

Most people are insecure, and with good reason.
Not me.
This is probably because I've had to think about who I am and who I'm not, which is something your average person generally doesn't have to do. Your average person has a pair of parents, or at least a mother, or at least knows roughly where they fit into all that family business in a way that I, for better or worse, don't. Usually I think it's for the better, though sometimes not.

Also, it helps that I am very clever, if challenged in other ways. Challenged in this context means that I am weird, strange, odd, socially disabled, forever looking at things from an unusual angle, or however you want to put it.

Most things, I've come to understand, fit into some sort of spectrum. The descriptions of myself fit into a

spectrum that stretches from 'highly gifted' at one end to 'nutter' at the other, both of which I am comfortable with. One comes from understanding and respect, while the other comes from ignorance and fear. Mrs Willoughby explained the thinking behind both terms. Well, she explained the thinking behind the latter term, the offensive, deliberately hurtful term; the thinking behind the former, respectful judgement seemed perfectly clear and valid to me. (She got that wincing expression on her face when I mentioned this, but didn't say anything. Hol was more direct.)

'But I am clever.'

'I know. It's not the being clever that's the problem, Kit. It's the telling people.'

'So I ought to lie?'

'You ought to be less . . . determined to tell people how clever you are. How much more clever you are than they are.'

'Even if it's true?'

'Especially then.'

'But—'

'Plus, you're missing something.'

I felt myself rock back in my seat. 'Really?'

'Yes. There are different types of cleverness.'

'Hmm,' I said, which is what I've learned to say rather than the things I used to say, like, *No there aren't*, or, *Are you sure?* – in what was, apparently, a sarcastic tone.

'If nothing else,' Hol said, 'other people *think* that there are different types of cleverness, and that's what matters, in this context.'

One of the ways I am clever is that I can pay very close attention to exactly what people say and how they phrase things. With Hol this works especially well because she is quite clever too, and expresses herself well, and mostly in proper sentences (Holly is a journalist, so perhaps the habits of her trade have had an effect). Also, we have known each other a long time. With other people it can be harder. Even Guy – whom I’ve known even longer, because he’s my dad, after all – can be a bit opaque sometimes. Especially now, of course, as he’s dying. They don’t think there is a tumour in his head affecting his mind, but he is on a lot of mind-muddling medication.

So, to return to Hol’s last phrase, ‘in this context’: there was an almost audible clunk as she added these words to the end of the sentence. She put those words in there because she knows that I like them, that they make a difference to me. Both Hol and Mrs Willoughby have explained to me – sometimes at great length – that context matters a lot in various situations, and especially in social interactions, which is the stuff I tend to have difficulties with. Adding ‘in this context’ means she – Hol – wanted me to think about what she’d just said rather than just dismiss it out of hand because it seemed to me at the time that there was, plainly, only one sort of cleverness.

Anyway, other people ‘*thinking*’ that there are different types of cleverness was, apparently, what I was supposed to focus on.

‘Are you sure, Hol?’ I asked, patiently.

‘There you go.’

‘There I go what?’

‘There you go, sounding sarcastic and patronising.’

‘But I wasn’t being either. I was trying to sound patient.’

‘Again, what you *meant* isn’t what matters, Kit. What matters is how you appear, what other people think you meant.’

‘It’s not my problem if . . .’ I began, then fell silent under a look from Hol. The look concerned involves her dipping her head a little to the right and her eyebrows rising while her lips purse a fraction. It was her look that says, as near as I can gauge it, ‘Now, Kit, we’ve been over this before.’

‘It *is* your problem,’ she told me. ‘If you’ve given people the wrong impression when you could have given them the right one, you’ve—’

‘Yes yes yes, I need to make allowances for people,’ I said, wanting to get back to the proper point. I may have waved my hands, too. ‘So, what other sorts of cleverness are there?’

Hol sighed. ‘Emotional cleverness, Kit. Empathising with others, getting on with people, intuiting what and how they think.’

‘But if people would just say what they—’

I got the look again.

Now it was my turn to sigh. ‘That’s another area where I have to make allowances, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is. Plus, people don’t always know what they think themselves, Kit,’ Hol told me (and, in another turnaround, now *she* was sounding what you might call

conspicuously patient). 'Not precisely, not so they can tell you clearly and unambiguously and without contradictions.' She paused, probably waiting for me to protest that, well, people just *should* know what they think, and express it properly (it was certainly what I was thinking). But I didn't say it. 'And a lot of the time,' she continued – when I just sat there and smiled the way she'd taught me – 'even when people *do* know what they think and why, they don't always want to tell you.' Another pause. 'Sometimes because they don't want to hurt your feelings, or give you something you might use against them later, either directly against them, to their face, or use against them by mentioning what's just been said to somebody else.'

'Gossip.'

'Often, yes,' Hol agreed, and smiled. Hol has a plain face but the consensus seems to be that it lights up when she smiles. I like to see her smile, and especially I like to see her smile at me, so I suppose this must be true. Hol has always been my favourite of Dad's old friends (not that he really has any new ones). Even before we came to our financial arrangement, I knew that I trusted her and I would listen to her and take her seriously. 'Sometimes,' she went on, 'they're ashamed of what they're thinking, or just need more time to decide what they really, truly feel, because emotions can get very . . . well, tangled.'

'So,' I said, 'what you're saying is, it's complicated.' (This is almost a joke between us. A lot of apparently simple things seem to end up being 'complicated'.)

Hol nodded. 'People are. Who'd 'a thunk?'
I thought about this. 'Well, everybody, obviously.'
Holly nodded. 'Well, everybody else, Kit.'
'So I ought to hide my light under a bushel?'
'Oh, Jeez, Kit, you haven't been reading the Bible again, have you?'
'Is that where that's from?'
'Yes. I mean, I think so.'
'No. But should I? Hide my light under a bushel, I mean?'
'Well, just don't insist on putting it under a magnifying glass.'

