

Chocolate Hobnobs

The first time I saw you, you were standing at the far end of the playing field near the bit of fence that's trampled down, where the kids that come to school along the wooded path cut across.

You were looking down at your little brown straggly dog that had its face stuck in the grass, but then you looked up in the direction of the tennis court, your mouth going slack as your eyes clocked her. Even if I hadn't followed your gaze, I'd have known you were watching Alice Taylor because she had that effect on me too. I used to catch myself gazing at the back of her head in class, at her silky fair hair swaying between her shoulder blades as she looked from her book to the teacher or said something to Katy Ellis next to her.

At that moment she was turning to walk backwards, saying something to the girls that were following her,

the sketchbook she takes everywhere tucked under her arm. She looked so light and easy, it was like she created space around her: not space in the normal sense but something else I can't explain. Even in our green school uniform it was obvious she was special.

If you'd glanced just once across the field, you'd have seen me standing in the middle on my own, looking straight at you, and you'd have gone back through the trees to the path quick, tugging your dog after you. You'd have known you'd given yourself away, even if only to me.

But you didn't. You only had eyes for Alice.

I looked round to see who else had spotted you. There were loads of kids on the field, but they were all busy with each other, footballs or their phones.

I looked back at the windows of the school building. I thought I'd see a teacher behind one of them, fixed on you, like *I know your game, sunshine*. I saw Mr Matthews walk past the History window reading from a piece of paper and Miss Wilcox one floor down in the staffroom talking to Mrs Henderson.

Then the bell went.

I didn't see your reaction because Robert pushed Dan into me, shouting 'He wants you, Doner – don't deny him,' then staggered backwards, laughing as Dan swore at him and tried to get him in a headlock.

I caught a glimpse of your blue jacket disappearing between the branches, though. The saying *Saved by the bell* came into my head because Dad always used to say it, and as I walked back across the field, I whispered the words slowly – 'Saved by the bell, saved by the bell' –

even though I knew that you weren't saved by anything, that you'd be back.

My name's not really Doner. It's Yasmin. It's just Doner at school – which is hilarious by the way because it's short for *Doner Kebab* and as well as being overweight I'm half Turkish. It used to be plain 'Fatty' at junior school, then 'Blubber-Butt' when I came to Ashfield, or 'Lesbo' till Mel Raynor and Natalie Simms started publicly making out, making lesbianism *à la mode*, whatever that means.

Anyway, I didn't see you at school the following day, even though I watched for you. At break and lunch I sat against the Games Hut where all the PE stuff like nets and balls and bibs is kept. I could see the whole of the fence that runs alongside the wooded path from there. I ate the chocolate Hobnobs I buy every morning on the way to school, chewing slowly and trying to ignore the fact that my bum was going numb from the concrete, scanning the trees for a bit of your jacket and listening for the kind of bark your little dog might make.

I was *vigilant*, and I wouldn't have missed you because of being distracted by friends because I don't have any. People look at me and think the same as I thought when I saw you: freak. So I figured, as well as feeling compelled to stare at Alice Taylor, being freaks was something else we had in common.

English is the only classroom I go to that overlooks the playing field, so I looked out for you there too. I have to sit in the third row from the window, but I could just about see the fence at the bottom of the field if I

sat up, except that it was difficult to look without being obvious about it – which I was, because Robert threw a screwed-up piece of paper that hit my ear, and because a few minutes later Miss Frances, my English teacher who's really a Borg, said 'Yasmin' in that sarcastic tone teachers use just to waste everyone's time because they know you're not listening and won't be able to answer whatever it was they asked.

I looked at her, rolling my biro in my fingers.

What she was telling me with her ice-blue eyes and black triangular eyebrows was, *I hate you Yasmin Laksaris and wish with all my frozen heart that you'd leave this school I have to teach in, but while you're still here don't think I won't make you pay for it.* What she said was: 'Any ideas about why Robert Browning chooses to set his poem in a storm?'

