

## THE BONE CLOCKS

‘An epic in many voices featuring supernatural beings, rips in reality and a global battle between good and evil. Yet Mitchell’s **superlative** prose makes this much more than a tall tale: the novel also takes in family love and loss, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a horribly plausible near-future in which the end of oil is catapulting the world towards barbarism’

*Guardian*

‘Stunning, funny, sad, prophetic, fantastical, satirical, achingly real and **gloriously fictitious** . . . a compendium of things the novel can do.’

Stuart Kelly, *Scotsman*

‘He writes with a furious intensity and slapped-awake vitality, with **a delight in language** and all the rabbit holes of experience’

Pico Iyer, *New York Times Book Review*

‘A mind-spinning, genre-splicing  
time-travelling **epic**’

James Kidd, *Independent on Sunday*

‘Intellectually rigorous and **stunningly imaginative** . . . a rich and dense, inventive and witty thriller’

Caroline Jowett, *Daily Express*

‘His most sinewy, fine and full book to date, a Mobius strip-tripping **great** novel that will reward bleary-eyed rereading’

Randy Boyagoda, *Financial Times*

‘Everything you could possibly want from **a conjuror at the height of his powers** . . . [It] affords its readers the singular gift of reading – the wish to stay put and to be nowhere else but here.’

Derek Thompson, *Atlantic*

‘I desperately wanted to know what happens to Holly . . . a real life of meaning and emotion’

Louise Jury, *Independent*

‘Like Mitchell’s epic novel *Cloud Atlas*, this one mixes believable realism with big fantasy, while focusing more tightly on one woman’s story and making sure we care about her every step of the way . . . It’s massively bold and ambitious, but also thoroughly readable, **funny and moving**.’

Boyd Hilton, *Heat*

‘I was completely blown away . . . an incredibly explosive, surprising, intelligent, dark and **magical** story.’

Lucy Frith, *Stylist*

‘600 pages of metafictional shenanigans in relentlessly **brilliant** prose . . . a whopper of a story’

Ursula K Le Guin, *Guardian*

‘**Unmissable**’ *Psychologies*

‘When a writer creates a world in which centuries-dead reincarnated souls are at war – and makes it entirely believable – you know you’re in the hands of a master . . . Every page **fizzes with energy** and humour. Wildly imaginative and truly magical, this is a big, chunky feast of a book’

Deirdre O’Brien, *Sunday Mirror*

‘At once a gripping thriller and a far-out fantasy, a **brilliant** mash-up that pulsates with energy, satire and wit.’

Sebastian Shakespeare, *Tatler*

‘It might just become the 1984 of the climate change movement.’

David Ignatius, *Washington Post*

‘Such enormous good fun it takes a few days to realize how serious its intent is . . . He writes with such a **luminous** clarity and pitch-perfect voice he can basically lead a reader anywhere he wishes.’

John Freeman, *Boston Globe*

‘Wild, funny, terrifying . . . a slipstream **masterpiece** all its own’

*Esquire*

‘David Mitchell is a **superb storyteller** . . . You feel that he can do anything he wants, in a variety of modes, and still convince.’

James Wood, *New Yorker*

‘Mitchell’s **mesmerizing** saga is evidence of the power of story to transport us, and even to stop time entirely.’

Elissa Schappell, *Vanity Fair*



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## DAVID MITCHELL

Born in 1969, David Mitchell grew up in Worcestershire. After graduating from Kent University, he taught English in Japan, where he wrote his first novel, *Ghostwritten*. Published in 1999, it was awarded the *Mail on Sunday*/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award. His second novel, *numberdream*, was shortlisted for the Booker and James Tait Black Memorial prizes, and in 2003, he was selected as one of *Granta's* Best Young British Novelists. His third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial and South Bank Show Literature prizes and the Richard & Judy Best Read of the Year. It was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and adapted for film in 2012. It was followed by *Black Swan Green*, shortlisted for the Costa Novel of the Year Award, and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, which was a No. 1 *Sunday Times* bestseller. Both were also longlisted for the Booker.

In 2013, *The Reason I Jump: One Boy's Voice From the Silence of Autism* by Naoki Higashida was published in a translation from the Japanese by David Mitchell and KA Yoshida. David Mitchell's sixth novel, *The Bone Clocks*, was published by Sceptre in 2014.

He lives with his wife and their two children in Ireland.

THE  
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CLOCKS  
David Mitchell

  
SCEPTRE

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For Noah

30 June

I fling open my bedroom curtains, and there's the thirsty sky and the wide river full of ships and boats and stuff, but I'm already thinking of Vinny's chocolatey eyes, shampoo down Vinny's back, beads of sweat on Vinny's shoulders, and Vinny's sly laugh, and by now my heart's going mental and, God, I wish I was waking up at Vinny's place in Peacock Street and not in my own stupid bedroom. Last night, the words just said themselves, 'Christ, I really love you, Vin,' and Vinny puffed out a cloud of smoke and did this Prince Charles voice, 'One must say, one's frightfully partial to spending time with you too, Holly Sykes,' and I nearly weed myself laughing, though I was a bit narked he didn't say, 'I love you too,' back. If I'm honest. Still, boyfriends act goofy to hide stuff, any magazine'll tell you. Wish I could phone him right now. Wish they'd invent phones you can speak to anyone anywhere anytime on. He'll be riding his Norton to work in Rochester right now, in his leather jacket with LED ZEP spelt out in silver studs. Come September, when I turn sixteen, he'll take me out on his Norton.

Someone slams a cupboard door, below.

Mam. No one else'd dare slam a door like that.

*Suppose she's found out?* says a twisted voice.

No. We've been too careful, me and Vinny.

She's menopausal, is Mam. That'll be it.

Talking Heads' *Fear of Music* is on my record player, so I lower the stylus. Vinny bought me this LP, the second Saturday we met at Magic Bus Records. It's an amazing record. I like 'Heaven' and 'Memories Can't Wait' but there's not a weak track on it. Vinny's been to New York and actually saw Talking Heads, live. His mate Dan was on security and got Vinny backstage after the gig, and he hung out with David Byrne and the band. If he goes back next year, he's taking me. I get dressed, finding each love bite and wishing I could go to Vinny's tonight, but



he's meeting a bunch of mates in Dover. Men hate it when women act jealous, so I pretend not to be. My best friend Stella's gone to London to hunt for second-hand clothes at Camden Market. Mam says I'm still too young to go to London without an adult so Stella took Ali Jessop instead. My biggest thrill today'll be hoovering the bar to earn my three pounds pocket money. Whoopy-doo. Then I've got next week's exams to revise for. But for two pins I'd hand in blank papers and tell school where to shove Pythagoras triangles and *Lord of the Flies* and their life cycles of worms. I might, too.

Yeah. I might just do that.

Down in the kitchen, the atmosphere's like Antarctica. 'Morning,' I say, but only Jacko looks up from the window-seat where he's drawing. Sharon's through in the lounge part, watching a cartoon. Dad's downstairs in the hallway, talking with the delivery guy – the truck from the brewery's grumbling away in front of the pub. Mam's chopping cooking apples into cubes, giving me the silent treatment. I'm supposed to say, 'What's wrong, Mam, what have I done?' but sod that for a game of soldiers. Obviously she noticed I was back late last night, but I'll let her raise the topic. I pour some milk over my Weetabix and take it to the table. Mam clangs the lid onto the pan and comes over. 'Right. What have you got to say for yourself?'

'Good morning to you too, Mam. Another hot day.'

'What have you got to *say* for yourself, young lady?'

If in doubt, act innocent. 'Bout what exactly?'

Her eyes go all snaky. 'What time did you get home?'

'Okay, okay, so I was a bit late, *sorry*.'

'Two hours isn't "a bit late". Where were you?'

I munch my Weetabix. 'Stella's. Lost track of time.'

'Well, that's peculiar, now, it really is. At ten o'clock I phoned Stella's mam to find out where the hell you were, and guess what? You'd left before eight. So who's the liar here, Holly? You or her?'

*Shit.* 'After leaving Stella's, I went for a walk.'

'And where did your walk take you to?'

I sharpen each word. 'Along the river, all right?'

'Upstream or downstream, was it, this little walk?'

I let a silence go by. 'What *diff*rence does it make?'

There're some cartoon explosions on the telly. Mam tells my sister, 'Turn that thing off and shut the door behind you, Sharon.'

'That's not fair! Holly's the one getting told off.'

'*Now*, Sharon. And you too, Jacko, I want—' But Jacko's already vanished. When Sharon's left, Mam takes up the attack again: 'All alone, were you, on your "walk"?''

Why this nasty feeling she's setting me up? 'Yeah.'

'How far d'you get on your "walk", then, all alone?'

'What – you want miles or kilometres?'

'Well, perhaps your little walk took you up Peacock Street, to a certain someone called Vincent Costello?' The kitchen sort of swirls, and through the window, on the Essex shore of the river, a tiny stick-man's lifting his bike off the ferry. 'Lost for words all of a sudden? Let me jog your memory: ten o'clock last night, closing the blinds, front window, wearing a T-shirt and not a lot else.'

Yes, I did go downstairs to get Vinny a lager. Yes, I did lower the blind in the front room. Yes, someone did walk by. Relax, I'd told myself. What's the chances of one stranger recognising me? Mam's expecting me to crumple, but I don't. 'You're wasted as a barmaid, Mam. You ought to be handling supergrasses for MI5.'

Mam gives me the Kath Sykes Filthy Glare. 'How old is he?'

