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Behind blue eyes: A memoir of childhood who am I?: A collection of essays

Glyn Parry
Edith Cowan University

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Behind Blue Eyes: A Memoir of Childhood

Who Am I?: A Collection of Essays

Glyn Parry, BA, Grad. Dip. Ed., MA

Thesis submitted for the award of PhD (Writing) in the Faculty of
Community Services, Education and the Arts, at Edith Cowan University,
on 30 June 2006.

Abstract

How should one approach childhood memories for the writing of literary memoir? Behind Blue Eyes is my childhood revisited. I have fashioned my earliest memories in order to tell a story. *My* story, and the story of my family. It covers the years between 1963 and 1967, when I was a boy growing up in the north-east of England. I made the decision from the outset to tell the story through the eyes of a child. This is an approach seldom taken, but one that has intrigued me for some years now. Could I sustain the voice of a four-year-old, a five-year-old, a six-year-old, and so on? Yes, I believed so. Could I capture the essence of a boy's life in the north-east of England back then? I hoped so.

Behind Blue Eyes is now in the hands of a publisher. There is a book there and I should be well pleased. But I worry about what my parents will think, particularly my mother. Soon I will have joined that growing number of novelists who turned their hand to creative non-fiction. Some may argue that I have merely delivered another novel anyway. They may well be right. Yet, this is my childhood as I recall it, several decades on. It's not so much a historical record as a personal journey. It's my square mile of childhood faithfully reproduced. I just don't wish for my mother to be hurt.

Who Am I? is the set of essays that immediately followed the writing of Behind Blue Eyes. The ficto-critical approach best suited my purpose, which was to explore the way memory worked for me (or didn't) as I plundered my past. As the research progressed I found myself increasingly alarmed by the sheer inventiveness of memory. Can the story of one's childhood be laid out with any degree of authenticity? I started to have my doubts. How, then, should one go about the tricky business of packaging one's life into a narrative structure suitable for publication? And what gets lost along the way? I was interested to find out.

Candidate Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed: _____

30 June 2006

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I wish to thank Dr Richard Rossiter of Edith Cowan University for his unfailing enthusiasm and wise counsel over four years. He is a very wonderful teacher and friend. I also wish to thank my parents Glynne and Josie for their decision to migrate to Australia with their thirteen suitcases and two thousand pounds. Finally, I wish to thank my wife Sandra for not allowing me to throw in the towel.

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Part One



Two Laughing Skeletons

The first thing I like about the place is the daffodils. They grow in the field behind our caravan. They grow beside the river. If you look closely, See, a big fish, Dad.

At first Dad cannot see. He's a blind man. He shields his eyes from the sun.

He says, What fish? Where?

I'm pointing, and then the big fish jumps and there is a splash.

Oh, now I see. You've got good eyes, Glyn.

Soon we are walking again, as far as the riverbank allows. We come to a fence and long grass where there could be snakes. There might even be a baby dragon. Dad lifts me high up and over.

They're called salmon, he says, meaning the big fish wearing the silver shirt with buttons and bells. And this is the Tamar River.

Dad, you could jump in the river.

But would I even want to? With a little laugh he shakes his head.

Daffodils are everywhere, even on the other side and up the slope into the woods. I like the daffodils. I'm not so sure about the woods. They look dark. A boy could easily be lost.

Dad says, Did you know there were pirates?

Pirates! Now I'm forgetting all about a salmon. It's the sea for me and a yo-ho-ho.

Oh, yes, Cornwall's famous for pirates, says Dad. They looted lots of villages here. Spaniards, they were the worst.

This makes me think of two laughing skeletons standing over a treasure chest. Their home is a beach that is palm trees and monkeys. I tell Dad what's in my head.

Laughing, you say?

Dad, they were happy pirates to the end. They fished and hunted and dreamed.

When we are back on the lane away from the river, Dad brings up the pirates, saying, Glyn, I don't know that they were ever a particularly happy crew. Mostly they ran away to sea to escape the gallows.

I know about the gallows. That's the hangman's noose and a rope that swings. Swish! That's another one gone off to the devil.

Dad says, Come on, we should be getting back. Your mother and sister have been baking. Let's beat the crow.

Gypsy

After our walk beside the river I don't see Dad for two more weeks. He's away at sea again. He's a Navy man. Some days he's at port and some days he's at sea.

Today he's at sea.

Mum says, Damn that Navy for stealing my man. It's too much.

She stabs out her cigarette and marches up her end of the caravan for a good cry.

Again? says Julie, looking up from the curlers. She is on the cushion on the carpet, arranging Mum's hair curlers into colours: red, green, blue.

You shouldn't be touching Mum's things, I say.

I am ignored. I sit at the table listening to Mum sob, then it's all quiet. After ten minutes she's back. Her eyes are puffy.

She smiles at us both and says, Silly me. He's a good man and look at me, not even out of my dressing gown yet. She puts on the kettle.

Now, where Dad works is Plymouth. That's where the ships get scrubbed and sanded and painted, ready for more weeks at sea. Dad is in stores. His job is so important the Navy would be lost without him.

Like Mum is lost without him.

But I must not stand in his way, she tells Queenie, the next time Queenie comes knocking on our door. Queenie is always knocking on our door.

Mum is saying, I think Cornwall was a mistake, I really do. I see even less of him now.

She is tucking her hankie up her sleeve after another cry.

There, there, Josie. Let's get you another cup of tea.

I need my cigarettes, says Mum.

Of course you do, sweetie.

Queenie is Mum's best friend in Notter Bridge Farm, so she's allowed to see her crying.

Mum laughs anyway. I'm being daft, she says. Now he's talking about migrating to Australia.

This is a surprise.

Oh, I've heard Australia is lovely, says Queenie. It's quite civilised.

Yes, but, Australia. He's a gypsy, our Queenie. I've married a gypsy for my sins. And a handsome Welsh one at that!

And this makes Mum laugh all the more.

Shoes

When Dad's back from his days at sea, I'm sitting on the grass in front of our caravan helping him polish our shoes. The Cornwall sun is warm on my neck.

He says, Look after your shoes and they'll look after you. You'll be able to walk into any job.

But it's not shoes I'm worried about. It's the idea of leaving Cornwall so soon.

Mum has the idea stuck in her head. We'd all be better off in the north-east and no Dad in the Navy. But Dad hates the north-east, I know. The place makes him sad. He doesn't know how to get comfortable there. A Welshman is lost in a place like that because the language they speak is geordie. They say nowt instead of nothing. They say, Why aye, man.

I ask, What's the name of Nana and Grandad's pub again?

The Colliery Inn, Son. God, but I don't miss it. And this place is called Notter Bridge Farm. So, you're missing your grandparents, is it?

Only Grandad, I say. And his little car with the engine in the boot.

Yes, Grandad. He's a good man.

Where we are doesn't look like a farm. There are no cows. There are no hens. Where is the sheepdog called Bob?

Dad says, The farm part is up over there, over that hill. This part is for all the caravans. Old Mr Marquand the farmer has rented his field to capitalise on the holiday season. It's all rather beautiful, don't you think?

What's capitalise, Dad?

Money, Son. Money to make the world spin faster.

Dad's still polishing his shoes. I ask him if old Mr Marquand rides on a tractor.

I imagine so, yes. Why, do you want to be a farmer now?

No. But if I *was*, I'd have a blue tractor.

Dad doesn't say what colour his tractor would be. He only tells me we're down the very south of England now, with no more Jack Frost on the windscreen, and how do I feel about that? What do I say?

About what, Dad?

About moving here to Cornwall. About getting away from the north-east and all that rotten cold.

I'm glad, Dad. It's nice here. Except, I saw a rat.

A rat! Dad looks at me amazed. No, there are no rats here.

I think there might be.

He says, Rats have no place living next to people. They're a pest and a pestilence. Next shoe, please.

I hand him another shoe.

So. What have you done these past two weeks?

I've been thinking.

Thinking?

Thinking about ghost pirates, Dad. They might wander out of the woods.

Dad says, Yes, well, don't say it too loudly or Mum will be hearing noises. She's already seen one ghost. That's plenty.

He shows me how to polish my own shoes.

See how it's done, Glyn? Now you try.

I rub the shine onto them with a little spit and yellow cloth. I ask, What kind of a ghost was it, Dad? The one Mum saw?

The kind that walks through walls, Son. Me and Mum were staying the night in a stone cottage near the woods. We hadn't been married more than a month. First Mum woke up, and she thought, There's a man standing in the corner.

What man?

I'm telling you what man. Glynne, Glynne, your mother was saying, and her elbow woke me up. That's when I saw him for myself. Who are you? I said. What do you want with us? But it wasn't a man at all. It was a soul in despair.

As soon as Dad tells me this I *know* the ghost pirates will come visiting and I say so.

Dad says, I don't want your sister thinking there's ghosts or pirates. She'll not sleep for a week.

I won't say a word, Dad.

Good boy. How's that shoe coming along?

An Island We Lived At

Easter Sunday is supposed to be our best day with painted eggs to roll in the field. Except it's done nothing but rain. Mum says we all have to put a brave face on it.

This lousy weather, says Dad, pulling the curtain aside. I miss the sun.

Now, when Dad says he misses the sun, he means Cyprus. That's an island we lived at across the sea, where there are goats and grapes. He wishes we were back there. Or, yes, let's away to Australia, home of the kangaroo.

We'd still be there, wouldn't we, Josie? If the Navy hadn't pulled us out.

Yes, I loved Cyprus, says Mum, wanting another cigarette. She's smoked two already. Then she changes her mind and puts the packet back in her bag. She's watching me and Julie painting our eggs. My egg is a smiling face that's blue. Julie's egg is a face that's been in a car crash.

In Cyprus the Greeks hate the Turks and the Turks hate the Greeks. It's called, hostilities.

The fighting wasn't very nice, Mum admits.

We didn't see any fighting, says Dad. We lived at Number 42 Paphos Street with Anastasias and Froso and their three children. They were Greeks.

Greeks. I can't remember the house or the three children. I only know that their photograph sits on our shelf.

Are you sure you can't remember living there? asks Mum.

In the photograph it's Christmas day and we're all eating dinner. We wear our party hats. That's me and Julie, yes, but the other children, I don't know.

You played with those three, says Mum, pointing. Every day for nearly two years. And see, the house.

This is our house in Limassol. Julie has her ears pierced with gold earrings and I am riding my rocking duck.

Dad says, Don't you remember any of it, Glyn?

He is waiting for my answer. Yes, that's me, but I'm not much older than a baby. My head is muddled.

You don't remember me taking you for long walks in your pram?

I can see that Dad wants me to, and he's waiting patiently.

Sorry, Dad.

That's alright. Here. Listen up, mister.

Soon he is shifting up beside me to tell me all about the long walks we had. The man from the bicycle repair shop rushed out with his oil can to oil every wheel. Or the women, they'd fetch iced water for the little one with fair hair.

That would be you, Glyn Parry, says Mum. You were bleached. You both were.

Dad says, And the beach with all the pebble!

I say the one beach I know, Grandad's beach, Crimdon, and Dad hugs me anyway.

No, Son. Crimdon's the north-east where it's cold. When we lived at the Colliery Inn, remember? The pub?

Yes, the pub. I remember the pub, all big and cold and dark, with loud men shouting and a glass getting smashed. I am afraid of the miners.

No one ever swam at Crimdon, says Dad. Not even a fish swims at Crimdon with all that coal tipping. The coast is a ruin. They've destroyed that whole coastline for a thousand years.

I think Mum is about to tell him off for not being nice about the north-east, which is her favourite place to be in spite of the cold, but then Julie has her tantrum.

Where was I? she wants to know, looking up from her painted egg.

Mum says, What do you mean, Where were you? You weren't anywhere, Julie. You were with us. Isn't that right, Dad?

Where else would you be?

Julie isn't happy. She says, I was somewhere else.

Julie, you were *born* in Cyprus, says Mum. I think I'd know if you were somewhere else. You're being a bit silly.

The sky rips open. Rain comes down heavy and loud on the caravan roof. It's playing Grandad's drums. Dad's at the curtain again, shaking his head. *Ding!* Round two.

Mum says, I'll never get all the washing dry in this.

You'll manage, says Dad, checking for drips.

Oh, I will, will I? Well, yes, if you can call this managing.

It's a good buy, this caravan, says Dad quickly. See. Tight as a drum.

Mum's stopped listening. Now she's only in a mood to drink a cup of coffee and have one more cigarette.

Give the place a chance, says Dad. Let's make it work for us.

Work for you! she snaps back at him. It's not much fun for me and the bairns, stuck in a muddy field. As for that river—I do not trust that river.

Dad doesn't want to hear this. He looks trapped, like he isn't sure what to say. He has the look of a rabbit stuck in the corner of a hutch. In the end he says nothing, which is the sensible thing to do when Mum's in one of her moods.

Be My Prince

To sea again! For three days Mum keeps us inside. Last time it rained this bad we were living in Nana and Grandad's pub. We all got colds. Nana was not happy. Dad was in Gibraltar singing *Danny Boy* in a sailor bar with a pint glass in his hand.

He loves to sing. He is from the valley and Taid my other grandad is from the valley. Every Welshman is from the valley. It must be a very big valley, is what I think.

Mum says I'll be a singer, too, once my voice breaks. Singing is in my blood.

I don't want my voice broken, I say. What if it can't be fixed?

Silly. Half of you is Welsh.

Which half?

The singing half. And one-tenth daft.

Rain, rain, go away. This week, a miracle! Everything is back to sunshine. Mum looks at her washing on the line.

Fingers crossed, she says.

See, Mum. No more clouds. Yesterday and today. Please can we go out and play?

Julie stands hopeful beside me.

Mum says, Well, I suppose we can't be cooped up in a caravan the whole of our lives. She gives me and Julie fair warning not to go near the river. The river is out of bounds.

Let's pick flowers in the farmer's field, says Julie.

Are we allowed?

Yes. Why? Did someone say we aren't? Get your hearing tested, mister.

When we get there, old Mr Marquand's field is all grass and pollen sneezes. We pick flowers, but not daffodils. We pick bluebells and daisies. We pick buttercups. There are other flowers, too—foxgloves and thrift.

I wish I had a book of flowers to look at, to know all their names. The trick to reading is you start with the picture, then look at the words.

You can't read, says Julie, jealous.

Can so. Some words are easy.

Julie kicks a stick. She doesn't believe me. She never believes me.

Why was Mum crying? she wants to know.

She's missing her man, I say.

What man?

Our dad the sailor man who wants to be a gypsy and go live in Australia.

Where's Australia?

Somewhere that's not the north-east, I say.

Then I see a big lonely tree we can walk to. Trees are lighthouses for the land. They point the way. They say, Well, sir, here you are.

There might be fairies, says Julie, when we're almost there. If there are, say nothing. You're just the boy. I'm the princess.

You're not a princess, I tell her.

Yes I am. Daddy says I'm his little princess. He says it every time.

When?

Whenever! All the time I'm his princess. You're stupid, Glyn.

I don't think I'm stupid. Stupid is walking onto a road when a car is coming.

I'm not surprised that we don't see any fairies. They are very secretive. So now I want to climb the tree and be Monkey Boy, but the first branch is too high up. I need a big ladder. Some trees are trees and some trees are giants. This one's a giant.

I jump. I jump again. Julie quickly gets bored with watching me jump for a branch. She kicks another stick and sits down.

You're only going to twist your ankle, stupid.

I wish she would stop calling me that. Stupid. I'm not stupid. I jump anyway. If I had springs in my shoes or elastic for arms this would be so easy.

Stop jumping, says Julie, irritated.

I jump anyway. Boing! See, I'm Zebedee. She can't tell me what to do.

You'll be sorry when your leg is broke.

After I've jumped three more times, Julie gets up off the grass, brushing herself down. Grass is on her tights and she isn't bothered. She says she's going to leave flowers for the fairies to find and I should do the same.

I don't want to give the flowers away. That wasn't part of the game.

Just do it, Glyn. You have to. It's the rule.

They're for Mum. Can't we give some to Mum?

No. What does Mum need flowers for when she has a husband? What we can do is make a circle. I hope you're going to help me. If you're not, find a new friend.

The circle we make wraps right around the tree. We make a pattern—bluebell, daisy, buttercup. When we're finished Julie wants to do the fairy princess waltz.

You have to dance now. See. This is our fairy circle we made. You can be my prince.

Can't I be a monkey?

No, that's not the game. Be who I say. I'm letting you be my prince, so act happy.

The fairy princess is dancing. The prince is trying to dance. Mostly he's wanting to be a monkey in the tree. Monkeys get to knock down coconuts and they have lots of pirate friends. They go, Ooo Ooo Ooo!

Dead Thing

Soon we've lived at Notter Bridge Farm more weeks than I can multiply. The sky stays turquoise and the sun stays warm. Other caravans arrive, but no children. I think the Pied Piper has hidden the children of Cornwall in a mountain.

Play nice with your sister, Mum tells me. There's a good boy.

I ask, Can we get a dog, Mum?

What? No, of course not. Don't be silly. Dogs aren't allowed.

Mum has more friends to smoke with and drink coffee. Otherwise, she sits alone in her dressing gown and has a good cry for her man over the sea. I miss him, I miss him, she says to her cigarettes and her hair brush. On days when she can't stop crying and Queenie doesn't come, she has to take a tablet.

I say, Mum, Can we go out now?

At first she doesn't hear, but then she does, saying, Yes, yes, darling. Yes, take your sister for a nice walk.

She lets Julie and me go wandering.

On one of our adventures I climb through a fence, saying, I'll show you a fish, Julie. It's called a salmon.

To show her the fish I have to show her the river. It's at the bottom of the field and through some hedges. Somewhere.

Now what? says Julie, when we're on the other side of nowhere in particular.

We're in a different field. Or it might be the same field and fairies have played a trick on us.

We're lost, says Julie.

We're not lost. It's this way. I think.

We're lost, says Julie again. You're in trouble, mister. What if there's a bad man?

There is no bad man, I say, seeing another fence we can go through. I'm careful not to mention ghosts or pirates.

After a long walk I sit down and close my eyes. I'm thirsty. I wish we had cordial.

Are you thirsty, Julie?

She is. We're both thirsty. I'm hungry, too. This could have been a picnic with jam and bread, and a game of hide and seek afterwards.

Come on, she says, grabbing my sleeve. We're going home. You don't know how to have fun.

Yes I do.

How many friends do you have? Not any.

Lots.

Liar. How many really?

Some.

Not one, Glyn. You don't have a single friend.

Julie shakes her head at me and starts walking. She says, Thanks for getting us lost, stupid.

That's it. I rush at her with my fists and knock her down. Before she can even scream, I'm hitting her on the arm and kneeling on her side.

Stupid! shouts Julie, wriggling out from under me. Stupid boy!

She has grass in her hair and on her sleeve. As soon as she stands up I want to knock her down again. It's clear I haven't hit her hard enough.

Now I'm telling, Julie says, already marching away from me.

You're always telling, I say, catching up.

We stop fighting.

After a long walk and no talking we stumble across the river. First it's a rumour, then it's a noise. The grass is dancing.

See! Now I'll show you the salmon.

Forget the salmon. I'm going home.

Julie! Wait!

She sits down. Fine. Show me the stupid salmon.

Keep looking, I say. You've got to have good eyes, like me.

Don't kid yourself, mister. Your eyes aren't that good. You're the cross-eyed lion, in case you didn't know.

Don't say that.

It's the truth, Clarence.

Lazy, Julie. I have a lazy eye, is all. You're cruel.

I find a rock to throw in the river.

There is no salmon, says Julie.

She may be right. Not today. There's only bumblebees pollen shopping.

We should go home now, I say, after we've waited and waited for the splash.

Then Julie finds the dead thing lying face down in a clump of grass.

Ughh, she says, staring at the little rib cage and bits of fur.

I kick at it with my shoe.

Glyn! Germs, stupid.

I quickly pull back. I step away.

You touched it, says Julie.

No, I didn't!

You touched the dead thing.

I know about germs. Germs cause diseases. Not washing your hands after lifting the toilet seat causes diseases. There's only one germ that's worse, and that's a germ from another world.

Something did this, I say, looking at the thing.

Now it's time to find our caravan, fast. The river brings us to a familiar field. After this the lane isn't hard to find. I'm glad.

Do you think anything followed us? I say, looking back over my shoulder.

Like what? Julie is bored again.

Nothing. Walk faster, if you want.

Sorry

I know we're in trouble because the sun is in the wrong part of the sky. Plus there are clouds. Mum will not be pleased. As if she hasn't got enough on her plate already, and here we are, lost and late and more rain for Notter Bridge.

We'll say we've been on the swings the whole time, I tell Julie, coming back from the river. Okay?

If you say so, she says.

I do say so. It's never a good idea to make Mum cross. She has headaches. A little hammer starts up and she isn't able to put the kettle on because of the din. She needs her tablet. It's like a little man hammering nails through a wall—thump, thump.

We don't get to the swings in time. Mum spots us sneaking into camp. Or, rather, she has her spies out.

Now she is *furious* cross. She's out of her dressing gown and into her work clothes. Her jobs finished an hour ago. She wants answers. We are her big disappointment for the day.

Where were you? she asks. And, mind, no telling lies.

Only the field, I say.

She asks Julie, Where were you?

With Glyn.

So now it's my turn again.

Glyn, did you go to the river after you were told not to? You did, didn't you?

If I say yes I will get a smack. If I say no I'll be caught out in a lie and get two smacks. I look at Julie. I start to cry. The sky's suddenly the colour of paste.

Glyn, you've been told I don't know how many times.

Mum has been to see the wives. She's been listening to tales again. I see them standing together, pretending to mind their own business. But what

happens in a caravan park is everybody's business. No one is happy to see a boy who can't do as he's told.

Mum says, Home. Let's go.

I can't stop crying.

Julie can't start. She never cries.

In our caravan Mum says she can't bear to even look at us, that's how naughty we've been. Me, especially, because I was the trusted one. It's not fair.

I'm sorry, Mum.

Sorry's not good enough. You're always sorry. Wait till your father hears. And after he's worked so hard to give us this lovely caravan to live in.

Mum says all this without looking at me once. It's the pantry door she's telling off, not me. First the pantry door, then the coffee tin, then a spoon.

I have to stand in my corner. Julie has to stand in hers. We're not allowed to look at each other, and if we talk, there'll be smacks all round.

I hate that river, says Mum, to no one but herself. I hear her, though. I hear *everything*.

What I hate is Dad will be sad, then I will be sad watching him be sad. Sadness is a wheel.

Julie makes it worse. She's never sorry. She likes the corner.

Mum is saying, You've got the devil's obstinacy, our Julie. Who you take after I'll never know.

Me, I hate the corner.

Mum asks Julie one more time, Are you ready to say sorry?

No, I am not sorry.

Suit yourself.

Then I hear my name being said. Julie is getting me in worse trouble.

What dead thing?

A dead animal thing, Mum. He was playing with it.

No, I wasn't!

Too late. I have to go straight to the bathroom and wash my hands.
With soap, Glyn. Lots of soap. Scrub them clean.
I scrub and scrub until my nerves are fish-jumping.

Monkey Island

Fairies have magic dust. I wish I had some now. I'd sprinkle my arms and fly to Monkey Island.

Mum's headaches are back. She has her little bottle of tablets half emptied in a week. After breakfast she asks, What did you promise your father, Glyn? What was the very last thing you said when he was about to get on the bus? Do you even remember?

I remember. To be Mum's helper, and I haven't been any help at all. Every time I try to be good, I mess up.

Well, have it your own way, mister, says Mum, between cigarettes.

This spells trouble.

All I did was trip Julie up and send her flying. She deserved it.

You cut her knee, says Mum.

Dad won't smack me. What he'll be is very quiet and not talk much after the TV is off, only saying, Why not? if Mum is thinking of brewing another pot of tea.

Dad's silence is worse than a smack, somehow. A smack stings, silence burns.

Mum says, I'm sick of the pair of you fighting, Glyn. I don't even know why you would *want* to fall out with Julie. You're best friends.

Julie's not my best friend. She's my talking crow.

Now Mum is back in the bathroom. I hear her open the medicine cabinet, where she keeps her tablets.

When the bathroom door slides open again, Mum is finished and happy. It's a new mum she wants us to see. She claps her hands.

Out! she says, sweeping us past the TV with her pretend broom. Out into the sunshine to play before the man upstairs changes his mind about the weather.

What man? says Julie, throwing Dolly down onto the settee.

The man in the sky. Glyn, explain it to her. I just need half an hour.

This means, Please take your sister to the playground, there's a good lad.

So I do. I take Julie to the playground. I do not take her to the river.

There is no man, says Julie, when we've reached the swings.

Is so, I tell her. He lives in the clouds.

Julie is not convinced.

I say, Julie, can you be nice? Please. It was an accident.

She's sitting on the swing, the chains going this way and that, rubbing her knee.

Look at that, I say. The sandpit is still full of water.

I dare you to go in, says Julie. I will if you will.

I shake my head. Don't even think about it, I say.

When we go back, Mum's curtain is drawn. Julie switches on the TV. It's too early for Andy Pandy.

Then Mum is calling out to me. She's sitting up on her bed with a postcard in her lap. I crawl up to be next to her.

She says, Look, Glyn. Dad is having a lovely time. He always does. It's me who has to hold things together.

The postcard is of a little dutch girl. I turn it over to see what kind of stamp it has.

We should go back to the pub, says Mum, and I'm not expecting her to say this at all. Me, you and our Julie. We should pack our suitcases and leave.

But, Mum—

Back to the north-east, she says. Where we have family to look after us all. What do you say?

Before I can answer, or even shake my head, she hugs me tight, suffocatingly.

Don't tell Dad we had this little talk, she tells me. Don't be telling tales or I'll be very disappointed.

Smack On The Leg

Mum is telling stories to the other wives. They drink pots of tea and reach for their Embassy cigarettes. When they start laughing it's like they are witches, saying, Oh, Josie! and, Never! They sound like Nana, who is a witch.

I have to stay up our end of the caravan, mine and Julie's. Mine's the top bunk, Julie's down below. I'm allowed to sit and draw or read or play quietly with my Lego.

Julie's bunk is empty. She's up the noisy end with them. The wives are training her to be one of them.

Careful now, Josie, says one of the wives. There might be a rat hiding in that sugar bowl.

There is no rat, says Mum, loud enough for me to hear along the passageway. She wants me to hear.

No one else has seen the rat, only me, so it must have been a cat. Mum says there are cats in the caravan park.

Yes, I am thinking. There are cats. Queenie has a cat. But what I saw is a rat. Rats carry a disease called the Black Death.

This morning they are having a grand time, Mum and the friends she has made. I hear lots of shushing.

There is nothing the wives don't know because there is nothing Mum doesn't tell them.

One of the wives asks, What boat's your Glynne on, Josie?

The Belfast, says Mum.

Your Glynne *is* the Belfast, says Queenie, and this is another good cackle for everyone to have.

Dad is very proud of his ship, the Belfast. It has big guns and sank the Germans in a fierce sea battle. Below the waterline the mermaids were singing, Come to me, unlucky Fritz.

