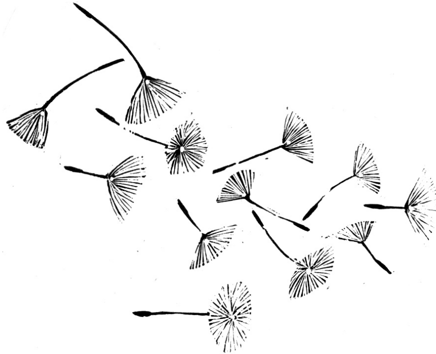
PROLOGUE

The Addition of Time



In 1972, two seconds were added to time. Britain agreed to join the Common Market, and 'Beg, Steal Or Borrow' by the New Seekers was the entry for Eurovision. The seconds were added because it was a leap year and time was out of joint with the movement of the Earth. The New Seekers did not win the Eurovision Song Contest but that had nothing to do with the Earth's movement and nothing to do with the two seconds either.

The addition of time terrified Byron Hemmings. At eleven years old he was an imaginative boy. He lay awake, picturing it happen, and his heart flapped like a bird. He watched the clocks, trying to catch them at it. 'When will they do it?' he asked his mother.

She stood at the new breakfast counter, dicing quarters

of apple. The morning sun spilled through the French windows in such clean squares he could stand in them.

'Probably when we're asleep,' she said.

'Asleep?' Things were even worse than he thought.

'Or maybe when we're awake.'

He got the impression she didn't actually know. 'Two seconds are nothing,' she smiled. 'Please drink up your Sunquick.' Her eyes were bright, her skirt pressed, her hair blow-dried.

Byron had heard about the extra seconds from his friend, James Lowe. James was the cleverest boy Byron knew and every day he read *The Times*. The addition of two seconds was extremely exciting, said James. First, man had put a man on the moon. Now they were going to alter time. But how could two seconds exist where two seconds had not existed before? It was like adding something that wasn't there. It wasn't safe. When Byron pointed this out, James smiled. That was progress, he said.

Byron wrote four letters, one to his local MP, one to NASA, another to the editors of *The Guinness Book of Records* and the last to Mr Roy Castle, courtesy of the BBC. He gave them to his mother to post, assuring her they were important.

He received a signed photograph of Roy Castle and a fully illustrated brochure about the Apollo 15 moon landing, but there was no reference to the two seconds.

Within months, everything had changed and the changes could never be put right. All over the house, clocks that his

mother had once meticulously wound now marked different hours. The children slept when they were tired and ate when they were hungry and whole days might pass, each looking the same. So if two seconds had been added to a year in which a mistake was made – a mistake so sudden that without the two seconds it might not have happened at all – how could his mother be to blame? Wasn't the addition of time the bigger crime?

'It wasn't your fault,' he would say to his mother. By late summer she was often by the pond, down in the meadow. These days it was Byron making the breakfast; maybe a foil triangle of cheese squished between two slices of bread. His mother sat in a chair, chinking the ice in her glass, and slipping the seeds from a plume of grass. In the distance the moor glowed beneath a veil of lemon-sherbet light; the meadow was threaded with flowers. 'Did you hear?' he would repeat because she was inclined to forget she was not alone. 'It was because they added time. It was an accident.'

She would put up her chin. She would smile. 'You're a good boy. Thank you.'

It was all because of a small slip in time, the whole story. The repercussions were felt for years and years. Of the two boys, James and Byron, only one kept on course. Sometimes Byron gazed at the sky above the moor, pulsing so heavily with stars the darkness seemed alive, and he would ache – ache for the removal of those two extra seconds. Ache for the sanctity of time as it should be.

If only James had never told him.

PART ONE

Inside

1

Something Terrible

James Lowe and Byron Hemmings attended Winston House School because it was private. There was another junior school that was closer but it was not private; it was for everyone. The children who went there came from the council estate on Digby Road. They flicked orange peel and cigarette butts at the caps of the Winston House boys from the top windows of the bus. The Winston House boys did not travel on the bus. They had lifts with their mothers because they had so far to travel.

The future for the Winston House boys was mapped out. Theirs was a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The following year, they would take the Common Entrance exam for the college. The cleverest boys would win scholarships and at thirteen they would board. They would speak with the right accent and learn the right things

and meet the right people. After that it would be Oxford or Cambridge. James's parents were thinking St Peter's; Byron's were thinking Oriel. They would pursue careers in law or the City, the Church or the armed forces, like their fathers. One day they would have private rooms in London and a large house in the country, where they would spend weekends with their wives and children.

