

Area 25

by

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ABSTRACT

Area 25 is a novel written in British English, following six months in the lives of three teenaged girls and one young woman who live in the fictional town of Morvale, in the south east of England. Set fifteen years after the 7/7 London tube bombings of 2005, the narrative is told in first person character chapters after a teenaged boy is murdered in the local park on the anniversary of 7/7. British slang and speech styles of working class people in the south east of England are used throughout. Each character has one chapter for each month of the novel.

The 'Area 25' of the title relates to an area of the brain which research in the 2000s linked to depression. The fictional drug DNaTeen, which Heather takes for depression after becoming paranoid about the murder, is described by the manufacturers as working with the patient's DNA and Area 25 of the brain. Intended as a YA cross-over novel, Area 25 explores themes of pharmacogenetics and mental health, ephebophilia, friendship, sexuality, and cultural fear of terrorism.

1. July

ZOE

That Neon kid got stabbed on 7/7 and I was there. Not the 7/7, but it was the 15 year anniversary. Some people say it's nothing to do with that, but they weren't there, they're outside and don't understand our little Morvale micro-climate. There's theories about what he did, this kid. The most popular one is that he sprayed over a Pure propaganda poster with his Neon tag - a peace sign in bright pink with the gaps filled in purple, and his street name underneath - Much Love. They might be vandals, but they brighten the place up. The Pures, the little teenage ones who roam about terrorizing people, weren't even born then, 2005, some of them. But hatred can run in the blood easily enough.

His name was Danny, the kid, the one who got stabbed. I didn't know that until I heard people shouting it out, but I knew his face from 'around' I think. But it's hard to tell after you've seen someone's face in the newspapers and on posters and the internet a hundred times, innit? Did I already know his face or did I just think that? The papers didn't use his name at first. I didn't know he was a Neon then either - but the Pures always seem to know who is. Horrible bastards they are.

People seem to remember where they were when they heard about the bombings in London. They remember that, and 9/11 and where they were when Princess Di died, and different parts of different wars.

My mum heard it on the radio at work. She was working part-time at a call centre then, answering phones for a catalogue. One of those ones where you can pay off a pair of trainers for 2 quid a week for the rest of your life. They all stopped mid pitch, trying to up-sell the latest perfume, obliged to get through the whole spiel in their recorded call. Yes, Mrs. Lazarus, I know you've already ordered the Jennifer perfume, but that's why we think you'd *really* enjoy the new Susan scent... And then there was a break in the top 40 playlist of the local radio station. A newsflash.

She said that used to drive her mad, listening to that commercial radio station all day. Worse than the phone calls themselves. This crappy little black plastic radio, so old it had a cassette player and huge aerial sticking out at the top, and a space for four gigantic batteries in the back. Pushing them in was a mission in itself - she said they sprung out at least five times before you could get the cover on. I like hearing about old things, the feel and heft of these huge devices. Sometimes she wanted to just break the damn thing.

Her first thoughts were of her friends in London. She got out her phone and started texting in a panic. Mum's friend Peter took three hours to get back to her - those were long hours I reckon. Nothing worse than not knowing.

That whole day, 7/7 as it became known, forced a sick dread into the stomachs of a lot of people. Some in loss, some fear, some hate. I was very little, but I can remember this clip they kept showing on the TV. Or maybe I just think I remember it - it's not like I haven't seen it again since over and over. Some guy recorded it on his phone, from down there in the tunnel. Smoke, screaming, darkness lit by some kind of night vision function. Darkness and blood, although I didn't see the blood, just knew it was there. Death and bones. They tried to file out in the thick smoke, probably gagged by the smell of it, of dirt and burning. I imagine the horror of body parts and shock. I can't help where my mind goes after a history class. It runs and runs. Three tube bombs and one bus. Those good old London buses with the school kids eating fried chicken and chips, five different songs playing at once on mobile phones, newspapers, elbows, Ears, Eyes, and Teeth. Texting and chattering and ignoring everyone else, eyes front. The morning crush when everybody touches another body and arms and hands get strained hanging on to rails. People perched on the luggage space like

canaries. All the varieties of Lynx body spray merge into one eye-watering, stinging mist of high school boy scent, filling the noses and backs of throats of everyone and lingering on the tip of one lucky girl's tongue.

Where were you? I was probably dancing in my nappy to one of mum's Bob Marley albums, dad holding my chubby little hands. Or maybe he was at work and I was at playschool. Their whiteness, the whiteness of my hands, my skin I mean, didn't seem like anything then. Already the beginnings of groups were forming. Fear flowing coolly through those 'Pure' veins. Pure White British. Suspicions like a bug in a sealed room - how did it crawl in? *I thought you closed the window, darling. No, I thought you had.* I wonder how life would be if it never happened, if all the bombs had failed. But that is as futile as wondering why I was born. Something else would have happened instead, innit.

Fifteen years later me and my sister, Lucy, we were sitting on the hill in the park sunbathing. Lucy was reading a book about physics and listening to her Ears. Lolita sunglasses on, lying on the grass on her back, holding this actual print book up to block out the sun. She was wearing a bikini top and shorts, which would make sense if we lived anywhere other than England. A glance out the window that morning suggested heat, glory, and a summer holiday to be

cherished. The reality was that every couple of minutes the sun was behind a cloud, the wind would blow and I'd have to put my hoodie back on. July. Still, it's better than January. I was resting on my elbows, watching a group of kids scuffle way over by the swings. Mesmerising dance of ants, but it was starting to look a bit nasty. Like a beetle might be about to walk in and kill a few workers.

'Put some lotion on my stomach, will you?' said Lucy, lazily sliding the bottle across the grass in my direction using the back of her hand. She didn't look like she wanted to move, so I squeezed a great blob of the stuff on her tummy without warning. She gasped.

'Fuck, that's cold! Slag.' She smirked at me. I started rubbing it over her ridiculously pale skin. She really should use some fake tan. My back was turned away from the scuttling kids and I became absorbed in moving my hands in circles over her stomach. She lifted her sunglasses to squint and peek at me. I started on her legs too. Nothing worse than sunburnt shins.

'There's absolutely no reason why you couldn't do this yourself.' I said, teasing, because I didn't really mind.

'And yet you did it anyway. Innnnteresting.'

Fucker. I stuck my tongue out at her and started tickling her. The lotion wasn't all rubbed in, I'd used far too much,

and as she wriggled and shrieked grass was sticking to her. She threw the book down to retaliate with full force. We didn't carry on for long, there was no real intent. I put my hands up to show I was finished and she poked me in the side with one finger, biting her lip. I offered her a cigarette and she put it between her full-on pouters lips, screwing up her face to focus in on the flame of the lighter, cupping a hand round the end of the cig to fend off the stupid July wind. Even with her face screwed up she looked like a magazine model. The kind you have to look at for ages, because you don't really know how they got in to modelling in the first place, but there's definitely something about them. Something weird and magnetic, a little bit wonky and unusual. We both lay down and enjoyed two and a half minutes of actual sunshine and warmth before the wind started up again.

And then I heard a lot of shouting. I sat up and looked over at the brawling kids. No beetles, but some hard looking bastard in a tracksuit was gearing up to do some damage to a smaller Asian guy who was dressed like some kind of skater-goth-emo cocktail. They looked about fifteen. A minor tracksuit girl, straggler at the back, caught me looking and sneered. The boy who was about to get decked had black shaggy hair over his eyes with a little streak of purple in

it. He looked scared. He stood out and I realised there were a lot more of the hard looking tracksuit bastards than there were skater-goth-emo mates. He turned to walk away, shouting, angry and arms flailing. Then he fell to the floor and I heard a thud, and I thought they'd punched him.

'Shit,' said Lucy, suddenly perking up. 'Shit, shit. Let's go.'

'What? Why? We haven't done anything. I'm watching.' Then I realised he hadn't been punched. People were freaking out, his mates were crouched over him, the tracksuit bastards were running away, someone was screaming. Screaming out 'Danny, Danny!' The tracksuit girl looked back but didn't look at me this time. I don't think she knew that was going to happen. He must have been stabbed, the way they were around him like he was dead or dying. Lucy picked up all our shit lightning quick and flung it in her bag, pulling me up roughly by the arm and started running away. I followed, not really knowing why, just that it was horrible and we shouldn't have seen it. They were just there and then... it was so quick. Looked like ordinary kids having a scrap.

We kept legging it. I saw that woman with cool red hair who works in the library. She's quite fit. She was walking

the other way, texting or doing something with her phone, and looked a bit flustered when we came charging past her.

'Oy!' she said, but smiling with it, and I shouted out a mumbly sorry and then we were well gone. We didn't stop until we got home, even when we got to the front door Lucy was scrabbling for her door key like we were being chased. A siren blared in the distance. I hadn't even thought to call an ambulance, but someone else evidently had. Or the police, I can't tell the difference. We fell in to the house and ran up the stairs, straight to my room, and we both sat on the bed trying to make sense of what just happened. We didn't say anything for a couple of minutes, getting our breath back, feeling shaky and wired. I wondered if he was dead. Wondered if I should have stayed to help, if that would have been stupid and made me a target. I felt a pull like I should go back to see if it really happened. I felt guilty for running away like a stupid child.

'We shouldn't have run, what if someone saw us? Fuck. Bollocks. Was he dead? Was he dead?'

She turned to look at me, fiddling with a bracelet from the bedside table, me at the end of bed.

'Do you really want to be a witness to a fucking gang murder?' Which was all she needed to say on the matter. She was right. Things are bad enough round here. That track suit

girl won't remember me. Lucy doesn't know we were clocked I don't think. She had her eyes closed. And we were quite far away. It'll be alright. He'll be alright.

Lucy looked like she was about to lose it though, staring at the floor, hands gripping the bed sheets. She lay down on the bed and I joined her. We lay there for ages holding hands, fingers laced, her stroking in circles with her thumb, chilling me out, slowing my heart until my phone buzzed and broke the spell. It was the first texts that afternoon asking me if I'd heard about what happened in the park. It was all over the estate. We agreed we wouldn't say we'd seen anything. It would be easier that way.

HEATHER

Making lists is a really nice feeling. Especially when you turn on your Eyes and the first thing you read in the local news is that a boy, about your age, was stabbed to death. Wicked, just wicked. Not that I was panicking or anything. On school days a to-do list used to look like this:

- 6am get up, bath, dress, dry hair.
- 6.45am sit ups, bike ride.
- 7.20am breakfast, read news.
- 8am check bag, take lunch from fridge.
- 8.45am school
- 3.15 cross country club (or netball practice, or hockey)
- tidy room
- dinner
- homework
- read
- make lunch
- pack bag for school
- 10pm bed

And then I'd tick off each thing when it's done. Sometimes they'd be more detailed, listing the full components of

tidying my room (clean desk, arrange furniture, put clothes in the wash, Hoover, disinfect desk drawer handles) or the exact food that would be eaten at each meal. If I'm feeling particularly stressed the calorie count and nutritional content may also be listed, so I can feel 100% certain I'm eating properly. These lists were compiled before bed so that I knew what I'd be doing the next day. Sometimes I'd get up lots of times in the night to check the list, or add things. Lists get things done. Lists are wicked.

When it got closer to my GCSEs there was lots of revision on there and later bed times. Sometimes I have two baths, one in the morning and one after *Hollyoaks*. I know a lot about health from PE, and food tech. I just don't feel like my hair is really clean sometimes. If I stick to what's on the list I can make it through the day, no matter what anyone says, or doesn't say, to me.

I usually get As in everything at school, except Physics which I don't really understand yet. But I will. I recorded myself reading parts of the text book and I listen to them over and over again on my Ears until I can recite whole pages. I have a pretty good memory, especially for films and their years and directors, the bones in the body, and phone numbers.

It was Marmite on brown bread and a glass of orange juice for my breakfast this morning, which I ate whilst watching the local news and fending off Buffy's swiping paws. She wants the crusts and doesn't like waiting for me to finish, mewling pitifully and with diligence. I like this time of day, because no one else is up and it's very still outside. You might have noticed that there is a forty-five minute gap between me picking up my school bag and the start of school. I live a five minute walk from Morvale High School, but if I leave at 8, when it's still quiet, then I can avoid getting stones thrown at my head. Which is a much better way to start the day.

But now a blank page in my to-do list notepad - the summer holidays. This year is different from every previous summer holiday because there will be exam results. Everyone seemed so happy about the end of compulsory school. Six weeks of getting drunk, hanging about in town. I could do that. Maybe me and Lucy. Yeah, right. I've never been drunk in my life.