I hear Queenie say to Mum, In the morning we're all on the bus, Josie. Why don't you come with us?

Yes, do, says another.

Mum goes quiet, and that's because she knows she can't go *anywhere* with two bairns to look after. We can't be trusted to behave for a babysitter.

She says, What sort of day would I have? A nightmare worrying about these two.

Mum's been married the longest. None of others have any children yet, but one is pregnant. That means a baby is curled up behind her pee hole.

I know all this because Julie told me. Julie knows because she doesn't miss a beat. The wives are loud, and Mum forgets to say, Go outside and play with your brother, Julie. It's grown-ups time.

So it's not true babies are born in the allotments for their daddy to find and bring straight home wrapped up in straw with a turnip.

The next day I'm eating toast and jam, and Julie says, Ughhh, what if you sat down and it was the baby's head? You'd be squashing its brains in.

This is a big question that I don't know the answer to. It's not in any of my books.

Ask Mum what happens, I tell Julie, not really fussed. Babies are no fun at all.

When she does, Mum tells Julie off for being ridiculous. She tells her you can't squash the baby. It's protected. It's safe inside its watery room with no windows and not even a bed.

Mum tells Julie we can have one biscuit each out of the tin.

Can we watch TV? asks Julie.

Yes. Not too loud.

We watch TV. Andy Pandy is coming out to play.

Mum doesn't see what Julie does next, which is to scratch me down the leg with her nails. I pull my leg away. She scratches my face.

Bleed, says Julie, after I have pulled her hair.

Be nice, I tell her, because it could have been my eye.

Later, Mum wants to know who scratched my face.

Not me, says Julie.

She gets a smack on the leg. She gets two, one for scratching and one for lying.

Indian War Cry

On the morning Dad is expected home, the other wives arrive early to fuss over Mum like she's a film star. Julie is allowed to watch if she promises not to touch the lipsticks.

I stay away. I am reading. The words are big, but not so big that I'm stuttering over the hoot and howl of them. I like the pictures.

Mum and her friends drink their coffee and smoke their cigarettes, with Julie in charge of passing around the plate of chocolate biscuits.

Mum is saying, I think I've smudged. Have I smudged?

Josie, you look a million pounds. Julie, tell your mum how beautiful she looks.

Dad's radio is playing. Someone is singing about three steps to heaven.

I should buy a pair of blue jeans, says Queenie. America, here I come!

I hear Mum telling the others that Queenie falls in love with every singer who comes on the radio.

Josie! What a thing to say!

Mum laughs and calls out to me. Glyn, come in here and tell me what you think. I know you've been listening.

I close my book.

I go in to see what they have done to Mum. I'm not ready for how pretty they've made her look.

Well? says Queenie, waiting.

Yes, I say.

Mum says, That's it? That's all I get?

I don't know what I'm supposed to say. She is wearing purple eye shadow and ruby lipstick. Her hair is different, shinier. Queenie has fixed it with hair spray. She looks like someone else's mum, not Mum.

Oh, but doesn't she look beautiful, Glyn. Like a picture.

Again, I say, Yes.

Julie is sitting on the bench top, nibbling the last of a biscuit. I spy the empty packet. There are no more left on the plate.

Two hours later, the wives are gone back to their separate caravans. Queenie announces that it wouldn't do for them to still be here when Dad walks in.

You look gorgeous, Josie, she says, and then she's going, too, back to her own caravan and her cat that hissed at me a week ago. That cat doesn't like me.

It's going to rain, says Mum, eyeing dark clouds like she's looking for a spaceship. Wouldn't you know?

Now the day is less than perfect. The sun can't make its mind up, stay or go? Stay or go? It wants to spoil Dad's homecoming.

Mum has put away all our toys in the long box at the end of our bunk beds. She says, Show Julie the pictures, Glyn. Go on. Show her the Cheshire cat.

Looking beautiful with hair that must not be touched has made Mum very restless. She sits down, gets up, sits down again. In an hour she has smoked three cigarettes and had two cups of coffee. She switches the TV on, then switches it off. Why do I want to watch TV? she says.

She doesn't go into the bathroom.

I don't want to look at the pictures, says Julie after I show her the grinning cat. She is restless like Mum is restless.

Well, what would you rather do? asks Mum.

Paint, says Julie.

This is not a good idea. Mum shakes her head.

Can we go to the playground? I ask.

This is a much better idea. Mum says we're only allowed to go to the playground.

I take Julie to the playground. She turns her nose up at the swing. The seat is wet. She has a think about the sandpit, but no, not today.

After only ten minutes I'm taking her back to Mum.

What happened?

She doesn't want to play, I say.

Julie—

Mum doesn't bother finishing her sentence. Julie is in one of her awkward moods.

An hour passes and the long wait is over.

Who's this I see? says Mum, looking along the lane.

Dad is a small dot with his kit bag sitting on his shoulder, and a parcel under each arm. The first thing he sees is Mum wearing her prettiest dress, and she has her hair done, and her nails, too, so isn't he the lucky one? A film star wife is what he sees.

I do an Indian war cry.

Julie shouts, Daddy!

Go on, then, says Mum, meaning we can run to him and who would he rather keep company with, us or sardines?

Watch out for puddles! shouts Mum after us.

Mum doesn't run. It might ruin her hair. Also, she mustn't break her heel. Her shoes are still shiny new, Cinderella shoes for dancing beneath a mirror ball.

My Handsome Prince

We'll have a marvellous week, she says, handing Dad a cup of tea. Now, who's starving?

We all are. Mum has made a plate of party sandwiches, with ham or chicken, there's plenty to go round. We have sausage rolls, too, hot from the oven. And best of all, a tall bottle of fizzy drink.

After dinner Dad says, Well, I wonder what we have here.

Presents! We know that already. Dad always comes home with presents. I wish the Navy would let him bring home a monkey. It's against the regulations.

Dad lets Mum do the handing over. There are two brown paper parcels, one for me and one for Julie. Mum helps us untie the string.

My oh my! she says.

We each have a red coat, and there are four shiny buttons made of wood.

Oh, yes, very smart, Mum says, when the last button is fastened. She swivels me around to stand up straight next to my sister. Yes, here's my handsome prince.

I don't want to be her handsome prince. Doesn't she know that I'm Monkey Boy?

They seem to be the right size, Dad says, and Mum brushes fluff off my shoulder.

Dad calls Julie and me a picture. We look like twins.

Yes, well, if we had a camera, says Mum, clicking her tongue.

This isn't the first time she has said we need a camera. Christmas came and went, and so did her birthday.

Josie, please. Not now.

Glynne, the only pictures we have are what other people give us. It's embarrassing.

Yes, okay, says Dad. You've made your point. He gets up from the table and fixes my collar. There. It's straight. We don't need a silly camera, do we, Glyn?

Say yes, Glyn!

Yes, I say.

Traitor, says Dad, standing back to see how I look with the buttons all done up.

Mum leans forward and kisses me on the cheek.

Good boy. There's more lemonade for you.

Were they fighting? says Julie, when it's back to us two being alone in our room.

After all the excitement, Mum and Dad go to bed for a lie down. Dad closes the curtain up their end. They have the radio on and for a little while Dad is singing.

Julie sits next to me on the top bunk with drips falling past the window. Mum and Dad are past caring. They're just so happy.

I think they were fighting, says Julie.

No, they're happy. Can't you hear them giggling?

It's not easy to hear them giggling above the music. It's saxophones and trumpets and black men singing. A happy cloud is all over the caravan, their end and ours, and even the rain looks warm now that I have a new red coat to wear.

I can't hear them, says Julie, after a while.

Me, neither. But I saw them kissing.

The face Julie makes is not very nice.

Julie, it's called being married. You don't know anything.

Nana and Grandad are married. They don't kiss.

This is true and I'm stumped. Nana is forever slapping Grandad about the head and making his bad chest worse.

Nain and Taid are married, too, says Julie. And do they kiss? No, never.

I turn the pages of the book we have. Julie doesn't look at every page like she's supposed to. Babar is in the jungle. All the other animals have gathered around him for the grand announcement. Julie doesn't even want to know.

She says, It's a stupid elephant, anyway.

No he isn't!

You're stupid.

I'm the oldest, I say, wanting to push her off my bunk. If I do, Dad will hear the thump and I'll be in trouble.

Mum has stopped crying, I say. She's all better. She can throw away her tablets.

Julie kicks the pages of Babar shut.

Boring! she says.

Strip Of Shiny Surprise

For a rainy day treat we're in Plymouth at the train station, just me, Dad and Julie. The train station is the place for new sounds. Train doors go clickclack! After the doors I like the loudspeaker best. Words fly up to the rafters to shake lazybones pigeons loose from their dreams of puff pastry. After that, a whistle blows and that means a train is going to London.

Dad takes us to a booth. He pulls a heavy curtain aside and sits us down on a stool, saying, Don't move. Smile for the camera. We'll surprise Mum.

We don't see any camera, only a square of glass. Dad draws the curtain quick, saying, Smile!

Nothing happens except we are sitting on a stool looking at our reflection, then everything happens fast, so fast that it makes us jump and we forget to smile.

Then we're all finished and off the stool. I'm seeing pigeons again. Dad says, How was it?

There was a flash, I say, studying a man struggling with his suitcase.

Now we wait. Dad is watching the railway porter with sacks of mail.

We have to let the photo machine do its work, says Dad.

I didn't even know it *was* a machine. It doesn't look like one.

Well, what does a machine look like? asks Dad.

A silver ball, I say, that you hold out in front of you across fields and it beeps.

Really? What does it do for all that beeping?

It's a puzzle, Dad.

It's Rupert, says Julie.

The man with the suitcase has turned the corner. Then it's time for the photo machine to spit out a strip of shiny surprise.

It's photos, says Julie.

Yes, of course, says Dad. Photos. When he sees them he laughs. Look at you two. You're both in shock.

What's shock? I ask.

This! This is shock. Your mother will have a blue fit.

Dad buys us a comic each. I have the Dandy. Julie has Robin.

Now I have something to read for on the bus back to Notter Bridge Farm. Desperate Dan is eating a cow pie. Surprise, surprise, it's raining.

They don't look happy, says Mum back in the caravan, after Dad hands over the small strip.

We're in shock, I tell her, because it's my new word for the day.

What do you mean, shock?

There was a big light, I tell her, and that makes me think of a big light Dad saw another time he was off to sea, which was the A bomb. A is for atom. B is for bomb.

Mum puts the photos down and says there's nothing else for it, she'll just have to save up her cigarette coupons and buy a camera. Someone has to.

Josie, that's a lot of coupons, says Dad, who won't ever smoke, coupons or no coupons, cigarettes are bad.

But Mum isn't listening. It's her pocket money to spend any way she likes.

She says, Do I complain when you lot come home singing half the caravans awake? Well, do I?

This shuts Dad up.

Black In The Moonlight

On his second day, Dad spots the rat—definitely not Queenie’s cat—heading away from the toilet block. Mum sees it, too, and she’s got the look of dread.

She says, Do something, Glynne. Grab a shovel.

I don’t have a shovel, says Dad, anxious for *anything*.

A big stick, then. A rock.

I’ll see about this, says Dad. He’s seen what rats can do, on merchant ships where the fight has been lost already.

I run to the window and watch him walking up the hill to the farmhouse, all seriousness and sulk. If he hits old Mr Marquand on the nose the police will come. Our caravan will be towed away.

Dad has been gone for more than an hour and all of us are trapped inside our caravan. I have the settee. Julie has the carpet. Mum is standing at the window.

I don’t want him to be in a fight, I say gloomily.

Don’t be so silly, Glyn. Your father’s not like that.

He’s done boxing, I say, thinking of a photograph in a shoebox.

Glyn, please—

Dad’s going to teach me to box, I say, determined to hold him to his promise.

Mum says, He was no boxer. He quit as soon as his nose was broke. And a good thing, I say. Why ruin his handsome face for a shilling?

Mum hates boxing as much as she hates football.

She says, Forget boxing, Glyn. Be a brain.

I know something about brains, I tell her. There’s enough electricity inside a man’s brain to make a light bulb glow.

Really? says Mum. Well, there’s something I didn’t know.

Julie is instantly suspicious. Anyone can be taught to do a trick.

Dad comes home with milk and eggs. He is our happy Navy dad again, with a sailor song to carry him along.

Well? says Mum, waiting. She wants any excuse to leave Cornwall and return to the north-east. It has to be the north-east, because our Cyprus days are over, and Australia is too far away, and as for Wales, don't get Mum started on Wales. The Welsh are as rude as they are daft.

We will never live in Wales.

Everyone can just relax now, says Dad, and there'll be no more talk in this caravan about rats.

The reason for his big smiles is old Mr Marquand, the farmer, knows his voles.

What's a vole? I ask.

Like a rabbit. Harmless.

Mum says, I know what I saw.

Dad's not in the mood for an argument. He says Mr Marquand is a gentleman and why would he want to lie to his favourite tenants. His *first* tenants, because no one was here before us.

Mum finds her cigarettes.

Josie, I wish you wouldn't smoke, says Dad.

There's lots I wish, says Mum. And she strikes the match anyway.

Hours later, I am having trouble sleeping. I'm too busy remembering the story Grandad told me about rats he saw in the coal mine. The rats marched. First six, then two dozen, then a hundred or more. That was just the start.

What happened, Grandad?

Thunder happened, Glyn. Thunder and a suffocating stench of thousands of rats. Six men and me the apprentice all trapped in a recess with this black river flooding past.

Where did they come from, Grandad?

Horden and Blackhall Collieries, and God knows what other pits. Rats! Do you know what happened after that, Glyn?

What?

Nothing. Not a sound. You could hear a pin drop.

Where did they all go?

That's just it. No one knows. But a farmer out High Hesleden way swears black and blue he looked out his upstairs window and saw his fields crawling black in the moonlight.

They've got sharp teeth and beady eyes, haven't they, Grandad?

Yes, that's right, Son. They'll steal the biscuit out of your hand.

I roll over in my bed, away from the window. Julie is already asleep. I wish I could steal her happy dream for myself.

New Red Coats

In the morning we have our new red coats to wear, with our four buttons to fasten.

Dad's already gone to work, to Plymouth, before any of us are even awake.

He's supposed to be here with me, says Mum, not very happy with the Navy chiefs for finding him even more jobs to do.

Before we can go out to play, she is finding her purse. She gives me sixpence to give to the lady who has knocked on our caravan door shaking a tin for the poor. The poor aren't allowed to shake a tin for themselves. That would be begging. There are no beggars in England.

Put it in, says Mum, so that's what I do and I get a badge to wear.

When Julie sees my badge she wants a badge, too.

You can share the badge, Mum says with a little laugh. I'm sure this lady hasn't the time to be standing here on our doorstep all morning.

Oh, I'm in no hurry, the lady says.

Hearing this, Julie twists her face. Glyn got a badge, she says.

Mum shows Julie inside her purse and, see, I have no more sixpences, only two pennies and a stamp. The poor won't be needing a stamp.

I want a badge, says Julie again.

I won't be a minute, says Mum to the lady. She goes off to the wardrobe for the red tin with the little key. This is where she hides the money from robbers wearing stockings over their heads.

What polite children these two are, the lady says, when Mum comes back with a sixpence for Julie to put in the tin. Are they twins?

He's a year older. And this one was born in Cyprus. My husband was stationed there. Happy days they were, too.

I want to tell the lady about the fighting we never saw, and the beach I can't remember, and my duck that I sat in and rocked.

You're from the north-east, the lady says to Mum, guessing Sunderland.

Yes, Sunderland way. Close enough, at any rate.

This seems to make the lady happy, guessing correctly. Julie is happy, too, because she has her badge now.

I'm not happy.

I've spotted a cloud. Rain has a special liking for Cornwall. If it rains Mum will stop us from going outside.

Actually, says Mum, I'm from Horden.

Then she remembers the playground.

You two can go now, she says, holding the door open. Mind, no going by the river.

Let's play in the sandpit, says Julie, and I think that is a very good idea.

But today the playground is a small lake and the sandpit is full of water. It's like a paddling pool.

Now what? I say. If we get wet Mum will stick us in the corner.

So get wet! shouts Julie.

She rushes at me and pushes me hard. I land in the sandpit. I'm in the puddle. Yellow sand splashes onto my trousers and new red coat.

Julie!

It's only sand, she says.

It's mud, too! See, Julie. Mud.

Sand, stupid. Don't you know anything?

I step back up onto the grass. I've got my yellow wellies on.

Julie thinks it's funny seeing how I've splashed my clothes. She's trying to get me in trouble. She likes it best when Mum can't hide her disappointment.

Don't do that again, Julie, I tell her in my gruffest voice.

Big baby. It's sand. Sand.

Then Julie dares me to hold hands and jump in the sandpit.

I say, Look, the swings are dry.

Before I can stop her, she grabs my hand and we're in. I trip over. I'm on my hands and knees in cold water.

Julie! Now look!

Julie can't stop laughing. I throw a fist full of sand at her. That stops her silly laughing.

Stupid! Look at me!

All the time I'm getting up she's kicking water on me.

Stop that! I yell.

Next she throws sand.

I say, Hey, I can throw sand, too, don't you know?

She throws sand. I throw sand back at her. I don't notice Mum and Queenie walking fast across the grass.

Look at your new coats! Mum is shouting. Get out of all that muck! Now!

Queenie has her arms folded. She's not smiling. She's looking at me and Julie standing in the big mess we've made.

Glyn threw sand in my hair, says Julie, showing Mum where the sand has landed all over her new red coat.

I'll see you later, Josie, says Queenie, walking back to her caravan. Where the lady with the tin has gone I have no idea.

And already I am saying sorry.

Oh, be quiet, Glyn, says Mum. You're always sorry.

Nine Wonderful Years

I'm suddenly awake in the dark. Who's talking? Mum's talking. It's night time and she and Dad are in their bed not asleep. Mum is saying she doesn't want to be married to the Navy forever. She wants blue curtains for the front windows.

I hear Dad say, What are you talking about, Josie? We don't even own a house.

Yet, she says. We don't own a house *yet*. Don't think I'm not going to have a proper roof over the bairns, Glynne.

You can't be serious, says Dad.

Glynne, listen to me. What's the use in buying a big TV if we've nowhere decent to watch it?

We watched it tonight, says Dad quietly, and he's not telling lies. Dixon of Dock Green was on, and that's Dad's favourite, especially when PC Dixon's standing outside the station saying, Evenin' all!

I hear Mum saying, You know what I mean. We're all stepping on each other's toes.

Josie, let's not fight.

Mum isn't listening anymore.

Glynne, think of us for a change.

She's using her getting-cross voice. I shouldn't be listening, but I can't help it. I have big ears.

Enough is enough already, says Mum. It's been nine years. Yes, nine wonderful years, and Cyprus was lovely, but we're a growing family now. Those two need space.

Dad says words back to her in the dark, saying, Josie, Josie, but I don't hear what else, and then he's through talking. I hear him get up out of bed and the curtain swish.

Don't be like this, I hear Mum hiss.

He's in his chair in front of the TV.

Glynne—

When Dad still hasn't gone back to bed, Mum goes out to him.

It's a new Navy, I hear Dad say. A lot of the old faces have left.

Yes, and don't you think there's a message in that? I'm not going to stay here through winter, Glynne. I won't do that. Sorry, but there you have it. I've said it. It's time me and the children went back to Durham and family.

You don't mean that, Josie.

Oh, really? Watch me!

She goes outside to sit on the caravan step and smoke a cigarette. It's a quick cigarette, on account of the hour and ghost pirates across the river in the woods.

Josie, let's go to Australia House, I hear Dad say, in a voice almost too quiet. Forget the north-east.

Mum isn't ready for this conversation so late at night. She says, Glynne, we've already discussed this. My answer is the same.

No, listen, Josie. We can do better than this. Any of this. It's sunny there.

Please, Glynne, don't start.

Who's starting? he says. All I'm saying is, Forget Durham. Forget England. Let's give these two a proper life.

No, Glynne. We've been overseas.

And we can be overseas again, says Dad quickly. I'll get a job. A different job. It's a land of opportunity.

Mum has stopped listening. As soon as she has finished her cigarette she's back to bed, leaving him to sit there on his own in the dark.

And I am thinking, Dad works so hard with all the important jobs he has to do, and his ship breaking through the waves.

Rupert

So now we are leaving.

Autumn is here and winter is coming. Birds are flocking, making whizzy patterns against the sky.

I don't want us to leave. Dad's life will be an empty sack. Queenie's right—he *is* the Navy. Mum packs up most of our toys and books so that we are ready for the long trip back to Nana and Grandad's pub in the north-east.

I don't want to go to Nana. I say, Can't we go to Wales to live?

Mum looks up from her packing. Wales? Don't be daft. What is there in Wales?

Nain and Taid, I say. All my Welsh aunties and uncles and cousins. The pretty mountains.

We're not going to bloody Wales, says Mum, and that's final.

Mickey the Monkey is laughing at me from my top bunk. He's been laughing at me for days now. What's so funny, mister? I punch him in the face. His plastic face, because guess what, stupid. You're not even real. You're just a stupid toy.

Dad isn't coming till later, says Mum, running packing tape along one edge of a carton.

She explains. First he has to finish up with the Navy. They can't just let him go.

I know what the jobs are. If the captain wants a thousand nuts or bolts, Dad makes it happen. Nothing comes onto the ship that Dad doesn't tick off on his clipboard.

Mum says, Glyn, please try and be a good boy for me in these next few days. We all have to pull together, and no argument.

In my head the argument doesn't stop. Why do we have to go back to the ice and snow? I like the daffodils. I like the fields and the river and the woods across the way. I like the moon bright like a shiny blanket. I saw a salmon. I did not see a rat.

I look over to see Mum wrapping up dinner plates in newspaper. She doesn't want any smashed. They're a set she bought for a million Embassy coupons. They were in the catalogue.

Mum, could you buy a lawn mower from the catalogue? I ask.

If it's shown there, yes. Mum stops what she's doing to look at me closely. Why would I even want a lawn mower?

Because you haven't got one, I say.

I haven't got lots of things.

But if you had a lawn mower, Mum.

Julie wakes up asking questions. How many more sleeps?

Lots more sleeps. Glyn, help your sister turn the pages nice like I showed you.

I have to sit on the settee next to Julie and turn the pages. Rupert and his friends are enjoying their picnic near the castle when a strange fellow in a silver suit appears.

Who's that? asks Julie, smudging the page. She should stop touching.

I don't know, I say. But that's Rupert.

I know who Rupert is, stupid. He's only a bear.

Read nice, says Mum, or you'll be lying down for a rest.

We're not tired, I say.

I just had a sleep, says Julie.

Then read nice.

I wish I had a silver suit. Then I'd be able to invite Rupert back to *my* castle.

Mum, are there spacesuits in the catalogue?

Now you're being silly, she says, getting back to her wrapping.

I ask, Can I stop reading now? Julie's not even looking.

Yes, I am!

Mum gives up. She says, Go out and play. You, too, Julie.

I'm off the settee before Mum changes her mind. I squat down and start to screech, throwing my arms from side to side. Ooo Ooo Ooo!

Were there monkeys in Cyprus? I'd love to know. Because there are no monkeys in the north-east, only icy winds and leaves falling off the trees. But it's not something I'm about to ask Mum. Not today.

Grand Adventure

You have to remember all of this, I tell myself the morning Dad starts the car borrowed from work. It's a big car, maybe even the admiral's car.

I look at our caravan one last time, even though it's not ours anymore. It's sold in a day. A man said, Done! and Dad shook his hand.

Dad says, This car sure beats the bus, right, Glyn?

It's posh, I say.

Oh, yes. This is a Vauxhall.

Dad, you could drive us to Durham, I say hopefully.

Sorry, Son. No time for that. Anyway, you'll have a grand time on the train.

Will it be the Flying Scotsman, Dad?

No, those days are over. It's all diesel now.

What's diesel? asks Julie.

The end of an era. Right, are we all ready?

Mum stabs out the cigarette she has been smoking. She lifts herself up off the caravan step and waves to Queenie.

Queenie looks very sad to be seeing us going like this. Who will be her best friend?

Me and Julie are ready on the back seat. Mum gets in the front, to sit next to Dad and look very important in the shiny car.

Wave goodbye, says Mum, cheering herself up because now everyone in the caravan park has come out to see us go, even the new people who are just being nosy. Say bye-bye, she says.

Bye-bye, says Julie, holding up her dolly to see. Its fingers have been chewed.

And then we are leaving and Dad isn't saying much. He drives us out of Notter Bridge Farm and across the bridge.

Bye-bye, I am thinking, as I see the river for the last time.

Here we go again, says Mum, meaning we are gypsies again, following lorries and buses on the busy road to Plymouth. Dad is taking us to the

station. Our suitcases are packed and all the arrangements have been made. Grandad will be waiting for us in Durham.

A grand adventure, right, kids?

Right, Dad, I say, though I know it's not a real adventure. A real adventure would be Spaniards sneaking through the woods to steal everyone's money. Or a spaceship crashing in the woods. Or the ghost that woke Mum up in the cottage in the woods.

I say, We didn't explore the woods, Dad.

Dad tells me not to worry about that. There'll be plenty of woods to explore next summer when we're in Wales on our holiday. He says there are more important things to think about today. Like when we're at the station, making sure I'm holding Julie's hand tight and not letting go.

I'm a big girl, says Julie.

I know that, Julie. But you'll hold Glyn's hand anyway.

The way Dad's talking means he's putting me in charge again. Julie had better do as she's told.

I'll phone you tonight, Josie, says Dad.

That would be nice, Mum says, and then we are going up a steep hill.

I wonder if I'll ever see Cornwall again. I expect so, when I'm a man and the Navy lends me a Vauxhall, too.

Soon we are going faster, but not fast enough that we are beating all the traffic. I see a man in the car beside us. He's licking an ice cream. Another car flashes by. I see a boy in the back seat who is smaller than me. He waves. I wave back.

Dad says, It's not like we haven't done all this before.

Ha! says Mum.

More and more cars speed past us. I wish the Vauxhall was the fastest.

Part Two



Are We There Yet?

London is an everlasting gobstopper to be sucked and sucked. Its flavour is aniseed. The houses and roads don't stop. There's no end to the roofs.

Soon you'll see all the famous buildings, says Mum, getting excited for Julie and me. In ten minutes, maybe fifteen. This isn't even the start of it.

Start of what? All I see is out the train carriage window is more houses and more roads and haze. They have a lot of haze. I keep looking for the coal mine, but Mum laughs saying there are no pits in London. There's only—people.

Mum turns me around in my seat. Look closely, Glyn. Haven't you noticed? Everywhere is crowding in.

Mum's right. The train is climbing into the sky, rising up fast, faster.

What a place, Mum says.

Then, the city. Slowly, the train is drawn into it all, and we're digging now, not climbing. We're digging ourselves into a hole. The sun shuts down, that's how many buildings there are. If they had mouths we'd be eaten. Maybe we're to be eaten anyway.

Where'd London go? asks Julie.

Nowhere, says Mum. It's right here. This is it.

This?

Julie, we're right in the middle of it.

This is where the Queen lives? says Julie, climbing up on her seat like she's hoping for a glimpse of the golden carriage.