Now I fold my arms. 'None of your business.'

Mam's eyes go slitty. 'Twenty-four, apparently.'

'If you already know, why're you asking?'

'Because a twenty-four-year-old man interfering with a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl is illegal. He could go to prison.'

'I'll be sixteen in September, and *I* reckon the Kent Police have bigger fish to fry. I'm old enough to make up my own mind about my relationships.'

Mam lights one of her Marlboro Reds. I'd kill for one. 'When I tell your father, he'll flay this Costello fella alive.'

Sure, Dad has to persuade piss-artists off the premises from

time to time, all landlords do, but he's not the flaying-anyone-alive type. 'Brendan was fifteen when he was going out with Mandy Fry, and if you think they were just holding hands on the swings, they weren't. Don't recall him getting the "You could go to prison" treatment.'

She spells it out like I'm a moron: 'It's – different – for – boys.'

I do an I-do-not-believe-what-I'm-hearing snort.

'I'm telling you now, Holly, you'll be seeing this . . . car salesman again over my dead body.'

'Actually, Mam, I'll bloody see who I bloody well *want!*'

'New rules.' Mam stubs out her fag. 'I'm taking you to school and fetching you back *in the van*. You don't set foot outside unless it's with me, your father, Brendan or Ruth. If I *glimpse* this cradle-snatcher anywhere near here, I'll be on the blower to the police to press charges – yes, I *will*, so help me, God. And – *and* – I'll call his employer and let them know that he's seducing underage schoolgirls.'

Big fat seconds ooze by while all of this sinks in.

My tear ducts start twitching but there's no *way* I'm giving Mrs Hitler the pleasure. 'This isn't Saudi Arabia! You can't lock me up!'

'Live under our roof, you obey our rules. When *I* was your age—'

'Yeah yeah yeah, you had twenty brothers and thirty sisters and forty grandparents and fifty acres of spuds to dig 'cause that was how life was in Auld *feckin'* Oireland but this is England, Mam, *England!* And it's the 1980s and if life was so *feckin'* glorious in that West Cork *bog* why did you *feckin'* bother even coming to—'

*Whack!* Smack over the left side of my face.

We look at each other: me, trembling with shock, and Mam, angrier than I've ever seen her, and – I reckon – knowing she's just broken something that'll never be mended. I leave the room without a word, as if I've just won an argument.

I only cry a bit, and it's shocked crying, not boo-hoo crying, and when I'm done I go to the mirror. My eyes're a bit puffy,

but a bit of eye-liner soon sorts that out . . . Dab of lippy, bit of blusher . . . Sorted. The girl in the mirror's a woman, with her cropped black hair, her *Quadrophenia* T-shirt, her black jeans. 'I've got news for you,' she says. 'You're moving in with Vinny today.' I start listing the reasons why I can't, and stop. 'Yes,' I agree, giddy and calm at once. I'm leaving school, as well. As from now. The summer holidays'll be here before the truancy officer can fart, and I'm sixteen in September, and then it's stuff you, Windmill Hill Comprehensive. Do I dare?

I dare. Pack, then. Pack what? Whatever'll fit into my big duffel bag. Underwear, bras, T-shirts, my bomber jacket; make-up case and the Oxo tin with my bracelets and necklaces in. Toothbrush and a handful of tampons – my period's a bit late so it should start, like, any hour now. Money. I count up £13.85 saved in notes and coins. I've £80 more in my TSB bank book. It's not like Vinny'll charge me rent, and I'll look for a job next week. Babysitting, working in the market, waitressing: there's loads of ways to earn a few quid. What about my LPs? I can't lug the whole collection over to Peacock Street now, and Mam's quite capable of dumping them at the Oxfam shop out of spite, so I just take *Fear of Music*, wrapping it carefully in my bomber jacket and putting it into my bag so it won't get bent. I hide the others under the loose floorboard, just for now, but as I'm putting the carpet back, I get the fright of my life: Jacko's watching me from the doorway. He's still in his *Thunderbirds* pyjamas and slippers.

I tell him, 'Mister, you just gave me a heart-attack.'

'You're going.' Jacko's got this not-quite-here voice.

'Just between us, yes, I am. But not far, don't worry.'

'I've made you a souvenir, to remember me by.' Jacko hands me a circle of cardboard – a flattened Dairylea cheese box with a maze drawn on. He's mad about mazes, is Jacko: it's all these *Dungeons & Dragons* books him and Sharon read. The one Jacko's drawn's actually dead simple by his standards, made of eight or nine circles inside each other. 'Take it,' he tells me. 'It's diabolical.'

'It doesn't look all that bad to me.'

"'Diabolical" means "satanic", sis.'

'Why's your maze so satanic, then?'

'The Dusk follows you as you go through it. If it touches you, you cease to exist, so one wrong turn down a dead-end, that's the end of you. That's why you have to learn the labyrinth by heart.'

Christ, I don't half have a freaky little brother. 'Right. Well, thanks, Jacko. Look, I've got a few things to—'

Jacko holds my wrist. 'Learn this labyrinth, Holly. Indulge your freaky little brother. Please.'

That jolts me a bit. 'Mister, you're acting all weird.'

'Promise me you'll memorise the path through it, so if you ever needed to, you could navigate it in the darkness. *Please*.'

My friends' little brothers are all into Scalextric or BMX or Top Trumps – why do I get one who does this and says words like 'navigate' and 'diabolical'? Christ only knows how he'll survive in Gravesend if he's gay. I muss his hair. 'Okay, I promise to learn your maze off by heart.' Then Jacko hugs me, which is weird 'cause Jacko's not a huggy kid. 'Hey, I'm not going far . . . You'll understand when you're older, and—'

'You're moving in with your boyfriend.'

By now I shouldn't be surprised. 'Yeah.'

'Take care of yourself, Holly.'

'Vinnny's nice. Once Mam's got used to the idea, we'll see each other – I mean, we still saw Brendan after he married Ruth, yeah?'

But Jacko just puts the cardboard lid with his maze on deep into my duffel bag, gives me one last look, and disappears.

Mam appears with a basket of bar-rugs on the first-floor landing, as if she wasn't lying in wait. 'I'm not bluffing. You're *grounded*. Back upstairs. You've got exams next week. Time you knuckled down and got some proper revision done.'

I grip the banister. "'Our roof, our rules," you said. Fine. I don't want your rules, *or* your roof, *or* you hitting me whenever you lose your rag. You'd not put up with that. Would you?'

Mam's face sort of twitches, and if she says the right thing now, we'll negotiate. But, no, she just takes in my duffel bag and sneers like she can't believe how stupid I am. 'You had a brain, once.'

So I carry on down the stairs to the ground floor.

Above me, her voice tightens. 'What about school?'

'You go, then, if school's so important!'

'I never had the bloody chance, Holly! I've always had the pub to run, and you and Brendan and Sharon and Jacko to feed, clothe and send to school so *you* won't have to spend *your* life mopping out toilets and emptying ash-trays and knackered your back and never having an early night.'

Water off a duck's back. I carry on downstairs.

'But go on, then. Go. Learn the hard way. I'll give you three days before Romeo turfs you out. It's not a girl's glittering personality that men're interested in, Holly. It never bloody is.'

I ignore her. From the hallway I see Sharon behind the bar by the fruit-juice shelves. She's helping Dad do the restocking, but I can see she heard. I give her a little wave and she gives me one back, nervous. Echoing up from the cellar trapdoor is Dad's voice, crooning 'Ferry 'Cross The Mersey'. Better leave him out of it. In front of Mam, he'll side with her. In front of the regulars, it'll be 'It takes a bigger idiot than me to step between the pecking hens' and they'll all nod and mumble, 'Right enough there, Dave.' Plus I'd rather not be in the room when he finds out 'bout Vinny. Not that I'm ashamed, I'd just rather not be there. Newky's snoozing in his basket. 'You're the smelliest dog in Kent,' I tell him to stop myself crying, 'you old fleabag.' I pat his neck, unbolt the side door and step into Marlow Alley. Behind me, the door goes *clunk*.

West Street's too bright and too dark, like a TV with the contrast on the blink, so I put on my sunglasses and they turn the world all dreamish and vivid and more real. My throat aches and I'm shaking. Nobody's running after me from the pub. Good. A cement truck trundles by and its fumey gust makes the conker tree sway a bit and rustle. Breathe in warm tarmac, fried spuds

and week-old rubbish spilling out of the bins – the dustmen are on strike again.

Lots of little darting birds're twirly-whirly like the tin-whistlers on strings kids get at birthdays, or used to, and a gang of boys're playing Kick the Can in the park round the church at Crooked Lane. *Get him! Behind the tree! Set me free!* Kids. Stella says older men make better lovers: with boys our age, she says, the ice-cream melts once the cone's in your hand. Only Stella knows 'bout Vinny – she was there that first Saturday in the Magic Bus – but she can keep a secret. When she was teaching me to smoke and I kept puking, she didn't laugh or tell anyone, and she's told me everything I need to know 'bout boys. Stella's the coolest girl in our year at school, easy.

Crooked Lane veers up from the river, and from there I turn up Queen Street where I'm nearly mown down by Julie Walcott pushing her pram. Her baby's bawling its head off and she looks knackered. She left school when she got pregnant. Me and Vinny are dead careful, and we only had sex once without a condom, our first time, and it's a scientific fact that virgins can't get pregnant. Stella told me.