We were in the sitting room of the house, sitting on overstuffed but threadbare couches on either side of the large, interestingly warped coffee table. A large vase of black glass containing real flowers sat between us. Usually we keep artificial flowers in this vase because real ones are such a bother and the only reason the vase is there anyway is to catch drips falling from the water-stained ceiling directly above. Holly had put the real flowers there. They were yellow; daffodils. This was spring, as in last spring, four Holly visits ago, when Guy seemed to be on the mend, or at least when the cancer was in remission.

I sat back in the seat and nodded in what I hoped was a decisive manner. 'I understand.'

Hol frowned. 'Hmm,' she said. 'Hu-fucking-rah.' (She is, unfortunately, somewhat prone to swearing, so arguably not that clever after all.)

* * *

Holly is wrong. I do understand emotions. When I see her shape in the frosted glass of the inner door of the porch, framed against the grey light by the storm doors bracketing her, I recognise her and feel a surge of good emotion. I run down the stairs to the door before Mrs Gunn can get there from the kitchen at the back of the house. I want to be the first person to greet Hol.

Mrs Gunn says that I ‘thunder’ when I run down the stairs. I don’t care. I jump down the last two steps, landing as lightly as I can – which is surprisingly lightly, I think – then take the last two and a half paces to the front door at a calm walk because I don’t want to appear too overenthusiastic. I can be a bit full-on, I’ve been told. (I’ve always thought this is really a good thing and people are just embarrassed and jealous that they’re not as forthright as I am, but both Mrs Willoughby and Hol have explained . . . Well, I’m not sure I could be bothered to listen on either occasion, but it was definitely one of those complicated areas where I have to pull back a bit and restrain myself.)

I open the door. ‘Holly!’

‘Hi, Kit,’ she says, and comes forward and hugs me, kissing me on both sides of the face. She rises on tiptoes to do this, and properly applies lip pressure to my cheeks, a couple of centimetres forward from each of my ears. There is no moisture transferred (thankfully, even if it is Hol), but it is more than the usual mwah-mwah that I know, through Hol, media people exchange, when there may be no physical contact between heads at all, just cheeks put briefly in proximity.

Hol's hair looks the same so I don't have to remember to compliment her on this, and she appears similar otherwise, which is good. She is dressed in blue jeans, a black T-shirt and a green fleece. It is mostly thanks to Hol – and a little due to Mrs Willoughby – that I know to look for these things and consider commenting on them, to keep people happy.

'How are you, love?' she asks me.

I like the way Hol says 'love'. She was brought up near Bolton but her accent is sort of placeless; if you were forced to, you might say she sounded vaguely like a Londoner – or at least somebody from the Home Counties – with a hint of American. Dad says she completely lost what he calls her 'Ay-ooop' accent within the first year of uni, remaking herself to sound less provincial, less identifiable, more neutral and bland. But she still says 'love' like a northerner, with the vowel sound like the one in 'low', not the one in 'above'. I realise I am thinking about this rather than actually replying to her question when I notice that there's an ongoing silence and Hol is looking at me with both eyebrows raised.

'Oh,' I say. 'Generally pretty well, thanks.'

'Huh,' Mrs Gunn says, appearing silently, suddenly at my side. Mrs Gunn is small, wiry, seemingly always bent over – forwards – and wears what we're all pretty sure is a tightly curled auburn wig. 'It's you,' she says to Hol. She turns away again, heading back down the dark hall, drying her hands violently on a dishcloth. 'I suppose you'd better come in,' she says as she goes.

Apparently Mrs Gunn is not the world's most welcoming person.

'Nice to see you too, Mrs G,' Hol says quietly to our housekeeper's retreating back. She pushes a small rucksack into my arms.

'Oh,' I say, startled, looking at it. 'I haven't got you anything.'

Hol sighs, takes the rucksack back. 'Never mind. I'll take this; you can get my case from the car. Heavier anyway.'

She stands aside and I go out to the car – the same old Polo – and take her case from the hatch. The car is red – the paint is faded on the short bonnet, which I've noticed tends to happen with red cars – and its rear is grey with motorway grime, making the hatch release feel gritty. I wipe my hand on my trousers but I'll need to wash it again as soon as I can. Or I could just stand here with my arm outstretched and my hand flat like I was looking for a tip from God; it is, as usual, raining.

'How's Guy?' Hol asks as we go up the stairs to her old room.

'Oh, still dying,' I tell her.

'Jeez, Kit,' she mutters, and I see her looking along the dark corridor towards his room.

I open the door for her and bring her case in as she stands there, looking across the rucked carpet and the sagging bed to the window with the faded curtains and the view over the densely treed back garden. The trees are only now coming into bud, so you can see the quarry

between the network of restlessly moving twigs and branches; a grey depth opening into the rainy distance.

‘Was I being insensitive?’ I ask her.

‘He might have heard you,’ she tells me, not looking at me, still staring out of the window.

‘He’s probably asleep.’ I leave a space. ‘And anyway, he knows he’s dying.’ Holly is still looking away from me, but I see her head shake slightly. ‘Anything else I’ve missed?’ I ask her. ‘So far?’

She turns to me. She wears a faint smile. ‘You might have asked me how I am, how my journey was, Kit.’

‘Sorry. How—?’

‘I’m fine. The drive was mostly shit; it usually is, especially on a bank holiday. But never mind. I’m here now.’ She puts the rucksack down. Her glance flicks to the half-open door behind me. ‘How are you doing, Kit, really?’ she asks. She has lowered the volume of her voice.

I am about to repeat that I am generally pretty well, thanks, when I realise that the glance to the door and the lowered voice mean that she is thinking of Guy, and – I’m guessing – how I might be feeling about the fact that my father is going to die soon. I’ve got quite good at thinking about this sort of stuff, and quick at it, so I leave a little extra time before – with a serious expression on my face and also at a lower voice-volume – saying, ‘I’m okay, Hol.’

‘This must be hard for you, though,’ she says, coming up to me and putting her arms round me, hugging me and putting the side of her head on my upper chest.

Hol is smaller than me. Most people are. I put my arms round her and hug her in return. I think about patting her on the back, but she is the one trying to comfort me, so I don't.

'Little whiffy, to be blunt, Kit,' Hol murmurs, though she doesn't lift her head away from where it is, her nose near my left armpit. She briefly squeezes me a little tighter, as though to compensate for the personal criticism. 'You showering every day?'

