?’

The teacher studies the faces of his students.

‘Hey, by the way,’ asks Owen, ‘what’s with your Fro today, Joe? It’s kinda . . .’

‘My hair’s kinda what, Owen? Frizzy? Bushy? Ginger?’

‘Kinda Shit,’ advises Owen.

Joe clutches his stomach mockingly. ‘Oh, bravo, Owen,’ he mocks. ‘Insulting, insightful, and *so* inventive.’

‘Well, it is shit.’

‘Really? *Shit’s* the best you can come up with? How about –’
Joe shrugs, points at Melvin. ‘– You, pick a letter.’

‘Er, D?’

‘For D you could have had detestable or disagreeable, dreadful or dismal, deplorable—’

‘Shut it, showoff.’

‘Oh, touché.’

‘Careful, Owen,’ warns Gary. ‘He might use his sumo on you.’ And they start a chorus of: ‘Sumo! Sumo!’

‘Alright, that’s enough.’ Over Owen and Gary’s laughter the teacher asks: ‘Will you be entering again this year, Joe?’

‘What, after last year’s fiasco?’ snickers Gary.

‘Oh, come on now,’ pleads the teacher. ‘We all know it’s been a tough time for Joe recently.’

‘It’s always a tough time for some people,’ quips Owen.

Gary laughs, cruel and loud, but the rest of the class are not amused and even Melvin looks sympathetic.

Exchanging a challenging look with Owen, Joe tests the weight of his snow-globe as if it really *were* a grenade he might roll under the clown’s desk. A snow-bomb that will burst with a mighty bang under the terrified buffoon’s arse, showering him and Gary with glitter and embarrassment and making them shit their pants (whilst leaving the rest of the class unharmed and highly entertained).

Joe nods absentmindedly and smiles to himself.

‘What is that?’ sneers Owen.

‘Brought one of your toys in?’ mocks Gary.

‘Joe, over here, dear boy,’ calls Trevor. ‘Join us, do.’

Trevor is seated at the back of The Cliché Café, installed in a booth, holding court; those around him clearly enthralled by whichever anecdote he’s been recounting.

‘Make room, make room,’ bids Trevor, and those sitting opposite, Mrs Spencer the old woman from the charity shop, and Ben, a middle-aged clerk in the town’s only bank, scoot their bums along the green vinyl bench seat. The young woman beside Trevor is Polish dental assistant slash receptionist Marta. Joe knows them all to be Jehovah’s Witnesses; he’s seen all three at his front door on various occasions. Paul always sends them packing; tells them he’s not interested in religion – theirs or anyone else’s.

‘What is that?’ asks Joe at the table.

‘A Saville Row Smoking Jacket, dear boy – the finest.’

Once upon a time, a dapper smoking jacket it may have been, *the finest* even, but today, the quilted burgundy over-garment is faded, worn, riddled with holes and absurdly out of place.

Where does he think he is? Joe wonders. In a stately home, by a roaring fireplace, packing a pipe with tobacco; like Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective stories?

'Pure velvet. Feel that quality. I wore this in our touring production of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*. I played the lead, Garry Essendine. And I was magnificent.'

Trevor catches the attention of a server.

'A treat for my guest: a milk-shake, or Knickerbocker Glory, or whatever it is the kids are into these days.'

Then, to Joe: 'Please, sit.'

Joe considers the offer. His last memory of Trevor was the old man touching his hand. Was that just a normal physical expression of a genuine human emotion – or was it 'inappropriate behaviour'? No, on reflection, Joe would *not* call the contact *inappropriate*. And besides, this is a public place, lots of customers, it should be fine.

He squeezes onto the bench seat next to Marta and is happy to do so. Close proximity to a pretty blonde who, as it turns out, smells divine – what's not to like?

'Just a half-pounder with large fries and an ice-cream sundae to follow, thanks, Jess,' he tells the server. 'Oh, and a diet coke. No, make it a regular.'

The full name on her badge is Jessica but Joe knows her well and frequents The Cliché Café regularly – and why wouldn't he? The diner has a Never-judge-a-book-by-its-cover corner where a host of paperbacks are available for any customer to read for free.

(The books are also available to buy for a modest charge if you find one you like. Or spend £10 and take home any title for free.)

'One Ignorance-is-bliss burger, a Chip-off-the-old-block fries, an Everything-in-moderation coke, and a What-doesn't-kill-you-makes-you-stronger sundae coming up,' affirms Jessica before spinning on a heel and disappearing.

'So, who's Garry Essendine?' asks Joe, secretly enjoying the weight of Marta's thigh against his own.

Trevor is suddenly on his feet, hamming it up as Garry Essendine: 'I don't care whether they've put a swimming bath in my dressing room, and a squash court and a Steinway Grand,' he recites. 'I will not play a light French comedy to an auditorium that looks like a Gothic edition of Wembley Stadium.'

Trevor's dining companions clap politely and gently stamp their feet. The old actor takes his bows as if it were an opening night debut. Although Joe doesn't recognise the play, if indeed that's what it is (he doubts the others know either), he feels compelled to join in with the applause.

'Ah, my public still love me. Thank you, thank you. You really are too kind.'

The server walks over and stands by their table.

'You're quite right, Jessica,' apologises Trevor profusely. 'We should keep the noise down. This is a respectable establishment. Any more noise,' – he points at the door – 'and out we'll go.'

'No, I was just bringing Joe his Everything-in-moderation coke,' sniffs Jess. 'There you go, Joe.'

'Still, we were making rather a commotion, for which we wholeheartedly ask forgiveness – it shan't happen again.'

Jessica shrugs. 'Can I get anybody anything else?'

'No, we're fine,' agree Trevor's companions, sipping the last of their tea as Jessica collects Trevor's empty plate.

'That was delicious, my dear – and thoroughly deserving of a pudding. What do you have? Enthral me with your sweet delights.'