I thought about what the weather had been like when you were watching Alice. Dull and grey and so still it was as if the world had been sucked into another dimension where everything moved in silent, super-slow motion.

'She doesn't know, Miss,' Robert said. 'She's a kebab' (said like *Shish a kebab*). Miss Frances didn't laugh, even though I'm sure she found it quite amusing. She didn't want Robert stealing her spotlight. She folded her arms till she had everyone's attention again, then said, 'Do you have any opinions about *anything*, Yasmin?'

I stopped twirling my biro. It's chewed, the plastic split halfway to the tip and the blue bit that fits in the end isn't there (I'm a chewer as well as a freak). I thought about giving my opinion that her drawn-on eyebrows

make her look like she's a member of an enemy alien race that's managed to infiltrate the education system. Then I thought about giving my opinion about you – about how you were watching our school and had your sights set on Alice Taylor and that, if I was asked, I'd say one day pretty soon you might even take her.

I don't think I realised till that second that I *did* think you were going to take her. I knew it then, though. I knew the way you'd looked at her was never just looking. It was *wanting*. I bet it was wanting in a way you'd never wanted anything before. Like you'd never seen anything so lovely, never even dreamt about having anything quite that good – being able to touch her hair, slide your hands beneath her crisp white shirt.

Anyway, luckily for you I didn't say anything. No one would've believed me in any case. I'd probably have been sent to Miss Ward, the Head, who'd have said something like *I've told you about telling lies before, haven't I, Yasmin?* Which she has, several times. Instead, I looked around. Everyone was staring at me and I realised they were all waiting for me to answer Miss Frances's question about having opinions. Dan sniggered.

'No?' I said. It came out like a question, like I didn't know whether I had any opinions or not.

The whole class fell about then, and even though I couldn't care less, I felt my face burn. I probably looked at Alice without thinking, *instinctively*, to see if she was laughing with the rest of them.

She wasn't. She was the *only* one that wasn't. She was just looking at me over her shoulder, her green eyes sort of observing me.

I thought maybe in some parallel universe or via telepathy she'd heard my opinion about what you were going to do and that she'd understood somehow that I was going to save her, so I smiled. A small, secret smile. And even though she frowned and wrinkled her nose up before she turned away, I knew she'd felt it too – the connection.

I've kept Alice's steady green eyes in my head ever since. I still think of them even now – usually when I'm alone in the house, doing something ordinary like wiping the worktop or changing the sheets on the bed. They appear as suddenly as they did that day in English, and float about the house with me, watching me wherever I go, whatever I do.

Anyway, that day after school, I didn't know Alice's eyes would watch me forever, so I concentrated all my efforts on not losing them – on keeping them there in my head. It was like a self-induced trance. I didn't speak to anyone and ate dinner gazing somewhere beyond the telly, ignoring Gary pointing his knife at my plate and having a go at Mum for putting too much mash on it, saying, 'You're not doing her any favours you know,' and moving along the sofa without a word when Mum patted me to budge up, all the while only hearing things like they were far away and only seeing Alice's green eyes watching me, watching me, watching . . .

When the six o'clock news came on, I went up to my room. Mum had closed the curtains and it was nice and cosy. I shut the door, switched on my giant lava lamp and took Alice's Box out of my bedside cabinet. It's square like a cube and gold and probably had chocolates

in it to start with. For years it had my hair things in, like clips and scrunchies, but I stopped wearing them when I went to senior school and threw them away.

The first thing I put in it – the thing that made it Alice’s Box – was a piece of green foil that went round a snack she’d had at break. That was in Year 7 when we were all new. It was a nice green, sort of smoky. I’d watched her lay it on her French book and smooth it carefully outwards from the middle with her fingertips. I don’t know if she meant to leave it behind, but when everyone’d gone and I’d slid it carefully between the pages of my textbook, I imagined she had. I imagined it was a secret message – her way of telling me she’d be my friend if she could, if Katy would let her.