'Normally every second day,' I tell her. This is my winter regime. In the summer I shower every day.

'Hmm. Maybe you should change your T-shirt more often, hon.'

This is a regular theme with us. Usually I wear camouflage T-shirts and trousers – mostly green NATO fatigues, though sometimes I wear the basically beige British or US desert gear that has become more and more prevalent in the sort of shop or on-line store that sells such apparel. Sand-coloured fatigues don't make much sense here amongst the browns and greens of the frequently damp north-east of England, but I don't wear this stuff because I want to crawl around the countryside unnoticed (I don't go out much beyond the garden at all, and I hate mud); I favour camo gear because you can wear it longer before you have to bother washing it. Stains just disappear. Dad says I'm a messy eater and shouldn't wipe my hands on my T-shirt so much.

Today I'm also wearing an old yellow checked shirt of Dad's and a padded olive gilet, because it's cold.

'Do you want me to go and change now?' I ask.

'No, love,' Hol says, sighing. She pushes herself away and looks up at me, her gaze criss-crossing my face. 'You getting proper help from the local health people?' She still holds me, her hands on my forearms. She blows once, quickly, out of the right side of her mouth, attempting to shift some black hair from near one eye. Holly has collar-length straight brown hair, which she dyes black.

'We're getting some help,' I tell her. 'Though there seems to have been some sort of mistake with his last Work Capability Assessment. He was too ill to get there and we got a letter a week later saying he's been put back on the able-to-work register. I think. Guy wouldn't let me see the letter.'

Holly lets go of me and turns away, shaking her head. 'Jesus fuck.'

'I wish you didn't swear so much.'

'I wish there wasn't so much to fucking swear about.'

The door is half open behind me. Across the hall the stairwell window facing the front of the house is as tightly shut as it can be but its frame is wonky and it admits both draughts and sound – and leaking water, too, if the weather is from the south. I can hear a noise of crunching stones from the driveway beyond.

I nod backwards. 'Somebody else,' I tell Hol.

We go out onto the landing, to look. Out beyond the slope of the front garden lawn, the straggle of assorted, unkempt bushes and the stone gateposts guarding the drive – the left one tipped precariously, as though trying to block the entrance, replacing the long-sold-off gates

– a swell of ridged brown field hides most of the city; only the triplet towers of the Minster and the spire of St Thomas’s church show dark grey above the brown corduroy of the land.

A large white Audi swings round the loop of driveway in front of the house, narrowly avoids hitting Hol’s little red Polo and scrunches to a stop out of sight below, right by the front door.

‘Buzz Darkside’s arrived, then,’ Hol says.

She means Uncle Paul. As we start down the stairs the Audi’s horn blares quickly, twice. It is quite loud. Moments later a bell jangles distantly in the kitchen, as though the house is answering back.

I can tell the difference between the sounds of the bells for different rooms. ‘Dad’s awake,’ I tell Hol as we get to the bottom of the stairs. A car door slams.

‘Thoughtful as ever, Paul,’ Hol mutters, though her pace quickens as she approaches the door, where a shadow is looming. Her hand is out towards the handle but Uncle Paul opens the door himself, breezing in, kicking it shut behind him. Paul is below average height for a man but carries himself bigger. He looks tanned and has naturally black curly hair he keeps tidily short. He works out a lot, he says, though his face looks a little puffy. Hol thinks he’s had work done, certainly on his teeth and probably on the bags he used to have under his eyes. He’s about thirty-nine. They all are, because they were in the same year when they went to uni and this was their home in term time. Only Guy breaks this pattern; he’s a couple of years older.

'Hey, Hol. Kit! Wow. You look even bigger! Here, take this.' He shoves an old battered-looking leather briefcase into my arms. 'We can get the rest later. Hol.' He leans in, kissing her, cheek against cheek, while Holly cooperates resignedly. 'How's my least favourite movie critic?'

'Fuck off, Paul.'

Uncle Paul looks at me as he lets Hol go. 'Aww, her first words.' He pulls in a breath as he steps back to take in Hol's appearance. 'Great to see you too, petal.'

'If this is about *Kinetica*, it was still shit.'

Paul shakes his head. 'Grossed one-fifty worldwide, for a budget of thirty. Slightly south of thirty, actually. If that's shit let's hope they all are.'

'So it's shit that grossed one-fifty worldwide. Still shit.'

Paul smiles broadly at her. 'You are welcome to your biased, bitter and basically totally bizarre opinion.'

Paul is a corporate lawyer for Maven Creative Industries. Maven Creative Industries make high-concept cinema (movies, according to Uncle Paul; films, if you listen to Hol), have multiple interests in theme parks and are increasingly moving into electronic games and other virtual arts and entertainment spaces where they are poised to exploit the synergies offered by multiple-platform cross-conceptualisations. So says their website. (HeroSpace, the game that I play, is not one of theirs.)

When they all lived here back in the early-to-mid nineties, before I was around but when I was conceived, everybody coming here this weekend was a student in the Film and Media Studies department of the university. Except Dad, who was, nominally, originally with

the English faculty before he changed departments. He changed courses a lot. His status was such he was sometimes described as the Student Without Portfolio (a Hol coining, apparently. It sounds like one of hers).

‘How are you, anyway?’ Paul asks Hol.

‘Just about keeping my head above water. You?’

‘Water-skiing.’ Paul grins. ‘Things are good. You heard I might be coming up here to, ah . . .’

‘Get parachuted into the local safe seat over the heads of the loudly protesting local party?’ Hol says, folding her arms in front of her. ‘Yeah, heard. Well done; you finally made it into *Private Eye*.’

‘Yeah, I know; having that issue framed.’

‘I thought that was the police’s—’

Uncle Paul – he’s not a blood relation, he’s just always liked me calling him Uncle Paul – turns from Hol and smiles at me. ‘Hey, Kit, I could end up being your MP!’ He laughs. ‘I should court you!’ He frowns. ‘You are allowed to vote, aren’t you?’

‘Jeez, Paul,’ Hol begins.

‘Can I count on your vote, Kit, yeah?’ Paul says, smiling broadly at me.

