

1. Meltdown

I'd wanted to kill him for a long time - ever since she'd met him in fact - but never really thought I would. Well, you don't do you? At least, not in England. I hated him though. Hated them both at the time. The psychologist I have to see shows me again the paragraph in the local paper in December 1979 buried on page eight, beginning **Man Commits Suicide in Eden village**. Eden village like hell. I reckon there are more murders and suicides here than in New York. Trust me, dying is in the air. Behind the olde worlde postcard village, the timbers are rotting away by the beamful and the corpses are piling up. Only last week, Pat Benson kissed goodbye to life with a Capri's exhaust and that was just six months after his mother had murdered her husband. The headlines of the national newspapers should be, **Yet Another Body Found in the Styx**. But the locals don't like to draw attention to it. And, for once, neither do I. I try not to show any emotion at the news. This is easy for me as, apparently, I have a face as readable as a brick wall.

Just as well.

The psychologist suggests I write things down. She thinks it will be 'therapeutic'. I doubt it but I like writing - I even won a pony by writing - so, maybe, I will write about what happened. She's promised not to read it. She'd better not. Her face would catch fire and she would splutter that I should be honest, not make things up. Either that or she would have me arrested. Although she assures me that everything I say will be confidential.

To be honest then, I'm not sure where the hatred came from. With her, it was gradual: each new man, each new house and each new school added another layer. With him, however, it was pure hate at first sound. He sat beeping outside the house in a grey Cortina with a jagged red stripe along the side - like the car in Starsky and Hutch, only it looked more like somebody's bleeding finger had been dragged from bonnet to boot. He held his fist on the horn until Mrs Dumpington from next door shouted down to him to bloody well stop that noise or she'll come and give him something to beep about.

She was darting about downstairs like an overweight deer trying to dodge the hunter as she gathered her purse, fags, lipstick, brush, matches. The long beeee-p stopped only when Mrs Dumpington rapped on her kitchen window with her knuckle duster. The jagged, red stripe was hyphenated as the car door swung open and as I set eyes on him

my tummy tumbled over with the hate. He looked like a ginger Neanderthal man as he swung up the path towards the front door and grunted, 'Are you fucking ready or not woman?'

But the hating wasn't just for them.

I hated school and its occupants almost as much. That September, in 1979, soon after the Yorkshire Ripper had murdered his twelfth victim, they married and we moved to another bricked up terraced box with Mrs Dumpington's blessing, 'Good riddance. And don't fucking come beeping round here no more.' I set off to yet another new school remembering *her* words, 'You better settle down at this one young lady or else...'

Or else? It's all very well for them but they don't realise they're dragging someone else from one set of bloody bells to another. They're *so* stupid. And this school was Hate of all Hates. In fact, it was all that fifth year's fault that everything happened. I wanted to kill her as well, like that American girl, Brenda Spencer from San Diego, who opened fire in a Elementary school in Cleveland in January 1979 and shot her classmates because she didn't like Mondays.

It was a Monday it happened as well.

I think I'd been there for five miserable weeks when I stood in the tennis courts at break in the middle of October, unaware that my life was about to go horribly wrong. There was a group of older girls standing nearby smoking and acting shit hard. They're all wearing loads of makeup and a couple of them are big. I mean, Big. Bulldozer Big. Anyway, I knew they didn't like me. I didn't really know why as I'd never even spoken to them. I guess, having moved around so many parts of England but mainly up north, I have a slight northern accent. I say (or, at least, used to say) 'fukin', they say 'fucking'. Therefore I am different. They move closer. I know they are talking about me.

'What a fucking shame this school's been invaded by a foreign slut,' big fat bitch says, turning to look at me. She is wearing dark pink lipstick, her hair is short and gelled. It sticks up on her big fat head like roots growing out of a mouldy potato.

'Well you'd better move then,' I hear myself say. My words are thrown out like darts by some mysterious force. Bullseye.

'You fucking what?'

'You heard.'

They heard all right. They are moving in. All five of them. I bite my tongue. At five foot two and a quarter and more like the front wheel on a Chopper bike than a bulldozer, I am not in a position to hit the board, let alone score. They pen me into the tennis court, hounding me like a pack of animals about to make their first kill. Various kids strangely materialise out of corners of the school, their grey uniforms gathering like storm clouds on the horizon. The first fist in the face hurt. Thump. Right into the side of my eye. And it doesn't get any better. I find my arm trying to protect my face, but they take it and the other one and pin them against the wire. I look up as if I hope to see Pegasus circling the skies. But the sky is empty and grey. Off white. Reddish. Blood is coming from somewhere.

'That's enough. Leave her alone,' someone says.

'Fack off. I'm gonna teach this slag a lesson.'

'You facking tell her. Go on Jem.'

More fists in the face. Bell please ring. But no. Big fat bitch takes out a lighter and tries to set fire to my long dark, curly hair. I might have screamed at this point. Or maybe the bell went. The smell of burnt hair is nauseating. Brenda Spencer, where are you?

'Come on. We have to go.'

Then big fat bitch flicks out a knife and presses it against my neck. Death jabs me in the veins.

'I don't want to see your facking face around here again. You got that?'

They walk away and leave me like an empty crisp packet chucked onto the concrete. A few familiar grey uniforms come towards me from the horizon. But I don't want anyone's sympathy now. I just want to get out of here, to see Pegasus, my magic pony. Or even Tom. No, I wouldn't want him to see me in this state. I somehow get up and wipe my hand across my face. There is blood everywhere. My eyes are killing me. I walk out of the tennis courts, past the school entrance where everyone's filing back in, and out of the school gates. I will miss double geography but I don't give a flying shit.