Yes, darling. The Queen.

Where? I don't seen any palace.

Mum says, Well, I don't know where *exactly*. But somewhere.

Mum is watching other passengers. Some are smiling. A man has stood up to put on his overcoat.

I wish we were going to London to live, and not just to change trains for the north-east. Dad says the North Sea puts ice blocks on caravan roofs to make Cornwall farmers rub their chins. But Mum was born in the north-

east, and she's happiest there, and the last thing Dad said is we all have to dig in and put on a brave face.

Geronimo had a brave face.

They have trains under the ground, I tell Julie, who doesn't believe me.

Glyn's right, says Mum. It's where people fled to when the bombs were falling out of the sky.

She doesn't say this too loudly.

They have bombs? says Julie.

In the war, I say quickly. A hundred years ago, right, Mum?

Well, almost, darling.

Then there's hazy sunshine again, only for a few moments, and I see a rolling park and many trees. All around the park are high-rises for the Londoners to live in and stare down at the wives pushing their prams.

What a place, says Mum again, then, quietly, I'd be lost.

I want to live in the sky, I say, thinking how much fun it would be to open my window and be above the haze.

I only *see* London. Mum's been here, off the train and out of the station and along the street past the Underground sign and onto a London Transport double decker.

I was only very little, she says. I was with Nana. Don't ask me what we were doing all the way down in London, but we were. I had a new frock on and my hair was in ringlets, like Shirley Temple's.

Just when I think Mum's going to tell us a story, the train starts to slow down. It's stopping.

Up you both get, says Mum, putting her magazine in her bag and looking all around.

I know three facts about London. First, the Queen lives in London. Everyone knows that, even our Julie. The second fact is London sent all its children on big adventures when the war was on. That's because the Germans kept sending bombs into people's front rooms. The last fact is Guy

Fawkes and the gunpowder plot. He's the reason we have bonfire night. He was a mad pirate who sailed up the Thames.

When I try to tell Mum my three facts she says, Not now, Glyn. Let's get off the train first.

Her head is full of worries. All she wants is to get us safely to Nana and Grandad's pub up the north-east in time for tea. She wants us bathed and in our pyjamas, ready for Dad's phone call.

This isn't London, says Julie, realising we're arriving in another station. You said we were going to London.

Julie, don't start, says Mum.

Julie starts anyway.

The train stops. Everyone stands up. People are helping other people lift their bags down.

That's it, says Mum, helping Julie do up her buttons. Coat on, Glyn. Good boy. We have to change trains now.

Will Dad be here? asks Julie.

No, no he won't, says Mum. He's stuck in Plymouth. Julie, you know he is, so why ask?

A Different Country

I want the next train ride to be as exciting as the last, and for our grand adventure to never end, but after London—we ate a packet of crisps while Mum smoked her cigarettes—we're on a long slow journey with too few stops, and Mum closing her eyes for a minute, then an hour, and an old man across the way snoring a tune for bears to dance to. There are other people, too, all grown-ups, and everyone looks so sleepy. Someone is stealing the air.

Are you sleepy, Mum?

Yes, darling, says Mum with her eyes closed. Your poor mum is.

Not Julie. She's wide awake. She's after my seat again. I've got news for her. It's *my* seat and she's not having it.

It's the same wherever you sit, says Mum, squeezing one eye open. She's in no mood to put up with any more of Julie's nonsense.

Julie twists her face.

Right. Glyn, you're sitting on this side. Julie, sit there and don't say another word. You're being very naughty.

Then I am giggling. An old man across the way is snore-talking.

Don't, says Mum, meaning don't make fun of an old man asleep and resting his tired bones. Now I mean it, you two. No more fighting.

Mums and dads don't understand fighting is shouts and scratches and hair-pulls. It's bites and nips and arm-thumps.

We weren't fighting, I say.

Look, a cow, says Mum. She's awake now, determined for us to play nicely. I know, let's count cows.

Why? says Julie in a mood.

Soon there are no more cows, just towns and factories and smoke stacks, some up close and some far away. In a wreckers yard I see cars stacked three high. I see an old double decker bus with all its windows smashed in, and a crashed lorry, and another lorry with a burnt out cab. This town has bad drivers.

Ice cream van! shouts Julie, which wakes a lady up, and causes another lady to give Mum the evil eye. Not *the* evil eye. That would be a tinker's curse, and a mother's milk turning sour.

Julie, please. People are very tired.

Then we are rushing past back gardens. I'm looking at washing on lines, at swing sets, at a man forking the soil over, at another man sitting on a chair watching the train go past. His newspaper is folded on his lap.

More smoke stacks. And a motorway crosses a muddy field that has a bad case of the bulldozers. Mum says we are up the north-east now, almost home.

What country?

Mum looks at me astonished. It's all the same country, silly.

England.

Yes, England. Where else would we be?

Silly, says Julie, putting her feet on the seat again, and this time a different lady is watching, looking up from her book, and she says something to her husband. Now he is watching, too. They're not impressed.

Feet down, hisses Mum, or the guard will come along and he'll be very cross.

Julie pretends not to hear.

Now!

Mum, in Australia they have kangaroos, I say, after not saying anything for minutes.

Yes, that's right, darling, says Mum, happy to have Julie settled again.

And maybe monkeys.

Maybe.

Mum doesn't want me talking about Australia. She says, Oh, look, the mist is coming down the mountains. You must remember this.

Another thing to remember. It's a good job I forget things, too, to make more room.

Julie asks, Are we there yet?

The first time she asks, we're nowhere near there yet. The second time she asks, Mum says don't ask again. The third time she asks, Mum says there's still an hour to go.

Are we there yet? asks Julie a fourth time.

I'm expecting her to get a smack on the leg, but Mum is all smiles now. She says, Yes, darling, we are. See who can be the first to spot Grandad.

And then it's over. We are off the train. We're back to Durham and I'm sitting in the back of Grandad's Volkswagen. We're going to Shotton.

Part Three



Rules

After we've been living at the pub a month the weather turns nasty. Water pipes freeze. People slip over on the ice and bang their heads. You wouldn't want to be an elephant in the zoo.

Then, snow.

Every house in Shotton has its fire going the week the big snows come. It's one of the worst winters on record, and that's official. The pub has three fires on. All is snowdrifts and car breakdowns, and mostly a man can't see to drive down the street.

No driving for me this day, says Grandad, looking at his keys on the hook next to the castanets from Spain.

Nana says, I hope you're watching the time, Fred Hall. Is the downstairs fire still going? It had better be. They'll all be coming off the shift soon and wanting some cheer.

She means the miners, fresh from the showers and a clean set of clothes.

Some men work in the factories at Peterlee, but most work down the pit at Shotton Colliery. Grandad is the lucky one. He works in the pub. He's not going down in the cage ever again. It's a death trap, that rattling cage, ask anyone.

Today the pub stays mostly empty. Yesterday was the same. It's almost a waste of coal to light the downstairs fire, if the miners stay away, but Grandad lights it religiously. Drinkers like to warm their bones.

Julie and me aren't allowed downstairs once it's opening hours. The brewery inspector might walk in, and then Grandad and Nana might lose their license, because a pub is no place for bairns. We're supposed to stay behind the door marked Private. Or better still, we're to stay upstairs.

Upstairs, now! hisses Mum on her way to do more jobs for Nana. There's always more jobs to do.

So now I fall flat on my stomach and inch my way forward. My leg is broke to bits. My fingers have frostbite. It's a hard mountain to climb, the pub staircase.

As soon as Mum hears the noise I'm making, she's out of the lounge room to tell me off.

She says, Glyn, what have I told you?

No noise in the daytime, I say.

Get up, she says. You'll be filthy. And be quiet. Nana's asleep.

I know that she would be. Nana is always asleep. She lives in her bedroom. Her curtains aren't blue and they never open.

Mum says, Look, you and Julie have to understand that this isn't a playground. It's a business. It's a working man's pub. There are rules.

RULES.

This is my new word to remember.

Nana has been talking to Mum again. Twice this week we've woken her, and is that fair when she has to be downstairs in the bar every evening? Well, is it?

I say sorry. Again. What I'm really sorry about is being here in the first place.

I miss our caravan, I say. We were supposed to walk in the woods.

Mum marches up the stairs and shakes me hard, saying, Enough! Show some respect for where you were born.

When is Dad coming home? I say.

Whenever!

And then Nana is awake, calling out, Is that you, Josie?

The look Mum give me says, There. See. You've woken the old witch up.

She crosses the room to look inside her bag. Then she looks everywhere at once. She's lost something, I can tell.

She says, Now where did I put my cigarettes? Glyn, be a good boy and help me find my cigarettes.

Nana is up and about. I can hear her slamming drawers and strangling kittens.

This Boy Is Special

It's the truth. I wasn't born properly. Everyone in my class was born in a hospital. I was born in the pub.

Why wasn't I born in a hospital? I ask.

Mum says, Just because. Be grateful you were born at all. You're our miracle boy.

Nana says, Tell him, Josie. Tell him the trouble he caused.

What happened is I died three times and came back three times, with the doctor saying, This baby can't make up his mind.

The third time I stopped breathing, Mum had a dream where Dad's best friend who was burnt to death knelt down beside her smiling. Don't worry, pet. This boy is special. As soon as he said this I coughed and the doctor rushed over and I was back to stay.

The midwife laid me out on Mum's tummy.

Where was I back from, Mum? I ask, because I don't remember any of it. Where was the bright light? People talk about being on death's doorway and meeting Jesus, who looks like the diddy man, claps his hands and here come sparks.

I saw nothing. Or if I did, I can't remember.

Before Mum can say where I came back from, Nana answers for her, saying, The land of the dead.

This is not the answer Mum wants to hear. She says, You weren't back from anywhere, darling. You just stopped breathing, is all.

Mum told the doctor her dream and he shook his head. If you say so, Mrs Parry.

The midwife, she was Scottish and she believed my mother. I've heard of this happening, she said, and Mum thanked her for believing her.

I thought I was going out of my mind, said Mum.

So, I am special. I don't know that I feel special. And back then I was just a new-born baby without a thought to think or even one happy memory to remember. New-born babies have frog spawn for brains.

Downstairs Nana and Grandad waited for any news, and then they heard me cry because the doctor smacked me, my first smack, in trouble already and not even in the room five minutes. I've had a million smacks since.

After the doctor made me cry, he opened the door and said, It's a boy, Mr Parry. This meant Dad could come in and see me, and kiss Mum on the cheek, all is fine now, thanks very much, with Nana and Grandad behind him.

How many toes does he have? asked Grandad, and earned a clout for his troubles.

The doctor was packing away his instruments. He gave Nana a tired smile, and then he shook Dad's hand and Grandad's hand, too, and he told Mum she had been very lucky this time around.

You're a long way from Portsmouth, he said to Dad.

Dad agreed. Yes, yes I am.

Try for the hospital next baby, he said to Mum, putting on his coat.

To me he said nothing, all the trouble I had caused.

The very next morning Dad was gone on the train out of Durham, back to the Navy far away. Mum cried and cried, saying she was fed-up of missing her husband, which is only silly emotions talking, and Nana the witch told her so.

Josie, she said, all women cry after their bairn is born.

Nana gave her two aspirin and a glass of water. She made Grandad fetch another pillow to prop her up.

Dad phoned the pub that night. He said he fell asleep on the train and when he woke up he was in London.

I've been delayed, he said, and then his pennies ran out.

How did the man catch on fire? I want to know.

Mum says she won't tell me. It's too upsetting.

Before I can say I won't be upset, Nana is on to me.

Who broke Grandad's banjo string? she says, looking right at me.

I hate Nana. The air she breathes is all poison and accusation. She might have been a nice nana a long time ago, but I don't think so.

Eaten Up By Snow

Every day I have to get off the stairs and not make a sound.

Mum says, Read a book, Glyn.

Or Nana the witch says, That's a silly noise you're making, Glyn. Stop it, please.

I'm sent up the stairs, *our* end of the pub. I have to stay in the lounge room.

When I'm there, Julie is lying down on the settee, bored because we've been stuck inside since Sunday. Dolly will be needing new hands, that's how bitten she is.

I liked the other place better, says Julie, throwing Dolly down. Why are we even here?

Plus there are noises, I say.

Yes, noises.

Scary noises.

No, just noises.

Soon we're both standing at the window watching a car below us skid slowly into the kerb. The driver is having a terrible time, getting the wheels to stay straight and the car to go where he wants. It's not even lunchtime yet.

Two more times the man skids his car into the kerb. He'll be swearing now.

Julie gives up watching the man. She's wanting to be awful. It means she's bored.

Santa Claus isn't real, she says, digging her thumb into my side. I know you think he is, but he isn't. His beard isn't even real.

I'm not listening to any of Julie's nonsense, not a word of it, because now the man has gotten out of his car and he's not happy. I want to see what he will do next. He's lost the race. His breath is dragon's breath and the snow keeps falling. He's shipwrecked in the street below, directly opposite

the Colliery Inn. Come in and have a drink, I am thinking. Come and warm your bones by Grandad's lovely fire.

Aren't you listening, Glyn? I said there's no Santa Claus.

Julie's thumb is starting to get me annoyed. I dig my elbow into her. She pulls my hair. I pull her hair back.

I've *heard* Santa, I tell her, not letting go until she lets go. Ouch!

Julie pulls my hair even harder. She's cruel. She turns pain into a contest.

Ow! Julie, let go!

You let go first. Stupid.

We stop pulling each other's hair. First I let go, then she lets go. She goes back to the settee to comb Dolly's hair. Dolly is finished, wrecked, ready for the bin men.

For the next half hour I stay by the window. That man is determined to drive his car away. But the snow is more determined. Somewhere in the clouds a factory billows out snow.

I'm telling Mum what you said, Julie. Liar. Santa is so real.

Then the man leaves his car. He walks down the hill and turns the corner into the next street to be eaten up by snow.

At tea time Grandad talks to Nana about how cold the pub is, and getting colder by the hour, and do we have enough coal, Marjorie, to last the week?

Nana tells him to shut it. Nobody's snowed in.

Do we have food, Marjorie?

Yes, Fred. Enough food to feed a small army.

He says, I've never seen snow like this. It's unheard of.

Fred, shut it, I said. It's only snow.

But it's been snowing all week, Marjorie.

Aye, and it'll be snowing on your head if you don't shut it. Eat your tea, Fred, you useless lump of a man.

There's not much love comes Grandad's way, but what can he expect, married to Nana and her secret book of spells.

Give me a proper kiss, says Mum, later when she's there to tuck me in.

I don't want to. I peck at her cheek like before.

Mum looks hurt. Then she looks angry.

Your father said he would try and ring every night. And how many days is this?

Five, that's how many days Dad has forgotten us all. The phone has not rung. The postman has delivered no mail from Plymouth.

Wait till I bloody hear from him, says Mum, and I know he's in for it when she does.

Mum, what are the noises?

What noises?

There are noises. Julie hears them, too. Scary noises.

There's nothing to be scared of in this pub, says Mum. It'll be nothing. Time for sleep.

Nana is suddenly in the doorway, not saying a word.

Monkey Brains

Tonight in my room I'm bashing Mickey the Monkey. I'm throwing him at the wall and on the floor. I'm kneeling on his head.

It's because Grandad took me to the pictures to see James Bond.

You're the baddie, I say, propping him up the far end of my bed. You wanted to blow up the world.

Over the next week I practise my bad temper on Mickey the Monkey, finding new ways to show him who's boss. At the top of the stairs I give him a shove.

Why are you being so rough? Mum wants to know when she catches me. You've had him since he was a baby. He's your favourite toy.

I'm playing. He likes it.

Mum picks him up and dusts him down. She sits him on the settee, where he can watch TV. He's not even real. He's only plastic for a face and stuffing for insides.

Mum covers Mickey the Monkey's flappy ears, saying, Don't listen to him, Mickey. He's just an angry little boy.

She goes to her bedroom. When she's back, she has the photo album.

See. Here's a photo of the pair of you.

I look at the photo. I'm a big boy now, I say.

Yes, you are, darling. But you're being so awful to Mickey.

He likes it, I say again.

Mum isn't hearing me. She closes the album.

What is it with you two kids? If it's not our Julie eating the fingers off Dolly, it's you torturing poor Mickey.

Come on, Mickey, says Mum, picking him up gently like he was a real monkey. You can live with me for a while.

I don't see Mickey the Monkey for days. If Mum thinks I'm missing him, I've got news for her. I'm having too much fun in my Aston Martin, going vroom-vroom round the settee, firing my James Bond rockets.

But then I do miss him. I ask, Mum, can I have Mickey the Monkey back now?

She puts out her cigarette and says, Are you going to treat him nice?

Yes.

You promise?

By the end of a second week his ear is half off. I keep having to pack his monkey brains back in. I pack in a wood screw to give him bad dreams.

Sparky

Grandad has a drum kit set up behind the door for those noisy Saturday nights when someone shouts, Hey up, Freddie, play us a tune.

He has a banjo, too, and a grass skirt from Honolulu that Dad bought from a stall.

I like the drum kit best.

I pick up a drumstick and tap gently. The drum rat-a-tat-tats. Next the cymbal shivers with bad weather approaching. Another drumstick has a brush end which makes the sound of a rattler. Rattlers live in the desert and spook lonesome cowboys. Buzzards finish them off.

The drum kit is fun while it lasts.

Is that our Glyn breaking Grandad's drum kit? Nana's voice is at the top of the stairs. Don't think I can't see you.

Sometimes I wish I was a pirate, then I wouldn't have to be afraid of Nana and her eyes that see around corners.

I put the drumsticks down. I stop touching.

Are you being good?

Yes, Dad.

Staying out of trouble?

Yes.

Dad finally rings us up at the pub. He's been out at sea, across the channel.

Mum's not angry with him anymore.

Tell Dad about all the snow, she urges me.

So I tell him. He likes it when I mention the RAF helicopters flying over Shotton to keep an eye on us all.

Are you staying warm?

As toast!

I'm happy. Mum is happy.

Julie's turn, she says.

Later, I get in trouble anyway.

Nana doesn't like it when I bump my head into her knee. She hasn't seen me hiding under the table and suddenly I'm there.

What are you doing? she says. Josie, what's he doing now?

Glyn, get up off the floor, says Mum.

My eyes are closed. I can't see. Once they are closed I don't even squint. No, to play the game properly I have to keep my eyes shut tight.

Julie says, He's begging for a sugar cube.

What? Josie, will you please sort him out.

Julie says, He wants feeding, Nana.

Hearing this, I paw the kitchen floor and whinny.

Open your eyes, Glyn, says Mum, not impressed at all. You're being silly.

He's blind, says Julie. And his name's not Glyn anymore. His name is Sparky the pit pony.

Get up now, Mum says, tapping me on the leg with her slipper. No one thinks you're funny.

We had a pit pony called Carrots, says Grandad. Mind, that was a grand horse, that one.

I want to be where Grandad's voice starts.

I bump into the chair leg, then Grandad's knee under the table. I think it's Grandad's knee, until Nana is saying, Josie, will you please do something before this child breaks all the furniture.

Mum smacks me. I'm stuck under the table, and she smacks me again.

He wants sugar, says Julie.

I know what he wants, says Mum, trying to catch my foot. Come out from under there, you little devil. Come out before I fetch Dad's belt.

And I am thinking, Dad doesn't have a belt. What does he need a belt for?

I whinny for my sugar lump.

Words

In the morning Nana is in the kitchen having words with Mum. We've been living in the pub six weeks now, through the start of the most miserable winter, and a colliery pub is no place for children who can't do as they're told.

Julie says, Hello, Nana.

Nana says hello back. She hands her the box of Sugar Puffs.

I say, Good morning.

I hope it is, says Nana.

Go out and eat your breakfast, Mum tells me. Go on, Glyn. There's a good boy. Your nana and me are talking.

With that Mum shuts the kitchen door. I hear Nana start in on her. First I hear my name being said, then Julie's. After that, lots of shushing and secrecy.

What's she saying now? Julie wants to know, because I'm the closest.

I make out some of the words—lipstick, eye shadow.

I'm in for it, I tell Julie, and it's the truth. I've been touching Nana's dressing table. It's worse than breaking Grandad's banjo.

Mum'll smack you, says Julie. Hide in the cellar.

You hide in the cellar. There's daddy-long-legs down there.

I'm not the one in trouble, she says.

Julie's got that bit right.

The whispering doesn't last long. Mum says, Not now, Mother. I'm trying to get organised.

Breakfast. I tell Julie to eat her breakfast.

What else is she saying?

Listen yourself, I say.

Alright. I will.

Julie changes seats. Nana gets louder.

Suddenly a plate smashes and Mum cries out. See! See what I've done!

Now we are in more trouble than the maker. Nana isn't happy that the pub has been turned into a playground, with Ladybird books left out on the stairs for anyone to have a fall.

Mum says, Say what you mean, Mother. If you don't want us staying here, just say the word. We'll pack up and go to Horden to be near our Mary and Linda.

Whatever the word is, Nana doesn't say it.

After breakfast Mum helps us with our red coats, and she puts her own coat on.

Where are we going, Mum? It's snowing outside.

She doesn't answer me. Her bad temper wraps me up in cigarette smoke. She does my button up without a word.

Where to, Mum? asks Julie.

The park, darling. The swings. Alright?

What, in the snow?

Yes, Julie. In the bloody snow.

The Same Snow

Three days go by and another RAF helicopter flies over the fields behind Shotton Colliery. It's an angry wasp that wants to sting anything that moves. I shoot at it with my bazooka.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

You're shooting down the wrong enemy, says Grandad, filling the doorway behind me. They'll be on their way to help stranded motorists.

The witch has sent him downstairs to tell me off for being outside again. I keep letting in the cold and how will we ever keep warm if I can't do as I'm told? Am I stupid?

It's a monster, I say, waiting for the crash and boom somewhere behind the high back wall.

Grandad picks up snow off the step and makes a snowball. It's not a good snowball. I watch it break up in mid-air.

Here, try my bazooka, Grandad.

Now it's Grandad's turn to say, Bang! Bang! Bang!

My snowball hits the red brick wall, a puff of surprise. I'm quick to throw another one.

If Grandad wasn't a man with packed-in lungs, he'd be the best fun. After only a minute the cold has gotten onto his chest and he's going back inside.

I go in with him.

Grandad, I ask. Are there monkeys in Australia?

Yes, definitely. Monkeys, and emus, and kangaroos. And sheep, Son.

Sheep?

Lots of sheep.

Upstairs, all is quiet. I don't know which room Julie is hiding in and I don't care to find out.

I'm at the sitting room window again, looking down at a different car stuck in the same snow. Don't they ever learn?

That man needs my super X-ray powers, I say, as Mum walks into the room. She has our colouring-in books and all our pencils.

She says, What man?

His car's been there since yesterday. Same as the last time.

Oh, poor man. He must be beside himself.

At lunchtime a different man walks up the hill. He leans over the windscreen and scrapes a porthole to see. Then he gets in the car. The car starts up, first time. He drives away with not too much skidding. At last, someone has beaten the weather.

Glyn! Julie!

Mum is running up the stairs.

We look up from our colouring-in books.

Something's happened, I say, and I'm not wrong.

Mum and Grandad are upstairs, too, to tell us the big news. Dad is on his way home!

Mum says, He's not in the Navy anymore. He's discharged.

What's discharged? I ask.

Grandad puts two lumps of coal on the fire, saying, He's a free agent, Son.

What? Like James Bond?

He starts to cough. The coughing persists, but he's also greatly amused.

Aye, Son, he says. James Bond.

Mum gives me a kiss on the cheek. Life will get better now, she says. Your father's coming home. We'll be a family again.

Will he bring presents? asks Julie.

Yes, pet. Presents.

Nana thinks it's rude that Julie can only think of presents. Who does she take after?

Oh, Mum, says our mum, because Nana could be a bit nicer if she wanted to be.

I'm just making the point—

Oh, shush, Mother.

Mum is too excited to allow Nana to ruin the moment.

Nana looks slapped and I'm glad.

To Heaven

Tonight Durham miners are keeping England warm, says Grandad proudly, stoking the fire in the main bar.

His coal has been delivered. The worry is over.

Aye, it's all down to us, says one of the miners, lifting his glass. You're right there, Freddie.

Even so, on the Friday an old couple in Manchester is found frozen to death upstairs in their bed. This is what I overhear another drinker telling Grandad as he's pouring a half pint.

They had a cuddle and a big sleep, Freddie, and the angels stood at the end of their bed, saying, Howay, you two. Let's away to heaven.

The man is drunk, that's what I'm thinking as I rush upstairs. I sit down on the carpet beside Julie and say, Guess what happened.

Julie is sitting warm by the fire, drawing pictures with *my* crayons. I tell her the news.

I say, It's the coldest start to spring, right, Mum?

Mum is lying on the settee. She has another of her headaches. Yes, Glyn, she says.

That's why every morning Grandad's first job is to get the fire going. Until he does, my teeth are typing a letter.

Julie tells Mum she doesn't want Dad to freeze to death out in a field for a farmer to find.

Mum tells Daddy's fine. He isn't in any field. Why would he be in a field? He's down the far south working in Plymouth.

Nana walks in from her secret business and she isn't at all happy that I've been downstairs listening.

Mum says, You shouldn't be anywhere near the bar, Glyn. You stay away, do you hear?

Yes, I say. It's *all* I hear—keep out, sit down, shut up, be still, no noise, stop fighting.

It must be like going to sleep, I say, thinking about the couple lying dead in their bed.

Mum tells me to please stop talking about dead people. You're upsetting your sister.

I'm not upset, says Julie, drawing two stick angels.

You're upsetting me! says Mum, seeing her picture. Draw something nice, Julie, for goodness sake. A flower, the sun.

They ought to close down the factory that's making all this bad weather, I say.

Josie, there's something not right with this child, says Nana.

Mother, please.

The both of them, says Nana. They've been spoiled.

Hearing this, Mum gets very upset, saying, They've hardly been spoiled, Mother. We lived in a caravan for months on end.

The witch turns and walks out of the room, which is very rude. I can see why Dad doesn't like her very much.

Part Four



Train Rides To The North

One night I hear someone bump into the dresser and then I am awake. Dad sits on the edge of my bed. I scramble up to see him.

I ask, Did the admiral give you a big send off?

Something like that, he says.

It is nearly eleven o'clock and very late. He's had the longest day travelling the length of England.

He says, But here you are, Son. And how are you?

Before I can tell him I'm having all the air squeezed out of me. Dad's giving me a bear hug, that's how pleased he is to see me.

I tell him about Nana not letting me play in the back yard. After he's listened to me for a bit, he says, Tonight in parts of Scotland there are cars buried under six feet of snow. You've seen the helicopters all last week. Well, up there in Scotland it's even worse. Are you warm enough?

I think so, I say.

He goes over to the wardrobe and finds an extra blanket to throw over me. He's all hands and shadow. I wish I could see his face.

I tell him, Dad, there are noises here.

He wants to know what noises. I don't know what the noises are exactly, but I know where they're coming from—the room at the end of the passage. Next to Nana's bedroom.

Shhh, now, he says. Don't go scaring yourself.