‘No,’ I tell him. ‘We’re in Bewford South here. Not Bewford City.’

‘Really?’ Paul looks taken aback. He’s frowning. He reaches out and takes me by the right elbow. ‘Well, never mind,’ he says, sounding sympathetic. His attention leaves me. ‘Hey, Mrs Gunn! How you doing?’

I think I hear a distant ‘Huh’, then the sound of the kitchen door closing.

Paul frowns briefly, shrugs. 'Same old Mrs G.' He looks around the front hall, inspecting. 'Same old everything, I guess,' he says, more quietly. 'Place looks a bit shabbier, that's about it.'

I suppose the place does look shabbier. It is deteriorating all the time because although we have a big house we don't have much money and Guy sees no point in keeping the place in good repair anyway. There are various leaks in the roof and many slates are missing or flap loose in gales and storms. (When the wind blows, it is, I've heard Guy say, 'like living in a castanet factory in an earthquake'.)

Most of the gutters and downpipes are blocked – a small tree at least as old as I am is growing in the downpipe on the north-west corner of the house. There's a crack big enough to fit a finger into running down two storeys of the back wall facing the quarry; two internal doors fit so poorly they have to be shoulder-charged to gain entry to the bedrooms concerned – or hauled open with both hands if you're inside and want to get out – while another fits in its frame so loosely that just walking past it on the landing outside is enough to make it click and creak open (easily confused people find this 'spooky').

Several windows are cracked across their corners and the one in the boxroom fell out entirely ten years ago and was replaced with hardboard, itself now warped with damp. The electrical system needed refurbishment twenty years ago (I estimate we go through about a metre of fuse wire per annum); the fire in the parlour

produces a strong smell of smoke in the bedroom immediately above it, the two above that and the attic above those; the plumbing clangs and bangs; the boiler or something close to it groans and wheezes when called upon for hot water; and the central heating makes a noise like a slow drill and never really heats the two furthest bedrooms much beyond taking the chill off. The upper floor, which housed the servants in the old days, isn't heated at all, though a little warmth finds its way up there anyway because nothing in this house fits or insulates properly.

Guy still talks with surprising bitterness about the folly of removing the Aga that used to take up half of one kitchen wall and replacing it with an electric cooker. That happened nearly a quarter of a century ago, when his parents were modernising the place. He used to talk of buying a new Aga, or at least one new to us, but he never did, and now, of course, never will.

I've grown used to the house slowly crumbling away around me – I've grown up with it – and of course I see it happen very slowly and incrementally, every day, while Paul visits only about once a year, so any changes will look more dramatic. He glances back to the front door. 'Think the rain's going off. I'll get my gear.'

'I'll help,' I say, remembering to be helpful. Holly comes out to the car, too. Paul points the key fob at the giant Audi and the rear hatch hisses up. 'Cool,' I say. We have a dark blue Volvo estate, which is older than I am. Guy bought it from an antique dealer in Buxton twenty years ago and now it's practically an antique itself, he

says. It lives in the wooden garage, which sort of leans against the south side of the house. I can drive it, after passing my test last year, though I've never driven it very far and I'm frightened of the motorway. I keep it maintained, too, though it's a messy business, requiring several sets of overalls, and surgical gloves. Sometimes two layers.

'Grab that antique Halliburton, will you, Kit?' Paul says, nodding at an aluminium case. I lift it. Paul pulls out a posh-looking suitcase. I think it's made from carbon fibre. Hol steps forward, hand out. 'Hol?' Paul says, sounding concerned. 'You sure you should be carrying anything, in your condition?' Hol glares at him. 'You know, with that enlarged spleen and overactive bile duct of yours? Sure we're not going against medical—'

'I thought you might need help getting your ego into the house,' Hol tells him.

Paul just laughs, then says, 'Still working for *Sight Unseen*?'

'*Sight and Sound*, and fuck you again. And don't pretend you don't read it, even if it's just because you have to.'

He laughs again.

'I'm not any bigger,' I tell Paul as we head back into the hall.

'What?'

'I'm the same size as I was last summer, last time you were here.'

'Oh. Are you?'

'Yes. I'm one hundred kilos.'

'Are you now?'

'I'm always one hundred kilos. I have been since before I was sixteen.'

'Really.'

'I just like being one hundred kilos.'

'I see,' Paul says, as we troop up the stairs. 'Well, that's, ah, that's a nice round number.'

'Yes,' I say. 'Exactly.' I'm leading the way up the stairs at this point so I can't see his expression.

Guy's bedroom bell jangles again and a moment later I hear Mrs Gunn bustling out of the kitchen, muttering, 'Yes, yes, I hear you. Can't be in three places at once.' She comes stamping up the stairs behind us.

'Hello again, Mrs G!' Paul says cheerily as she passes us.

'Mm-hmm,' she says, not looking at any of us as she passes. She has her outside wellies on and is taking off her gardening gloves as she goes, disappearing round the corner at the top of the stairs.

'How is Guy?' I hear Paul say quietly.

'Haven't seen him yet,' Hol tells him. 'No better, from what—'

I turn round, lower my head and my voice and whisper, 'He's still dying,' to Paul.

Paul looks instantly serious. 'Sorry to hear that,' he says.

Behind him, Hol seems to be keeping a neutral expression.

We're in the kitchen ten minutes later, drinking tea that I've made and eating shortbread that Mrs Gunn has

made – she is still upstairs, probably helping Dad get up – when the doorbell rings.

The doorbell also links to one of the kitchen bells. These are over one hundred and thirty years old, as old as the house itself. The bells exist in a long box up on the wall of the kitchen. They look like little handbells hanging on the ends of metal springs shaped like question marks. A white-or-red disc under each bell used to show which one had rung most recently even after the bell had stopped ringing and the spring had stopped quivering, but the discs haven't worked for at least the one point eight decades I've been around.

When the quarry on the far side of the back garden wall was still being worked, up to four years ago, the twice-weekly blasts used to shake the whole house and make all the bells ring faintly. It was as if the house was trembling and crying out in alarm.