No one tries to stop me.

I get the bus home.

'Are you all right, lav?' the bus driver asks me. 'Looks like you could do with going to the hospital. You make sure you tell your parents.'

Yeah sure. I say that I am all right. A complete lie. I have sunsets in my eyes, a nose bleed, burnt hair and I am hurting. And hating.

I get back to the ugly concrete box we live in. Shena, my cat, is there waiting for me, as if she knows. The Neanderthal has banned her from inside the house but I let her in anyway. I don't hate her. She is black and fluffy with the greenest of eyes. I've had her since I was seven. Once, before the layers of hate began to cling tight, Mum said she looked like me.

I clean myself up as well as I can. My green eyes are red and puffy. But most of the blood has come from my nose which makes it look worse than it is. I cut the hard, frazzled bits out of my hair. It looks even wilder.

When *she* gets home she takes one look at me and says, '*Beertrice!* Fighting now are we? What next - Borstal?'

Hate them, hate school, hate him, hate her. Hate the name 'Beatrice', especially the way she says it.

I don't go to school for the rest of the week. Then it is the weekend. Then it is the weekdays. Then it is the weekend. Still I don't go.

I don't go for five and a half weeks. Autumn turns to winter as hatred turns to fear.

But nobody knows I don't go. I get up, put on my uniform, then, when they have left to go to work, I change again. Some days I go down to the village and play on fruit machines and space invaders in the pubs or sit on crumbling brick walls with friends, smoking black packets of JPS. But most days I go to the stables and ride Pegasus. Sometimes Tom meets me there on his back-firing motorbike which sounds like a troll farting.

I learned a long time ago that there were no such things as flying horses. But, even without wings, I loved Pegasus. I won him in a competition in the *People & Ponies* magazine last year for an advertisement for horse feed. Yes, I'm ashamed to say that I am responsible for the brand name 'Pegasus' and the caption: 'Give your pony wings'. Then I had to write 500 words about why I wanted a pony. All complete crap but for once it worked. I won my dream.

I'd always wanted a horse since the beginning of time but, as it had often been pointed out to me, 'Just forget it, *Beertrice*, there's no way we can afford one'. When my mother was still with my father (until I was seven) I used to go riding every Saturday morning. Every night for years I would dream about horses, talk to them, be them, ride them, fly with them.

When Mum met and married the Neanderthal man and we moved to the southern Styx, they wouldn't pay for riding lessons. 'I would grow out of it,' I was told. All girls want a pony. But that's not true is it? I know loads of girls who don't want ponies. They want boyfriends and/or pet rocks. So anyway, at twelve, I got a job washing up in a restaurant on Sundays and, with the money I earned, I used to ride for an hour a week on Saturday mornings. In the afternoons I would lurk in a dark corner of the tack room and read any magazines that were lying about. I knew the second I saw the competition that I would win.

I don't mind writing as long as it's nothing to do with school and I even like reading. No one reads in our house except for me. My mother says she doesn't have time. Reading's for the rich or idle, apparently. She says she's too busy working in an office and looking after me. She seems to have plenty of time to sit in front of the telly in the evening and smoke pack after pack of Embassy in her fluffy slippers and her towelled hair cone though.

Anyway, I once read a book about Greek myths which opened up a whole new universe. Such wonderful stories. In Greek mythology, Pegasus was a winged horse who Bellerophon rode and fought the Chimera, a terrible monster, and killed it - which gave me the idea in the first place. I filled out the competition form and a few weeks later I received a letter from the *People & Ponies* magazine telling me I'd won and that I'd soon be contacted. I couldn't keep my feet still for the rest of the week.

'I've won a pony!' I cried to my mother when she came in the back door.

'Don't be stupid,' was the reply.

After I'd shown her the letter and the news had been finally digested, there was unhappiness in her dark eyes which I didn't understand. Dave, the Neanderthal, sounded less than unhappy, but that wasn't surprising because he was a prat. 'Well, she needn't think that I'm paying for it,' I heard him say that evening when I was supposed to be in bed. 'I've just paid the fucking electric bill and the rates - that was enough. And there's no way I'm paying another fucking phone bill like that again. It's being disconnected.'

'Oh Dave...' I heard her say. The sound of that whining voice made me feel sick.

The next morning the only thing my mother had said was, 'Well, this had better not upset your school work, or else you're not keeping it.'

I was so excited when Pegasus arrived in a trailer at the local stables where I'd arranged to keep him. He was a 13.2hh bay gelding and I loved him immediately. He

was so handsome with his shiny brown eyes, long lashes, smiling nostrils and pricked ears.

A woman called Annie, who worked for the magazine, had done a couple of interviews with me over the last year and once I'd featured centre page in the magazine. I'd shown the articles to my mother and Dave, but they hadn't said anything comprehensible.

Unfortunately, the year is almost up and I don't know what will happen. I have a pretty good idea - especially if they find out I haven't been to school for five and a half weeks. But I don't want to think about it. I live one day at a time. I dream and dream as I ride around the country lanes, free from the rot and hatred and murders of Eden, just me and him. The leaves drift from the trees, the skies turn heavier, the air colder, but still I can't think about what may happen, that one day they will catch up with me. I mean who knows the world might end by then. We are close to Meltdown. One nuclear reactor had practically exploded in March. It probably won't be long before the next one.