I started keeping other things of Alice’s I found after that. Not any old thing. I didn’t want her used tissues or empty crisp packets out of the bin – just things that were nice, or personal to her. Apart from the green foil, which was special because it was the first thing, I loved the heart: Alice’s heart. She drew it. If I try and describe it, it won’t sound anywhere near as lovely as it was, so you’ll have to imagine the black lines, finer than cat hairs, swirling in and out and around each other. She was amazing at art, better than anyone. It was the way she saw things, I think, like she wasn’t just looking, but feeling them too.

The thing in Alice’s Box that you’d probably think was the weirdest was one of her trainer socks. For a few days I wasn’t sure myself if it should go in, but then because I liked holding it and smelling it, I decided it should. It didn’t smell of feet, if that’s what you think (even though she’d worn it) – just a soft cottony smell.

I got a nice feeling when I looked at her things, when I held them. They made me feel calm. I'd whisper to start with – just words, her name, things I'd like to say to her – turning and touching whatever I was holding till I got so calm I stopped needing to whisper, stopped needing to breathe, even. Till everything floated away and it was just me and her.

After I put Alice's Box away, I took the Cadbury's Dairy Milk Turkish Delight out of my bedside drawer. I broke off a row, broke that in half, then put both bits in my mouth and lay back on the duvet. I let the chocolate melt slowly across the roof of my mouth and held my eyelids almost closed so I was looking through my lashes. That way, the galaxy that Gary painted on my ceiling before Mum and me moved in two years ago looked more convincing. I think he forgot I was thirteen and not eight when he did it, but I suppose it was nice of him. He didn't have to.

I thought about how it'd be when you took Alice – where I'd be when it happened. I imagined myself walking into English after lunch break (which would make it a Friday). I notice that Alice isn't at her desk. Everything's normal apart from that; everyone's messing around. Katy's the first to act any different, looking up at the clock that's saying it's two minutes past and calling across to Sophie, *Where's Alice?* Miss Francis comes in then. Everyone settles down and then *she* asks, *Where's Alice?* I look out of the window but of course you're not there. Nobody's there. Katy says she was with Alice at lunch. *She went back to get her coat after the bell*, she says. *She left it by the tennis court*. Miss Frances starts the

lesson, reading from a book. She's distracted, though, and ten minutes later she glances up at the clock and checks her watch. She tells us to carry on reading, that she'll be back in one minute, and leaves the room.

I thought about how you didn't know I even existed, which gave me a nice feeling, like that even though you thought you were the one in control of things, you weren't because I was. *I* was in charge. I could save Alice. I thought if I told anyone what you were going to do, they wouldn't believe me, but that if I found out more about you, I could tell the police when the time came . . . when you took her. I thought I might even catch you in the act, if you tried to take her while we were at school. I thought I wouldn't let her out of my sight.

Either way, whether I was there or not, I'd still be the one that saved her. I'd be a heroine – Alice's heroine – and afterwards me and Alice would be bonded forever in the way people are after something traumatic. And even though Alice's parents would try and give me thousands of pounds in reward money, which Mum and Gary would be pleading with me to take, I'd say all I wanted for my reward was your dog. And in the papers there'd be a picture of me holding him and it'd say I was a heroine in the true sense of the word.

I went downstairs to get a drink then, being quiet because I didn't want Mum, or especially Gary, to come out of the sitting room and catch me with a glass of his secret Coke stash. Fizzy drinks are strictly forbidden on my diet plan (along with Cadbury's Dairy Milk Turkish Delight and chocolate Hobnobs, in case you were wondering). Apparently I should drink water instead. Dr

Bhatt says it's nice when you get used to it. In his Indian accent he goes, '... and with a bit of lemon or lime squeezed in it's really something rather special', his eyebrows all high like he actually believes it! I love Dr Bhatt. He's my dietician. He's sort of spiritual in the way he says things. He's kind as well, even though he's got to deal with me, which must be frustrating because I'm bigger now than when I first started going to him a year ago.