When I think Dad is about to go, he tells me about Taid, my grandad who lives in Llanfair.

Your taid was once a great fisherman, Glyn. In summer he rowed his little boat across the Menai Straits. That's how strong he was, able to beat the fierce current every time. I always felt safe.

In summer Dad is determined to take us all back to Wales for a holiday. You shouldn't miss out, he says.

Tonight I'm hoping he will stay and tell me another story about when he was a boy growing up, but no, he's worn out after the train rides to the north.

He says, I have a job interview lined up for tomorrow. I haven't wasted any time, not even a day. It's my new life now. I have to stay positive.

There's a lot of snow outside, I say.

Yes, and this room is freezing, he says unhappily. Stay under the blankets. God, what a winter we've all come back to. There's no snow down south. Only the north. Always the north. Did Mum miss me?

Yes. I missed you, too, Dad. And Julie.

I haven't been very fair on any of you, says Dad, scratching my scalp. But the Navy was good to me. I can't believe it's over so soon. And look where we've all ended up. God help us.

There is beer in his words.

This is new.

A Factory Man

Dad gets the job that says, No more singing for you, sailor man. Every morning he is out of the pub early before anyone else is up. I'm downstairs quick as Jack Flash. Maybe Grandad thinks he hears the front door slam. And maybe Nana tells him to go see, whispering into his scrawny neck, Go see, Fred. Make sure it's not robbers.

Nana doesn't like robbers. A robber put her in hospital for a three days. He bashed her skull in. After that her nerves were shot to pieces. Her hair fell out, every lick and curl, and she has to wear a wig now.

The next thing I know Grandad has tiptoed downstairs into the main bar. He flicks the light switch. He's hugging a bowling pin close to his chest.

Grandad, I say.

He jumps, startled, looking this way and that. And here I am, sitting on the window shelf.

Look, I say, pointing.

Snow has fallen almost up to the glass. The road almost isn't there, and there's no more pavement to carry Shotton boys down the hill to the corner shop and bubble gum cards. There's not even the front steps of any of the houses. Everything is—snow.

At first Grandad is unsure of what it is I'm pointing to.

It's Dad, I say. See, there he is.

Deep foot holes show the way Dad's headed, and Grandad sees him a long way off in the dark. He sees him with his back to us, a thick warm coat plodding along beneath the streetlight. He has to take long tall steps.

Soon another man is walking out of his house and away into the darkness. He'll be a factory man, too, like Dad. Elsewhere, hundreds of men are hewing coal for their wages. It's not bitter cold underground, just black and damp and poisonous.

Go back to bed, Grandad tells me. His trousers are pulled up over his pyjamas. Go on now, or Nana will be up and we'll both be for it.

I do as I'm told. Dad has turned the corner anyway, with the other man not too far behind.

I hop. I am a kangaroo. I screech. I am a monkey.

This makes Grandad smile a little.

I love Grandad, but not Nana. She sends me pictures that won't go away.

I go back to bed.

In another hour the pub is awake. Julie is up. I hear Mum in the kitchen telling Nana all about Dad's job in Peterlee.

Josie, the man's a fool, says Nana, stealing one of Mum's cigarettes. How far does he think he'll get working in a factory? He'll be just one more number.

It's a good company, says Mum. Very reputable.

Nana laughs, but it's not a nice laugh. It's a crisp factory, Josie. They make potato crisps.

Don't be like that, Mother. He's trying, poor man.

You should have let him stay in the Navy. Mind, you were selfish there.

Look, it was his decision to leave.

Ha! says Nana.

Mum needs a cigarette. She smokes a lot now that we're all living with Nana. She'll be off to the doctor for more tablets next.

I hear Grandad say, Mind, there'll be no more money like that, not up this way. He'll be missing his wage.

He has a wage, says Mum quickly. It's a good wage. Look, it's a start.

Nana is on Grandad's case in a heartbeat. Shut it, Fred, she snaps. Did our Josie ask for your ha'penny's worth? Well, did she? Can't you see she's worried sick?

This starts Grandad off. He's coughing. His hand will be fumbling for his hankie now, I bet. Bits of coal are stuck in his lungs and they won't ever go away, no matter how much phlegm he spits into his rag. The coal stays and the wheezing stays. It's the sound of hurting and unhappiness.

Go downstairs and make yourself useful, Nana tells him. Go on now.
They'll be in the door before we know it. Have you cleaned out the trays?

Why aye, says Grandad, up on his feet already.

Spring flowers arrive late in the north-east. The TV shows a farmer walking into his field to where the lambs don't move. His sheepdog sniffs the dead air.

It's not good news on a Sunday.

Switch it off, Grandad, says Mum. It's depressing enough.

Mum's not very happy. Already the factory has Dad working longer and longer hours, and he's only been there a month. First it was a Saturday. Now it's a Sunday.

Grandad, please. Is there nothing else on for these two bairns?

Grandad ignores Mum. Soon she's back to the kitchen to help Nana.

I'd like to meet this Jack Frost fellow in a blind alley, that's what I'm thinking. Because I might be a farmer sitting on my tractor that's painted blue, and that might be me staring into the TV camera, saying, It's a crying shame, that's what it is.

This weather's a wolf, I say, but nobody's much listening to me.

The kitchen door swings open and Nana walks in, followed by Mum. Sunday dinner is ready at last. There are roast potatoes and mashed potato and it's a good thing we all like potato. Save some for Dad, I am thinking. He'll be starving after all the overtime he's putting in.

Mum sets the food down in the middle of the table. Nana does the same. Then she looks up.

What's this the bairns are watching? Turn it off, Fred.

But the football—

I mean it, Fred. What, are you going to make me come over there and switch it off myself?

Grandad gets up and turns the TV off.

I watch the white dot fading, fading, gone.

Nana says she doesn't care to see dead things brought into the living room when we are about to eat. And definitely no football. There'll be no football while we're eating.

But it's the Sunderland match, says Grandad.

Nana raises her hand to him. Just when he thinks she's about to slap him on the head, she does. She slaps him on the head. She slaps him twice.

Give over, woman!

I'll give you Sunderland match, she says. You're showing me up again.

I giggle and Nana is onto me.

Now what's gotten into the fool boy?

Mum shakes her head.

He's a strange one, says Nana, looking straight at me. Then she slaps Grandad on the arm, stinging him hard.

Give over, Marjorie!

I hope you're satisfied, she says. Dinner is ruined.

Now I'm not giggling. I've fallen silent. Whenever she slaps Grandad like this, or calls him bloody useless, or watches him struggle up the stairs with buckets of coal and his wheezy chest an accordion, I feel angry inside. What's worse, Mickey the Monkey is gone for good—collected by the bin men—so there's no one left for me to kick or punch or throw down on the ground.

I wish Dad was here, I say.

Glyn, don't start, says Mum, setting down my plate.

But if Dad was here—

It's my turn to be slapped. Mum hits me on the arm.

Dad! Dad! Dad! I yell.

And receive another slap for my troubles.

Enough, I said! Eat!

After lunch, me and Grandad are sitting in his Volkswagen Beetle. The roads are still too dangerous for him to drive anywhere, all slush and slide-outs now that the snow is melting, but the engine in the boot needs warming up.

We can pretend drive, he says.

After we've pretend-driven across the finishing line of the Grand Prix, Grandad turns the key. He likes to switch the motor off and listen to make sure everything sounds right back there.

Do you know, it's impossible to slam a Beetle's door shut? That's engineering, Son. They'll still be on the road well into the next century, you'll see.

I don't want to upset him, but Grandad is wrong. The next century will be jet scooters and hover discs. No more roads, either. I tell him people will touch down and take off like dragonflies over a pond.

Dragonflies, you say?

I show him my TV 21 comic. All the houses are built shiny round in the sky, perched on long stalks.

So that's your future happiness, he says, handing me the comic back.

Grandad, see. People wear silver suits and silver boots to match. It's the modern age.

Well, don't tell Nana. She thinks the sixties is silly enough.

What's the sixties? I ask.

You're sitting in it.

Dizzy

By the time I start school, I'll be a reader. I'm a halfway-there reader already, so it's a good start. Now all I need to do is to meet Peter and Jane. I want so much to be standing outside the toy shop window next to Peter and Jane. Oh yes, it's the Ladybird book life for me!

Peter and Jane don't live in a horrible pub that makes noises in the night. They live in a house. They have a dog.

Why can't we live there? I tell Julie, tapping the page. Then we could have a dog.

I don't want any dog. They bite.

I keep turning the pages. Peter and Jane's dog looks like a very happy dog to own.

We could teach him tricks. Sit. Beg. Roll.

Glyn, it's only pictures in a stupid book. Julie can't be bothered looking anymore.

I read the Ladybird books quickly. They're easy. Mum says they're not supposed to be so easy.

Soon there are no more Peter and Jane books left.

You've read the series, says Mum, reading the back part. She sees my long face.

What's wrong now? she asks.

Not *finished*, finished.

The next time she is in Sunderland, Mum looks all over for more Ladybird books with Peter and Jane on the cover. She doesn't find one. She makes a phone call to the big bookshop in Newcastle. The man in charge tells her there are no more titles in the series. But there are lots more Ladybird titles that are *not* Peter and Jane.

Soon Mum is handing me *Rumpelstiltskin*. The ugly creature stares back at me. What is this? I'm not reading this.

Can't we have a dog, Mum?

No, we can't. Don't ask again.

But Mum, if we had a dog—

If we had a lot of things, Glyn. Please don't ask again.

I do ask again, in front of Auntie Mary when she's come to tell Mum there's a house in Horden that she's seen.

A house? Don't tease me, Mary. Really? A house in Horden?

It's one street over from Linda and me. Belford Street.

Really?

Get out there and see it, says Auntie Mary, before it's gone. It's got a huge back garden, too. It's a good one, Josie. Solid.

We could have a dog, I say.

Right, says Mum. You were warned, Glyn. Come here and get a smack.

I don't move.

Looks like you're in trouble, says Auntie Mary.

I don't want a smack. Mum jumps out of her chair and has me by the arm. She's determined. I'm held fast in her grip, running around and around her as her arm swings and misses, swings and misses.

Stand still, you silly bugger! You're making me dizzy.

Mum starts laughing. I don't think it's funny at all. Auntie Mary is shaking her head, saying, Ee, it's not right, our Josie.

What's he done now? says Nana, walking into the room. She's dressed ready for opening hours.

He knows what he's done, says Mum, no longer laughing.

The poor bairn's done nothing, says Auntie Mary, but it does me no good. Mum won't be happy until I'm hit. I keep moving.

I knock her ashtray over and Nana can't believe the mess I've made. This makes Mum all the more determined.

Bloody stand still!

No, Mum, no!

Then I'm hit, and I'm crying. My leg is suddenly a red handprint.

Ee, our Josie, says Auntie Mary. You've stung his little leg.

Rumpelstiltskin! I am shouting.

All Roads Lead To Peterlee

My best Christmas present is broken. This morning there's just me and Grandad and the Give A Show Projector that's in bits on the kitchen table.

It worked fine last time, Grandad.

He points to the insides. See here, Son. The ends are corroded.

Then he tells me where all the dead batteries end up. There is a mountain leaking sour taste into the air. People don't like to be anywhere nearby on windy days. Birds fall out of the sky, crying, I'm dead! I'm dead!

When Grandad tells me this I'm not sure I believe him. He's always tricking me.

It's true! Ask anyone. Haven't you ever seen a dead bird lying beside the road?

One time, yes.

Well, then. Where do you suppose it flew from?

Then he's telling me the workings of a battery. How one works is there's a plus and a minus. Together they make a circuit. When anyone throws the switch, hey presto! Energy. Light. Music on the radio.

You mean, Joe 90 on my wall again, Grandad.

Who's Joe 90?

He's on the telly.

Oh, him.

I like Joe 90. He's always on his own, mostly saving the world.

Can it be fixed, Grandad?

Anything can be fixed, Son. Leave it to me.

The reason it's corroded is the batteries have leaked their runny taste of vinegar.

He says, You didn't lick your fingers, I hope.

A bit.

Did it taste like yuck? I bet it did.

Nana is out with Mum and Julie, gone over to Horden to look over the house in Belford Street. Dad is where he always is—at work.

We might be in a house, I say.

Aye, says Grandad. You might as well be. A pub is no place for children. I'll miss you all.

But, Grandad, Horden's just over the hill.

Aye, Son, and so's the moon.

Making a mess on the polished table is not a problem for Grandad. He's having fun.

We'll raid the pantry, he says, already making plans. And as long as you don't tell you-know-who, she will be none the wiser.

She is the cat's mother, Nana, and it's her pantry and her kitchen. It's not her pub, though. The Colliery Inn belongs to the brewery people. Nana and Grandad could be thrown out on the street with only the clothes on their back and a suitcase for Sunday.

You should look for a house, too, Grandad.

I don't want to look for a house. This here will do me.

But, Grandad, the brewery people.

Leave the worrying to me, Son. You worry about anything.

Soon Grandad's found a packet of white powder and now he's mixing up a thick paste.

Bi-something Soda, I say, reading the packet.

You're a reader, that's for sure. Shall we make a big explosion like the one your dad saw above Christmas Island?

Yes, please.

You'd like that? I don't know that the Nimmos people will be too happy to hear we've blown the Colliery Inn sky high. Where will their drinkers go?

Peterlee, I say without hesitation.

Yes, Peterlee. All roads lead to Peterlee these days. Everyone wants to live in those rabbit hutch houses.

Not us! We're off to Horden. We're off to Belford Street.

I feel sorry for anyone living in Peterlee. They don't have a park. They don't have a dene. They only have a sculpture, made by a famous London

artist no one has heard of before, and some people love it and some people hate it, and most people have more important things to talk about, like getting the washing dry.

Yes, go to Horden, says Grandad. It's a much more sensible idea. Your mum was born there. Did you know that?

Yes, I say.

I worked down the pit, says Grandad. Did you know that, too?

There were rats, I say.

Yes, rats. I told you that story then. Lots of rats.

I watch as he fixes the contacts up, good as new. He's a fixer. It's probably why the Nimmos Brewery gave him the pub to run. When he's done, he says, Batteries. Now that's going to be tricky.

Nothing's too tricky for Grandad. He has a little think and I have a big think sitting next to him.

He says, Wait here, Son. If a one-legged midget calling himself John Henry comes tapping on that window over there, hide under the table and count backwards from a hundred.

I will, Grandad.

Whatever you do, don't let him in.

I won't, Grandad.

Good lad.

Bath Night

And, then, yes, it's definitely happening. Papers all signed and no turning back.

We've been to see the bank, says Dad. I'm not supposed to tell you. But the house is ours. We might even be in there for your birthday if we play our cards right.

What cards, Dad?

It's a saying, Son.

He says he's putting in a lot of overtime and the money's coming in. He's determined for us to be a family again in our own place. Not a pub or a caravan, but a house with an upstairs and a downstairs.

And a big back garden, I add.

Yes, a boy should have a garden

Dad, and a dog.

Don't push your luck, mister. You know what your mother thinks about that.

If it was Australia, we could get a sheepdog, Dad. We'd have to get a dog if it was Australia.

Don't get me started on Australia, Son. Now, where's the soap?

I'm sitting in the bath, nearly lost in the soap bubbles. Dad has put too much bubble bath in. He makes bath night fun.

Right, I have to wash your hair, he says. Head down and do not splash.

No shampoo gets in my eyes and I'm happy. Dad lifts the big saucepan and rinses the shampoo away. Three times he has to do this. It's like being under a waterfall.

Can I stay in a bit longer, Dad, I ask, when he's all finished.

Julie has had her bath. She's in her pyjamas ready for bed. She's watching TV. Downstairs there's a big night on, with Nana and Grandad both behind the bar. All the miners have brass in their pocket. They've brought their wives. It's a smoky dungeon down there.

Five minutes, then, says Dad. You can open your eyes now. You're done.

I'm in a submarine, I say.

Of course you are.

Dad has to go downstairs and help out in the bar as soon as he's finished with me. Someone has turned 21. That means, old enough to be married.

Dad, can you tuck me in tonight?

I *always* tuck you in. You know I do.

With a story, I mean. You haven't told me a story for ages. About Wales, Dad. Please.

We'll see, he says.

Can it be the story about Taid's little boat?

Dad can't believe I'd want the same story again and again, but I do. Always the rowing boat story. It's my favourite one.

Then Mum is standing in the doorway. She says, All finished?

I've told him, says Dad on the way out. Sorry.

Glynne! You can't be trusted with anything!

At first I think Mum is angry at Dad, but she's not. She kisses him, then puts Julie's towel back on the rack to dry.

Well, what do you think, Glyn? Do you think we should move to Horden?

Yes, I say. I want a garden. I want a back lane. Suddenly it's the best bath night ever and I can't stop smiling.

Mum says, What, darling? Tell me.

Nothing, I say. Is Horden like Shotton?

Oh, better by far. Horden has lots of children. Shotton's had its day. The clever money's all going to Horden. There'll be boys your own age.

And later, when Dad tucks me in, I don't even mind that he's too tired to tell me a story.

I understand, I tell him.

Oh, you do, do you? Cheeky monkey.

Yes, that's me, I say. That's who I am.

Part Five



Write Her Name In Purple

Letter by letter I learn to write. It's my first job to do in our house in Belford Street, Horden, number five. Mum sets up the kitchen table. DOG is easy. CAT is easy, and so is TREE.

Now I'm up to the big stuff.

ELEPHANT, I write.

That's the way, says Mum, watching me get started with my black pencil. If you can write this well *before* you start school.

SCHOOL.

Until this morning I have twenty-four pencils, more than all the colours in a rainbow. They came with my Pinky and Perky colouring-in book, which Mum has given to Julie. Her other colouring-in book is wrecked already.

Now she's getting some of my pencils. This is not good. This is a catastrophe. This is Middlesborough beating Newcastle three-nil.

You have to share, says Mum.

Julie isn't careful. I know what she'll do. They'll lose their points, and then I'll be waiting *more* days for Dad to pull out his penknife and sharpen them again. Or she'll drop one off the table and they're never the same. Their insides get broken, just like people's insides get broken, and after that they're useless.

Now, isn't this nice? says Mum, when Julie's coloured in three pages already. All of us settled in our nice new house and both of you hard at work.

See, Mum, says Miss Messy.

Lovely, Julie.

Not really. You can't do three pages in a minute.

Mine's nicer than yours, Julie tells me, as soon as Mum's off to our bathroom that we don't have to share with Nana or Grandad.

You need glasses, I tell my careless sister. It's a mess.

She says, Shut up, *Clarence*. Oh, look, your eyes are crossed. Again.

No they're not!

Clarence!

Julie—

Every picture is scribble that reaches onto my pages if I'm not looking.

Her tree is a crushed spider.

I write, SPIDER.

She pinches my leg.

Ow!

Stop it, you two, says Mum as soon as she is back.

Before I can say a word, Mum is taking Julie's side.

UGLY. STUPID. SISTER. ELEPHA—

Mum snatches my piece of paper away. She rips it up before my eyes.

You can start again, she tells me. Start with sorry.

SORRY, I write.

All I ever do is say sorry. That's why I'm glad when Auntie Linda arrives to take Julie to her house for an hour.

But she isn't gone yet. First Auntie Linda wants a cup of coffee. She has an announcement. She's going to have a baby.

No! says Mum.

Yes, Josie. It's definite.

Mum and Auntie Linda are hugging and laughing. I don't know what's so funny about having a baby. They poo and wee and can't even tell you they've done it.

Come on, Julie, says Auntie Linda at last. You can come to my house and help me bake a surprise cake for Uncle Peter. He's going to be a daddy.

As soon as they are gone it is quiet again. Mum makes herself a second cup of coffee. She lights up a cigarette and sits at the end of the kitchen table watching me write out the letters to make into words.

Can you believe it? Auntie Linda's pregnant. She's going to have a baby.

I'm not sure what to say.

What if I was the one pregnant, Glyn? Wouldn't you like a baby brother to play with?

Brother, yes. Sister, no.

Mum pretends to be shocked. She says, You don't really mean that. You love Julie. You know you do.

JULIE.

I write her name in purple.

She's having a girl, says Mum not many evenings later, when Dad is in from work tired. Our Linda, I mean.

Josie, how can you possibly know that? asks Dad.

The ring never lies, Glynne. She taps her wedding ring. Earlier she and Auntie Mary have done the ring test over Auntie Linda's tummy.

I want a sister, says Julie.

Mum looks at Dad. Dad says, Don't look at me. Now, is there anything to eat, do you suppose, for this man who has been out of the door since six this morning?

Maybe, says Mum. If you give me a kiss and stop being sour milk.

Shoes

When we've been living at 5 Belford Street a few weeks, and I have one friend called Tommy and another friend called Andrew, it's suddenly time. It's my first day at school. It's everyone else's, too.

I'm in Infants now.

We arrive at school on time, me and Mum. A boy is crying, but at first I can't see who. His mum is saying, Enough, Edward. You're being daft.

I look for the boy Edward. He's short, like me, and his hair is blonde, like mine. He sees me and sobs. He doesn't even try to hide his face in his mum's skirt.

Mum says, It's not nice to stare, Glyn.

I'm not staring. I just want to know who he is, that's all. His misery is perfect. Because, why? Why is he crying?

All the Horden mums stand around the big school gates. Cars drive past on the busy road that we must never cross on our own, not unless we want to be riding in the back of an ambulance.

Do you want to be in the hospital?

No, Mum.

Then stay off the road.

Yes, Mum.

A tall girl arrives back there all alone. She's older, very nearly a woman. I notice her shoes. They are pink.

Mum takes out her hankie from up her sweater sleeve and dabs at my nose. There is a speck of dirt that bothers her. Another mother is doing the same to her boy.

Oh, that silly woman, Mum says, holding me still. She's giving in to him.

Mum means Edward, who won't be starting school today. His tears have worked. All the mums watch the crybaby being led past the railings and across the road.

Andrew isn't crying and neither is Tommy.

I won't cry, either.

That's not the way to do it, says a woman wearing a red scarf.

No, no, everyone agrees.

The older girl has caught me staring at her shoes. She doesn't know how to smile, or frown, or anything. She's all eyes, however. She's not afraid to stare back at me.

Mum says, You're doing it again, Glyn.

Pink shoes, I say.

Then a big a lorry thunders past and there is a whistle from inside the cab.

Cheeky bugger, says one of the mothers.

Mum puts her hankie away and says, Come on then. No use waiting around here all morning.

We walk the long walk across to the bright classroom with paper snowflakes on all the windows. Inside the classroom is warm. Two teachers are waiting there meet us.

A boy went home, a girl tells the teacher.

It happens, says the teacher, who is my teacher, Miss Anderson .

And what's your name? she asks the boy next to me, and he tells her his name.

She says, You have two older brothers, am I right?

I do, Miss.

Mum pushes me forward. This is Glyn, she says.

Glyn. That's a first for Horden. A Welshman in our midst.

Mum says, His father is Welsh. Glyn's English.

I was born in the pub, I say.

He can read, Mum quickly tells her. He's always got his nose stuck in a book.

I see, says Miss Anderson. Then maybe you'll read for me.

Well, here you all are, says the other teacher, who is older than Miss Anderson and in charge. All the mums stop talking and listen.

I look back across the playground for the pink shoes. They're gone now. They've walked away.

Soon the classroom is emptying, with more hankies coming out of cardigan sleeves, and one mum saying to another, I can't believe I'm reacting like this.

Miss Anderson and the teacher in charge are well used to this carry on. They give us plenty of time to say our goodbyes, which isn't really goodbye, anyway. School, that's all it is.

Mum's hankie stays up her sleeve. She says, A big day, Glyn.

Billy Goat

The only name Dad hears from me all week is Miss Anderson.

If you're thinking what colour her hair is, Dad, it's gold.

Gold, you say. Like summer?

No, just gold.

School is where I have milk and a straw, and there is a fish named Sebastian, and all our names hang on the wall in rainbow colours, and we learn to put the names of the days in the correct order, Monday through Saturday, with Sunday the day of rest.

What day is it today, children? Miss Anderson asks.

Monday! we all sing out, and I say, It's twelve weeks to my birthday, Miss.

Miss Anderson gives me two gold stars, one for my reading and one for being polite.

And then I ruin everything by doing the stupid thing.

Miss! Miss! I am shouting the morning I spot her across the playground.

When she sees me I put my head down. I get a good speed up, too, because it's all downhill. I'm the fastest billy goat she'll ever see.

Glyn! What on earth—

Then I'm stopped sharp. It's a thick wall, the business end of a classroom, and suddenly I'm dizzy.

Glyn, can you hear me? asks Miss Anderson.

I'm feeling my head. It's hurting a lot, and I think even my brain *knows*, black being the first colour out of the tin this morning.

Miss Anderson asks, Are you hurt?

She has rushed over to pick me up. I'm on the ground in the wet, back against the cold. Two girls are by her side, and I think I know their names.

He ran into the wall, Miss.

Yes, I saw that. I watched him do it. *Saw* him doing it, I mean. Glyn, what are you playing at?

I'm a billy goat, Miss.

Look at your head. Dearie me. You have a bump.

Sure enough, I am the egg man, just like the song says.

But why would you want to do that? asks Miss Anderson, helping me up. Her help is not needed. It's my head I've bashed, not my knees. I'm not a cripple.

I'm a billy goat, I say again.

That was a very silly thing you did, Glyn.

He's bleeding, Miss.

At first Miss Anderson is very concerned. Where? Where are you bleeding?

He *might* be, says the girl.

What happened to Glyn? asks Andrew, running over.

He's a billy goat, says the girl.

Come on, says Miss Anderson, taking me into the school and along the wide corridor to the office part. Let's get you properly looked at.

Until the bell rings I'm made to sit out in the corridor pressing a damp tea towel to my forehead.

Andrew walks near, then runs off to fetch Tommy to have a look.

See, he says.

Tommy says, Your head's caved in, Glyn. Does it hurt?

A bit.

A teacher chases them away, saying, Back to the yard, you two. Go on. Away with you.

One of the other teachers opens the staff room door to have a look for himself at the boy who thinks he's a billy goat.

Alright, Son?

Sir.

Two more teachers look in on me before the bell rings.

One of yours? I hear one teacher say, noticing me sitting there pressing the headache away.

God, no, says the other.

But the bell is the bell is the bell. The office lady takes the tea towel away, saying, You have to go to assembly now.

Assembly is the great hall, with coughs and murmurs and a shuffling of feet, all excitement and nervous glances, until the headmaster says, Enough now. Remember why we're here.

There's the Lord's prayer to recite, and All things bright and beautiful to be sung. The men teachers all think they're Tom Jones. The lady teachers all think they're Lulu.

Go on now, says the office lady, helping me on my way. You can't skip assembly.

Are you often running into walls, Glyn? asks Miss Anderson when I'm back in class. She says it quietly, so no one else can hear.

No, Miss, I say. Sometimes I'm a racing car. And sometimes I'm a cheeky monkey. And if we go to Australia, I'll be a kangaroo. We'll own a million sheep and we'll have a sheepdog, too.

Hearing this, she smiles. I think she smiles. It's hard to say, with her looking at my head mostly.