Bunting's strung across Queen Street, like it's for Holly Sykes's Independence Day. The Scottish lady in the wool shop's watering her hanging baskets, and Mr Gilbert the jeweller's putting trays of rings into his front windows, and Mike and Todd the butchers're offloading a headless pig from the back of a van where a dozen carcasses are hanging from hooks. Outside the library a bunch of union men are collecting money in buckets for the striking miners with Socialist Workers holding signs saying *COAL NOT DOLE* and *THATCHER DECLARES WAR ON THE WORKERS*. Ed Brubeck's freewheeling this way on his bike. I step into the Indoor Market so he can't see me. He moved to Gravesend last year from Manchester where his dad got sent down for burglary and assault. He doesn't have any friends and shows no sign of wanting any. Normally that'd get you crucified at our school, but when a sixth-former had a go at him Brubeck punched his nose out of shape, so he's been left alone

since. He cycles by without seeing me, a fishing rod tied to his crossbar, and I carry on. By the games arcade a busker's playing funeral music on a clarinet. Someone lobs a coin into his case and he bursts into the theme from *Dallas*. When I get to Magic Bus Records I peer inside. I was looking at 'R' for 'Ramones'. Vinny says he was looking at 'H' for 'Hot' and 'Horny' and 'Holly'. There's a few second-hand guitars along the back of the shop, too. Vin can play the intro to 'Stairway To Heaven', though he's never got past that. I'm going to teach myself to play Vin's guitar while he's at work. Vin and me could start a band. Why not? Tina Weymouth's a girl and she's the bassist in Talking Heads. Imagine Mam's face if she goes all, 'She's not my daughter any more,' then sees me on *Top of the Pops*. Mam's problem's that she's never loved anyone as deeply as me and Vin love each other. She gets on okay with Dad, sure, though all her family in Cork were never crazy about him not being Irish or Catholic. My older Irish cousins enjoyed telling me that Dad got Mum pregnant with Brendan before they were married, but they've been married for twenty-five years now, which isn't bad going, I s'pose, but still, Mam's not got this amazing bond with Dad like me and Vin. Stella says me and Vin are soul-mates. She says it's obvious, we're made for each other.

Outside NatWest Bank on Milton Road, I run into Brendan. Moussed-back hair, paisley tie and his blazer slung over his shoulder, you'd think he was off to Handsome School, not the offices of Stott and Conway. Bit of a heart-throb, is my older brother, among my friends' older sisters – pass me the vomit bucket. He married Ruth, his boss Mr Conway's daughter, at the town hall, with a flashy reception at the Chaucer Country Club. I wasn't a bridesmaid 'cause I don't wear dresses, specially dresses that make you look like a *Gone With the Wind* collectable, so Sharon and Ruth's nieces did all that stuff, and loads of our Cork relatives came over. Brendan's Mam's golden boy and Mam's Brendan's golden mam. Later they'll be poring over every detail of what I say right now.

'Morning,' I tell him. 'How's it going?'



'Can't complain. All well at the Captain?'

'Fine. Mam's full of the joys of spring today.'

'Yeah?' Brendan smiles, puzzled. 'How come?'

I shrug. 'Must've got out on the right side of bed.'

'Cool.' He notices my duffel bag. 'Off on a trip, are we?'

'Not exactly. I'm revising French at Stella Yearwood's – then I'm staying overnight. It's exams next week.'

My brother looks impressed. 'Good for you, little sis.'

'Is Ruth any better?'

'Not a lot. God only knows why it's called "morning sickness" when it's worse in the middle of the night.'

'Perhaps it's Mother Nature's way of toughening you up for when the baby arrives,' I suggest. 'All those sleepless nights, the arguing, the puke . . . Needs stamina.'

My brother doesn't take the bait. 'Guess so.' It's hard to imagine Brendan being anyone's dad but, come Christmas, he will be.

Behind us the NatWest opens its doors and the bank clerks start filing in. 'Not that Mr Conway'll fire his son-in-law,' I say to Brendan, 'but don't you start at nine?'

'This is true. See you tomorrow, if you're back from your revision-a-thon. Mam's invited us over for lunch. Have a great day.'

'It's the best day of my life already,' I tell my brother and, in a second-hand way, Mam.

One flash of his award-winning smile and Brendan's off, joining the streams of people in suits and uniforms all going to work in offices and shops and factories.

On Monday, I'll get a key cut for Vinny's front door, but today I go the usual secret way. Up a street called The Grove, just before the tax office, there's this alley, half hidden by a skip overflowing with bin-bags smelling of bubbling nappies. A brown rat watches me, like Lord Muck. I go down the alley, turn right, and now I'm between Peacock Street's back-garden fences and the tax-office wall. Down the far end, the last house before the railway cutting, that's Vinny's place. I squeeze through

the loose slats and wade through his back garden. The grass and weeds come up to my waist and the plum trees are already fruiting up, though most of the fruit'll go to the wasps and the worms, Vinny says, 'cause he can't be arsed to pick it. It's like the forest in *Sleeping Beauty* that chokes the castle when everyone's asleep for a hundred years. Vinny's s'posed to keep the garden neat for his aunt but she lives up in King's Lynn and never visits and, anyway, Vinny's a motorbike guy, not a gardener. Once I'm settled in I'll tame this jungle. It needs a woman's touch, that's all. Might make a start today, after a session teaching myself the guitar. There's a shed in the corner half hidden by brambles, with gardening gear and a lawnmower. Sunflowers, roses, pansies, carnations, lavender, and herbs in little terracotta pots, that's what I'll plant. I'll make scones and plum pies and coffee cakes and Vinny'll be all, 'Jesus, Holly, how did I ever get by without you?' All the magazines say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. By the rainwater barrel a fingery purple bush is swarming with white butterflies, all confetti and lace; it's like it's alive.

The back door's never locked 'cause Vinny's lost the key. Our pizza boxes and wine glasses're still in the sink from last night, but no sign of breakfast – Vinny must've overslept and raced off to work, as per usual. The whole place needs a good tidying, dusting, hoovering. First a coffee and a fag's in order, though – I only ate half my Weetabix before Mam started her Muhammad Ali act on me. I forgot to get any ciggies on the way up – it flew out of my head after meeting Brendan – but Vinny keeps some in his bedside table, so I pad up the steep stairs and into his bedroom. Our bedroom, I should say. The curtains are still drawn and the air's like old socks so I let the light in, open the window, turn round and jump out of my skin 'cause Vinny's in bed, looking like he's cacked himself. 'It's me, it's only me,' I sort of gupper. 'Sorry, I – I – I – I thought you were at work.'

He claps his hand over his heart and sort of laughs, like he's just been shot. '*Jesus*, Hol. I thought you were a burglar!'

I sort of laugh too. 'You're . . . at home.'

‘Cock-up with the rota – the new secretary’s bloody hopeless – so Kev phoned to say I’ve got the day off, after all.’

‘Brill,’ I say. ‘That’s great, ’cause . . . I’ve got a surprise.’

‘Great, I love them. But put the kettle on first, eh? I’ll be right down. Shit, what am I saying? I’m out of coffee – be a sweetheart, pop out to Staffa’s and get a jar of Gold Blend. I’ll pay, uh, you when you get back.’

I need to say this first: ‘Mam found out ’bout us, Vin.’

‘Oh? Oh.’ He looks thoughtful. ‘Right. How did she, uh . . .’

Suddenly I’m scared he won’t want me. ‘Not great. Went a bit ape-shit, actually. Told me I couldn’t see you again and, like, threatened to lock me in the cellar. So I walked out. So . . .’

Vinny looks at me nervously, not taking the hint.

‘So can I . . . like . . . stay with you? For a bit, at least.’

Vinny swallows. ‘O-*kay* . . . Right. I see. Well. Okay.’

It doesn’t sound very okay. ‘Is that a yes, Vin?’

‘Ye-es. Sure. Yes. But now I *really* need that coffee.’

‘Serious? Oh, Vin!’ The relief’s like a warm bath. I hug him. He’s sweaty. ‘You’re the best, Vinny. I was afraid you might not—’

‘We can’t have a furry-purry sex-kitten like you sleeping under a bridge now, can we? But really, Hol, I need coffee like Dracula needs blood, so—’ He doesn’t finish the sentence ’cause I’m kissing him, my Vinny, my boyfriend who’s been to New York and shaken David Byrne’s hand, and my love for him sort of goes *whoosh*, like a boiler firing up, and I pull him back and we roll onto a lumpy hill of duvet, but the hill wriggles and my hand pulls the duvet away and here’s my best friend Stella Yearwood. Stark naked. Like I’m in a bad sex dream, only it’s not.

I just . . . gape at her crotch till she says, ‘It can’t look so *very* different to yours, can it?’

Then I gape at Vinny, who looks like he’s shat himself but then does this spazzo giggle: ‘It’s not what it looks like.’

Stella, cool as you please, covers herself with the duvet and tells Vinny, ‘Don’t be dense. This is *precisely* how it looks, Holly. We were going to let you know, but, as you see, events have

overtaken us all. Fact is, you've been dumped. Not pleasant, but it happens to the best of us, well, most of us, so *c'est la vie*. Don't worry, there are plenty more Vinnys in the sea. So why not cut your losses now and just go? With a little dignity intact?