Anyway, I managed to get the Coke out from behind the Pledge Furniture Polish and Mr Muscle Window & Glass Cleaner without making too much noise. Mum and Gary think I don't know he keeps it there under the sink, and even though, when he's having a go at me about my weight (like he's not pretty *rotund* himself), it'd give me great pleasure to be able to point out what a bloody hypocrite he is – I want to keep it that way. I poured myself a glass and drank it down quick, then had another one. It's not as nice when it's not cold but it was too risky to faff about getting ice out of the freezer. Then I rinsed the glass under the tap and filled the bottle up with water to the same level it was before, because Gary, I bet you anything, makes a mental mark on the bottle of *exactly* how much is left every time he's had some. That's the kind of person he is, which is why, normally, I buy my own drinks.

I heard Mum and Gary arguing, then – or rather Gary delivering one of his lectures, his voice raised. When I was going back down the hall, I heard him say, 'It's a bit more than just puppy fat, Jen! I hate to say it, but it seems to me like she growing *into* it, not out.'

I stopped outside the sitting-room door. I suppose you

just do that, don't you, when someone's talking about you, even if you really don't want to hear? Even if you couldn't care less what they're going to say.

'She's been much better recently,' Mum said. 'She's definitely lost a few pounds. Let's just wait until she's been to the hospital.'

'OK, fine. But I think you're avoiding the issue. You're burying your head in the sand.'

'And I think you expect too much.'

'It's not about what I *expect*, Jen. I want her to be happy.'

'She is happy.'

'Have a normal teenage life,' Gary went on. 'You know – friends. *Boyfriends*. I mean, come on! Who's going to want to date her like . . . like she is?'

'Well, we're dealing with it, aren't we?' Mum said, her voice raised as well now. 'She's losing weight. Honestly, Gary, she's only fifteen. I don't really want her doing anything with boys.'

There was another silence. Then Gary, wanting to have the last word like always, said, 'OK then. Let's just pretend she's losing weight and everything's hunky-dory, shall we?'

'Everything *is* hunky-dory, Gary. Let's just wait and see.'

I did a silent cheer for Mum for beating Gary to the final word and started up the stairs, but she wasn't finished. She said – the words clipped like she was accusing him – 'You weren't there.'

Yeah, I thought. You weren't there, Gary Thornton – Gary Thorn-in-my-bum. You weren't there.

School felt different the next day, and it wasn't anyone else. Everyone was the same – basically either ignoring me or calling me names.

I was different, though. And I knew why. It was because I had a purpose now, because I had to save Alice. It put a new angle on everything. It's like the perspective thing we did in art last year: far away = small, close up = big. It's obvious, I know, till you've got to draw it (unless you're Alice, of course, who could even make rotting fruit look lush). What I'm trying to say with the perspective thing is that I've always felt like *I'm* far away, like *I'm* the dot in the distance, and that everyone else is close up – big – living. But suddenly that day I didn't feel like the dot anymore. I felt like I was the one that was close up – the one who knew the score, who could see the big picture – and I walked around the place like *Bring it on!*

I didn't get much of a chance to look for you, other than out of the top corridor windows on the way to History. For one thing, it was raining all morning and I wasn't so desperate to see you I'd get wet for the privilege, then there was a GCSE Drama meeting at lunch. I'm not really any good at drama. I only took it because I thought it'd be easy. And because I knew Alice would take it. And because I knew none of the Klingons like Katy or Sophie would choose it, meaning I could look at Alice without getting evils off them all the time.

Anyway, when I walked into the drama studio, Alice was in there on her own, sitting at one end of the semi-circle of chairs, drawing in her sketchbook.

Normally I'd have sat at the other end, or maybe in

the middle somewhere. I'd definitely never have had the guts to sit next to her. But with my new perspective I just strolled over like it was the most normal thing in the world and plonked myself down beside her. 'Alright?' I said, like no big deal.