'We have An-apple-doesn't-fall-far-from-the-tree pie, You-are-what-you-eat lemon meringue, There's-no-time-like-the-present sherry trifle, At-least-I've-got-my-health—'

'Ooh yes, the sherry trifle – thank you.'

'One No-time-like-the-present coming right up.'

And with that Jessica returns to the counter.

'Well, that was a close one,' whispers Trevor conspiratorially.

'What was?' asks Mrs Spencer.

'About the noise.'

'Oh, I don't think she was bothered,' smiles Marta.

'All the same, perhaps it would be best if you were to leave,' encourages Trevor.

'Us?' asks Ben. 'But I really don't think—'

'The clapping, the whistling, the stamping of feet,' interrupts Trevor. 'We must consider our fellow diners must we not? Besides, I have a rather compelling matter I'd like to discuss with Master Joe in private.'

'You do?' asks Joe with regret. He could happily listen to Marta's Polish accent all day – and then there's her leg, still pressing against his own, after all this time!

'If you wouldn't mind,' asserts Trevor to the group.

'In private, eh?' frowns Mrs Spencer.

'Exactly,' confirms Trevor.

The companions look to each other a little taken aback.

Fine, we'll leave you to it, they agree wordlessly at last.

'You're too kind,' praises Trevor.

Ben and Mrs Spencer rise, and Joe moves too, reluctantly allowing the lovely Marta to escape.

'Oh, and would you mind settling the bill on your way out?' petitions Trevor. 'I appear to have forgotten my wallet. Perhaps a third each would be most fair.'

Ben, Marta and Mrs Spencer amble to the counter muttering to each other. It's Ben who asks for the bill.

'The next one's on me!' calls Trevor. 'Lovely people,' he tells Joe. 'But fans can be somewhat tiresome on occasion.'

'Fans?' parrots Joe.

'Ah, here's dessert – and your burger.' Trevor pushes aside a folded copy of *The Stage* and Jess tables their order.

Joe dives right in and Trevor tries a spoonful of trifle.

'Mmm, you can so taste the sherry,' purrs Trevor. 'Want a taste?'

Joe shakes his head and speaks around a mouthful of fries and burger: 'Watching my weight.'

'Nonsense, you look fine.'

'I was kidding,' attempts Joe, accidentally spitting out a piece of partially chewed burger.

'Kids are far too worried about their bodies these days; their self-image.' He laughs and booms: 'Let it all hang out I say and the devil take the hindmost!'

Jessica frowns at that, not quite sure what he means, this new guy about town. Llanidloes had known its share of eccentrics over the years, some of them transients, many of them locals, but Mr Smoking Jacket here was still relatively unfamiliar and the server hadn't quite worked out how she felt about him; not yet.

Jessica turns to Joe and raises an eyebrow.

'You okay?'

'I'm fine,' he assures her continuing to tuck in.

'We'll call you if we require anything else,' adds Trevor.

'Right, well if you need me,' Jessica's piercing blue eyes switch to Trevor, 'I'll be just over there.'

'Thank you, Jessica,' replies Trevor. 'And *mmm*, this is simply delicious.'

'I'll let the management know you're happy,' advises Jessica flatly before walking away.

'More than happy,' froths Trevor. '*Ecstatic!*'

Another spoonful of trifle disappears.

'Mmm, this really is so good,' he moans softly. 'Sure you won't try?'

The spoon, laden with custard, jelly and cream, is held out close to Joe's mouth. As tempting as it looks, Joe remains resolute; he shakes his curly-mopped head and pops in another batch of fries.

‘Fine,’ smiles Trevor. ‘Your loss.’

And he continues to noisily finish off the trifle, heaped spoonful by heaped spoonful, until finally, the glass is empty bar a few colourful streaks of red, yellow and white.

He sighs, sits back rubbing his tummy and belches.

‘Oops, pardon.’

He wipes his moustache and beard with a paper napkin.

‘Now, what can I do you for?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Just a corny old expression, dear boy. I mean, of course: *What can I do – for you?*’

‘You called *me* over, Trevor. You said you had “a rather compelling matter you wished to discuss”.’

‘No, no, that was just an excuse.’

‘An excuse?’

‘To be rid of those three.’ Trevor nods his head toward the door. ‘Lovely people but honestly, I’m sure they’d have had me reciting Shakespeare until closing time if you hadn’t come along to rescue me.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Indeed it is, and as much as I enjoy my art, I am *not* a performing monkey.’

‘If you say so,’ mutters Joe.

‘But enough about me,’ laughs Trevor, ‘isn’t there something *you* wish to ask me?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Not really.’

‘Then fine, there’s nothing more to be—’

‘Yes, okay,’ blurts Joe. ‘Can you show me the trick again?’

‘The trick?’

‘I mean . . . *the magic*.’

‘Of course, dear boy, I thought you’d never ask.’

Trevor roots a pocket and produces a black-and-silver robot no bigger than your thumb.

‘Will Mr Sparky here suffice?’

‘Sure.’

The robot is passed to Joe.

‘Then be so kind as to place Mr Sparky in my hand.’

Trevor pulls back his sleeve and holds out an open palm.

Joe places the robot in Trevor’s sizable paw.

‘Watch closely, mind. At no time must you avert your eyes from Mr Sparky or my hands.’

Joe's eyes narrow with concentrated focus. He *will* uncover how this illusion is performed.

Trevor slowly folds his fingers around the robot then cups the fist with his other hand.

'Now, to ensure everything is above board and bona fide, you must squeeze my hands as tight as you can.'

Joe hesitates.

'I need you to trust me, Joe.'

After a long beat, Joe acquiesces and clasps Trevor's hands within his own.

Trevor nods approvingly.

Here and there, turns a head or two – people tuning in.

'Good,' he breathes. 'And of course, there is one other thing.'

Joe's eyebrows rise quizzically.

'You need to *believe* in magic.'

'Okay, yes, I believe.'