If you're not going on to sixth form then it's much longer than six weeks. It's whatever you want then. It's a job and moving in with your boyfriend, like the girls who work at Somerfields down the road. We share a mutual hatred - them of me, me of them, and they snarl at me as though

we're still in the dinner hall and as if it matters now that they won't be coming back to school ever again. Julie's already on nicotine patches from the doctor. She's not even old enough to buy cigarettes. How very grown up. Me, I've never tried a cigarette because of those pictures of what it does to your insides. I had a recurring nightmare about that for two weeks a little while back and wondered if my subconscious was trying to tell me I had lung cancer.

I don't like going in that Somerfields much, but it's closer than going in to town. I don't like them knowing what I buy, my shampoos and diet cola and acne facewash. I know they think I'm hideous. They have lines in their faces and layers of make-up and bleached hair. Danielle who works there has a face like a bulldog, but somehow she's shagged loads of boys. And older men. I want to say dogs are a man's best friend, but I shouldn't be so nasty however much I hate them.

The teachers and my parents have been talking about Oxford and Cambridge already, they seem to think I could do that with even more hard work. Someone like Lucy, she could just do it. Someone like me has to spend every waking second on it. I haven't even passed my GCSEs yet. Might not for all they know. I might get stabbed up in the park first for wearing the wrong clothes or having the wrong skin. I'm

convinced I fluffed Maths, and Physics. I'll never be good enough for Oxford. I don't even know how to put make-up on properly. When I was revising I applied pressure to myself as though I might bleed to death if I stopped. I don't want to let anyone down, especially not dad. I'm clever, which sounds arrogant. I'm not better than anyone else. I just want to be less awful than I am. All those magazines for teenaged girls tell me it will get better, and then tell me how to be someone else on the very next page.

I used to like pop music, I listened to the charts every Sunday and knew the words to all the top ten songs. Every Christmas and birthday mum and dad would buy me songs from the top ten. My bedroom walls were covered in posters from pop magazines. Mum let me have her tapes of the Spice Girls and an old cassette walkman which I didn't dare take out of the house in case anyone saw me. It used four AA batteries and had big foam covered red headphones, but I used my own earbuds. When the batteries wore out it started going slower and slower until Mel C sounded like a man with a speech impediment. I downloaded her songs after that, they sounded better. I'd be crucified if people at school knew about it.

Then Lucy gave me this old CD by a band called Skunk Anansie. She was appalled that I still liked 'pop'. She

muttered something about 'corporate puppets' or it might have been muppets, and then went home without even saying goodbye. She came back forty-five minutes later with the Skunk Anansie disc. I watched their videos online. Skin was like a bomb going off in my head and it was like all the Christina's and Joanna's and diva pop girls were blown away. 'Charlie Big Potato' made the hair on my arms stand straight up the first time I heard it. Had I just been deaf to this kind of music before? I don't think I'd have understood it until the day Lucy gave it to me anyway. Maybe because it came from her. And I couldn't believe it was old from the 90s, same as the Spice Girls. How could two things so different exist at the same time? It was just too wicked.

She'd had really puffy eyes the day she went home for that CD like she'd stayed up all night crying, but insisted it was just allergies. Lucy looked like that a lot, so I always tried to cheer her up and invited her round a lot. She refused to talk to me about the stabbing and said I shouldn't worry about it all so much. She's so smart, in a different way to me. She knows how to do her hair nice, and her make-up and she reads really weird looking books. And understands physics. And now I know what she listens to. When she started painting her nails black I asked her to do mine too. She let me have the rest of the bottle. All it

took was black nails to add 'Emo' and 'Neon' to the bullies repertoire of insults. I didn't even really know what an Emo was, but apparently Danny was one. Mum says it's like what they called grungers and greebos in her day, people who listen to heavy music. I felt like I didn't want to be aligned with any group though after the stabbing, and didn't paint my nails black again for another six weeks.

KAREN

When my girls aren't here I'm lonely and I just can't freeze-wrap them, doesn't work like that. That which first impresses them never changes, never, but *they* change. It's a formula, a pattern. They grow up and wonder and worship, or what I offer disintegrates under the weight of their own self knowledge. I wish I could trap them as they are, but that wouldn't be fair. Pretty bugs in jars flying round in circles. But the cusp of blooming does indeed imply a full bloom on the horizon. I can't change that. I've been thinking about Nick again lately, because that boy who got stabbed was only 14 or 15, and Nick was alternative too just like this one.

It started when I was seventeen, so then it wasn't too much of an issue. A few jibes but nothing insane. I went to Morvale High School. Me in Year 12, him - well, he looked that much older. Yes, him, not her. I wasn't sure enough then and he was nice. I knew he was younger, purely by the uniform, but I just assumed he was Year 11. It was only when a concerned teacher asked if the rumour about me going out with a Year 9 was true that I twigged. I confronted him after he gave me a Slipknot album. I felt horrible, especially since he'd given me a present. Nick. He was slim, hard bodied, much taller than I expected a fourteen-year-old

to be. His hair gel smelt cheap. The Neon was really a big thing then, so it was cool that he painted his nails black, and wore the same faux-goth crap from Camden that we all coveted. He bought me a long metal chain for my keys, ridiculously oversized, but I loved the heft of it hanging from my jeans. Sorted. I gave it away some years later to a wannabe gothic girl I got to know. Pures was a concept that was only just emerging round here then, a couple of years after 7/7 and I didn't really think about it much. I mean we knew about BNP and all that, and it didn't look very organized. He wasn't one of course - wouldn't have been with me if he was, but there's always this suspicion now if you've got blue eyes and light skin. You're either one thing or another until proven otherwise. One of those eternally flip-flopping hatreds depending on the fashion of the day. One thing I remember more than the blue eyes, and the cheap hair gel, was his scent. It wasn't exactly his flesh, but I was smitten by it whatever it was. Maybe it was the hair dye, or the generic Body Shop aftershave. His hug was firm, a teddy bear squeeze, his kiss grotesque and wet, but I liked him, even though boys weren't really my first love. I met him on the stairs in Gordon Block one day when I got to school a bit early and he was hanging out on his own with his headphones in.

Because he was just a boy his pecs were firm, but flat. Not full of the swell of protein and the weight bench. Just nice. I know, I know, what will I do when I'm fifty, right? I get away with it for now. I go for girls sixteen and seventeen to start with. It's certainly not the worst anyone's done. I mean, it can be hard to tell though. What's the different between fifteen and sixteen? What I'd like is to keep one though. Maybe we could get past it together. She could turn nineteen and we'd celebrate together. Like adults. I'd buy her a cake and promise I'd stay forever and the older we get the less it would matter. I could wank over Lolita while she's out, and keep myself alive like that. No one wants to be alone. I can't keep repeating the cycle. They're like fresh chicken breasts, the way they look before you cook them - clean, fresh, and tender to touch. And their bums are just firm. It's like a peach that's not quite ripe, but almost. Almost. You can't beat that.

Love is a doing word, so the song goes, and they feel love when it's like that because its so much more than they ever expected. However uncomfortable this is, I know that you know what I'm talking about. Oh shut up, you 'don't know'. Save it. When you're at the train station and can't quite tell how old that fit girl is. If she's sixteen then you're just peachy as a plum, except of course it doesn't

feel that way at all. It feels wrong, and you want it. You might shuffle uncomfortably and glance sideways and suddenly you're imagining her with no clothes on, bent over your bed. You keep her in your head for a week, without knowing her name. Sometimes she was Annabelle, but then you changed it to Rebecca. Then she was gone. Nick was where it started because his pliability astounded me. He was smart enough to fool me into giving him two extra years of in my mind. I didn't have sex with Nick, I was still a virgin and he was too sweet. And I'd have been in trouble. I dumped him horribly by kissing an older boy in front of him at an underage disco. I feel a bit bad about that, even now.

LUCY

Real Neons don't wear Neon. They don't want you to see them,
only the messages they send.

2. August

ZOE

Slamming doors are a familiar sound in our house. People are so angry all the time, it makes me wonder why I don't hear the sounds of doors slamming twenty-four hours a day. Bang bang bang, constantly like the bassline you hear pumping out of the cars of rude-boys driving at a million miles an hour. Nothing worse than doors slamming. The reason, I suppose, that I can sit here now and hear little else but the birds singing is that humans have come up with more efficient ways of displaying and releasing their anger, like riots, and murder. The Great Door Slamming of '92 did not put an end to world hunger. The Busted Hinge in '18 did not make dad any warmer to the idea of Lucy going camping that summer with friends and no adults. In dad's twisted mentality it's okay for him to ignore us and let us run wild ninety percent of the time. But when we decide in that other ten per cent that we'll let him know where we're going so he won't worry, say if we've all been getting on okay for a few days and think it justified to look after each other, he flips.

Since mum left Dad just deteriorated. There was an awful mess at first when she left. Police officers, suspicions within the family although I wasn't told what, just felt it. Eventually the police went away. Some of the

family put up missing person posters. They searched. Perhaps a few of them are still searching. But the ones who aren't came to the conclusion that she was always a bit of a wild one and if you looked at it closely maybe it wasn't so strange. People came to see us, the Social. Dad's drinking let up then for quite a while, and he was a good dad then. He was broken inside, that much was clear, but he was trying. Eventually the Social were satisfied too, and like the police they stopped coming to the house. And then it was gradual, he started slipping back. He wouldn't speak for what felt like ages. I'd get Lucy ready for school and make our lunches, make dad get up and have his breakfast in the morning. Send him to work with a packed lunch, like a miniature version of mum. I knew that if he didn't go to work things would get worse. Dad was an accountant. A logical, sensible accountant. Sometimes I felt so sorry for him. He was my dad and I loved him. He'd lost his wife and been left alone with two children. Those times I looked after him.

When I was angry with him, when I didn't have the right things for school and he couldn't get his act together to take us shopping for uniforms and I'd get bullied and called a tramp in my worn out blazer with the sleeves half way up my arms (despite the fact most of the kids were no better)-

then I wouldn't want to. I wouldn't want to cook and clean and be mum, and pack him off in the morning to work, and eventually come to put whiskey in his tea so he could get up in the morning. Things you do out of love and duty. No, then I'd let things go. A few times I didn't get him up for work and he was hours late. His drinking became twice as bad at those times because he got in trouble for being late and that was my fault. And then he'd shout at me when he got home and wouldn't have bought any shopping for me to make tea.

August is better than July, because you might actually get a *whole day* of sunshine. But rarely more than two in a row. Hot days on the estate bring the people out. The sun teases them out of their semi-detached identical houses like tweezers pulling a splinter free of its infected fleshy home. Slowly they venture out, not sure if it's just an illusion. It may *look nice* beyond the window, but this is England. We sit on our steps drinking tea and smoking fags. The same local radio station can be heard blaring from every window, the same generically manufactured cheery summer hits. The one hit wonders you hoped would never find their

way into your mind again are suddenly revived as radio-wave zombies on those sunny days, lurching back to life in another attempt to eat your brains. Up in the high rise blocks, which I can see from my bedroom window, some of the inhabitants are buzzing on the walkways. Bees trapped in a jar. They seem to want to enjoy the weather but spend more time discussing it in the shaded areas outside their front doors than sitting in it. The more ambitious, the council block butterflies, flit towards the recreation ground.

I joined Lucy on the front step, where she sat mournfully watching the sudden and rare activity in the street. How different it looks bathed in gorgeous light and warmth. The boys look less menacing in just shorts and trainers rather than the hoodies and caps and baggy jogging pants they tend to wear round here in cooler weather. She's pissed off because some turd of a boy called Gary, who promised to take her out today, texted with flimsy excuses.

'Probably gone out with his mates instead. It's not fair, he sees them all the time,' she says in such a sulky tone that it reminds me of her throwing tantrums when she was five. I put an arm round her and she tenses up.

I half expected her to get up, stomp her foot loudly on the ground and go back inside. But she didn't, she just sat there with her head in her hands looking at the chavvy boys

playing football in a green space across the road. They noticed me and stopped kicking the ball to say something and laugh, looking over at us. Lucy thinks they are laughing at her, but I know differently. These boys know about me from the rumour mill. Sometimes other people know things about you before you even know it yourself. I've had 'lezza' and 'dyke' shouted at me since I was thirteen years old, four years now. I'm not sure if I *am* a lezza, or a dyke, or bisexual, or a freak, or normal. Or none of those things. But I know I'm attracted to women. My art teacher, Miss Green, said to me after I'd sat sullenly holding back tears for the whole hour of class, one particularly bad day, that some things just shine out of some people. She said that shining a light that others can see isn't always such a bad thing, better than living in the shadow of your secrets. She didn't use words like dyke or queer but I knew what she was saying to me. The kids bullied her, too. Her own self-loathing was what shone out of her, they could see it. And I'm pretty sure she stole that line from *Queer As Folk* too, so I did wonder about her.