Then, on that Thursday at the end of November 1979, someone raps at the front door. A rare occurrence as no one comes round to see us. A man, dressed in a dark blue suit, wearing metal glasses and holding a clipboard, growls that he is someone from the educational administration or something like that.

'Are you Miss Beatrice Blake?' he accuses.

'Tricia... Tricia Blake...' I mumble.

'Are you Beatrice's sister?'

'No. I'm Beatrice but people call me Tricia.'

He sighs. His breath smells.

'Is your mother in Beatrice?'

'No,' I lie. Well, I hate that. You tell someone what your name is and they go and call you something else.

'Well, Miss Blake, I have reason to believe that you have not been to school for... erm... almost six weeks. Your school has contacted me as they are concerned about you.'

'I was sick,' I lie again.

'Does that mean you're better now?'

‘No.’ This time I am telling the truth. I feel very sick.

‘I see. But surely your mother knows her responsibility of informing the school of illness.’

‘I guess not. I’ll ask her.’

‘So what has been the problem?’ He peers over his glasses at me.

‘Gastronitis,’ I reply quickly. Is there such a word?

He looks confused. Then he writes something down on his clipboard.

‘I see. Well, if you can ask your mother to get in touch with the school, just to confirm. Thank you.’

I close the door behind him and sink into a chair in the lounge feeling the severe effects of gastronitis. The plug is pulled out of the bath upstairs. I have to make some quick decisions. I could pretend that I am sick now, stay off school and go back with a forged sick note, or I could get a friend to forge one for me. No, there is no way I can go back. They’d slash me into rashes of raw flesh and then roast me above a fire. At least.

She comes down the stairs into the lounge. It is an open staircase so I see the feet first. She is wearing her pink dressing gown and those disgusting mule slippers with little heels on them and that fluffy bit on the front. Just the sight of them makes me feel ill. She is drying her straggly brown hair with a towel. She is middle aged, tall, quite fat except for her face which is pointed; high pointed cheekbones and pointed nose. One of her front teeth has a cap on it because my father smashed it. You can hardly tell though.

She has a collection of faces which she uses for different people but she reserves one exclusively for me. She tips her head to the side, her lips and nose narrow, her eyes frown and she tightens her cheekbones as she sucks in air before bollocking me.

‘Who was that at the door?’ she snaps, whipping the towel around her head and heading towards her packet of Embassy.

‘Oh just some man, trying to sell books, bibles I think,’ I lie again.

‘Bet he wishes he’d never come here,’ she says.

Now what had I done to provoke that? I don’t reply. The back door opens and I hear a few male grunts, followed by the arrival of the Neanderthal man in a suit. But maybe I’m being unfair to Neanderthal men. Sorry ancestors, no offence. Anyway, *he* works for the Rail Companies. I have no idea what he does but it’s some crappy managerial position. He doesn’t talk about it. Mind you, he doesn’t talk to me full stop. He is fairly short, fat, with excessive red hair on his otherwise pale face. Where the hair doesn’t

grow there are hundreds of lines criss-crossing over each other - especially round his blue eyes. I can never quite work out what it is about those eyes. They are full of meanness. They aren't too close together or exceptionally large or small. It's just that something nasty behind them shines through.

'What's going on?' he asks.

His arrival means that I am no longer welcome downstairs. I scurry up to my room which consists of little more than a bed and a floor. I lie on the bed, hugging Twittie, the owl who I've had forever and, I hate to say it, but I begin to cry. I remember my grandmother sitting me on her lap and telling me that it's good to have a cry, cleans the system. She would join in and the pair of us would rock back and forth sobbing happily. It didn't help her as she's dead. It doesn't seem to help me either. Perhaps it gives me gastritis. Oh shit.

I find the dictionary I'd nicked from school and look it up. 'Gastronomy' means 'the art and science of good cooking' and 'gastritis' means 'the inflammation of the stomach'. Well, maybe I'm not so wrong. Gastritis must mean the inflammation of the stomach caused by home economics.

I wish I could climb out the window like they do in films or novels but there isn't even a drainpipe nearby. And I would have to pass the lounge window. There is no way out and there is equally no way I'd be allowed out: it is a weekday and I am only allowed out if there is a competition at the stables and there isn't one until Monday evening. So I decide to wait until tomorrow as I have arranged to meet my friend, Hollie, in the pub at lunchtime. Then we'll be able to sort it all out, won't we?

I wish I still had my imaginary friend, Otto. I lost him somewhere between moves. Or maybe he'd just had enough of moving and left.

I spend a bad night dreaming of being in a school circus during which I am chosen to go on stage and have knives thrown at me. The knife thrower is wearing a mask but I know who's behind it. I wake up as the first knife goes straight into my heart. No analysis needed there. It is a freezing, dark, Friday November morning and I am in trouble. I get up and wash my blood drained face. I have a spot below my mouth and another two on my forehead. I put some cream on and notice that my eyes are getting greener. It is because I cry a lot. My dark hair is wildly scattered over my shoulders and, however much I brush it, it won't stay where I want. I tie it up.

I put on my school uniform until they leave for work, then change again into stretch jeans and red jumper and apply some mascara on my long, already dark eyelashes, and

smudge on some red lipstick. My friends tell me I am attractive but I cringe whenever I catch sight of myself in a mirror. Especially now my nose is ever so slightly crooked. I am quite small but have a big bum which I can't decide is good or bad. *She* tells me that I stick it out, that I walk like a slut. Slut or not, I can't hold it in any further: my spine is shaped like a half moon. My breasts are also expanding at an alarming rate - like a slut, no doubt. They get in the way and they often hurt.