'I mean *really* believe, Joe.'

Joe nods. 'I do.'

Not entirely convinced, Trevor closes his eyes.

'There, did you feel that? He's gone.' Trevor smiles broadly. 'Now, would you like me to bring him back?'

Joe frowns and sighs.

'Just kidding,' winks Trevor. He nods at their still gripped hands hovering above the table. 'Look.'

Joe disengages in the manner a fortune-teller might release a crystal ball after a long reading.

And little by little Trevor opens his meaty paws . . .

No Mr Sparky! Trevor's hands are completely empty. Both are rotated, fingers spread apart, thus proving that the robot isn't taped to the back of a hand or secreted between fingers.

'That's good,' nods Joe casually (even though he is, in fact, *extremely* impressed). 'So, where is it?'

Trevor's face registers disappointment in the boy's continued scepticism.

'Come on, Trevor, it has to be somewhere. Things don't just disappear.'

Trevor's frown deepens.

'I'm not a child, Trevor. I know it's not *Ooooh, magic*.'

Trevor sighs. 'Very well, perhaps this will convince you.' He extends a flattened palm. 'Keep watching.'

Joe watches the hand . . .

Nothing.

'So—?'

'Shush,' hushes Trevor.

Joe shakes his head but continues to observe – still nothing. But then, yes! There is something; something slowly materialising; an object, before his very eyes – Mr Sparky, reappearing as if from nothing, as if from nowhere.

Joe, open-mouthed, lost for words for once, touches the robot, checking it's really there. He shakes his head.

'And . . . he's back in the room. That is *sooo* freaky.'

Joe takes Mr Sparky and taps him on the table, testing his solidity perhaps.

'Yeah, that's perfect,' froths Joe. 'You have to show me how you do it. I want to do it exactly like that.'

'Then why don't you?' suggests Trevor rubbing his temples. 'Do it now.'

'But how? I don't know how.'

'You just need to believe, Joe. *Really* believe. – Only then can true magic happen.'

'Show me,' petitions Joe.

'Here.' Trevor shapes Joe's hand, fleshy palm up, places Mr Sparky in the centre, closes Joe's fingers around the robot and moulds his other hand so it cups the fist. Trevor then squeezes the resultant robot-fist-hand combo.

'Now, will it away, Joe,' urges Trevor before removing his own mighty paws.

Joe, intense concentration on his face, holds his locked hands in place; they shake a little from the pressure.

Trevor nods, spurring Joe on.

After a long beat, Joe's eyes widen. 'I can't feel it.'

'It'll come to you, keep trying.'

'No, I mean I can't feel *it*. I can't feel *anything*. I think it's gone.'

'Might just be the pressure making your hand go numb.'

'Nope, pretty sure I've cracked it, Trev,' beams Joe.

'I may have misheard you there. Did you just say: *Trev*?'

Joe nods enthusiastically.

'Well, I guess there's only one way to find out – *boy*.'

After a knowing smirk and a suitably suspenseful delay, Joe springs open his hands with a celebratory 'Ta-da!'

And there's Mr Sparky, twinkling in all his shiny black-and-silver magnificence.

'That's because you didn't believe, Joe,' sighs Trevor. 'You *have* to believe.'

CHAPTER 6

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Undies

The man in the burger van leans over the counter conspiratorially. ‘So, can I get you anything else?’ he asks of the schoolgirl who just cadged a cigarette from him, the one with the permanent trout-pout and affected manner. ‘I mean, besides a free smoke – a hotdog or something?’

He winks at her sour-faced non-smoking friend.

Jade believes the burger man is being crude and doesn’t appreciate it. Bad enough hearing filth from certain boys in their school – one might even expect it from immature teenagers – but so much worse from a guy in what, his thirties, forties? – Hard to tell with the full beard.

‘You’ll cop it if a teacher catches you, Megs,’ warns Jade. Her head swivels, scanning for staff.

Megan blows smoke at her friend. ‘Chill out, Jade.’

‘Yeah, chill out, Jade,’ parrots Liam.

Jade rounds on burger man, certain now that her initial instinct was correct: there’s something not right about him.

‘And you shouldn’t be looking at girls our age.’

‘Who’s looking at you?’ asks Liam, immediately wishing he hadn’t been so confrontational. People, especially females, remember contentious conversations.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got any gum on ya, do ya?’ asks Megan; presumably to replace the piece she’s been chewing noisily since approaching the van with free fags in mind.

Gum, fags? carps the mummified head in the van’s fridge. *She’ll be asking for a free burger next.*

Although Liam could respect Megan’s moxie, the duck lips and affected manner were painful to look at. Then there was Jade: all cold, snippy and fish-eyed. No, he didn’t like either of these two very much.

I don’t know which one’s worse, whines Joel’s head.

Jade, definitely. At least, that’s Liam’s gut feeling on the matter. He’d always hated stuck-up individuals; snotty smarty-pants who act all condescending and superior. For that reason, if nothing else, he thought she deserved to lose her smug, supercilious head.

Yes, kill her, urges Joel. *Kill them both! That’ll take us to a hundred. We’ll have hit the century! Not exactly Shipman but still.*

True, the Head Honcho is currently on ninety-eight according to police records, and these two would make the accredited murder count an official one hundred, but Liam's beginning to regret bringing the van to the school. Yes, he'd accidentally 'promised' Joel a non-adult murder – the so-called deal he'd foolishly agreed to back in Manchester – but here, outside the school's main entrance – well, it was just too high profile.

Bullshit, rasps Joel. *We're hiding in plain view.*

Bollocks, contends Liam internally.

Grab 'em! Grab 'em both. Do it now! No-one's looking.

No, there's no way, insists Liam inwardly. Not here, not now; not both of them – too many people about. If we're going to snatch a kid we have to do it on the quiet.

What do you mean, if?

Fine – *when.*

'So, can I keep these?' blinks Megan exhaling a cloud.