It was the beginning of June in 1972. A trim of morning light slid beneath Byron's blue curtains and picked out his neatly ordered possessions. There were his *Look and Learn* annuals, his stamp album, his torch, his new Abracadabra magic box and the chemistry set with its own magnifying glass that he had received for Christmas. His school uniform had been washed and pressed by his mother the night before and was arranged in a flattened boy shape on a chair. Byron checked both his watch and his alarm clock. The second hands were moving steadily. Crossing the hall in silence, he eased open the door of his mother's room and took up his place on the edge of her bed.

She lay very still. Her hair was a gold frill on the pillow and her face trembled with each breath as if she were made of water. Through her skin he could see the purple of her veins. Byron's hands were soft and plump like the flesh of a peach but James already had veins, faint threads that ran from his knuckles and would one day become ridges like a man's.

At half past six, the alarm clock rang into the silence and his mother's eyes flashed open, a shimmer of blue.

'Hello, sweetheart.'

‘I’m worried,’ said Byron.

‘It isn’t time again?’ She reached for her glass and her pill and took a sip of water.

‘Suppose they are going to add the extra seconds today?’

‘Is James worried too?’

‘He seems to have forgotten.’

She wiped her mouth and he saw she was smiling. Two dimples had appeared like tiny punctures in her cheeks. ‘We’ve been through this. We keep doing it. When they add the seconds, they’ll say something about it first in *The Times*. They’ll talk about it on *Nationwide*.’

‘It’s giving me a headache,’ he said.

‘When it happens you won’t notice. Two seconds are nothing.’

Byron felt his blood heat. He almost stood but sat back again. ‘That’s what nobody realizes. Two seconds are huge. It’s the difference between something happening and something not happening. You could take one step too many and fall over the edge of a cliff. It’s very dangerous.’ The words came out in a rush.

She gazed back at him with her face crumpled the way she did when she was trying to work out a sum. ‘We really must get up,’ she said.

His mother pulled back the curtains at the bay window and stared out. A summer mist was pouring in from Cranham Moor, so thick that the hills beyond the garden looked in danger of being washed away. She glanced at her wrist.

‘Twenty-four minutes to seven,’ she said, as if she were

informing her watch of the correct time. Lifting her pink dressing gown from its hook, she went to wake Lucy.

When Byron pictured the inside of his mother's head, he imagined a series of tiny inlaid drawers with jewelled handles so delicate his fingers would struggle to get a grip. The other mothers were not like her. They wore crochet tank tops and layered skirts and some of them even had the new wedge shoes. Byron's father preferred his wife to dress more formally. With her slim skirts and pointy heels, her matching handbag and her notebook, Diana made other women look both oversized and under-prepared. Andrea Lowe, who was James's mother, towered over her like a dark-haired giant. Diana's notebook contained articles she had snipped and glued from the pages of *Good Housekeeping* and *Family Circle*. She wrote down birthdays she had to remember, important dates for the school term, as well as recipes, needlecraft instructions, planting ideas, hair styling tips, and words she had not heard before. Her notebook bulged with suggestions for improvement: '*22 new hairdos to make you even prettier this summer*.' '*Tissue paper gifts for every occasion*.' '*Cooking with offal*.' '*i before e except after c*.'

'Elle est la plus belle mère,' James sometimes said. And when he did he blushed and fell silent, as if in contemplation of something sacred.

Byron dressed in his grey flannel shorts and summer vest. He had to tug to fasten the buttons on his shirt and this one was almost new. Securing his knee-length socks

with homemade garters, he headed downstairs. The wood-panelled walls shone dark as conkers.

'I'm not talking to anyone but you, darling,' sang his mother's voice.

She stood at the opposite end of the hallway at her telephone table, already dressed. Beside her, Lucy waited for her plaits to be tied with ribbon. The air was thick with Vim and Pledge polish and it was a reassuring smell in the way that fresh air was reassuring. As Byron passed, his mother kissed her fingertips and pressed them to his forehead. She was only a fraction taller.

'It's just me and the children,' she said into the mouth-piece. The windows behind her were opaque white.

In the kitchen Byron sat at the breakfast bar and unfolded a clean napkin. His mother was talking to his father. He rang at the same time every morning and every morning she told him she was listening.

'Oh, today I'll do the usual. The house, the weeding. Tidying after the weekend. It's supposed to get hot.'

Released from their mother's hands, Lucy skipped to the kitchen and hoicked herself up on to her stool. She tipped the box of Sugar Stars over her Peter Rabbit bowl. 'Steady,' said Byron as she reached for the blue jug. He watched the splashy flow of milk in the rough vicinity of her cereal. 'You might spill it, Lucy,' he said, although he was being polite. She already had.

