

We look out the window, down into the yard where the shadows of children run and scream under the sun. They go in all directions, in straight lines and zigzags until they stop at the walls, turn around and start running again. We rest our head against the glass and close our eyes. Sometimes we wish we could go outside and join them. Sometimes we wish we could play soldiers, march in time, fire our guns. Sometimes we wish we had a tank that we could drive at the walls to knock them down.

But we can't.

No.

Because we can't drive.

—

And we haven't got a tank.

!

A bell rings. A hooter hoots. We open our eyes, see the children walk across the yard towards us and form into a line.

A bolt slides, a key clunks, the children shuffle forward. We stand up on tiptoe and watch the last one disappear through the door beneath our window. Even though the bell has stopped we can still hear it ringing in our ears.

We walk over to our bed, lie down, stare at the

cracks in the ceiling, the cobwebs that stretch from the light bulb to the corners. Footsteps and shouts echo through the corridors and halls. Our heart starts to thud, our head thuds harder.

This is the place where we live.

This is the place where they keep us. This is the place we have been trying to escape from for the last three years of our lives.

Because our dad has gone missing.

Yes.

He's gone to the moon and we've got to find him.

Who's telling this story?

We are!

Ha!

Ha!

A door slams shut. We roll over and face the wall and think about the times we have tried to escape. How the police always catch us. They ask us what's the point? What's the point in running away when we know they will always find us?

Because one day they won't?

Exactly.

So we have to keep trying?

Of course—

We screw up our eyes as a pain shoots through the middle of our head like a bullet from a rifle.

It hurts.

I know.

We put our hands over our ears and curl into a ball.

It's one of our headaches.

It's the first sign of our madness.

. . . *What's the second?*

—

What's the second?

The pain shoots again.

You know.

I don't.

Remember what Dad used to say?

Sporry wurry sputnik?

No, not that.

Don't talk when the planes fly?

Yes . . . and the third?

—

A sound grates in the middle of our head like someone with a spade is trying to dig us out from the inside. We press our hands tighter until our blood thuds through our palms. We know the third sign of our madness, but we can't tell anyone.

Except them.

?

Our readers.

What's the third sign of our madness?

What's the third sign of your madness?

The third sign of our madness is me talking to you even though I know you are dead.

—

—
We put our head in our hands.

—
I'm sorry . . .

—
I had to tell them.

It's OK.

But it's not really?

No.

—
—
We lie on our bed and wait for the pain to go away.

—
—
Can we show them our book now?

?

Can we?

I think we should just lie here.

We lift our head and reach under our pillow.

!

We've writ a book.

We've written a book. Our mum told us to write it six years ago during the hot summer.

We did it on the kitchen table every evening after we'd finished tea.

That's why it's crumpled at the edges.

That's why it's covered in baked beans.

Because you were too lazy to mop them up.

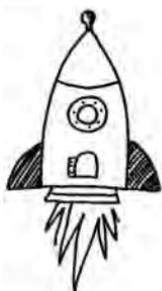
I'm lazy—

He's very lazy.

I only drew the pictures, he wrote the words.

—

Here's one of Dad's rocket.



It's not actually Dad's rocket.

But it's one just like it?

It's as close to the truth as we can get.

And that's important?

Yes. Mum said everything had to be true. She said our book should be like a Bible, and that we were her disciples.

She named us after them.

My name is Tom.

My name is Jack.

Tomorrow we will be eighteen.

Not me.

No, not you.

Tomorrow we will be eighteen and they will open the gates and let us out.

Chapter One

The moon hangs high in the sky and we wish we were on it. That's where Dad said he had gone. It's 240,000 miles away, beyond the clouds, beyond the jet stream and the atmosphere, but if we reach out and press our finger against the glass we can touch it. It's smooth.

And it's cold.

It took Dad thirteen hours to get there in his rocket. If we stole a car and drove at sixty miles an hour we'd get there in 167 days.

But we haven't got a car.

No.

And we wouldn't steal one.

Do you have to interrupt all the time?

But—

It's hypothetical.

?

It means we can't actually do it.

But I saw it in a film . . . a man, and a lady, and two children.

That was fantasy.

?

Magic.

Oh.

We think for a while without talking. Cars can't fly, but sometimes it doesn't hurt to imagine. All we need is FTT.

Flight, thrust and tragedy!

Trajectory.

Oh, isn't it the same thing?

No, not really.

But we're still going to find him?

Yes.

Tomorrow we will go out the gates without being chased. Tomorrow no one can tell us when to eat or where to go. We will be able to talk as much as we like, shout at each other and tell jokes.

We can run up hills and roll back down them. We can go to the park, play on the swings and roundabouts.

