Live

For Mum & Dad

Live

Luke Palmer



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Meanwhile music pounded
across hearts opening every valve to
the desperate drama of being
a self in a song

Anne Carson – Autobiography of Red

Other books by Luke Palmer:

Grow
(Longlisted for the Yoto Carnegie Medal 2022 and shortlisted for the Branford Boase First Children's Novel Award)

Play
(Shortlisted for the Yoto Carnegie Medal 2025)

Part I

The black car handled with youthful zeal by the driver speeds through the country night rounding corners with a giddying lean. Around a sharper bend a faint hiccup from the back left wheel as if it had lifted from the road and spun freely in the night air for a second before joining the tarmac again. And the road's white markings flash like a pulse beneath it. And signs blare out from the hedge rows frozen for a blink in the headlights before they're gone.

The driver smiles, throat open in song and delight, the car thick with noise and joy. Beneath the music filling the car, the growl of the engine. Beneath that, a pretty hush from the tyres as they sluice across the wet surface.

It is raining lightly. Each streetlight's glow repeats a thousand times in the windscreen's constellation of raindrops. The lazy arc of the wipers clears the glass and the whole thing starts again. Soon, houses rear up, their walls flat and huge, windows like shut eyes and blind to the passing meteorite of the rushing car and its shimmering trail of sound.

Then suddenly and without warning the black car is slipping sideways quickly and the road running out even quicker and with a lurching sudden thud the quick car lifts suddenly quickly too quick and sudden over the kerb and suddenly towards the wall as the driver grips the wheel and grips the wheel and grips the wheel and

ONE

Wednesday morning. They're in *Emily's*. As usual.

George slumps in his seat by the window, the seat he always slumps in. 'It's not right though, is it? Why should we have to travel that far?' He stirs his straw around the bottom of his chocolate shake.

Across the small table, Owen shrugs, rubs the back of one hand across his bleary morning eyes.

'I mean, on top of the tickets it's fifteen quid and two hours on a coach which drops you a half hour walk from the venue. And you still have to leave early to catch the return because they always oversell the seats and the last to arrive won't get on.' He stabs at his drink with a straw. 'Or you spend more than double the cost of the ticket on the first piss-smelling train the next morning, and you can stay for the whole gig only if you're willing to spend the night at Paddington station avoiding drunks and perverts. It's a joke!'

Owen takes a slurp of his own milkshake (also chocolate) then stares down at his breakfast burrito, nodding in glum agreement. 'If we knew someone with a car, though…' He chews a tasty mouthful.

George laughs. 'You've *got* a car. Besides, we're public transport people. Ecowarriors. Or something.'

'And no way I'm driving in London, mate.'

There's a brief pause before George continues. 'Remember the last time we did the train though, after we saw Violent Slipper at the Roundhouse? The dickhead attendant on the public toilets who wouldn't let us in?'

'We didn't have 50p.'

'We had *one* 50p. He should have let us both through his little turnstile together.'

'But it was 50p *each* to get in.'

'That's not the point. The attendant didn't give a shit. Earning minimum wage to sit on his arse all night, why would he? And you didn't help, mooching off down the platform as soon as he started to argue.' He takes a long slurp of shake. 'But that guy on the other side of the platform was *looking at us*, remember? Like, really creepily.'

'The attendant wasn't going to let us in though.'

'He would have. I was working on him. But that guy was looking, eyes boring into my vulnerable, young back while you're off on a mooch. Leaving me alone while you do a mooch down the platform to check timetables or whatever.'

'Yeah, he was a bit weird. I think you overreacted a bit, though.'

'He wasn't going to go for *you* though, was he? You had your leather jacket on, hair like that, big guy

like you. He wasn't coming anywhere near *you*. It was me he was after, in full twink mode, looking like a wounded fawn, like some kind of *buffet* laid out in front of his pervy eyes.'

'So why didn't you go into the toilets on your own?' Owen's halfway through his wrap, just hitting the yolk on the extra egg he always orders.

'What, and leave you on *your* own? No way. We stick together. Against the perverts.'

'Thanks, mate.' He dabs at his chin with a napkin.

'No worries, mate. Besides, you'd mooched off and taken your 50p with you.'

A pause. They both dip to their drinks, take long gulps.

George sits up again. 'And who even *carries* cash with them nowadays? Coins are dead. What kind of public facility in the twenty-first century doesn't accept contactless?'

Owen pushes his plate to one side, leans forwards on the table, cheek lying on crossed forearms. 'They did, remember? The man's machine was broken.'

'SO HE SHOULD HAVE LET US IN, THEN!'

Owen groans into the crook of his elbow, reaches for the last slice of toast on George's plate. *Emily's* does the best toast. He's already finished a plate of his own, dripping in butter.

George swipes the toast-seeking hand away and leans in, a pointed finger (purple nail varnish, chipped) jabbing at the tabletop. 'That's corporate neglect. And the rail networks are a public service so that makes him a government employee so it's *governmental* neglect. And *that's* how you end up with bodies in the canals.' He picks up his last slice of toast, folding it into his mouth, continuing his diatribe despite his hamstering cheeks. 'We were being *watched*, remember? *Hounded* by a peeping-tom. You've seen the news; you know what happens next. Same story every time.'

'I know.'

''Course you do. How many hours were we sitting on that bench, freezing our arses of?'

'I was perfectly warm.'

'You had a fucking *coat*, though.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'Irrelevant detail. We were freezing our arses off into that bench. Arse-icicles dripping through the little holes in the metal so we couldn't even move if we *wanted* to. Had to wait for the sun to come up and thaw our arses out. And sleeping in shifts, keeping an eye on that *pervert* on the other platform who didn't take his eyes off us *all night*.'

'Not even once.'

'Sitting there with his *stupid* little hat in his hand.'

'Quite a big hat, actually.'

'Sitting there with his stupidly big stupid hat. Our little arse-icicles binding us to the seat.'

'Little arse? Speak for yourself.'

Behind the counter, Emily herself is polishing glasses. She looks up as the pair in the window seat move into the last stage of their story. She's heard them tell it dozens of times before, but it always makes her smile.

George continues. 'My freezing, tiny arse, watched by a hawky pervert and his big, tall hat *all night*. Couldn't take our eyes off him or he'd have come for us.'

'Come and taken us away.'

'Snatched us up, dragged us into the shadows, dropped us in the canal. He watched us *all night* from his seat on platform 8. Didn't even turn his head once. Not a single degree.'

'And why is that, exactly.'

Emily delays putting a stack of coffee mugs away to avoid drowning out the punchline, holds herself back from joining in.

'Because it was a statue of Isambard Kingdom Brunel!' They always shout it together.

She laughs along with the boys in the window – young men now, she supposes – and calls over. 'Like the arse icicles, George. Nice new detail.'

'Thanks, thought you'd appreciate.' He rearranges himself in his seat, faces her. 'So when are you going

to save us the trips to London and almost certain death and start putting bands on here, Emi-Lou?'

Emily smiles, waving away the question. All her younger customers call her Emi-Lou. They always have. She's probably called Emi-Lou more often than her real name.

But she doesn't mind. If she did, she'd get the sign fixed above the door. The bottom of the 'y' hasn't been attached for years. But if she got that fixed, she'd have to fix all the chipped tiles behind it, and then the window frames beneath that, and then she'd probably have to start fixing up the inside too… So the sign says *Emilu's,* and Emi-Lou is her name.

She goes into the kitchen to check the morning delivery, start filling fridges with lettuce, peppers, mushrooms.

In the seat by the window, George turns back to Owen. 'Point is though, why do we have to go all the way to London to see some grungy pack of musicians from Iowa? And *don't* say because it's easier than going to Iowa. *They're* the ones on tour. Why aren't they coming nearer to here?'

'Because 'here' isn't really anywhere. I mean, who'd come here, in their right mind?' Owen throws arms wide, gesturing to the near-empty diner and to the wider emptiness that surrounds it.

'Yeah, true, but why are they only doing three UK shows before buggering off to Europe for three months?'

'I guess Americans think of the UK like another state. You look at their US tour last year, right, and they only did one show per state. Two, tops, and even then, it's at the same venue for two nights. In the states, that's a 75-date tour. Takes you months in a transit van.'

'They don't have transit vans in the States.'

'Whatever. Anyway I was thinking maybe we could get one.'

'Get one what?'

'A van. For touring.'

George shuffles a little. 'Sure. Definitely. Maybe soon. Then we can support all those bands and get paid to get there. At least then we'll be guaranteed entry. Brine Mango's pretty much sold out already.' He leans back on his seat, calls to two fellow customers in a booth across the room. 'Hey Dyl, Carson, you get Brine Mango tickets?'

One of them looks up. 'Yeah. London date. You?'

George shakes his head, turns his attention back to Owen. 'London sold out in minutes. London's full of freaks, though. Not like out here in the sticks.'

'Us provincial freaks – "preaks" – are fucked then, aren't we.'

'To the preaks. Fucked though they may be.' The pair clink glasses, down the remainder of their chocolate shakes and stand, chairs shunting backwards across the floor. Owen's falls over with a clatter, bringing Emily back out from the kitchen.

Owen, unsurprised by his own clumsiness, rights the chair, flashes a disarming smile at Emily as he continues. 'Good name for a band, The Preaks. It's closeness to phallic euphemism gives it pleasing *frisson*, wouldn't you say?'

Emily meets the pair at the cash register. They've code-switched again into what she calls their 'toffish English guff'. She's had the pleasure of the full routine this morning.

'Yuh, shhh*ure*. Frisson *definitely*,' George drawls. 'What the French might call a, a, a, a, a certain "I don't know *what*".'

Owen pulls a debit card from a back pocket. 'This one's on me, old chap.'

It always is, thinks Emily.

'*Frightfully* kind of you, old chap. I'll get next week.'

Emily holds the card reader across the counter. 'Everything OK for you again this morning?'

'Brilliant as always, thanks Emi-Lou.'

'Seriously,' George leans on the counter. 'You should put bands on in here, Emi-Lou. Fill the place with sweaty teenagers on a Friday night.'

'And preaks,' Owen chimes in.

'Of course, the preaks.'

'Not really my scene, I'm afraid.' Emily tears the receipt from the reader, hands it to Owen.

He picks up a biro from the top of the till, signs the receipt *For Emi-Lou, love Owen* with a theatrical

flourish and hands it back. 'For when we're famous rock stars.'

It's the same every Wednesday morning – same table, same order, same ruse with the receipt. As always, Emily balls the autographed till paper and flicks it into the bin behind her, eliciting the same sad-puppy look from Owen. 'Besides, who'd want to come and play here?' She looks over the cracked varnish, the temperamental lighting, the battered furniture. 'Bit of a hole, isn't it?'

'Nonsense.' Owen smiles. 'It's an *institution* is what this is.'

'We'd be honoured to do a show here, Emi-Lou. We'd put you on the map, I reckon. What do you say?'

Emily looks at the boy – eager, almost desperate – and finds it easy to believe him. She smiles. 'See you next week, boys?'

'Definitely,' the pair say in unison, pushing through the front door and out into bright sunshine.

After waving them goodbye, Emily stays behind the counter, cashing up the takings from the previous evening. The place is almost empty now. Just one more pair of students, regulars like the boys. More regular, probably. She doesn't know these two by name, just their orders, often growled or whispered hoarsely through stale morning breath after sleepless nights and long train rides. They're also musical pilgrims, travelling far and wide for whatever band is

playing somewhere – London, Bristol, Birmingham. A few weeks ago it was Manchester, they'd said.

Always the same order though, to bring them back to normality after a transcendent night. One has a blueberry and oatmeal smoothie, the other opts for kiwi, banana and wheatgrass. And always, like this morning, they nurse their drinks in the same booth. Blueberry sits one side of the table, their long, plum-dark hair curtaining the purple beverage. Opposite them, kiwi stirs their thick morning shake, their short hair twisted into spikes died yellow and green. Emily can't remember if the hair colours or the breakfast orders came first, but it must be conscious. Mustn't it?

The occasional peal of laughter comes from their table as the clock ticks on towards nine.

She looks up from her counting every few minutes, surveys the place.

Her place.

Still a bit of a hole, though, with its view of the traffic lights at the bottom of the high street. Inside, the wooden floor and service counter are genuinely 'distressed' rather than being designed to look that way, cracked like a dried-up riverbed. Clustered around un-matched tables, the chairs look considerably down in the dumps, bleached plywood beginning to peel from metal frames pocked with rust. The booths aren't faring much better. The vinyl is wearing thin, and the benches wheeze whenever

customers shuffle across them to cosy up in a corner. Shabby-chic would be a generous description. But she also knows she's lucky that the place – her place – is still alive. And not just alive – in rude health, in fact. She looks down at the evidence in front of her, rolls of bank notes, bags of coins and a stack of till receipts in a neat row on the counter. And just from a Tuesday. Her regulars really are loyal folk. If only the bills weren't so expensive, maybe she'd have something left over for a re-design. Maybe she'd even put in a raised area at the back, like a stage.

TWO

Band chat

Today

You – 15:15

Still on for rehearsal?
I booked a practice room.
Bennet's gonna let us in.

FinSkins – 15:15

Only if **@NewOwen** admits
McCoys are old man crisps

NewOwen – 15:15

Never. They're clearly
a top-tier snack.