'I know what I'm doing, Byron. I don't need help.' Every word of Lucy's sounded like a neat little attack on the air. She replaced the jug on the table. It was vast in her hands.

Then she slotted a wall of cereal packets around her bowl. He could see only the flaxen crest of her head.

From the hall came their mother's voice. 'Yes, Seymour. She's all polished.' Byron assumed they were discussing the new Jaguar.

'Please could I have the Sugar Stars, Lucy?'

'You are not supposed to have Sugar Stars. You must have your fruit salad and your healthy Alpen.'

'I'd like to read the packet. I'd like to look at the picture of Sooty.'

'I am reading the packets.'

'You don't need all of them at once,' he said gently. 'And anyway you can't read, Luce.'

'Everything's as it should be,' sang his mother's voice from the hallway. She gave a fluttery laugh.

Byron felt a notch of something hot in his stomach. He tried to remove a cereal box, just one, before Lucy could stop him but her hand flew up as he was sliding it away. The milk jug shot sideways, there was a resounding smash, and the new floor was suddenly a wash of white milk and blue pins of china. The children stared, aghast. It was almost time to clean their teeth.

Diana was in the room within moments. 'No one move!' she called. She held up her hands as if she were halting traffic. 'You could get hurt!' Byron sat so still his neck felt stiff. As she made her way to the cleaning cupboard, balancing on tiptoes, with her arms stretched out and her fingers pointed, the floor swished and snapped beneath her feet.

‘That was your fault, Byron,’ said Lucy.

Diana rushed back with the mop and bucket, and the dustpan and brush. She twisted the mop in soapy water and dragged it through the pool of liquid. With a glance at her watch, she swept the broken pieces into a dry patch and scooped them into the dustpan. The last splinters she scraped up with her fingers and shook out over the bin. ‘All done,’ she said brightly. It was then that she noticed her left palm. It was cut with crimson, like spilling stripes.

‘Now you’ve got blood,’ said Lucy, who was both appalled and delighted by physical injury.

‘It’s nothing,’ insisted their mother but it was slithering down her wrist and, despite her bib apron, had made several spots on the hem of her skirt. ‘Nobody move!’ she called again, turning on her heels and rushing out.

‘We’ll be late,’ said Lucy.

‘We’re never late,’ said Byron. It was a rule of their father’s. An Englishman should always be punctual.

When Diana reappeared she had changed into a mint-green dress and matching lambswool cardigan. She had wound her hand with a bandage so that it looked like a small paw and applied her strawberry-red lipstick.

‘Why are you still sitting there?’ she cried.

‘You told us not to move,’ said Lucy.

Clip, clip, echoed her heels across the hallway as the children raced after her. Their blazers and school hats hung from hooks above their school shoes. Diana scooped their satchels and PE bags into her arms.

‘Come along,’ she called.

'But we haven't cleaned our teeth.'

Their mother failed to answer. Swinging open the front door, she ran into the shroud of mist. Byron and Lucy had to rush outside to find her.

There she stood, a slight silhouette against the garage door. She studied her watch, her left wrist clamped between the thumb and fingers of her right hand, as if time were a small cell and she was examining it through a microscope.

'It's going to be all right,' she said. 'If we hurry, we can make up time.'

Cranham House was a Georgian building of pale stone that shone bone-white in full summer sun and pink as flesh on a winter morning. There was no village. There was only the house and the garden and then the moor. The building sat with its back resolutely set against the mass of wind, sky and earth that loomed behind, and made Byron think of a home that wished it had been built elsewhere, in acres of flat English parkland, for instance, or on the gentle banks of a stream. The advantage of the setting, his father said, was that it was private. This was what James called an understatement. You had to drive at least three miles to find a neighbour. Between the gardens and the first slopes of the moor, there was a meadow with a large pond, and then a belt of ash trees. A year ago the water had been fenced in and the children were forbidden to play there.

The gravel drive popped beneath the wheels of the Jaguar. The mist was like a hood over Byron's eyes. It stole

the colour and edges from even the closest things. The top lawn, the herbaceous borders and rose pagodas, the fruit trees, the beech hedging, the vegetable plot, the cutting beds and picket gate, they were all gone. The car turned left and carved its path towards the upper peaks. No one spoke. His mother sat straining forward over the wheel.