I catch the bus into the next village where we'd lived next door to Mrs Dumpington and I go in our local pub. I ask for a coke, hoping that Hollie will turn up soon. Another friend of mine, Mick, often comes in at lunchtimes to play the machines so maybe I will see him too. I don't know the barman that well: he's old and bald, but he smiles and serves me. If you think it's strange, I look a lot older than my fourteen years. And, of course, I act a lot older. Most people think I am eighteen. I light a B&H from a ten pack (I've gone off JPS as someone said they make your lungs bleed) and chat to the barman and a couple of the locals.

'Pat Benson was in here last night apparently,' the barman says as he's pulling a pint of bitter for John.

'How was he?' I ask after a moment's silence.

'Pissed as a fart.'

'Well, you can't blame him,' John says. His voice is full of ashes. 'With a dead dad, a murdered step-dad and a mother in the nick.' He coughs.

'How long did she get?' I ask, intrigued.

'Life, poor soul. That'll be a sixty pence, John please.'

'But I thought he tried to kill her?'

'He did,' the barman says, opening the till. 'Smashed a bottle in her face so she picked up a bread knife and stabbed him. So they say.'

'But that's self-defence,' I say.

'Maybe,' says the barman. 'They said though that she'd had the bread knife with her all along, that she provoked him or sammit like that. That right, John?'

John holds up his bitter, stares into it, opens wide and drinks thirstily. Then he wipes his mouth and sighs with satisfaction. 'Another one mate. Oh yeah, she meant to do it all right.'

So what if she did? After a lifetime of abuse I don't blame her. I am outraged that she is in prison while men like the Yorkshire Ripper are ripping away to their hearts' content.

Faced with such injustice, my own problems slip into the distance. I can hardly even see them. Even though Hollie still hasn't come, I'm not worried any more. I go over to the jukebox in the other bar and put on 'Message in a Bottle' by the Police and play a game of space invaders.

When I go back into the main bar they are talking about the new female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. A man in a skirt, they call her. They reckon that the Soviets would never dare drop a nuclear bomb on her for fear of what she keeps in her handbag.

'She'll sort them miners, you watch,' the barman says. 'A sixty five percent pay rise? They'll be lucky.'

'I don't give a shit about the miners, just as long as she sorts out my mortgage.'

I start to worry about nuclear bombs and the contents of the Prime Minister's handbag. I am just lighting another fag when I hear the back door click open. Thinking it must be Hollie, I turn round and nearly die there and then on the stool. In fact a mushroom cloud would have been infinitely preferable to the sight of my MOTHER. She heads straight for me and you can probably guess what happens then. She makes it quite clear that she hasn't come for a drink. I try to say good-bye to the nice people in the pub.

'Put that out,' she hisses, grabbing hold of my arm and dragging me out the pub.

I don't have to: her breath is enough to extinguish my cigarette. Then I am marched to the bloody Cortina. She is furious. I think she is over-reacting but I somehow know that this is the beginning of the end. If only I'd had a few more hours: I could have sorted the sick note out, gone back to school, got slashed to pieces and none of this would ever have happened. But it wasn't to work like that.

'... and of all the places to find you in. That pub...'

It is strange. There are eight pubs in the village.

'... I tried the stables and I told them what had happened so you'd better not go there again, young lady. Have you any idea what it feels like to receive a phone call at work from your school? Have you any idea how much embarrassment and inconvenience this has caused me *Beertrice*? It's not easy for me to get time off work to go searching for you...'

'What did they say?' I ask, as the car grinds up the hill. I watch the rolling valleys misting over, imagining the fall out.

‘What did they say? You know bloody well what they said. They said you hadn’t been for five weeks, that’s what they said. And then to find you drinking with a load of dirty old men. I can’t believe such sluttish behaviour. I don’t know what your father will say, Tricia. He’ll have to take care of you. I can’t cope any more. I’ve had it. So’s Dave. You don’t think about him do you?’

I don’t say anything. I can’t think of anything to say that won’t result in an explosion. The strained silence inside the car causes it to judder. She drops down another gear and crunches the gear box. But, despite the hatred, I don’t really want to fight. The car purrs in relief at reaching the top of the hill. She seems less pointed now.

‘I’m sorry, really I am. I just can’t go to that school. They beat me up...’ A large lump in my throat cuts through my voice.

‘I know how they feel,’ she retorts nastily. ‘Have you ever thought that perhaps you deserve it?’

The lump disappears. ‘I don’t go to school because I get beaten up! So what? It’s not like I’m a ... a ... murderer! Or a politician with bombs in my handbag!’ I shout now, not really knowing what about.

‘Don’t be stupid. But that’s not all is it? You are rude, insolent, you hang out in pubs, you smoke, drink... We should never have allowed you to keep that bloody horse.’

As soon as Pegasus is involved I can’t stop myself. ‘Why? What’s he got to do with this? I won him. You don’t have to pay a penny!’

‘And what happens now that your year’s up? I had hoped that maybe Dave would pay, but that’s not going to happen now is it? I’m telling you, unless you change drastically, there’s no way you’re going to keep it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because since you’ve had that horse, you’ve become selfish, ignorant, arrogant and the only thing that exists for you is that damned animal, the stables, and now, it seems, drinking with old men.’

I sigh. Beam me up someone, please. Throw those knives. Drop those bombs. ‘I was only waiting for a friend.’ I know the situation is out of control and I don’t know what to do.