Lucy and her boyfriends. A different one each week, or so it felt. And it's always me she comes crying to. Nothing worse than seeing her cry. Me and my non-existent girlfriends. We made a sad pair out there on the step. I'd

be joining the butterflies in the park if I had someone else to go with. I don't get along with many people around here. I've never fit in and I can't say I mind any more. Mass hysteria isn't my thing.

'Want to go to the park for a while with me?' I ask, expecting to be told to get lost. Since the stabbing last month we've not exactly been feeling up for it. She thought about it, sniffing and wiping her eyes with her hand.

'Ok.'

'Oh, cool.' I was surprised, but pleased to have the company. We went inside and she collected a book and Ear speakers.

It was a Friday, the last Friday of that August. We spent the afternoon reading and enjoying the sunshine, and weren't bothered by anyone at the park. No tracksuit skank girls or boys getting stabbed. We didn't say much, it was just... nice. She held my hand with her free one, the other holding up a smoky smelling volume of poetry. We lay down and shuffled closer and closer to each other, until we were sort of cuddled up, both in our own little worlds. But then I realised I was actually stuck to her from the heat and I had to peel myself off, and she turned away without seeing anything. It was just a nice chilled out afternoon.

That was all shattered when we got home. Dad had been drinking at the local pub all afternoon. It wasn't even time for dinner yet and he was steaming. Nothing unusual there though.

And that evening I was really irritated because dad ruined a nice day and Lucy promptly ignored me when we got home, turning cold the second we got upstairs. I lay on my bed wanting to sleep even though it was early. It's like every noise was piercing my brain with a sharp spike of annoyance. How can anyone sleep in this? Dad was drunk downstairs, watching some Leonard Cohen concert on BBC4, and Lucy was talking loudly on her mobile to some friend called Heather, about the corruption of the welfare system. Throwing my book, or rather Lucy's smelling old dead-tree book which I thought I'd try, at the wall I stormed out of my room, picked up my keys and headed for the front door. I picked up a hoodie to throw over my pyjama top and rubbish track pants that I only wear in bed. Dad didn't notice me slam it as I walked out into the night and down to the river to smoke and brood. The night was warm and comforting, sounds in the outside world not irritating me in the

slightest compared to the crap coming from the house. I knew it wasn't really their noise I resented that evening, it was them. Dad and his drink and his ways. Lucy's seeming ability to carry on as though dad did not exist and as though mum had never existed at all. Where is she tonight, I wondered. I walk through the streets that lead to the riverside, past houses with parties in their back gardens and a feeling of calm in the air. I just needed to relax, and think.

The bench I always head for at this time of night was occupied. I could make out a small figure with short, bright red hair which shone in the street-lamps orange light. It was a woman, hunched up with her arms hugging her legs and her head on her knees. She was shivering a bit and crying. I couldn't decide whether to go closer and sit down or just quietly walk away. I didn't think I needed this right now.

I needed to know if she was okay. I sat down. Then I realised it was the woman from the library

'Are you okay?' I asked, wanting to put an arm around her but knowing it might be met with revulsion or anger.

'Yeah... Hi... I just... sometimes come here to think and get away. Sometimes I think about it all too much,' she said between gulps of air and an attempt to right herself from the crying.

'Yeah,' I knew she probably just meant life. It was the same reason I was here. To look at the water in some peace and get away from my problems. Except I always brought them with me for company of course. 'I've seen you around. On your bike and... the hair and stuff.'

Great line Zoe. *The hair and stuff*. Smooth moves my friend. Stupid stupid stupid. My heartbeat quickened with embarrassment. I wished I didn't fancy her so much. It was making me idiotic. We were facing away from the light, and she was looking at the water from her heads perch between her knees, so my blush never existed. Small mercies.

'Yeah, I see you walking to school sometimes,' she replied absently. 'And you and your sister ran nearly knocked me over running around, remember?'

'Oh, er no, sorry.' Of course I remembered, I was fleeing a crime scene.

School. She mentioned school. So she thought of me as a child. How. Em. Barassing.

'It's sixth form college, not school' I corrected, then after a pause said 'So, did you er... want to talk about it? Want a fag?'

I rummaged my pockets to get the battered pack of menthols out and the blue plastic lighter. I love menthols. Not many people seem to, but I do. They feel cold at your

lips and warm at the tip. The kind of dumb juxtaposition I enjoy, in my adolescent attempts to find the contrasts between senses and feelings. I learnt that word in English Lit, 'juxtaposition'. It's a current favourite.

School. It stung. Lucy was at school, Lucy with her stupid boys and tantrums, her perfect hair and immaturity. Although she'd be in sixth form with me in a few days time. I was surely ahead of her, in a different category. I didn't want to be seen with the children, I wanted to stand alone and mature. I'm a serious *person*.

Karen Jones accepted a cigarette. She always dressed in a way that didn't seem to fit the person I thought she might be, but yet she pulled it off. That night she was wearing a thin Marvel Comics hooded jacket, mostly coloured blue and with the words **WHAM!** and **BOOM** and **AARRGGHH!!!** on it in a repeating pattern over squares of comic strip art. This same kind of jacket had been this year's fashion among hoodie-chavs, except they wore poorly printed fakes in grey and black. Karen's was authentic. She probably reads graphic novels and watches Japanese films. I doubted those chavvy boys and Pure arseholes who menaced me from their street corner could even read. Her jeans were a baggy 'boy fit', and she had Dunlop green flash trainers, the lace-up kind. Very retro-cool. Combined with the piercings (six in each

ear, one in her right cheek and a hoop through the left side of her lip. I already knew that from counting them at the library) she just couldn't have looked any cooler. She also looked like she hadn't tried, which was the overall allure of the whole thing, and also the source of annoyance and envy it bought me.

Look at me, judging. But yet I can't stop despising the chavs on the corner any more than they can stop despising me, I suppose. I scolded myself mentally. School child. The school child waved its plastic lighter under Karen's fag while she sucked on it and it came to life.

'What's your name?'

'Zoe. You?'

'Karen.'

I already knew that, she wears a name badge at work. We shook hands and smoked quietly for a while, looking out at the water. Her skin was so soft and she had a nice grip. Not too hard but not all feeble either. I wanted to say something meaningful, help with the tears. Her hand on mine had been sheer delight, it felt warm despite the fact that she shivered from time to time in the cooling air of the night. Perhaps I should offer her my hoodie. But if she said no I'd be even more embarrassed. I kept sneaking sideways looks at her marvellous hair. Such a colour! The orange

light gave it a different hue, but it was still awesome. My own hair had been many colours, but not bright like that. Dark purple or black, sometimes just a very dark brown. I loved it. I should dye my own hair green in appreciation of Karen's wild mane. Hair envy, or possibly just ridiculous infatuation, even though I knew little more than her name. But a name meant I could say 'Hi, Karen,' when she cycled past me from this day on. A small step, but it was good to think of in that moment.

And then a dreaded question emerged from her luscious lips. They weren't pouty like Lucy's, but they were still good.

'How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?' She looked like she really, really wanted to know. All hopes of a meaningful exchange were cut down by those poisoned words. Bugger. I paused. I delayed. Which probably made it worse.

'Seventeen.' It was out. Cursed number, illegal number. Child's number. I hate my life. She gazed off into whatever it was she could see in her mind on the water and said nothing.

Then, 'Cool.'

Not the reaction I was expecting. I thought she might make some joke out of it. Relief flooded through me and caused me to blush unseen again.

'What about you?' hoping this wasn't offensive. The answer didn't really matter to me, but I felt it was only polite to ask, seeing as she'd asked me. Although maybe she only asked me to reassure herself she wasn't about to befriend a child. Child. I'm not a child.

'Thirty' and she laughed. I wasn't sure what was funny, but I felt inferior anyway. 'Yep, fucking thirty and I don't know what I'm doing. You just try and get by, when you should be living. And then you worry about the fact you're not living and it stops you from truly living. And it just slides by and you get older and the things you want get further away. What a crock.'

'Ha!'

I was laughing at the word 'crock' more than the statement, because really it was as true as it was sad. Crock. A tiny peculiarity and already it made me feel like bursting with infatuated love for her. And as soon as I felt that, I felt immediately another love and a stinging guilt. Lucy was at home, and dad was drunk. But I've got to be me sometimes. I felt courage creep up on me.

'Do you wanna, like, go for a walk? Chat? You seem like you could use it,' I ventured, ever braver in my resolution to break out of bad habits.

She hesitated and looked at me like I was a bad habit, but stood up, brushing fag ash off the Marvel jacket and gave her face a wipe with her hands. She drew a deep breathe and that seemed to signal the end of her tears. We walked slowly and started to chat, smoking another ciggie each. We were vaguely headed towards the arcade, but I didn't fancy it. Nothing worth than flashing lights in your face when you just want to chill out. She told me she was upset because her job had needed to make budget cuts and she was one of the unlucky ones. She'd been given a month's notice. She called them bastards and tried to laugh about it, because 'life's too short', as she put it.

She said it was the library she worked at and I tried to act like I had no idea, mumbling an 'Oh, really?' in a over-enthusiastic tone. I told her about my A Levels and she seemed really interested. I avoided talking about home. I didn't mention my sister. We got right up to the arcade and I could hear the music pumping out and kids laughing and the gaudy lights suddenly lit up both our faces.

'Fancy it?' she said like it was a dare.

'Honestly, I can't face that lot in there. It's a bit gross don't you think? Shagging in corners and manky old games.'

There was an anti-immigration poster on the wall outside, sprayed over with a peace sign in green. Her agreement was nice; it was all you could do to convince people round here that Roger's was not the be all and end all. We turned around and walked back exactly the way we had come, this time in silence. It was alright though, nice. I carried on walking with her all the way to the tower blocks, which is past my house but I was in no hurry.

'Want to come in for a cuppa, or do you have to get home?' She said, indicating with her hand that she lived 'up there' somewhere. I probably should get home, I thought. But fuck it, I doubt dad would even notice, the state he was in when I left. Lucy was doing the cold routine and she had Heather to call, or whatever those two do.

'Yeah, ok.' I said, which made her smile a sweet, genuine smile. She was so welcoming. Warm. Nice to me even though I was just school kid.

'Sorted.' Another old fashioned curiosity word that made me smile.

Her flat was wicked. I walked in and smelt burned-out incense and scented candles. She led me through to the living room, turning on fairy lights that were attached to the wall and draped around pictures and photos. The room felt cosy and I sat down on a couch that had an elaborately

patterned throw on it, tie-dyed with things stitched onto it. Little beads and whatnots. On the wall opposite me were posters of Tank Girl and a painting of a woman in a bowler hat, posing seductively with one of her long legs up on a chair and her hand grasping the top of cane which she was leaning on for support. It was signed KJ at the bottom.

She walked into the other room and I heard the kettle being filled up and switched on. Then the sounds of keys and assorted pocket items being emptied onto a table, the rustle of a newspaper. I was nervous. I was in the too-cool-for-school amazing flat (even if it is in the high-rise) of a gorgeous woman I'd fancied for ages. Clearly she must be desperate for friends. But she can't be, not her. I felt dark then as I remembered exactly who I was. Rubbish, school child, witness, liar. I tried to push it away. I would talk to Lucy and we'd have to agree on it. Karen was rattling things in drawers and cupboards as I sat on the edge of the seat on my hands with the sick dread of *it* weighing down on me.

Dad. But she'll be alright with him. He was not good today though. She was cold, things were weird. So I walked out. At the end of this school year I'm getting out.

The water boiled and I heard it bubbling and pouring into the mugs. The clink of the teaspoon stirring and then

two taps on the side of the mug as she took it out. I thought it was just me who did that.

'Milk and sugar?' She called through.

'Milk and two sugars please,' I called back, trying not to sound as weak as I felt.

She bought the tea through as I tried to delete my memories.

'Ta.'

'Mind if I put a CD on?'

'Go for it.'

Of course she'd have CDs, being all retro-cool. Probably not a pair of Ears in sight. She put on Meds by Placebo. One of my favourites. She sat next to me and looked at me. I didn't say anything, couldn't say anything. Awkward much? She moved a bit closer. I sipped my tea and we smoked some more, just kind of both staring in to space, into our own private whatever. Life dribbling by like treacle. After a few songs and excruciating smiles and no words, I was able to make sounds again.

'I like the art. I take it you did that one, with the initials at the bottom?'

'Yeah, that's my ex, Kate.'

'It's very good, I love it.'

Thank you Jesus, I thought, she's just outted herself to me. Even so, I didn't feel like I had a chance. The air felt thick, I was a bundle of nerves. I could just kiss her or something. Brilliant idea, throw myself at this woman who was clearly a bit wrecked right then, a thirty year old woman with wonderful, lovely spiky hair.

'Do you live here by yourself then?' Not exactly a kiss. She nodded.