FinSkins – 15:15

Can't stand a ridged crisp –
it's an unnatural shape for a
potato. Makes me feel itchy.

NewOwen – 15:15

What about Walkers Max though?

You – 15:16

Can't believe you two are still doing this ... rehearsal? I'm on my way there now.

FinSkins – 15:16

Walkers Max are a different beast – thinner ridge, more delicate texture. And the paprika excuses everything.

NewOwen – 15:16

Hypocrite

S😊 – 15:16

> Re: NewOwen – 15:16
> Hypocrite

HypoCRISP!

FinSkins – 15:16

Shut up Sam.

NewOwen –15:16

> Re: S😊 – 15:16
> HypoCRISP!

LOOOOOOL SAM!

FinSkins – 15:16

You'd never find McCoys doing paprika flavour. Only old man flavours. Walkers are pioneers of the crisp world. Always pushing boundaries. And to be respected. McCoys are dead.

S😊 – 15:16

Did you know that Walkers in America are called 'Lays'?

You – 15:16

Er ... rehearsal?

FinSkins – 15:16

SHUT UP SAM

NewOwen – 15:17

> Re: S😊 – 15:16
> Did you know that Walkers in America...

Why yes, Samuel, I did. In fact, the UK based Walkers brand was acquired in 1989 by American food giant, Lays. So it might be more accurate to say that Lays are known as Walkers in the UK, rather than the other way around.

FinSkins – 15:17

Who even **are** you people?

S☺ – 15:17

If you can't hack this level of crisp chat **@FinSkins** maybe just step back & listen to the experts. McCoys are top-tier snacks. Up there with Kettle chips.

NewOwen – 15:17

Can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.

S☺ – 15:17

Can't take the pace, get out of the race

NewOwen – 15:17

Can't take the fat, get out of the frier

S☺ – 15:17

> Re: NewOwen – 15:17
> Can't stand the fat, get out of...

Ha! Yes mate!

You – 15:17

I thought we'd go over that new song again. **@S**😊 you got those lyrics remembered yet?

NewOwen – 15:17

Can't stand the dips, keep away from the chips.

FinSkins – 15:18

I hate you guys. Kettle chips are dead as well. Also are we going Emi-Lou's afterwards?

S😊 – 15:18

> Re: G-tar – 15:17
> I thought we'd go over that new song...

Yup. But I changed the words you wrote so it's all about crisps. **@FinSkins** deal with it.

S 😊 – 15:18

> Re: NewOwen – 15:17
> Can't stand the dips, keep away from...

This guy's killing me right now. Definitely up for Emi-Lou's. Split some chips?

You – 15:18

Re: **S**😊 – 15:18
Yup. But I changed the words you ...
NOT OK **@S**😊. But you guys are coming to the practice room...?

S😊 renamed the group **Crisp Chat**

FinSkins – 15:18

@S😊 you are such a dick

NewOwen – 15:18

@S😊 LOOOOOOOL
and yes to chips

You renamed the group **Band Chat**

You – 15:18

Seriously, guys, are you coming?

NewOwen – 15:18

Re: G-tar – 15:18
Seriously, guys, are you coming?
FFS George YES! We're already here. Bennet let us in five minutes ago.

FinSkins – 15:18

Been here for ages. Lefty
let us out of Geog early.

FinSkins – 15:18

@NewOwen's all tuned up already.

S☺ – 15:18

> Re: FinSkins – 15:18
> **@NewOwen**'s all
> tuned up already.

Makes a change.

You – 15:19

Nearly there

NewOwen – 15:19

@S☺ come at me, unless it'd hurt
your delicate little singing voice.

S☺ – 15:19

@NewOwen Mine is the true voice
of God; when you hear it your
head will explode with rapture.

@FinSkins did you
bring the snacks?

FinSkins – 15:19

Yup. Good ones for me and a bag of McCoys for you and **@NewOwen** to share with your pipe and Bovril

@G-tar where are you mate? You're late.

S😊 – 15:19

Yeah **@G-tar** we should've started by now.

NewOwen – 15:19

Anyone would think **@G-tar** wasn't taking this band seriously. Late to rehearsals. Not the work ethic we're looking for in a guitarist, TBH.

FinSkins – 15:19

I vote we kick him out.

S😊 – 15:19

> Re: FinSkins – 15:19
> I vote we kick him out.

It's not like he's any good.

NewOwen – 15:19

> Re: FinSkins – 15:19
> I vote we kick him out.

Seconded. Not like it's hard to actually *write* songs.

S😊 – 15:19

Everyone prefers covers bands anyway.

FinSkins – 15:19

Always been my dream to be in a covers band.

NewOwen – 15:20

We might actually get some real gigs if we played covers. Just sayin'.

S😊 – 15:20

Hey **@G-tar** is pretty close to getting Emi-Lou to let us play. I can just feel it.

FinSkins – 15:21

Yeah, he's been on the brink for almost a year now. Just keep buying those smoothies, **@G-tar**!

You – 15:21

I'm here. Love you guys. xxx

THREE

Tad pulls his front door closed behind him, yanking it past the point where it always sticks. He adds his shoes to the cluttered rack in the narrow hallway and dumps his bag alongside. Through to the kitchen, he clicks the kettle on, takes his special manuka honey from the back of the top shelf, the shelf that only he can reach, and puts a teaspoon of the mellifluous sweetness into the cleanest mug he can find. He does his usual check of the downstairs windows as he waits for the water to boil, waggling the handles on the ones that are already closed, just to be certain. Then he does the same upstairs.

His mum's room window is always open, even when it's cold and raining in the middle of winter. But it's not winter yet and today is warm and sunny. It feels a bit wrong to seal out all that sunshine. But seal it he must. It's not for long, anyway. He's got about thirty minutes before he'll have to come and open it again. Before his mum comes home.

And he must be finished before that happens. That's non-negotiable.

He tiptoes through her room, careful in the narrow gap between window and bed not to brush

against the duvet where the cat has curled herself into a patch of sunlight. Careful also that he doesn't leave any trace of himself on the immaculate, new carpet where the lines from the hoover are as clear and manicured as a well-kept garden.

His sisters' room is the polar opposite: toys everywhere and the carpet, where visible, stained with various drink and foodstuffs. When they can afford to do another room, theirs is next, Tad's mum says. He spots a bottle under one of the cots – must have rolled there this morning and been forgotten – and collects it with his foot. It's only water, luckily, not their sickly sweet milk formula. Brushing some fluff from the squishy teat, he puts the bottle on the windowsill where his mum will find it later, then pulls the window closed. The dry suck of the seal against the frame whooshes its confirmation that the outside world is shut out. It's a sound that Tad has come to adore. It means he's nearly ready.

Downstairs, the roar of the kettle has reached its crescendo and Tad pours water over the honey and stirs, adds a little cold from the tap. He sips the warm, soothing beverage as he goes back up to his room. He closes his own window – the last one. He double checks it's closed. Then he closes the blind. Then the Spiderman curtains that have hung there since he was eight. He needs as many layers as possible between him and the street – especially in here, where it happens. And darkness is best,

anyway. He feels more comfortable doing it in the half-light.

His mum and sisters are on the way home already, so he must be quick. But he must also be calm. Calmness, serenity, poise – all of these are vital. Another sip of the liquid honey as he ticks off the closed windows in his mind once again. His neighbour, Mrs Gideon, wouldn't notice if he was standing right next to her. She's probably in her front room right now, reading one of those books with the big print, her hearing aids turned off as always. Mrs Gideon's safe. But absolutely no one else must know what he does with these precious minutes on a Thursday afternoon. No one.

Not yet anyway.

He closes his eyes as he slips headphones over his ears, the perceivable world suddenly shrinking, distilled inside his skin to his heart's beating and the shudder in his chest. He breathes deeply, lets a soft sigh purr in his throat as he exhales, then tightens his vocal chords to hum a slow, melodious scale. His whole body vibrates with it.

He scrolls through his phone, finds his playlist. He turns his head slowly to the left, his chin almost meeting his shoulder, then slowly does the same on the right, then tilts upwards, then down. Two more deep breaths.

He presses play.

A few bars of piano, then he lets the familiar notes quiver up through his diaphragm like molten silver. Tad's eyes are closed, but he imagines the notes falling from his open mouth and pooling in the dark cube of his bedroom, washing over his feet. His voice follows closely the voice in his ears, matching it at every turn on the soft journey of the song – a gentle melody, just a warm-up really. The music eases along, a slow river, warm sun on its banks. Tad can see the gentle swelling of water, green fronds swaying in the current. His voice sways, equally green and lithe, wearing the earthy sweetness of the honey he just drank. In the final chorus, he sings a harmony, weaving the rills of his voice around the one in his ears, finishing a clean octave above their last, sustained note.

He opens his eyes, always a little surprised to find himself back in his room, the same posters on his walls, the same square of light creeping around the edge of his curtains.

Another sip from his mug, his voice relaxing, his whole body starting to glow.

The next song is a little faster. Tad imagines this one as a road rather than a river, the voice a little harder, purring and pulsing like an engine. It moves alongside the song's other vehicles – the shunting trucks of drums and bass, the sports-car guitars. Perhaps, he thinks, his voice is a motorbike, it's leather-clad rider with visor tipped down,

powerful yet light, ducking and weaving, sometimes overtaking, sometimes blending in with the traffic.

Next, his voice is a walk through built-up streets, neon lights glowing as the song ambles along the pavement – no, *struts* along the *sidewalk* – the air around it thick with the night-scents of the city. Then he's shouting from the rooftop of one of the city's many high-rises, arms spread wide as he looks down on the crawling movements beneath him, the grunt of all that life running up through the building, up through his legs and into his body, which grinds with the music, taking on a life of its own.

After the first four songs, the playlist changes gear – another driving beat, but thicker, an eight-lane highway rather than a city street, and everything travelling fast. His head dips in sync with the rhythm, his leg twitching. It's difficult, he finds, to keep something back for when this song climaxes after the second verse, so Tad stalks his room as he sings, his body taking on the angular dynamic of the music. A strange power builds in the back of his throat as he does so, knowing the peak that is coming, the power growing and growing until there's just one bar to go.

And when he really lets loose, pushing over the mountains and seething oceans of instruments beneath, it feels like flying, like his back has opened up and his lungs grown wings thick with feathers

as he soars, Icarus above the waves, the song's sun warm on his skin.

Just that one little lift before the last descent and the end.

But something inside Tad knows he won't make it and, just like Icarus, he falters. It's too high, and the note catches in his throat. He drops to a lower harmony with the voice in his ears and listens upwards to that last siren call, just out of reach, a feather's breadth beyond his range. He touches down at the end of the song, panting slightly. He takes a deep breath. He's happy, but a little disappointed that, once again, he didn't quite make it.

He opens his eyes, looks around his bedroom, feeling its weight once again across his shoulders. He'll always be here, he thinks, his songs bouncing against these four thin walls, unable to escape, to fly freely. But rather they stretch their wings in here than not open them at all, right?

He smiles, begins to nod in time to the next song. It'll be there next week, he thinks. That note, waiting for him. Maybe he'll get there, next time.

Tad's mum rises from her seat on the bottom stair where she's spent the past quarter of an hour. She tiptoes to the front door, gently opens it, and eases it closed behind her against the crystal instrument of her son's voice upstairs, winding into the next song. The twins' buggy is just inside the front gate, both girls still sound asleep. She only

sneaks home early to listen when she knows they won't wake up.

She doesn't like tiptoeing around like this, but if Tad had even the slightest sense she might be there, he would stop. Tad, his nickname – a playground shortening of his full name Tadhg, was like his father had been – a bone-deep, died in the wool poet, but only able to shine when he thought no one was watching. It was that pressure that led to his light going out completely. And she misses it every day.

For Tad to stop shining with song on his precious Thursday afternoons would be the worst thing in the world. She can always feel the energy around him after she comes home, even if he does sometimes forget to open her bedroom window again. His whole body is like one huge smile. But he's painfully shy with it. And she doesn't want to push him. To break him. Ever. She's seen where that leads, and the boy is his father's son in so many ways.

She kicks the brake off the pram, strains one final time to hear her son's voice against the traffic from the main road at the end of the street.

One more loop around the block, she thinks. Then he'll be done.

FOUR

It went well, George thinks. Overall. A few sloppy changes in 'Network Down', which was annoying – they'd nailed that one last week. And Sam had changed the chorus of 'Shift Yourself' to 'Crisp Yourself', which had made Fin throw a drumstick at him and Owen had to stop playing because he was laughing so much. Right before George's guitar solo, too. He'd been working on that for hours last night. But they'd restarted, and George had nailed it, getting a mid-flow 'woop' from Fin, a post-song backslap from Sam, and an approving nod from Owen which is worth everything.

And the new song's starting to take shape, Fin actually doing what he's been asked for once, and Sam's vocals sharp and angular against the staccato rattle of the chorus – exactly what George had wanted. And Owen, as always, brought magic. His idea to add a bar of silence to that final section, letting the song really tighten up before exploding into the last chorus, had been just what it needed.

The others have gone to Emi-Lou's for chips. George had made his usual excuses, not wanting to sit with a glass of tap water while everyone else is eating. He can stretch Owen to a weekly breakfast

– well, portion of toast – without too much of pushback, but there are only so many meals you can cadge off mates before it starts taking the piss.