‘What friend? That nasty girl Jill? I don’t ever want to see that girl again in my life and she’s certainly not welcome in my house.’

‘I shouldn’t think she’d want to come to *your* house.’ Jill is a good friend of mine from the stables.

‘No, I wasn’t waiting for Jill. I was waiting for Hollie and Mick.’

‘Well, I’m sure Hollie is at school like all *children* are and, as for that boy, I can’t think why you want to hang around with that village idiot.’

‘He’s not an idiot. That’s a... that’s a... fascist thing to say.’ (I struggle to find the right word. Mick has learning difficulties.)

‘Then why isn’t he working?’ she replies.

Oh please.

‘Because he can’t find a job. There aren’t a lot around in case you hadn’t noticed.’

‘Whatever, we have more important things to talk about - like what we’re going to do with you.’

‘Have you told Dave?’ I ask. Inside my heart feels like it is going to force itself out of my body. If she has told Dave that would be it. It’s not even a Monday. This is Black Friday. He would probably even try to stop me from going to the stables at the weekend and I need to practise for the show.

She hesitates before shaking her head. ‘No, not yet. I think you know what he’ll say.’

I do. But she hasn’t told him. I am surprised. Normally, she doesn’t make any decisions on her own. I ask the inevitable next question:

‘What did you tell the school?’

‘What do you think I said? I told them that as far as I knew you were there.’

We drive the rest of the way in silence. As we turn into the shingled drive at the back of the terraced brick houses, I feel as if it is my body being crunched beneath the car. Today the house looks even uglier. She gets out without looking at me. I stand there for a minute wanting to run away. Wanting to run. To keep on running. Forever. But slowly I turn and follow her.

She makes me a cup of tea. And then she does something she’s never done before: she offers me a cigarette.

‘I know you smoke,’ she says. ‘So you may as well have one.’

She first caught me smoking outside the house a couple of months ago just before we moved. I’d been walking home through the estate puffing away and the scarred Cortina had driven past with the pair of them staring at me like I was something in a zoo. I dropped the fag but they’d seen me. The smoking butt on the pavement was sending signals across the world. She didn’t say anything at the time and since then I’d been more discreet. I’m amazed she’d never caught me before though: I’d been smoking since I was eleven.

Anyhow, I appreciate this peace token, even if it is an Embassy, and thank her. Then she practically bursts into tears. *Do you realise what you are putting me through? What have I done wrong? Why are you doing this? You must know by now how difficult it is for me? How difficult it has been being a single mother? After all you weren't exactly planned, you know. And you remember that it was your father who dumped you as much as he dumped me.*

At times like this I don't hate her. I see her as a victim. I try to imagine what it's like being a single mother with an unplanned child and a husband who's dumped you. But however hard I try I can not justify moving in with a Neanderthal prat. I try to explain this as nicely as I can.

She tells me that she'd lied to me earlier; she had told the school that I was sick. I am once again surprised. In fact, I am so surprised that I agree to go to school on Monday, risk getting my body rearranged and try to fit into the brick wall, to work hard and, in return, she will say nothing to no one and the whole little escapade will be forgotten.

'And you won't tell Dave or anyone that I haven't been going?' I verify.

'Not a soul. It never happened,' she says, getting ready to go back to work.

And so they all live happily ever after.

2. Bricked up

Not quite. She tells him. Can you believe it? When they get home later, Dave, the Neanderthal, takes one look at me and sniffs at something in the stale, smoky air. My heart drags behind me as I climb the stairs. I close the bedroom door and wait. He wants to know ‘what the fuck’s been going on?’ Sure enough, she tells him. I hear him yelling, her crying. He orders her to phone my father.

‘I don’t think...’

‘Just call him.’

I can’t quite see the point in this. They know perfectly well he isn’t going to have me. He didn’t want me when he had me so there’s no reason why he would change now. I’d heard from my mother that this so called father lives in London these days with a young woman and he has a boat down in Poole. As far as I know, he/they are off sailing every weekend. She is about his third girlfriend since my mother. I wonder if he beats his new woman as well or whether it was just my mother.

I have seen him only once since she left him when I was seven - half my lifetime ago. And that was a couple of years ago - before he moved to London. We met at a motorway cafe. My mother was getting a dining table from him. Apparently he’d promised it years ago but he still had it. It was strange meeting him; he was very quiet, almost subdued. He was dark, like me, but he wasn’t as tall as I remembered and his hair was long, like a hippie. I wouldn’t have recognised him if I hadn’t known it was him.

He said, ‘All right?’ and went to pat me on my head, but I stepped out the way. I thought he was going to hit me.

‘Fine,’ I said.

‘How’s school?’ he asked.

‘All right.’ I hesitated. ‘Have you still got my bike?’

‘Your what? Bike? No, I don’t think so.’

‘What happened to it? You remember the red one?’

‘Yeah, vaguely, but I don’t know what happened to it.’

Then he’d put the table in the back of our car. It was wrapped in my old bedspread. Then he went. He’d lied to me. He knew what had happened to my bike; he’d probably thrown it out. Everyone lies. And he’d totally ignored my mother. He didn’t look at her

once. She didn't seem to care. She leant against the side of the car smoking an Embassy and staring at the Service Station. She'd curled her hair though. Since then, there was occasional contact between them. He was made to pay money, 'alimony' or something, and whenever he didn't my mother would call him and threaten him with a solicitor and all that. I didn't really understand. If he did pay, I never saw the money and it was supposed to be for me. Which I thought unfair.