Up on the moor, conditions were even worse. It covered over ten miles in each direction, although that morning there was no dividing line between hills and sky. The car headlamps bored shallow holes into the blanket of white. Occasionally a watery group of cattle or a protruding branch took shape and Byron's heart gave a bounce as his mother swerved to overtake. Once Byron had told James the trees were so scary on the moor they could be ghosts and James had frowned. That was like poetry, James had said, but it was not real, just as a talking detective dog was not real on the television. They passed the iron gates to Besley Hill where the mad people lived. As the wheels of the Jaguar rumbled over the cattle grid, Byron breathed a sigh of relief. Then, approaching the town, they turned a corner and braked hard.

'Oh no,' he said, sitting tall. 'What's happened now?'

'I don't know. A traffic jam.' It was the last thing they needed.

His mother lifted her fingers to her teeth and ripped off a shred of her nail.

'Is it because of the mist?'

Again, 'I don't know.' She pulled at the handbrake.

‘I think the sun is up there somewhere,’ he said brightly. ‘It will burn this off soon.’

There were cars blocking the road as far as they could see; all the way into the veil of cloud. To their left the dull silhouette of a burnt-out vehicle marked the entrance to the Digby Road Estate. They never went that way. Byron saw his mother glance over.

‘We’re going to be late,’ wailed Lucy.

Snapping down the handbrake, Diana pushed the car into first gear with a crunch, yanked at the wheel and accelerated towards the left. They were heading straight for Digby Road. She didn’t even mirror, signal, manoeuvre.

At first the children were too stunned to speak. They passed the burnt-out car. The glass at the windows was smashed and the wheels, doors and engine were gone so that it was like a charred skeleton and Byron hummed gently because he didn’t want to think about that.

‘Father says we must never go this way,’ said Lucy. She smothered her face with her hands.

‘It’s a short cut through council housing,’ said their mother. ‘I’ve been this way before.’ She eased her foot down on the accelerator.

There was no time to consider what she had said; that, despite their father’s rule, she had been this way before. Digby Road was worse than Byron had imagined. It wasn’t even tarmacked in places. The mist was glued to the rows of houses so that they reached ahead, dull and indistinct, and then appeared to disintegrate. Pieces of rubbish choked the gutters; rubble, bags, blankets, boxes, it was

hard to tell what it was. Occasionally washing lines appeared, strung with sheets and clothes that held no colour.

'I'm not looking,' said Lucy, sliding down her seat to hide.

Byron tried to find something that wouldn't cause alarm. Something that he might recognize and feel good about in Digby Road. He worried too much; his mother had told him many times. And then suddenly there it was. One beautiful thing: a tree that glowed through the fog. It presented wide arching branches that appeared festooned with bubblegum-pink flowers, although the fruit blossom at Cranham House was long since over. Byron felt a surge of relief as if he had witnessed a small miracle, or an act of kindness, at the moment he least believed in the existence of either. Beneath the tree came a moving silhouette. It was small; the size of a child. It was spinning towards the road and had wheels. It was a girl on a red bicycle.

'What time is it?' said Lucy. 'Are we late?'

Byron glanced at his watch and then he froze. The second hand was moving backwards. His voice sliced at his throat and he realized it was a scream.

'Mummy, it's happening. Stop.' He grabbed her shoulder. He pulled hard.

He couldn't make sense of what came next. It was so fast. While he tried to poke his watch, or more specifically the adjusted second hand, in front of his mother's face, he was also aware of the miracle tree and the little girl bicycling into the road. They were all part of the same thing. All of

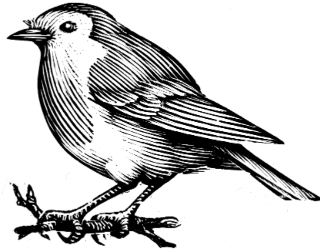
them shooting out of nowhere, out of the dense mist, out of time. The Jaguar swerved and his hands smacked into the mahogany dashboard to brace himself. As the car slammed to a halt there was a sound like a metallic whisper, and then there was silence.

In the beats that followed, that were smaller than seconds, smaller even than flickers, where Byron sought with his eyes for the child at the roadside and did not find her, he knew something terrible had happened and that life would never be the same. He knew it before he even had the words.

Above the moor shone a dazzling circle of white light. Byron had been right about the sun. It would burn through any moment.

2

Jim



Jim lives in a campervan, on the edge of the new housing estate. Every dawn he walks across the moor and every night he walks back. He has a job at the refurbished supermarket café. There is wifi access and a facility to charge mobile phones although Jim has no use for either. When he started six months ago, he worked in the hot beverages section but after serving cappuccinos with a raspberry twirl topping and a flake he was relegated to tables. If he messes this job up, there's nothing. There isn't even Besley Hill.