Now they're going to extend the quarry and the house is going to have to go; Guy is selling the place to Holtarth Moor Quarries and it'll be demolished. I don't entirely know where I'll end up but if there is one thing I'd like to keep from the house itself – I mean, apart from all my own stuff, in my room – it might be this box of bells here in the kitchen. I'm not sure why.

'Anybody home?' a distant female voice yells from the front hall.

'Hey, it's the fatuous Baker girl,' Hol says as we all stand, chairs scraping on the flagstones.

'We just came in,' says a male voice from the same direction. 'Hope that's all right . . .'

‘Oh,’ Hol says brightly, ‘and Mr Bobby.’

‘What does she call me?’ Paul asks me as we file out of the kitchen to the hall again.

‘Buzz Darkside,’ Hol says, before I can answer.

Paul looks unimpressed. ‘Still with that? Needs reimagining. Hey!’ he says, raising his voice as we see the others. ‘Hey!’ he shouts, even louder. ‘It’s the whole gang!’

I’d expected two more people – Alison and Rob – which I think I could have coped with, but instead there are four and I feel overwhelmed. The other two are Pris and Haze, who used to be a couple but now aren’t and yet they’ve turned up together. Everybody crowds into the hall except Mrs Gunn and Guy, who are still upstairs, and I back into a corner near the cupboard under the stairs, feeling suddenly hot and a bit dizzy, while people, us from the kitchen and the rest from the still-open front door, mill about and talk and shout and put luggage down and embrace one another and slowly start to sort themselves out, though in the meantime they all talk at once and talk over one another, so it’s difficult for me to tell who’s saying what.

‘Yeah, bit mob-handed, as my old da would have said. We did ring, but—’

‘Still not where the sat-nav says it’s supposed to be.’

‘Come in! Come in come in come in come in.’

‘It doesn’t *matter*.’

‘Paul. Ah, thanks. Yeah, thought that must be your great white behemoth blocking the front door.’

‘Yeah, look, I missed out on getting to the supermarket

so I haven't got any booze. But I've brought all me special spices and secret ingredients with me. Thought I might make a curry. I mean, I can go out specially later for drink, yeah? Oh, hi, Hol. Hey, Paul, what's up?

'Yes, but it should get it *right*. The place has *been* here long enough.'

'Passed Pris and her new chap on the motorway so I texted them. Met up for a coffee in Ormers and bumped into Haze.'

'Well, not for much longer. Evening, all. Oh, look; decent mobile reception. That's an innovation.'

'Yeah, that was just a misunderstanding, that disabled space.'

'Where's, ah . . . ?'

'And can I just say now, I've brought some lacto-free milk, and I'm not saying nobody else can't have any at all, but I will need some each day, so . . .'

'What did you buy?'

'Might ask you to move the Audi at some point, Paul; going to need access to a plug to recharge the Prius.'

'Rick, Paul. He's called Rick. He's staying in Ormiscrake. The King's Head.'

'Hey, Paul, Hol; good to see you, Kit.'

'What, is he just shy or something?'

'Oh, like, no, I wasn't . . . I was, um, donating, you know?'

'You've got a plug-in Pious?'

'He doesn't want to intrude, Paul. I know that's a hard concept for you to cope with.'

'Oh. It's just that you came out with a bag.'

'Hol the *doll*! You good? Look at you!'

'He looking after Mhyra?'

'Yew, harsh!'

'Well, you're kind or blind and I'm a mess, but thanks.'

'Nah, we left Brattus Norvegicus with my sister in Hemel.'

'What? Oh, ah. No, yeah, that was, like, stuff they couldn't . . . Hey, there's our Kit! Hey, Kit. Yeah, yeah. How are you, my friend?'

By early evening, when it is already dark but the rain has eased off again and a little watery moonlight is painted over the limbs of the trees crowding the back garden, they are all fed and watered and Guy is up and we are all in the sitting room, sitting.

Mrs Gunn has gone home. She lives in a neat little timber-frame, brick-skin bungalow in a cul-de-sac in the leafy suburb of Quonsley, which is a couple of kilometres away, just over the big bulge of field on the hill that hides most of the city from the house. I have been to her house once, when I missed the bus from school and was told to go to hers to wait for Dad, who was coming with the car. She keeps clear plastic covers on her couch and chairs in the living room. Her house was warm and draught free, and smelled of clean. It could not be much less like this place.

Willoughtree House. That's the name of this place, the name of the house we are talking about and which I live in with Guy, my dad.

'I *still* can't fucking believe it. I certainly couldn't

believe it the first time . . . *especially* the first fucking time. I remember thinking, Boris fucking Johnson as mayor of London? What next? The Chuckle brothers as secretaries general of the United Nations?’

‘Boris isn’t so bad.’

‘*What?*’

‘Yeah, come on, Hol; at least he’s, like, real.’

‘Fuck off. He’s a fucking right-wing Tory, friend of Rupert fucking Murdoch and defender of the fucking kleptocrat bankers. Another Bullingdon Club bully. How does coming across as being an incompetent bumbler at whatever he does make him *better?*’

‘I’ve met him. He’s not so—’

‘Oh, I bet you have. I bet he’s fucking charming. So was Blair. So what?’

‘Look, I didn’t feckin vote for him, all right?’

‘But Haze is right,’ Rob says. ‘Boris seems more like a normal person.’

‘Yeah!’ Haze says. ‘Not one of these robot guys, never giving a straight answer or anything. Just, just . . .’ Haze flaps both hands. ‘Yeah, like . . .’ His voice trails away.

‘You would have fucking voted for him, wouldn’t you?’ Hol says, looking straight at Paul.

‘I just told you I didn’t.’

‘Yeah, you’re contractually bound not to because after giving it a lot of thought you’ve plumped for Labour for your political career. I bet you would have if you could, though. And for all we know—’

‘Like I say—’

‘Look me in the eye, you twat, and tell me you weren’t

tempted to vote for him. Especially against Ken; you're more of a Blairite than that lying, war-mongering scumbag is himself. I bet you had to grit your teeth, if you did vote for Ken. Tell me you didn't want to vote for Boris.'

'Never even occurred to me.'

'You lying bastard.'