As he walks home, George hears the song in his head again, imagines the last few beats of silence filled with wild feedback. Maybe Fin could hit an open hi-hat just before the last chorus drops. It would be the kind of noise to suck you right in before everything really kicks off, the quickest of inhalations before a scream, the pupil's dilation before the brain registers what the eye has seen. It will be awesome. Especially when they play it live.

Maybe the others do have a point about the name, though.

'Darkitecture? What's a Darkitecture?'

'You know, like 'architeture'…?' George always felt awkward explaining himself.

'But… dark…?' Sam had offered. As he was the one who had to sing George's lyrics, he always tried to make the effort to understand what was going on in them.

'Yeah. I guess.'

'What, like abandoned buildings and stuff?'

Fin dropped the drumstick he was trying to spin through his fingers. As he scrabbled under the kit to retrieve it, George addressed his answer to the bass drum. 'Not really. It's like the building is *designed* to be dark and to feel abandoned and ancient. Like, everything is always *trying* to be new and shiny all

the time, but it always ends up just … old. Old and wrecked. So why not try designing it like that? From the start?'

Sam had nodded, apparently convinced. 'And so, this guy in the song, he wants…? He wants to *live* in a building like that…?'

Fin, who had found his drumstick, sat looking at George for an answer. Owen was using his thumb to get a bit of dust off the neck of his bass and couldn't care less. He wasn't really into the 'words' side of things.

George took a breath. 'It's a metaphor. This guy – the one who's singing the song…'

'Me?' Sam asked.

'Well, yeah, but also, no. I guess I was writing this as someone else.'

'As me?' Sam asked again, the downside to his undeniable front-man cool being this occasional slip towards narcissism.

'No. Someone I made up. Look, maybe they're fed up with how rubbish everything is at the moment. How crap everything is.'

'Bit like your other songs, then?' Fin asked, slowly.

'Yeah. But I guess it's kind of satirical, because he's imaging this new housing estate and instead of being all shiny and cheerful it's—'

'Wait, houses can be cheerful?'

'Shut up, Sam. Basically he wants to build this miserable abandoned place where no one is ever going to live.'

'Why not just call it "Shit Hole" then?' Owen had been listening, after all.

'Because then the metaphor doesn't work.'

'Yes, it does. No one wants to live in a shithole. Even *I* get it.'

Sam was nodding.

'"Shit Hole" is a way better title.' Fin stomped on the bass-drum twice. 'Good song though. Ready to go again? One, two, three…'

'You can't call a song "Shit Hole",' George had shouted.

It had descended, then, into their usual conversation about how 'punk' they were all committed to being. Sam, as usual, spearheading the extreme, anti-product side of the argument. George said he just wanted to play a few shows that weren't in the school hall, or to people who weren't their friends and had just showed up because there was a party. He was fed up with being the musical accompaniment to free beer and drunken teenage fumblings.

As he walks home, George concedes that their edgier stuff does sound better. Maybe the others are right. Maybe you can call a song 'Shit Hole' and get it played on the radio or boosted on the streaming sites nowadays. He imagines the cheer a title like

that would get from a crowd. Maybe not in the school hall though. Probably best not to introduce 'Shit Hole' the next time Mr Scott, head of the sixth form, tries to earn cool points by letting them play an assembly.

The first time they'd played an actual gig had been last year – a fortieth birthday of a friend of Sam's mum. They'd been practising for months and fired out a handful of covers that kept the old folk moving for an hour or so. They'd even been paid for it, though they didn't have a name back then and had just been introduced as 'Sam's band'. That had pissed George off. He'd written a song about it.

The money had bought them a PA system, microphones and speakers. All second-hand, of course, but now they could play house parties and set up their own gigs. That was the plan, anyway. If only they could persuade a proper venue to let them play.

Still, the house parties paid. Sometimes. Not that money's the reason for doing it. Of course not. But music costs. All art costs, thinks George. It's only been the odd fifty quid here and there, but it's been reinvested. George has needed a few packs of guitar strings, a couple of effects pedals and the new guitar case he's wearing on his back. Fin always needs new drumsticks, and he got a new cymbal to replace the one he dropped and dented after Sarah's party a few months ago. And there's the studio time that they're saving for, of course. Once they've got some decent

stuff recorded, not just shaky Instagram videos, they can send out some demos online, look for bigger gigs in bigger towns. Proper venues. It's all part of the plan.

Things are going to get bigger. Soon. George knows it.

Especially if they get more songs like 'Darkitecture' under their belts. Or 'Shit Hole.' Whatever.

George knows he's getting better at writing, and the band are getting their own *sound*, which is the important thing if you want people to recognise you. The A&R guys at the big labels want acts who'll stand out. It's still about the big labels, really, thinks George. They'll handle distribution and all the touring, leaving them to do what they do best, which is make music. You can't write songs like 'Bootlace', which is probably their most popular song – their *anthem* – while you're worrying about your social media feeds and booking shows for yourself, can you?

George walks into the garage for a chocolate bar, his stomach having gotten the better of him after all. He knows there's at least a few quid left in his account, and there's probably not much to eat at home.

'Bootlace' is an awesome song. George knows this for certain. It's simple, but effective. Catchy, energetic, fun: it's a perfect first single. Bit like a

chocolate bar, really. Not a lot of *substance*, maybe. It's not going to put him on the map as a *songwriter*, but that will come later. 'Bootlace' will be the world's first taste, and they'll love it.

Most of the sixth form know the words to 'Bootlace'. Which isn't hard; there are only about 25. In fact, more and more people know most of the words to most of their songs now. And it's such as buzz, hearing them chant his words back at them as he plays. To hear people singing *his* songs, their eyes closed, really belting the words out arms aloft and dancing wildly in whoever's garage or living room they're in, *getting it*. And that's what it's really all about, isn't it? Making that connection?

He pays at the self-checkout, pressing the buttons quickly before the annoying voice can finish a sentence, and he gets an idea for a new song title – 'Check Yourself Out', maybe. Or 'Check-out Yourself'…? Maybe it doesn't sound like one of their songs – more poppy and image-focussed, which isn't really what the band are all about. But, George thinks, does that really matter? He can always write songs for other people alongside the stuff he's doing with the band. That's what all the greats do, isn't it? They've got side-projects on side-projects on side-projects. He'd been reading last week about Beethoven – a letter that someone had written after meeting the great man in his apartment. The place was a complete wreck, apparently, and there'd been

manuscript paper everywhere. This guy – the letter-writer – had asked Beethoven if he was working on anything new, and the big man had said 'yeah, about five things'. He never worked on just one thing at a time, he'd said. Always had loads of projects on the go and just added to whichever one he fancied doing that morning. That's how genius works.

George smiles to himself as he starts up his own street. He isn't saying he's *actually* Beethoven. Not at all. That would be ridiculous. It's merely an observation on how the creative brain is constantly looking for stimulation – constantly looking for something new. It seeks variety. Creativity, George thinks, comes from plugging into as many things as you can, and seeing what sparks jump out. Like that steely whistle you hear when a train is approaching – George can hear it now, to his right, a strip of wire fencing and some scrub between the pavement and the tracks – that rising note as the rails start to vibrate and sing. That's like the feedback he'll put into the quiet bit of 'Darkitecture'. It's probably where he got the idea from, hearing that metallic screech of impending arrival or departure, day in, day out. Now his brain has just bubbled it up to the surface when he'd needed it.

The train blasts past – not one that's stopping here, but a fast service that only goes to the big places. And, George thinks, who can blame them? Who'd get off here if it could be avoided? Most

people wouldn't have any idea where *here* even is. Beethoven was born in Bonn, in Germany, and they've built huge memorials to him there. George wonders if they'll do the same for him, or maybe keep his mum's little terraced house that backs onto the trainlines as a kind of museum, like they did with John Lennon's house in Liverpool. Or maybe they'll just put up one of those blue plaques – 'Here lived George Farmer – Musician'. Whatever, George will be long gone. Miles away, in London, or California, or New York maybe, writing songs that everyone will know. And connecting. *Really* connecting. Because that's what it's all about.

FIVE

As long as no one notices her, she'll be fine.

For the past week, Beth has been planning her outfit to ensure the exact right level of anonymity for her first day at her new school. Then she'd realised, last night, that to plan the outfit would probably have the opposite effect, and that spontaneous, laissez faire anonymity is what she really should be going for. A studied attempt at blending in would probably lead to her standing out; a direct result (always) of an excess of effort in any circumstance.

She should have started at her (new) local sixth form a few weeks ago, when the new school year started. That would have been much easier, but there were complications. There always are. Mum couldn't leave her last job early, and the rental house wasn't ready for them yet. So here she was, two weeks behind everyone else and ready to stick out like a sore thumb.

She plans to stand out at some point, of course. But it will not be this day.

So, this morning, she has opted for plain jeans, an unbranded, grey jumper, and canvas shoes. A little make-up, obviously, but not too much. And just two earrings in each ear – one stud and one

medium-sized hoop. She looks in the hallway mirror. It'll do, she thinks, which is exactly the impact she's aiming for.

Her mother isn't so convinced. 'You're going like *that*?'

They'd been shopping last week especially, and Beth had let her mum buy her what she wanted – which was lots of things from all the shops that adults think kids like. It had felt a little awkward, her mum walking fierce into every shop (the same way she walked into everything), shouting above the loud music in one, complaining about the ridiculously dark lighting in another. But Beth knew better than to complain and took the armfuls of clothing dutifully into the changing rooms. She'd played on her phone rather than tried anything on and emerged from each curtained booth after the requisite amount of time with a token number of pieces on her 'yes' pile.

'What happened to the things we bought? That dress was lovely.'

'I'll wear them, Mum. Promise. I just need to check the vibe first, you know? I'm not sure if it's a "dresses" kind of place.' Beth had been to enough schools to know that *no one* wore those kinds of dresses. A few checks of the most popular Instagram accounts of students at her new school had been enough to double confirm that this rule held as good here as anywhere else.

'Oh, well…' is her mother's standard response.

Besides, Beth is the unrivalled master at the precise etiquette required for starting a new school. She's certainly had enough practice.

Beth doesn't mind all the moving around that comes with her mum's job. Or jobs. She's always quick to explain, when asked (and she is always asked, normally by her new form tutor) that it isn't the kind of job that meant they move for exciting reasons – her mum isn't a super-niche emergency disease specialist, or in the military, or a spy or something. Her mum works in HR – the two vaguest and most boring letters in all possible career paths. She just keeps taking promotions, regardless of where in the country they lead her (and where they take Beth and her dad in tow). But the moving itself is always a bit of an adventure, to be honest. And there have been plenty. They'd stayed put for years 10 and 11 – Beth's mum's concession to her daughter's GCSE grades (which had been exceptional) – but they must have moved every year apart from that. And now, a few weeks into the second year of sixth form – they're at it again. If Beth cared to look back through her stack of 'sorry you're leaving cards' from prior classmates (if she'd cared to keep them, which she hasn't), she'd be able to count six different schools in six different parts of the UK in just over seven years, from the north to the south, the east to the west. And now here.

Wherever 'here' is.

But one thing that Beth has learnt is that people are mostly the same anyway, wherever you go. Various shades of the same, basic bunch, with a light smattering of different names for things. Drop all your baggage and learn the new code words; those are the only things you have to do, really, to fit in.

Not that it was without its downsides. She'd been halfway through her A Level in English Language at her last school and gotten fed up with being used as a constant case study. It had all started when the teacher had got them to complete the survey online. The website boasted it could tell exactly where you were from based on the words you use, whether you watch your TV or your telly in your lounge or your parlour or your front room, or whether you eat a bun or a bap or a cob for your lunch or your dinner or your tea. After Beth had done all the questions, there was a map that coloured in the parts of the UK where the survey thought she lived, or had lived in, all based on the answers she'd given.

Most people in the session had just one part of their maps lit up. The website said they were 'deeply rooted' in that one place. But Beth's map had been an ombre kaleidoscope, with patches of colour all over it. And no mention of 'roots' once.

The teacher had leant over her shoulder, seemingly enthralled.

'Wow,' he'd said. 'You move around a lot!'

The truth was Beth had only actually lived in about half of those places. But in each of the places she had lived, she'd picked up all the different words used by the friends she'd made there. And they weren't always the local words. There was even the time her new maths teacher had thought she was Scottish because she'd been using the intonation of a girl she'd been friends with at her previous school.

'So where's "home"?'

Beth had been slow in answering, about to say something about her nan's house when the teacher had swung her chair around and loudly explained to the class that Beth's language – her *lexicon* – was utterly remarkable, showing how diverse a person's *idiolect* could be. After he'd done introducing the new vocabulary, he'd summarised.

'In short, it's a complete hodgepodge. Rootless.'

Beth had tried to feign interest but couldn't help thinking what happened to things without roots.

'Well, Elizabeth.' Beth's mum gathers car keys, handbag and various folders from the hallway table. 'I hope you have a good first day. See you later.' And, with a quick kiss on the cheek, she's gone.

'All set then, Lizard?' Beth's dad's childhood nickname for her is one piece of linguistic baggage that he lugs with them from place to place. Beth's happy with it, cringey though it may be. And she does prefer it to her mum's use of her full name. Not that she'd tell *her* that.

'I think so, yeah.'

'Want a lift? I could drive you right up to the front gates and toot the horn and shout 'I love you' out of the open window if you liked? Really help you bed in well and go unnoticed on your first day?'

'No, Dad. You're alright.'