The black sky is combed with trails of cloud like silver hair and the air is so cold it pares his skin. Beneath his feet the ground has frozen hard and his boots crash over the brittle stumps of grass. Already he can make out the neon glow that is Cranham Village, while far behind car headlamps make their way across the moor and they are a

necklace of tiny moving lights, red and silver, stringing the dark.

In his late teens, he was found up there in only underpants and shoes. He had given his clothes to the trees; for days he had been sleeping wild. He was sectioned on the spot. 'Hello again, Jim,' the doctor said, as if they were old friends, as if Jim was dressed, like him, in suit and tie. 'Hello again, doctor,' Jim had said to show he was not trouble. The doctor prescribed electroconvulsive therapy. It brought on a stammer and later a tingling in his fingers that even now Jim still feels.

Pain is like that; he knows. Somewhere in his brain what happened to him then has got mixed up. It has become something else, not simply the hurt he felt at the time, but another, more complicated one that is to do with over forty years ago, and all he's lost.

He follows the road to the estate. There is a sign, welcoming visitors to Cranham Village and asking them to drive carefully. Recently the sign has been vandalized, along with the bus shelter and the children's swings, and now reads *Welcome to Crapham*. Fortunately Cranham is the sort of place people visit only if their satnav has made a mistake. Jim wipes the sign because it is a shame to see it humiliated like that, but the '*n*' will not come back.

The new houses are packed tight as teeth. Each has a front garden, no bigger than a parking space, and a plastic window box where nothing grows. Over the weekend many residents have strung their guttering with Christmas lights and Jim stops to admire them. He especially likes the

ones that are flashing icicles. On the top of one roof, an inflatable Santa appears to be dismantling the satellite dish. He is possibly not the sort of man you want coming down your chimney. Jim passes the square of mud residents call the Green and the fenced-off ditch in the middle. He picks up some empty beer cans and carries them to the bin.

Entering the cul-de-sac, he looks at the house rented by foreign students, and the one where an old man sits every day at a window. He passes the gate with the dangerous dog sign, and the garden with the laundry that is never taken down. Ahead his van shines in the moonlight, pale as milk.

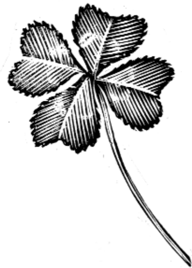
A couple of young boys whizz past on a bicycle, shrieking with excitement, one on the seat, the other balanced on the handlebars. He calls, Be c-careful, but they don't hear.

How did I get here? Jim asks himself. There were two of us once.

The wind blows and says nothing.

3

Lucky Talismans



WHEN JAMES HAD first mentioned the addition of seconds to Byron, he had presented it as another interesting fact. The boys liked to sit outside the chapel during their lunch break while the others ran about on the field. They showed their Brooke Bond tea cards – they were both collecting the History of Aviation set – and James told Byron stories from his newspaper. It had not been a leading article, he explained, and he had been obliged to read quickly because his boiled egg was ready, but the gist of it was that, due to the leap year, recorded time was out of kilter with the natural movement of the Earth. In order to change it, he had said wisely, scientists would have to look at things like the expansion of the Earth's crust, and also how it juddered on its axis. Byron had felt his face flatten. The idea appalled him. And even though James had talked about how exciting

this was, and then gone on to discuss something entirely different, the thought of tampering with the natural order of things had grown and grown in Byron's mind. Time was what held the world together. It kept life as it should be.

Unlike James, Byron was a substantial boy. They made an odd pairing. James was slight and pale, his fringe sliding into his eyes, nibbling his mouth as he thought something through; while Byron sat tall and stolid beside him, waiting for James to finish. Sometimes Byron would pinch at the folds of flesh at his waist and ask his mother why James didn't have them, and she'd say he did, of course he did, but Byron knew she was being kind. His body frequently burst through buttons and seams. His father said it straight out. Byron was overweight, he was lazy. And then his mother would say this was puppy fat, there was a difference. They would speak as if Byron was not there, which was strange when they were discussing the fact there was too much of him.

In the beats that followed the accident, he felt suddenly made of nothing. He wondered if he was hurt. He sat waiting for his mother to realize what she had done, waiting for her to scream or get out of the car, only she didn't. He sat waiting for the little girl to scream or get up off the road and that didn't happen either. His mother remained very still in her driving seat and the little girl lay very still beneath her red bicycle. Then suddenly, with a snap, things started to happen. His mother glanced over her right shoulder and adjusted her mirror; Lucy asked why they had stopped. It was only the little girl who stayed not moving.