When I stop crying, finally, I find myself on a cold step in a little courtyard place, with five or six storeys of old brick and narrow blind windows on each side. Weeds drilling up through paving slabs and dandelion seeds drifting around like snow in a snowglobe. After slamming Vinny's door my feet brought me here, round the back of the Gravesend General Hospital, where Dr Marinus got rid of Miss Constantin for me when I was seven years old. Had I punched Vinny? It was like I was moving in treacle. I couldn't breathe. He caught my wrist and it hurt – still does – and Stella was barking, 'Grow up and piss off, Holly. This is real life, not an episode of *Dynasty!*' and I ran out, slamming the front door and hurrying as fast I could, anywhere, nowhere, somewhere . . . I knew the moment I stopped I'd break down into a sobbing, snotting jelly, and then one of Mam's spies'd see me and report back and that'd be the cherry on her cake. 'Cause Mam was right. I loved Vinny like he was a part of me, and he loved me like a stick of gum. He'd spat me out when the flavour went, unwrapped another and stuffed it in, and not just anyone, but Stella Yearwood. My best mate. How could he? How could she?

Stop *crying!* Think about something else . . .

Holly Sykes and the Weird Shit, Part 1. I was seven years old in 1976. It didn't rain all summer and the gardens turned brown, and I remember queuing with buckets down the end of Queen Street with Brendan and Mam for water from standpipes, the drought got that bad. My daymares started that summer. I heard voices in my head. Not mad, or drooly, or specially scary, even, not at first . . . the Radio People, I called them, 'cause at first I thought there was a radio on in the next room. Only there never was a radio on in the next room. They were clearest at night, but I heard them at school, too, if everything was quiet

enough, in a test, say. Three or four voices'd chunter away at once, and I never quite made out what they were saying. Brendan had talked 'bout mental hospitals and men in white coats, so I didn't dare tell anyone. Mam was pregnant with Jacko, Dad rushed off his feet at the pub, Sharon was only three and Brendan was a plonker, even then. I knew hearing voices wasn't normal, but they weren't actually harming me, so maybe it was just one of those secrets people live with.

One night, I had a nightmare about killer bees loose in the Captain Marlow, and woke up in a sweat. A lady was sat at the end of my bed saying, 'Don't worry, Holly, it's all right,' and I said, 'Thanks, Mam,' 'cause who else could it be? Then I heard Mam laughing in the kitchen down the corridor – this was before my bedroom was up in the attic. That was how I knew I'd only dreamt the lady on my bed, and I switched on the light to prove it.

And sure enough nobody was there.

'Don't be afraid,' said the lady, 'but I'm as real as you are.'

I didn't scream or freak out. Sure, I was shaking, but even in my fear, I felt it was like a puzzle or a test. There was nobody in my room, but someone was speaking to me. So, as calm as I could, I asked the lady if she was a ghost. 'Not a ghost,' said the lady who wasn't there, 'but a visitor to your mind. That's why you can't see me.' I asked what my visitor's name was. *Miss Constantin*, she said. She said she'd sent the Radio People away, because they were a distraction, and hoped I didn't mind. I said no. *Miss Constantin* said she had to go but that she'd love to drop by soon because I was 'a singular young lady'.

Then she was gone. It took me ages to fall asleep, but by the time I did, I sort of felt I'd made a friend.

What now? Go home? I'd rather stick pins in my gums. Mam'll make me steaming shit-pie, dripping in shit-gravy, and sit there smug as hell watching me eat every shitty morsel, and from now until the end of time, if ever I'm anything less than yes-sir-no-sir-three-bags-full-sir, she'll bring up the Vinny Costello Incident. Okay, so I'm not living in Peacock Street but I can

still leave home, at least for long enough to prove to Mam that I'm old enough to take care of myself so she can stop treating me like I'm seven years old. I've enough money to feed myself for a bit and the hot spell looks set to last, so I'll think of it as my summer holiday beginning early. Screw my exams, screw school. Stella'll twist things round so that I was this hysterical pathetic Clinging Ivy who just couldn't face the fact her boyfriend was tired of her. By nine a.m. on Monday morning, Holly Sykes'll be the Official Windmill Hill Laughing Stock. Guaranteed.

An ambulance siren gets closer, more urgent, echoes round the courtyard and stops, like, in mid-sentence . . . I rejiggle my duffel bag and get up. Right, where now? Every runaway teenager in England makes a bee-line for London, imagining they'll get picked up by a talent scout or fairy godmother, but I'll strike out the opposite way, along the river, towards the Kent marshes: if you grow up in a pub you overhear exactly what sort of scouts and fairies pick up runaway teenagers in London. Maybe I could find a barn or an empty holiday chalet to stay in for a bit. That might work. So, off I set round the front of the hospital. The car park's full of windscreens flashing in the bright sunshine. In the cool shady hospital reception area, I see rows of people smoking and waiting for news.

Funny places, hospitals . . .

Holly Sykes and the Weird Shit, Part 2. A few weeks went by, and I began to think I'd only dreamt Miss Constantin, 'cause she'd never come back. 'Cept for the fact I didn't know that word she'd called me, 'singular' . . . I looked it up and wondered how it'd got into my head if Miss Constantin hadn't put it there. To this day I still don't know the answer to that. But then one night in September, after we'd gone back to school and I'd turned eight, I woke up and knew she was there, and I was more glad than I was scared. I liked being singular. I asked Miss Constantin if she was an angel, and she laughed a little, saying, no, she was human, like me, but she'd learnt how to slip out of her own body, and go visiting her friends. I asked if I

was one of her friends now, and she asked, 'Would you like that?' and I said, yes, please, more than anything, and she replied, 'Then you shall be.' And I asked Miss Constantin where she came from, and she said Switzerland. To show off, I asked if Switzerland was where chocolate was invented, and she said I was one of the brightest buttons she'd ever known. From then on she visited me every night, for a few minutes, and I'd tell her a bit about my day, and she'd listen, and sympathise or cheer me up. She was always on my side, like Mam or Brendan never seemed to be. I asked Miss Constantin questions, too. Sometimes she'd give me direct answers, like when I asked her her hair colour and she told me 'chromium blonde', but as often as not she'd sidestep my questions with, 'Let's not spoil the mystery quite yet, Holly, shall we?'

Then one day our school's most gifted bully, Susan Hillage, got me as I walked home from school. Her dad was a squaddie in Belfast and, 'cause my mam's Irish, she knelt on my head and wouldn't let me go unless I admitted we kept our coal in the bathtub and that we loved the IRA. I wouldn't, so she threw my bag into a tree, and told me she was going to make me pay for her dad's mates who'd got killed in Belfast, and that if I told anyone, her dad's platoon'd set fire to my pub and my family'd all roast and it'd all be my fault. I was no pushover, but I was only little, and Susan Hillage had pulled all the right levers. I didn't tell Mam or Dad about it, but I was worried sick about going to school the next day and what might happen. But that night, when I woke up in the warm pocket of my bed and Miss Constantin's voice came, it wasn't just her voice in my head – she was actually there, in person, sitting in the armchair at the end of my bed saying, 'Wakey-wakey, sleepyhead.' She was young, and had white-gold hair, and what must've been rose-red lips were purple-black in the moonlight, and she wore a gown thing. She was beautiful, like a painting. Finally I managed to ask if I was dreaming and she replied, 'I'm here because my brilliant, singular child was so unhappy tonight, and I want to know why.' So I told her about Susan Hillage. Miss Constantin said nothing until the end, when she told me that

she despised bullies of all stripes, and did I want her to remedy the situation? I said, yes, please, but before I could ask anything else Dad's footsteps were coming down the corridor and he'd opened the door, and the light from the landing shone in my eyes, dazzling me. How was I going to explain Miss Constantin sitting in my bedroom at, like, one o'clock in the morning? But Dad acted like she wasn't even there. He just asked me if I was okay, saying he'd heard a voice, and sure enough, Miss Constantin *wasn't* there. I told Dad I must've been dreaming and talking in my sleep.

Which was what I ended up believing. Voices are one thing, but women in gowns, sitting there? The next morning I went to school as usual, and didn't see Susan Hillage. Nobody else did, either. Our headmaster hurried late into school assembly and announced that Susan Hillage had been hit by a van while she cycled to school, that it was very serious and we had to pray for her recovery. Hearing all this, I felt numb and cold, and so much blood left my head that the school hall sort of folded up around me, and after, I had no memory even of hitting the floor.

The Thames is riffled and muddy blue today, and I walk and walk and walk away from Gravesend towards the Kent marshes and before I know it, it's eleven thirty and the town's a little model of itself, a long way behind me. The wind unravels clouds from the chimneys of the Blue Circle factory, like streams of hankies out of a conjuror's pocket. To my right, the A2 roars away over the marshes. Old Mr Sharkey says it's built over a road made by the Romans in Roman times, and the A2's still how you get to Dover, to catch the boat to the Continent, just like the Romans did. Pylons march off in double file. Back at the pub, Dad'll be hoovering the bar, unless Sharon's doing it to get my three pounds. The morning's gone muggy and stretched, like it does in triple maths, and the sun's giving me eye-ache. I left my sunglasses in Vinny's kitchen, sat on the draining board. Fourteen ninety-nine, they cost me. I bought them with Stella, who said she'd seen the same sunglasses on



Carnaby Street for three times the price so I thought I was getting a bargain. Then I imagine myself strangling Stella and my arms and hands go all stiff, like I'm actually doing it.