We can lie on the bank, drink beer, smoke cigarettes and get off with girls.

?

You can close our eyes.

Thanks.

A cloud creeps across the moon, makes us feel cold. We shiver, our breath plumes out onto the glass and turns the stars blurry. We wipe the window with the sleeve of our pyjamas, but the night sky has now disappeared into fog.

I think we should go to bed now.

'I wish you fucking would!'

We jump and turn away from the window. Martin Frost sits up in his bed in the corner, his eyes piercing through the dark. We don't like him.

Because he swears a lot?

Because he killed his sister.

He said it was an accident.

Ha!

What?

Jack, all murderers tell lies.

But he said she slipped on a banana.

He told me it was a pool of water.

It happened in the kitchen.

—

We don't go to the kitchen.

No. Especially not with him.

Especially not with a knife—

'Jesus, are you going to keep mumbling all fucking night?'

Sorry.

Sorry, Frost.

Sorry—

We put our hand over our mouth to stop our words coming out.

Frost lies back on his bed, pulls his blanket up to his chin. His feet stick out the end like he's in a mortuary.

What's a mortuary?

It's where you go when you're dead.

But he's not dead.

No, but we wish he was.

Frost clamps his pillow around his ugly head, rolls over and faces the wall. 'Aaaaaaarghhhhhhh!' he shouts.

Ha!

What?

You said he was ugly.

His eyes are too close together.

Like an eagle.

Like a bald eagle. They shaved off his hair because he had lice.

And he smells of fish.

!

But he does . . . sometimes . . . in the mornings . . .

But we don't tell him.

No.

We look back out the window, down into the garden where the shadows of tall trees crawl across the grass to the house. Everything that was dark has just turned darker. Everything that was cold has just turned colder. The hills are like clouds, and the clouds are like monsters.

I'm scared.

I'm excited.

We are scared and excited. There's a light on a hill with only darkness between us and it. It flickers on and off like a lighthouse.

Because we're on an island.

Because we're in the middle of nowhere . . . It's like Alcatraz without water.

What's that?

It's a prison in America.

The one with sharks?

Yes.

Are there sharks here?

No, only Mrs Unster.

Ha!

Shush! She'll hear us.

We stop talking and listen. Mrs Unster's room is below ours. Her radio is playing. She comes up and checks on us every night, just to make sure we are still here. She checks every room. The house is full of rooms.

And the rooms are full of beds.

And the beds are full of children.

Children like us.

'I fucking give up!'

And children like Frost.

—

Ha!

Our laughter echoes against the window.

Shush!

But can we tell them about the children?

—

. . . *And the TV?*

OK . . . We all argue about what is on TV. There's only one TV.

It's black-and-white.

One black-and-white TV, twenty-six children.

Not including me.

Not including us . . . We don't get to watch TV, the others stand in front of it and block our view. They say it's only the news, but we have to watch it to know when the next mission will go into space. We complained.

I shouted.

—

And I screamed. Aaaaaaargh!

'Jesus fuck!'

Ooops!

Sorry, Frost . . . but it was something like that.

It made our throat sore.

It made our ears bleed.

It didn't work.

They put us in here with Frost.

And I'm scared.

And I'm excited.

We already said that.

I know; sometimes it doesn't hurt to say things twice.

Like Dad did . . . Sporry wurry sputnik! Sporry wurry sputnik! Ha! It got on Mum's nerves.

Like you get on mine.

!

The wind blows through the trees, rattles the window. A draught tickles our neck and makes us shiver. We hug ourself and try to get warm, but our

blanket is damp and heavy and itches against our skin. We yawn. We are tired, but we can't go to sleep because we need to start packing. We turn to face our bed, it's long and skinny and moves in the night.

Because I wriggle.

Because it's got wheels like the beds in hospitals. We go to sleep in the middle of the room, and when we wake up we're by the door. Frost can't get out.

And Mrs Unster can't get in.

It's our barricade, but she barges the door and still gets through.

Because she's like an elephant. One day she fell—

We've not got time for that now.

Sorry.

We walk over to Frost. He hasn't moved for a while. We lean over and hear him breathing, see a picture by the side of his head, crumpled on his pillow. We try to look closer. Frost grunts and rolls over. The picture falls down onto his bed. We pick it up, see five people sat eating fish and chips on a wall. His mum, his dad, his brother, his sister, and Frost smiling, sitting in the middle. We look at Frost, then back at his picture and wonder how someone who looked so happy can have turned into someone so sad.

—

—

We put the picture back on his pillow and creep back to our bed.

Our clothes are piled at the foot end – three pairs of trousers with holes in the knees, four pairs of socks with holes in the toes. We reach under the bed, pull out our suitcase and pack blindly in the dark. We're not sure we need all our jumpers, they take up too much space and it's the middle of summer.