Starting up the engine, Byron's mother placed her hands on the steering wheel in the exact position his father had taught her. She reversed the car to straighten it and pushed the gearstick into first. He couldn't believe she was driving away, that they were leaving the little girl where they had knocked into her, and then he realized it was because his mother didn't know. She hadn't seen what she had done. His heart thumped so hard it hurt his throat.

'Go, go, go!' he shouted.

In answer, his mother bit her lip to show she was concentrating and pressed her foot on the accelerator. She went to angle her mirror, twitching it a little to the left, a little to the right—

'Hurry up!' he shouted. They had to get away before anyone saw them.

Steadily they made their way down Digby Road. He kept twisting from left to right, craning his neck to see out of the rear window. If they didn't hurry, the mist would be gone. They turned on to the High Street and passed the new Wimpy Bar. The Digby Road children made shadowy queues at the bus stop. There was the grocer, the butcher, the music shop and then the Conservative Party local head-quarters. Further along, uniformed assistants from the department store were polishing windows and unwinding the striped awnings. A doorman with a top hat was smoking outside the hotel and a delivery van had arrived with flowers. It was only Byron who sat clutching his seat, waiting for someone to run out and stop the car.

Yet this did not happen.

Diana parked in the tree-lined street, where the mothers always parked, and lifted the school satchels from the boot. She helped the children from their seats and locked the Jaguar. Lucy skipped ahead. Other mothers waved good morning and asked about the weekend. One said something about the heavy traffic while another wiped the sole of her son's school shoe with paper tissue. The mist was thinning fast. Already the blue sky shone through in patches and drops of sunlight pricked the sycamore leaves like tiny eyes. In the distance, the moor trembled pale as the sea. Only a trail of smoke lingered over the lower foothills.

Byron walked beside Diana, expecting his knees to give way. He felt like a glass that had too much water inside, and that if he rushed or stopped abruptly he might spill. He couldn't understand. He couldn't understand how they were still going to school. He couldn't understand how everything was continuing as before. It was an ordinary morning except that it wasn't. Time had been splintered and everything was different.

In the playground he stood wedged at his mother's side, listening so hard that his eyes became ears. Yet no one said, 'I saw your silver Jaguar, registration number KJX 216K, in Digby Road.' No one said that a little girl had been hurt just as no one mentioned the extra seconds. He accompanied his mother to the girls' school entrance and Lucy seemed so carefree she didn't even remember to wave.

Diana squeezed his hand. 'Are you all right?'

Byron nodded because his voice wouldn't work.

‘Time to go now, sweetheart,’ she said. He sensed her watching as he walked across the playground and it was so hard to go that even his spine ached. The elastic of his cap cut into his throat.

He needed to find James. He needed to find him urgently. James understood things in ways that Byron couldn’t; he was like the logical piece of Byron that was missing. The first time Mr Roper had explained about relativity, for instance, James had nodded enthusiastically as if magnetic forces were a truth he had suspected all along, whereas for Byron the new idea was like tangles in his head. Maybe it was because James was such a careful boy. Byron watched him sometimes, aligning the zip fastening on his pencil case or wiping the fringe out of his eyes, and there was such precision in it that Byron was filled with awe. Sometimes he tried to be the same. He would walk carefully or arrange his felt-tip pens in order of colour. But then he would find his shoelaces were undone, or his shirt got untucked, and he was back to being Byron again.

He knelt at James’s side in chapel, only it was hard to get his attention. As far as Byron knew, James did not believe in God (‘There is no proof,’ he said), but once he was engaged, as with most things, he took the business of praying very seriously. Head forced down, eyes screwed tight, he hissed the words with such intensity it would be blasphemous to interrupt. Then Byron tried to linger beside James in the queue for the refectory but Samuel Watkins asked what he thought about Glasgow Rangers and James

got held up. The problem was, everyone wanted to know his opinion. He thought things before you were even aware that there was anything to think about them and by the time you had realized there was, James was off thinking about something else. At last Byron's opportunity came during games.

James was outside the cricket pavilion. By now the day was so hot, it hurt to move. There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun was almost shouting. Byron had already been to bat and James was waiting his turn on a bench. He liked to concentrate before a game and preferred to be alone. Byron perched at the other end but James did not look up or move. His fringe hung over his eyes and his luminous skin had begun to burn below the sleeves.

Byron got as far as 'James?' when something stopped him.