Liam had killed college-aged kids before, of course (as had Joel, when he was alive) but an actual non-adult of the juvenile variety would be different. If he were to be caught, prison would be a nightmare. This had been a long-held concern. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a hundred adults, *young* adults, even; that would be fine – but just one victim even a smidgen under sixteen and—

That was the deal, Liam!

Christ, would his dead brother ever get off his back about the fucking deal! He'd been keeping a low profile since arriving in Llanidloes in 2011 and there probably wasn't a single day when Joel hadn't nagged him about it.

'Come on, let's go,' urges Jade. 'He's not even listening.'

'Sure,' Megan sighs. She tosses back the burger man's cigarette packet, minus the two she's taken; the one she's drawing on now and the one she's cheekily stuck behind one of her pierced ears.

Jade hooks arms and leads her unruly friend away.

'Don't know how you can smoke those things.'

'Jeez, Jade, give it a rest, it's just a ciggie,' grumbles Megan. 'If he's daft enough to give them away.'

'I think he was after a bit more than just a smoke.'

'Fuck, Jade, you're so crude sometimes,' teases Megan.

'And you're a foul-mouthed mother-flipper,' nudges Jade.

'Go on, say motherfucker, it won't kill you.'

'I will not.'

'Cocksucker!' bellows Megan.

'Megs, quit it,' barks Jade.

'Tits, arse, fanny!' shouts Megan into the air for anyone to hear. 'Cunt!'

Jade's jaw drops. 'OMG! You are unbelievable.'
'They're just words, Jade. They won't kill you.'
'Your mum will kill you if she hears you saying that.'
'He was nice looking though, wasn't he?'
'Who? Creepy burger guy?'
'Aw, don't call him that.'
'Ew, it'd be like being hit on by your dad.'
'Ew.'

'Exactly,' snorts Jade. 'Seedy fucker.'
Megan laughs. 'Finally,' she grins. 'That's my girl.'
'Glad you're happy, now keep walking.'

Just as well, thinks Liam as the duo continue to distance themselves from the van. Even if it were practical, there was too much of a connection. Someone had surely seen him talking to the girls. Then both go missing after school? No, if he was to snatch a child, it would have to be on its own. No-one around to play hero, to try and muscle in and save—Shit, do they have CCTV cameras on schools here? Liam knew they did back in Manchester; hell, they had them on everything back there.

Narrowing his eyes he scans along the building's eaves.

Don't see any, remarks Joel's voice.

'Some of those fuckers can be tiny,' Liam reminds his brother's head. 'No, it's too risky. Coming here was a stupid idea.'

And with that he decides they'll fall back to maintaining a low profile, return to the 'lay-by plan' – a quiet out-of-town country lane and lie in wait for a solo backpacker or cyclist – until the situation is foolproof: the right time, the right place, zero witnesses and the perfect victim.

[The murderous lay-by plan had been unavoidably knocked on the head for a while: a large group of menacing Irish travellers had forced a 'trade' of the *original* burger van for a rusty VW Camper rolled off a trailer. Liam lived in the VW for a time after first arriving in Wales, which was handy, but when he later had the opportunity, just a couple of months ago, he swapped it back for a near identical burger van he'd spotted on a used vehicle lot in Newtown.]

Maybe you're right, concedes Joel. *Shame though, because that blobby, red-haired kid over there looks like he'd make a great ninety-nine.*

'Which kid?'

The one talking to himself; and are they – judo moves?

'Excuse me, do you have *permission?*' squeaks a voice.

'Permission?' sneers Liam.

‘Yes, permission to trade,’ clarifies the little bald-headed fella below the counter,

‘And who the fuck, are you?’ Shit, thinks Liam, so much for maintaining a low profile.

‘Mr Smallwood,’ states baldy puffing out his chest. ‘I’m the headmaster of this establishment.’

‘You’re the head?’

‘That’s right.’

‘The head?’

‘Yes.’

Oh, we could definitely do a sign on that! laughs Joel.

As you may be aware, Liam and Joel, aka the Head Honcho, always left their victims’ heads in one place, limbed torsos in another, both in plain view but usually many miles apart. The serial killers’ other usual ‘signature’ was a cardboard sign bearing a so-called humorous message. Who could forget the body posed in a passport photo booth – the gruesome scene recorded on a strip of neck-and-shoulders photos in the dispensing slot – the Honcho’s sign left hanging around the torso’s stubby neck; it bore the message: *HOW DO I LOOK? I CAN’T SEE A THING WITHOUT MY GLASSES.*

That guy was a teacher too, coincidentally. So many murders and yet the police always pooh-pooed them being the evil exertions of two men working in tandem. Only after Liam killed Joel with an axe during an argument about Liam’s level of intelligence, did this actually become true. Then, with the Honcho down to one pair of hands, Liam began leaving heads and torsos together; this meant less labour, less travelling, a reduced risk of being caught, and it provided him a whole new opportunity for dark humour. Sick-but-funny, Liam called it; like that tall bloke (six-foot prior to decapitation) he crammed into the Postman Pat coin-op ride and made it look as though he’d ‘run over his own head’ – the sign read—

‘I say; excuse me,’ pesters Smallwood. ‘I said you’re supposed to have a trading license from the council’s Environmental Health Department.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I’ve got one,’ grunts Liam.

‘Then can I see it, please. Where is it? It’s supposed to be displayed.’

‘Sorry, mate, but I’m packing up.’

Liam reaches for the shutter handle.

‘Right, well, if you come back I’ll need to see that license. Or I’m afraid I will be forced to report you.’

‘Report me, eh?’

‘That’s right.’

Kill him! screams Joel's rotten head from the under the counter. *Pull him in and club him, no-one's looking.*

'Yeah, no worries,' sneers Liam with a sniff. 'Trade's crap here anyway.' And with that, Liam snaps down the shutter, closing off the serving window and any possibility of further discussion.