I'm thirsty. By now Mam will've told Dad something 'bout why Holly went off in a teenage strop, but I bet a million quid she will've twisted it all. Dad'll be joking 'bout 'The Girls' Bust-up' and PJ and Nipper and Big Dex'll nod and grin like the shower of tossers they are. PJ'll pretend to read from the *Sun*. 'It says here, "Astronomers at the University of Bullshitshire have just found new evidence that, yes, teenagers really are the centre of the universe".' They'll all cackle, and Good Old Dave Sykes, everyone's favourite landlord, will join in with his you're-so-witty-I-could-wet-myself laugh. Let's see if they're still laughing by Wednesday when I haven't shown up.

Up ahead, in the distance, men are fishing.

Weird Shit, Last Act. Even as I was half carried to the school nurse's room, I could hear the Radio People were back. Hundreds of them, all whispering at once. That freaked me out but not as much as the idea that I'd killed Susan Hillage. So I told the nurse about the Radio People and Miss Constantin. The old dear thought I was concussed at best and nuts at worst, so she called Mam, who called our GP, and later that day I was being seen by an ear doctor at Gravesend General Hospital. He couldn't find anything wrong, but suggested a child psychiatrist he knew from Great Ormond Street Hospital in London who specialised in cases like mine. Mam was all 'My daughter's not mental!' but the doctor scared her with the word 'tumour'. After the worst night of my life – I prayed to God to keep Miss Constantin away, had the Bible under my pillow but, thanks to the Radio People, I could hardly sleep a wink – we got a call from the ear doctor saying that his friend the specialist was due in Gravesend in one hour, and could Mam bring me up right now?

Dr Marinus was the first Chinese person I ever met, apart from the ones at the Thousand Autumns Restaurant where me and Brendan were sometimes sent for takeaways if Mam was

too tired to cook. Dr Marinus spoke in posh, perfect English, quite softly, so you had to pay close attention to catch everything. He was short and skinny but sort of filled the room, anyway. First he asked 'bout school and my family and stuff, then moved on to my voices. Mam was all, 'My daughter's not crazy, if that's what you're implying – it's just concussion.' Dr Marinus told Mam that he agreed, I wasn't remotely crazy, but the brain could be an illogical place. To help him rule out a tumour, she had to let me answer his questions on my own. So I told him about the Radio People and Susan Hillage and Miss Constantin. Mam went all jittery again but Dr Marinus assured her that auditory hallucinations – 'daymares' – were not uncommon in girls my age. He told me that Susan Hillage's accident was a big coincidence, and that coincidences even of this size were happening to people all over the world, right now: my turn had come, that was all. Mam asked if there was any medicine to stop these daymares, and I remember Dr Marinus saying that, before we went down that route, he'd like to try a simpler technique from 'the Old Country'. It worked like acupuncture, he said, but it didn't use needles. He got Mam to squeeze a point on my middle finger – he marked it with biro – then touched a place on my forehead, in the middle, with his thumb. Like an artist putting on a dab of paint. My eyes shut . . .

. . . and the Radio People were gone. Not just quiet, but gone-gone. Mam knew from my face what'd happened, and she was as shocked and relieved as me. She was all, 'Is that it? No wires, no pills?' Dr Marinus said, yes, that ought to do the job.

I asked if Miss Constantin'd gone for ever, too.

The doctor said, yes, for the foreseeable future.

The End. We left, I grew up, and neither the Radio People nor Miss Constantin ever came back. I saw a few documentaries and stuff about how the mind plays tricks on you, and now I know that Miss Constantin was just a sort of imaginary friend – like Sharon's Bunny Bunny Boing Boing – gone haywire. Susan Hillage's accident was just a massive coincidence, like Dr

Marinus'd told me. She didn't die, but moved to Ramsgate, though some people'd say it's the same difference. Dr Marinus did some sort of hypnotism thing on me, like those cassettes you can buy to stop yourself smoking. Mam stopped saying 'Chink' from that day on, and even today she's down like a ton of bricks on anyone who does. 'It's "Chinese" not "Chink"', she tells them, 'and they're the best doctors in the National Health.'

My watch says it's one o'clock. Far behind me, stick-men are fishing in the shallows off Shornemead Fort. Up ahead's a gravel pit, with a big cone of stone and a conveyor-belt feeding a barge. I can see Cliffe Fort, too, with windows like empty eye-sockets. Old Mr Sharkey says it used to house anti-aircraft batteries in the war, and when people in Gravesend heard the big guns, they knew they had sixty seconds – tops – to get into their air-raid shelters under the stairs or down the garden. Wish a bomb'd fall on a certain house in Peacock Street, right now. Bet they're scoffing pizza for lunch – Vinny lives on pizza 'cause he can't be arsed to cook. Bet they're laughing about me. I wonder if Stella stayed over last night. You just fall in love with each other, I thought, and that's all there is to it. Stupid. *Stupid!* I kick a stone but it's not a stone it's a little outcrop of rock that mashes my toe. Pain draws a jagged line up to my brain. And now my eyes are hot and watering – where's all the water coming from, f'Chrissakes? The only liquid I've drunk today is when I cleaned my teeth and the milk on my Weetabix. My tongue's like that oasis stuff they use for flower-arranging. My duffel bag's rubbing a sore patch on my shoulder. My heart's a clubbed baby seal. My stomach must be empty, but I'm too miserable to feel it yet. I'm not turning round and going home, though. No bloody way.

By three o'clock, my whole head's parched, not just my mouth. I've never walked so far in my life, I reckon. There's no sign of a shop or even a house where I can ask for a glass of water. Then I notice a small woman fishing off the end of a jetty thing, like she's sort of sketched into the corner where nobody'll

spot her. She's a long stone-throw away, but I see her fill a cup from a flask. I'd never normally do this but I'm *so* thirsty that I walk down the embankment and along the jetty up to her, clomping my feet on the old wooden planks so as not to scare her. 'Scuse me, but could you spare a drop of water? Please?'

She doesn't even look round. 'Cold tea do you?' Her croaky voice sounds from somewhere hot.

'That'd be great, thanks. I'm not fussy.'

'Help yourself, then, if you're not fussy.'

So I fill the cup, not thinking about germs or anything. It's not normal tea but it's the most refreshing thing I've ever drunk, and I let the liquid swoosh all round my mouth. Now I look at her properly for the first time. Sort of elephanty eyes in a wrinkled old face, with short grey hair, a grubby safari shirt and a leathery wide-brimmed hat that looks a hundred years old. 'Good?' she asks.

'Yeah,' I say. 'It was. Tastes like grass.'

'Green tea. Lucky you're not fussy.'

I ask, 'Since when's tea been green?'

'Since bushes made their leaves that colour.'

There's a splash of a fish. I see where it was, but not where it is. 'Caught much today?'

A pause. 'Five perch. One trout. A slow afternoon.'

I don't see a bucket or anything. 'Where are they?'

A bee lands on the brim of her hat. 'I let them go.'

'If you don't want the fish, why do you catch them?'

A few seconds pass. 'For the quality of the conversation.'

I look around: the footpath, a brambly field, a scrubby wood and a choked-up track. She must be taking the piss. 'There's nobody here.'

The bee's happy where it is, even when the woman stirs herself to reel in the line. I stand off to one side as she checks the bait's still secure on the hook. Drips of water splash the thirsty planks of the jetty. The river slurps at the shore and sloshes round the wooden pillar things. Still seated, and with an expert flick of the wrist, the old woman sends the lead weight loopy-looping away, the reel makes its zithery noise, and

the weight lands in the water where it was before. Circles float outwards. Dead calm . . .

Then she does something really weird. She takes out a stick of chalk from her pocket and writes on a plank by her foot, *MY*. On the next plank along she writes, *LONG*. Then on the next plank, it's the word *NAME*. Then the old woman puts the chalk away and goes back to her fishing.

I wait for her to explain, but she doesn't. 'What's all that about?'

'What's what about?'

'What you just wrote.'

'They're instructions.'

'Instructions for who?'

'For someone many years from now.'

'But it's chalk. It'll wash off.'

'From the jetty, yes. Not from your memory.'

Okay, so she's mad as a sack of ferrets. Only I don't tell her so 'cause I'd like more of that green tea.

'Finish the tea, if you want,' she says. 'You won't find a shop until you and the boy arrive at Allhallows-on-Sea . . .'

'Thanks a lot.' I fill the cup. 'Are you sure? This is the last of it.'

'One good turn deserves another.' She turns a crafty sniper's eye on me. 'I may need asylum.'

Asylum? She needs a mental asylum? 'How d'you mean?'

'Refuge. A bolt-hole. If the First Mission fails, as I fear it must.'

Crazy people are hard work. 'I'm fifteen. I don't have an asylum, or a, uh, bolt-hole. Sorry.'

'You're ideal. You're unexpected. My tea for your asylum. Do we have a deal?'

Dad says the best way to handle drunks is to humour them, then dump them, and maybe the doolally are like drunks who never sober up. 'Deal.' She nods and I drink until the sun's a pale glow through the thin bottom of the plastic.

The old bat's gazing away again. 'Thank you, Holly.'

So I thank her back, and return to dry land. Then I turn around and go back to her. 'How do you know my name?'

She doesn't turn round. 'By what name was I baptised?'

What a stupid game this is. 'Esther Little.'

'And how do you know *my* name?'

'Cause . . . You just told me.' Did she? Must've.

'That's that settled, then.' And that was Esther Little's final word.