Counting. A steady stream of it. James was whispering, as if someone very small was tucked between his knees and he needed to teach this small person their prime numbers. Byron was used to James's muttering, he had witnessed it many times, but normally he did it under his breath, so that you could easily miss it. 'Two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two.' Above Cranham Moor the air shimmered as if the upper peaks would melt into the sky. Byron felt himself overheating inside his cricket whites. 'Why do you do that?' he said. He was only trying to start the conversation.

James jumped as if he had not realized he had company and Byron laughed to show he meant no harm. 'Are you practising your times tables?' he said. 'Because you know

them better than anyone. Take me. I'm useless. I get my nines wrong. Aussi my sevens. Those are très difficile for me as well.' The boys voiced in French the things that were either too dull or difficult to explain in English. It was like having a secret language, except that it wasn't really because anyone could join in.

James dug the tip of his bat into the grass at his feet. 'I am checking I can double numbers. To keep me safe.'

'Safe?' Byron swallowed hard. 'How will that keep you safe?' James had never spoken in this way before. It was completely unlike him.

'It is like running to your bedroom before the lavatory stops flushing. If I don't do it, things might go wrong.'

'But that's not logical, James.'

'Actually it is very logical, Byron. I am not leaving anything to chance. The pressure is on, with the scholarship exam. Sometimes I look for a four-leaf clover. And now I have a lucky beetle too.' James pulled something from his pocket and it flashed briefly between his fingers. The brass beetle was slim and dark, the size of Byron's thumb, and shaped like an insect with closed wings. There was a silver hook where you might keep a key.

'I didn't know you had a lucky beetle,' said Byron.

'My aunt sent it to me. It comes from Africa. I can't afford to make silly mistakes.'

Byron felt an ache behind his eyes and inside the roof of his nose and he realized with a stab of shame that he was going to cry. Fortunately there was a shout of 'Out' and a round of applause from the cricket field. 'My turn to bat,'

said James with a gulp. Games was his least successful subject. Byron didn't like to mention it, but James tended to blink when the ball came towards him. 'I have to go now,' he said. He stood.

'Did you see, ce matin?'

'See what, Byron?'

'The two seconds. They added them today. At a quarter past eight.'

There was a tiny hiatus where nothing happened, where Byron waited for James Lowe to say something and James Lowe didn't. He simply stared down at Byron in his intense, waxy-pale way, with the beetle tight in his hand. The sun was right behind him and Byron had to squint to keep looking. James's ears shone like prawns.

'Are you sure?' said James.

'My second hand went backwards. I saw it. Then when I looked again at my watch it started going the right way. It definitely happened.'

'There was nothing about it in *The Times*.'

'There was nothing about it on *Nationwide*. I saw the whole thing last night and no one mentioned it.'

James glanced at his watch. It was Swiss-made with a thick leather strap and had belonged to his father. There were no digits to show the minutes, only a small window for the date. 'You're sure? You're sure you saw?'

'I'm positive.'

'Why, though? Why would they add the seconds and not tell us?'

Byron screwed up his face to stop the tears. 'I don't

know.' He wished he had a beetle keyring. He wished he had an aunt who sent him lucky talismans from Africa.

'Are you all right?' said James.

Byron gave a vigorous nod that shook his eyeballs up and down inside his head. 'Dépêchez-vous. Les autres are waiting.'

James turned towards the pitch and took a deep breath. He ran with his knees high and his arms going up and down like pistons. If he carried on at that speed he would pass out before he got there. Byron rubbed his eyes in case anyone was looking, and then he sneezed several times so that, if they were still looking, they might think he had hay fever or some sort of sudden summer cold.

The key for the new Jaguar had been a gift to his mother after she passed her driving test. His father rarely indulged in surprises. Diana, on the other hand, was more spontaneous. She bought a present because she wanted you to have it and wrapped it in tissue and ribbon, even if it was not your birthday. His father had not wrapped the key. He had placed it in a box beneath a white lace handkerchief. 'Oh my goodness,' she'd said. 'What a surprise.' She didn't seem to realize about the key at first. She just kept touching the handkerchief and looking confused. It was embroidered with her initial, D, and small pink roses.

At last Seymour had said, 'For God's sake, darling,' only the word came out wrong and sounded less like a term of endearment and more like a threat. That was when she had lifted the handkerchief and found the key with

its special Jaguar emblem embossed on the leather tag.

'Oh Seymour,' she said over and over. 'You shouldn't. You haven't. I can't.'

His father had nodded in that formal way of his, as if his body was dying to leap about but his clothes wouldn't make room. Now people would sit up and take notice, he had said. No one would look down on the Hemmings now. Diana had said yes, darling, everyone would be so envious. She really was the luckiest woman. She had reached out her hand to stroke his head and, closing his eyes, he had rested his brow on her shoulder as if he was suddenly tired.