'Your loss. Love you, Lizard.'

'Love you, Dad.' She un-arranges her hair one last time, picks up her bag and the as-yet-photographless ID badge the school posted to her last week. It had been waiting for them on the doormat when they'd moved in. She leaves her father munching toast in the kitchen and shuts the door behind her.

It's not a long walk to school, maybe fifteen minutes. Beth takes in the early autumn sunshine as she goes, walking easily. She's already Google Mapped all the road junctions and turnings she has to make.

A few houses down from her own, a boy emerges onto the pavement. She hears him crunching along his gravel driveway before she sees him, and she soon realises – somewhat awkwardly – that she's fallen into step just ten metres or so behind him. He hasn't noticed her yet, his head down in what seems to be a perma-scowl, hands gripping the shoulder straps of the guitar bag on his bag. The guitar bag instantly interests Beth, but it's not the boy from the Instagram accounts – George or something – whose

band seems to play at every party that's happened all summer. This boy is taller, leaner, with a shock of bleached white hair under his black beany hat. His long coat billows behind him as he walks.

Beth slows down, crosses the road to put a little more space between her and the boy. She'll take the next right, she thinks, rechecking her phone to confirm that, although the alternative avenue takes a slightly more circuitous route, it still leads to the main road. But the boy has now crossed over as well. Obliviously, it seems, as a car slows down to let him pass. He's on course to step onto the pavement right next to her.

She could turn back, of course, pretend she's forgotten something. Or cross the road again. He wouldn't notice, she thinks, spotting the white buds glinting in his ears. Perhaps she could continue on this road, on this side of it, instead of turning right. But the pavement on this side of the road ends after this junction. There's no way she's going to style it out on that wide, sloping verge. But it's too late, the boy is stepping up onto the pavement. What should she do?

Beth stops, dead.

So does the boy. Mid step. His front foot almost floating in the air for a second. He doesn't look up.

Beth stands still, the beginnings of a smile forming on her face, a laugh somewhere at the bottom of her throat. What on earth is going on?

Slowly, as if coming out of some kind of sleep, or emerging from fog, the boy turns his head towards her. His hands reach up and pluck the buds from his ears and there's a tinny sound of ticking drums and something like screaming.

And then he smiles, too, the perma-scowl dissipating like thin mist on a bright morning. His smile is broad and gawky. 'Bit awkward. Sorry.' He gestures, letting Beth go first.

'No, after you. You're faster.'

'I doubt it.' The boy clocks the ID badge dangling on its bright lanyard around her neck. 'I don't recognise you. Are you new?'

'Yeah. First day. Don't be mean.'

The boy extends a slender hand, fingernails immaculately kept and painted a deep, shimmering crimson. 'Wouldn't dream of it. I'm Jeff.'

Beth holds her own hand out for the oddly formal greeting. 'Hi Jeff. I'm Beth.'

'Shit, we rhyme.'

'Tragic. We'll be the talk of the town, now.'

'Oh well, best we go face the music, I guess. Come on, I'll introduce you around.'

'And you're what, the most popular kid at school?' Beth realises they're still shaking hands.

Jeff smiles again, broader, gawkier, and gestures towards his whole self. 'Obviously. This reads as *completely* normal here.'

Beth laughs.

And the two of them walk side by side through the glimmering morning towards school.

SIX

The poster's pretty simple. 'NEW BAND FORMING,' it says. 'MEMBERS WANTED.'

It's been pinned to the common room notice board for a week now. No one has taken any of the tear-off strips with an email address printed on them – an address newly minted for this purpose, it would seem. Where the poster came from remains something of a mystery, though. Not least to George, Fin, Sam and Owen.

On the Monday that it went up, finding himself late for registration and alone in the common room, Fin had thought about ripping the poster straight down. Instead, he'd sent a picture of it to the group chat.

George had laughed when he saw it, amused that someone was trying to challenge their spot as quasi-official 'band of the school' – 'quasi' because there weren't any others, as far as he knew. Sure, most people played something, and impromptu group renditions of well-known tracks often started up from various corners of the common room. Some of the year group were even quite good, but there was no one else that was *organised* with it like he was.

Like his band. And no one, certainly, has ever put up a poster like this before.

What, he thinks, do they think it will achieve?

He'd laughed again when he saw it in real life that breaktime, slap bang in the middle of the notice board, surrounded by old sports team results and adverts for university open days. He'd laughed the laugh of a confident man.

Then he too had thought about ripping it down.

George has checked each morning to see if any of the strips are gone. It's not as if he's worried about it. Of course he isn't. People can do what they like. He's cool with that. But he's made sure to check if any of the strips had been removed. They haven't. This makes him feel slightly better. Not that he was feeling bad in the first place.

Today, George (still not worried) finds himself looking at the poster again. There's a scatter of noise from various groups around him. Dylan and Carson talk as they work at one of the study pods, green-tipped hair in spiky twists bent in conference with a long, plum, dark hair-curtain. There's another group in the kitchenette, making cups of tea. And, in the corner, shy Tad who barely speaks is listening to the new girl talk to Peta and Eloise about driving. Sounds like Peta took her theory last week and passed.

Driving seems to be all that anyone wants to talk about nowadays – now that everyone's got their

provisional licences and many have started lessons. A few have passed already, and the kids with cars have quickly rocketed to the top of everyone's people-I-want-to-hang-out-with list. Not that they weren't there already, of course. For other reasons. The Venn diagram of 'those who drive' and 'those with rich parents' is pretty much a single circle, cars just another means of winning that particular popularity contest. The kids who *really* talk about driving all the time, who roll their car keys around their fingers like some kind of medal, are the same clique who came out on top when everyone started wearing their own clothes at the start of year 12 – their new drip and creps a distinct cut above everyone else's.

George is quite happy he's not part of all that nonsense, and is pretty happy in his beaten-up old trainers and well-worn jeans, too. But driving seems unignorable, regardless of what you think about it. Alongside the rich kids is the staunchly anti-driving contingent, a group that has been growing increasingly vocal all year. George would be welcome with those guys any day, although his reasons for not driving and theirs for refusing to are, perhaps, a little different. Sure, the ecological credentials of his mum's chronic health issues must seem pretty sound – no car, very little food waste, not a lot of fossil fuels being sacrificed for heat and electricity. All very 'green'. But it's not exactly a choice that she can't work much and, if George is being honest, he'd

rather take the money if he were given the option. He'd certainly be able to get to more gigs that way.

Maybe he can drive the band's van, if they get one. That would be a bussin'… bus.

But the money thing means he's not even that bothered about learning and would happily just ignore the whole driving craze. It's just a distraction, anyway. For him, music comes first and everything else quite a long way behind. At least that's what he's trying to hold to. George wishes that all the 'saw you on the roundabout' and 'overtook you on the ring-road' banter would just fade into the background along with all the bitching about who's taken up two parking spaces on the estate next to the school because they can't even do a reverse parallel park properly (whatever that is). But some days it does George's head in, as he will regularly explain to anyone that will listen.

Today, it's Sam. Sam is sitting 0pposite George and receiving the benefits of George's musings while they both try to ignore the work they should be doing and the 'band members wanted' poster.

'Some of them don't even live a fifteen-minute walk from school and *still* insist on driving in every day,' George says. 'That's why I wrote the lyrics to 'Shift Yourself', you know?'

Sam nods, rearranging his sunglasses.

'Not that I care, really. But people aren't going to Emi-Lou's for lunch anymore, schlepping out to the

drive-thrus on the edge of town instead. "Can't park near Emi-Lou's", they all complain. What happened to walking?'

Sam nods again.

'Not that I really care, but it's hard to keep asking Emi-Lou for gigs if all the year group have abandoned her.'

Sam nods, sage and wise. He rubs a spot of dirt off the side of his trainer.

'Speaking of gigs,' George says, pointing to the elephant in the room. 'What are we going to do about this poster?'

Sam folds his arms. 'I suppose it could be fun, having another band to play with. They could be our support act.'

'Supporting what, exactly? We haven't got any gigs lined up.'

'We're doing Libby's party next weekend, remember?'

'Oh yeah. Forgot about that. Hardly going to be ready by then though, are they?' George tips his chin at the poster. 'Whatever they're going to be called.'

'The Noobs.'

'Noobastank.'

'Noob Noobington and the Nooby Experience.'

Jeff wanders over from the group in the kitchenette. 'What are you two talking about?'

Jeff's a guitarist, too. Not as good as George, obviously, even though George would admit that

Jeff has a better guitar. But that just makes him *seem* pretty competent. This is entirely due to Jeff having rich parents. Well, a rich step mum; rich enough to make Jeff's dad ditch Jeff's actual mum and move in with her last year, prompting Jeff's real mum to move back to Canada so Jeff hasn't seen her since last Christmas, which is all pretty sad, but George knows he can play better, and he also has a better amp.

And George writes his own songs, including the lyrics.

Jeff stands between Sam and George, looks at the poster, nods approvingly. 'You feeling threatened?'

This isn't Jeff's poster. George is pretty certain of that (not that he's given it much thought of course). Jeff wouldn't put up a *poster*. Jeff will no doubt emerge from the crypt of his room (the whole basement of Jeff's step-mum's house is his domain) not with a band but a series of animatronic puppets clutching top-of-the-line instruments that will perform, like Jeff, swathed in trademark black. He wouldn't resort to a *poster*, with its sour hint of desperation.

'Bit of competition, then?' Jeff's elbow nudges George's elbow.

'Yup,' says George.

'Looks like it,' says Sam.

The three stare at the poster in silence.

'And good luck to them.' George tries to keep his voice even as he picks his bag up from where

he'd slung it on a bench. 'As long as they don't start getting any ideas.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, you know, *ideas*. Like … about their place and stuff.'

'What *place*?'

'I think what George is trying to say,' Sam offers. 'Is that this is George's town, and it ain't big enough for the both of them, whoever this "them" might be.'

'Something like that, yeah.' George smiles.

No one speaks for a moment.

'What does that even…?' Jeff's grinning – he always is – but his voice has an edge of incredulity. 'I mean, who do you think you *are*?'

George shrugs, grinning back. 'It's not arrogance when you've got the chops to back it up. Anyway, how are you getting on with those plectrums I leant you? The two point two mil ones?'

'Fuck *plectrums*, George. I'm serious. You're a tin-pot band in a little backwater town no one's ever heard of, playing gigs for parties in friends' front rooms and the occasional fucking *barn*.'

'Woah, easy there, Jeff.' Sam is used to the cut and thrust of George and Jeff's ongoing one-upmanship, but the other conversations in the room are starting to quieten. There are people turning their way. In the kitchenette, a teaspoon holds a dripping teabag over the bin, but it does not fall. The drip of hot water on plastic goes tick, tick.

'You're not even that *good*.' Jeff continues. 'It's more style than substance – lots of power chords and 'ooh look, a minor seventh in the middle'. All your solos sound the same and your lyrics are—'

George, aware of the growing audience, knows that his lyrics get the most likes when he puts excerpts on the band's Instagram page. He must defend them to the death, and publicly. He shuffles his feet, broadens his stance a little. 'My lyrics are what, Jeff?'

Jeff's faux rage seems to desert him for a second and he almost starts laughing, but he puffs his chest out again. 'I mean, what even *is* a 'darkitecture'?'

There's a ripple of laughter around the common room. George is blushing, momentarily stumped. He can't let Jeff win that easily.

'You can have your plectrums back, anyway.' Jeff rummages in his pocket, pulls out three triangles of black plastic. 'They're too thick. All I get is string buzz.'

'That's because your action's set too low. You'd know that if you were any good, not just some indulged rich kid whose step mum's got deep pockets and endless guilt.' George says this a little louder than he means to.

No laughter this time. Just stony silence. From the kitchenette, someone mutters 'low blow'.

Jeff does his best to look unphased, forcing the grin to stay on his face. 'Whatever. No one cares, George.'

A pause.

'Well, we've got a lesson, so…'

'Yeah.'

A long pause. 'Sorry, Jeff. That was mean.'

'Me too.'

'Well, gentlemen,' says Sam. 'I think we'll call that one a draw?'

'George! Sam! Glad I caught you.' Another boy enters, swinging a large sports holdall off his shoulder and onto one of the soft seats in the common room.

'Hi, Andy,' George and Sam chorus, sharing a glance.

'What sport was it today, Andy?' Jeff asks.

'Cricket. Last few weeks before they take the nets down so got to get the training in while I can, eh?'

'Andy, I do wonder how you find the time for all the Head Boy duties whilst playing pretty much every sport ever invented.'

'*And* going to all our gigs,' George adds.

'About that. Look, I know what you're probably going to say, but is there *any* chance you'll let me do a song with you this time? I know *all* the words to "Shift Yourself" now. Been watching that video you posted after the last one and—'

George and Sam are shaking their heads. 'Sorry, Andy. Not going to happen, mate. Anyway, we've got sociology now, right?'

The four boys file out together, Andy still pleading. The other students disperse to various classrooms.

A few girls on a free period stay seated in the far corner, talking about driving lessons and how easy three-point turns are but how reversing around a corner is going to *destroy* them if they have to do it on their test.

Beth isn't really listening. She rises and walks towards the noticeboard. Her neat black fingernails pull the pin from the top of the poster, fold the paper in half and let it fall into the recycling bin. A week was enough. She has what she needs.