'Yeah, it's bloody scary though,' she laughed. 'Not quite to the mortgage stage of life at least. I kind of miss living with housemates a bit, in a way. It was a laugh, you know? But I don't miss the mess. I just thought I should try sticking it on my own. Been in this little place about a year.' She inhales some smoke, exhales. Sips the tea. 'I don't like the building but the flats aren't bad inside. I've got it all sorted how I like it.'

'I think it's very cool, I love this room. It's very... you,' I said, hoping I didn't sound like a stalker.

'Because I Want You' was the next track. I felt this horrible clichéd kind of expectation. People meet in the street and go home and fuck all the time. Why not me? People walk away from their needy alcoholic fathers and little sisters all the time. Hot thirty year old women come on to seventeen year old muppets all the time.

'Wicked, I love this one so much,' she said.

'Me too.'

She moved closer without me seeing her do it.

'Put down your tea,' she said gently. I did it without thinking. Her gaze was suddenly very powerful. It felt awkward, I had a sense of what was coming but didn't know what to do. She put her own cup down and put her arm around me. 'You're alright, aren't you.' She said in a whisper, not a question, just a statement. She put her hand to my face and forced me to look her in the eyes. 'Let's have a bit of a laugh, yeah? You like me, don't you?'

'Yeah, I... yeah, I mean. You're really cool.'

Kill me.

She kissed me, gentle at first, until I put my own arms around her and pulled her closer to me, feeling a rush as she suddenly kissed me a lot harder. I couldn't quite believe it was happening. But like I said, why not? I knew it wasn't really real, she was upset, I was just there.

Brian Molko's words in the background made me wonder again if Lucy was okay left on her own with dad and that killed it for me. I pulled away and Karen instantly looked embarrassed. Shit.

'Sorry, just a little nervous,' I said with a silly laugh. She was so beautiful in the crazy colours of the

fairy lights and she looked wounded. As 'Because I Want You' turned into 'Blind' I thought I had to forget about Lucy and dad tonight.

'Sorry. I'm silly, I thought you were giving me that vibe.' She said.

I regained my nerve and turned to kiss her again but she'd frozen up.

'I hardly know you, god, sorry,' she stuttered, and I realised I was being an idiot. 'I do this, jump in before I even though know them.' She had that far away look, and I wondered if she was thinking of the girl in the picture.

'Them?'

'People, I mean.'

But sometimes that's better. Not knowing all the shit that comes along with a person, but just knowing your idea of them, and their beautiful skin and hair. I allowed myself to move closer to her, conscious of fairy lights twinkling in the background and all the women on the walls watching us. They're just jealous. Lucy can wait.

Except, she really couldn't.

Heather

Are you aged 14 – 19? Feeling low? Living in Greater Morvale? Answer our survey, turn your life around, and get happy!

I had been feeling a bit low since the murder. My parents got all para about it, forbidding me to go anywhere and then changing their minds all the time. The survey appeared on my Eyes as I was walking into town one afternoon at the beginning of August. I was on my way to an orthodontist's appointment. Everything's rubbish round here, even my teeth. The traffic hummed warmly, busy and anonymous. The sun was shining but it didn't left my spirits. Fuck neon today. Too happy, too bright. Everything wrapped in cling film, suffocating the scum.

Please Confirm your age

I jabbed my finger at the box for 16. A tick rolled smoothly into the space, happily, even.

Answer the following based on your experiences during the last two weeks:

please indicate answer on a scale of 1 – 4:

1 – Not at all 2 – Some days 3 – Half the days 4- Everyday, or nearly every day

Have you found little pleasure in things you used to enjoy?

2. No, 3. Memorizing had lost some of its glitter, and bike rides had been non-existent. Every time I went out I just felt like someone might be out to get me, or might get killed in front of me.

Have you felt hopeless and like things wont get any better?

4. I didn't just feel it, I knew it.

Have you been feeling lethargic or lifeless?

3. Can't be bothered.

Has your sleep changed – for example sleeping too much or too little?

4. If I wasn't up worrying about the next day, I was in bed trying to forget it.

Do you feel you have let others down, or failed?

1. Everything in me was telling me to put a 4 but I can't tell if it's true or not.

Has there been a change in your appetite?

3. Despite careful calorie counting I had eaten a few extra packets of crisps. Very distressing.

Do you feel that the future is hopeless?

4. Fuck yes, every day.

Have you thought about or planned ways to end your own life?

2. I hadn't really, expect a few vague moments in the space between being awake and asleep, when I wondered how I'd like to go, and what might be better than being knifed to death in a local park.

Is it difficult to make decisions or concentrate?

3. Was it? I didn't know. Which answered the question for me. I had found myself drifting a lot, thinking about Lucy, or that boy, or the many ways I might mess up my exams and let everyone down in the end.

Do you have obsessive Thoughts or find it hard to let things go?

4. That one's a no-brainer.

I went back to the letting others down question and changed it to a 3. I hit the **Assess Answers** button.

Our initial assessment indicates that you could be suffering from: Major Depression.

DNaTeen tablets could be beneficial to your condition. Please confirm your details to book an appointment at Morvale psychiatric centre. Only a trained professional can make a diagnosis. Turn your life around.

Major Depression? Seriously, I didn't think it was that bad, but those questions... I might not get As with Major Depression. I might not get in to Oxford with Major Depression. I didn't even realise it was Major. I punched in my details and some small print scrolled across my Eyes. I decided not to obsess over reading it - like it said in the

survey, obsessive thoughts. It was true, I couldn't deny it. I should take charge of that, starting now. No more obsessing over not obsessing over obsessive thoughts. Simple.

DNaTeen (a second generation A25UI) is a part of the Lilly Ingles Pharmacogenetics Company (LIPCO), patent pending. Side effects of DNaTeen may include: dry mouth, orgasm irregularity, headaches, dizziness, glandular swelling, feeling sick to your stomach, loss of interest in sexual activity, a feeling of unreality, jumping genes, fatigue, insomnia, agitation, depression, an increased risk of thoughts of self harm, restless leg syndrome, abnormal eye movements, diarrhoea, vivid dreams, chills, muzziness, increased sensation of electrical impulses.

DNaTeen works directly with your own DNA sequence and Area 25 of the brain to help you control your depression.

Your appointment and medication will be funded by the 2019 'Happiness is Good for You' government initiative, in conjunction with national health services.

Something about headaches and the NHS. I carried on walking and thought about what it might be like not to be a loser anymore. And tried not to obsess over it.

'Now maybe you won't look so ugly, right!' barked Dr. Grunt with the toothy smile of a Rottweiler about to start gnawing on the delicious meat of a kill. Dr. Grunt is my orthodontist, who speaks as bluntly as the name implies, and is also cheerful in a rather offensive way. For four years Grunt has been sticking plastic moulds in my mouth, x-raying my head and subjecting me to various forms of pain. The first time I came in I thought Grunt and the team were trying to choke me. They filled up the green plastic mould with grey plasticine stuff and then shoved it up into my top teeth so firmly I thought it would never come off. I was left to brew for a time while the impression set. It stretched my mouth so that the corners got all dry and sore, and the acne on my cheeks started to ache. Grunt's assistant came back to remove it. There was a slurping sound as the suction broke and a horrible thick wet feeling on my teeth and tongue. I rinsed with bright pink mouth wash that tasted of cheap sweets. The assistant stared at me with disgust, then she took the plastic cup away. Bits of the grey stuff came out when I spat and it looked like cement. Then they started preparing another batch of the plasticine/cement mix

and shoved it in the bottom of my mouth. I wanted to swallow it. My twelve-year-olds blonde bob keep falling into my face and I had to wash the cement out when I got home, but not before I'd been back to school looking like I'd dipped the end of my hair into clay. Combined with the stretched mouth redness and the dry chapped lips I looked even more unfortunate than usual and the boys laughed at me all afternoon. A plastic and wire retainer was made from the resulting model of my teeth. It looked like something I saw in the Tate Modern Gallery once that was hanging from the ceiling, next to an Ikea lampshade. I hoped that it would work and the other kids might stop calling me 'goofy'. I had to adjust the retainer myself with a little key. It always smelt of chlorine no matter how often I washed it with the special fizzy tablets and water. The fit was secure and somehow comforting in its soreness, as though punishment for my wretched face and uncoolness. I liked that. When it was time to move on to train-tracks it was not so comforting. Grunt would leave little pieces of the wire sticking out at the ends which dug in to the inside of my cheek and got caught on a regular basis. Grunt seemed unable to hear me when I requested the wires be trimmed just a little shorter. Grunt had no first name as far as I knew, and the doctor

part gave little away about a possible gender. Grunt was just Grunt.

There were new and exciting ways to clean my teeth. A little brush in the shape of a fir tree got between the wire, and the toothbrush was specially made with a groove to fit over the tracks. Apples were no longer something I could eat, despite Grunt's insistence that it would be fine. The skin would get caught, and I couldn't risk that kind of embarrassment at school on top of everything else. I sometimes ate them cut up in very small pieces at home, alone.

Grunt dug around in my mouth with a sharp metal claw and signalled to the assistant in some kind of sign language and grunting to indicate which tool was next. Usually they give me a choice of coloured bands to go around the little metal squares on my teeth. Last time I had pink and black, but this time no choice has been offered to me.

Despite the agony of having my brace tightened I usually enjoy these visits as in term time it gets me some time off school. I take my note to the school office to get signed out and walk out the side entrance which is for

visitors and nothing like the usual door I come in through. The visitors get to see all our sporting trophies in a little cabinet that says Morvale High School above it, and twenty years worth of Year 11 photos up on the wall. My face will be up there next year, a blob smaller than a penny among a hundred and fifty other faces. Yet it will still be mine, ugly and stupid looking. People tell me that I haven't grown in to my face yet, but I think that's just a way of deflecting the fact that I'm ugly so that they don't have to deal with it. Lucy is cool about it though, she says that yeah, I've got acne, and I'm too skinny and look a bit gangly right now but acne goes away and I'll fill out. She also says the rest of the twats in our year are stuck with their looks forever now and they'll look forty when they're twenty-five. It's nice of her to say so, but I don't see much hope when I look in the mirror.

Grunt has been shining a blue light into my mouth and pulled the wire out.

'Whaaaas gaaag on?'

'It's time to take it off, goodbye metal mouth!' said Grunt with glee. 'You will look less awful now, good, huh!' Off? It's coming off! No one thought to tell me this, least of all Grunt when she booked the appointment. I was so excited I couldn't stop smiling as they yanked it off, and

cut up my cheeks for the last time, which hurt considering how long I'd had my mouth open for. Grunt grunted with satisfaction. Once it was all off they took another mould, the same as the very first time I came in. I prayed it wasn't for another kind of brace after all this.

'Just a plastic shell to go over your teeth and stop them moving back, no one will see it. Wear it for six months and it should be fine. I have done such a good job, yes?' Grunt grinned, and I noticed a row of very crooked teeth for an orthodontist. And that was it, gone. My teeth felt so huge and my tongue slipped over them without getting cut.

The next day I had a doctor's appointment about my ever worsening acne. After thinking more about getting 'happy', and the awesomeness of not having a brace anymore, I thought that beating the acne was the next step. I've tried every cream, facewash, diet - nothing works. I've listed every one in my diary, all a failure. All a load of bollocks. I've been going to the same doctor's surgery all my life, but today I've got an appointment with one of the female doctors, a new one. The usual one, Dr. Stine, speaks quietly and never can make a conclusive diagnosis other than 'Take

two paracetamol and drink plenty of fluids'. If I went in there with my foot mangled in an industrial accident he'd still tell me to take some paracetamol.

The waiting room was hot, and hence I imagined a breeding ground for all the diseases lurking in here. An incubator. I tried not to breathe. Children screamed and dribbled on books. Fat chavs pawed over women's magazines that were only out of date by four years. Bird flu, pig flu, man flu, small pox. Whatever it is, I didn't want it. Gurgling phlegmy coughs to the right, dry hacking ones to the left. But I didn't want to obsess. Perhaps it was Major Depression talking.

I can't help feeling mildly excited every time I visit a doctor, or anyone medical. I like the stethoscopes, thermometers, concern. It's a bit of extra attention and excitement. What I like most of all about medical stuff though, is the cleanliness. The smell of antibacterial creams and antiseptic lotions. Fresh dressings and the destruction of germs. I read a lot about hospitals being dirty places, but I've never stayed in one other than to be born. I like the idea of the microbes being killed. Potential killers eradicated. Sterile and silver healing. I read that in some places they still use maggots to eat the dead flesh of a wound.