When they kissed, his father murmured as if he were hungry and the children slid away.

Diana had been right about the mothers. They had crowded round the new car. They had touched the mahogany dashboard and the leather upholstery and practised sitting in the driving seat. Deirdre Watkins said she would never be satisfied with her Mini Cooper again. The Jaguar even smelt expensive, said the new mother. (No one had quite got her name.) And all the while, Diana had flapped after them with her handkerchief, rubbing off finger marks and smiling uncomfortably.

Each weekend his father asked the same questions. Were the children wiping their shoes? Was she polishing the chrome grille? Did everyone know? Of course, of course, she said. All the mothers were green. Had they told the fathers? Yes, yes, she smiled again. 'They talk about it all the time. You're so good to me, Seymour.' His father would try to hide his happiness behind his napkin.

Thinking of the Jaguar and his mother, Byron's heart bounced so hard inside his chest he was afraid it would wear a hole. He had to press his hand to his chest in case he was having a heart attack.

'Daydreaming, Hemmings?' In class Mr Roper pulled him to his feet and told the boys this was what you looked like if you were an ignoramus.

It made no difference. Whatever Byron did, staring at his books or out of the window, the words and hills floated out of focus. All he could see was the little girl. The curled-up shape of her, just beyond the passenger window, caught beneath her red bicycle, its wheels whisking the air. She lay so still it was as if she had stopped suddenly where she was and decided to fall asleep. Byron stared at his wrist-watch and the relentless progress of its second hand, and it was like being eaten.

4

Things That Have to Be Done

Jim unlocks the door to his van and slides it open. He has to stoop to step inside. White winter moonlight falls in a cold shaft through the window and shines on the laminated surfaces. There is a small two-ring hob, a sink, a fold-out table and, to his right, a bench seat that pulls out to form a bed. Sliding the door shut, Jim locks it, and the rituals begin.

'Door, hello,' he says. 'Taps, hello.' He greets each of his possessions. 'Kettle hello, Roll-up Mattress hello, Small Cactus Plant hello, Jubilee Tea Towel hello.' Nothing must be left out. When everything has been greeted, he unlocks the door, opens it and steps back outside. His breath blooms into the dark. There is music from the house with the foreign students and already the old man who sits all day at his window has gone to bed. To the west, the last of

the rush-hour traffic makes its way across the upper peaks of the moor. Then a dog barks and someone yells at it to shut up. Jim unlocks the door to the van and steps inside.

He performs the ritual twenty-one times. That's the number it has to be done. He steps in the van. He greets his things. He steps out of the van. In, hello, out. In, hello, out. Locking and unlocking the door every time.

Twenty-one is safe. Nothing will happen if he does it twenty-one times. Twenty is not safe and neither is twenty-two. If something else swings into his mind – an image or a different word – the whole process must begin again.

No one has any idea about this part of Jim's life. On the estate, he straightens the wheelie bins or picks up small items of litter. He says, H-hello, how are you? to the boys at the skate ramp, and he carries the recycling boxes sometimes to help the refuse collectors, and no one would know what he must go through when he is alone. There is a lady with a dog who sometimes asks where he lives, if he would like to join her one day for bingo in the community centre. They have lovely prizes, she says; sometimes a meal for two at the pub in town. But Jim makes his excuses.

Once he has finished stepping in and out of the van, there is more. There will be lying on his stomach to seal the doorframe with duct tape and then the windows, in case of intruders. There will be checking the cupboards and under the pull-out bed and behind the curtains, over and over. Sometimes, even when it is finished, he still doesn't feel safe and the whole process must begin again, not just with the duct tape, but also with the key. Giddy with tiredness,

he steps in and out, locking the door, unlocking it again. Saying Foot Mat hello. Taps hello.

He has had no real friends since he was at school. He has never been with a woman. Since the closure of Besley Hill, he has wished for both, for friends, for love – for knowing and being known – but if you are stepping in and out of doors, and greeting inanimate objects, as well as securing openings with duct tape, there isn't much left-over time. Besides, he's often so nervous he can't say the words.

Jim surveys the inside of the van. The windows. The cupboards. Every crack has been sealed, even around the pop-up roof, and it is like being inside a tightly wrapped parcel. Suddenly he knows he has done everything and relief swamps him. It is as good as being freshly scrubbed. Across Cranham Moor the church clock strikes two. He has no watch. He hasn't had one in years.

There are four hours left to sleep.