Good, thinks Smallwood. He doesn't want his students eating fatty processed foods of unknown origin. That stuff, he's always telling them, can kill you.

Little did he know.

Retired farmer Don rattles his rickety rust-bucket of a Land Rover over a corrugated strip of frozen mud and pulls up outside one of the farm's many storage buildings. A pack of farm dogs, a mix of kelpies and huntaways, announce the arrival, barking loudly at Don's ancient (and also retired) border collie, Jed.

Don stopped working several years ago – he'll be eighty-four in a few days – but hardly a day goes by when he doesn't visit the farm (he now lives in a little cottage just up the lane with wife Carol) or go out and about tending to smaller tasks, such as reattaching a loose wire to a fence post or oiling a squeaky gate.

After a slow extrication from the Land Rover, Don aims a sour expression at the dogs. 'Gwor, shoo!' he orders.

The ancient collie isn't bothered about the new dogs; he remains unmoved, sitting bolt upright on the passenger seat, milky eyes staring blankly through the muddy windscreen. Jed loves being in the Land Rover, it had become his home many moons ago; he sleeps in there – he's sleeping more and more these days, hardly ever being called upon to do any proper work. Not anymore.

'Go on, shoo!' the old farmer repeats; and this time the dogs bolt, in the direction of the milking shed. Then, following a string of frustrating attempts to close the vehicle's slack door, Don, with ruddy cheeks (partly from a long life outdoors, partly from bottled beer) turns his gaze to the nearest barn.

Sam, who has been the head of the family-owned farm, running it with his own sons Mark and Robbie since Don stepped down, is repairing the engine of a large tractor. In and out the barn, Mark and Robbie ferry large sacks of animal feed, shouldering them from tractor-trailer to a corner of the building.

Don ambles over, relocating his frowzy beanie hat and grubby petrol-green overalls.

'Here, let me help you with those,' he tells Robbie.

Robbie and Mark both look to Sam for guidance.

‘Dad, you’re retired now,’ Sam reminds the old man, not for the first time. ‘Stop worrying. We can manage just fine.’

‘I know you can, son, but I can still lend a hand. I’m sure Dawn would appreciate that. Wouldn’t you, Dawn?’

Dawn, Sam’s wife, has just emerged from the barn. ‘You really don’t need to bother,’ she tells Don breezily whilst easily sliding the next feed sack to the edge of the trailer. ‘They’re very heavy.’

Don laughs. ‘Listen, dear, I’ve been shifting far heavier loads than this since before you were born.’

Dawn glances to Sam whose expression suggests: Just let him help if he really wants to.

‘It’s no bother,’ sniffs Don.

‘Well, okay, if you’re sure.’ With consummate ease, Dawn smoothly slips a broad shoulder under the sack of feed and hoists it off the long trailer, straightening her knees in the process, loaded up ready to go.

‘If there’s one thing I can still do,’ insists Don stepping forward and emulating her actions, ‘it’s—’

As Don takes the weight there’s a sudden ratchet-like sound loud enough for everyone to hear; something has cracked or torn at the base of Don’s back.

Sam and Dawn help keep Don upright; supporting him under his unexpectedly sweaty armpits, as Mark and Robbie quickly divest the old man of his burden. Then Sam and Dawn awkwardly escort Don the ten yards or so to the piggery’s low stone wall and sit him down.

‘I’ll just rest here for a minute,’ puffs Don immediately looking to stretch out horizontally on top of the rough, uneven stones.

‘Will you be okay?’ frowns Sam helping his dad lie back.

‘Course, son,’ he groans. ‘Right as rain in a minute.’

‘Do you want us to call Carol?’ asks Dawn.

‘No, no, I’ll be fine,’ Don assures her. ‘You carry on. You’ve got the farm to run.’

Trevor pours another large sherry, teeters gently to the caravan table, and plants himself opposite Joe.

After a long, silent beat, Joe muses, ‘So it’s definitely not a trick. And it’s not hypnosis.’

‘Hypnosis?’ slurs Trevor, merrily scoffing. ‘Pfft.’ Topsy eyes fixing on Joe, as best they can, Trevor wiggles his fingers in the air like a hypnotist. ‘Wooooooh,’ he intones as if portraying the proverbial spooky ghost.

‘Which means,’ continues Joe, ‘that you can show me.’

Trevor arches an eyebrow. ‘Show you?’

‘Show me how. How to—’

‘How to what?’ blinks Trevor. ‘Perform a trick? A sleight of hand? How to—’

‘Believe,’ Joe interrupts. ‘How to believe.’

‘I can’t show you how to believe, Joe.’ Trevor quaffs his sherry in one go. ‘Either you do, or you don’t.’

Joe considers this. He studies Mr Sparky, turning the small robot over in his pudgy hands.

‘What do you think,’ asks Trevor hoisting his empty glass, ‘room for one more before supper?’

Joe studies Trevor’s face. He’d seen that expression before: on his mum’s face when she came home after one of her rare girls’ nights out. Actually, no, his mum usually looked merry and light-hearted – Trevor appears gloomy and serious.

‘What does Mr Sparky say?’ asks Trevor.

Joe stands the little robot on the table, facing Trevor.

‘He says you’ve probably had enough.’

‘Does he indeed?’ Trevor places the glass over the robot. ‘Now what does he say?’

‘He says I should be going.’

‘But the evening is young and . . .’ Trevor appears to lose his trail of thought. ‘Young and . . .’

‘Not like you to forget a—’

‘I don’t know where I’m going from here,’ blurts Trevor rising dramatically to his feet, ‘but I promise it won’t be boring. Do you know who said that?’

‘Dunno. Shakespeare—?’

An unsteady Trevor slumps back onto his seat. ‘Nope. David Bowie. Ha, see! I’m hipper than you are.’

‘You should speak to my sister. She’s a big fan.’