I hear her mumble into the telephone. I open the bedroom door slowly and poke an ear out.

'... Okay, fine, if that's the way you want it. But it's not just my problem, she's your responsibility too you know... Excuse me, I've received one payment in the last two years... It's just that I can't cope with her any more... Well, I'm going to have to send her away then because...'

'What?' The Neanderthal voice sounded like a wine gum. A green one.

'He put the phone down.'

'So he won't have her then. Can't say I blame the bastard.'

'Oh Dave, don't say that.'

'I'll say what I fucking want.'

I close the door, wondering why I'd ever wanted to listen. Fortunately, it is too late in the evening to call the school as well or else I'm sure he would have made her.

That weekend is a nightmare. I'm not allowed out except to feed Pegasus on Saturday. Even then I am escorted. I'm not allowed to ride and it's the show jumping competition on Monday evening which I need to prepare for. In protest, I begin my vow of silence. Peace, at last, they say. On the Sunday, I am taken to the restaurant I work in. I have to speak there, but everyone is nice to me. As I stand filling up the dish washer I think about making a dash for life out the back door, but I don't know where to dash to. I hope that Hollie or Tom or any one of my friends from the village will come to see me but today, typically, no one comes. I have a date to meet Tom at the stables after work so, perhaps, he is there waiting for me. I wish I could get a message to him but I can't.

Later on, back in my room, when I am thinking about slashing my wrists, I think I hear a troll farting angrily on the main road out of sight from the back of the house. I wonder if it is Tom on his motorbike. I stand by the window but I can't see anyone. Besides, what could he do about me being bricked up? I will see him tomorrow night at the competition. I notice the rain is turning lighter and whiter. I loved the snow as a child. My grandmother, in between crying, once told me that snow was really angels

flying down from heaven, but even the sight of falling angels fails to make me smile. I put the razor back behind the curtain on the windowsill though.

Then, on the Monday morning, I have to put on my school uniform and I am told to go to the car. She is taking me. We set off to my funeral at eight thirty.

At that moment, I think I must have hated Mondays more than Brenda Spencer. I try to tell myself that as long as I can get through the day, I have the show in the evening to look forward to. But it is hard to think beyond the next hour. Let alone eight.

It has been snowing all night: the world is covered in angels. I imagine an army of them lining the road preparing to rescue me. There, on the hedges, are hundreds of pairs of wings clipped to the evergreen ready to fly me off to a better world. But no one comes to my rescue. In the meantime, my fists grip my grey school skirt and my lips are bolted.

A man in a woollen hat flings up a bonnet of an old Ford and stares into the engine. A cloud of misery dribbles out of his mouth. Misery. I think then that the country's made of misery. Even they've admitted it and are calling last winter the winter of discontent. This year's no different. At the bus stop there are even more clouds being spat out of cold, angry mouths as they stand there. Waiting. To go to their miserable jobs which they all moan about but which they have to go to in order to live out their misery. Well, what's the alternative, they'll say. They remind me of the corpses waiting on the roadside to be buried when the gravediggers were on strike.

You see, the cracks are beginning to show.

We pass the half buried bungalows and come to some fields or allotments on the right, known locally as 'Blackberry Fields', for obvious reasons, I suppose, although I've never seen anything black there. Now everything is white. Like a nuclear winter. White as far as the eye can see until the white meets the horizon which is grey.

Just as I am thinking what it would be like to live through a nuclear winter, she puts the radio on and blasts me with Cliff Richard. She's been at it non-stop all the way. Bla-bla-bla. Bla-bla-bla I can deal with, but Cliff Richard? I temporarily break my vow of silence and mumble, 'Do I have to listen to that crap.'

'Well if you won't listen to me young lady. I'm fed up of living with your stubborn silence. I'd rather listen to music. Do you know you're a very lucky girl? You've had more than most, you ungrateful child. If I receive one more phone call like the one on Friday you are in serious trouble, Beatrice. And I'm certainly not going to cover for you again. You know what we agreed on Friday. I'm sorry Dave found out but he was

bound to in the end. I'm not going to put up with this behaviour any more. And neither is Dave. He means what he says you know. He's been very good to you. It's not everybody who'd agree to look after a teenage daughter. You know what'll happen, don't you?'

I tap my foot to Cliff Richard just to annoy her. My so called 'thumping feet' result in more abuse but, to tell the truth, I really don't care.

Just then Cliff Richard is cut off by the man on the radio who broadcasts the time (8.35am) and the predictable misery for the country. A little hope almost knocks the air out of my lungs as he begins to announce roads blocked and schools closed on this White Monday, 3 December, 1979.

I unclench my fists and grip the sides of the passenger seat and silently pray to God (I don't believe there is such a thing and, if there is, he - typical - must be pretty bloody stupid if he made man in his image, but you never know) that I be saved while still staring out the window. In the background I can hear her screaming, louder and louder, but I have other things to worry about. There they are. My Executioners. The flocks of dark blue anoraks appear along the sides of the road. First there are only a couple, then more and more join them like the children in that crap fifties horror film, the *Village of the Damned*. I begin to feel sick. We stop at a traffic light dressed in an ominous white hood. There is a crossing. Now, more than ever, I am determined not to go.