But it gets cold at night.

Yes.

We wear one, pack one and leave the third behind. Shoes are easier, we've only got one pair and we've got them on. We squash all the clothes in one side and look around the room.

Don't forget my crayons.

They're already in there.

And my Lego.

OK.

What about our aeroplanes?

They're under the bed.

But we're taking them?

Yes.

We reach under the bed and pull out a cardboard box. We put it on our blanket and lift sheets of newspaper out. Underneath are our model aeroplanes with drop-down wheels and stickers on the wings – Hawkers, Hurricane and Tempest. Sea Otter and Spitfires, Supermarines.

Fighters.

And bombers.

Our planes came in boxes with pictures of them on the front, flying between the clouds with fire burning from their engines. Dad used to open the box and lay out the pieces of plastic in a line on the table. He used to show us the stickers and put them in a saucer of water. They floated on the top and we'd pick them up on our fingers and stick them onto our planes.

We put swastikas on the Spitfires.

We covered the Messerschmitts with Union Jacks.

Dad said that was wrong.

He peeled them off and swapped them over. We didn't think it mattered. We thought they were just decorations to brighten up the grey. We didn't know it was so people knew who were their enemies and who were their friends.

We reach back into our suitcase and pull out a Lancaster: it's the heaviest and the biggest. We lift it up into the sky, stand on tiptoe and fly it from our bed to the door—

Oh no, do we have to fly the planes again?

I like it.

But we're too old.

I'm not.

We fly over Frost, back to the window, bank left and start the circuit again. The Lancaster gets heavy, makes our arm ache. We need to save fuel, fly higher, lighten the load.

Bandits below, bandits below!

We need to stop.

We only just started.

We'll wake Frost. We'll disturb Mrs Unster.

Who cares?

Our planes soar high up towards the ceiling. We bank and turn. Spin our wings and slide our tail.

Eeeeeeeeeeeonnng!

We release the hatches and drop bombs that scream through the night sky.

Boooooooooombhhhh! Boooooooooombhhhh!

They explode below us into fragments of burning light.

Oh shit!

That's a bad word.

Oh fuck!

That's worse.

!

Have we woken Frost?

No, we've bombed Mrs Unster.

Ha!

Shush!

Mrs Unster turns her radio up louder.

Under fire! Under enemy fire!

We climb high, bank left, bank right, dodge the white lines of tracer bullets, dodge the red splinters of shells. We clamber onto our bed, stall in the air, dump the last of our bombs and have a dogfight with the light bulb.

We should stop now.

Mayday! Mayday!

!

The bed moves, we wobble, the Lancaster veers out of control, takes bullets in its wings, smashes into the light bulb.

Oh no!

Oh fuck!

You shouldn't say that w—

'You noisy fucking bastard.'

He shouldn't say those words, either.

Bits of glass shower around our head and fall down onto our bed. Frost jumps up, thuds across the boards towards us.

'I'll kill you. I'll fucking kill you . . . Every fucking night . . . Every . . . fucking . . . night.'

We run to the window, along the wall, crawl under our bed. Frost crawls after us, tells us we're a bastard and grabs at our ankles. He pulls off our shoes, throws them at us.

Ha! Missed.

They go over our head and smack against the door. We jump on his bed. He jumps up, opens his arms like a bat and traps us in the corner. We curl up into a ball. Frost punches us on the head, sticks his elbows in our ribs, puts his knee into our stomach. Our breath shoots out of our body.

It hurts.

I know.

We want to cry.

No, we don't.

We jump up and push him against the wall. He kicks us, we kick him. He grabs at our face, gets a grip on our hair. We reach for his throat, curl our fingers around his neck, press our thumbs on his Adam's apple. His eyes bulge. We squeeze tighter. He makes a noise like a cat being sick. The bed moves away from the wall. We fall over the top of his bedstead onto the floor. We roll over and over, one moment we are on top of him, the next he is on top of us. Shards of glass stick in our back. We hold on tight, turn away when he dribbles spit onto our face.

'You bast—'

The music turns off.

We stop.

We listen.

We stare at Frost.

He stares at us.

We pant like dogs.

A door clicks open. A door slams shut. We hear footsteps land heavily at the bottom of the stairs, then get heavier and louder the closer they get to the top. Frost jumps up, runs across the room and climbs into his bed. We lift up our case, put the Lancaster inside and close the lid. The footsteps thud along the landing. A shadow stops, blocks the light under the door. We

climb into bed, lie down and pull our blanket over our head.

I can't breathe.

Shush!