Plastic

Twelve weeks is six weeks is five sleeps is today! The front room is full.
Mum has sent invitations to every boy and girl in Belford Street.

Games everybody! she shouts, clapping her hands. You, too, our Mary.

Auntie Mary says she's too old for playing games.

Howay, Mary. It's the bairn's birthday.

Dad walks in from work early, the first time in many weeks. The bosses at the crisp factory must have heard about my birthday party. Mum says he can be in charge of the music. We have music from the radio in the kitchen.

Right! shouts Mum, in charge of all the fun and games. Are we all ready? Mary?

First we play statues. Dad turns the radio off quick, and then it's hands on head and be a statue. If a statue so much as blinks, they're out.

Julie blinks.

Out, Julie, says Mum.

I didn't move!

You blinked. Out.

Glyn blinked, too.

Play nice, Mum says, smiling grimly at one of the wives who looks as if she'd much rather be at home in front of the fire, and wouldn't you know her dirty boy has picked his scabby face.

Would you have a tissue, pet? she says, walking into the kitchen to see Dad.

Dad fetches a clean hankie. Soon he's dabbing at blood and germs. He doesn't care. He's feeling sorry for a boy's scabby face.

The next game starts. Julie cheats again. She makes a girl cry.

Julie, I won't tell you again, says Mum. Play nice.

I was playing nice! she yells.

Mum pulls her into the corner by her arm. Listen. It's your brother's birthday. Be nice.

I know whose birthday it is, says Julie.

Then, smile!

Julie doesn't know how to smile. That's because she's naturally miserable.

She can be as miserable as she likes. I have a toy yacht to sail.

Where's that cake! sings Mum, clapping her hands. Let's see now. I wonder what this could be.

My birthday cake has green icing. It's Thunderbird 2, with Smarties for windows and liquorice for legs. I have five candles to blow out.

I blow like I'm the big bad wolf and here's the house of sticks. All the candles go out. We eat cake, even Nana, who's been telling Mum and Auntie Mary all afternoon, No, none for me.

Righto, there's cake for everyone, says Mum, after she's passed round paper plates.

Cake, Tommy, I yell across the room. Andrew, cake!

Tommy's seen the slice he wants. It's BIG.

Then she hands out bags of sweets, with a party whistle for every child, and what a big mistake that is.

Why, our Josie, says one of the wives. This is madness.

Mum says, You hear that, Glynne. Madness.

Dad nods his head from in the kitchen. He's making a pot of tea.

At five o'clock on the dot, Mum sends everyone home—including Andrew and Tommy—and I'm allowed to play with my presents. She needs a cigarette. She needs two.

Dad runs the bath nearly to the top.

C'mon, Captain. Let's see what she's made of.

The blue plastic yacht tips on its side. It half floats, half fills with water. But it refuses to go down to Davy Jones locker.

I wouldn't want to skipper that yacht, says Dad, and he leaves me to it where there the giant octopus hides in a cave.

I bring my yacht out of the bathroom. A bit has snapped off already. The sticker has peeled.

Bye bye, birthday, I'm thinking.

Squeak

The real birthday present arrives the next day, out of the hedge over the road from our house. It's waiting for me on the pavement.

Julie, come see!

Night shift miners are trying to sleep. I'll be very popular. I'm shouting for the world to hear.

Look, it's trying to get up!

The bird is all flopsy. Its little eyes aren't even open yet, and it's got fluff for feathers. Specks of dirt stick to its breast.

Julie runs off, shouting, Mum! Quick!

Soon Mum is taking charge. We need to keep the poor thing warm or it'll die for sure. It's been abandoned, poor soul.

We make a new nest out of cotton wool and toilet paper, all packed in a corn flakes box. Julie says, I'm its new mother.

Milk, says Mum, warming a small saucepan on the stove. It needs milk.

The bird is a sparrow, not yet ready to fly. Mum says not to build our hopes up or there'll be tears.

Here, let's see if it wants some, she says, putting milk into a teaspoon.

The bird wants the lot. It's a greedy guts. Then it squeaks. After that, we have a pet named Squeak.

Go dig for worms, Julie bosses me after mum's doing jobs upstairs.

It's a good idea. Then I have a problem. I don't like worms.

Mum is looking out of the top front room window. She sees me digging soil over in the front garden with the fireplace poker. She knocks on the glass. Next, she is down the stairs and opening the front door in no time.

She says, Have you gone mad? Squeak's far too little to eat worms.

For the short time Squeak is with us, its box is under the TV so that we can watch both. Every time it's End of Part One or End of Part Two, I get down on the carpet and peek in. Julie does the same.

Will you leave that bird alone? says Mum, saying, Babies need lots of sleep. It's how they grow.

For five days Squeak lives with us. He doesn't grow much. He never opens his eyes. On the sixth day he is buried in the front garden beneath Dad's rose bush. Mum does the burying and I do the hymn.

Julie does the sniffing into her sleeve. She was the one who gave Squeak a bath in Mum's mixing bowl.

You did this, I say. You're a witch.

Julie starts to cry. Julie never cries.

So now Mum says I'm cruel for calling Julie a witch—she's your sister, not a witch—and I have to go straight upstairs to my room and have a good long think about what I said to my sister to make her cry.

One hour, says Mum. I'm very cross.

I sit on my bed. An hour is forever. Down in the lane, Tommy and Andrew kick a football back to each other. They're wondering why I'm not there yet. I'm always there. Now they'll think I'm not their friend.

I'd open my window and yell, but I'm not allowed to. In Newcastle a boy fell out the window onto the backyard step and split his head open like a watermelon, and what a nasty surprise his mum got when she went to hang out the washing.

Mum, can I come out now? I ask, when I hear her upstairs putting clothes away. The boys are waiting.

I'm not listening, Glyn. Don't ask again.

A long time passes and then my door opens.

You're really sorry?

I am, yes, very.

Well, I hope so, Glyn. Julie was only trying to help that little bird and didn't know any better. It would have died anyway, poor thing.

I'm listening.

When she's sure I've heard every word, she says, Alright, then. Out you go. Go play with your friends.

Quick as a shot, I'm off out the back door. I'm across the yard and opening the gate.

Andrew! Tommy!

Tommy kicks the ball to me.

Navy Days

Dad doesn't follow the footballers, only the teams. Knowing the teams makes it easier to fill out the pools coupon each week. Me, I collect all the footballers.

This one's Charlie George, I say. Arsenal player. And that's Colin Bell. He's with Manchester City now.

Dad is very impressed.

We'll win the pools, you'll see, he tells me one afternoon at our kitchen table. He shows me what a pools coupon looks like. He says, Your taid's won. He's won twice. The house I grew up in is paid for with the winnings. He was very lucky both times.

If I won the pools I wouldn't buy a house. I'd buy an island like Robinson Crusoe's, and we could all live there—me, Mum and Dad—and I would be in charge of the fire. If the natives didn't want to join in, we'd chase them away to the other side. You had your chance! I'd shout down at them from a cliff top.

Julie wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the island. Let Auntie Linda or Auntie Mary adopt her.

Dad wonders what I would eat, if I was like Robinson Crusoe. Fish, he says. And maybe crab meat.

I like crab, says Mum, sitting knitting.

I'd take boxes of Tudor crisps with me, I say, surprising Dad

How crisps are made is they start off as potatoes and end up as crisps. I still don't understand much of what Dad tells me, only the part where the uncooked crisps ride along a long belt to the fryer, all the time busy hands snatching away the green ones.

I ask, Can anyone work on the belt, Dad?

Most anyone, yes.

I could get a job there, says Mum.

You could, says Dad, but you won't. No wife of mine is going out to work.

I could work there, I say.

If you were old enough.

Hearing this, I imagine I'm fifteen already. Look at this, the working me says, spotting another green potato. After an hour I'm the best green potato picker in Peterlee.

The crisp factory is Tudor Crisps, and people all over the country buy the packet with the Tudor king on the front.

First I have to order all the potatoes in, says Dad, getting back to how crisps are made. And then there's the oil to cook them in. I have go round the side whenever the lorry's in, to check off the delivery.

Is the factory like a ship, Dad?

Yes and no. I mean, a ship is a ship. It takes you places.

Mum puts down her knitting. She says, Julie's asleep. I'm just going around to Linda's. I'll be half an hour.

Dad doesn't mind a bit. He can show me more souvenirs from his Navy days. Soon we're looking at photos.

Here he is, then, in his Navy uniform, and how important he looks. And here are his postcards from South America and Honolulu. This is a photograph of him with all his Navy chums standing on the big ship in only their shorts. Here's a shoebox to put it all in. And here's the suitcase for the shoebox. Memories are a complicated business, just the storing of them.

My favourite souvenir is a small wood carving of a monkey.

That little fellow travelled the long way round, says Dad, meaning by way of the Panama. He opens a brochure that is really a fold-up map of the world. He shows me exactly where the canal is.

See, Son, he says, taking my finger to the spot on the map. See how the section narrows to nothing. A lot of good men died to stitch two oceans together.

Dad makes my finger into a ship. We sail around the southern-most tip of South America, past Tierra del Fuego.

There were penguins and whales, he says. We were getting close to the very bottom of the world. And let me tell you, it was bleak like this place is bleak. By then we were a long way from Honolulu, that's for sure.

Honolulu is special to Dad. It's in his voice, a dancing word. In Honolulu the ladies wear grass skirts and the men play drums. The hotels in Honolulu go for a mile or more along the seafront.

Where's Australia? I ask.

You really want to know?

Yes.

Dad shows me. Australia is round, an island, the biggest island on the map.

I can be a kangaroo, I say.

Hop-hoppity-hop! says Dad.

We're having a grand time, Dad and me, with Julie asleep upstairs and Mum around the corner at Auntie Linda's. But then he's watching the clock.

Let's put it all away for another time, he says.

He has to say this, otherwise Mum will be back and shaking her head. She thinks Dad spends too much time living in the past. She prefers the suitcase to be put away and out of sight.

Smashed The Sky

But first, the bomb.

A is for atom. B is for bomb.

Everyone had to stand on deck with their back turned. There was a big flash and a hot wind that reached into shirts. Then the men were ordered to turn around and see. What they saw looked like a big mushroom in the sky.

See, Glyn, says Dad, showing me the front page of the Daily Mirror. Doesn't that look like a big mushroom to you?

It does!

It cost a lot of money to explode that A bomb. But the scientists were very happy. They like anything that makes a big splash on the front page of the Mirror. It put Britain back in the race.

What race? I ask.

The arms race. We have to make sure the Russians know their place.

Who are the Russians?

The other side, Son.

None of this makes any sense to me, but I don't want to spoil the story. It's exciting. I want to know what happened next, after the sky caught on fire and the mushroom grew and grew.

Ah, well after that we come to the pigs, says Dad.

Fish were dead in the water and wild pigs screamed on the island, and then the scientists flew in a helicopter and went ashore to have a closer look.

At the pigs?

At anything and everything, says Dad. Scientists are like that.

The name of the island was Christmas Island.

Weren't the people scared, Dad?

Oh, no, the islanders all got moved to a different island. They were fine. The British government provided them with somewhere else to live.

The Queen must own a lot of islands, is all I can think.

Were there rats, Dad?

Let me see now. Yes, plenty of rats. All dead.

Dead?

Son, it was an A bomb. That's what A bombs do. They take away life.

Even so, I wish I could see them drop an A bomb. When I tell Dad this, he shakes his head and frowns. He puts the newspaper clipping back in the suitcase with all his other important Navy papers.

We smashed the sky into a million little pieces. Believe me, it's not something I'd want you to see.

Joe 90

One night my bedroom door opens and Dad says, What, again? The time, Glyn. Do you have any idea how late it is?

I have *some* idea, because there's no more car lights shining on my curtains from the main road.

Dad sits on the end of my bed and looks at the colours on the ceiling. That's impressive, he says, and for the first time he sees how bright the Give A Show Projector can be when there's new batteries inside.

Grandad gave them to me. It's all fixed now.

Good for Grandad. But you have to sleep, Son.

We're both enjoying the lantern show as he tells me this. I pull the slide strip through, and it's a different picture above us.

Joe 90, Dad, I say. Does he look like someone you know?

Someone called Glyn, you mean?

Yes. Me.

He's a bit out of focus, Dad tells me, but I know that already. I like it that way.

A picture can be sharp or it can be a dream. All I have to do is twist the lamp. It's the same at the Empress, where the man upstairs in the little room looks through the small square window. His job is to make sure the Technicolour sky is touching the Technicolour grass just so, and no mixing of the two.

When I was a little boy I had an army tank, Dad tells me. That was my favourite toy. I'll tell you about it another time.

He leans over and takes the projector from my hands. He finds the switch that breaks the circuit that tells the batteries, Bed now.

I want to protest.

There's always tomorrow, Glyn. That's what you have to hold on to.

You're right, Dad.

Right. Well, goodnight, then.

He's tucking me in tight now. I'm his sardine in a can.

What colour army tank was it, Dad?

Oh, a big green one. With batteries, just like yours. Quiet now, or you'll wake Mum.

Before he leaves, he pulls the curtain an inch to look outside. I'm not sure what he's wanting to see, because no people are about, if you don't count the madman running across moors.

A thousand men at work already, Dad says, meaning the miners slogging their guts out underground. Do you think we did the right thing, coming here?

Yes, Dad. Yes, I do.

Well, there you are, then. That's something, I suppose. Goodnight, Son.

His Other Self

In the morning I walk to school through the park. This is my favourite way to go, because I like the flowers and the trees. The other way is busy with cars and lorries.

Mum loves the park. She says we can all be proud. No one need look down their noses at Horden. It's a bonny place to be living, and the park is proof enough. It's the one thing every Horden miner can be proud of, because out of every pay packet a few pennies go into the looking after of the grounds, all twenty-one acres. Mum says the park is the lungs the pit can't steal from a miner.

LUNGS.

Men work down the pit, and the pit works on men, and that's all there is to it. But it must be hard to BREATHE if you have two dirty sponges for LUNGS.

I pass a miner sitting on a bench having an argument with his other self.

And you! he's yelling.

And you! his other self is yelling back. Then his LUNGS start hurting. He's coughing.

He doesn't notice me the schoolboy walk past.

Later, when I find Dad in the back garden and tell him about the man in the park, he goes very quiet.

I think he was poorly, Dad.

Yes, a kind of sickness, for sure. God, what this place must do to a man.

He means the pit. He means, life underground, like being a mole.

Your mother won't listen to me, says Dad. She's got her sisters living in the next street, so why would she even want to listen to me?

He starts to dig the soil over. I run off to find Tommy and Andrew so we can have a war.

Then it's two nights later and I hear Dad and Mum talking downstairs at the front door. Dad is home late, as usual, but not from work. He's been to a pub in Peterlee.

It's all right, Josie. Can a man not have a drink, then?

Mum is saying, Since when do you go drinking alone?

I wasn't alone, I hear Dad say back to her. I was with some of the boys from work.

Again Mum says, Since when?

Go on up, Josie. Go back to bed where it's warm.

The front door closes.

I get out of bed then. I turn the corner and look down.

Mum is upset, shaking her head. Dad is taking off his coat, fumbling at buttons that have turned into mushrooms.

They don't notice me.

Here, says Mum, helping him. You're daft, Glynne. There's Lloyd to drink with, if you must.

Josie, Josie. Don't be like this.

Like what? says Mum. You want me to be a gypsy? I will not.

Somewhere out on the road I hear a car drive past our house. How late is it? *Late* late. The fire will be out in the grate.

I don't like you out drinking, says Mum, taking the coat from him. I didn't marry you for that.

Yes, says Dad. I heard you already.

They don't climb the stairs as I expect. They don't even look up to see me wide awake sitting on the top landing.

They go through to the cold kitchen. Dad is saying, I've been thinking, Josie. Let's migrate anyway. I know, I know, we've just bought the house, but let's do it. Let's away.

Mum cuts him off, saying, Let's have no more talk about migrating. We're nicely settled.

Are we, Josie?

Don't, says Mum. Don't start.

Then, nothing. The front room door closes. Their voices don't carry all the way up after that.

I climb back into bed. I look out my window. Up at the crossroad, the orange lollipop lights are flashing like they always do—on off, on off. There is no traffic.

Rain

Sunday morning we all have breakfast together as a family. Dad turns to me. How's the swimming coming along, Glyn? Can you float on your back yet?

I can.

We never had swimming at school when I was a boy, he says. There's lots we didn't have, but I'm not complaining.

Mum takes one look at the miserable weather and shakes her head. Oh, the poor paperboy will be drowned.

Then he should take some lessons with Glyn, says Dad.

This makes Mum poke out her tongue.

Swimming is my favourite thing to do, even in my bed. I swim under the blankets, inside my sheets.

Or I swim to school.

What are you doing, little man? the dustbin man asks me, up high in his cab.

I'm an otter!

An otter. Right. I see.

I'm swimming.

So you are. Very good. He shouts to his two offsidiers. Did you not see that lad just now?

I hear the men laughing, but I don't care.

In summer in the park I swim across fresh-mown grass. Then it's over onto my back to solve the puzzle of clouds.

I'm a good swimmer on land. Soon I will be a good swimmer in water. Already I can float, dog-paddle, use the kick board, and put my head under for ten seconds. Every Monday for the last ten weeks my class has caught a bus to the baths. This is our year for swimming lessons. It costs us sixpence every week. That's because we have a real swimming teacher, not Uncle Tudor.

Is he a good teacher? Dad wants to know.

Better than Uncle Tudor, I tell him.

On the first day of our holiday in Wales when I was little, Uncle Tudor was determined.

Come on, Glyn. Jump.

We were at the baths in Bangor. I had no trunks to wear, only my Y-fronts.

Jump, Glyn bach.

Uncle Tudor was already in the pool, holding out his hands. My Welsh cousins Rosie and David were swimming and duck-diving and being silly to each other, speaking in Welsh.

I can't jump, I said.

Sure you can, said Uncle Tudor. Close your eyes and jump. You can jump, can't you?

You'll drop me, I said.

No, no, I'll catch you.

Nearby a bigger boy said to his friend, Look, that boy is wearing knickers.

English boys, and I understood them perfectly. One said to the other, Big baby.

Uncle Tudor waited to see what I would do. They ran off laughing, and the lifeguard said, No running, you two.

Jump! said Uncle Tudor, because he had better things to do than to be looking after me. He'd paid his money for a swim, and so far—

I jumped.

Uncle Tudor is a very good postman, and Llanfair's best motor mechanic, but he's a very bad catcher.

Oops. Sorry, Glyn bach, he said.

I fell past his arms. I went straight under.

Yes, we have a very good teacher, I tell Dad. He has badges sewn on his jacket.

Mum says, Well, I should hope so. The money it's costing.

Josie, it's sixpence, says Dad.

It's still money!

The paperboy is late, says Dad, looking out the window and listening for the back gate. It's just wrong, the route they make that boy do.

I've seen the paperboy's struggle up our street, pulling his go-kart full of papers, comics and magazines. All hard work it is, and today miserable with cold. Some days the rain falls down and some days the rain blows sideways. Today it's both. That's the North Sea when it has the mood on.

It's always nice and warm at the baths.

Part Six



Summer

Summer visits Horden, with bees and flowers and sunburnt arms. On a Thursday along comes the fair. First the lorries pass the school, then big American cars pulling caravans. One is a Buick. Another is a Ford that can't be bought from any showroom in Britain.

That's the waltzer my uncle sicked up on, says Tommy, and he gets that bit right. Lots of uncles have been sick on the waltzer.

They have waltzers for astronauts, I say, waving at the next big car I see.

Away from the railings, you boys, says one of the teachers, looking at the sky. He's a young teacher and he is always looking at the sky. What he sees there is a mystery.

None of us moves. We're waiting to see what other rides the show people have brought to Horden this year.

Away from the railings, boys, says the teacher again. Or is it the stick you'd rather listen to?

He's soft as nougat. We're not fooled.

The boy next to Andrew asks, Are you going to the fair, sir? We're all going. Everyone goes. You have to, sir.

The bell rings.

All the next day the fair sets up on the big ground near the crossroads. Before the sun is gone down, the work is done. The show people are ready to throw the switch to their generators. We see coloured lights! I wish those coloured lights were visible from my window.

At tea time Dad says, Can we afford it, Josie?

I haven't any money for rides, says Mum.

No rides. But Mum—

No money for anything. Sorry, you two. Not this year. We'll be leaving out a turnip for Santa, that's how empty my red tin is.

You can win a goldfish, I tell Julie across the table. They're hung up in plastic bags.

No goldfish, says Mum, because Auntie Alice had a goldfish land on her carpet once.

Goldfish In Plastic

Then, on the Friday night, we're there. It's like a holiday for families.

Mum hands Dad a ten shilling note. She says to me and Julie, Now, mind, I'm not made of money, so don't be asking for everything you see.

She is never made of money, but that doesn't stop her buying her cigarettes, or Dad's paper on a Sunday, or my TV 21.

We cross the main road. A double decker bus waits, and all the people sitting up top from Easington and villages further along watch the chair-oplane go faster and faster. They'll be wishing they'd moved to Horden where the work is and where the fair sets up every year. The bus pulls away, and it's goodbye to sky boats see-sawing up and down, and the waltzer rushing riders sideways.

Move to Horden, I want to yell.

The fair never goes to Easington, only buses and rent collectors. We're lucky to be living in Horden.

Dad is after a prize for Mum. There are so many chances to win! First he tries to win a transistor radio, but to do that he needs five quoits on, and he manages only one. Next he tries to win a big teddy bear, throwing five darts, then ten, then fifteen.

The teddy bear isn't going anywhere soon.

I could have saved you the trouble, says Mum, who is a better dart thrower than Dad after her years in the pub.

There are air rifles. Dad lets me have one go, winking at the man in charge as if to say, Give the lad a go.

Mum doesn't like me firing a gun.

It's not a gun, says Dad. It's an air rifle.

He should know. Taid has real guns sitting up high on the wall next to the kitchen in Wales. Taid is a poacher. He jumps a fence in the woods and brings home pheasant fresh from the Marquis of Anglesey.

Mum is upset. Dad's showing her up in front of a crowd.

She says, It is a gun. It's got bullets, hasn't it? Come on, Julie. Let's see what's over there before he puts his eye out.

Mum's wrong. Dad's right. It's an air rifle. Air rifles don't have bullets. They have slugs.

But now Dad wants a prize for Mum again. He's spied a better teddy bear. I'm not going home empty-handed, he says, stopping at the stall with ping pong balls and jam jars. But he can't win. The ping pong balls bounce everywhere but in the jar. Dink-dink-dink.

Mum gets angry, saying, Give up, Glynne. I don't need a silly teddy bear. If I want one I'll buy one soon as the shops are open on Monday.

Hearing this, Julie says, Win *me* a teddy bear.

This is not the time for me to see a boy carrying a goldfish in a plastic bag.

No goldfish, says Mum, before I even ask. I've wasted enough money on silly prizes already. She says, You can go on the chair-o-plane and like it.

It's for little kids, I say.

Mum has had enough. She's tired. Her feet hurt.

She says, Come on, Glynne. Let's away.

Dad turns to me, saying, I think we'll make the waltzer our last ride. What do you say?

The best for last.

On the grass is a circle of sawdust, put there by an attendant after someone was sick.

Your funeral, says Dad, finally taking me up the steps and onto the platform. We sit down on the bench seat, and a big iron bar falls across us, to keep us in. Once every car is full, the ride starts. We lurch forward.

When we get off Dad is hurting. My shoulder, he says.

Home, says Mum. Have we all had a good time?

Julie says she had a very good time.

I see all the goldfish in plastic bags, still waiting to be won. It's that, or they'll be cat food.

Dad wants to know, Did you have a good time, Glyn?

Yes. Thankyou.

Julie has a plastic daschund to take home. Mum offered a man sixpence and he said, Why not? You knock its head, up and down, up and down. It's supposed to live on the rear shelf in a car and make people smile. We don't have a car.

Get it out of your mouth, says Mum, because Julie has started already. She's nibbling. That dog's going to have no paws after a week.

I'm exhausted, says Dad happily, as Horden families drift back to their homes. The sun is a light show behind the colliery. Over by the caravans, lights have started to come on.

Ours

Belford Street life is good for us all, says Mum, when we've been living there six whole months.

It's not like the Colliery Inn, I tell her.

No, not at all, she says. Go outside and play if you want, Glyn.

These are my jobs—dry dishes, pick up Lego, remember to flush the toilet.

Can I go to Gordon's house, Mum?

Anywhere, darling. As long as it's not the front.

The front means cars. We play in the back lane where it's safe. Our mums don't mind which end we play at, top or bottom, as long as we can be seen and are playing nicely.

Our back lane.

Gordon is my new best friend, same as Tommy and Andrew. He's new. It's 1966 and the whole of England wants to live in Horden, on account of the coal mine we have, the biggest coal mine in the world.

Plus we've won the cup!

We map out the Wembley pitch. We take off our coats for the goals. Julie and her friends tie one end of a rope to a gate. Dogs bark and mums fold their arms and watch, always watching.

This is how it is in the back lane of Belford Street, and there's no place I'd rather be when the sun is shining and the day never wants to end.

I'm watching you boys over there, a mother will say. I'll be telling your fathers if I see you do it again. Play nice.

No stranger can walk into our back lane and not be spotted. No salesman selling brushes is welcome. Sunday morning comes the papers; Sunday afternoon the ice cream man.

Where's our Tommy?

Andrew's house.

Where's our Glyn?

Tommy's house.

Ours. There's no safer place to be, and Mum is saying, Out! Out! Get some sunshine into your bones.

So now I am running knee-high into the long grass and weeds. There are stinging nettles, put there by the devil who is spiteful and cruel and a big spoilsport.

That way! shouts Gordon, pushing me hard in the back. It's only a game, but he keeps pushing me. This new boy knows how to push.

Stop, pushing! I shout. Can't you see I've been stung?

Who's pushing? he says.

Gordon's bigger than me. He can fight, too.

Andrew's getting away, I say, after I'm stung twice more on the shins. I bend over to pull up my socks.

What? You're giving up? says Gordon.

Andrew is fast. He can beat me in a race. He may even be the fastest boy in Horden. But no, I'm not giving up. Parrys never quit.

Watch out for nettles, I say, rubbing my shins.

Gordon pushes me again, but not so rough. Catch him. I'll catch the other one. Let's fight this war our way.

Because today the war isn't going so well. Our side is losing to the Germans. We're missing Tommy. He has something wrong with his scalp and chin. His head is shaved and his chin is painted purple. He's contagious.

Earlier I ask Mum what contagious means exactly. Is he badly poorly?

He's infested. Stay away.

What's infested?

Shame for his poor mother, that's what. Don't go kissing cats, you hear? Don't let any animal lick you.

An—drewww!

Andrew's mum is at the back gate, shouting for him to come home. It's the first of the many. Every day ends with our mums at the back gate calling us in.

Gl—yynn!

It's no use pretending I don't hear. Mum's call is unique. She's like a bird calling her young.

Gor—dooon!