The newsreader is still naming the closed schools. Please, please, please say the Gate of Hell. Some of the blue anoraks step onto the road from the pavement on the left. I look down at my own anorak and the grey skirt beneath it. The newsreader finishes the list of schools without uttering the magic words. By the time he begins talking about burst water pipes and old people without heating, I am desperate. I want to crawl through the bottom of the car and bury myself in angels. Desperate people have desperate thoughts and by the time the car turns towards the Gate I have a plan. A slight smile creeps onto my lips and my ears listen for a few seconds. I remember a case of a parent being shot waiting to collect her son from school. Or was it college? I wonder if that was a Monday.

'I'd wipe that smile off your face now, if I were you, young lady. You don't have anything to smile about. If you do one more thing wrong, that four-legged friend of yours is going. And then you're going. Do I make myself clear?'

We are nearing the gates: two prefects are posing outside threatening to report the younger kids for smoking, or for being late. Don't stop there, don't stop there, I think frantically. If they see me, that'll be The End. But then perhaps there is a God.

'I'll stop here and then I can turn around. Now, make sure you behave yourself and then perhaps we won't have to take any further action...'

By this time my feet have stepped into the snow. I feel like I am murdering a thousand angels, crunching them beneath my black shoes.

'Thanks for the lift,' I say, just a little sarcastically, sling my bag over my shoulder and walk on slowly, determinedly.

I slow down, pretending to check my bag for something. The car turns round behind me, the wheels get caught in the snow, the engine revs, then pulls away. Yes. I close my bag and keep on walking.

But I still have to get past the prefects guarding the Gate of Hell, scrutinising the uniformed bricks as they file into the building. A couple of them nearest the gate approach a young boy. He must be a first year or, at least, someone younger. God knows what he's done, but that boy saves my life as, while they are interrogating him, I am able to walk straight past the Gate, head held high.

Once past, I realise that my legs are freezing beneath the stupid grey skirt and white socks. My black loafers aren't really practical for hiking through snow and my bag is heavy with unread words. But I don't care. I have escaped. And freezing to death on a blanket of angels is infinitely preferable to having my throat cut. I think.

I go past the parameters of the school walls and begin to look for a stile. I am out of sight now. Few people approach the school from this direction as it is on the edge of the town. I remember once seeing a public footpath sign which pointed over the fields. And there it is. I wade towards the hedge. Chucking my bag over the stile first, I lift my skirt above my knees and climb over. This is it. Freedom. Fuck them. And yet, as I stumble by the side of the hedge, for some reason, something is gnawing at my insides, like rotting beams.

When I reach the next stile and I am fields away from anyone or anywhere, I stop and rummage around my bag for a ten pack of Bensons. There are three left. I light one and head in the direction of the Blackberry Fields. I stop to inhale and worry for several drags about how it is all going to end. I mean I couldn't go on like this could I? But then I reckon tomorrow is a lifetime away. And this evening I have the show at the stables.

Besides, who needs education?

On the white hedge I notice a beautiful spider's web coated in white crystals. In the middle is a beetle struggling to get out. The spider inspects her catch, ensures that the beetle won't be going anywhere and then lets herself down onto the white ground beneath her, leaving the beetle to die in its own time. Bound up with no way out, freezing cold.

And if only I'd known that this was still the beginning.

3. In search of a murderer

Before long I can't feel my feet. My hair has turned white, my lips are chapped and even my eyelashes are frozen. Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, but I am freezing cold. In order to warm up, I pretend to be a horse and start to canter. It is hard work. Beneath the loose snow I stumble over the frozen ridges of a ploughed field. Then, cold and exhausted, I have to walk again. But there is the Blackberry Fields and beyond that is the main road where I'd sat earlier frozen with horror in her car.

I pass by some caravans. One of them is bright green. Gypsies apparently - or pikeys as they call them here. Everyone says they nick things, that they are responsible for all the burglaries in the area, that they are rude and dirty. When I was born, we lived in a green static caravan and I don't think we were responsible for any burglaries, but who knows. My father (supposedly) went to work all the time and some of my earliest memories are of him coming back in a foul mood and shouting. She went to work too. In a local supermarket. I got dumped on people who lived in a house on a nearby estate. I hated it there. I always felt uncomfortable perched on the edge of a dirty sofa, trying not to take up too much room, watching television I didn't want to watch, while on the floor little boys played all kinds of games which involved killing with armless action men, guns and tanks.

A man comes out of the green caravan with a dog barking round his heels. Perhaps he will murder me? There is no one around for miles. I can see the headlines: **Young Girl Found Dead in Killing Fields**, and I fantasise about how sorry she would feel. The idea grows on me so much that by the time I am near the old man I am willing him to kill me. Perhaps he is the Yorkshire Ripper? Or the Blackberry Ripper? But he goes back into the caravan. He isn't even dirty or rude. Not even the dog barks at me. Which just goes to show: there's never a murderer when you want one.

Then it starts snowing again. My fingers are already hanging like frozen stalactites ready to snap off, but I'm happy that it's snowing. It means that before I reach the road I will be incognito; no snooping neighbour or passing acquaintance of hers will recognise me. But what if she is at home, lying in wait for me? My heart panic beats as I cross over the deserted road and crunch towards the concrete box. By the time I creep around the back I feel sick. But there is no one there except my cat, Shena, a miaowing ball of snow. This time she isn't the only one not allowed in the house. The key, usually left

under a small slab near the back door, isn't there. I try all the windows but they are shut. There are some glass venetian type windows above the other windows which open into an old conservatory area of sorts. One of them is broken and has been for a long time. It is so narrow that even Shena can't get in. However, I pull out a stick from the tiny backyard and try to remember where I've seen a piece of string. I dig about in the snow and miraculously find it. I thread the string through the end of the stick to form a loop. Then, standing on the windowsill, after much patience and many attempts, I manage to put my arm into the open pane and undo the latch of the window below it.