They're always running behind at The Surgery. Doesn't matter how packed or empty the waiting room may be, it's always the same. Bringing a book is usually a good thing, unless you want to read about the weddings of celebrities who long ago broke up, or pop stars who are already long forgotten in the four years since The Surgery updated its magazine collection. Apparently they are 'donations'. Maybe the person who donated them died of something they caught while they were waiting in here. I have to breathe. They should give out masks on the way in like they did when there was the equine flu scare. Whatever's going around in here clearly isn't threatening enough. Since The Surgery got automatic doors there's been a ginger cat who lets himself in wondering around. He's not winking at you, he's actually missing an eye. Lovely little thing.

Luckily for me, I'd remembered a book this time. It's one Lucy picked up in a charity shop called *Carrie*, about a girl who gets bullied at school and has a really messed up life. Doesn't sound all that unusual but she reassures me I need to stick with it. I've only just started it but it's much better than some of the crap they made us read for our GCSEs. So far the first few pages are a bit gross.

'Meather HocMonald, womb swix,' crackled a voice over the intercom. That must be me.

'Room six?' I clarified with the receptionist as I made my way through. She nodded but didn't make eye contact. She's a right one.

I made my way to womb swix to meet my new doctor. The first thing I noticed as I entered womb swix was a box of tongue depressors. I've always found those funny. They're just lolly sticks. For depressing tongues. Giving tongues Major Depression. There was an electronic thermometer on the wall with a diagram on it. The face looks like a pacman, just a circle with a triangle cut out for the mouth, a dot for an eye, and the thermometer going in to the triangle. Eating ghosts and eating thermometers.

'Sit down,' said the young doctor. 'I won't bite.' She snorted at her own joke. What a thick joke. Some people *like* being bitten. Perhaps she doesn't realise. She swished her long curly hair out of her face and it fell back in front of her eyes immediately.

'So... Heather. Nice to meet you. I'm Dr. Block. How are you?' I understand why they ask it, but isn't the answer always I'm Not Well Doctor? Would you go to the doctor if you were well. I don't know. Suddenly I felt embarrassed. Like I was wasting her time with my teenage hormones. But it's ugly. Everyone likes to tell me how ugly it is.

I tensed up. Stupid. Stupid. Horrible, filthy skin. Waiting room diseases. Major Depression. Obsession.

'It's my skin. My spots. I... they won't go away. I've tried all the washes. I exercise, I eat well. Well, I mean I was. Lately been feeling a bit rough. Nothing helps.' And suddenly I'm crying. Oh Dog, this is disgusting. I don't know where it came from, but I couldn't stop it and let forth an outpouring of crap from my juvenile mind. 'Everyone thinks I'm ugly. I *am* ugly. I get bullied and my spots are just disgusting. I hate myself. I hate myself!'

Did I really say that in front of another human being? Block's face looks devastated. 'Heather! No, no. You're not ugly. This is perfectly normal for teenagers, but I know it's frustrating. Can I have a better look please?' She had an accent I found pleasant, it wasn't the harsh sounding nowhere accent of The Grunt. She sounded Scottish. Block's face was open and creaseless, fair skin with dark brown eyes and the long unkempt curly hair. I remember thinking her hair was the colour of conkers when you shine them up with vinegar. Conventionally you might call it Chesnut Brown, but I've always thought of that shade as vinegar brown.

Block rolled closer to me on her wheeled office chair, just a flicker of glee on her face for a second from the joy of rolling. I expected her to say 'Wheee!', but she didn't.

Better than the one I had for my computer desk at home, but it looked like a leather 'effect' rather than real leather. I wondered if the NHS paid for such things or whether Block had bought her own in for the new job. She indicated for me to move my head to the left, then the right.

'And on the chest? Back?'

I nod. 'Yes. It's horrible, I can't wear strappy tops and you can see it when I go swimming. It's just... crap.'

'Yes, yes.' She's looking at me sympathetically, so much so that I'm embarrassed.

Block sighed. 'No need to be so upset, it's perfectly normal for a girl your age to get acne. I can start you on a course of antibiotics. If nothing is happening in a couple of months we could send you to a specialist. I'll also prescribe something topical. I think you will see results. There are some side effects as with all medicine, the main one being nausea with the tablets. Read the leaflet before you start taking them.'

She typed up the prescription and looked extra pleased with herself.

'And is there anything else I can do for you today, Heather? You seem distressed. How are things at home?'

'Things at home are fine, and I have an appointment at Morvale Psych so I can be happy.'

Block looked curious and turned to her screen to look at my notes. 'I don't see any referral here Heather, did you go there yourself?'

'I got a message from the government 'get happy' scheme or whatever it's called,' I said, sniffing miserably with embarrassment and wanting to just get out of there.

'Ahhh, now I understand. That'll be the youth group, right? They were looking for local participants. Excellent pilot scheme so I hear. But you're not taking any medication already, are you?' She scanned the screen in front of her again, moving her finger down it to scroll through my record.

'No, I'm not taking anything.' I didn't mention the happy pills from the survey, seeing as I might not even get them.

'Well, I'll make a note that you're going to the youth group and you let me know how that goes next time you're in, won't you.'

We said our goodbyes, and I left clutching the prescription she'd printed out. She was beaming at me as I left, and I could still feel it all the way down the corridor.

Life ambled on for a few more sickening weeks. I remained in a sort of daze, waiting for the GCSE results, for the start of a new term so that I could get over this strange malaise. My first appointment with Morvale Psych had been set for the first week of September. They sent me a very enthusiastic email. Lucy flitted in and out of my view, and the rest, my old friends like Eesh and Jo just faded further out. I was really enjoying my reading. I asked the cool librarian, the one with the spiky red hair, what she recommended for someone looking for something 'different'. I decided to go there that day after I had my brace off, so I had a stack of stuff I'd been working on. She was very keen, I don't think she gets many people checking out anything other than romance novels. I said I preferred a bit of dead-tree. She said the Eyes wouldn't last anyway - look at CDs, look at Teeth. Antiquated now, yet still functional. Dead-trees books are different, they feel nice. And Lucy reads them.

Results day got closer. A week away, and then a day away. The thoughts of failure were persistent, combined with occasional dreams of success and a string of As. The night before I tried to remain calm. My mum and dad were scuttling around trying to pretend that it didn't matter, that the

rest of my life didn't hinge on these results. Lucy was unreachable. Mum, dad, and me had dinner at the table together and I tried not to throw up. They still kept going on and on about the dead boy. It hadn't even made national news, just local, and they were terrified I'd get killed if I so much as looked out the window.

I scrubbed my hands thoroughly with the nail brush before I sat down to eat. There were things on my skin that I couldn't really see, but I knew they were there and they were waiting to get into my food. I couldn't afford to be ill, not tonight. After dinner I escaped pretty quickly to my room. Mum was all smiles and nerves and dad was radiating pride in anticipation.

'We know you've done well, we can feel it,' said dad, smiling his big fat smile on his chubby cheeks. 'Maybe we'll do something special tomorrow to celebrate, how about it?'

I nodded. There was no point in arguing that there'd be nothing to celebrate, that their daughter was going to end up in the Neon Graffiti crew, just a shadow in the middle of the night somewhere with a spray can, writing about her Major Depression. I lay on my bed watching the clock, reading, clock watching again. Getting up for a drink, flicking through programs online. Results were available to be collected from 9am. Were they already there or would they

be delivered in the morning? If I concentrated really hard could I make them better now, while they were still in some kind of limbo between the jumble of letters and the real world? Positive thinking. They'll all be As. Even maths. I planned to get up at 6. I checked the alarm clocks again, all three of them.

'Mum!' I shouted down the stairs, 'You will wake me up tomorrow, won't you?'

She came rushing up the stairs and knocked on my door, coming in without waiting.

'Of course I will, love. And you'll ring me at work as soon as you get them, won't you? And when you get home, so we know you're alright.'

'Yes, mum. Promise.'

She was beaming, so proud already, but she looked sick as a dog as well. I gave her a hug goodnight and decided I should try and sleep. I had a list set up for the morning. I already had my Hello Kitty pajamas on, so I gave my hands a final scrub - dead-tree books are covered in filth - and then got into bed. I lay there for about 10 seconds before I had to get up and check all the alarms again. Then I got back in and turned out the light. I was doomed, I thought. I wouldn't be going to Cambridge, or Oxford, I wouldn't even be going to Sixth Form College. I wouldn't even be part of

the Neon Graffiti crew. No, I'll end up with an ASBO scrubbing their tags off the walls, making Morvale grey and ugly.

Orange squash. That's what I wanted. I got out of bed and went to the kitchen. Mum was sitting in the living room listening to a gene symphony. Back to bed.

I tossed and turned. The air suggested a thunder storm and it was too close. I threw the covers off. Light back on. Lucy had sent me a rant about the virtues of Irvine Welsh, so I picked up *Marabou Stalk Nightmares* from my stack of books by the bed. Class commentary, she said, was even more important back then, after the Thatcher business and all of that. I knew about it vaguely from history class which Lucy said was biased crap that the machinery of modern education wanted to shove down the throats of people like me. I don't know how she has time to read so much.

I got right in to the book though. It was a welcome distraction, very mental. Didn't seem worth going to sleep - I was going to look awful anyway, puff-eyed and frantic. I must have finally dropped off though, because suddenly all three alarms were screaming murder at me and I could hear mum coming up the stairs to wake me.

I arrived at the gates of Morvale high at 8.50. People were milling around in hoodies, texting, Eyeing, talking. A few were smoking electric cigarettes in a last attempt to violate the school rules. Lucy smokes real ones. I'd made an effort with new clothes, mostly neon like everyone else.

Eesh and Jo waved me over to their patch at the side of the main crowd.

'Hi ya!' Eesh said, looking genuinely pleased to see me and not in the slightest bit nervous. I noticed others pacing, chewing nails, hiding under their hoodies. Miss Mookherjee was standing behind the glass door at the entrance of Smith Hall. All those assemblies in there, open evenings, the sex education talks. Miss M was talking to someone I couldn't see and looking at a clock above one of the A Level art pieces on display in the entrance. A few students were trying to rattle the doors but they were locked. She looked at them, mouthing 'not yet' and shaking her head for no.

'Oh my GAWD, I'm so nervous. Fuck, fuck, fuck.' Jo was twirling long bits of her hair around her fingers then letting them untwirl again whilst pacing a square route around me.

'You're making me feel sick,' I said with far too much venom in my voice.

'Sorry, I'm just bricking it.'

'Me too.'

'Don't be stupid. You'll get all As, your parents will love you forever and you'll be poshing it up at Cambridge in two years time. Me,' she pointed at herself, poking herself in her right boob, 'I'll be a data-entry dullard.' She started jabbing at a pretend Eye-screen in the air, her tongue sticking out to one side and making herself cross-eyed. 'Durrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp.'

I couldn't help laughing and she smiled. Neither of them seemed to notice that my brace was gone.

'It's gonna be fine. *Someone's* got to enter data though, you know...' I said with a wink as Miss M nodded to the unseen person and unlocked the door. There was a surge forward. About sixty of our year were there, the rest I assumed either coming later, checking online, or not bothered. Lucy would come later, alone, but I wanted to know now and it was sort of nice to be in it with other people.

The surge became a forced trickle as Miss M restored a sense of order, spinning out the usual lines about not getting there any faster if you're pushing. The hall was arranged with several tables set up for different

alphabetical sections according to surname. Brown envelopes stood vertically in grey plastic boxes, tidily waiting to be rummaged by teachers' hands while eager and anxious students felt the quickening heart beat of anticipation. The temptation to snatch was unbearable, kittenish in our need to reach out and paw at the boxes, but of course we weren't allowed. Chaos should have descended but the presence of authority figures in their mid-twenties kept us dignified. I stood by my table while Mr. Fletcher went through the box, looking up to see which faces were there and calling names, handing over deeds of death with a fake smile. The chatter was loud now, the sound of paper envelopes ripping open, the rustling of the papers - a moment to take it in and then a 'yes' hissed out or a 'huh' which I assumed meant an unfavourable outcome judging by the looks on the faces that accompanied it.

'Heather,' said Mr Fletcher, holding my envelope out with his eyes down to the next in the box. I took it firmly and hurried off to a corner so I could turn my back on everyone else. Eesh was shrieking somewhere on the other side of the hall, too absorbed in her own joy to notice me now, so I had a few seconds.

My hands were shaking and I could feel tears welling up. I knew I was going to bawl now, whatever happened. I'd

have to make a swift exit. I ripped it open, but had to try twice because the first time I didn't get it all the way. I pulled out the small sheets of paper, one from each of the three exam boards. Everything was an A. Three of them were A*s. I checked it again, and again. Fuck yes! Yes! It was all going to be okay. I couldn't believe it though, my eyes scanning the paper for my name at the top just to make sure these weren't someone else's results. It was all good.