Sure, no one has taken a slip, but her phone has buzzed every day with alerts from the email address she's set up.

The first one was from Jeff.

Rehearsals start next week.

SEVEN

Band chat

Today

FinSkins – 13:35

> Re: **@NewOwen** 13:22
> Cream eggs are absolutely the…

Actually they're not cream eggs. They're called crème eggs.

NewOwen – 13:35

Same thing though

S😊 – 13:35

It's not. Cream rhymes with dream. Crème rhymes with phlegm. Which, given the texture, is kinda more appropriate.

FinSkins – 13:35

Phlegm eggs. 😭😭😭

NewOwen – 13:36

I can never un-know that – never eating one again. Thanks **@S**😊

You – 13:36

You guys on the way?

FinSkin – 13:36

Re: G-tar – 13:36
You guys on the way...
On the way where mate?

You – 13:37

Hilarious **@FinSkins**.
Seriously though, we're
supposed to be there at 2.

S😊 – 13:37

All good – in the mum-mobile
as we speak. ETA 13:52.

FinSkins – 13:38

Car's packed. Dad's just going for
a wee. Might be a poo though.

NewOwen – 13:38

TMI **@FinSkins**

FinSkins – 13:39

¯_(ツ)_/¯

You – 13:39

Re: S😊 – 13:37

All good – in the mum-mobile...

You got all the cables? Don't forget the mic leads like last time!

S😊 – 13:39

Relax **@G-tar** it's all on board.

You – 13:39

Speaker stands **@S**😊?

You – 13:41

@S😊, you there?

You – 13:42

@S😊 have you got the stands for the speakers?

S😊 – 13:43

Er... Might be a bit late lads. Have to pop back for something.

FinSkins – 13:43

FFS **@S**😊. Really?

You – 13:43

literally wrote you a list. 😠 Same as every other show we've played.

NewOwen – 13:44

Actually, just ate another cream egg and I don't care that it sounds like phlegm. They're amazing.

S😊 – 13:44

Can't we just put them on chairs or something?

NewOwen – 13:44

Why would you put chocolate on a chair?

You – 13:44

Not chocolate **@NewOwen** you mug. Sam forgot the speaker stands.

NewOwen – 13:45

Oh. No biggie though. Put the speakers on chairs.

S😊 – 13:45

We're nearly home again. No dramas. We'd only just left TBH.

FinSkins – 13:46

Dad's finished. Definitely a poo. We're on the way now.

NewOwen – 13:46

@G-tar you still need a lift, mate? Be with you in five. I've got a spare phlegm egg if you want one.

S😊 – 13:46

Is Sports Andy messaging anyone else? Honestly, this guy...

You – 13:46

He's doing my head in. Did anyone tell him he could play with us? **No one tell him he can**, right? We need a united front on this one. As per.

You – 13:47

Re: NewOwen – 13:46
@G-tar you still need a lift...
Guess I'll go back inside to wait then...! 😉

FinSkins – 13:47

Don't complain **@G-tar** it's a lovely day. Are we inside? As in, the gig? Or is it a marquee job?

You – 13:47

Re: FinSkins – 13:47
Don't complain **@G-tar**
it's a lovely...
Libby said it's the garage.
Think it's pretty big though.

S😊 – 13:47

Libby's place is massive. The garage is bigger than your house **@G-tar**. Games room upstairs and everything. It's gonna be **lit**.
Got the stands BTW. On the way again. ETA 2:05

You – 13:48

👍

NewOwen – 13:48

@G-tar you mind if we grab a Maccy D's on the way? I missed lunch and I'm starving. Need nuggets. Can do a drive-thru no worries. It'll be quick. Can literally hear your passive aggressive snarl in that thumb, BTW.

FinSkins – 13:49

> Re: NewOwen – 13:48
> **@G-tar** you mind if we grab...

Why is it that since you got your licence you've literally *never* been on time Owen? Like, for anything? Is that what freedom means? True that on **@G-tar** 's thumb though. He's aaaaangry.

You – 13:49

> Re: NewOwen – 13:48
> **@G-tar** you mind if we grab...

Whatever. It's your car. Buy me a burger.

You – 13:49

Wait. Are you texting while driving or have you actually not left yet?

NewOwen – 13:50

Just getting in the car now.

FinSkins – 13:50

@NewOwen you're useless mate. But rather late than my dad giving me a lift. I'm not sure he's washed his hands or something.

You – 13:50

😠

S😊 – 13:50

Lowest of the low **@NewOwen**. Poor George waiting on the kerb all on his lonesome. He can't even be **passive** aggressive anymore. Look at his little red face.

NewOwen – 13:50

Can't hear you. Driving. Stop distracting me or I'll do an accident.

S😊 – 13:51

Could only find one speaker stand **@G-tar**. Sorry. The other one will have to be chaired.

FinSkins – 13:55

What *was* my dad eating last night...? Jeez.

EIGHT

Owen guides his little black car, loaded to the roof with his and George's equipment, between the high gateposts. Never mind the size of the house they're arriving at, or the amount of space between it and its closest 'neighbour', or the three white Audis, all with personalised, green-flashed plates, lined up at the far end of the sweeping driveway; just the tyres crunching on the gravel screams 'rich' to George's ears. The car that belongs to Libby (017 LIB) probably costs more than his mum has earned in the last five years.

'Is it weird that some people have this much stuff?' he asks Owen.

'Probably,' the bassist replies, his neck craning to see the top of the truly impressive house, like something out of a costume drama. 'But if you've got this much *space,* you've got to fill it with something.'

'Ah, the vacuous abyss of late-stage capitalism.'

'Good album title.' Owen smiles. 'Pretty impressive set-up, though.'

George shrugs, trying to ignore the imposing house and focus on the venue – a triple garage that is, just as Sam said, definitely bigger than his whole house. The three up-and-over doors are open, and

inside it's like a village hall. The concrete floor is immaculately clean, and the walls are bare. A wooden staircase runs along the back wall up to what must be the games' room.

'Lads! Look at this!' Fin shouts as they get out of the car. He stops unpacking his drum kit from the cases stacked on one side of the garage and runs to an American-style fridge in the opposite corner. The door clinks as Fin opens it – it's full of beer.

George nods, approvingly.

'Hope that'll do for a rider,' comes a voice from behind him. Libby and her mum are crunching across the driveway from the house's open front door. A young boy – not even a year 7, George thinks – stands a few paces back. He didn't know Libby had a brother. To be fair, he doesn't know much about Libby at all. She only joined the school last year and doesn't really talk to anyone much.

George feels twitchy, the way he does when the security guards start following him around the little shopping centre in town. He looks down at his grubby trainers leaving marks on the gravel. And he can't see anywhere appropriate to put down his battered old bag, preferring to keep it clutched at his side rather than messy up the place. 'What? Sorry, pardon?'

'Don't you rockstars always ask for a slab of booze or something before you play? Or is it for afters when you're hanging out with your groupies?'

Libby's mum does a weird wiggle with her hips when she says 'rockstars' and 'groupies'.

Libby looks like she wants the ground to open up and swallow her. 'Muuuuum.'

The boy behind them is edging a little closer, trying to peer into the boot of Owen's car.

George is about to say something when another voice comes, once again, from behind him. He's surrounded.

'So, you must be the famous George.' Dressed in crisp jeans and a white shirt, Libby's dad is coming down the stairs from the room above the garage. He's carrying a couple of extension leads and a guitar cable, all new and still in their packets. 'Thought I'd get in some spares in case you needed them.'

George chances a glance at the gaffer-taped and battered multi-way cable that's peeking through the top of his bag. He pulls the flap down a little harder. 'Ah, great. Thanks.'

'You'll probably want to use your own stuff though. Stuff that's been "gigged" a few times?' He points to the bag. 'No substitute for gear you can trust, right?'

George nods. 'I guess so.'

'But you can have these when you're done. If you like.' He hands George the cables. A silence builds. 'Anyway, we'll leave you guys to get set up. Just wander into the house when you're done, and we'll

get you installed in the den and fed before everyone arrives. Hope you boys like pizza.'

Owen's trying to get his guitar case from the boot of his car and finish his large box of chicken nuggets at the same time, but his ears prick up at the mention of food. 'Thanks, Mr Kennet.'

'It's the least we can do. See you in a bit.' But Mr Kennet doesn't leave. He stands, arms crossed, looking at the scene unfolding in his garage with a strange look on his face. 'This takes me back. I used to play, you know.' He points at the guitar cable, now in George's hand.

'Dad!' Libby's meaning is sharp and clear.

'Right. Of course.' Mr Kennet turns on his heel, heads for the front door. 'Come on, Teddy. We'll come and have a look when they're done.' He takes the young boy by the shoulder and leads him back towards the house.

'We're gonna *party* tonight!' Libby's mum follows her husband, walking backwards and throwing up some hand horns in a classic rock salute to three boys on her driveway.

They wave awkwardly back at her.

'This is for you.' Libby steps forward, an envelope emerging from behind her back. 'Thanks for agreeing to do this.'

George takes the package, glances briefly at the abundant, crisp edges of twenty-pound notes inside, and stuffs it in the top of his bag. Five hundred

pounds. And they're being fed. And given enough beer to last them months, it seems. And they're staying the night, presumably in the 'den' that Libby's dad mentioned. Whatever a 'den' is. A whole heap of benefits. So why did George still feel like he shouldn't be here?

'Thanks, Libby. It's no problem. It's our pleasure, in fact. Happy to oblige.'

Libby fixes George with a strange look that he can't quite read. He's suddenly desperate to go and see if Fin's drumkit should be moved a few inches to the left, or if Owen needs a hand adjusting his guitar strap.

'It's really good of your parents to clean out the garage for us.'

'Oh, it always looks like this. We keep all the garage-y stuff in the workshop, mostly.' Libby points to another building to the side of the main house. Through a pair of barn-style double doors, George can make out the front of a ride-on lawnmower. It's the same size as the one they use for the field at school. Behind the 'workshop', the garden slopes away. The trees at the bottom seem small, distant.

'Maybe I can show you around later?'

'Yeah, that'd be nice.' George catches that look again and starts to feel a warmth creeping up his neck. 'Sure. Yeah.'

'Anyway, like Dad said, just come in when you're finished. The front door's unlocked.'

As George watches Libby depart, Sam's mum's estate pulls through the gates and glides up to the garage. As soon as the car stops, Sam's mum jumps out, pulling her sunglasses down and staring up at the house with her mouth open.

'Sam.' She gawps. 'You're famous. You're playing at a famous's house.'

'Mum, it's just Libby's. Her dad's the inventor. The tech guy, remember?' Sam replies, keeping his sunglasses on, as always.

'What, the man who does the computers? You go to school with Bill Gates's kids? Hi, George.'

'No, not that guy. This one does other stuff.' Sam tires quickly of the badinage with his mum and looks over at his band mates. 'You OK, George? You delivering something?'

'What?' George looks down, remembering the envelope of cash he's taken back out of his bag. 'Oh, this? Yeah. Actually, Mrs Wheeler...?'

'Shelly, please.' Sam's mum stops gawping at the second-floor balconies for a moment, turning to George. 'You make me feel all old.'

'Shelly, can you hold onto this for us, please? I'd leave it in Owen's car, but…'

Sam, his mum, and George watch as Owen pulls his skateboard from his boot and places it on the gravel driveway. With some manhandling, he balances his bass amp, the size of a washing machine, on top of it. Seemingly pleased with

himself, and with a bag of fries in one hand, Owen gives the amp a push with his foot. But the skateboard's wheels are going nowhere on the deep gravel, and the whole rig tips dangerously forward. After a series of thuds, groans and mild expletives, Owen somehow ends up on his back with the teetering arrangement propped up with his knee. Realising he has an audience, Owen raises the still-intact bag of fries towards them. 'Didn't even spill one! How's that?'

'George, you make a good point,' says Sam's mum, plucking the envelope from George's hand. 'Your money's safe with me.'

After George and Sam have unloaded the PA system – including, by some miracle, both speaker stands – Shelley waves goodbye and reverses back across the drive, out through the imposing gate. As he watches her go, the gig money safe in the car's glove compartment, George catches sight of Libby in an upstairs window. He's about to raise a hand to wave, but she's gone with a flick of gossamer curtains.

Sam's at his side. 'You said hello to the princess yet?'

'Who, Libby? Yeah. She's alright.'

'You know she only came to our sixth form so she could boost her chances of going to Oxbridge, right? There's too much competition at the private schools.

A state-school postcode gives your application the edge nowadays.'

'What? Which of your latest conspiracy theories is this?'

Sam looks over the top of his sunglasses. 'Wake up, George. If you apply from a state school, they can tick off their 'poor kids' quota, but actually ensure they're getting a few more of the 'right kind' of people.'

George scoffs. 'Who'd you hear that from?'

'What, you think these people don't game the system whatever way they can? How do you think you end up with a place like this? By playing fair?'

'So why have a party with us lot, then? Why not just invite all your old posh-school mates?'

'Gotta make it look real, right?' Sam taps the side of his glasses. 'Gotta keep it real.'

'Well, they do pay pretty well.'

Throwing an arm over his friend's shoulder, Sam pulls George in close. 'This is the honey they feed you, my friend. They buy you off. But we are the Robin Hoods of sound, George. We shall take these people's money – their filthy lucre – and distribute it to where it is much needed. In the form of music.'