Around four o'clock I get to a strip of shingly beach by a wooden groyne thing sloping into the river. I take my Docs off. There's a doozy of a blister on my big toe, like a trodden-on blackberry. Yum. I take my *Fear of Music* LP out of my duffel bag, roll my jeans right up and wade in to my knees. The curving river's cool as tap-water and the sun's got a punch to it, but not as hard as it was when I left the crazy old woman fishing. Then I frisbee the LP as hard and far as I can. It's not specially aerodynamic, and flies upward till the inner sleeve with the record in drops out, plops into the water. The black album cover falls like a wounded bird and floats for a while. Tears, more tears, seep from my aching eyes and I imagine wading over to where the record's spiralling down now, down the slope of the river-bed, strolling through the trout and perch to the rusty bicycles and bones of drowned pirates and German aeroplanes and flung-away wedding rings and God knows what.

But I wade back to shore and lie down on a bed of warm shingle, next to my Docs. Dad'll be upstairs with his feet up on the sofa: 'Reckon I'll go and pay this Costello fella a call, Kath,' he'll be saying. Mam'll drown her cigarette in the cold coffee at the bottom of her mug. 'No, Dave. That's what Her Ladyship wants. Ignore her Big Statement long enough, and she'll start appreciating just how much we do for her . . .'

But, come tomorrow evening, Mam'll start fretting 'bout school on Monday, 'cause once school asks where I am and why I'm not sitting the exams, she'll be a whole load less snotty about my Big Statement. She'll march round to Vinny's house, all guns blazing. Mam'll tear strips off Vinny – good, ha! – but she still won't know where I am. Decided. I camp out for two nights, and then see how I'm feeling. So long as I don't buy

any cigarettes, my £13.85 in coins is enough for two days' worth of chip butties, apples and Rich Tea biscuits. If I get to Rochester I could even take some money from the TSB and extend my little vacation.

A massive freighter heading downstream blasts its horn. *Star of Riga* is written in white letters on the orange hull. Wonder if Riga's a place, or something else. Sharon and Jacko'd know. I do a huge yawn, lie back on the clacking pebbles, and watch the wash from the massive ship lap the shingle by the shore.

Christ, I'm dead sleepy all of a sudden . . .

'Sykes? You alive? Oy . . . Sykes.' The afternoon breaks in and it's *Where am I?* and *Why am I barefoot?* and *What the hell is Ed Brubeck doing touching my arm?* I jerk it back, get up and scuttle a couple of yards while the soles of my feet go *ow ow ow* on the hot pebbles and then I bang my head on the wooden groyne thing.

Ed Brubeck hasn't moved. 'That hurt.'

'I know it bloody hurt. It's my bloody head.'

'I only wanted to make sure you weren't dead.'

I rub my head. 'Do I *look* like I'm dead?'

'Well, yeah, a second ago, you did, a bit.'

'Well, I'm bloody not.' I see Brubeck's bike lying on its side with its wheel still spinning. His fishing rod's still strapped to its crossbar. 'I was just . . . snoozing.'

'Don't tell me you *walked* here from town, Sykes?'

'No, I came by space hopper but the fecker bounced off.'

'Huh. Never had you down as the great outdoors type.'

'I never had *you* down as the Good Samaritan type.'

'We live and learn.' A bird's singing, a loopy-loony-tweety one, a mile or so up. Ed Brubeck pushes his black hair back from his eyes. His skin's so tanned he could be Turkish or something. 'So where are you going?'

'As far away from that shit-hole as my feet can carry me.'

'Oh dear. What's naughty Gravesend done to you now?'

I lace up my Docs. My blister hurts. 'Where are *you* going?'

'My uncle lives thataway.' Ed Brubeck waves an arm inland.

'He's not too mobile these days and almost blind, so I go and keep him company a bit. I was cycling off to Allhallows for a bit of fishing when I saw you and—'

'Thought I'd died. Which I haven't. Don't let me keep you.'

He makes a suit-yourself face, and climbs up the embankment.

I call after him, 'How far is it to Allhallows, Brubeck?'

He picks up his bike. 'About five miles. Want a backie?'

I think of Vinny and his Norton and shake my head. He mounts his bike, poser-style, and he's gone. I scoop up a fistful of stones and fling it over the water, hard and angry.

A speck-sized Ed Brubeck vanishes behind a clump of pointy trees way up ahead. He didn't look back. Wish I'd said yes to his offer, now. My knees are stiff and my feet are two giant throbs and my ankles feel like they've been attacked with tiny drills. Five miles at this rate'll take me for ever. But Ed Brubeck's a guy, like Vinny's a guy, and guys are all sperm-guns. My stomach growls with dry hunger. Green tea's great while you're drinking it, but it makes you pee like a racehorse, and now my mouth feels like a dying rat crapped in it. Ed Brubeck's a guy, yes, but he's not a total tosser. Last week he got into an argument with Mrs Binkirk, our RE teacher, and got sent to Mr Nixon for calling her 'Bigot of the Year'. A grown-up insult, that. People are icebergs, with just a bit you can see and loads you can't. I try not to think about Vinny, but I do, and remember how only this morning I dreamt of starting a band with him. Up ahead, from behind the clump of pointy trees, comes a speck-sized Ed Brubeck, cycling back my way. Probably he's decided it's too late to fish, and he's heading back to Gravesend. He grows bigger and bigger until he's life-sized, and does a show-offy skid-turn that reminds me he's still a boy as well as a guy. His eyes are white in his dark face. 'Why don't you get on, Sykes?' He slaps his bike saddle. 'Allhallow's *miles*. It'll be dark before you get there.'

We wobble along the track at a decent clip. Whenever we go over a bump Brubeck says, 'You okay?' and I tell him, 'Yeah.'



The sea-breeze and bike-breeze slip up my sleeves and stroke my front like a pervy Mr Tickle. Sweat's glueing Brubeck's T-shirt to his back. I refuse to think 'bout Vinny's sweat, and Stella's . . . My heart cracks again and goo dribbles out and stings, like Dettol on a graze. I grip the bike rack with both hands, but then the track gets rucklier so I steady myself by hooking one thumb through a belt-loop on Brubeck's jeans. Probably Brubeck's getting a hard-on from this, but that's his problem, not mine.

Fluffy lambs are nibbling grass. Ewes watch us, like we're planning to serve up their babies with sprouts and mash.

We scare birds on stilts with spoony beaks: they skim off across the river. Their wing tips touch the water, sending out circles.

Here the Thames is turning into the sea and Essex is turning gold. That smudge is Canvey Island; further on, Southend.

The English Channel's biro-blue; the sky's the blue of snooker-chalk. We judder across a footbridge over a rusty creek, half-marsh, half-dune, inland: WELCOME TO THE ISLE OF GRAIN.

It's not a real island, mind. Once upon a time, perhaps.

That loony, loopy, tweety bird's followed us. Must of.

Allhallows-on-Sea's basically a big holiday park spilling up to the shorefront from a nothingy village behind. It's all rows of caravans and those oblong cabins on little stilts they call trailer-homes in American films. There's half-naked kids and totally naked toddlers all over the shop, firing water-pistols and playing Swingball and running about. Half-sloshed mums're rolling their eyes at sun-pinked dads burning bangers on barbecues. I try to eat the smoke. 'Dunno about you,' says Brubeck, 'but I'm starving.'

Too enthusiastically I say, 'Just a bit,' so he parks his bike at the fish-and-chip place, next to Lazy Rolf's Crazy Golf. Brubeck orders cod and chips, which is two pounds, but I just order chips 'cause it's only fifty pence. But then Brubeck tells the bloke at the counter, 'Two cod and chips, please,' and hands over a fiver, and the bloke glances at me and gives Brubeck that

nice-one-son look that men give each other, which pisses me off 'cause me and Brubeck aren't boyfriend and girlfriend and we're not bloody going to be, however many battered cods he gives me. Brubeck gets us two cans of Coke too and notices my face. 'It's only fish and chips – no strings attached.'

'You're damn right there's no strings attached.' It comes out spikier than I meant. 'But thanks.'

We walk past the last cabin and on a bit to a concrete shelter, just on the lip of the dunes. A whiff of wee leaks through the slitted window but Brubeck climbs onto its low, flat roof. 'This is a pillbox,' he says. 'They were machine-gun posts during the war, in case the Germans invaded. There's still hundreds of them around, if you keep your eyes peeled. This is peace, if you think about it – machine-gun nests being used as picnic tables.' I look at him: You'd never dare say something that clever at school. I scramble up on my own and take in the view. Southend's across the wider-than-a-mile mouth of the Thames and the other way I can see Sheerness docks on the Isle of Sheppey. Then we open our Cokes and I peel off the ring carefully to put in the can after. They slice open dog's paw-pads. Brubeck holds his can towards me so I clunk it, like it's a wine glass, but I don't meet his eyes in case he gets any ideas, and we drink. My first gulp's a *boom* of freezing fizz. The chips are warm and vinegary and the batter's hot in our fingers as we pull it back to get at the fat flakes of cod. 'It tastes great,' I say. 'Cheers.'

'Not as good as a Manchester chipper,' says Brubeck.

A stunt kite writes on the blue with its pink tail.

I fill my lungs with one of Brubeck's Dunhills. That's better. Then I think of Stella Yearwood and Vinny smoking his Marlboros in bed, and suddenly I have to pretend I've got something in my eye. To distract myself, I ask Brubeck, 'So who's this uncle of yours, then? The one you visited earlier.'

'Uncle Norm. My mum's brother. Used to be a crane operator at Blue Circle Cement, but he's stopped working. He's going blind.'

I take another deep drag. 'That's awful. Poor guy.'

‘Uncle Norm says, “Pity is a form of abuse.”’

‘Is he completely blind, or just partly, or . . .’