I don't know how I did it. I think it was sheer will power.

Once inside, I change, give Shena a cuddle and some milk, and leave. I take the public footpath that runs almost parallel to the road, and little used. It is much further this way but, at least, I can be sure no one will see me. It stops snowing and the sun comes out, making the world look like it is made of stars. It is one of those moments that I want to freeze. I often have those; moments when I want the world to stand still, to be framed forever. Photographs don't do that. It's more than a visual thing; it's a feeling.

I walk into the back entrance of the stables. The first person I see is Jill carrying a rake out of a box. She is bigger than I am and even though she is a year younger she looks as old as me.

'Hiya skiva!' she calls, standing outside the box. 'What the hell's happened? I saw that bitch storming round looking for you on Friday. Then you weren't here all weekend.'

'Oh Jill. I am in such deep deep shit.'

'Tell me. I'm all sympathy, you poor bastard.'

I tell Jill what has been going on.

Jill is the one my mother hates. At thirteen I suppose adults think she is pretty mouthy. She doesn't give a shit what she says to people. If she doesn't like something, she'll say so. Unlike adults who say one thing and think another. Her parents are separated as well. I've only met her mother once - she's half Chinese apparently. Jill lives with her dad who lets her do anything, including bunk off school, and he is always there for her, pays for her horse and lessons. She's lucky. She is a great rider as well. As I tell her my story her slit eyes widen.

'What you need is a fag init,' she offers. 'What about the show tonight?'

'I'm going,' I say. 'No matter what.'

We laugh and go into the tack room. There are a few AI students in there keeping warm by the kerosene heater. As trainee instructors they won't normally talk to me as I am so much younger, but now I've been made infamous by my mother, who'd marched through the yard interrogating anyone she could find as to my whereabouts, they're all dying to know what I've done. Although when I tell them they are sympathetic, they don't seem to really comprehend the serious nature of it all.

'Going to school's not everything,' one of them, Carole, tries to console me. 'I hardly ever went.'

But this is about much more than that.

'It's about growing up,' she says. 'You'll laugh about it one day.'

I doubt it.

The tack room is warm and dark. I immerse myself in the sweet aroma of saddle soap and leather. For a few hours I am very happy. One of the students comes in and throws a snowball. It doesn't hit anyone but everyone scrambles outside to fight snow wars. Twenty people and five dogs join in the battle. There are no victors and dripping wet and aching with laughter, we go to sit in the students' flat in front of the fire. The flat is filthy. In fact, the horses' stables are cleaner, but I wish I could stay there forever.

'So you girls gonna win something tonight?' Carole asks.

'Course *I* am,' Jill replies, screwing her nose up at me as if to say I don't stand a chance.

'I saw an interview with you in *People & Ponies*, a few months ago,' Carole says to me.

Jill laughs. So do I. It is kind of embarrassing.

'What? Why you laughing? Jill, you're just jealous.'

'No it's a laugh init? Winning a pony for making up a fucking name of a horse feed! I mean what a laugh.'

'Do you want a career in horses?'

Jill laughs again. I know it's the word 'career' that does it.

I nod.

'She's gonna breed flying horses ain't you, Trish?'

I somehow doubt that as well.

Before it gets dark I collect an almost white Pegasus from the field. His New Zealand rug is around his fetlocks and he looks very pleased with himself. I tell him off, rearrange the rug, take him back to the stables and put him in a stall. Then I try to clean

him up as best I can and leave him with some hay to munch on. It's time to go back. I need to be at the house before they come back from work. Before I leave, Pegasus gives me a big, sloppy kiss.

'Hope they don't brick you up again,' Jill says.

I run home the way I came. Shena is miaowing outside the door and I decide to let her into the back, give her some more milk and cat food. Then I rush upstairs, wash and change into my white jodhpurs and blue jacket and begin the nervous wait. The worst case scenario is if the school has contacted her to say that I hadn't been there today either.

The car pulls into the drive, the doors slam and footsteps come towards the house. Shortly followed by, 'How did that fucking cat get in here?' and 'How did you fucking get in here?'

'The window was left...' I try to explain.

'And more to the point, where the hell do you think you're going?'

'It's the show this evening. You know I've been planning this for weeks.'

'It's also a school night *Beertrice*,' my mother says.

'Shut up. I'll deal with this,' Dave says, walking past me into the lounge, taking his blue jacket off.

'Now just bloody well listen, young lady, you've caused your mother enough harm with your insolent behaviour...'

That was a big word for him.

'... and we've both decided to give you a month's trial, during which time you'll not be allowed out and certainly not to ride that bloody horse and you must get satisfactory school reports ...'

I scream. I scream so loudly even he shuts up.

'How dare you? You can run my mother's life, but you're not fucking running mine.'

He takes a couple of steps towards me. I don't move but I see his hand come closer. You dare, you dare and I'll kill you, I find myself thinking furiously. A resounding thump hits me in the face. In a tiny fraction of a second a thousand responses flash before me and yet I do nothing. My face is on fire.

'Dave...' my mother begins. Her voice is high-pitched, scared.

'Shutit.'

I turn and look at her, plead with her. But maybe she doesn't see me.

'Get out of my house,' he says.

‘With great pleasure.’ I pick up my bag and leave, promising myself that he will regret this for the rest of his life.