Paul spreads both arms, looks round at everybody else, as though appealing to them. He even looks at me. 'Holly,' he says, when his gaze returns to her, 'I don't know what to say to you when you're in this sort of mood. I don't know how to handle you. Politics is politics and there are some decent people on the other side just like there are some twats on our side, and until you accept that you're always going to sound like some Spartist caricature. Get a fucking grip, why don't you.'

'Can we talk about something else?' Alison asks.

'I'm not arguing there are no decent people in the Tory Party,' Hol says to Paul. I think she's trying to keep calm now. 'But they're like bits of sweetcorn in a turd; technically they've kept their integrity, but they're still embedded in shit.'

'There you go,' Paul says, laughing lightly.

'Yeah, come off the fence, Hol,' Haze says. 'Tell us what you really think!'

'Things have changed, Hol,' Rob tells her. 'Phase-changed, even. We're just not where we were.'

'I'm being serious here,' Alison says. '*Can* we talk about something else? I mean, does any of this really *matter*?'

Hol shakes her head. 'What a choice: Neo-Labour, the toxic Agent-Orange-Book Lib-Dems or the shithead rich-boy bastardhood that is the Tories. We really are all fucked, aren't we?'

'Finally a note of realism,' Paul says, shaking his head.

'There's always UKIP, Hol,' Haze says.

Hol looks at Haze as though she's about to say something, but then her face sort of screws up and she just makes a sound like 'Tschah!'

A bell rings in the hall, not the kitchen. It's the special one we put in last year. Guy isn't in the room with the rest of us right now; he left about five minutes ago, pushing on his Zimmer frame and refusing help.

While he's been absent, I have been asked again about exactly how Guy is. I've done my little speech about how he has good days and bad days and good weeks and bad weeks, though month-on-month he's very obviously heading downwards, and the good days and good weeks now are like the bad days and bad weeks of just a few months ago. Everybody seems satisfied with this.

The thing is, with Mrs Gunn gone, I'll have to answer the bell if it goes again (we have a code), though I'd rather not. I'd rather stay here with the others, even though I'm just sitting on the edge of the group and only listening, not taking part. This is where I'm comfortable, being with a few other people rather than just with Dad, but not actually having to do much except listen.

The numbers have to be right. Too many people – more than ten or twelve, say – and I clam up anyway,

confused by all the different voices and the interrupting and the trying to work out what people mean behind what they say and what their facial expressions and body language are telling me, but, on the other hand, if there are too few people, then they seem to feel they have to try to involve me in the conversation, because they don't want me to feel left out, or because they don't see why I should get to listen in without contributing something.

I'm still waiting for the other bell, dreading it. I am Pavlov's dog, though instead of salivating I have a little jolt of fear in my guts each time it rings.

'And don't think I didn't hear that bit about "For all we know",' Paul is saying to Hol, pointing at her. 'You didn't actually get to the point where you might have impugned my word, but you sailed pretty close to that . . . to that particular waterfall.'

'What the hell are you—'

'Seriously,' Alison says, '*can* we talk about something else?'

'And who the fuck uses words like "impugned" amongst their pals, for Christ's sake?' Hol asks, sounding angry. 'Is that, like, lawyer talk or something?'

'All I'm saying—'

'Or is it politico lingo?' Hol is asking Paul. I think she's still angry but she makes a sort of small laughing sound as well. 'Have they put you through some sort of Talking Like a Politician induction course? Is that Spad-speak? Now you're probably going to be an MP, are you going to start talking about straw men, and

things getting knocked into cocked hats? Is that how it works?’

‘Politilingo? Polingo?’ Haze is saying.

I have seen Hol and Paul argue and talk and shout like this before. According to Guy they were always the same.

‘Anyway. Think I’ll get another drink,’ Haze says, standing. ‘Anybody else need another drink?’

‘Yeah, that’s what this conversation needs,’ Pris says. ‘More alcohol.’

The sitting room is probably the most civilised space in the house, and the warmest. It has that long rectangular coffee table made of wood in the middle; the one with the flower vase at its centre. A three-seater couch faces each of its long sides and an easy chair faces each of its short sides. One of the couches and a chair are matching blue velvet; the other couch is brown, pretend leather. The other seat is a swivel chair made of stretchy red fabric pulled tight over an expanded polystyrene moulding. Pris has told me this is a piece of authentic seventies batwing kitsch and so old it’s been back in fashion at least twice. Or would have been but for the tears in the fabric and the stains on it. (Last time we talked, she wasn’t sure of the current position of such furniture – she said she’d have to consult a magazine called *Wallpaper*. Which I found confusing, because we’re talking about a chair.) Anyway, the red chair and brown sofa don’t match anything else in the room.

Guy was sitting in the red chair until he left. He used to always sit in the blue velvet armchair when we had

guests, until his back got so bad and getting out of the chair became so difficult. Paul is sitting there instead. Hol and Pris are sitting on the blue velvet sofa. Alison, Haze and Rob are on the brown one.

I've pulled out the blue velvet pouffe that usually squats under the table in the bay window. I'm sitting on it, hunched, with my hands clasped between my pressed-together knees. The pouffe has lost a lot of its stuffing, or it's compressed over the years, so you sit quite near the floor on it, plus it makes a sort of crackling noise when you sit on it and you have to kind of waggle your bottom to get comfortable, but I don't mind.

I'm sat by the side of the blue velvet sofa, near Hol. Hol has said a couple of times I should sit up on the couch with her and Pris but I don't want to; I'd feel too big and obvious and people might expect me to join in. From here, low down, I can watch and listen without disturbing anybody.

Hol has put on a faded orange cardigan instead of the green fleece, and big thick blue socks. Paul is wearing neat-looking blue jeans and an open-necked pink shirt. Pris wears tight glittery trousers and a baggy black jumper, Rob wears black chinos and a grey polo neck, Alison is in a black knee-length dress with thick black woollen tights, and Haze has olive trousers and the same dark green Therapy? T-shirt and loose padded tartan shirt he arrived in.