She said 'Hi,' but she was a bit surprised, I think. She closed her book and did that leg-crossing thing where if you cross them away from the person, it means you don't like them. (She crossed her legs away, if you were wondering, but I wasn't going to let a little thing like that stop my rocket.)

'That's *good*,' I said, meaning her drawing. I wasn't just saying it either, although I'd only caught a glimpse, because everything Alice drew was incredible. 'Can I see?'

She hesitated and I thought I'd gone too far then. I thought she'd get up and move away – sit over the other side. But she didn't. She put the book in my hand. *In my hand* – just like that! And I thought of that saying that Dad used to tell me: *If you don't ask, you don't get.*

Everyone else at school plasters their sketchbooks with things cut out of magazines, like words and dismembered bits of models and any other stupid stuff they can find to stick on. Alice's cover was blank, though. Black – just how it was when Miss Trainer handed them out. I loved that. It was like she didn't need to impress anyone; like she was telling the world that all the good stuff's on the inside and it's up to you to find it, like it didn't matter to her if you did or you didn't.

I flicked through with my thumb, catching colours

and sketches and words written in fine pencil lines, and the beautiful delicate flowers she'd drawn in the corners with the page number in the centre of each – some in colour, some in pencil, some just in black ink, depending on whatever she had in her hand I suppose. I wanted to stop on every single page of course and stare at it all – at every line – but obviously I couldn't. Not with her there. I got to the drawing she'd been working on. It was a girl, like a Manga girl, that glared out at me from the paper with gleaming eyes beneath a thick, black fringe. She was standing defiantly, like she should have a sword in her hand or something, though what she was actually holding was an apple.

Alice'd spent time on it, you could tell. The shading was brilliant – cross-hatched so it got darker and lighter just where she wanted it, like Miss Trainer's always trying to get me to do instead of smudging with my thumbs. And round the edges were hundreds of tiny, wispy lines that were like ghosts of the finished drawing, or expressions of it or something. I don't know. It was beautiful. It took my breath away. 'It's amazing,' I said.

I didn't look up, but I saw Alice out the corner of my eye twist her lips and give a little shrug, like maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. 'Thanks,' she said. Some of her hair fell forward. It was inches away, pale and gold, like a waterfall or something, even though I know that sounds corny. The point is, it was right there. I could've touched it.

That's all I could think of then: imagining how her hair would feel slipping through my fingers, pooling onto my palms – cool, like water. My chest felt like it had an

owl in it trying to beat its way out and I wanted to tell her, suddenly, about Alice's Box – *her* box – and how it feels when I hold her things. I wanted to tell her about you as well, and how she should be really scared but at the same time not worry about any of it because I was protecting her and because I wasn't going to let anything happen.

Robert came in with Max Bailey, though. I didn't think so at the time, but it was probably lucky, because otherwise I might not've just closed Alice's sketchbook and given it back. I might've flung my arms round her.

A couple of days after, when I was watching the path for you from the PE hut after lunch, I saw someone through the trees and hurried down to the fence with my bag. It wasn't you. It was two women in wellies walking three big dogs.

I kicked the fence. I was annoyed. I knew you were planning to take Alice, so where were you? Why weren't you there? Then the bell rang and right after that – after I'd turned to go back across the field – I heard a dog bark.

It was high-pitched and quite far off, but it came from a small dog. It's yours, I thought. It's your dog. I walked along the fence to the cut-through, did a quick scan of the playing field to see if anyone was looking, then a few steps and I was on the path.

I stood under the canopy of trees and listened. A bird was rustling about in the undergrowth and I could just make out the engine hum of cars on Aldenham Road.