There's no more war with Germany this day. Soon Zebedee will be jumping up to say goodnight to Dougall, and next it will be, Go wash your hands, Glyn. Use plenty of soap. They're filthy.

There might not be much more TV after that, if Mum is too tired for Julie's nonsense. Dad is working extra late at the crisp factory. Mum might be getting one of her headaches.

It's ending. The long day is ending. Down, down, sinks the sun, bye-bye.

And in the morning, more sunshine.

Blackberries tomorrow, says Mum, cheering herself up. Blackberry pie.

Third Night In A Row

So, yes, blackberries.

Blackberry picking is supposed to be fun. Then I prick the same finger twice.

Mum, Glyn's bleeding, says Julie.

What, again? Mum puts her bowl down to take a look. That's nothing, she says, squeezing a drop. Suck it better.

I suck it better. The bleeding stops, but not the hurting.

You'll die now, says Julie, when Mum has gone back to the house to fetch us a drink. You sucked poison. It was on your fingers from a berry.

No I didn't. This isn't the woods. There is no wicked queen. I'm not listening to you, Julie.

In the morning you'll be dead.

Shut up, Julie.

When Mum is back she pours out three glasses of lemonade. We have earned our treat.

Look how many blackberries we have, she says, happy to be in the sunshine with her mixing bowl full. She says she's a little girl again, and I almost believe her. Her eyes have a fire to them.

We'll have three pies at this rate, she says, as if they're already baked and there on table, cooling down.

I drink my lemonade. Mum wants to know why I'm not happy.

After the picking's done, Mum makes Julie sit on the back doorstep.

Say sorry, Julie, she says. I've had enough of you being nasty to your brother.

Julie won't ever say sorry. The day she does, the world will flip upside down and everyone's hats will fall off into outer space. Kangaroos will turn into lizards.

She says, I'm not hungry.

Mum lets me make a gingerbread man. I get to watch TV by myself.

Only after it's growing to dark does Mum finally give in. She reaches for her cigarette packet, but stops short of lighting up. Shall I or shan't I? her fingertips seem to say. She wants to stop smoking.

Julie wins again.

Come on you, I hear Mum saying. In you come, Miss. I swear I don't know who you take after.

Julie's told to sit at the table and not say a word.

Eat, says Mum.

Tonight it's alphabet soup. I can just imagine the words she's making—
POISON, BERRY, DEAD.

She eats her soup words alone. I've already eaten mine—
SISTER,
STUPID.

Dad's tea is in the oven, ruined, third night in a row.

He doesn't know when to say no, says Mum unhappily. Nothing's changed. Here we are and where's he? Working for bloody Tudor Crisps.

She keeps looking at the clock up on the mantelpiece, then Dad's empty chair. I know what she's thinking. In Cyprus we had grapes. In Cornwall we had strawberries.

We have blackberries, I say.

What? What are you talking about, Glyn?

We have blackberries.

I'll go run a bath, says Mum.

Coal

Me, I'm glad Dad works at Tudor Crisps. Because, if he wasn't there, where would he be? Underground, that's where.

I've seen the miners. I've seen their phlegm.

The coal mine is 600 fathoms deep beneath our feet in the fields behind our street. That's what I'm told by an older boy whose Dad works down there.

How deep is that? I ask Dad, first chance I get.

He puts down his papers and his pen. Very deep, he says, but the answer is meaningless.

Dad doesn't give up. Glyn, think of the deepest wishing well in all of England. It's so deep if you threw a burning rag and watched it falling, soon you wouldn't see it anymore. And if you dropped a brick, you'd never hear the splash.

Suddenly I am scared for all the dads in our street who work down the mine every day. They're swallowed up by the dark, and their boots splash in water, and their lungs are a handclap for clean air that never comes. No one can see them or hear them, these distant men, our neighbours, sent to smash fossil.

Ah, but they have lights, Dad says quickly. You've seen the pit helmet, Glyn. You shouldn't worry so much.

They have machines, too. There are roads under the ground. There are cutting machines and belts and trolleys.

I ask, Is it like another Horden down there, Dad?

It *is* Horden, he says. It's why this place exists. Take away the colliery, and there is no Horden. Same with Shotton. Same with any of the villages around these parts. Take away the coal, and what are you left with?

I don't know the answer and Dad doesn't tell me the answer. It's a mystery.

Time for bed, says Mum, when she sees how tired Dad is. Lately he's bringing home more and more paperwork to keep him going through the night. Under his feet the miners are working, too.

I'm off to bed. I don't want to sleep, though. I prop my pillow and look out across the allotments to the fields. I imagine a sweaty man eating a sandwich looking for the stars. He sees only a ceiling of coal.

The morning walks me into the back garden before Mum and Julie notice I'm gone.

It's bitter cold out. I don't see a fox or a rabbit. I only see my shoe prints sliding after me in wet grass. I lean my ear to the ground, thinking that *other* Horden might talk to me the way it talks to miners. I want to hear anything, machines especially.

But there's nothing.

On the way back I look up. I see an eagle hovering high above the allotments where the men grow leeks.

Mum says, Perhaps you saw a kestrel, pet. They're like an eagle, only smaller. Why don't you ask your teacher?

My teacher isn't even sure we get eagles in the north-east, only in the zoo.

I ask Miss Anderson.

Miss, do we get eagles in the north-east?

She doesn't know. It's a good question, though, she says. Keep asking those questions, Glyn. That's my boy.

Dead Man Loses

Today things are going very badly for us. We're down three men. We have three casualties before we've even been tagged.

The Germans don't care.

No fighting, you boys. Gordon's dad speaks up from inside his garden shed. We don't see him. I don't want to.

Gordon says, We're not fighting, Dad. Honest.

I bloody well mean it, gobshite. No fighting.

He has shaky hands. Then comes the coughing and the not-breathing. He's not well at all. Why he moved to Horden is anybody's guess, because he's unfit for work. He's an ambulance case, pour soul.

Come on, says Gordon, running me past the garden shed quick smart before his dad surfaces from the gloom. Gordon's always got bruises, and not just on his arms. He's had a black eye before now, and a nose that didn't want to stop bleeding.

Dad tells me it's the acid rising up in the man's tummy. A man that sick will turn to bitterness and bile. He's measured out his days in regret.

I don't know if dad has read this in a book, or watched it on TV, or that he just *knows*, but I'm sure he's right.

Your dad should see a doctor, I tell Gordon when the menace is passed.

And then I'm told the way sickness works in Horden. The doctor didn't want Gordon's dad going down the mine anymore. He wrote out a sick note. The note got torn up and thrown on the floor of the waiting room. A man who can't work anymore gets his house taken away. A few streets over, someone died. They found him dead next to his shovel. The bosses stopped the free delivery of coal the same day. A dead man loses all his entitlements. The wife and bairns don't live in Horden anymore. They're probably in a cave at Blackhall Rocks. Their beds will be set up, and they'll have potatoes for soup. A baby was born in a cave at Blackhall Rocks, in the old days before newspaper men learned how to shame the bosses with headlines that shouted, Family Out On The Street!

Gordon tells me doctors are nothing but bloody interfering idiots, bugger the lot of them.

He's a swearer, Gordon is. And he pushes me! To the ground!

Now we're crawling on our bellies to be closer to the enemy, Andrew.

Ready? asks Gordon.

I am, yes.

Up! Go, Glyn!

Andrew has nowhere to run. We've caught him picking his nose.

I've got you now, mister! I am crashing through grass like a baboon.

Andrew starts to run.

Gordon's already running. Andrew is cornered. I tag him, he dies. But he second-guesses me and is down the street and through the gate into his own back garden.

Hey! Not fair! Andrew, that's cheating!

His back garden isn't in the war. Past the house end corner isn't in the war. Anywhere on the pit wall side isn't in the war.

You're cheating! I shout as he rests a while. Andrew's cheating, everybody!

No one's allowed in Andrew's back garden. Andrew isn't even allowed, but he's in there anyway. His dad grows champion leeks in straight rows and they're nearly up for the judging. It's the only garden in the street that has a scarecrow.

Andrew is always doing this, running off into no-man's land, the big baby. In a real war he'd have stood on a landmine by now, and it's hard to run when you've suddenly no legs and blood misting up.

But he he can still be my best friend.

Knife

The day Tommy, Andrew and Gordon are all too busy to come out and play is the day Julie tricks me into playing her silly game. She's been to Auntie Linda's again.

You're in labour, she says, leading me by the hand into the back garden of two girls—Amanda and Sally—who live up the road. Their dad doesn't like gardening at all. It's a garden for getting lost in, that's how tall the grass has grown. We have to trample down a place to play.

Julie takes charge. She's always taking charge.

Lie down in the soft grass, she orders me, then, No, not on your side. You can't have a baby on your side. On your back. Don't you know anything?

I know grass is itchy.

Julie teases me. You don't even know how babies come out, do you?

Yes, I do, I say. They're like eels.

I'll be the doctor, says Julie, wanting me to lie still. Just call me, Doctor.

The game starts. Nurse Amanda says in a hurry-up voice, Oh, doctor, come quick. The baby is on its way.

The doctor pushes open a pretend door in the long grass and is standing over me.

I say, Can I get up now, Julie? This grass itches.

You're having a baby. Shut up and look happy for your husband. He's out there pacing the floor.

I try to look happy. There might be beetles. Grass is a housing estate.

Nurse Sally, says Julie, please look at the chart and tell me what it says. Is this woman an emergency?

Nurse Sally looks at her chart. She says, Pulse normal. Blood pressure normal. Everything is coming along nicely.

Good, good. That's what we like to hear, says Julie. Scream a bit when I say so.

A lot, says Nurse Amanda, because her auntie just had a baby and she nearly passed out with the hurting.

Hearing this, Julie gives more orders. She wants a stick for a needle.

Or we could give the patient gas, says Nurse Amanda. Gas is good.

Nurse Sally is in full agreement. Gas is the way to go.

Suddenly I'm not liking this game at all, and I say so.

No more talking, you, says the doctor bossily. Close your eyes and count to a hundred.

I do as I'm told. One, two, three—

Squinting, I watch Nurse Amanda hand over Dolly. Julie hands Dolly onto Nurse Sally.

Put it under his jumper, I hear her whisper.

Eyes shut tight, you!

Then I have Dolly under my jumper. It doesn't tickle, it scratches.

You're stretching my jumper, I say, trying to sit up.

Knife, says the doctor, and I am made to lie back down. You can open your eyes now. If you must.

Nurse Amanda hands over the knife, which is a stick. Julie pretends to cut open my tummy.

Scream. You have to scream now.

I don't want to scream.

Now, says Julie, or you can't play with us.

I give one long scream. It's not loud, or older boys down our lane will come running. I'll be laughed at.

Thankyou, says Julie, then, Oh, dear. The baby's coming out upside-down and back-to-front. Nurse Sally, turn on the gas. Nurse Amanda, fetch me the gas mask that's hanging up on that wall. Quick now, or we'll lose the both of them.

I pretend-scream again.

No, you're under the gas, stupid. You're asleep dreaming of something nice.

Having a baby is a lot of remembering when to scream and when to shut up.

Julie yanks Dolly out from under my jumper.

Ow!

I open my eyes.

Amanda and Sally are no longer playing nurses. They're hugging each other and waah-waahing, pretending to be new-born babies crying.

We're twins, says Sally, which is true. They *are* twins.

Ah, there, there, Julie is saying. Aren't they just perfect angels!

Now I'm not in the game anymore.

Sally waah-waahs some more.

Oh, shush now, little one, says Julie, holding Dolly the way a real mum would, with Amanda saying, Ah, what lovely bairns you have. Twins it is.

Suddenly I'm forgotten. The game is stupid. Girls don't know how to play by the rules.

That was fun, says Sally.

Yes, says Julie. We're going to watch TV, Glyn. You're not allowed, so don't even ask.

Other People's Houses

I wander down our back lane. Julie is a witch. Amanda and Sally are stupid to have a witch for a friend.

Then a man I have never seen before stops me and asks, Can you ride a bike, lad?

Never tried, I say.

He's a stranger, kitted out in expensive clothes. I am standing there, not sure what to say next. But he knows Jenny, Gordon's sister.

Here, doll, he says. Let the boy have a try. He lifts Jenny off the bike and invites me to take her place. Go ahead, lad. It's okay. You're not scared, are you?

I'm not scared of a bike, no. I get on.

What's your name, anyway? he asks.

Jenny tells him my name. I'm feeling awkward as soon as she does.

So you're from Wales?

No. I'm from here, I say.

Mum is there in no time at all, taking off her apron and standing by our back gate. She's come out to keep an eye on the man I'm talking to.

Well, then, let's see what you're made of, then.

He means me. He means the bike. He steadies me and I'm all set to take off down the lane. Or embarrass myself trying.

Ready?

Yes.

It's clear he's no miner. Blind Freddie can see that. His shirt is all swirly patterns and his trousers are purple and he's not wearing a cap.

Righto, he says. I'll push the bike, lad. All you have to do is pedal like mad.

I want to like him, this sharp-dressed fellow with the quick tongue.

Mum marches over, arms folded. She says, Get off the bike, Glyn.

He's okay, missus. No harm done.

Off. Now. I won't say it again.

I do as I'm told. The man is left holding the bike.

Jenny, do you know this man? asks Mum.

He's Uncle Teddy.

Oh, he is, is he?

Mum says something to Jenny's Uncle Teddy, but I don't hear what. I've been told to stand by our gate. The man says something back, and he's smiling. But his smile is all wrong somehow. It's not a smile I very much like.

Mum says, I don't want you talking to my boy.

Have it your own way, missus, he says.

Jenny, is your mum in? asks Mum.

She is, Mrs Parry. She's having a lie down.

Well, I think you should go home now. Go on. In you go, pet.

The man lays the bike down. He starts to walk away.

Not so fast you, Mum calls after him.

He's still smiling, shaking his head, but he doesn't look back the whole time he's leaving. Mum stands watching him go.

Jenny, go home, she says, and now she's making sure Jenny does as she's told. Jenny picks the bike up and leans it against the coal shed wall. She opens her back gate and is in the yard.

Then it's my turn. Mum is poker-faced.

That man, she says. He's not a nice man.

I tell her I didn't like him, either.

Then why did you talk to him, Glyn? You even got on his bike.

It's Jenny's bike, I say. He's given her it as a present.

Yes, and I wonder what's going on in that house now that the mister's away.

Jenny's dad doesn't live there anymore. Where he's moved to, no one knows.

It's right queer, says Mum, sighing. Don't play with Jenny anymore. Not unless I say so. There's trouble brewing under that roof.

I ask, What's she done?

Nothing, says Mum, and don't be saying I said otherwise. Did I say she's done something wrong?

I shake my head. No.

No, that's right. Don't say anything to anyone. What happens in other people's houses is their own business.

She sends me upstairs to my room. I don't know what for, only that I'm in trouble, and when I ask why, she won't tell me.

You never learn, Glyn. You're too trusting, just like your dad.

Battle Of Britain

Another time I get in trouble is the day Mr Healy buys in some new toys. The World War II planes are in the shop window on a tray, threepence each, and ten models to choose from. I want them all.

Mum says, Come on, Glyn. What are you standing here for?

Look, Mum. Can I have one? Please.

As soon as Mum sees what they are, she tells me no. Forget it, they're Hong Kong rubbish. She says she hasn't got threepence to waste on rubbish.

I say, They're not rubbish, Mum.

Glyn, they're cheap and nasty. Don't ask again.

But—

I don't say what I'm thinking. If I do I'll be whining, and then Mum will never say yes.

Inside is worse. On the counter is another tray, and more models to choose from—Spitfire, Stuka, Mustang, Fokker. Suddenly all I can think about is the war I'll have.

Mum, look. These ones are better.

Mum doesn't want to look. We are there to buy potatoes—and a packet of Embassy cigarettes—not some silly plastic airplanes that will break soon as you look at them.

Warplanes, Mum. These are for war.

One more good reason not to buy them, she says. Now, don't embarrass me.

From my piggy bank, Mum. Please, Mum. Just that Spitfire.

He's got his mind set, says Mr Healy the shopkeeper.

Mum isn't listening. She has me by the wrist and is leaning into my face.

Just wait till I get you home, she says.

Mr Healy is laughing. Then he isn't laughing.

Don't encourage him, says Mum, taking her change. To me she says, As for you, outside. Now.

The shop bell clangs behind me. A scruffy dog trots past me with its head down.

Through the shop window I see Mr Healy on the sharp end of Mum's bad temper. I like Mr Healy. He gets in penny bangers for bonfire night, and selection boxes for Christmas.

Then the shop bell is clanging again, and it's *my* turn to be told.

Home, now, says Mum. Don't walk slow.

We're past the fifth gate and getting close to passing Auntie Linda's house when Mum says, Dad lost his job.

What job?

His job! His job, poor thing. He made a big mistake with the vegetable oil and they sacked him. So please don't be asking for any pocket money.

I won't be seeing how the crisps are made?

It's the wrong question to be asking.

All week I daydream of the dogfights I could be having. All week Dad walks up and down the roads in Peterlee asking factory managers for a new job.

Then, a miracle from heaven! I see a ten shilling note resting up against the kerb outside our house. So now I am the richest boy in Horden.

The warplanes are still waiting for me in the window and on the counter.

I've got ten shillings to spend, I say, and I show Mr Healy.

He says, Your mum gave you ten shillings, did she?

Nana did, I quickly say. For my birthday in May.

So I see, says Mr Healy. May is months away.

Mr Healy has a cloth in his hand. He's wiping dust off cans.

She says I can buy anything I want, I tell him. It's my money to spend how I like.

Does your mum know?

Yes. She was the one who sent me.

Hearing this, Mr Healy puts the cloth down. Well, I don't know about this, he says. Didn't your poor dad just lose his job?

Yes, I say. But it's okay. Really.

I hand over the money. Soon I'm choosing my warplanes for the Battle of Britain.

Mr Healy is putting them in a bag for me when he says, You wouldn't be telling me fibs now, young man? I won't be lied to in my own shop.

I tell him no, I'm not telling lies.

Mr Healy isn't finished with me yet. Because it's not often a boy walks into my shop with a tenner. That money wouldn't be stolen out of his mother's purse, now, would it?

Nana gave me ten shillings, I say.

The last warplane goes into the bag. I leave the shop with none of my earlier joy. I detour to Tommy's house.

Let's have a war, I say, tipping the bag out on his carpet.

Before Tommy can say one word his mum says, That's a lot of planes you have there, Glyn.

Nana gave me ten shillings, I say.

Oh, I see. Well, you two play nice. I'm just going out for a minute.

As soon as I walk in the door, Mum is waiting for me. Her ashtray is full. I'm in big trouble.

Give me those bloody planes, she says, snatching the bag out of my hand.

A kitchen chair is already set up for me. This is my punishment, to sit where the two walls meet and not say a word.

Mum, please—

I'm still sitting there when Dad's home. He's had no luck finding a new job. It's grim.

Oh, he says, walking into the front room and seeing me. What's this?

I have to tell him everything.

Out Of Tune

But then Dad does get a job, right across the road from his old one—in the shirt factory—so now we're the luckiest family in the world on this hot August holiday. This is what Mum is saying, as the bus comes flying down Sunderland Road. Dad agrees it's a perfect day to get out of Horden and be by the seaside.

Mum says Horden Beach *was* the seaside, but not anymore. Now the golden sand is coal black. The colliery tips waste straight into the sea. Buckets run on cables high over the beach. But the sea doesn't want the waste, and that's where the moon tide comes in, and where the sea coalers come in, too, with their monster lorries left over from the army.

They've ruined the whole coastline, says Mum.

Dad says, Yes, well, let's not spoil the day, Josie. There's other beaches. There's Crimdon.

The bus pulls up and we all get on, Julie and me first, mind the step, you two, then Mum with our bucket and spades. Dad has everything else.

Lots of other mums and dads have the same idea. Let's away to Crimdon to steal the last of the sunshine. The sun is powerfully rare. We catch the bus. If it was a coach to Whitby we'd all be singing Yellow Submarine.

Mum has been spotted by a lady who says, Is that you, Josie Hall?

Josie Parry now, says Mum, holding up her ring finger. There's no doubting Mum is a married woman anyway, because here we are, me and Julie, proof indisputable.

Dad nods to the woman and smiles. She's someone who went to school with Mum. Now it's her turn to show off her ring that must have cost a small fortune.

Oh, Josie, wouldn't you know, says the woman. He's away at sea just now and I miss him awful.

Get away! says Mum, but not nasty. She's remembering all the days the Navy kept her own man away.

Soon Mum and the woman are talking about tearful rushed goodbyes.

But he's out now, aren't you, darling? says Mum, squeezing Dad's hand.
That's right, says Dad.

After this, he falls into his own quiet, and I'm hoping he's not missing his old sea legs too much.

Do you miss the sea? the woman wants to know, and Dad tells her no. He's telling her a fib.

We're very happy, aren't we, darling? says Mum.

Very. Yes, we are.

When Dad says this, I look at him. He sees me looking and smiles.

Dad is fine. I *think* Dad is fine. He's got a job that's better than Tudor Crisps. Now he's working at Dewhirst.

Look, Glyn. Do you see?

Here is the Dene. And here is the viaduct. Our bus is flying. It feels like we're flying, this high up, and soon I'm looking out the window at the woods where monks hid and goblins plotted.

The woods, I say, almost as a wish.

Aye, the woods, says Dad, who was a wild boy once. He and his brothers hooted the cuckoo call all through Menai on the lovely island of Anglesey that Dad still calls home.

There are mushrooms taller than a man's head, I say, squashing my face against the bus window. And monks who are mad.

Dad says, You've been listening to Grandad.

Then it's Dad's turn to talk to a passenger. A man asks him for the time, and after that they are talking about a life at sea.

I wish I'd gone into the Navy, says the man. He works in the pit in Easington. It's the only place he's ever worked, most of it underground.

He gets into a coughing fit.

Sorry about this, he says, turning his head away to spit into rag. His breathing is an out-of-tune accordion.

He's not well, I can tell.

Sunderland for the cup, right? says the man, lightening up.

This one's a Newcastle supporter, says Dad. A traitor in our midst.

Suddenly the man is noticing me.

Newcastle? What'd you want to support them for? They're miles up the road.

The colours, I say. I like black and white.

Ah, I see. Well, that's alright then. Those are serious colours, black and white.

Dad knows Wyn Davies, I quickly say.

Oh, he does, does he? The man's a marvel with his head, mind.

It's the truth, says Dad.

So, you're not a miner, then?

Dad shakes his head quickly, as if to say, No, no. Doesn't it show? I'm a shirt factory man now. I'm in the warehouse.

What I'm not expecting next is for the man to mention Australia. Dad is suddenly very interested.

My brother-in-law, says the man matter-of-factly. Brisbane.

What does he think of it?

Paradise. Good job, good money, plenty of sun. I'd be out there like a shot if the wife let me.

Dad smiles at this, until he notices Mum listening in.

The bus slows down and it's nearly our stop.

Monkey's Blood

So, Crimdon it is! Gutsy-eyed seagulls hop across the sand. They're telling all their relatives, Eats! Eats!

Mum has made the best sandwiches for a holiday treat. We have leg ham, and a thick slice cheddar between crusty bread.

Get lost, damned seagulls, I say.

Dad has never heard me talk like this before. He is shocked. Who taught you to say that?

No one. A boy.

What boy?

A boy at school. A new boy.

It's not nice, says Mum, handing out plastic plates. Don't say it again.

You haven't to hang around foul-mouthed boys, says Dad, shuffling up beside me on the Crimdon sand. Boys like that will only get you into trouble.

Yes, Dad. Sorry, Dad.

After we've eaten our fill, Julie starts digging with her spade. She wants a sandcastle that's bigger than any other, which means work for me and Dad. My job is to fill the moat. I get the bucket and run down to the water. The water is brisk, the North Sea.

But there's no filling the moat. The water soaks away.

This isn't going to work, I say, and Dad has no answer to give, only a story to tell.

My school had a moat, he says. How many schools do you suppose have their own moat?

The Welsh are different. Their schools are a castle in Beaumaris.

A man close-by has listened to Dad.

Get away, he says, tapping his wife on the leg. Did you hear that? A castle for a school.

I heard, says the man's wife. When she turns round and spots the jumper Mum is knitting.

That's a bonny pattern you have there, she says.

It's for the baby. My sister Linda.

Righto, says the woman.

Crimdon makes wives smile and strangers talk, and this gives me my chance to run down to the sea again.

Julie doesn't like the water. It's too cold, too deep. Her sandcastle is starting to look like it's supposed to. She has a little union jack flag to fly, a warning to that mad Scottish lot across the Tyne.

A fat lady sits cross-legged on her towel, eating cake that has a cherry stuck on the icing.

You're staring again, Glyn, says Dad, following me down to the shoreline, and then we're dipping our toes.

This, he says with a shiver, is not the Mediterranean.

After that, ice cream.

Mum says she's not made of money.

The ice cream van hasn't moved at all. There's been a steady line to its window all day.

Go on, then, says Mum at last, but only a cornet.

Julie asks what else there is. Can she have a banana split, with nuts and monkey's blood?

No, Julie. You can have a cornet like everyone else.

Who remembers where we are going next week? asks Dad.

Me! I remember!

Llanfair, I say.

Yes, Llanfair.

Where's that? asks Julie.

Wales, stupid. Where else would it be?

Glyn, be nice, says Mum.

I *was* being nice.

And don't be cheeky, says Mum.

Later, when it's just Dad and me and time for bed, he's tucking me in with an idea for our Welsh holiday.

We'll go meet Uncle Tom. We'll go to his house and pay him a visit. He'll be chuffed.

Who is he? I want to know.

A hero of the village, Son. A man who fought in the war. Just you and me, okay. No Mum or Julie.

Okay.

Grandad has agreed to loan us the car. We'll have the best holiday, you'll see.

Part Seven



Purple Dodgem Car

My best Wales holiday ends twenty seconds into a dodgem ride in Rhyll.
It's our third day and the funfair is the place to be.

Let's go, Glyn, says Dad, who is the happiest dad in the world now that
he has Welsh soil beneath his feet and clean mountain air to breathe.

He grabs my hand before Mum can change her mind. Riders get off and
dodgem cars sit empty, but not for long.

That one! Dad pushes me in the direction of a red car.

Someone else's dad and his boy are too fast for us.

Okay, that one!

We jump into a purple car.

Keep your hands inside at all times, warns Dad, reading aloud the sign
on the back wall.

I want fast. I want to be the fastest dodgem car rider. Call me, Fast Boy.

I look for Mum and Julie. They aren't even watching. Mum is talking to
a woman from Kent. She's glad to hear English spoken again, and the other
lady is, too.

Mum will be saying, They're a funny lot, the Welsh.

And the lady will be saying, Ah, but it's nice mountains and valleys they
have, and lovely Tom Jones, too.

Julie has her back to the dodgems. She's watching a balloon
disappearing over the sea. It's not a red balloon. Then a hooter sounds. It
teases my ears with the prospect of speed. Julie is interested to see me get
smashed. All around us, cars jump forward.

Here we go, Glyn. Hold on tight, Son.