‘He’s lost about three-quarters of his sight in both eyes, and the rest’s going. What gets him down most is that he can’t read the papers any more. It’s like searching for your keys in dirty snow, he says. So most Saturdays I cycle out to his bungalow and read him pieces from the *Guardian*. Then he talks about Thatcher versus the unions, why the Russians are in Afghanistan, why the CIA are taking down democratic governments in Latin America.’

‘Sounds like school,’ I say.

Brubeck shakes his head. ‘Most of our teachers just want to get home by four and retire by sixty. But my uncle Norm loves talking and thinking and he wants you to love it too. He’s sharp as a razor. Then my aunt makes a big late lunch, and my uncle nods off, and I go fishing, if the weather’s nice. Unless I see someone from my class at school lying dead on the beach.’ He stubs out his cigarette on the concrete. ‘So. What’s your story, Sykes?’

‘What do you mean, what’s my story?’

‘At eight forty-five I see you walking up Queen Street, ducking—’

‘You *saw* me?’

‘Yep – ducking into the Indoor Market, but seven hours later the target is sighted ten miles east of Gravesend, along the river.’

‘What is this? Ed Brubeck, Private Investigator?’

A little tail-less dog that’s all waggling bum comes up. Brubeck chucks it a chip. ‘If I *was* a detective, I’d suspect boyfriend trouble.’

My voice goes sharp. ‘None of your business.’

‘This is true. But the tosser’s not worth it, whoever he is.’

Scowling, I drop the dog a chip. He scoffs it so hungrily, I wonder if he’s a stray. Like me.

Brubeck makes a funnel out of his chip-paper to pour the crispy bits into his mouth. ‘You planning on going back to town tonight?’

I abort a groan. Gravesend's a black cloud. Vinny and Stella and Mam are in it. *Are* it. My watch says 18:19 and the Captain Marlow'll be cheerful and chattery as the evening regulars drift in. Upstairs Jacko and Sharon'll be sat on the sofa watching *The A-Team* with cheese thingies and a slab of chocolate cake. I'd like to be there, but what about Mam's slap? 'No,' I tell Brubeck, 'I'm not.'

'It'll be dark in three hours. Not a lot of time to find a circus to run away with.'

The dune grass sways. Clouds're unrolling across the sky from France. I put my jacket on. 'Maybe I'll find a nice cosy pillbox. One that's not used to pee in. Or a barn.'

Here come seagulls on boingy elastic, scrawking for chips too. Brubeck stands up and flaps his arms at the gulls like the Mad Prince of Allhallows-on-Sea to make them scatter, just for the hell of it. 'Maybe I know somewhere better.'

We're cycling along a proper road again. Big fields in the pancake-flat arse-end of nowhere, with long black shadows. Brubeck's being all mysterious 'bout where we're going – 'Either you trust me, Sykes, or you don't' – but he says it's warm, dry and safe and he's stayed there himself five or six times when he's been out night-fishing, so I'll go along with it, for now. He says he'll head off home after Gravesend. That's the problem with boys: they tend to help you only 'cause they fancy you, but there's no unembarrassing way to find out their real motives till it's too late. Ed Brubeck seems okay, and he spends his Saturday afternoons reading for a blind uncle, but thanks to bloody Vinny and Stella, I'm not so sure if I'm a good judge of character. With night coming on, though, I don't have much choice. We pass a massive factory. I'm 'bout to ask Brubeck what they make there when he tells me it's Grain Power Station and it provides electricity for Gravesend and half of south-east London.

'Yeah, I know,' I lie.

The church is stumpy with a tower that's got arrow-slits and it's gold in the last light. The wood sounds like never-ending

waves, with rooks tumbling about like black socks in a drier. 'ST MARY HOO PARISH CHURCH' says a sign, with the vicar's phone number underneath. The village of St Mary Hoo is up ahead, but it's really just a few old houses and a pub where two lanes meet. 'The bedding's basic,' says Brubeck, as we get off the bike, 'but the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit handle security, and at zero quid a night, it's priced competitively.'

Does he mean the church? 'You're joking, right?'

'Check-out's seven sharp or the management get shirty.'

Yes, he means the church. I make a dubious face.

Brubeck makes a face that says. *Take it or leave it.*

I'll have to take it. The Kent marshes are not dotted with cosy barns full of warm straw, like in *The Little House on the Prairie*. The only one I've seen was a corrugated-iron job a few miles back, guarded by two Dobermans with rabies. 'Don't they lock churches?'

Brubeck says, 'Yeah,' in the same way I'd say, 'So?' After checking no one's around, he wheels his bike into the graveyard. He hides it between dark brushy trees and the wall, then leads me to the porch. Confetti's piled up in dirty drifts. 'Keep an eye on the gate,' he tells me. From his pocket he digs out a leather purse-thing and inside's a dangly row of spindly keys and an L-shaped piece of thin metal. One last look at the lane, then he pokes a key into the lock, and jiggles it a bit.

I feel a lurch of fear we'll get caught. 'Where did you learn to break into buildings?'

'It wasn't footy or repairing punctures that Dad taught me.'

'We could get done for this! It's called, it's called—'

'Breaking and entering. That's why you keep your eyes peeled.'

'But what am I s'posed to do exactly if somebody comes?'

'Act embarrassed, like we've been caught snogging.'

'Uh – I don't *think* so, Ed Brubeck.'

He does this half-hiss, half-laugh. 'Act it, I said. Relax, you only get nicked if the cops can prove *you* picked the lock. If you don't confess, and if you're careful not to bugged the mechanism . . .' he feeds a skeleton key into the keyhole ' . . . then who's to say you didn't just happen along, find the door left

ajar and go in to satisfy your interest in Saxon church architecture? That's our story, by the way, just in case.' Brubeck's got his ear against the lock as he's twizzling. 'Though I've stayed here three Saturday nights since Easter and not heard a dickie-bird. Plus it's not like we're taking anything. Plus you're a girl, so just sob your eyes out and do the "Please, Mr Vicar, I'm running away from my violent stepfather" bit and, chances are, you'll walk away with a cup of tea and a Penguin biscuit.' Brubeck holds up a hand for hush: a click. 'Got it.' The church door swings open with the perfect Transylvanian hinge-creak.

Inside, St Mary Hoo Church smells of charity shops, and the stained-glass gloom's all fruit-salady. The walls're thick as a nuclear bunker and the *thunk* when Brubeck shuts us in echoes all around, like a dungeon. The roof's all beams and timbers. We walk down the short aisle, past the ten or twelve pews. The pulpit's wooden, the font's stone, the organ's like a fancy piano with exhaust pipes. The lectern-thingy must be fake gold, or a burglar – Brubeck's dad, for example – would've swiped it long ago. We reach the altar-table and look up at the window showing the crucifixion. A dove in the stained-glass sky has spokes coming off it. The Marys, two disciples and a Roman at the foot of the cross look like they're discussing whether it's starting to rain or not. Brubeck asks, 'You're Catholic, right?'

I'm surprised he's ever thought 'bout this. 'My mum's Irish.' 'So do you believe in Heaven and God and that?'

I stopped going to church last year: that was me and Mam's biggest row till this morning. 'I sort of developed an allergy.'

'My uncle Norm says religion's "spiritual paracetamol", and in a way I hope he's right. Unless God issues personality transplants when you arrive, Heaven'd mean a never-ending family reunion with the likes of my uncle Trev. I can't think of anything more hellish.'

'So Uncle Trev's no Uncle Norm, then?'

'Chalk and cheese. Uncle Trev's my dad's older brother. "The Brains of the Operation," he says, which is true enough: he's got brains enough to get losers like Dad to do the dirty work. Uncle Trev fences the merchandise if the job's a success, does

his Mr Non-stick Frying Pan when it goes belly-up. He even tried it on with my mum after Dad got sent down, which is partly why we moved south.'

'Sounds a total scuzzball.'

'Yep, that's Uncle Trev.' The psychedelic light on Brubeck's face dims as the sun fades. 'Mind you, if I was dying in a hospice, maybe I'd want all the spiritual paracetamol I could get my hands on.'

I put my hand on the altar rail. 'What if . . . what if Heaven *is* real, but only in moments? Like a glass of water on a hot day when you're *dying* of thirst, or when someone's nice to you for no reason, or . . .' Mam's pancakes with Toblerone sauce; Dad dashing up from the bar just to tell me, 'Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite'; or Jacko and Sharon singing 'For She's A Squishy Marshmallow' instead of 'For She's A Jolly Good Fellow' every single birthday and wetting themselves even though it's not at all funny; and Brendan giving his old record player to me instead of one of his mates. 'S'pose Heaven's not like a painting that's just hanging there for ever, but more like . . . Like the best song anyone ever wrote, but a song you only catch in snatches, while you're alive, from passing cars, or . . . upstairs windows when you're lost . . .'

Brubeck's looking at me like he's *really* listening.

And, *fuck it*, I'm blushing. 'What're you looking at?'

Before he can answer, a key rattles in the door.