‘No, no, stay, dear boy,’ slurs Trevor. ‘And Mr Sparky’s quite right: I feel sure I have reached my limit. Anymore and I fear I should be compelled to lie down for an hour.’

Joe stands. ‘No, I really should be going.’

‘Very well, but answer me one question before you depart.’

‘Okay, if I can.’

‘Mr Sparky there – he isn’t the only reason you came here this evening, is he?’

Joe frowns. ‘Er, yes, he is.’

Trevor studies his visitor for a moment.

‘Oh very well,’ he sighs. And with that he removes the glass dome imprisoning Mr Sparky. ‘Let’s do it, then.’

‘You’ll show me?’ blurts Joe. Excited, he sits down again. ‘You’ll show me exactly how it’s done. I mean, for real.’

‘Indeed, sir,’ hiccups Trevor. ‘For real.’
He places the little robot in the palm of Joe’s right hand.
‘Now squeeze. Good. And cup your other hand around.’
Joe cups his left hand around his right. ‘Like this, yes?’
Trevor nods. ‘Exactly so.’ He reaches across, squeezes Joe’s hands in his own. ‘And now . . .’
Joe looks across, a tad uncomfortable.
‘Stay focused, boy.’
‘Okay . . .’ replies Joe shakily.
‘You *must* trust me for this to work.’
Joe nods that he understands.
‘Good. Now concentrate – concentrate and believe.’
Joe becomes intent, focused. He breathes in and out, in and out, slow and even.
‘That’s it, good, good. Keep believing. Make it happen.’
If you think about it hard enough, echoes Wilf’s voice, *you can make anything happen. Anything.*
Joe takes a deep breath and screws his eyes tight shut; he begins shaking with the sheer effort – perspiration trickles down his furrowed brow. Trevor wills him on.
‘Yes, Joe, push.’
‘Grrrrrr!’ growls Joe and an image springs into his mind. One of the many times that he’s been constipated and had to—
‘Focus!’ snaps Trevor.
‘Sorry,’ puffs Joe. And he returns to his deliberations, grunting and groaning.
‘That’s it, my boy, go on.’
Joe’s eyes pop open.
Trevor nods, then disengages in the manner a healer might after laying hands upon a sufferer and relieving them of a sickness. Joe looks to his hands. He removes the left and opens the fingers of his right. No Mr Sparky! Joe’s hands are one-hundred percent robot-free.
‘Oh my God, where is it?’ asks Joe genuinely shocked.
‘You did it, Joe,’ Trevor assures him. ‘You did it.’
‘I did?’ checks Joe.
‘I did!’ he announces proudly.
‘I DID!’
Well done, Joe, congratulates Wilf’s voice. *I told you, you could do it.*
‘Now watch,’ points Trevor. ‘Wait. Keep looking. Do not allow your eyes to wander.’
Joe stares, as directed, at his open, empty hands.
‘Stray not your gaze.’

Joe's eyes remain locked.

Still nothing; Mr Sparky has well and truly—No, wait, what's this? A nebulous shape; unclear at first, but then slowly appearing, as it did in the café. Yes, a robot shape, there it is; flimsy, dubious, shaky but increasingly less so, gaining density in waves of atoms it seems – until at last it is tangibly solid. Joe is ecstatic but then quickly troubled.

'What is it? – I did say it could only disappear for a moment.'

'No, it's not that,' gasps Joe, 'it's the head banging.'

'Ah, the price of success, dear boy. And that was for such a little thing.'

'A little thing?'

Trevor presents the tiny robot within finger and thumb.

'Anything more and your head might explode. Boom!'

Joe laughs. Trevor laughs too. Then both suddenly stop.

'Oh dear,' groans Trevor. 'One sherry too many, I fear. Why didn't you stop me?'

Joe doesn't reply, he looks like he's about to pass out.

'Are you quite alright, dear boy? Here am I, complaining of a tittle too far when you must have a head like thunder.'

Trevor moves seats to comfort Joe.

'Better now?' asks Trevor outside the caravan.

'Yes, I'm okay.' Joe rubs a temple. 'I think so anyway.'

'Good, good. You'll be fine.'

They say goodbye and Joe sets off. He's no more than a trailer length from Alison's twitching curtains when Trevor hails him.

Joe stops, turns. 'What?'

'Are you sure you won't tell me the other reason why you visited this evening?' calls Trevor.

'Huh?' replies Joe loudly. 'What other reason?'

'The one besides Mr Sparky.'

Joe shrugs, shakes his head.

'Never mind, it'll come to you.'

'Oh and Trevor!'

'Yes?'

'I still think it might be a trick!'

Trevor's face registers disappointment.

The cracked lens surveils the house: closed curtains, blinds down, and barely a light on; as if the place is in lockdown. It had been this way for over an hour, with nothing of interest to see the whole time.

Don sighs, collapses the telescope, tosses it onto the dashboard and thinks about driving home. He'd had several beers but doesn't see that as a problem; country police rarely patrol local lanes. No, the only reason he doesn't immediately turn the ignition is apathy, plain and simple. He just can't be bothered. So he stays. There's always a thin chance he'll see something of interest if he sticks it out a while longer.

With the house still in darkness (apart from a small lamp illuminating Joe's curtains) and a heavy lethargy weighting his old bones, Don swivels his inebriated head.

To the left of the Land Rover: fir trees.

To the right: fir trees.

Indeed, all around, except for the hard track road and the small clearings in front and behind: fir trees. Finger Hill is covered in them. Trees currently alive with a multitude of Carrion Crows, big, bold and noisy, as they always are when returning to their roost for the evening; quickly filling every bough and branch, clicking and cawing to their neighbours.

The farmer and his aged dog pay them no heed. Jed has settled down to sleep on the passenger seat and Don is considering the scarecrow that stands in the clearing to one side of the Land Rover.