Pris is pretty and curvy and the colour of coffee with milk, with dark eyes and shiny black, scraped-back hair

with lots of ringlets. Rob is about average height but quite wide; gym-fit, Hol has said. He keeps his head shaved but he has brown hair, I think. Alison is small and blonde and always wears make-up. Hol says Alison used to be fat and now exists in a state of perpetual semi-starvation. Haze is nearly as tall as me, though he doesn't carry himself that way. He's been slowly putting on weight ever since I've known him and his thin brown hair is receding in an orderly fashion straight back from his eyebrows, which are usually slightly raised.

Hol's face looks a little flushed, as does Paul's. This might be because they have been arguing, or because they have been drinking wine. Paul arrived with a crate of red wine from the French region of Médoc, and so far four bottles have been opened and three finished. I tried some, though I prefer sweet white wine if I feel I have to drink. Drinking isn't really for me. I suffer from acid reflux but more importantly I don't like the feeling of losing control. (I think most people drink because they're not happy with their sober self and wish to alter matters, whereas I am quite happy with who I am.)

Though Hol looks flushed, she seems more alive than she did before, her facial expressions both more animated and drawing from a longer menu. Paul appears deliberately relaxed, as though his instinct is to shout and gesticulate but he's decided not to.

Guy put on what he calls his Sunday Best to be with the others: the trousers and waistcoat of an old three-piece, lavender-coloured suit and a dove-grey leather bomber jacket. These clothes date from twenty years

ago when he was a size thirty waist the first time, but they hang off him now, he's grown so gaunt. Most people who knew him from the old days and who haven't seen him for the last few years tend to go quiet and look shocked when they see him because he's lost so much weight and his face, which was always thin, now looks cadaverous. There are dark circles under his large, blue, hooded eyes and his skin is dry and flaky. His lips look bruised all the time.

The people who don't go quiet and look shocked when they first see him usually haven't recognised him at all, and think he's somebody much older.

He wears a hat knitted from brown wool, to hide his baldness after the chemo treatment. He used to have long blond wavy hair he was very proud of. Originally the hat had a sort of woolly bobble on top like a little fronded pompom, but Guy thought that looked silly so he cut it off with a kitchen knife. As a result the hat has started to fray and unravel at the top, so you can see a little of his baldness through the two-pence-sized hole. Mrs Gunn and I have both offered to repair this – she was going to darn it (I'm not sure what that involves) and I could at least have sewn it back together – but Guy has refused so far. He can be stubborn. Hol says this is where I get it from.

There's no second bell, so I start to relax.

'Did I hear a bell there?' Hol asks nobody in particular.

'Just Guy letting us know he's on his way back,' I tell her.

'Ah.'

'Well, there is stuff we could talk about,' Paul says, glancing at me. 'But maybe not with Kit here.'

'Ah,' Haze says, 'yeah. The, ah . . .' He sticks a finger in his ear and waggles it this way and that. 'The video. The tape, the . . . yeah.' He looks round at the rest of them. 'Yeah, that.'

'Don't see why we have to excuse Kit,' Hol says, though she doesn't sound very sure.

'Oh,' Paul says, smiling, 'I think we do.' He smiles at me. The rest look or glance at me.

I'm feeling hot.

Silence. Suddenly Alison leans over and glares at the bottom of the couch she and Rob are sat on, concentrating on the little fringe of grubby green tassels that hang down almost to the threadbare rug. 'I thought I could feel a draught,' she says. She nods at the fringe. 'Those . . . That fringe is *moving*.' She stands, then uses her knees and hands to push the sofa back, making it scrape on the floorboards.

'*Now* what are you doing?' Rob asks her, tutting as he's moved back along with the couch. He is holding a glass of gin and orange juice.

'Yeah, don't offer to help or anything, lover,' Alison says, pulling the rug back. 'Look!' She nods down at the floor. 'There's a damn great hole.'

We all sit forward, crane our necks; whatever. There is a fist-sized hole in the floorboards there.

'That's where a large knot fell out,' I tell them. 'Out of the floorboard,' I add, which is probably unnecessary,

though on the other hand they are all quite drunk. 'Though if you ask Guy he'll tell you a rat gnawed it.'

'What?' Alison asks, looking horrified.

'Definitely a knot, though,' I tell her. 'No teethmarks.'

'Jesus,' Alison says, and starts trying to pull the sofa back to where it was, grunting.

'Fucking place is falling apart,' Paul says, looking around.

'Yeah, well,' Haze says.

'Guy says he doesn't think they'll need to actually pull the house down,' I tell them (they all look at me). 'Says it's only held up by us being in it; him and me. Once we're gone, once we stop believing in it, it'll fall down all by itself.'

'Plausible,' Alison says, tugging at the sofa. It's harder to move it that way; I think it's the grain of the wood or something. She gets the couch to jerk forward a centimetre.

Rob tuts again, licks at his hand. 'Do you mind?' he says. 'You're spilling my fucking drink.'

'Oh, help her, Rob, for goodness' sake,' Hol says.

Rob shrugs. 'Wasn't my idea to start moving the fucking furniture around.' He drinks his drink. 'This happens at work, too, you know,' he tells Hol. 'She starts out on some irrelevant, seat-of-the-pants new project, causes chaos everywhere and then I have to come along and clean everything up. I'd probably have advanced a lot further in the company if I didn't spend so much time sorting out Ali's messes.'

Alison smiles widely at Hol. 'That's Rob-speak for I

initiate some bold new venture taking the company in an exciting, fresh but entirely course-complementary direction and then he breezes in when all the hard work's done and takes the man's share of the credit. *I'd* be a couple of rungs further up by now if I didn't have him constantly in tow.' She tugs hard at the couch, grunting.

'Jesus!' Hol says, getting up and going round the back of the couch to push it. It slides back to where it was. Hol looks at me as she sits back down again. She's frowning. I wonder what I've done wrong now.

Then there's a double ring on the hall bell.

Shit. I don't want to have to go. On the other hand, I sort of do want to go now.

I stand up. 'Excuse me.'

'Kit,' Hol says, extending one hand towards me, 'you don't have to—'

'Yeah, Kit . . .' Haze says.

'No,' I say, pointing to the door, 'I have to . . . Excuse me.'

'Is there blood?'

'There is a little blood.'

'Well, what does that mean? What does "a little" mean?'

'It means there is a little blood.'