George looks around. At the potted trees standing either side of the front door, the immaculate lawn, the gleaming cleanliness of the fleet of cars that may as well have had 'daddy bear', 'mummy bear' and 'baby bear' on the license plates. Despite

the hospitality, he did feel a bit like Goldilocks, expecting to be chased out at any moment.

But a gig is a gig, and Libby seems nice. He was pretty surprised when she popped up on his Instagram account (hers was all skiing chalets and walking on tropical beaches at sunset, and they didn't even look photoshopped) to ask if they'd play her birthday party. To be fair, he'd said yes before she'd even mentioned the money. That gives him integrity, George thinks. Some people, like Sam, just judge people before they've given them the chance. Libby can't help it that her parents are rich. And it probably isn't even up to her where she goes to school.

As he ponders, George pulls his battered, second-hand amp from Owen's car and carries it into the garage, setting up to the left of Fin. He loses himself in the methodology of plugging things in, taping down the cables, cycling through his effects pedals and adjusting the EQ ranges on each one to get the sound just right.

On the other side of the drum kit, Owen is doing the same. The warm, fuzzy notes of bass guitar and the solid thud of Fin's bass pedal vibrate together in George's chest. Sam mounts the two PA speakers, plugs them into the control board and pulls up the appropriate faders before fiddling with his mic stand, spitting some pops and squeaks into the microphone as he does so. George dials up his own volume and

a peal of distorted notes ripple above the rest of the cacophony.

And after some time, they're ready.

George gives the signal for them to come to order, Fin counts them in, and they rip into the new song – 'Shit Hole'. The garage's concrete walls have the effect of pushing all the sound outwards, through the open doors, and George walks out onto the driveway, to the extent of his guitar lead's reach, to see how they're sounding. It's good. The sharp angles of the song wash over him, and he can't help but smile, nodding back at his bandmates. It sounds even better inside the garage, the floor and ceiling pulsing with noise, the four musicians seeming to hover inside it: Fin's incessant beats keeping them airborne, Owen's pulsing bassline shuddering through their feet. Sam's vocals are stark and melancholy and, in the tense few seconds pause before they launch into the final chorus, the wail of feedback sounds to George like a possessed and angry soul, his guitar taking on a voice of its own of lament and loss and anguish. They watch each other for the final flourish, Fin's arms aloft above his cymbals and, as he brings them smashing down, the song collapses in a heartbeat like it's been sucked into a black hole.

Across the driveway, Libby and her parents are watching from their front steps, clapping.

'Feel free to turn it up if you want, gents,' her dad calls out. 'The neighbours are away for the weekend. We can make as much noise as we want.'

Libby's mum woops. George looks at the happy family in the doorway of their stately home. Music's brought plenty of people at least as much as that, right? Soo why not him, one day? Why shouldn't his talent earn him a spot on those front steps?

'Tonight, my friends,' Sam announces, buzzing just as much as George is. He gathers his band mates in a four-way huddle. 'Tonight is going to be a very good night indeed.'

*

After pizza – the really nice, top-shelf-of-the-fridge-section, hand-stretched-sourdough-and-just-picked-ingredients kind of pizza – and after everyone has dumped their sleeping bags in 'the den' – a room that, to all intents and purposes, is just one giant sofa – George finds himself wandering the downstairs, looking for the toilet.

Opening one door, he finds Libby's dad sat behind a desk. 'Oh. Sorry. Was looking for the bathroom?'

'Almost there, George. Next door along. Actually, have you got a minute?'

George stands awkwardly in the doorframe. 'Er, yeah?' He steps inside. 'What can I do for you, Mr—?'

'Just Paul's fine. Look, you four were sounding pretty good out there. I'm no expert, but I was going to say, last month I was doing some work on the systems over at The Green Lab. Do you know it?'

Know it? George is barely off the website. It's a recording studio hidden away in the woods a few miles out of town. Very top end. All the big bands use it. He nods his head. 'Yeah, think I've heard of it.'

Libby's dad smiles. 'Well, the guy who owns the place is kind of a friend and—'

'You know William March?'

'Bill? Yeah. Anyway, if you wanted, I could pass on a demo or something? Do you guys still have demos nowadays?'

'Er … yeah. No. I mean, yes people still have demos, but no we haven't got one.' George is talking quickly, his tongue feeling suddenly hot in his mouth. 'I mean, we're saving for some studio time. We've got a couple of videos, though, online…'

'Great. Pass the links on and I could let Andy have a look next time I see him? No promises, though. OK?'

George's hands suddenly feel clumsy. He wedges them in his pockets. 'Wow. That would be amazing. Thanks. Thank you, Mr … Paul. Thanks.'

'No probs. Just send the links to Libby.'

'Sure, yeah. Brill. Brilliant. Er…'

'Bathroom's still next door, George. Good luck tonight!'

George shuts the door behind him, the corridor righting itself around his reeling head. Was this it? Were they about to get connected? Hooked up with William 'Bill' March at The Green Lab? There were rumours Brine Mango were planning on doing their next record there. Would he – George – get to actually meet them?

He can barely wee straight for excitement. After making sure to clean up after himself and wash his hands, he emerges from the toilet into a strange, new world. He somehow finds his way back to the den and is about to announce this revelation to his bandmates when Libby appears at his elbow.

'How about that walk? I'll show you around.'

'Er…'

But Libby's already addressing the room. 'So, there's a pool table in the games room over the garage. Feel free to hang out up there. Or in here. Whatever. People will start arriving in about an hour.'

Owen and Fin dash off, jostling through the front door and arguing about who gets to break first. Sam follows a little slower. As he passes, he tips his sunglasses down and gives George a wink, mouths something about 'keeping it real'.

Libby leads George back through the kitchen, on into a vast and tropically warm conservatory, and then out onto a patio the size of a tennis court, complete with barbeque area and outdoor seating. Further down the lazily undulating lawn is an *actual* tennis court behind a high mesh fence and, beyond that, still more garden.

Libby nods towards the court. 'Do you play? Maybe you could come over for a game one weekend?'

George shakes his head. 'Don't really do sports, I'm afraid.' His mum had enrolled him on a summer camp at the local leisure centre once, years ago, in primary school. She'd bought him a racket (second hand, of course) and walked him to the gates every morning for two weeks. George had hated every minute.

They stand quietly for a few minutes on the edge of the patio, George watching the late-afternoon sun making patterns on the lawn, his mind still on The Green Lab. He tries to tell himself it might all come to nothing. 'Focus on the real world,' he says to himself. He takes a deep breath. So much grass. And all so neat. A light breeze brings the warm smell of earth and greenery up the garden towards them.

'What are you thinking about?' Libby asks.

The possibility of stardom takes some forcing down. George's eyes dart around. What could he be thinking of to come across as suitably mysterious and

interesting? 'Nothing really.' Not the best start, but it's bought him some time. 'Just watching the sun on the grass.' That'll have to do.

'That's what you're looking at, but what are you *thinking* about?' Libby's voice is playful.

George eyes her strangely. 'You really want to know?'

'I asked, didn't I?'

George hesitates a little, takes a deep breath. 'OK. You see those trees at the end of the garden? And you see how the patterns on the lawn are made by the sun coming through them as they're moving?'

'I get how shadows work, yes.' Libby sounds unconvinced.

George smiles. 'Well, I'm watching to see if I can spot the point where each tree's shadow, or each branch's, reaches the edge of movement before it sways the other way.' As he speaks, George tries to show her with his hands, acting out a tree moving this way, then that way, in the wind.

'And…?'

'And there's a rhythm to it, if you watch for long enough. The same little patches of grass flash and go dark again, in sequence.'

'Do all boys think like that?'

'Er ... I don't know.'

Libby has suddenly turned towards him and leans in as if to check his face for clues, to see if he'll give an honest response.

'I mean I've not really canvassed all of them…'

Libby laughs, then grabs George by the wrist. 'Come on.' She leads him down the lawn. It's spongey underfoot and George, happy that his spiel about shadows seems to have worked, has a sudden urge to take off his shoes, to feel the pristine grass beneath his toes. Looking down, he notices that Libby has already slipped out of hers. They lie abandoned on the edge of the patio behind them. Her feet are bare, her toenails painted a deep blue, like the night sky.

Libby stops at a bench overlooking the soft curve of a watercourse – too wide, George thinks, to be called a stream, and not quite big enough to be a river. A willow tree trails its branches in the water and a small wooden bridge crosses to a gate. A large field lies beyond, its long grass rippling in the sun.

'Is this weird?' Libby asks, sitting down.

George stays standing. 'What do you mean?'

'All this…' Libby gestures generally at the scene in front of them. 'The babbling brook, the pasture beyond. All this *verdure*?'

'Er…' George is unsure what she's asking.

'The school I was at before, everyone had this. Or a version of it. Tuscany, Val d'Isère, wherever. It's not normal, is it?'

George thinks of his own back yard – ten-foot square of patio slabs overgrown with weeds, and the oily slick smell of the train tracks beyond it.

His mum has tried to brighten it up with a few pot plants, and they'd had a go at growing tomatoes once. George watched for weeks as the little green spheres fattened, turned yellow, then ripened to a post-box red. They'd gathered a dozen of the biggest ones for a special picnic one Saturday. But they'd tasted like the train tracks. 'Not really,' he says. 'No.'

Libby's night-blue toes are drawing circles in the grass.

'It's nice though. All this.' George sits next to Libby, gestures generally at the scenery. 'It's very … lovely.'

'Thanks for agreeing to do this. To play, I mean. I know it's not…' Libby trails off, starts picking at the cuff of her jumper.

'It's not what?'

'I don't know. Not what you're used to, I guess.'

'Hey, it beats the school hall, any day.'

Libby looks up, smiles at him, then looks back up towards the house, over George's shoulder. 'And it means people might actually *come* to my birthday party. Yay!' Her laugh is forced, halfway to being a sob. 'So, thanks for that, as well.' When she looks back at George, there's a thin line of water under each eye – not big enough, yet, to be a tear.

A strange heat surges up the back of George's neck. 'Oh, yeah. No problem.'

'Do you think they'll like it? Do you think they'll *actually* turn up?' Libby is leaning towards him again.

'Yeah, of course. Everyone's been talking about it. They can't wait.' A pause. 'And there'll be all your friends from your old school, right?'

Libby laughs again, louder this time, tipping her head back and looking skyward. It sounds even more like a cry.

'What?'

She looks at George again, wipes her eyes with her cuffs, shaking her head. 'It's not an exeat, they've said.'

'What's an exeat?'

'A weekend you can leave school. Boarding school. Besides, they wouldn't come even if they could. They don't really talk to me anymore.'

'Why not?'

Libby breathes deeply. 'Can I tell you something? Private, though. OK?' She puts a hand on George's leg.

'Er… Sure.'

'The reason I left my last school is nothing to do with me playing the system to get into Oxford or whatever. I know what people have been saying behind my back.'

'What?' George does his best impression of cluelessness. 'Who would even *say* that?'

Libby continues after a barely perceptible eye-roll. 'Dad's overstretched himself. He's working on something new, he says, and it'll be brilliant if'—Libby corrects herself—'*When* it comes off. It'll be

brilliant. But at the moment … we can just about afford to stay in the house. For the rest of the year, at least. Mum's trading in her car next week for a smaller one. And we've had to sell off the meadow.' She tips her chin at the field across the river.

'But your friends wouldn't just cut you off for that, would they?'

'Depends on what "friends" means, doesn't it? I don't think I ever really fitted in anyway.' Libby pulls one foot up onto the bench, props her chin on her knee and stares forward. 'It's weird, money. Mum says, some people's money isn't the same as other people's. Dad made his first breakthrough when he was pretty young, before I was born, and they started getting invited to loads of places. Weekends away, trips on yachts with other rich people. Rich *men*. It was a proper boys' club. But Mum says she's never really been "accepted" either. The other wives always gave her this funny look. And so she stopped going. Me and my brother weren't born doing ski seasons every year, or learning to ride a thoroughbred or whatever, surrounded by other rich kids. We grew up here. Playing in the brook, pitching tents in the meadow. It's the only place we've ever really fitted in. And now…'

George thinks of the crisp twenty-pound notes in their envelope, the pristine driveway, the goldilocks row of cars sitting demurely upon it. Hardly crushing poverty, is it? And he knows what Sam would say.

But still, it's not Libby's fault. No one deserves to have their sanctuary taken away from them. And her dad might be hooking him up – hooking them all up – with certain stardom. Not that that's the only reason to be nice to his daughter. There's something about Libby that George can't quite put a finger on. But maybe, he thinks, he'd like to try. This makes his fingers tingle.

'I know I don't really fit in at school, either.'

George tries to protest, but words don't come quick enough.

Libby meets his silence with a raised eyebrow, then looks around again at the garden and back up towards the house. 'I guess I just wanted to share this with people. Whoever they are. Might be the last chance I get. So thank you for agreeing to come. I like your songs – I really do. Thanks for giving the place a good send off.'

From the trees above them, a bird lets fall a waterfall of notes. Across the meadow, another echoes its tune.

'I just heard someone pull in. People must be arriving. I'll go and play hostess.' Libby rises from her seat, dabbing again at her eyes.

George stands too. 'Libby, I—'

'It's fine, George. Just have a good night, OK?'