Only, we have a problem. Our purple dodgem car doesn't want to move.
It's stuck. Dad has the wheel turned wrong. He keeps fast-bumping us into
the barrier.

All the other cars are racing.

Come on, man! shouts a rider who has bumped into us. The other way!

Then an attendant is leaning into our car. He snatches the wheel from Dad. Suddenly we are off.

Alright, then? says our rescuer, and he jumps away to help another stuck rider. An oily rag is looped through his belt. His trousers are filthy with oil. Running away to join the fairground means lots of dirt.

Wooo! shouts Dad, glad to be moving.

Only, a fast dodgem car comes right at us. It's big in my vision.

Dad!

After that I can't see properly. Blood drips through my fingers. All I know is I'm being carried back into sunshine.

Oh, God, look at him, I hear Mum say, and then I'm dumped on the grass. Look at his brow!

Mum is touching my eyebrow. Ouch! I twist my head. Dad wipes blood with his hankie.

You must let me see, says Mum, then, God, you're cut. He's cut, Glynne.

Yes, Josie. I can see that.

I'm not crying. I've managed to find a different place to be.

Blood fetches me back. It's all down my shirt and in my hair and dripping off my cheek. I'm not crying, I'm not even scared.

Other mums and dads are seeing if they can help. I'll call an ambulance, says a man, and it's all Dad can do to stop him.

I don't think he's for the ambulance, says another man. No, no ambulance. It's not deep.

Someone says, Ouch! Someone else says, No, it's nothing. See. The boy is fine.

Already they are drifting away. I'm no more drama than a rabbit in a field.

Mum says to Dad, Does he need a doctor? We should see a doctor.

Dad stands me up. A big bump is coming up on my brow. I wanted to touch it, but it's throbbing.

Hold the hankie on there, Glyn. That's it. We're leaving.

We are walking out of the fair, and Julie says, What about my ride?

Mum pulls her away by the arm. I'd keep very quiet if I were you, Julie, she says. I'm in no mood for your fun and games.

Julie doesn't ask again. She's too busy hating me.

It's only a small cut, says Dad, examining me again when we have reached Grandad's Volkswagen. Do you need a doctor, Glyn?

How can he know? says Mum angrily. I told you not to take him on those bloody things. She rummages inside her handbag. She needs to smoke. What did I say, Glynne? Didn't I beg you not to take him?

Josie, please.

The drive back to Llanfair is sighs and cigarettes in the front, sulks and hatred in the back, and who's to blame? No one, that's who. There are misty mountains on one side and white beaches on the other. Dad keeps quiet.

It was a damned accident, he says at last.

An accident waiting to happen, says Mum frostily.

Tonight when he's dreaming of his Menai woods, Mum will be Dad's owl conscience sitting on a low branch, letting him know how dangerous dodgem cars are and what a fool Welshman he is.

Oceans

Mum makes me stay indoors for one whole day. The bump on my brow is nothing and the cut barely a scratch, but she's not taking any chances. She sends me upstairs for a lie-down on the big double bed.

We are staying with Nain and Taid. Their house is at the top of the village, next to woods and fields and postcard views of Snowdonia.

Dad remembers snow from when he was a boy. As soon as Mum is gone to Auntie Sally's for a cigarette—English is spoken there once Uncle Tudor is off to work—Dad comes up the stairs to see how I am.

I'm not hurting, Dad, I say, because I want to be out of this bedroom and out of this house and back to exploring the big rock in the field along the lane. There are places to climb and places to hide.

I brought you lemonade, says Dad. Try not to spill any on Nain's bedspread.

Lemonade means, Sorry, Son. Mum's orders. You're not going anywhere too soon.

Dad looks at the view that has not changed in centuries. He says, Hillary trained on those mountains.

Who's Hillary?

A true Son of the Commonwealth. A New Zealander. Do you even know where that is, New Zealand?

I shake my head. Dad goes downstairs to fetch Taid's atlas. When he's back he sits on the big bed beside me and turns to a map of all the countries. We find New Zealand. It's across the page.

What's down there? I ask.

Sheep, Son. And cows. That's because there's lots of grass and very few people. I've never been there myself, but it's what I've heard. It's the land of the long cloud.

I can see that New Zealand is a long way away and surrounded by blue.

What's the blue, Dad?

Oceans, Son. And see here. Australia. I told you about Australia, remember.

I do remember. Australia is kangaroos, koalas and kookaburras, magpies and cockatoos.

Dad says, There's beaches, and sunshine, and a better life for those who want it. They're bending over backwards to get workers out there. Why shouldn't that be us, Glyn? It pains me to be missing out.

Dad's had enough of living in the north-east. His new job at the shirt factory hurts worse than any dodgem car. He's stuck there, listening to sewing machines and watching the clock. He wants to move us all again, back to sunshine and blue. Not quite Cyprus, he says, but somewhere Mediterranean. He's shining just to be telling me this. He says, Horden's no place for a boy like you, Glyn. You're a bard, not a barbarian. You'll be swallowed up by their ugly pit humour.

I have no idea what Dad is talking about, but I say not one word to spoil his happiness. Then he surprises me.

We're to leave Horden, he says in a quiet voice. Mum will have words, I know, but I do not choose those miserable streets. I have to get us away.

Don't you like Horden, Dad?

He doesn't want to admit it. There might be a plate hitting the wall. A cup might join it. All the plates and all the cups, and maybe even a fork, if Dad doesn't shut it. Then we'll be eating out of newspaper.

Dad turns my question around. He asks, Do *you* like it?

I like playing wars, I say. I like our big garden across the lane.

Dad doesn't press me. Anyway, he says, closing the atlas. Hillary's a New Zealander and those mountains you're seeing out this window are where he trained. A great, great man who's done something with his life.

What's he done? I ask.

Climbed the mountain.

Dad, I say. There's a pot under the bed.

Dad smiles.

He says, This bedroom was for me and your Uncle Tudor and your Uncle Owen. We had three single beds then, not this monster. Ken and Len had the other room.

Then he is telling me the story of the toy army tank that crawled over his tummy one Christmas morning. The army tank was hidden under his bed by Father Christmas, and he didn't even know it was there. At breakfast Taid said to Nain, Who left that parcel under the boy's bed?

Which boy? said Nain, passing out plates. We have five boys here to feed.

Taid says, The boy my shoe is pointing to.

Quickly, Uncle Len, Uncle Ken, Uncle Owen, Uncle Tudor and my dad Glynne all looked under the table. They were five boys having breakfast on Christmas morning in Wales.

My bed! said Dad, and he ran up the stairs to find the parcel Santa had left.

I wish I had an army tank, I say.

It was a good toy, says Dad.

And I wish I had a sheepdog called Bob.

Me, too, Son. Me, too.

Llanfair

Later, I'm allowed downstairs. Mum has decided I'm alright now that I'm well rested. The holiday might not be ruined after all. We have two days left.

Taid is sitting in his armchair. He calls out something in Welsh to Nain who is in the kitchen. Nain laughs and says something in Welsh back to Taid. Now Taid laughs.

Mum looks uncomfortable, and seeing this Taid says, Josie, the boy will be fine.

He gives me a mint. His mints are never far away.

Soon I am telling him all about the RAF helicopter I saw.

We're well used to seeing those helicopters, says Taid, folding up his newspaper which is printed in Welsh and looks very strange.

Mum is gone. She's out the front door and walking along the lane to who knows where. Dad is after her. They're having words, I know.

Now Nain is calling out something else in Welsh, but there's no more laughter. Taid says, Shhh, Nell.

He's talking to me about silly climbers who don't pay enough respect to the cold. They break a leg or an arm, or they simply haven't the right gear, and then they're in big trouble.

What kind of trouble? I ask.

Men die up on those mountains, Glyn bach.

Have you climbed Snowdon? I ask.

This sends a smile. He's shaking his head, no, no. Then he's calling out Welsh words to Nain, who hears him in her kitchen and says happy words back to him.

I wish I could speak Welsh. The language is stubbornness and pride, and, I think, a kind of secret strength.

Taid says, Will you go running off to a life in the Navy like your father? Will you be turning the corner past Mrs Hughes' little shop there and not be seen again?

No, I'm going to be a pilot of the future, like Dan Dare. If you want to see me, look through a big telescope.

I see. Well, that's a very unusual job to aim for.

It's not a job, Taid. It's a life on Mars.

Then Mum and Dad are back, with Mum sour-faced, and Taid gets up to go in the kitchen to ask Nain how our tea is coming along.

Once the house is quiet, and no more creaks on the staircase, Dad sits on my bed and tells me not to worry about Mum.

She's just missing her own. Llanfair must feel very foreign to her, but it's the way we are, Glyn. We're Welsh, not English. It's who we are.

Llanfair is the short version of the village name. The long version starts and ends in spit. It's as long as the railway station platform. You can buy the longest train ticket in the world. When Dad was a boy of my age, English tourists paid a penny just to hear it said: Llanfair, the long version.

Try and try as I may, I cannot get the word out. Too long, and too many awkward sounds.

The spit trips me up.

The Mysterious, Beautiful Woman

The next day it's just me and Dad waiting for the others to get back from Bangor. Dad shows me a photograph of the woman who left the village to go to America. She is the aunt who never returned.

She lives in San Antonio, Texas, Dad tells me, when I pick up her photograph for a closer look. I imagine she's living a very glamorous life. Good luck to her.

She isn't dressed like an aunt you see on the doorstep wanting to borrow a cup of sugar. She looks more like a film star or a singer, with a rich husband and servants. There's probably a cocktail drink named after her.

Dad says, I like to think she married an oil-rich Texas cowboy and lives on a ranch. Wouldn't that be something?

Dad, cowboys aren't rich.

Don't you believe it. In Texas they own oil wells and drive Cadillacs.

Did you eat a steak there, Dad? When you were in the Navy?

Oh, I never got as far as Texas. Only as far as Rio.

The Rio Grande!

Rio de Janeiro, Son. South America, not North.

Oh, I say, a little disappointed.

This beautiful woman scandalised the village, says Dad, glad to have the photograph in his possession after so many years.

We're both looking more closely at the woman wearing the wide hat and sparkling necklace. She is a mystery.

I can understand her wanting to go, he says, having seen a bit of the world myself. The world is a rich and beautiful place.

You've been *nearly* everywhere, I say, wishing I could say the same.

Dad isn't really listening. He's travelling. He says, The sun did make me happy.

Me, too, I say.

You, too? You don't even remember, you rascal. You don't even remember the grapes.

Dad has a point there.

Let's put all these photos back in their box, he says, and I take one last look at the mysterious, beautiful woman who had the courage to vanish.

Then, noisily, Nain and Taid's little house at the top of the village is full again.

How are you? asks Mum, coming straight in to see me.

I've been sitting here, I say.

She feels my forehead and is satisfied. I'm no longer for the hospital. I'm cured.

We saw toys, says Julie. We've been in all the shops.

Be nice, Julie, says Mum, digging in the shopping bags for my present.

I know what it is, says Julie, spoiling my surprise.

I have a stick of candy rock from Bangor.

Well, says Mum, clapping her hands. Tomorrow is going to be sunny and we're going to the seaside. Isn't that right, Dad?

Before Dad can answer, Taid and Nain are inside the front door, speaking in Welsh. First Nain speaks to Dad. Then it's Taid's turn.

For once Mum doesn't even mind. She says, Come on, Julie. You can help me make a pot of tea.

Goosebumps

Dad chooses the quiet end of the seaside, beside the river mouth, away from the crowds.

Yes, perfect, he says. Just us and the seagulls.

He is eating his ham sandwich and sipping tea from his mug. He seems nicely settled. If I'm not careful, he'll sit in the deckchair for the rest of the afternoon. There'll be no time for exploring the beach or climbing the dunes.

Dad, can we play now? I say, and it's a silly question to be asking.

Glyn, some of us are still eating, he says.

In a minute, then.

In a minute we'll see. Aren't you hungry? You must be hungry.

I've already eaten mine, I say.

He offers me his plate anyway. There is one sandwich left. Three seagulls take tiny steps across the sand. Their names are Piggy, Gutsy and Gannet.

I'm full up, I say, wishing I'd asked for a kite.

Mum asks Dad if he'd like a bit of cake.

Later, he says, watching those three seagulls watching him.

You have to let your food go down, Mum tells me, even though it's down already, it's in my tummy, ate.

Those are big waves out there, says Dad, again looking at the far end of the beach. A big sea is running. We're better to stay here.

Mum doesn't want me anywhere near the water, not even the river mouth. I'll be lost. RAF helicopters will give up the search after a day. Lighthouse keepers up and down the coast will drink their cocoa and study the swell and wonder what became of the boy from County Durham, the disobedient one who looked like Joe 90 and broke his mother's heart.

Why don't you build a sandcastle, darling?

I'm not having any fun on our grand outing to the Welsh seaside. All we ever do is build a stupid sandcastle for the tide to rub out.

Can I swim, Mum? Please.

Across the other side I've spotted cliffs and driftwood and the beginnings of a cave. It isn't far.

Mum's not listening. She's finding her packet of Embassy. She's playing deaf. It means I've asked one time too many.

I ask anyway.

Please can I go in now, Mum? I'm boiling.

Can he? she asks Dad.

I guess, says Dad.

This means maybe.

I can swim, I say.

A little swim, says Mum, putting the picnic hamper to order. And, mind, no going in above your head. Now, I mean it, Glyn.

This end of the river doesn't look deep at all. It's a pond. I don't know why she's even worried.

Are you listening to me? she asks.

I'm listening, I tell her.

Dad finishes off his sandwich and waves me in.

I'll watch him, he says. Is Julie alright over there?

Mum looks to see that Julie isn't doing anything silly. There's no one else at this part of the beach. We have the whole of the river mouth to ourselves.

Julie's fine, says mum, satisfied, enjoying a cigarette. Leave her be. It's quiet.

Well, in you go, then, says Dad. Rather you than me. It looks freezing.

I'm in up to my ankles in case Mum makes him change his mind.

Is it cold? Dad wants to know.

Not icy, I say, putting a brave face on it.

Where this river starts is high up in the Welsh mountains and snow. Where this river ends is goosebumps.

Dad laughs. I wade in up to my waist, and now it's very cold. When I fall forward with a splash I have to suck in the shock and frog-kick away.

Deep

In no time at all I'm across to the other side. A ship must have smashed up in a storm. That's what I'm thinking when I'm climbing over rocks. In front of me, in the shadow place under the cliff, lies a flat square of wood that looks like a trapdoor.

Dad! Look!

Dad is out of his deckchair. I try to lift the driftwood find, but it's solid. I make turtle tracks in the sand, dragging it along.

Now Dad's waving for me to swim back. Leave it, he is shouting.

I want this trapdoor. I found this trapdoor. I have salvage rights and no one can take my find away.

Dad looks like a sea captain, the way he's standing there with hands on hips.

Pirates, Dad!

He isn't wanting pirates. It's me he wants.

Can you get back? he calls out to me. Come on back if you think you can.

This means he's got Mum in his ear most likely, telling him it's getting late, and we've had enough sun, Glynne, let's be off. But mostly—Is he alright over there?

Now, Glyn! Dad calls out, and I see him taking off his shoe. Julie is back. She's standing next to Dad.

I drag my treasure across the bumpy sand. When I'm next to the river, I push it in for a raft. It's the second last day of our holiday in Wales, my last chance to have an adventure. At first I think the wood is going to sink straight to the bottom. When it floats, I broadcast the news.

See, Dad! See!

No one wants my news.

Now Mum is standing next to Dad, and Julie is holding her hand. They're all three watching me.

The trapdoor is snatched off me by invisible hands. I'm swimming after it. The river has movement all of its own.

Dad surprises me. He's wanting to join me in the cold water. His other shoe is off, and so is his shirt and trousers. I see him in the river, swimming out to meet me.

Then he is tired and he can't stand up, that's how deep the water can be. He splashes harder now, and he's not going anywhere. A swimming instructor would be saying, Kick! Use the power in your legs, man.

I'm fine, says Dad, a few feet away from me now, paddling like a dog.

I have a raft, Dad. See. It doesn't sink.

When Dad sees me pushing the driftwood ahead of me, he tries to grab hold. His head goes under, and after that he's spluttering. The moment he reaches the trapdoor he's resting, saying, Made it!

See, Dad. Do you think it's off a ship?

Here, hold on, Glyn. For God's sake, don't let go.

He isn't bothered about ships. He's only interested in finding the bottom of the river with his toes. The water is deep.

Are you okay, Dad?

His breathing is ragged, like Grandad's almost. All of his weight—his arm and shoulder—rests on the trapdoor. His other arm strokes, strokes. He's swimming one-handed and getting a good rhythm up. Then everything tips violently and he loses his grip.

Hold on, he says again, spluttering.

I already was holding on.

There's no bottom, he says, and now I can count on being in big trouble.

Am I in trouble? I ask, because I don't want my holiday to end badly.

No, no trouble. Dad lets out a big breath. We're nearly—there.

We're nowhere near the sea, so I don't know why he's acting this way. Cold, is all.

And then he's happy again. His toes scrape the bottom and he hauls me off the raft and sends it on its way.

My wood! I cry out.

He's alright, Dad is saying to Mum, and Julie is watching me being carried like a rag doll to be deposited on the sand.

Then Dad is down beside me, laughing, as my treasure drifts further away, wanting to be back where it came from, some faraway place across the seven seas for pirates to dance a jig.

My treasure!

Mum smacks me on the leg.

A Garden

The next morning early, on our very last day, Dad walks me up a hill to meet Uncle Tom, his hero of the village.

He was wounded in the Great War, says Dad, explaining that Uncle Tom is his favourite uncle and a very brave man. His leg has never healed after the mustard gas of Flanders and the Somme.

What's mustard gas? I ask.

The wickedness of war, says Dad, which doesn't tell me much and I'm wishing for more. He says, A gas to kill men with, Glyn. They dropped it into the trenches and there was never enough warning.

And then I have my answer. Before they could get their mask on, their throats and lungs were finished. The gas made ulcers.

So now you know, he says. Just don't tell your sister.

The house where Uncle Tom lives has a big garden that is overgrown and wild-looking. Yes, I can believe an old man lives there alone, and that a garden is growing up wild all around him.

It was never like this, says Dad, but not too sadly.

A sycamore tree grows next to the wall. There are lots of places for a boy to hide. My father loves the garden and says so three times. A boy could be lost in there, pretending not to hear his brothers shout, Come out, come out, wherever you are!

Or so I suppose. Every garden is easy to love if there are branches to climb and fruit to steal and hiding places away from the house.

I wish our garden back in Horden was like this one. Our gang would be my gang, and we'd all know the secret war cries. Woop! Woop! Wooo! would be our signal sneak back to the bottom bushes. Hark! Hark! would be, They're coming! They're coming!

We could build a fort with an escape ladder and a rope.

Dad sees someone he knows, a man driving a yellow Austin Morris.

I went to school with that man, says Dad, when the car has passed.

Dad walks more slowly once the garden comes into plain view. The sky is dark, it's going to pour down, but he doesn't notice at all.

Over there used to be rhubarb all in a row. Over there used to be the woodpile and the saw. This was *my* Nain and Taid's house, your great grandparents. It fell to Uncle Tom. He's the only one left. He's the keeper of stories.

All Uncle Tom's brothers were killed in Flanders and the Somme. Others in the village disappeared the same way. That's why men all over the country stand drippy wet every November wearing their tray of red poppies.

War is shocking, he says.

I say yes, remembering what Grandad told me about horses that were killed. It's not nice to think about horses being shot or gassed or even breaking a leg, but that's what happened.

We walk up to the front door through a small gate and Dad knocks three times, loud, because Uncle Tom will be home, just a little deaf, is all.

A lot deaf.

Dad knocks again and we wait a long time, long enough for him to kneel down and tie my lace which keeps coming undone.

You need new shoes, Glyn. This pair's just about had it. I'll talk to Mum and see what can be done about it. That's if she's still talking to me.

I hate new shoes. Bigger boys stamp on your toes.

I hear movement, says Dad, straightening up.

The door opens.

Uncle Tom

I've never seen a wounded man before, only at the pictures. I wonder if he'll be in a wheelchair, or at least have a sweet nurse in attendance, but no, Uncle Tom answers the door unaided, a lonely old man, a cripple.

He smiles at me.

My father and he speak in Welsh. They both look up at the sky, then down at me, all the while Uncle Tom nodding and smiling, and then he holds out his bony fingers for me to shake.

I have chocolate biscuits, he says, leaning in close, all pipe tobacco and soap, and I guess correctly that these will be the only words of English spoken.

We go inside to the front room.

The front room is almost dark. It smells of ointment and newsprint. The whole of one wall is a huge Welsh dresser, with old photographs and medals.

Medals mean bravery.

In the corner stands a tall grandfather clock that tick-tocks loudly. Its face is the seaside, the most sunshine to be had this morning.

Here's a seat, says Dad, steering me to a settee beneath the window. Then he follows Uncle Tom into the bright kitchen to put the kettle on. I watch for a clue, hoping to see how a wounded man walks. Dad catches me looking and frowns.

I sit down. The first drops of rain spatter on the ground outside. A car drifts by, then another. The postman crosses the road, ignoring the rain. He doesn't care that he's getting soaked.

There isn't any mail for Uncle Tom. When you're as old as he is, and most of your friends lost to sickness and drooling, it's as if you become a ghost.

The kettle has boiled. A pot of tea is made. Dad and Uncle Tom walk back to the gloom. They sit in front of the empty fireplace to talk. Uncle

Tom is smiling at me. He has Dad's eyes; the war has not turned him into a monster.

Dad hands me a chocolate biscuit on a plate. He says, Count how many cars go by, Glyn. See if you reach ten. I bet you don't.

After that he forgets all about me, that's how pleased he is to be with his uncle. I have no idea what they are saying. Some words I recognise, however. I catch Horden, Australia, Josie. The rest is all code. I don't mind at all. I sit on the settee and watch the rain make patterns—dog, cat, hen.

We stay longer than fifteen minutes. It's closer to an hour. Mum will not be pleased. I count fifteen cars, two lorries and a motorbike. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. I like the clock that speaks of sunnier days. Yesterday was sunny.

I nibble my chocolate biscuit.

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Invisible Boy

Checking the Volkswagen engine for oil has put Mum in a mood. It's still our last morning in Wales—why aren't we on the road yet?—and trouble is starting like a wobbly tooth. Mum wants to back in Durham by tea time, but Dad is stalling. First the hour at Uncle Tom's, and now this business with Grandad's car.

The car will be fine, says Mum. Howay, Glynne. The sooner we're on the motorway.

Yes, the motorway, says Taid with his hands. Vroom!

Dad says, Fifteen minutes, Josie. You can wait that long. I have to check the battery next.

The battery will be fine! Glynne, please. The time. They'll be exhausted.

Plenty of time, he says, smiling past Mum on the front doorstep. Go inside. Have a cup of tea.

I've had a cup of tea, she says. It was a very nice cup of tea.

She goes inside. She takes Julie with her.

Come and say goodbye to Nain one last time, she says, not happy to be going back into the house.

This leaves Taid and Dad to talk important men's talk—the best garages for petrol, which roads to avoid. I think this is what they are saying.

Then it really is time to be going, with hugs and handshakes and manly slaps. Taid hands me a shilling for my journey. He's sly and Dad catches him too late.

I'll save it, I promise.

Put it in your piggy bank, says Taid. Don't let the fairies steal it.

Fairies don't need to steal a shilling, I say. They already have pots of gold.

Taid is impressed. You know your fairy lore, he says.

I do, Taid. It's true.

Julie has the same, one shiny shilling, or else there'd be a war on. There might be war anyway, because already Julie is saying, Can we stop at the shops in Bangor?

No, Julie, says Mum. No shops today. Now I mean it. Don't be asking all the way home, because I'm not in any mood for your nonsense.

Just one shop, Mum.

Julie!

I help Dad put the suitcases in Grandad's Volkswagen at the front. It's a car that has a beak.

Then we are going.

The long car ride back to the north-east is not a happy one, and the rain isn't helping. Mum calls the Welsh arrogant. Dad tells her we've a long way to go and he doesn't want to hear this. Mum doesn't care what Dad wants.

Josie, enough, says Dad. The children are listening.

Let them listen. Maybe they'll learn something.

The rain makes driving difficult. Dad is a very good driver, but the rain means it's going to be a long drive. If there's fog on the motorway, two hundred cars might crash, one after the other, and then we'll be on the news.

Do you have to smoke? he says.

Yes, as a matter of fact I do. One cigarette isn't going to hurt anyone.

Mum brings up the rudeness of the Welsh again.

Dad lets out a deep breath. Josie, pay no mind to it, he says. We are who we are.

Mum minds. She minds a lot. She says it's rude, and there's no call for it, and what's wrong with speaking English anyway? The whole world speaks English. Even the Africans have started speaking English. Why do the Welsh have to be so bloody awkward?

Were we talking about you? says Dad, and it's the wrong question to be asking.

Well, how would I even know? Yes. Probably.

Don't be like that. You're being unfair.

It's like we were invisible, Mum says, not listening to Dad. She means her and me and Julie.

Hearing Mum say this makes me wish for a magic cloak to wear. I can be Invisible Boy. Dogs being walked by their owners will whimper and whine, straining the leash to sniff the ground where I have walked, curious and confused.

Goodbye, holiday, I say under my breath. We're on the motorway trying to reach ninety.

Too fast! Too fast! the beak is saying.

Slow down, says Mum, after Dad almost misses a turn-off.

Mum can't get out of the place fast enough. Me, I rub my bruised brow to remind myself the place was real.

Part Eight



Not A Good Night

After Wales nothing seems right in our Horden house anymore. Dad and Mum have words about nothing. A saucepan hits the floor.

Go on, then! shouts Mum. Go on out the door!

And Dad does. He walks out the door and out of Belford Street and into the park where the leaves have all turned brown. The wind throttles them to the ground. Then it rains and he goes to Lloyd because Lloyd is the only one Dad knows to talk to.

Or he goes to the Bell Inn.

Don't worry about a little shouting, says Mum, when she catches me and Julie whispering. We're fine. Your dad and me are fine.

Why are you fighting? I want to know.

Never you mind. Watch your show, Glyn. You, too, Julie. Your father and me are champion.

She stands at the kitchen sink and smokes two cigarettes to tell us this, and the saucepan stays where it has landed.

Mum, there's peas.

Yes, darling. I know. Now don't you worry about peas. The peas aren't hurting a soul. Why don't you take Julie upstairs like a good boy and read her a book.

I don't want to, says Julie.

No, I didn't suppose you would, says Mum, and she locks herself in the bathroom and stays there for a good half hour.

We might as well go to bed, says Julie.

Might as well, I say.

I leave the TV on so that Mum can listen through the door if she wants to. Tonight is Opportunity Knocks, her favourite show, and she's missed half of it already.

Once in bed I am determined to stay awake for Dad. But if he comes home wolf howling and singing Danny Boy, I don't hear him. It's dark, and

it's late, no cars on the high road, and only the wind outside, spooky and violent, and not a good night all round.

I see him the next morning going out the door for work. I'm up early and there he is, buttoning up his great coat.