The door clicks open. We spy through a hole in the blanket. Mrs Unster's body blocks the doorway. The only place that light gets through is either side of her head. She sucks in air and then blows it back out.

Has she got asthma too?

No, she's just fat.

Oh.

'What you doing?'

—

—

'I said, what you doing?'

—

—

'I know you awake. I hear you muttering . . . So, what you do?'

We slide our blanket off our head, put our hand over our eyes to shade them from the light.

Nothing.

Nothing, Mrs Unster.

'Nothing . . . Always you say nothing.' She turns and looks at the lump that is Frost in his bed. He snores loudly under his covers. 'I hope all your mumbling not wake Martin.'

Frost rolls over, stretches and yawns. ‘. . . Uhhh . . .
What’s that?’

‘He wake you?’

Frost sits up and rubs his eyes. ‘Yeah . . . they did
. . . He did . . . Always talking . . . and more bombs,
Mrs Unster. I heard lots of bombs.’ The whites of his
teeth catch the light.

It was only Hamburg—

Shush!

. . . *And Berlin.*

‘And still he doesn’t stop.’ Mrs Unster’s fat sucks
away from the door frame, shards of glass crack under
her feet as she walks towards us. She stops and looks
up at the light bulb and sighs.

‘You damage again?’

It wasn’t our fault. It was an accident.

‘Always you say it nothing. Always you say it accident.’
She stands and stares at us. We stare back.

We . . . We didn’t bomb Moscow.

!

Mrs Unster shakes her head, turns away, closes the
door behind her, then thuds down the stairs.

Frost sniggers. We hear the sound of trumpets,
cymbals and drums coming up through the floor-
boards. They shake our bed, rumble through our body.
It gets louder and louder until it feels like we are
surrounded by an army of marching soldiers.

I think you upset her.

Me? It was you that said Moscow.

That's where she used to live.

She lived in Latvia.

Isn't that the same?

No.

'Bloody nutter!' Frost rolls over and faces the wall.

We wait for five minutes, then get out of bed and start packing again. We park the aeroplanes in the corner of our case, wedge them together, slide wing under wing until the tips touch the fuselage. We get out our rockets. They are easier to pack, but we have to be careful. Dad used to tell us they were more delicate than planes, that they were more sensitive to the wind direction and pressure. We know we have to protect them. We wrap them in our jumper and then put the jumper in the case.

Are we packing our book too?

No, we'll carry it.

Can't we read it now then?

I think it's too late.

It's not.

We walk over to the window and angle our watch to the moon.

. . . Ten to two?

Ten past ten.

So it's not too late?

It is.

What about if we just read one of Dad's letters?

No.

I'll get the torch.

!

We tiptoe across the boards and find the torch on the chair by the piss-pot. We creep back, put our blanket over our head and sit cross-legged on the bed.

Like we are in assembly.

Like we are Red Indians around a fire.

We turn on the torch, it shines on the cover, on the drawing of us standing with Mum and Dad in front of our house. Dad's stood tall, smiling with his uniform on, Mum is smiling, wearing a flowery dress, and we are standing in between them with our hair in our eyes.

?

What's wrong?

I don't think our hair was that yellow.

It was, people used to say you looked pretty.

!

They said you looked like a girl. Ha!

That's all right.

?

I used to tell them you were my sister.

Oh.

—

—

We hold our book. It took six months to write, but we have been reading it for the last three years. Dr Smith tells us it's part of our therapy, that reading about our past

might help us get better. He says one day we will write another chapter, when everything is quiet and all our headaches are gone.

Are we going to write it now?

No.

?

Because it's not quiet yet.

Oh.

We open the cover and flick through the pages. Some of them have fallen out and been stuck back in, some of them are torn, and on some of them the ink and pictures have started to fade away. We flick past our pictures, past the maps that Dad left us. The blanket weighs heavy on our head. Where it has holes, the wind comes through; where our clothes have holes, we itch.

I can't breathe . . . My asthma.

We lift the blanket, turn it round so that the hole we spied through is now by our mouth.

Better?

Yes.

Our torch flickers bright, then starts to fade. We shake it to make it come back to life. An envelope slides out from our book and lands between our legs.

Are we going to read this one?

Yes. It might be an omen.

?

It might have fallen out for a reason.

Oh.

We look at the envelope, all the corners are bent and Dad's writing is scrawled across the front. We remember the day we first saw the letter on the mat by the front door at the bottom of the stairs.

I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering.

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking. We picked it up, ran through the hall into the kitchen and gave it to Mum. She told us to calm down, that we wouldn't be able to read the letter if we didn't stand still.

I wish she—

I know.

—

—

—

We put our torch under our chin and open a letter from the moon.