Slow-motion seconds lurch by me, like a conga of piss-heads, and Brubeck and me are Laurel and Hardy and Starsky and Hutch and two halves of a pantomime horse, and he bundles me through a wooden door I'd not noticed behind the organ, into this odd-shaped room with a high ceiling and a ladder going up to a trapdoor. I think it's called a vestry, this room, and the ladder must lead to the bell-tower. Brubeck listens through the door crack: there's no other way out, only a cupboard thing in the corner. Coming our way are at least two men's voices; I think I hear a third, a woman. *Shit*. Brubeck and me look at each other. Our choices are: stay here and try to talk our way out; hide in the cupboard; or squirrel it up the

ladder and hope the trapdoor opens for us, and whoever's coming doesn't follow. We probably wouldn't make it up the ladder now. Suddenly Brubeck's bundling me into the cupboard, then he gets in too and pulls the door shut the best he can. It's smaller than it looked from the outside: it's like hiding yourself in half a vertical coffin – with a boy you have no interest in being crushed up against. Brubeck pulls the door shut . . .

'But the man believes he's the Second Comin' of Fidel soddin' Castro!' The voices enter the vestry. 'Love Maggie Thatcher or loathe her, and there's plenty who do both, she *did* win an election, which Arthur Scargill hasn't. He didn't even ballot his own union.'

'None of that's the point,' says a Londoner. 'This strike's about the future. That's why the government's using every dirty trick in the book – MI5 spies, lies in the media, no benefits for miners' families . . . Mark my words, if the miners lose, your children'll be working Victorian hours for Victorian wages.'

Brubeck's kneecap in my thigh's giving me a slow dead leg. I swivel a bit: his *ow ow ow* is quieter than a whisper.

'We can't keep dying industries alive for ever,' the yokel's arguing back, 'that's the point. Otherwise we'd still be forkin' out for castle-builders or canal-diggers or druids. Scargill's arguing for the economics of Fantasy Island and the politics of Bullshit Mountain.'

I feel Brubeck's chest, rising and falling against my back.

'Ever been to a mining town?' asks the Londoner. 'You can't go now 'cause the fuzz won't let you near, but when the mine goes, the town dies. Wales and the north ain't the south, Yorkshire ain't Kent, and energy ain't just another industry. Energy's security. The North Sea oil-fields won't last for ever, and then what?'

'A quality debate, gents,' says the woman, 'but the bells?'

Feet clomp up the wooden ladder: lucky we didn't choose the bell-tower. A minute goes by. Still no sound from the vestry. I think all three've gone up. I shift a fraction and Brubeck gasps in pain. I risk whispering, 'Are you okay?'



'No. You're crushing my nuts, since you asked.'

'You can adopt.' I try to give him more room, but there isn't any. 'Think we should make a run for it?'

'Perhaps a silent creep, once the—'

The stuffy darkness booms with bells. Brubeck opens the door – fresher air floods in – half-hobbles out, then helps me climb out. High above, two chubby calves are dangling down through the hatch. We tiptoe to the door, like a pair of total wallies from *Scooby-Doo* . . .

Me and Brubeck leg it down the lane, like we've escaped from Colditz. The bells sound sloshy and shiny in the blue dark. I get a stitch so we stop at a bench by the village sign. 'Typical,' says Brubeck. 'I want to show off my How to Survive in the Wild skills, and it's the Invasion of the Wurzels instead. I need a fag. You?'

'Okay. Will they be ding-donging for a while?'

'Guess so.' Brubeck hands me a cigarette and holds out a lighter: I dip the tip in the flame. 'I'll let you back in when they've gone. Yale locks are a cinch, even in the dark.'

'But shouldn't you be getting home?'

'I'll call my mum from the phone box by the pub and say I'm staying out night-fishing after all. Little white lie.'

I need his help, but I'm nervous 'bout a price-tag.

'Don't worry, Sykes. My intentions are honourable.'

I think of Vinny Costello and flinch. 'Good.'

'Guys don't *just* think 'bout getting off with girls, y'know.'

I fire a beam of smoke straight at Brubeck's face, so he has to squint and look away. 'I've got an older brother,' I tell him. We're by an overgrown orchard, so when we've finished our cigarettes we climb in and scrump a few unripe apples. There's a brick wall to clamber up. The apples are tart as limes, but good after an oily dinner. Lights blink on the power station we passed earlier. 'Out thataway,' Brubeck chucks an apple core in the general direction, 'past them hazy lights on the Isle of Sheppey, there's a fruit farm, Gabriel Harty's. I worked the strawberry season there last year and made twenty-five quid a

day. There's dorms for the pickers, and once the exams are over, I'm going back. I'm saving for an InterRail in August.'

'What's an InterRail?'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

'A train pass. You pay a hundred and thirty quid and then you can travel all over Europe, for a month, for free. Second class, but still. From the tip of Portugal to the top of Norway. Eastern-bloc countries too, Yugoslavia and places. The Berlin Wall. Istanbul. In Istanbul, there's this bridge, right. One side's in Europe and the other's in Asia. I'm going to walk across it.'

Far away, a lonely dog barks, or perhaps a fox.

I ask, 'What do you do in all these countries?'

'Look around. Walk. Find a cheap bed. Eat what the locals eat. Find a cheap beer. Try not to get fleeced. Talk. Pick up a few words in the local lingo. Just *be* there, y'know? Sometimes,' Brubeck bites into an apple, 'sometimes I want to be *everywhere*, all at once, so badly I could just . . .' Brubeck mimes a bomb going off in his rib-cage. 'Do you never get that feeling?'

A bat flaps by, like it's on a string in a naff vampire film.

'Not really, if I'm honest. The furthest I've ever been's Ireland, to see my mum's relatives in Cork.'

'What's it like?'

'Different. It's not all checkpoints and bombs like up north, though the Troubles are still in the air a bit, and it's best to shut up about politics. They *hate* Thatcher 'cause of Bobby Sands and the hunger strikers. I've got this one great-aunt, my mam's aunt Eilish – she's brilliant. She keeps hens and has a gun in her coal-hole, and when she was younger she cycled all the way to Kathmandu. Really, she did. She'd felt that wanna-be-everywhere *boom* thing, for sure. I've seen photos and newspaper cuttings and stuff. She lives on this long headland near Bantry – the Sheep's Head peninsula. It's like the edge of the world. There's nothing there, no shops or anything, but' – there's not many people I'd admit this to – 'I really loved it.'

There's a moon sharp enough to cut your finger on.

We say nothing for a bit, but it's not an awkward nothing.

Then Brubeck says, 'D'you know 'bout the second umbilical cord, Sykes?'

I can't make out his face any more. 'You what?'

'When you're a baby in the womb, there's this cord—'

'I know what an umbilical cord is, thanks. But a "second" one?'

'Well, psychologists say there's a second umbilical cord, an invisible one, an emotional one, which ties you to your parents for the whole time you're a kid. Then, one day, you have a row with your mum if you're a girl, or your dad if you're a boy, and that argument cuts your second cord. Then, and only then, are you ready to go off into the big wide world and be an adult on your own terms. It's like a rite-of-passage thing.'

'I argue with my mam, like, *daily*. She treats me like I'm ten.'

Brubeck lights another fag, takes a drag and passes it to me. 'I'm talking a bigger, nastier fight. Afterwards you know it happened. You're not the kid you were.'

'And you're sharing these pearls of wisdom with me why?'

He lines up his answer carefully. 'If you're running off because your dad's a petty crim who beats your mum up and throws you downstairs when you try to stop him, then running away's the clever thing to do. Go. I'll give you my InterRail money. But if you're sat on this wall tonight just because your umbilical cord got snipped, then, yeah, it hurts, but it had to happen. Cut your mum a bit of slack. It's just a part of growing up. You shouldn't be punishing her for it.'

'She *slapped* me.'

'Bet she feels like shit about it now.'

'You don't even know her!'

'Are you sure you do, Sykes?'

'What's *that* s'posed to bloody mean?'

Brubeck lets it drop. So I let it drop, too.

The church is quiet as the grave. Brubeck's asleep in a nest of dusty cushions. We're up on this gallery thing along the back wall, so we won't be spotted if any Satan worshippers drop by for a black mass. My calves are sore, my blister's throbbing and

my mind keeps rewinding to the scene with Vinny and Stella. Wasn't I good enough at sex? Didn't I dress right, talk right, like the right music?

22:58, glows my Timex. The maddest minutes of the week at the Captain Marlow are right now: last orders on a Saturday night. Mam, Dad and Glenda, who just works weekends, will be going full pelt: a roaring wall of drinkers flapping fivers and tenners through the fog of smoke and the racket of chatter, shouts, laughs, curses, flirting . . . Nobody'll care where Holly's ended up tonight. On the jukebox 'Daydream Believer' or 'Rockin' All Over The World' or 'American Pie' will be booming through the building. Sharon's fallen asleep with her torch on under the blanket. Jacko's asleep with people murmuring foreign languages on his radio. Up in my room, my bed's unmade, my schoolbag's slung over my chair. A basket of washed laundry's just inside the door where Mam puts it when she's pissed off with me. Which is most days now. The big glow of Essex at night'll be shining orangey light across the river, through my undrawn curtains, over the *Zenyattà Mondatta* and *The Smiths* posters I scavved from the Magic Bus. But I'm not going to start missing my room now.

No feekin' way.

## 1 July

Tin whistles, scratty noises, birdsong, and a stained-glass angel. The little church on the Isle of Grain, I remember now, lit by sun through the first crack of the day. Mam. The row. Stella and Vinny, waking up in each other's arms. My throat goes tight. I s'pose if some man's been inside you often enough, it'll take a while to get rid of him. Love's pure free joy when it works, but when it goes bad you pay for the good hours at loan-shark prices. 06:03, says my Timex. Sunday. Ed Brubeck: there he is, asleep on his cushiony things, mouth squashed open, hair floppy. His baseball cap sits on his neatly folded lumberjack