People were congregating in to small groups, comparing, congratulating, and commiserating. A few people had broken down into sobbing fits. Rachel Barrett looked devastated. 'I tried so hard,' I could hear her saying to Raj as he was trying not very subtly to hide his own results from her, presumably because he was satisfied with his own. The end of year frivolities had already occurred - shirt signing, year book bollocks, people who looked old enough had gone out drinking. But today was another excuse for a piss-up, and I could tell by the way Eyes were being consulted that plans were being made. Eesh was grinning so hard it was painful, and she was waving me over to her. Miss M. was saying congratulations again and again, whilst also trying to steer people outside to make room for the next people coming in.

We made our way outside in the buzzing slipstream of bodies. The general flavour of the conversation centred on

plans to get mullered tonight in town. Eesh and Jo were begging me to go out but I told them my mum and dad wanted me to do something. I trailed home in a dream, calling my mum at work on the way. I could hear her choking on her tears of pride as she said she'd email dad straight away.

The first thing I did when I got home was to start a new list - things to buy for the new term and a separate one for new goals and aspirations to stick on the wall. I had a message from Lucy. She had got all A*s and invited her herself over for the afternoon.

The rest of that day was so full of promise, and that night I fell asleep thinking of everything that was ahead of me. I could forget all about that strange cloud of depression of the last few weeks and get back to my quest for academic excellence.

KAREN

In August all I can think about is September. September is when the kids go back to school. I look out my window on those still warm mornings and watch them in crisp uniforms, probably ironed by mum the night before, sandwiches in the backpack. It can't be that much different from when I went to school. Having the right pencil case could be the deal breaker. We used to write the names of bands on our backpacks in marker pen, those Berol fine line pens were good for that. Some people used to stitch the names in but I was crap at sewing. And we all had those badges you could iron on (or get your mum to) that came from the market, three quid a go. Nirvana was old news by the time I got there, but these kids still have Nirvana badges too. They have other things though that I've never heard of this year. Like Portland Walk and Counsel's Saps.

What interests me is not the crispness of the uniforms or which bands are hot each year (although I'll be taking notes), but who *isn't* in uniform. Who is a sixth former now? Who did I notice a sparkle in last year but didn't pay too much mind because they were in a tie and a skirt? Of course, I'll probably do nothing about it. I just can't risk that, not when they're still in uniform. If I keep dipping into the same pool people will talk to each other. It's not like

I'm doing anything wrong, but if I already shagged all their friends they are going to get wary and pissed off.

Eight-thirty in the morning and the late ones are on their way. There's no way they can make it from here to get there for the eight-forty-five Bell. But they'll try, they always do. They start power-walking, giggling, looking nervously at their watches, but not *really* caring as it's the first day back. Summer is still in the air. The overanxious kids, already at school, gossiping and catching up on what happened over the summer. Noticing that some of their friends have grown a couple of inches, hairstyles changed, new earrings and piercings are in place, which they will be told to take out as soon as the bell rings. It's the ones who are less anxious that I'm interested in, the ones who don't play by the rules, who like the alternative bands and crazy hairstyles. They want to get out of this fucking place, and maybe I can plan it with them. They say *At the end of this year, I'm getting out. I hate my parents, I hate my sister, I hate my life. I hate school. This is who I am.* And I say, I know. There's more to you than all that. And they look at me like I'm God because I understand. It's so exciting to be the catalyst of someone's dream, to be the push that gets them out of Morvale. One day I'm going to go

with them. One of them. I can make it stick, it'll be right. Sorted.

I met a girl on the last day of August, a few years ago, who was wandering around drunk down by the river. I was sitting there thinking about the end of the school holidays. The library changes for those six weeks.

Her name was Lauren.

'RRRAAAeeeeerrgh!' was the first sound I heard come out of her gob. She was spinning around looking up at the sky, screaming like she was being stabbed, like their might be blood pouring out of her turning the river red. But the river was still the same colour of night time muck and stagnant filth. A shopping trolley winked at me as it bobbed up and down, watching the spinning crazy-arse girl.

'Woah, woah there girl,' I said smiling, and gently put my hands on her to make her turn and face me. It was early evening, warm enough to wear a light jacket or hoodie, but if you stayed out late that way you'd feel the nip. Lauren was wearing a mid-length black skirt and bright pink hoodie with stars in blue and green all over it. I remember this because everyone had those hoodies with the stars on them that year. I had one too. She stood there panting, grinning, lopsided with alcohol and eyes wide like she was on a really good pill trip.

'Yeah, yeah,' she said, breathing heavily and freeing herself from my grip to put her hands on her thighs and steady herself. She looked out at the water. Her hair looked brown in the orangey street light, but I wasn't sure. It was long and wavy, full like shampoo advert hair but also lacking any definite style.

'Mad hair, man,' she said, grinning at my red spikes and not looking in to my face.

'Cheers, man,' I said. I never usually say 'man', but it sounded good on her.

'What's going on then? Had a good night?' I said, offering her a fag, which she snatched off me and turned away to light with her own lighter. She turned back to puff the smoke back out in a curling stream, narrowing her eyes as she did so. It was a brash, untrusting action. There was chav in her for sure. But not too much. A bit of styling and direction could have gone a long way with her.

'Dick'ead boyfriend. The usual.' She paused for a few seconds, her eyes glazing over with the memory, and then ranted for a few minutes about Darren, or David, or Dickhead, or whatever his name was. He kept borrowing money off her, dropped out of college, fucked up his car, she thought he was probably cheating on her with Cherise, and maybe with Raj too even though he said they were just mates.

All the suspicion - 'I knew it, I fucking just knew it, ya know?' - lead to Lauren getting so drunk that she poured a pint of Fosters over his head in The Millers when she thought he was looking at some skank who just happened to walk past their table. Messing up Dickhead's hair and embarrassing him in front of his underage tosspot mates had been a step too far.

I drank it all in. Every part of her monologue could be used later. Collecting puzzle pieces, the things people don't think you'll remember so you can mix them in to your chameleon skin.

'I'm well sorry, sounds like a right arsehole.'

She looked me up and down like I might be shit.

'I was just going up the arcade actually. You going that way?' I asked. She looked at me again, this time like I was a nonce. 'You gonna jolly my roger?' she said, cackling, practically spitting it at me, like she'd been holding the joke in for a week. Like it was a good wank fantasy she'd been saving for a special occasion. We both cracked up. The arcade is like Morvale's very own pier amusement except we're not by the sea and it's not really that much fun. It's called Roger's Arcade, and really the only reason kids go up there is to give someone a good old rogering in a dark corner or booth.

'I was actually thinking about playing Dubstep Dance Superstar. I was bored, just fancied a wander and that.'

'How super retro of you,' she said in a faux posh accent, saying super the same way she'd said *jolly*. 'Nah, but really mate, you're 'aving a laugh right? Dubstep Dance? That must take fuckin' farthing's in the slot it's that fuckin' old.'

'Yeah, yeah. But I still robot better than anyone,' I gave it my best cheeky grin.

'Whas your name then? I'm Lauren, but everyone calls me Loz or Lozza.' She slurred at me.

'I'm Karen. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Lozza,' I said in my best gentleman voice. She giggled. I took her hand and we started skipping up the road to Roger's Arcade.

She was too drunk to dance to the game, but she tried anyway. It was pretty hilarious; it was making her dizzy and euphoric and pissed off in a cute way.

'Who the fuck thought this game up? You can't dance to dubstep, it's ridiculous.' She said as I beat her for a fifth game in a row and all the lights flashed just for me.

'Alright, I'm sick of this thing now. Let's do something else.'

There was a group of scabby looking fourteen-year-olds lurking around some shooting game, seeing if they could trick it into giving them credits using a crack-code on their Eyes. It obviously wasn't working - they turned on one boy and started ribbing him for it, because apparently he was full of shit and couldn't hack into a calculator, let alone an arcade game. Lozza was watching them, snorting with laughter, looking like she was about to go over and make a scene or something. I didn't know her well enough to know what she might be about, but I didn't fancy any trouble.

'What the FAARRRK are you kids doing?' She shouted embarrassingly loud at them, they stared but I dragged her away and into a corner before they had time to do more than look up. As soon as my back was turned someone shouted 'Is that your mum?' and they all laughed, but Loz didn't seem to hear it. There's always some shite chart music pumping out of the ceiling at Rogers. You can put credits on the juke box in there and choose the songs. There's a drinks machine which is out of the order at least half the time from people kicking it in. I started dancing with my ridiculous robot moves to make her laugh. It was this tune I remember from when I was quite young, with a chorus that went 'I can teach

you a thing or two'. It was much easier to dance to than the stuff in the game, and it had a good beat. One of those tracks a club will pull out as a 'classic' for all the old pill heads to start raving to. She started dancing in this stupid head-banger pogo kind of way that wasn't right but it was just her pure energy and drunkenness. She pulled a plastic bottle I didn't know she had out of her inside pocket and took a swig.

'Is that spider?' I asked, as it suddenly hit me that her eyes were too wide to just be drunk. Cider and speed in the same bottle - spider. Popular playground choice right now. We did them separately in my day, but speed cost more than the average kid's pocket money back then. It might as well be the dirt from the pavement these days, but thinking like that makes me feel fucking old.

She grinned and held it out to me, and I took a swig. Sorted. Carefully I danced closer, step by step, trying to avoid getting knocked out by her flailing mental dancing. An advert above the drinks machine flashed for Serotonin Pop, with that fucking annoying woman from TV grinning like an absolute psycho. Serotonin Pop was banned almost as soon as it came out but this place still has the button on its' machine. Won't get much luck if you pressed it though. Loz was oblivious to it all, grabbing my hands and waving them

in the air, smiling like her jaw might be aching a little bit. I pulled her quite hard into me and moved her hands to my waist.

'What are you up to?' she smirked.

'Dancing with a pretty girl, I reckon.'

She was obviously flattered. The song changed to something newer, slower but with some dirty bwomp bwomp bassy noises in it. The kind of thing that really gets you if you're intoxicated. We danced close for a minute or so, my heart beating painfully, electric excitement starting to crackle in me. She broke away for more spider, then sat down in the seat of a racing game, looking suddenly more the worse for wear.

'I ain't a lezza, ya know.' She said looking me straight in the eye, like it was a challenge. I didn't say anything. 'But I love your hair. Can I touch it? Looks hard and pointy.'

'Go on then,' and I knelt down next to where she was sitting, all the lights flashing from all the games, and noise. I put my head forward so she could have a better feel, and got a full-on look at grime on the floor, which I always notice but don't really wish to be that close to. On the back of the seat someone had written in marker pen 'pure scum fuck off haters'. That shit has been going on for years

now. Racist twats, and the ones who try to fight against it. It's probably the same everywhere but we've got our own special brand of Morvale culture. Local flavour. I've never been involved with one of them, but I get my share of insults from the local rabble. They've got this crackpot notion that any one who isn't whiter than white is a terrorist or something. A relative of someone or other died in tube bombings and it was just like another bomb went off over here. Little pockets formed, passed on their shite views to their kids, and now it's little gangs of wankers fighting. They probably don't even really know why. 'Pure' whites against everyone else - the whites who have to fight not to get written off as racists have it just as hard as everyone else.

Her hands were at the tips of my spikes, and she made a cute noise when she realised they weren't hard.

'How do you get it like that? How does it stay up?'

'It's just wax, it's softer than gel. Like it?'

'Yeah, feels really nice,' she murmured, running her hands right through it, which gave me a little tingle from the spider. She could see I was loving it, I must have looked like a little cat being stroked.

'Do mine!'

I suggested we get in the Photo Me booth for more privacy and she obliged. It sort of hurts to think about it. Not the first time I've asked someone in to the Photo Me booth for it either. It didn't take long to move from hair stroking to kissing, to me hurriedly asking her how old she was, her saying sixteen, and then having a quick one right there on the crappy photo booth chair, trying not to make too much noise about it. It was really nice, nicer still for the speed.

I gave her my number and we ended up back down by the river before she split off to go home. But she never called or text me. The only reminder I have of Lauren is a stain on the end of that evenings trainers from her eventually vomiting on me from all the spider.

Lucy

I heard that Danny's dad got in an argument with a guy who lost his sister in the 7/7 bombings. I also heard that he was really Much Love. I also heard that he just looked at someone the wrong way.

3. September

ZOE

The September that mum went AWOL I'd sort of sensed it already. It was in the air and I wished they'd my parents would get divorced like everyone else on the estate and stop the fighting. I was ten years old. Old enough to have a feel for what might be going on, but young enough not to fully understand. Mum put me to bed one night and we were reading a book of 'weird tales' - one by Paul Jennings. I was into that and *Eerie Indiana* repeats that summer holiday. I'd also started reading Stephen King novels in the adult library that year, having read almost everything on offer at school and feeling impatient to move on. They wouldn't let me take them out on my child ticket, and the librarians looked slightly concerned by my choices. I fooled mum into getting me *Firestarter* by telling her it was Young Adult and 'I was nearly old enough anyway, please mum, pleeeeeease' when she was in a particularly flustered mood. Not wanting to argue, she glanced quickly at the little girl on the cover and checked it out with her own books. It was the best thing I'd ever read.