'Don't be fucking smart, Kit; just tell me how much blood there is. And what colour? Red? Brown? Black?'

'Are you sure you can't turn round and take a look?'

'Not without going out into the fucking hall, waddling,

with my trousers round my ankles and my cock hanging out, so, no.'

'If I had a smartphone I could take a photo and show you.'

'I'm not buying you a fucking smartphone. Will you shut up about the fucking smartphone? You don't need one. And you'll just post the photos on Facebook. Or find a way to sell them in your stupid game.'

'Course I wouldn't,' I tell him. 'Though you could have Faecesbook, I suppose,' I add. Well, you have to try to lighten the mood.

'Oh, Christ.'

'There's only a smear,' I tell him. 'And it's red.'

'Good, fine. Look, just, just, you know, wipe me off and . . . Christ, this is . . . Just, would you? Okay?'

This doesn't happen all the time but, sometimes, I have to wipe my dad clean after he's moved his bowels. He can't stretch round or underneath any more to do it himself; even on the opiates the pain is too much now that the cancer has moved into his spine. Often Mrs Gunn will do this. She is paid to be a carer now, though I'm not sure this whole arse-cleaning thing is really within her remit. Guy cried following the first time she performed this service for him. He doesn't know that I know this; I heard him through his bedroom door, afterwards.

The first time I had to help Guy wipe himself I tried to do it with my eyes closed. This was unsuccessful, and messy. My compromise these days is to breathe through my mouth so I don't smell whatever might be in the

toilet bowl (I resent being made to look in there but Guy feels a need to know whether there is blood in his stool). Obviously I am wearing a pair of blue surgical gloves; we keep a box by the door. I can let myself into the downstairs loo because it has a relatively modern mechanism that can be unlocked from outside via a slot in a small metal stub projecting beneath the handle. You use a screwdriver, or a penny.

The bell that Guy rings when he needs help in here is attached to a length of string that rises from beside the toilet bowl, goes through a couple of U-nails hammered into the ceiling and out to the hall through a hole I bored using our electric drill. The bell in the hall hangs from another grey galvanised U-nail. It is spherical and from a budgie's cage, so it's quite quiet.

You have to listen for it, and once or twice I've tried to pretend to myself that I haven't heard it, but then it'll ring again, and again, and even if I leave it for half an hour Guy still keeps ringing it and still can't wipe himself and so I have to go in the end. When I do eventually go to help him he is sometimes crying, and always grateful, not angry, and that is how I know, I think, that he really can't do this simple thing by himself and really does need help and isn't just doing it to be cruel to me.

In theory we could just keep our mobiles about us and he could phone or text when he needs me, but Guy is not very good with mobile phones and frequently forgets to carry his, or keep it charged. I've tried reminding him about this sort of thing and have offered

to make sure he always has his phone and it's properly charged, as well as taking over responsibility for his meds (he forgets to take his medication, a lot, then sometimes takes too much), but he just accuses me of trying to run his life and tells me to back off.

Guy stands, bending forward to rest on the Zimmer frame. I flush the toilet, to be rid of the sight, then, while his always skinny, now scrawny, legs quiver, I carefully wipe him down. Once you get over the simple unpleasantness of it – I suspect most people would gag, the first time – it is easier to wipe somebody else's bum than it is your own, because you can see what you're doing and use both hands at once if necessary. The whole process is much more efficient and uses no more toilet paper than is strictly required, so it's better for the environment, too. If we were being really green we'd all have somebody else wipe our bums, though I can't see it catching on.

'Fucking portable prison,' Guy mutters, and slaps at the Zimmer. Dad hates his walking aid, even though it helps him a lot. He can still move around fairly easily on the flat, even out in the garden, using his Zimmer frame and, on good days, just a single forearm crutch. On really good days he can get by with just a walking stick.

Guy starts coughing. He sits back down to do this. Probably wise; sometimes when he coughs really hard a little poo can come out. His cough makes it sound like his chest is full of Lego bricks. He stopped smoking five years ago, about twenty years too late. He's taken

it up again recently, reckoning there's nothing left to lose, and also, I think, as an act of defiance. He's shared a roll-up with Haze already this evening and I can smell the tobacco on his clothes.

After half a minute or so he stops coughing and goes back to just wheezing.

'That you okay?' I ask him.

'Fucking never been better,' he says. He hauls some phlegm up into his mouth, shuffles back a little further on the loo, and carefully spits between his spread legs. I choose not to follow the whole process. 'Christ,' he says, sitting back against the cistern and breathing hard, a noise of gurgling coming from his lungs, 'knackers me just having a cough these days.' He sighs, wipes his lips, looks at me. 'I hope the shareholders of British American Tobacco are fucking grateful.'

'Think we're done?' I ask him.

'Done and dusted, kid,' he tells me. 'Done and dust-to-dusted.'

I flush a second time, strip off the gloves and dump them in the bin, help Guy on with his pants and trousers and run the taps, holding the towel ready while he rests his forearms on the Zimmer and washes his hands.

'Okay, okay,' he says. 'I'm all right. Stop fussing.'

I don't think I was fussing but I've learned there's no point arguing.

I head back to the sitting room and hear him lock the loo door. He doesn't like me to accompany him back into the room when we have guests, so making it obvious he needs help in the toilet. There are still proprieties – or

at least little face-saving deceptions – you can observe even when you're reduced to this level of helplessness.

And, of course, it's only going to get worse, as we both know.

The whole thing about the smartphone is a bluff, by the way; I have one, though Guy doesn't know about it. I bought it via Holly with money I made on HeroSpace.

I go back to the sitting room, hearing their voices from the hall. When I enter they fall silent. I suppose I wasn't away long enough for them to talk through whatever it is they needed to talk about.

I know there's something about a tape – an old audio-cassette tape or digital videotape, I think, from what I've gleaned over the years from a few partially overheard mentions, muttered between them during previous visits – but I also know there's been talk about what will happen to me after the house is demolished and Guy is dead (or Guy dies and the house is demolished, though I'm not sure the order makes much difference).

Possibly, also, they might be talking about exactly who – and possibly even which one of them – is my mother.

That would be nice to know.