'Jack' has an old leather football for a head, with cut-out facial features, much like a Halloween pumpkin – only fossilised. A ripped and dirty red cagoule hangs over washed-out Hessian sackcloth trousers; each roughly-stitched leg still bearing sections of faded green lettering left over from the brand name of the original feed supplier. The scarecrow's arms, such as they are, are tied, crucifix style, to the long handle of a rusty scythe which in turn is secured horizontally, by baling-twine, to the vertical stand.

Don transported Jack here over two decades ago when the daily running of the farm was handed over to Sam, Don's son. One of the first decisions Sam took was to replace the 'old-fashioned' scarecrow with a newfangled machine that emits high-frequency ultrasonic sounds to drive birds away from freshly broadcast seeds.

'Did I do right, Jack?' hiccups Don. 'Or should I have set you alight? *They* wanted to. *Happy* to. Thrown on gasoline and ready to burn. Was it a mistake? Should I have allowed it? Reduced you to ashes and – hic – left you in your field?'

He sucks down another gulp of Theakston's Old Peculier (the petrol station had run out of Old Speckled Hen).

Had you had enough, Jack? Don wonders for the umpteenth time. For years he'd drunkenly posed the question: Should I have

let you go? Destroyed you? Would it have been a kindness? By bringing Jack here had he condemned the old scarecrow to forever—?

Jed yelps, legs kicking, no doubt chasing a bitch or rounding up a sheep in his sleep.

‘Go on, Jed, good dog,’ encourages Don. ‘Nice to dream you’re young again.’ Then the farmer, as he so often does, revisits the subject of Jack . . .

Don’s father had built Jack when he, Don, was just a lad. Don had always thought the scarecrow terrifying. He often felt watched by him. The eerie figure disturbed the boy greatly and that feeling never really went away. Not even when Don was older and wiser. (Not that he was ever that brainy; land-smart, yes, but not scholarly. He was educated at home: an education that consisted almost entirely of learning how to farm.) Then, when the time came to replace the longstanding prop with modern technology, Don suddenly had an awful feeling that something dreadful would befall the farm if Jack were destroyed. And though the old farmer, unlike most of his counterparts, had never been superstitious, he panicked and shifted the scarecrow in his Land Rover to this new out-of-the-way spot. He regretted it now but felt stuck with the result of his actions. Not that he would ever tell Jack that.

‘To you and me, eh, Jack?’ Don raises his beer bottle. ‘And to old times.’

Jack’s cut-out eyes stare back, silent, hollow and grim. Don had faced the scarecrow outward many times, spun him to overlook the trees on the ‘nail’ of Finger Hill, but whether turned back by wind or wildlife, it always seemed to Don that Jack had insisted on a view of his own choosing; usually the houses below, the farm up on Bryn Crow, or Don himself, who the ungrateful Jack blamed, the farmer felt, for his useless seclusion.

‘Don’t blame me,’ blurts Don, ready, as always, for the inevitable argument. ‘It’s not my fault you’re an old fossil!’

Don sucks on his beer.

A cold gust flaps the ripped cagoule, agitates straws sticking out of the holes in Jack’s sackcloth trousers and flutters the hardy weeds that had long ago rooted into the top of his head, making the sunken-football face appear to shake out a defiant *Says you!*

Don wipes dribble from his chin.

‘And don’t think I haven’t seen you looking down there.’

He taps the neck of the bottle against the steering wheel.

The scarecrow stares back.

‘Oh, shut up, it was *you* who suggested we—’

Don raises beer to lips but stops short.

‘No, not *me*, Jack – *you!* You’re the filthy old has-been! Carol may think I’ve got the urges of a horny old goat,’ slurs Don, ‘but she doesn’t know what *you’re* like!’

Don senses he might have gone too far as he grows increasingly aware of Jack staring at him. And not for the first time: it was undeniable that over the years Jack had progressively adopted a negative, sinister vibe toward him – more dark and creepy with each passing season – of this he was sure; standing there silently watching him and his doings; doings which Don considered to be *harmless*, not lewd and salacious at all. Bloody Jack! And anyway, what did *he* know about it? He was just a stupid, rotten scarecrow. Not flesh and blood like farmers.

‘What do you say, Jed; no harm in looking, eh?’

The collie twitches in his sleep, perhaps at the sound of his name.

‘And that’s a fine show of gratitude from someone rescued from a near hellfire,’ Don reminds Jed for Jack’s benefit. ‘It was Sam who said scarecrows had become, how did he put it? – Archaic. Not me. *I saved him.*’

The last of the bottle is quaffed and with a loud clink he dumps the empty into the pile in the passenger footwell.

Jed opens an eye.

‘Sorry, old boy. Go back to sleep.’

Jed falls almost instantly back to sleep and the farmer contemplates the house below – until a carrion crow lands on Jack’s head and eyeballs him.

Caw-caw-caw-caw!

‘You can shut up too,’ the farmer tells the black-eyed corvid.

Caw-caw-caw-caw!

‘What?’ barks Don. ‘Ah, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Caw-caw-caw-caw!

‘Hey! If I’d been a minute later, he’d have burned to ash. Wouldn’t that have been worse, Jack, than standing there?’

The bird shits on Jack’s shoulder and launches itself, flapping wide wings before disappearing into a tree top.

‘Right, bollocks to this,’ huffs Don. He climbs out, staggers over to the scarecrow, wipes the shat-upon shoulder with a crusty old hankie, turns Jack’s face away, back towards the trees, then returns to the Land Rover.

After several attempts to close the door Don gives up.

He checks that Jack hasn’t immediately spun around again – he hasn’t – and so, no longer suffering the scarecrow’s accusatory

gaze, the farmer reverts to spying on the Evans' house with the telescope.

'*Definitely* no harm in looking,' he retells his dozing dog.

Time passes with a whole lot of nothing noteworthy, just Jed snoring and Don absentmindedly slow-scraping the steering wheel with his pocketknife. A final beer, he decides then he really must be getting back.