Mum sat next to me on the bed and listened to me read, and was most impressed that I didn't get any words wrong. She said so, I remember. I also remember that her hand was shaking as she held the book open and she looked like she

was faking her enjoyment of the story. I felt something heavy in the pit of my stomach because I knew something was wrong. I stopped reading.

'Mum... ' I said after a pause, afraid to ask but feeling worried. 'What's wrong?'

She looked at me. She looked terrified.

'Me and daddy just had a silly argument, that's all. Everything's fine,' She smiled more convincingly on the *Everything's fine* and I felt relieved. She must have seen that because she gave me a tight hug, still with the book in one hand.

'What was it about?' I said, and then knew I'd gone too far.

'Christ Zoe, it doesn't concern you. Why do you always want to know *everything*? Some things are private between grown-ups, okay? You wouldn't understand.'

The temptation to ask *what* I wouldn't understand was intense but I stopped myself. She'd get really angry with that one. She had gone a bit red in the cheeks. We started on the book again as if nothing had been said. I still felt a knot in my stomach. I knew it wasn't fine. I knew they were going to split up, just like everyone else's parents. It made me feel sick, but I pretended I was enjoying the story and I laughed stupidly hard at parts that were only

mildly amusing to try and reassure her I was okay. Looking back she must have known I was faking. Just like she was.

She tucked me up in bed and gave me my favourite teddy, a stuffed tiger called Stripy. He had seen me through so many tantrums and tears in the past. The last smile she ever gave me was a genuine one.

'Really, things will be okay. You'll see. Nothing to worry about,' then the smile. 'Goodnight, Zo. Sweet dreams, sleep tight.'

'Night, mum,' I said, clutching Stripy and smiling back. She looked at me for too long before leaving me to sleep.

I was just settling in to sleep, feeling better and trusting those final words when I heard raised voices from the kitchen. They were trying to be quiet, doing that loud whispering voice adults do because they think if they hiss the words out at the same volume it somehow becomes undetectable. Nothing worse than that hissy argument voice. I heard Lucy get up and go downstairs - to get a glass of water she later told me. Then I heard her running back up the stairs, breathing heavily and making a moaning noise that made her sound like a puppy. I cried myself to sleep, clinging on to Stripy as though cuddling him tighter would mend my breaking heart.

When I got up the next morning dad was sitting at the kitchen table looking as though he'd been up all night. And mum was gone. I wonder what she'd think of my AS results, Lucy's GCSEs. Mine were nothing to get excited about, but Lucy's were awesome. Most things Lucy does are awesome.

Lucy was still pissed at me for leaving her with dad while I stayed at Karens. I've seen Karen four times now. I tried to sneak back into the house the morning after the fourth time to get my things for school without dad noticing. No such luck. He was in a rage, morning drink not enough for him.

'Where the fuck were you last night?' he screamed at me.

'Like you care! I could be dead and you'd still be more worried about where the next drink came from. Get ready for work, you look disgusting. I'm sick of looking after you and clearing up your mess. I'm seventeen, I can do what I want!' and with that I ran up the stairs and flung open my bedroom door, all the joy from my wonderful night with Karen squashed by the weight of his misplaced concern, and the

moody routine I was probably about to get from Lucy. I got changed and snatched up my bag and my purse.

I spun round, wanting to get out as fast as possible. Lucy was behind me. She looked worse than dad. Her eyes were swollen and puffy and she was pale. She'd been dying her hair a very dark brown recently and the whiteness of her skin in contrast reminded me of a dead monster girl from a Japanese horror movie. Like a *yūrei*, a Japanese ghost, especially as she had a baggy white T-shirt on that she slept in. Her arms hung limply by her sides and her eyes had taken on an unnerving blank stare.

'Why did you leave me here with him?' She said so faintly that it was just a whisper.

I put my arms around her and after a minute she returned the gesture and clung on.

'I'm sorry. I mean... can't I have friends? Did he shout at you? He didn't hit you did he?'

She didn't answer.

Dad was not a violent drunk, at least not physically towards us. Sometimes he'd get in a temper, sometimes he might bash things about in the kitchen, but he'd never hit us. She just looked so lost that I didn't know what to think. With the image of the *yūrei* planted in my mind, I thought of the violence it takes to leave those ghosts

trapped on earth. Or jealousy. But Lucy was not a ghost and this was not a horror film. Morvale felt like a horror film though. No one ever bothered us about seeing Danny get killed, but I'm sure I've seen that girl with the track suit at Roger's Arcade. At least I thought I did but when I looked again she was gone. I kept telling myself that's just typical paranoia.

My stomach felt like it was turning over, dread bubbling through me and guilt gnawing at the back of mind. How could I have left her with him all night? But it was both of them I'd wanted to get away from, they do my head in.

'You can understand why it's been hard for me lately, can't you?'

She nodded. I told myself that they must have just had a falling out. It happens in this house a lot.

'Why don't you get ready and we'll walk together?'

'Okay,' she said, sniffing a bit and clearly tearing up.

She turned to walk away but then turned back and looked at me accusingly.

'Are you going to tell me where you stayed last night then?'

'Just at a friend's.' Shit. I smiled at her reassuringly. She looked unsure, but then said okay and trudged off to her bedroom. I didn't feel ready to explain myself just yet.

Another thing I didn't feel ready for that morning was a day at Morvale Sixth Form College. The start of a new term, A2s. New bunch of scrags coming up for their AS levels. Jostling, bustling, chav-riddled, skank-riddled cess pit of misfits and thickos. The sixth form block is better than the rest of the school, but we still have to go to classes in the main buildings and weave through all the dross on the way. All the buildings are grey and ugly, with weird names after people who taught there, or something. There's Donald, Platt, Smith, and Gordon. Then there's the sixth form block, the sports block, the dinner hall, and the fields. There's a technology block as well with rooms I've never been in because I dropped tech when we chose options and did cooking instead. I can make one dish now, vegetarian lasagne. And pasta and stuff from the freezer, but that's my only proper dish really. Got an A in GSCE food tech with that beauty. And everyone kept going on about GCSEs getting easier every year, and I just thought Fuck You, I put a lot of effort in to that vegetarian lasagne.

Oh and I almost forgot - the music block. Underfunded and set far away from the rest of the school, a tiny drama studio on the ground floor and two class rooms upstairs. I love music, but school music isn't really my thing. Sharing a keyboard for twenty minutes once a week with some spaz I didn't like wasn't really where it was at for me. They tried hard though, and I always felt sorry for the music teachers. Morvale was bidding to become a sports college, and all the money was going in to improving sports facilities and buying new pleated skirts and gym knickers for the netball team. I wanted to go to some proper gigs in London, hear some real music. Maybe I could ask Karen.

Lucy was still effing around looking broken while I tried to focus on good things. She was one of those scraggs coming up from GCSE to AS. She's ahead a year, which doesn't happen as often as they make out in those American teen movies. It's actually quite exceptional, but then so is she. She doesn't usually let on about that. Sometimes she's so ghostly that I'm surprised people don't just walk through her. She can be annoyingly perfect, but secretly I'm a little bit proud of her.

Lucy wouldn't tell me about what happened with dad in any detail and the first week of school was the usual pile of wank. That first weekend of the new term was much needed and Karen was taking me to London.

At the train station I bounced on my Dr Martens Air Ware heels, nervous energy pouring off me like Red Bull waves into the beautiful still night. It was a little chilly, but still that time of year when the light is good and anything seems possible. Karen took my hand and squeezed, smiling that lopsided smile which means she's pleased as punch. When she showed me the tickets for The Puricks I couldn't stop grinning, I was made up. I've followed The Puricks since their first album, *Virginia Days*, and my poster of Monique Purick is getting so old that it's ripped all around the blu-tacked corners and fading in the places where the sun hits it. They're sort of punk, sort of electro, a bit too cool, but fuck-me fit. They're on at some venue in Islington, and then after we were going clubbing with some people Karen knows. I didn't want to admit that I've never really been out in London. I'm sweating it a bit about ID but Karen said it's no problem, she knows the people on the door. She kept looking around at the other people on the platform, like she's thinking about something else.

I dressed up. It felt good. Karen's so effortlessly stylish, I think she could wear a bin bag and look hot. She's got this worn out looking leather jacket, it's cracked as though it's totally parched and it smells like fresh tobacco. I pressed myself into her just to smell it again, its scent mingled with her FCUK perfume, her menthols and that sweet scent that's purely her. I want to go to bed with her right now, but I'm so pumped for The Puricks.

An old man watched us from his perch on the rusting metal bench which was once painted a dark factory grey, but now looks like a Neon threw up on it. He was the colour the bench used to be himself, drained looking and weary but grinning at me with a mouth full of stained teeth. I turned away and pressed myself into Karen again with intensity.

'Easy tiger,' she whispered seductively.

'We're being watched,' I hissed, and giggled. The breeze cut through my leggings and gave me a chill but it's worth it to look good. I needed some alcohol in my system, a beer jacket. That first cool Australian lager would be heaven. I told dad, and Lucy, that I was staying at a friends tonight, but truth be told I didn't know where we'd be staying. Lucy looked pissed. I'd already put Karen off in the week because Lucy begged me to stay at home and hang out with her instead. Lucy needs a lot of cuddling. She knows

I'm seeing someone but I've kept the details to myself for now - not even said if it's a girl or a boy. When I'm at Karen's I just don't have to worry about it all and that's mine.

The train pulled in, stretching out its' finish as though it would never actually stop. Toxic John was written under the windows of every single carriage in neon pink, as it was along the tunnels and tracksides for miles to come. I always wondered just how Toxic John managed to access the places he did without electrocution or prosecution, but his tag appeared again and again, for ever and ever amen.

As the doors opened I felt trepidation - if her friends are anything like her I'd be lost in a minefield of cool. I didn't want to disappoint her.

Heather

For the rest of the summer I mostly stuck it on my own so when school started again it was a bit overwhelming. I saw Lucy of course, when she appeared, but I got really in to the books and music she had been lending me and just kind of disappeared into myself. When I was reading, or painting my nails black, or listening to loud, euphoric music, then it been easy not to think about the impending doom of sixth form. Nights were a different story. I'd lie awake even more paranoid about my lists - because there was no homework, I'd invented homework for myself - reading chapters from physics books ready for my A Levels, or memorizing Macbeth. When I finally slept I'd have weird dreams, about falling down wells or rabbit holes, or being tortured after some unnamed failure had occurred. I had one where Lucy was beating the crap out of me for being so naïve. Then I'd wake up early and try to stick to my usual breakfast routines, go for a bike ride, go to the library for more books. I didn't always manage it though, and the thought of Major Depression kept gnawing away at me. That appointment was coming up though.

Mum and dad both worked in the day so I was left to just get on with it in my own little world for most of the holiday. 'Seen Ayesha or Jo lately?' Mum would ask, assuming that I still got invited to go out with them. They had both

found boyfriends and started going to pubs over the last few months. I knew I wouldn't get served when I'd still had my brace, and the skanky lads they tried to set me up with a couple of times were not really my thing. We went to the bowling alley one Friday night, Eesh and Jo dressed up in skirts and make up, me in my jeans. They'd met some boys at the park - I didn't like hanging about in the park when it got dark, and anyway I'd had revision to do. So there was three of us and three of them. Eesh paired up to bowl with the one called Conrad, Jo was with Pete, and I was left to pair up with Ash. Ash had a friendly enough face, even though when he smiled there were a few teeth missing. You can't hold that against someone though, anything could have happened. He had on matching grey tracksuit bottoms and jacket, with a plain grey t-shirt underneath. I recognised his gold chains and sovereign rings from a recent flick through the Argos catalogue. I asked him if he was cold. He couldn't work out what I was on about until I pointed at his socks which were pulled up high with the trouser legs tucked in. He looked at me like I was mad. 'S'jus fashion, innit.' I won the game which didn't win me any points with them. I think Ash was really pissed off to be lumped with the ugly one.

Then I'd had the results and the time just flew. First week back. School uniform, the symbol of the British school system and, to many, a pain in the arse. I liked its' regularity, the sense of smartness and proper dress. Knowing what to put on every weekday had been part of my routine for the last eleven years. Although I was not immune to melodrama over accessories. Which shoes would I *not* get bullied for wearing? Was that bag a hideous crock, that laptop case a mark of the poor? Were my Ears the right colour?