Then I heard the bark again. It came from the other

way, towards Finch Lane. I walked as fast as I could, wishing I didn't have to lump my school bag with me. I can't run because I get wheezy, which is one of the 'motivators' Dr Bhatt wanted to put on my list, as if running is something I'd do all the time if I could because it's such a fun thing to do. I told him I never even need to run. The only time I probably should is for the bus when I'm late for school, but then I wouldn't dream of actually doing it, because any time I don't have to spend at school is a bonus.

The end of the path was ahead of me – an archway of white light. When I got there, I stood in the brightness of Finch Lane squinting up and down it and panting, the insides of my thighs stinging from being rubbed together. (Dr Bhatt doesn't know about my stinging thighs or he'd add them to the list.)

The lane was empty. There was nothing except a cat dozing on the windowsill of one of the terraced houses on the other side.

I took my inhaler out of my bag and had a few puffs, then stripped off my cardigan, tied it round my waist and starting walking slowly back along the path. I thought about how the dog bark could've come from the other direction or a garden somewhere or from any small dog – there are enough of them around. I thought, I haven't even heard your dog bark. I just really wanted it to be your dog.

I'd never been on the wooded path in the middle of the day before. Once I'd calmed down a bit and got my breath back, it was like being in a fairy tale. The sun was sparkling through the leaves high above me, birds

were fluttering about with twigs in their beaks and squirrels kept popping their heads round tree trunks or running across the path. I felt like Snow White as I stepped along, looking all round me and listening to the birdsong. I thought how Snow White would've started singing, so I sang a couple of notes, but then I stopped because I didn't sound anything like a Disney princess. I know I don't look like one either, but imagining how I look when I can't see myself is a lot easier than imagining I sound lovely when I can hear I don't.

Some fat people, like the ones that sing in operas, have amazing voices, don't they? And they look really smug to be as massive as they are because they can do this special thing they wouldn't be able to do if they were thin. I don't have a good voice, though. I'm just fat. So I forgot about the singing and just looked at all the animals running and flying about and the sun spilling through the trees and enjoyed being on my own somewhere so nice.

When I got back to near the cut in the fence, I sat on a tree stump just off the path. I still had more than half an hour before the end of sixth period. I was missing History, which if you're going to skip class, is a good one because Mr Caplin is so blind he never notices if people are missing. He didn't notice the bin Robert put halfway between the door and his desk either.

There was only one chocolate Hobnob left in my bag. I ate half of it, then crumbled the rest up and threw the bits on the path. None of the animals came though, even after ages. I thought, they can probably see me sitting here – or maybe they're all on diet programmes too, only better at them.

It was obviously ‘smokers’ seat’ I was on, because there were cigarette butts everywhere. I picked one out of the grass. It had candy-pink lipstick on it and had been mashed out so fiercely the tobacco was all splayed out like crazy hair. I sniffed it, then dug my fingernails into the filter and pulled it apart to look at the fluffy yellow stuff.

I don’t smoke. I wondered if you did. I thought you probably did because you’re old and most old people smoke, especially old people that are bad. Then a voice said, ‘Unlucky for you, Yasmin.’

It was Mrs Wilcox, the French teacher and probably the one person you don’t want to get caught by. She made me walk the proper way to the Head’s office: down the path to Aldenham Road, then along that to the main entrance. She stood watching me till I was out of sight. Then I suppose she must’ve called the school office because the secretary said, ‘In you go, Yasmin,’ when I got there.

Miss Ward didn’t believe I was looking at squirrels. She gave me the usual spiel about smoking, the usual spiel about skipping class, then sent me home, saying that because I was already on report, I was suspended till Monday.

Whoopidoo, I thought, suspended for a whole day. Actually, it was a day and nearly two hours and I decided I was going to make the most of them. In my head I was already there on my bed with all five pillows (four behind me, one under my knees), a bowl of sweet ‘n salty popcorn in my arms and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* playing on my laptop.