He leans to the side and reaches down for an Old Peculier but finds only empties; they clink together as his hand agitates the jumble of bottles.

Following a deep, protracted sigh, Don slowly tips the rest of the way over, until his head rests on Jed's warm body – a sort of dog pillow – and there he stays.

Hardly a minute later, at the bottom of the hill, Sally sneaks out the back of the house, closes the door quietly behind her, and lights up a thin cigarette.

Had Don still been spying, the telescope would not have been able to determine that Sally's cigarette is in fact a long-long-long-awaited spliff (well over nine months) but it would surely – had the farmer not passed out – have spotted the boy sneaking in some time later. He climbs onto the sun-lounge extension, crosses its roof and slips in through a bedroom window.

The farmer's mobile rings in the Land Rover's glove-box.

After a short while the unanswered phone rings off.

Don and Jed remain fast asleep, snoring like saws.

Like the farmer and his dog, Paul is also creating a horrible noise.

Sally nudges him. 'Wake up,' she orders.

The guttural blare continues: like a whale in great pain.

'Paul, wake up.'

Another nudge and he wakes with a grunt.

'Hm? What?' Paul looks around the room, sluggishly regaining his bearings. 'Dreamt I was swimming.'

'Drowning more like.'

'What time is it?'

'I think I heard something. Go and check on Joe.'

'Was it Emily?'

Sally rechecks the baby-monitor speaker; its light blinks green.

'No, she's fast.'

Paul sighs, head sinking back into his pillow.

'Paul,' barks Sally.

'In a minute.'

Joe is down to his reindeer underpants when the main bedroom light comes on.

‘It wasn’t me!’ he blurts, startled.

‘Nice pants,’ teases Lucy.

Still squinting, Joe’s hands quickly drop from his nipples to cartooned crotch as Lucy, in a Sixties ‘Twiggy’ nightshirt, gently closes the door.

‘Sister’s room, down the hall,’ advises Joe. ‘No need to knock, apparently.’

‘Okay, Rudolf,’ mocks Lucy brushing past. ‘Don’t wet yourself.’

She steps over to the bed and pulls back Joe’s Snowman duvet, revealing pillows strategically placed to convince casual observers that he’s in there and asleep. Aiming narrowed eyes over a shoulder Lucy shakes her head, then sits on his desk and settles into a look which affirms: *We need to talk.*

‘Make yourself comfy.’

‘You’re late,’ scolds Lucy. ‘You didn’t go to see Trevor again, did you?’

Joe takes his pyjamas out of a drawer.

‘Joe?’

No reply.

‘Joe, answer me.’

‘I did the trick.’

‘What trick?’

‘That thing I told you about.’

‘Oh, that.’

‘Do you think I should show Max?’

Lucy rolls her eyes, shakes her head scornfully.

‘Sure, why not,’ she sighs.

‘Actually, it makes my head hurt – a lot – so, I might not.’

‘Your head? Joe, what are you—? You’re worrying me.’

‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ Joe assures her.

He indicates she should avert her eyes.

‘I mean it’s not like you really know this . . . Trevor, is it?’

‘I know he likes plays and poetry and books – so, he can’t be all bad, can he?’

‘As long as that’s all he likes.’

‘Lucy.’

Again Joe gestures for her to turn her head.

Lucy just closes her eyes. ‘Well . . .’

‘Well, what?’

‘Word is – he’s a bit . . .’

‘What? – Theatrical? – Affected?’

Lucy shakes her head.

‘Camp? – ‘Pompous?’

‘Great word: pompous.’

‘Thanks. You can open your eyes now.’

‘And there’s nothing wrong with camp; no-one’s saying that,’ insists Lucy. ‘No, I mean, you know,’ she widens her eyes, ‘a bit – scout master.’

‘Nice. And, by the way, that wasn’t *our* scout master. That was some bloke over in Llandinam or Trefeglwys or somewhere.’

‘Fine.’

‘And I never went to more than the first session because I hated the silly uniforms. Dad and his bright ideas.’

‘I said, Fine.’

‘It wasn’t because of some dodgy scout master.’

‘Jesus, Joe, I said, Fine.’

‘Not everyone’s a—’

‘Okay, okay. I just hope you know what you’re doing, that’s all.’

‘I do know what I’m doing,’ Joe assures her. He climbs in bed and adds with less certainty: ‘Pretty sure I know what I’m doing.’

‘I’m just saying it all sounds a bit shady to me. And if Dad finds out – well, you know what he’s like.’

‘How’s he going to find out? He’s always at work. And when he is at home, he spends all his precious time faffing with his hair.’

Joe clowns around, performing an impression of their dad spraying and teasing his hair into place. They both get the giggles, the infectious nature of which spurs them on to even louder chuckling.

‘Shush,’ urges Joe, though *his* chuckles are loudest. He throws a pillow at his sister which she deftly catches and holds to her face in a hopeless attempt to stifle an unladylike guffawing. They’re still giggling inanely when their mum bursts in.

‘What’s going on in here?’ Sally wants to know. ‘Do you want to wake Emily? Come on, it’s school in the morning.’

‘It’s Lucy, Mum,’ pleads Joe. ‘I told her to go.’

‘Lucy, let Joe sleep.’

Lucy stands, open-mouthed, not quite believing her ears. As Sally unnecessarily shuts the curtains tighter together, Lucy whacks Joe with the pillow.

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ gripes Joe.

‘Come on, Lucy, bed,’ insists Sally. ‘And give Joe his pillow back.’

Lucy throws the pillow at Joe.

‘Thank you,’ trills Joe in a tone that suggests he’d been asking for a while.

After turning out the light, Sally exits, pushing Lucy ahead.

Joe turns on his bedside lamp, shakes the robot snow-globe and sets it under the light. As he studies the whirling flurry of snow, Lucy sticks her head round the door.

‘You be careful,’ she reminds him.

Joe smiles and gives a thumbs-up.

The door closes.