People like Eesh managed to look stunning in uniform, wearing make-up and nice jewellery even though it wasn't allowed. She was tall and well-built, long hair and curvy, favouring old fashioned skirts over trousers - her own little rebellion. Most of the boys opted for the long grey skirts that went almost down to their ankles, but Eesh's was like a 1990s nightmare from the Spice Girls days. I can't believe I asked to listen to them. It was so short you could *almost* see everything. Not so long ago girls couldn't even wear trousers at school, and boys didn't much appreciate the practical coolness of a long skirt in hot weather before the world got a little bit warmer, so Eesh's ridiculous belt of

a skirt was designed to stand out. Sewing neon patches to the inside of the rough grey blazers had taken off in a big way last year, as well as colour changing nail polish. That one was a real bitch for the teachers to complain about - it was neon pink one minute and clear the next. *What nail polish, sir?* the chavvy bints could spit in their joyful revolt in being frankly revolting.

Now I was faced with limitless choices. No uniform in the sixth form at Morvale.

It's cornflakes for breakfast today. The list says so. My alarm clock pierced the silence this morning like an air raid siren, like it really had something against me. Why bother getting up? Last night's careless handwriting on today's list reminds me of copying letters off the board at primary school. Disgusting. Nausea rose up in me and formed a lump of potentially failed A Level grades in my throat. I'm choking on an E. I hit snooze and coughed up an F and a U as I thought of the nonsense I'd written on exam papers weeks ago. Did I get the answers the wrong way round? Carbon dioxide when it should have been oxygen, or dramatic irony in the place of a carefully explained juxtaposition. I can't

remember. But then I remembered it was okay, I had my results, that part was over until AS modules. I checked my little grade envelope again like I had every morning since results. Still there, not a mistake.

I scrubbed my hands extra hard before breakfast, the nail brush making its rhythmic scrape over and under my nails, like it's the nail inspector and I'm covered in foreign particles. I'm sure it just tutted. Mum's slipper padded footsteps grew louder and then softer again as she made her way downstairs, graceful and catlike. The sink was full of warm whitish-grey water with flakes of soap floating around like enlarged cells looking to form a cancerous soap mass. I started naming the colony, watching them float with my hands submerged until I realised I hadn't blinked for a while and must look quite mad. Lifting my softened hands out, I pulled the plug and watched Doris, Hatty, and John swirl away into oblivion. A few of the unnamed still clung to the skin so I had to rinse them off. The bar of soap was full of little grooves where I ran the nail brush over it. Drying my hands was a bit pointless - they felt clammy and full. Walking downstairs felt difficult, like I was wearing huge platform boots. I was definitely ill. And I has that Morvale Psych appointment after school.

'Hello, love,' mum chirped. 'I'm making bacon and eggs, do you want some?'

'It's cornflakes today,' I replied in monotone certainty.

'Is it? No one told me.'

She turned back to the frying pan and cracked two eggs into it.

'You alright? Thought you'd be out on your bike or having a run by now.'

'Don't feel like it today, I think I'm ill.'

It felt defeatist to say so.

'Well, a day off won't hurt,' she smiled at me, trying to be all pep and vim. I felt like vom. Suddenly I was really resentful. Does she think I'm lying? I am ill. I'm definitely ill.

'I can't miss school already, we're only a week in.'

It came out in a choke as tears started to come. I didn't want her to see me cry. She turned back from her sizzling pan and looked worried and puffy-eyed from just getting up. Her hair was flat on one side and full on the other, like she didn't move at all as soon as she hit the pillow at night. She came over to the table and put a hand on my forehead.

'You're not hot. I'll make you up a cup of tea.'

'No, it's okay. I didn't sleep well. I'll just lie down a bit longer,' and I ran back upstairs to avoid her noticing my tears. The door slammed just a little too loudly and I threw myself on to the bed crying hard and silent into the pillow. My hand snatched out at the list on the bedside table and I screwed it up into a ball. I threw it fiercely against the wall and it made a limp *cha-chom* noise as it hit first the wall, then the floor. Slinking under the covers and pulling them up over my head I curled into a ball and waited for sleep. I wanted to be in control, not bawling without good reason.

I like archery because it's controlled. People would argue - you could shoot an arrow through someone's head, but seriously, how likely is that? No, all the archery I've ever done has been in a controlled environment. You have all this safety stuff on like goggles and finger protection. Finger protection makes you feel safer and have more control, as though you are an extension of the bow, the equipment. I've been with the school and friends. The instructor tells you when to fire, how to pull back, how to avoid fucking it up. And when you aim and get that bull's-eye you feel so lucid. Like you made it happen, you are that arrow. I needed to be straightened out like a flying arrow, I needed to know what I was aiming for. That's what lists do. I uncurled myself

until I was straight and rigid, and I imagined myself as that arrow. That's all I needed. It was easier to drift when I was straight and sure.

Then fits and starts of falling and waking, running away, killer clowns and inescapable boxes.

I woke up feeling a bit calmer just before lunch time. Shit, lunch time. I hadn't meant to go back to sleep, I should have been in registration and physics, but my other periods were free on Friday mornings. I decided I could still make my afternoon lessons if I hurried up. Mum and dad had both gone to work. I tried calling Lucy but she didn't answer and she wasn't on messenger either. She should have been on lunch, but maybe she was busy. I wanted to chat to someone while I got ready. I thought about trying Eesh - but I couldn't face it. She'd be going on about men and tell me for the thousandth time I should wear make-up. I put on some baggy jeans, converse, and a black jumper. It was bloody freezing.

I sat and thought about it for a while. What's the worst that could happen if I took the whole day off? Would Oxford and Cambridge be notified and cancel my application before it was even in? No. Would anyone at school actually notice? Probably not. I'd never bunked before.

The library felt like the safest option. The village library holds no promise though, too small, too in my face with people saying hello.

Brushing my hair seemed like a waste of time, so I left it beddy. A list free day. A bunking day, even though I did feel a bit ill. I didn't even know what I was going to the library for. I just was. As soon as I stepped outside I knew I was underdressed. The wind made easy work of my jumper. I didn't go back for a coat though. Let the wind have me. It takes about thirty minutes to walk to Morvale town library. About five minutes in I was leaving the estate and heading along the main road. The library woman rode past me on her bike. She rang her bell several times at nothing. I realised I wouldn't normally be able to hear frivolous bell ringing - I'd left my Ears at home. At least I'd remembered a bag. I walked past the Morvale Psych centre. People said all sorts of things about the people who went there, and soon I'd be one of them. I've walked past it week in and week out for years, but never thought I'd have an appointment there. It's grey and miserable, and they scrub the graffiti off regularly.

The bright red hair of the library woman was out of sight. I trudged along half wanting to just go back home. My hand trailed along the top of the low brick wall surrounding

the psych place. I let my knuckles graze. The stinging in my hand and the wind woke me up a little. Despite the crappy weather there were ants everywhere. I tried not to kill any but it was impossible. Somehow I made it to the library although I felt as though a chunk of time had gone missing. The entrance to the library had become a metal 'portal', apparently modern art, which resembled the poor mans version of a stargate. Decorating the edge of the circular portal were the words 'Leave your stress at the door' and something written in Chinese characters. Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath I prepared to leave my stress at the door. I took a step through the portal and stumbled, nearly falling flat on my face. I either tripped over someone else's stress, or that thing wasn't a perfect circle. I don't think anyone saw.

What would Lucy read, I wondered as I started browsing aimlessly in biographies. She'd read some intense, obscure novel or a study in psychosis. Or poetry. Dead-tree or normal? I've seen her with dead-tree, but she must read electronic stuff too. New books. But classics looked game. I picked out things I'd never heard of in an attempt to break my usual focused hunting to find exactly what I came in for. Lucy's spontaneity wasn't easy to emulate. I bet she bunks off all the time. She'd flick her hair and gracefully

extract only the most intelligent and artsy choices, books so thick they looked heavier than she did. I plucked books with exaggerated artiness, flouncing and cherry-picking the juiciest looking volumes. A succulent Sade, mmm, Kafka - that sounds delicious. Studies in Hysteria by Freud. Thomas Hardy. That sounded like a solid name. I was almost dancing as I revelled in randomness, holding my stack of books under my arm like a severed head. As I smoothly bent over to pick the complete novels of George Orwell from its branch a hand on my shoulder made me fluff it and I fell into the shelf, dropping my severed head on the floor and only just managing to right the shelf before it could wobble over into hell.

'You scared the shit out of me!' I said too loudly at Lucy as she scooped up the books.

'If you will choose your books based on ballet, what do you expect? You were looking a bit crazy.'
Red spread like a blood stain across my cheeks.

'I definitely recommend the de Sade,' she said with approval. 'Not choices I expected from you. What's bought this on? And bunking? My my.'

'I just fancied a change I 'spose. I was trying to pick things I wouldn't normally. Like... an experiment.' An in experiment in you, I thought.

'Yes, well I've read all these except the Hardy. Let me know what you think of it.'

'I will. So, how are you? Haven't seen you for a while.'

She looked paler than usual, ghostly. I often wondered if she ate, she had an air of malnutrition. I knew that things were weird at home for her but she kept a lot of it to herself.

We've vaguely known each other ever since we started at Morvale High, but didn't really talk properly until about six months ago. I'd gone to the school library one lunch time as I wasn't in the mood to sit with Eesh and that lot - they wanted to watch the boys playing football but it was cold and windy. My face still ached with the memory of the football that smacked into it the week before, the laughter still ringing in my ears. Morvale High's library is somewhat underfed. They don't have the money to go fully digital, so we've still got dead-tree hanging around. Unluckily a lot of it is factually out of date. There's not much I haven't read, or would want to anymore. I used to read Blunt Horrors, but then I realised they were all the same. I was there reading about cells and trying to memorize a diagram for a biology test.

The library is the general hang out for the bullied, depressed, or the genuine intellectuals who usually seem to belong to the first two groups as well. There's not many tables what with budget cuts, vandalism, and the Morvale Neon graffiti 'problem'. Usually I end up sitting with some fellow silent losers, a curt nod of recognition before we immerse ourselves in books to forget our sins. On this particular day I had the luxury of my own table, or so I thought. I liked this table - on top it was actually clean, grey, and free of scrawl, but when I dropped a pencil and dived under to pick it up I was taken aback by the Neon Morvale messages underneath. Maybe it was the only way to arrange anything privately. Then Lucy came along gripping a huge, chunky novel and sat next to me.

'Mind if I sit here? There's no where else,' she said.

'Go ahead.'

My heart beat got faster. Was she looking to start on me?

Nobody *just* sits next to me.

'You might as well get an e-book or go online if it's biology. They probably still think homosexuality is a disease in that book.'

My face was heating up. Her tone revealed nothing.

'In America,' she continued, 'same-sex couples can't get married you know. Hard to believe. First they could,

then they couldn't, then they could again, and now... it's a joke. But then we're not so liberal here, are we? I mean, we say we are and then what happens-' she spread her hands, as though I should know the answer. '-then some old-school fascists beat up a lesbian in the street. You've done it wrong by the way. Might be an idea to just copy it out a few times over.'

I thought I was copying it out. What had I missed now? And she was right. Eyes are pretty expensive, the next in a long line of body mods. They go in your Ears - bit of a strange concept when you think about it. At least dead-tree books have travelled. Someone else as sad and unfashionable as me read this book in 2005 or whenever it was printed. They copied out this diagram and hoped for the best. I made a mental note to look up the word 'fascists'.

'Take my message address,' she said rummaging in her bag for something to write on. 'We should meet up.'

'Er... okay.' I wondered if it was a trick. The crispness of her shirt was making me feel unusual. It was neater than anything I could manage. Brighter. Cleaner. A thrill of envy went through me.

'Do you iron your own shirts?' I blurted out with instant regret. Someone shhhh-ed me from the other side of the room. Lucy considered the question. Her face was smooth

too, like she'd ironed out the usual teenage flaws. She looked right into my eyes. She held my gaze, letting me see all the different colours in her iris. After a few seconds I couldn't do it anymore and looked back to my book. As soon as I broke the stare she spoke.

'Yes.' Then she handed me her message address and her cool, bony hand brushed against mine. She went back to her book and the conversation was obviously over. I tried to get back to my cell, but her presence had thrown me off. I completely fucked up that particular test later the same afternoon.

Back in Morvale town library the air was thick with computer heat and dust and the obvious lack of air conditioning. A few fans could be heard whirring but they were more decorative than truly functional.

'I'm alright I suppose,' said Lucy as she handed me back the books. 'I've just been busy with things at home. Nice dancing, by the way.' She sounded quite sincere.

'Want to come over to mine when you're done here?' She nodded and followed me to a check-out point. Evidently she was done already as she walked out with me.

'Try not to fall over on your way out,' she said with a smirk, nudging me with her elbow.

Bugger.