Libby shoots a quick glance up the garden, towards the crunch of tyres on gravel. 'Fuck it,' she whispers, almost to herself. Placing her hands firmly

on George's cheeks, she pulls his face towards hers. Arms flailing, George struggles to keep his balance as Libby pushes her lips onto his. They are hot, salty, and they tingle against his skin.

A few seconds and Libby pulls away. 'Come and find me, later? You can give me my birthday present then.'

George watches her run back up the garden, slip back into her shoes, and disappear around the front of the house. He waits for his fingers to stop tingling before he follows her.

NINE

Beth cradles her drink – some kind of fruit punch with bits of mint leaf and strawberry floating in it. Some girls she didn't know emptied the contents of a hip flask into it just after she'd ladled out her own cupful. Beth wants to make this one last as long as she can.

She stands just outside the crowd of people at the garage doors, all pushing to get close to the band who've just come off stage after their first set. The boy that everyone calls Sports Andy is bouncing around George, looking like he's pleading for something.

Jeff is walking towards her. 'What do you think? They're great, aren't they?'

'Sure. Yeah. Really good.' She takes a small sip.

'They get better every show. They used to be crap, you know.'

'No, really?'

'Then Fin and Owen just sort of got it together last year. Caught up with George who's always been, y'know.'

'Oh, yeah. Definitely.'

'And Sam's always been a great frontman. Effortless, right? But George writes all the lyrics.'

'I did not know that. But thank you for the information.' Another sip, and Beth can't hide the fact she's empty. She shakes her empty cup at Jeff with an, 'Excuse me, I need to…' and drifts towards the trestle table set out on the other side of the garage, laden with drinks both soft and hard. Hearing Jeff fawn over those guys makes her quite keen to take the 'hard' option. Maybe she'll try fruit punch version 2.0 after all.

'Hey, what's up?' Jeff follows her, skirting the edge of the throng that surround the band. 'Didn't you like it? They absolutely nailed 'Bootlace' tonight, and that new one was epic!'

'They're all new to me, Jeff.'

'The one with the slow build and then the feedback. You know.'

Jeff makes a 'feedback' noise as they reach the drinks table. Beth turns, teeth gritted. 'Oh, yeah. That one.'

'Come on, Beth. What's the problem?'

Beth picks the ladle from the punch, which is almost three quarters gone, and sniffs. She tries not to reel at the sharp, burning smell in her nose. 'God, what's in here? Lighter fluid?' She empties three scoops into her cup. 'Look, Jeff. They were fine. They were good, even. In places. But how you can dote on a guy who said that about your dad the other week?'

'Oh, that? That's just what we do. Just banter.'

Beth rolls her eyes, adds another ladle for good measure. God give her strength against 'banter'.

'And he's right. My dad's a dick. My mum's a dick, too. And don't get me started on my step-mum.'

'And that drummer. Fin, is it? The way he looks at girls is just…'

'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

'Just before he went on, I'm sure I saw him squeeze at least three separate bums, and he put a bottle cap down the middle of Thea's cleavage. Has anyone called him out on it?'

Jeff shuffles awkwardly. 'Yeah, he's had a few to drink tonight, I think. But he's fine, though.'

Beth pushes back past him, keen to feel an open sky above her again. It's a warm night, and she thought she saw bats flitting in and out of the house's security lights earlier. 'I guess you would say that, not being someone with tits. We notice, you know. Even just a glance. When people stare at our boobs for just a second it's like a whole minute in boob-time.' Beth drops her head, fixes her gaze on Jeff's crotch.

He shuffles awkwardly. 'Er … what are you…?'

'See what I mean? Anyway, we're *better* than them, man! We'd wipe the *floor* with them. We're already tighter, and our songs are better.'

'Song. We've only got one.'

'Yeah, but we'll have more soon, obviously.' Beth knocks back a mouthful of the punch, grimaces

against the burning in her throat. 'And once we get those harmonies sorted out, then—'

'What harmonies?'

Beth and Jeff turn at the voice beside them. Tad is cradling his own cup of punch. Unlike Beth though, he seems keen to keep his at arm's length. He holds it up like a medical sample. 'Are you actually *enjoying* this?'

'Wouldn't say that, but it's doing a job.'

'Anyway, what harmonies? Are you guys in a band, too?'

Jeff looks off into the night. Honestly, any more awkward shuffling and Beth is tempted to upend her drink over his head. 'Yeah, we just formed. Isn't that right, Jeff.'

He turns back with an 'Uh-huh,' but he's looking past Tad, back to the band, who are handing out beers from a fridge behind the drumkit.

'Jeff, please tell me you're not looking to see if George can hear you? Are you *kidding* me with this shit?'

'What? I just…. I just think it'd be easier if he didn't know. Yet.'

'God, you're acting like he's your *boyfriend* or something. Wait. Shit. He's not *actually* your boyfriend, is he?'

'No. No chance of that.' Jeff raises his own drink to his mouth, stares off into the middle distance.

Beth looks at Tad for clarification, but he merely shrugs his shoulders.

'I tried,' Jeff continues. 'Years back. Don't think George picked up on my hints. But I'm over it.' Another long guzzle.

Beth mouths a slow 'Oh. My. God.' at Tad. 'Sorry, Jeff. I didn't—'

'Don't apologise, jeez. I know you're a well-travelled lady of the world and all that, but we're not all yokel simpletons out here in the sticks, you know?' Jeff smiles at her. 'How long's it been since the 'only gay in the village' trope got exploded? I'm bi, anyway. And, darling, the stories I could tell you…' Jeff raises his drink in an arc over the party scene in front of them, encompassing some hundred or so people, a wry smile on his face.

Beth laughs. 'Maybe some other time?'

George is jogging across the gravel towards them. Or towards Jeff, anyway. 'If it isn't the abandoned son!'

'Ah, the pauper approacheth,' Jeff replies, throwing his arms around his friend. As they hug, Jeff holds Beth's gaze, raises a single, conspiratorial finger to his lips. 'Good show, mate!'

'Thanks, mate. What did you think of the new song?'

'Aw, *mate!* It was *amazing*! The *feedback!*' Jeff does the noise again.

Any more 'mates', Beth promises herself, and she's walking home. She rolls her eyes at Tad.

'Hey, did you know that Beth plays, too?' Jeff steps back.

Beth freezes, drink at her lips.

'What, really? That's great!' Despite the bravado, George is failing to mask the uncertainty in his voice.

'Piano, mostly, but she plays all the instruments,' Jeff pauses for a beat. 'And she's a *really* good guitarist.'

George's eyes widen, halfway through a swig from his bottle. 'Really?' he manages not to splutter.

Jeff puts a hand on George's shoulder, playful eyes locked on Beth. 'Maybe you could let her do a song?'

'What?' Beth's splutter control isn't so good. She's just swallowed two mouthfuls of the punch, her stomach now threatening full revolt.

'Go on, mate. She's good. Do it for me?'

Beth shakes her head, eyes screaming at Jeff.

Who just grins back at her, patting George on the shoulder.

'But I've just told Sports Andy he can't…'

'Yeah, but this is different. Sports Andy asks every time. And he's never being *serious*, is he? He's shit. Beth's different. She's amazing. Go on. Please? For me? Do it for your rich but emotionally damaged friend?'

A long pause. Beth wants to curl up and die.

'Er … Yeah, go on then. Why not?'

Jeff pulls George into a bear hug, his eyes locked onto Beth's, gleaming with mischief. He nods at her.

She's still shaking her head.

Beth isn't really sure what's happening as, a minute later, she threads her arm through George's guitar strap. She mumbles something about not being OK while George presses a few of the effects pedals on the floor, leaning in close to the amplifier behind them.

'That sound OK?' he asks.

Beth nods, or thinks she might be nodding. She can feel the warmth of the drink inside her and her ears ringing. It's as if the world has gotten suddenly smaller, a feeling made worse, as her fingers reach for a few simple chords, by the growing hush in front of her. People who were slipping out of the garage into the warm air of the night have started to slip back in again, ensnared by the noises she's making. She slides her left hand up and down the slender neck of the guitar, attempts a few quick runs up the fret board to get a feel for the instrument.

Then George turns up the volume.

There's a laugh from the gathering crowd as, surprised by the noise, Beth stumbles backwards slightly. She smiles, sheepish.

'How's the vocal level?' George asks.

Beth turns to the microphone that's suddenly reared up in front of her. She mutters a few quick words and her voice booms through the speakers.

She looks at Jeff, standing in the front row. She can't tell if he's rooting for her or if he's enjoying her clear discomfort. Tad is next to him, a strange look on his face that seems halfway between wonder and envy. And George, standing a little closer, picking nervously at the label on his beer bottle and watching the guitar as much as he's watching her, no doubt keen to see that she returns his pride and joy in one piece. Now, she thinks, is not the best time to tell everyone she's never done this before.

Not the playing and the singing. She's done that before. Of course she has. But the *performing* bit of it? To an actual audience? The part she's been putting off until everything was ready, prepared and perfect? Nope.

She takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, her eyes closed.

'So much for all that', she says to herself.

And she starts to play.

TEN

Tad watches her sing.

He sees the knuckles of her left hand flush and whiten against the dark wood of the guitar. He recognises the shape her back makes as she curves to the microphone, the tilt of her neck. He can hear the blood in her throat as she bends to the higher notes.

But he feels, as he stands inside the room of her music, inside the room full of people, as if he is hardly there at all.

And afterwards, after the applause and the shouting and the crowd pushing in on Beth, as he walks alone across the driveway, white gravel crunching under his feet, he slowly comes to find himself back in his own body again. As if he has tumbled from a great height, he lands inside the cage of his own flesh with a heaviness he's not felt for a long time. The night around him grows suddenly cooler and a breeze sweeps up from the garden with the metallic scent of water.

He follows it.

He sits on a bench, facing a willow tree, watching its drooping branches trace inky ripples in the water beneath it. Through the dull edge of this sudden fatigue, he comes slowly to the realisation that he's

not alone. There's a figure, sitting on the grass, a few feet from him. Were they there before he sat down? How long *has* he been sat down?

'Hey,' says the figure. 'What are you thinking about?'

With an inordinate amount of strength, Tad raises his head towards her. 'Nothing, really. Just that I'll never be able to do that.'

'What, *that?*' The figure jerks a thumb back up the garden. 'Beth? She was good, wasn't she?'

Tad nods, solemnly.

'But why would you want to do *that*? Why not do something else, that *you* can do?'

'What do you mean?'

'Of course you can't do what Beth just did – you're not Beth. You're…' The figure pauses. 'Sorry. I don't actually know who *you* are.'

'I'm Tadhg. Tad.'

'Hi Tadhg. Is your name Irish?'

'Yeah. My dad was.'

'Was what?'

'Irish.'

'Really?'

Tad's used to it, the less-easily-guessable side of his identity.

'Thanks for coming to my party.'

'Thanks for having me.'

'But seriously, Tad. You can do whatever you want, as long as you're doing *Tad*. You get it? Don't

be down because you're not Beth. Only Beth can be Beth. In the same way that only you can be you. Tad.'

'Yeah, I guess.'

'But yeah, I wish I could sing like that, too.' She laughs, a fragile, tinkling sound. 'So what are you doing here? Apart from wishing you could be someone else, obviously.'

'Not much, to be honest. That's kind of … *it*.' But the weight on his chest eases slightly, and he slides his hands out of his pockets, sits up a little straighter. 'What about you? Why are you here instead of enjoying your party?'

'Oh, I am enjoying my party. I'm just waiting for someone. I told them to find me, later. They're bringing me my birthday present.'

'Oh. OK. Do you want me to…'

'Well, he's not here yet, so you're all good.'

'Right.' They sit in silence for a minute, enjoying the evening. The warmth seems to be returning to Tad with each breath. 'It's a nice place you've got here.'

'It is, isn't it?'

Another, longer silence. But comfortable.

Eventually, Tad stands. 'Well, I hope you find who you're looking for.'

'I'm not looking. They're looking for me.'

'Of course. See you around.'

'Definitely.'

Tad leaves the figure lying on the grass. One leg propped up on the other, she dangles her shoe on the end of her foot. As he heads back up the hill, another figure is walking down towards him, silhouetted against the bright lights and voices of the party.

'Hey, is anyone…?' George gestures down the hill with his beer bottle.

'Er, yeah. By the bench. Good show, by the way.'

'Great. Thanks, Tad.' George sounds a little off balance, as if he, too, is walking under some kind of weight. Or spell.

'What did you think of…?' Tad gestures up the hill.

'Yeah.' George stops walking, turns to face him. There's something shifting in George's gaze, as if the world – or part of it – has started to realign itself, and everything isn't quite what it is, or is meant to be. 'Yeah,' he says again.

'I know what you mean,' says Tad.

George continues his slightly stumbling walk down the garden and is lost to the night and the smell of the water.

Tad finds Beth just beyond the three white cars which, Tad thinks, look like a set of Russian dolls, neatly parked one beside the other. She's talking to Jeff again. No, not talking. Growling. Teeth bared and spit flying. Tad stays behind the biggest of the cars, not wanting to walk into the middle of an argument.

'That was *not* OK, Jeff. Don't fucking pull *anything* like that again, OK?'

'You didn't have to do it, did you? You could have said no?'

'I *did* say no. I was literally shaking my head at you. I mean what kind of power game *was* that, anyway? Showing off to your old mate, George?'

'But you did it, Beth.'

'I didn't *want to*. Do you understand? That was *not* my decision. I was *not* in control there. I did *not* give my consent.'