I let the first bus go past, though, because I remembered Gary. He might be there. He's a plumber, which is a pain in the bum because sometimes he goes home between jobs or finishes early, and if he was there, he'd say, *What're you doing home?* straight off without even looking at his watch, and then he'd give me the Spanish Inquisition (whatever that is), then phone school to check my story word for word against theirs. The pull of *The Next Generation* was too strong, though, even in the face of a possible Gary-encounter, and I got the next bus.

I stared out of the window and thought about how it'd be just my luck if you took Alice while I was suspended, and I sent you a message via telepathy telling you that you couldn't do it yet. I also told you that even though I was happy I was suspended, it was because of you that I'd got in trouble – that because of you, I'd have to explain myself to Mum and maybe even (please God, no) Gary.

It's official now, I told you. You owe me.

Gary wasn't at home, but Mum was. I could hear her in the kitchen going 'Mmmm' into the phone and sighing every few seconds and when she didn't put her head round the door to wave at me like she usually does if she's on the phone, I knew she was talking to school. I thought the Head was probably giving her the same lecture she'd given me about smoking (as if no one else in the world's ever been told about the dangers of smoking and it's her duty, as the lone crusader, to spread the word). Then Mum said, 'Well, we've been trying. We've done that.' There was another long pause, another

sigh, louder this time, like she was getting annoyed, then, 'It isn't easy, you know.'

I went into the sitting room and waited for her, watching a magpie stabbing a snail on the driveway with its beak. When she came in, she flopped into the chair, leaning her head back and closing her eyes like she was completely knackered. She's a mystery shopper, which means she has to push a supermarket trolley round different supermarkets all day, pretending to shop when really she's spying on people that hand out those tiny bits of cookies or cubes of cheese on toothpicks to make sure they're doing their job and not playing on their phones. It's hard work, even though Gary's always making fun of it, going, 'And who's watching *you*? Who's making sure you're doing *your* job properly?'

'I wasn't smoking,' I said.

She lifted her head and looked at me. 'I don't know,' she said.

I wanted to say, *You won't tell Gary, will you?* but it didn't seem like the right moment. I said, 'What d'you mean?'

She sighed again and picked up the Pizza Hut takeaway menu that was on the arm of the chair. 'I'm just too tired,' she said. She was looking at the menu, but I could tell she wasn't really looking. She wasn't reading it. I thought she probably didn't even know what it was. It was making me hungry, though.

I said, 'I didn't have any lunch.'

She shot me a look to tell me 1) that she knew that was probably a lie; and 2) that she also knew exactly what I was doing and that, in the circumstances, it wasn't

really acceptable. Then she said, 'We'll talk about it tomorrow, OK? I'm not letting it slide, though.'

I nodded. I said, 'Don't tell Gary.'

She pursed her lips and gave me the look again, but I was pretty sure she wouldn't. I don't think she relished the thought of a Gary lecture either.

I went upstairs then. I didn't have to tell her to get me the Deep Pan Stuffed Crust Hawaiian with extra Garlic and Herb Dip because that's my number one favourite thing to eat (along with Cadbury's Dairy Milk Turkish Delight and sweet 'n salty popcorn). And because Gary wasn't home, it meant she'd probably order me one that was actually big enough to fill a hole.

One thing I love about Mum is that she never makes things into massive dramas like most people. She usually just shrugs and sighs or says 'Ah well' or 'Never mind'. I suppose it's because of losing Dad. Once you've been through something like that, it puts things into perspective – things like your teenage daughter possibly smoking a cigarette on a tree stump when she should be fifty metres away listening to someone so old he can only mumble in monotone.

I typed *How to spot a paedophile* into Google on my laptop. About a billion sites came up. I took a quiz on one. It showed pictures of people (men mostly) and you had to click *Yes* for paedophile or *No* for not a paedophile. I only got half of them right, which technically means there was a 50 per cent chance I was wrong about you. Except I knew I wasn't. Anyway, I thought, you weren't just a photo, you were real. You *are* real, and I deduced therefore that it's a lot easier to tell a

paedophile in the flesh than from a picture. It's the same with telly or pop stars, isn't it? They seem super-duper lovely on screen but then you hear they're really vile and treat the people who work for them like crap. Hanna Latham at school said her friend's cousin was a runner on this TV show and that there was a really horrible presenter who'd tip packets of mixed nuts all over his desk, then make her pick out the cashews because they were the only ones he liked. Hanna said you'd never know he was like that from watching him, all smiles and jokes and floppy fun-guy hair. I bet if you met him in real life, though, you could tell straight away he was mean.

This other site said to pay particular attention to the mouth, to look out for the paedo-*smile*: apparently paedophiles usually have thin lips and are often smiling – especially if you're a child doing the looking. Obviously, you weren't smiling when I saw you because you were on your own and too busy, I expect, imagining what you'd do with Alice when you got her.

The website said to look out for props too, meaning things that would interest kids and make them trust a person, like bikes or scooters or kittens. It didn't mention dogs, but *obviously* dogs – especially one as scruffy and cute as yours.

The one thing all the sites did say was that predators like you are almost always known to their victims. I thought that bit didn't really fit unless you did know Alice – which is possible, I suppose, but you didn't look like you knew her. I mean, you weren't exactly ready to wave at her if she happened to notice you. You were

holding your dog's lead with one hand and the other one was stuffed deep in the pocket of your jeans.

Mum brought me a tea at 9 o'clock the next morning. She said, 'You awake, love?' even though it was obvious I wasn't, or at least hadn't been, and sat on the bed. Because I was officially in trouble, I couldn't tell her to pee off, so I pushed myself up, took the mug from her and had a couple of slurps.

She believed me about not smoking, but I had to come up with a reason for being on the path. Watching squirrels obviously wasn't good enough (even though it ending up being the truth) and I couldn't tell her about you, so I told her I was just feeling a bit down.

'Oh love,' she said. She leant forward and tucked my hair behind my ear. 'You've not had an easy time of it, have you?'

I was thinking, stop tucking my hair behind my ear, Mum, but I said it was no big deal and that everything was fine really, I just had my period coming. But the way she was looking at me all sympathetically made it impossible not to think about Dad, which made me get tearful.

She patted my leg through the duvet. 'Hey, c'mon,' she said, 'let's go to the shop and get something nice.'

I reminded her I had to see Dr Bhatt in the afternoon, but she said she was sure he was going to be pleased with me. She didn't know about the family-size Cadbury's Dairy Milk Turkish Delight in my bedside table drawer or the other three in my suitcase on top of the wardrobe, or about the packet of chocolate Hobnobs I buy in the corner shop near school every day.

She said, 'One treat won't hurt.' She said it was a treat for her too because she'd got the day off. She'd given the work to one of the other mystery shoppers.

She came out the Co-op with a box of Maltesers. 'Look,' she said, making me hold it when she got back in the car, 'they're so light they won't even show up on the scales.' We ate them there, sitting outside the shop. She told me she'd go on a diet too, but that Gary likes his ladies large. 'Something to grab hold of,' she chuckled, popping several Maltesers into her mouth at once with a naughty look in her eyes.

'Mu-um,' I said, because I really didn't need to be hearing what Gary does or doesn't like.

Then she said sorry, because she knew she wasn't being very helpful, but that the point she wanted to make was that it's what's on the inside that counts.

She looked really happy inside and out.

Dr Bhatt wasn't pleased with me. He never is because every time I go I'm heavier than the time before (and I'm not getting any taller), but even so I like going to see him. He's calm and patient and talks to me like he understands how it's really hard to lose weight. But I like going because of the hospital too. I like the way it's all white and quiet, the nurses and doctors walking round in their long clean coats and squeaky shoes, carrying clipboards or wheeling machines.

Ever since Dad was ill and Marion came to the house to look after him, I thought I'd like to be a nurse. You get to be kind to people, or firm with them if they won't do what you tell them to, like taking their pills or eating