Jeff throws his hands in the air, looking exasperated. 'And you were *amazing*. Tad, wasn't she brilliant?'

Tad, who thought he'd been hiding a little better than that, takes a reluctant step out of the shadows. 'Er, yeah. Brilliant, Beth.'

'That's not the point, Jeff. And all the *people*, afterwards.'

'What? The people saying "well done, that was amazing"? Yeah, how fucking *tragic* for you.' Jeff looks away, swigs from his drink.

Beth squats to the ground, fists clenched in her hair, and emits a short, sharp, and very loud scream.

The party goes suddenly quiet as dozens of heads turn their way. But the scream is so short, and Beth back on her feet so quickly, that it seemed almost imaginary. Some start looking up, seeking out an

owl, perhaps. And the hubbub and noise regains its pre-scream level.

'Beth, look, I—'

'Fucking save it, Jeff.'

Tad sees a gap in the conversation and tries to take a few steps backwards, but his crunching on the gravel draws a sharp look from both of the others and he stops moving altogether.

'I'm sorry. OK?' Jeff says.

'I'm shaking. I'm still shaking. Look.' Beth holds up a hand.

Suddenly reminded of what the strange girl at the end of the garden had said, Tad steps forward and takes Beth's tremulous hand in his, bringing it to his chest. He puts his other arm around her neck.

'I thought you were amazing,' he says, astonished at his own forwardness, into her ear.

Jeff looks on, equally astonished.

After a final squeeze, Beth steps away. Still holding onto Tad's hand, she looks hard at Jeff. 'Good friend,' she says, pointing at Tad. And then, jabbing her finger at Jeff's chest. 'Bad friend.' She starts to walk back towards the garage, Tad trailing after her.

Jeff starts to follow.

'No.' Beth turns, pointing at Jeff again, like he's some kind of dog. 'Bad friend. Stay.'

Jeff does as he's told.

Shrugging apologetically at Jeff, abandoned in the darkness, Tad spins at the pull on his hand as Beth leads him back towards the lights and the people. 'Is there any of that fruit punch left?' she says.

ELEVEN

George doesn't really want to be sneaking around this big, unfamiliar house.

It would be easier – much easier, he thinks – for Libby to sneak down to him, rather than him sneaking up to her. If there's any sneaking to be done at all.

She knows where the creaky stairs are and what the strange noise on the upstairs landing is. Having lived here for years, she knows perfectly well that the second door on the left *isn't*, in fact, the correct door, and she wouldn't have found herself on the threshold of her own brother's room like he does, every muscle of his being tensed, desperate for the boy to stay asleep.

He manages to shut the brother's door without a sound, taking a full ten seconds to ease it painstakingly into place and release his grip on the handle.

'Pssst,' comes the noise from behind him, seeming so loud that he almost falls over. 'What are you doing?'

He turns. Libby's head is poking through the opposite doorway. 'Ah, second door on the *right*.'

'Yeah. Obviously. Come on.' She eases the door wider. 'Mind that floorboard.'

George leaps as nimbly as he can into the room. A desk lamp, covered with a thin, orange scarf, throws a warm light across the neat bookshelves, the few photographs framed on a chest of drawers, the electric piano standing against one wall, sheets of music stacked on the stool and the floor underneath it. George's eyes come to rest on the double bed, covered in an orange blanket. Despite what happened down by the willow tree, something hard lodges in his throat.

Libby walks to the bed, sits crossed legged at one end and pats the space next to her.

He takes a while to settle, his legs refusing to fold under him in a way that feels natural. As he fidgets, clueless as to the behaviour of the bottom half of his body, George reaches under his backside and pulls out a small, fluffy something. A hedgehog, as far as he can make out.

Libby smiles and reaches for it, tucks it behind the pillow at her end of the bed, then looks back at George, mild amusement playing on her face.

'What?'

'Nothing. I'm just trying to work out if it's the whole "rock star" thing, or if you're actually hot.'

George can feel himself blushing. 'And the verdict is…?'

'Hmmm. I'll let you know.'

'Right.' They sit in silence for a while. George looks at the wall of photographs above Libby's headboard. Mostly they're family pictures – selfies with her brother against a background of city lights, or a shot of Libby and her mum standing on the edge of a wide, yellow beach in some exotic location. The pictures seem very spread out and, in the soft glow from the lamp, George can make out darker speckles of old bluetac on the wall where some of them have been removed.

'I took down a lot of them.' Libby points towards a stack of pictures on her desk. The top one, George can see, shows three girls of their age all throwing peace signs at the camera, at least two of them looking like they didn't want to be there.

'Good that you print them out, though. I broke my phone last summer, must have lost hundreds of pics.'

'Yeah, Mum's got this account where we get a hundred each month. Not that I've got anything to take pictures of anymore. So…'

'What about the party? I'm sure there'll be some good ones somewhere.'

Libby looks pained for a second.

'It was great, by the way. The party. Sorry Owen ended up in your stream, though.'

'No, that was funny. It's deeper than it looks, isn't it? How much did he have to drink?'

'Oh, nothing. Owen doesn't drink. Doesn't need to. He's like that all the time. Fin, on the other hand…' George doesn't know why he feels slightly responsible. 'I'll make sure Fin cleans up round the back of the garage before we go tomorrow. Fucking drummers.' George senses a small echo of his earlier anger rising in him. Fin had pretty much ruined their second set. They'd got through 'Network Down' and 'State of Rest' before he started to get really ropey, missing counts and losing track of the songs. They'd had to stop early. He knew the booing as they lifted Fin from his drum stool had been mostly a joke, but it still hurt.

'Does he always do that? Drink too much and…?'

'You mean the can't-drum-anymore thing, or the…?'

'Yeah, the other thing.'

'No. Not always.' But it wasn't the first time, either. It was pretty common knowledge that Fin got a bit letchy when he'd had a few, and he'd had some slaps from a few girls at school. 'The way he was talking to Sereena was….'

'Yeah. Not cool. Have you had a word with him about it?'

'Me?' George felt himself going suddenly hot again. What was it to do with him?

'Yeah, you. Or Owen, or Sam or whatever. You're his friends, right?'

'I guess, but…'

'Is it true? About Fin and his phone at school that time?'

George shrugged. Fin had been in the common room on his own, and it wasn't as if he'd been using the school's wifi when it happened. Fin, George and Sam been listening to some music at break, and Fin's phone must have still been linked to the Bluetooth speaker in the corner when he thought, what with everyone else in lessons, that he'd take the opportunity to do a little 'private browsing'.

Sam had been in Geography a few classrooms away. He said the sound through the wall was enough to make Miss Lampton actually squeak when she heard it, trying to raise her own voice to cover the 'ooohs' and 'aaaahs' and grunts of the video Fin was streaming. Fin said afterwards that he had his headphones on, thinking he was connected to those, which is why he kept turning the volume up and up. It might only have been thirty seconds before Mad-Dog Mike Scott, the head of sixth form, had stormed down the corridor from his office and pulled the speaker's plug out of the socket, but by that time everyone on the ground floor had heard it.

And then they couldn't do band practice for a week, until Fin was allowed back to school.

'It wasn't like it was anything nasty.' George shakes his head but isn't sure why he's trying to downplay it.

'He was watching porn at school. Do you not think that's a bit "ick"?'

'No. I mean, yeah. It's not cool, no.'

'Right.'

'Sure. But it's not like there's never been porn in school before.' The pictures and videos shared in group chats were a kind of open secret. And everyone knew that Taylor had a phone full of it, and a browsable catalogue of downloads on a hard drive at home, so the story went. 'Not that *I'd* ever…'

'No. Of course not. Bet you keep your browsing to yourself. Probably delete your history afterwards like a good little pervert. Laptop as clean as the driven snow.'

'I haven't got a laptop, actually.'

Libby looked at him suspiciously. 'Fine. Let's talk about something else.'

'And even if I did, we haven't got the internet at home.'

'What? *Everyone*'s got the internet.' Libby is smiling at him now.

'Wow. For someone who claims they didn't fit in with the spoilt little rich girls…' George doesn't finish his sentence. Libby's back straightens, and George can feel something like bile rising in his throat. He looks down, picks angrily at the blanket in front of him. 'Why are you so caught up on Fin, though? It's not like he went after you this evening.'

'It's not OK that he "went after" *anyone*, George. Is it? Some of the stuff he was saying to Sereena was…. She was pretty much crying before he left her alone to go and throw up round the back of the garage. Did you know that?'

George shakes his head, slowly.

'And…' Libby pauses. 'I caught Teddy looking at porn on his tablet the other day.'

'Who's…? Wait, your *brother* Teddy?' George looks up then, looks at Libby picking angrily at her own thread in the blanket as he flashbacks to the cars and trucks wallpaper and posters of Marvel superheroes in the room across the corridor. 'He's what, ten?'

'Nine. He's nine.'

'Shiiiiit. Surely your dad's got some kind of filter on it though?'

Libby shrugs. 'And I've caught him looking at Mum weirdly since then. Like he's trying to work something out. And yesterday, I was having a shower.' Libby gestures towards the half-open door to her en-suite bathroom. 'And when I got out, I *swear* I heard someone shuffling around in here. I really hope it was just the cat. If my brother turns into a creepy little sex pest, I swear I'll kill him. Anyway, like you said, let's talk about something else.' Libby brightens slightly, pulls her hair back into a knot.

'He'll be fine, Libby. He'll work it out.'

Libby stops, lets her hair fall again, looks quizzically at George.

George does his best to sound reassuring. 'That it's not the same. Porn and, like, *real* girls. Women, I mean.'

'Oh, pray tell, George, how *does* one tell the difference? Is it even *possible* with their clothes on nowadays? I mean the things some of these young women *wear*! I'm sure that your acquaintance, Fin, was simply "testing the water" with the sundry, polite requests he was making of Sereena this evening. Not his fault at all.'

'Well, no, yeah. Yes. I… I mean…'

Libby's eyebrows are raised in expectation.

'It *is* different, isn't it. They agree to do it, don't they? They're getting paid. And it's *their* choice.'

'And you always check the small print in the performers' contracts right before you click "skip ads", right?'

George looks at the blanket again, shaking his head. 'I thought we were going to talk about something else.'

'Look. I know, "everyone watches porn".' Libby does the air quotes aggressively. 'It's not as if I'm immune from the occasional Onlyfans free account. I just thought Teddy had a few more years to… I don't know. To be a *kid*, I guess.'

'I know,' George replies. The first time he'd seen anything like that, it had been Fin sharing a video,

back in year 8. Fin, who'd been talking about it for weeks previously, until someone – Sam, maybe – had called him out and said he'd never actually seen anything, and he was making the whole thing up. So, that evening, Fin had sent a group message. The memory was hazy, but George recalled the lurch in his gut, as if some kind of snare had been set off. The way his bedroom shrunk around him, and the way he wanted to keep watching it, but also to never watch it again. He was both frustrated and relieved when the messaging app did its thing, deleting the video forever after he'd finished viewing. 'I'm sorry,' he mutters to Libby. 'And I think you're right about Fin.'

They sit in silence for a few seconds. Then a few more. The sound of a man's cough comes muffled through the wall. George's head jerks towards it.

'Don't worry. Dad's on sleeping pills. Anxiety. No way he's waking up. And he gave Mum one tonight, too. She said she didn't want to be kept awake by "canoodling teenagers".'

'There was certainly "canoodling".' George smiles at Libby, who smiles back. 'Did you see Sports Andy and Peta slip off down the garden after we'd finished playing?'

'Which one's Peta again? Is she the dark-haired one, wearing the yellow wrap-top with bat wing sleeves?'

'I don't know about the wings, but yeah – yellow top, dark hair.'

'Noooo.' Libby leans in, conspiratorially. 'She was "canoodling" with Ben earlier. Sitting on the house steps, hands in each other's crotches.'

'Really? Ben the Bate?'

'What?'

'He goes to debate club, practically runs it, so we call him Ben Debate – Ben the Bate. And *he* was doing some bump n' grind with Carson earlier. I also saw Devin coming down the games room stairs with Flora just before we started our second set, but they've been together for ages, so…'

Libby sits upright again, grinning widely. 'Canoodling aplenty.' She reaches behind her, picks up an embroidered cushion which she places in her lap, running her nails over the stitching. 'Hey, does that mean it was a good party?'

'Yeah, of course. It was great.'

'Good.'

Silence falls again, more comfortable this time. The window is open and the curtains swell gently, a soft scent of something citrusy washing in from the garden. A light rain had started just after midnight, and the air is warm and damp. It blends with the orange lampshade and George gets the strange feeling he's sitting inside a tangerine.

'So, I've worked it out.' Libby throws the small cushion at George, playfully.

He catches it. 'Worked what out?'

'You *are* hot without the guitar.'

'Thanks.' The lump is back in George's throat. He pulls at the collar of his t-shirt, gets a faint whiff of something sour. Maybe he should have changed it after they'd come off stage.

'You're hotter *with* it, don't get me wrong. But still… canoodleable? If you wanted to…?'

'Sure you don't want me to go and get the guitar? I could wear it for you if you liked. Do a little dance…?' George turns, as if to rise from the bed.

But Libby reaches across and puts a hand on his arm, which slides down to his wrist, and then to his hand. Their fingers interlace, George's tingling.

'No. You'll do fine as you are.'