Autumn's upon us, he says, and not a word about the saucepan or the peas. He rubs my shoulder and braces himself for more bad weather.

Well, be good, Glyn.

And, yes, the front door is open and it's a grey sulk of a day, just like he knew it would be. He looks unhappy like he's got his head stuck inside a bad dream.

Why are you fighting? I want to shout after him, but I'm too late. He's gone.

First Mum, now Dad. They won't tell me why.

Tell me! I want to scream.

But they won't. They don't.

Go outside and play, says Mum, as soon as I'm home from school. Now, Glyn, I mean it. I want you outside and playing.

I've mentioned the peas again.

The Beatles

On the Saturday Dad tries to cheer us both up. He makes me jam and toast. Then he makes me hot chocolate. It's just us two because Mum is at the shops with Julie.

Look, he says, I'm feeling dreadful about all this. The other day, I mean. I don't like you to see Mum upset like that.

When I remain silent he says, Durham's not so grim. He says this and shakes his head.

I still say nothing.

Dad shifts in his chair like he's got a tummy upset. Then he forces a smile.

Some places are in complete darkness, Glyn. It's night time in the day. Can you believe that?

I want to. It's hard to believe. I eat my toast.

They must have huge electricity bills. You can't fathom it, but it's their life. Just like this is our life here.

Where does the sun go, Dad?

Nowhere. Well, somewhere. Look.

He shows me with the help of what's on the table. The sugar bowl is the sun; the big plate is the Earth. He moves the sugar bowl. He turns the plate.

Do you see? The sun is taking longer to reach us.

I don't see. I don't want to see. All I want is...I don't know what I want.

Mum is back not long after that, all breathless. Julie is her witness, too.

What's happened? asks Dad.

We both saw them, didn't we, Julie?

We did, Mum.

Saw who? Josie, calm down.

The Beatles, says Mum. We've just seen the Beatles drive past up at the crossroads. In a big posh car, too.

Dad is amused. He says, Josie, you did not see the Beatles just now. Sorry.

Oh, really? Mum fires off one of her looks. Then how do you explain the fact that John Lennon waved at our Julie here?

The next day the news is all around Horden. The Beatles were on their way to Newcastle. The car was shiny new. John Lennon waved at every child he saw. So, yes, Julie.

Let the Queen wave to Julie for all I care. So what? Anyone can sit in a car at the crossroad lights and wave.

Dad stays in the kitchen still refusing to believe. The Beatles passing through Horden. Sorry, Josie, but no.

The devil for me, says Mum, red-faced. The bloody devil!

She switches on the TV. But there's nothing to watch, only a documentary on the BBC.

Switch it off, says Dad, walking into the front room after her. Josie, switch the TV off. We need to talk.

Mum gets up off the settee. No, she says, with a shake of her head. No, Glynne, you need to talk.

She runs upstairs. We all hear the bedroom door slam. She leaves Dad standing there in the front room, not sure what to say or do next, and on the TV I see a rocket waiting on the launch pad.

Nasty

Then I have a new teacher. Miss Anderson is a Mrs now. She married her prince and has gone to London or Paris or Rome.

This one looks like work, whispers Tommy. He may well be right. The blackboard wants to eat us up with words and numbers. Words don't worry me much. I like words. There's music in words, and carol singing at Christmas. It's numbers I worry about. They're upturned dominoes, slapped down playing cards, and blind Mr Mallory holding out his shaky hand to Grandad, saying, How many pennies do I have, Freddie? Do you see a drink in there?

Numbers are yes and no, plus or minus, zeros and ones. What it all means I don't properly understand. Numbers are a puzzle without a picture.

You there. Stop day dreaming.

Tommy gives me a nudge.

Yes, you. Miss Stein is pointing me to a desk. That's where you'll sit from now on. You're a daydreamer or a troublemaker, I haven't made my mind up yet. Now sit.

Veronica in her dress with flowers starts to cry, and Miss Stein says, Stop that nonsense at once. This makes Veronica cry more, and her dress isn't so pretty with tears down the front.

In the end Miss Stein gets up out of her chair and says, There, there. We don't cry in this class.

I don't like Miss Stein. I won't be a billy goat for her. I definitely won't be her cheeky monkey. Already the boys are calling her Miss Frankenstein behind her back. I want to, too, but she'll hear me and then I'll be in for it.

Miss Stein is not Miss Anderson. Miss Stein is nasty. She has arranged the classroom and it's just not the same. Four long rows of desks facing the one big desk. *Her* desk.

Veronica hasn't stopped her nonsense. I can hear her sobbing. I want to lean over and say, It's no use sobbing. Pass it on.

I need to go to the toilet. I put up my hand, but Miss Stein doesn't look at me.

Miss, Glyn's got his hand up, Miss.

Not now, barks Miss Stein.

I pull my hand down.

If you don't stop being silly, says Miss Stein to the crybaby girl, you'll be sent to the headmaster.

The rule is, Stay in your seat. The rule is, No calling out. I put my hand up again. I say, Miss.

Miss Stein hasn't heard me or she doesn't want to. Again, I pull my hand down. Maybe the bell will ring soon and then I won't have to make her cross. I can wait that long.

I can't wait that long. Now it's my turn to start crying.

Aw, Miss, Glyn's wet his pants!

Candles For A Penny

After that I start hating school. No one will walk with me, only Andrew and Tommy. But some days even they stop walking with me.

I'm trouble.

Julie tells her friends she doesn't have to walk with me because I made Mum cry about the Beatles. I did not! They all laugh at the boy who pissed his pants, anyway, then walk faster. But a lonely boy called Arthur catches up, saying, I'll be your friend, Glyn.

Arthur doesn't have any friends. It's because he wasn't born properly. He has a hole in his heart. He could fall down dead in a week or a month or a year. He's the one to be waving at.

I soon find out walking with him through the park is a mistake. He picks up a leaf to look at. Then he picks up another leaf. He likes leaves.

C'mon, Arthur, I say, or we'll be in for it.

We're in for it anyway. We're late for school and that's against the rules. There are so many rules now that we have the evil Miss Stein, and big iron railings to keep us all in check. The railings are painted blacker than a sad man's regret. We see the playground empty.

We're in for it now, Arthur says, and I know that he's got that right.

Say we helped an old woman carry her bags, I tell him.

There wasn't any old woman, Arthur says, because he can't tell a lie. He's religious. Every Sunday he's in church sitting beside his nana who talks to God in riddles and lights candles for a penny.

The bell has already been rung, with the lollipop man driving off in his red mini, and I've never been this late before. That's because I've never walked with Leaf Boy before, and how slow can he be?

Tell Miss Stein it's not my fault, I say, and Arthur spits on the ground, his exclamation mark. He's a spitter, is Arthur, and no rag to mind his manners.

I can't say that, Glyn, he says. I won't lie for you.

You have to. You took so long.

I can't, he says.

So, after that, Arthur isn't my friend anymore. Walking by myself is better anyway.

Arthur's a slow head. The hole in his heart isn't the only troubles he's got. He fell off the swing when he was four and his skull cracked open. Ask Arthur what the capital of England is and he has to think about it. He sees gun smoke for a rainbow.

Thanks for getting me into trouble, Arthur, I say, when he's waiting for me outside the school gate at the end of the day. He still thinks he can be my friend!

Bye bye, mister, I tell him.

He just stands there, looking at the pavement. Leaf Boy. If he's not careful the name will stick.

Thunderbirds Are Go!

Then it's Saturday. Hooray for Saturday.

The line stretches halfway around the block. You have to do something wicked not to be in that line, like swear at a grown-up or nip your baby sister. That, or be stuck in bed with the measles.

Thunderbird Two is best, says Andrew, pointing to the poster.

Thunderbird One's the fastest, argues Tommy.

We move forward another yard. No one minds the long wait or the cold or even if it rains, only that the Empress shows the best films in Horden, which it does, sixpence to get in.

Thunderbirds Are Go! I say as I see the poster. In Technicolour.

No mum is waiting around to watch us go inside. They have two hours for shopping or visiting Gran or whatever they want. They happily give us up to the Empress. It's a fair trade, sixpence for freedom.

Our mum is off to Nana the witch to have another good cry about marrying a handsome Welshman who is one tenth daft and nine-tenths gypsy. That's what I think, at any rate.

Mum has been crying a lot. Dad should never have left the Navy, I hear her telling Auntie Mary and Auntie Linda just the other morning. Ee, I've ruined him, our Mary!

She has more tablets, too. She's been to the doctor.

A ride in Lady Penelope's pink Rolls Royce would cheer her up, I am thinking, as we reach our little window to pay for our ticket. And then we are inside. First comes the cartoon. That gets our feet stamping.

Staring up at the big screen, our necks hurt. We're sitting so close, but I'm not complaining. It's the dog end for me.

Batman!

And the familiar music washes over us and we settle back into our seats munching our sweets, wondering how the caped crusader will ever manage, but knowing that he always does, this Saturday and every Saturday, because there's no fooling Batman ever—he's filmed that way.

I want to be Batman.

Then comes the feature, and the big curtains pull sideways. The screen is wider now, and here comes Technicolour.

I live for Technicolour. It's everything the Give A Show Projector tries to be. Technicolour takes me up into outer space where there is an explosion. Virgil looks worried. This is sabotage. It's time to alert the boys on Stacy Island and push the palm trees flat.

And next week, Doctor Who and the Daleks.

One Saturday the unbelievable happens. I go to the Empress twice. Mum says she has been feeling bad about me and takes me there for the evening feature.

The real pictures!

This will be a good one, says a woman standing in the queue next to us. What, you're taking the bairn to see it?

He'll be fine with it, says Mum. He doesn't get scared easy, do you, darling?

Hearing Mum say this makes me fiercely determined. It's only a film. It's not *real* real. It's Technicolour. The Zulu warriors might be real, I don't know.

Suddenly I'm glad Mum's been feeling bad for me.

We reach the ticket booth. It's impossible not to pretend to be grown-up. Mum buys two tickets and I say, Mum, you should have asked for the dog end. Those seats are the cheapest.

Mum laughs, all embarrassed at what I've said. The people standing next to us have heard. She says, Darling, I'm not sitting all the way down there.

We climb the stairs like we're going to heaven. I've never been up to the good seats before. Saturday mornings the stairs are roped off to stop silly boys like Tommy thinking a great trick would be to fly.

Michael Caine is a marvellous actor, says Mum, but I'm more interested in seeing how the Welsh soldiers are going to keep thousands of Zulu warriors from cooking them in the pot.

Look away if you get scared, whispers Mum, a warning for me not to spoil the film for her. And mind, no talking.

We find very good seats, high up with no one's fat head in front of us. Mum's short and I'm short. We're the little people.

Mum opens her bag. She has a box of Maltesers.

Our treat, she says. Mind, no teasing your sister. If you do, I'll be disappointed.

I promise. I've forgotten all about Julie, anyway.

Then the lights are going down and people settle into their seats. The talking stops. First, we watch a cartoon.

You're allowed to laugh, says Mum. Relax a little.

I want to. It's not easy when I'm surrounded on all sides by grown-ups.

Here, says mum, taking my hand to give me maltesers.

I like maltesers. Maltesers aren't like tablets.

This will be something, says Mum, after the cartoon is over. Soon the picture's started and Michael Caine is standing up straight to attention.

Around me everyone smokes and is very serious. They're all thinking the same thing, that the Zulu chief is a cheeky monkey declaring war on Great Britain. Who does he think he is? Me, I'm waiting to hear the battle cry go up. That's when the story really starts. There'll be anger in Horden tonight. Don't be throwing spears at anyone wearing the Queen's uniform, not unless you want a war.

One last malteser lands in my hand. I try and make it last. It's a good thing the soldiers are all wearing red, to match the colour of their bloody insides. Mum says, Why do you keep rubbing your eyes?

I didn't think I was.

I'm having your eyes tested, she says. You're squinting.

It's technicolour, I tell her.

It's squinting, she says again. Dear me, now what? You'll be needing glasses I suppose.

Strong Colours

Mum's right. I need glasses. Technicolour and my squinting land me a visit to the Eye Infirmary in Sunderland.

You're going, and that's that, says Mum, and then we're on the bus and away.

The Eye Infirmary is not the scary place I expect. Noddy and Big Ears are painted on the wall. I like the room immediately. It is bright and happy, with comics for boys like me.

I read The Beano.

Soon my name is called out. I look at Mum. She's excited for me the same as when I went to the dentist. Maybe I'm to have a nice dream of giant strawberries. Then I stand up and the lady says, Hello, Glyn. Are you ready to have some fun?

She is wearing a long white coat and her fingernails are painted red. She carries a clipboard.

Will it hurt? I ask.

No not at all, she says. Come on, let's go see.

She takes me to another room, where there's a machine for me to stand in front of. I'm not sure I like what I see. It's a machine that doesn't do much of anything, just stands there like Robbie the Robot waiting to spit out sparks of destruction.

Then I meet the eye doctor. He says, Good morning, Glyn. How are we today?

Before I can say good morning back, his assistant is talking.

I told Glyn it's fun, she says.

Yes, it is fun, he says. Just, games with pictures. You'll like the pictures, I promise.

The doctor sits down on a stool, with the machine between us, ready to test my eyes. Mum's already told him I'm squinting. He'll be able to find the problem.

This is where you stand, Glyn, his assistant says.

She rests my chin on a support, and then I am looking through a lens. The doctor is an honest man. He shows me pictures.

All the time I'm looking the eye doctor is asking me which picture is the clearest. At first none of the pictures is the clearest. But I like the sound each lens makes as it drops it into its slot. That's the sound of cleverness.

What about now? he asks.

No, I say.

Another lens. More blurry pictures.

Now?

I think so.

Yes, I think so, too. Soon be finished. Now?

For the first time the pictures are almost sharp.

Oh, now I see. I say. Technicolour.

Technicolour is it? The doctor has a little laugh at this, saying, Well, yes, I suppose it is.

Now the fun starts. I have to put the guard in the sentry box. I have to put the lion in the cage.

This boy is passing all the tests, says the eye doctor to his helper.

I knew he would, she says. I can always tell the smart ones.

Goldfish in the bowl. Cat in the basket. The tests are easy. Anyone can pass these tests, so I feel like I'm cheating somehow.

I'm not cheating, I say.

Oh, we know that, says the assistant.

All finished, the eye doctor tells me.

Finished?

We're all done. Good boy.

The helper takes me back to the bright room, which is suddenly very bright. Noddy and Big Ears are in the sun. I rub my eyes.

So does he need glasses? Mum wants to know.

Definitely.

A fortnight later I am back. I have glasses. My glasses are exactly like cousin Tony's, except the right eye has a patch. The government wants every boy to see in strong colours, and to know where the kerb ends, and not to be hit by a bus.

The patch is to wake up my lazy left eye, says the doctor. This eye of yours isn't working hard enough.

It spends its days in bed, says Mum, trying to help.

You want to play for England, right? says the doctor.

This makes me think that I'd like that very much, thankyou. Newcastle United, I say. I'll chip the ball in the air for Wyn Davies to score a header.

Well, we need to strengthen the vision in that eye.

This visit is not like the last one. All the fun has flown out the window.

Soon the assistant is telling Mum the rules, because, like me, she wasn't expecting a patch.

He has to wear them all the time, adds the doctor. The glasses will only work over a very long time.

He'll wear them, says Mum. You will, Glyn.

No I won't, I am thinking. Already I hate them. The patch looks stupid.

You heard the doctor, says Mum, as soon as we are at the bus stop.

Take them back, Mum. Please.

If you take them off again, she says, I'll smack you.

But, Mum, they don't work, I say. They're stupid.

Leave them on!

Mum isn't listening. I'm stuck with the look that says stupid.

Circumstances

That night the big story on the news is a woman who has killed some children. Mum's still upset about what happened on the moors. I don't know where the moors are exactly and I'm glad. All I know is a mad one went out there to do some murdering. She had some bairns to kill.

Hanging's too good for that woman, says Mum.

I'm on the floor, playing with my favourite Matchbox car, which is an ice cream van. The ice cream man stands at the window and I wish it was me he was serving.

One cornet, please. With monkey's blood and nuts, please.

Mum isn't finished. She says, What have I told you about talking to strangers, Glyn?

Don't talk to strangers, I say.

That's right. Don't. You, too, Julie.

Julie is asleep on Dad's chair. Her bedtime has come and gone. When Mum looks up she says, Where do the hours run off to? I hate these nights when your father has to work overtime. He should be here enjoying this fire.

It's circumstances, I say, my new best word.

Yes, right, says Mum, getting up to peek through the curtains she hates. Your poor father.

A street light shines bright on the pavement in front of our house. Street lights shine all night in every street, otherwise cars would be crashing into people's front rooms.

Late again, Mum says, staying by the window. Mind, if I find out he's over at our Lloyd's telling more tales I'll clag him one.

We both know he's not.

Mum does the sums. Dad's working twelve hour shifts, six days a week. He's not supposed to work on Sundays, but he sometimes does. A little voice tells him to go see that the shirt factory is in tip top working order.

They're using him up, she says. I knew they would. It's money, I suppose.

She's wishing for a cigarette. Her packet is empty. The shop is shut. She sits down on the settee.

It's a roaring fire for once. We have a mountain of coal in the shed. Tonight the house is warm enough to grow bananas. I'll be a cheeky monkey yet, and then the Brooke Bond PG Tips people can put me on the TV. Hmmm, have a cup of tea, missus, I will say. Ooo Ooo Ooo.

I'm depressed, says Mum.

Me, too, I say, because now I'm thinking about poor Mickey Monkey and his plastic face crushed under tons of rotting garbage at the rubbish tip. He'll be sad and sorry and dead.

You, too, says Mum, surprised. How can you be depressed? Oh, come here, darling.

I put my Matchbox cars away and go to her. She pulls me in close and soon I am playing with her hair. I like Mum's hair, all golden curls and softness. My hair is straight.

He blames me, she says, staring into the fire. Then she lifts her head to look at me. You're a good boy for your mum. Julie, too. You're both very good children and your father is a good provider.

I don't know what to say. Mum saves me the worry. She gets up to make us both a cup of hot chocolate. She's been spying on Dad. I'm almost expecting jam and toast, but no, hot chocolate it is, and lots of sugar.

Dad comes home not long after that. He sits at the kitchen table and is not his usual self. He's cold and hungry, but more than that, unhappy, which means more troubles at work, and I wonder if a shirt factory in Peterlee isn't the worst job to have, after all.

A girl stitched her hand, he tells Mum, sitting down at the table. She's straight out of school a month ago and the needle ran right through.

Ouch. Poor thing, says Mum.

We sent her to hospital. We sent flowers.

Mum wants every detail. Me, too, which is why I curl up on the settee and be a cat. I'm there, but not there, and I can listen to the story.

Dad needs to tell the story, after such an awful thing has happened.

It's these blackouts, he says, and he's angry that a trade union is putting people's lives at risk. The whole country has gone mad with strikes and closures. There's not much great about Great Britain this year, he says.

Mum catches me listening to adults talking.

He's okay, says Dad, shifting in his seat, not smiling. He's heard the worst of it now, anyway.

Football

Dad is wrong. There's one thing that's great about Great Britain, and that would be the football. It's ten weeks to Christmas and football has stamped an excited look on Dad's face. He's taken Saturday afternoon off from work.

It's time you and me went to watch a match, Glyn. I wonder who could possibly be playing in Horden today.

I know then that it's the big game, for charity, and that a blue coach has driven up on the motorway all the way from London. They've come a long way, those players—past all the Esso tigers and Michelin men. Here in Horden, today, the best footballers in the land.

Dad holds up the Northern Echo and says, Could it be the cream of England, I wonder?

Soon I'm wearing my coat and scarf and balaclava. Mum puts a sixpence in my pocket and says, Mind, if you tell Julie I'll murder you.

He's not going to tell, are you, Glyn?

No, not me.

It's so cold out there today, says Mum, wrapping me up tighter than cotton. Try to keep out of the wind.

We walk. Everyone in Horden walks, seeing how there's not many who can afford a car. The recreation ground isn't far. Horden was planned that way. After monks saw coal in the cliffs a hundred years ago, every road was planned, over and under the ground.

Dad pays a man at the gate and then we're through the turnstile. I'm not ready for the size of the crowd.

Look, they're all here, says Dad, meaning the hundreds of men who have turned out for the big charity match. There aren't many wives or girlfriends.

The colliery band marches over to kick-off spot. They play God save the Queen.

Is *she* here? I ask.

No, not today, says Dad.

Now the colliery band leaves the pitch. Then we all clap and whistle. I *try* to whistle. The footballers are running on. The man next to me shouts, Howay the lads.

Every footballer has a number on his back. They run this way and that, wanting to be warm on a cold afternoon beside the North Sea. Soon they're all passing the football, making little runs and doing stretches. No one at school thinks to do little stretches. We just go at it like thugs.

Next the referee and linesmen run onto the pitch, all in black to show who's boss. Black is the colour of death and death always has the final say.

Then comes the kick-off.

The football goes all over the park, same as the players, with the referee watching to make sure no one makes a foul. Sometimes the football sails into the crowd. Mostly it stays up the wrong end of the pitch.

We're going to lose this game, says Dad confidently, and everyone around us mutters the same.

It's not every day we get to see these boys, says the man standing next to us.

You're right, says Dad.

Then the first goal is scored. The crowd sucks in its breath, and lets it out again, and the sound is a jet plane Dad took me to see one time.

Ho! I shout.

Dad likes that he's taken the afternoon off—no more shirt buttons for him this day—and here he is with me, his boy. He has a program in his coat pocket to look at whenever a number flashes past our part of the ground.

That's the Leeds player, he tells me.

That one's been drinking horse juice, says the man next to us. Will you look at the strength in those legs.

Another goal is scored, and one more after that, then the referee blows his whistle and the pitch empties. The colliery band marches back on to keep the happy mood.

Dad asks, Do you need to go to the toilet?

No, I say.

Just as well, he says. There's a queue a mile long.

Dad goes off to buy me a packet of crisps. He comes back with a cup of pea soup.

Football in Horden, he says, not to me so much as the men standing closest.

Aye, says one.

Righto, says another.

The footballers are back. The referee's whistle blows.

Here we go then, says Dad. Second half.

A Rainbow

It starts to rain, with bad weather straight off the sea and no signs of letting up. This takes all the fun out of watching the game. The program stays in Dad's coat pocket for the rest of the match. He pours his soup away. Another goal is scored and we both miss it.

Are you still having fun?

Yes, I lie.

It'd be more fun if the rain wasn't dribbling under my collar.

Are you really having fun? asks Dad.

If it wasn't raining so hard.

Come on, let's away.

We leave the ground ten minutes before the end. Dad hurries me over to the fish and chip shop. I like the clanging bell when he pushes open the door. We can have the warmth of the shop for free until our chips are wrapped up in a parcel of old news.

We wait and wait. No one seems to be in a hurry to get back into the sodden weather. Tonight I will lie in my bed listening to the drainpipes sing.

Then we're back to the rain and a drip-drip runny nose.

Here we are, then, Glyn. Hot chips for the walk home.

The chips are hot, very hot. Dad says I can keep my sixpence for another day.

We're suddenly seeing a rainbow towering over us. The rain stops.

Well, what do you know? says Dad. There's sunshine yet. In Horden! I don't believe it.

A chip burns my tongue. I don't make a fuss. Dad says they're good chips, and he should know. Potatoes are what he used to see all day when he was still working at Tudor Crisps—sacks and sacks of fresh dug potatoes.

I liked the match, I tell him, when we are walking through my favourite part of the park.

That's what I like to hear.

We've had a good day, haven't we, Dad?

We have, says Dad. We have indeed.

And you and Mum, you can watch TV if you want.

Yes, says Dad. Yes, we can.

The next day is Sunday and there are no more rainbows, only drizzle and bitter cold. There'll be snow soon, so goodbye blue sky.

Dad says he has to go in to work. There's a problem he doesn't know how to fix.

What sort of problem? Mum wants to know.

A problem with last week's orders. The numbers don't add up.

On a Sunday, Glynne?

Yes, yes, says Dad. Look, I won't be more than an hour. Maybe two at the most.

Five hours! When he comes home he's looking more tired than ever.

Someone is stealing shirts, he tells Mum. It's not going to be a good day tomorrow.

Mum gets his tea out of the oven. Soon he's eaten and back in his chair watching the telly with his eyes closed. He has a lot of worries since he started his new job with the extra pay. He worries about buttons for shirts. He worries about the big buyers up from London. And now he's worrying about giving a thief the sack.

It'll get better, says Mum, when he's rested.

I hope so, Josie, I really do. Because this, this is not what I signed on for.

Not now, Glynne. Please. Let's not fight tonight.

This shuts Dad up good and proper.

I feel sad. He's missing the Navy again. He's wishing for the grand adventures he used to have.

Clocking on at a shirt factory is not the same as waking up in a hammock. Where are the hula hula dancers? Who can sell him a mango?

Part Nine



Our House Is Broken Now

On the first day of December the bad thing happens. Dad comes in the back door and he has the miserable Horden look all the dads get from time to time.

Mum doesn't notice at first. She has her back to him. She's telling me to pick up my Lego. There's a good boy, Glyn. Don't lose any pieces.

Mum, I say, looking past her skirt. I'm pointing to Dad, who has sat down at the kitchen table and put his head in his hands. He sits and sits, touching the sugar bowl, then not touching.

Mum still hasn't noticed.

Mum. Look. What's wrong with Dad?

Nothing's wrong with Dad. Why, has he been talking?

Dad coughs.

Mum turns around and there he is, seated in the kitchen and not a word from him.

What's the matter, Glynne?

Josie, we've been robbed. The shed is empty.

No coal, says Mum, not wanting to believe. They can't have stolen all our coal.

They can and they have, says Dad miserably. Damn them to hell.

I know what this means and it's not cheery. There'll be no steamy bath in this house tonight.

I forget all about my Lego lighthouse where we all can live. It's time to sit on the settee and not move. Grown-ups need their space.

But who would steal our coal?

Dad has his suspicions. Caravan people looking for beer money. Louts from Peterlee. Sea coalers.

No one from around here, says Mum.

No, no one, says Dad.

Then who? Who could be so callous?

I can think of some people, says Dad.

The news is giving Mum pains already. No coal means no cooking. No heat!

What will we do? she says. Glynne, talk to me.

No words are coming out of his mouth. All his words have been snatched away, like the coal.

I have an idea. Run up to the main road to the phone box and dial 999. Send P.C. Dixon over to Belford Street, quick smart.

Dad gets up out of his chair, but only as far as the sink. There's no dishes for him to do.

Mum meets him halfway, throwing her arm around his waist. She kisses him on the cheek.

Look, it's only coal, she says, not wanting him to worry. We'll be all right. I'll go see Norman.

I can fix this, says Dad, as if the stealing of all our coal means our house is broken now. I can put this right.

I look at my Lego lighthouse. I look at the four Lego people who live there—Dad, Mum, Julie and me.

With all the coal stolen, Mum takes over the kettle, saying, Here, let me do that. You go play with our son.

Dad walks over to sit down cross-legged the other side of the Lego.

How are you today? he asks, and straight away answers for me. Fine, I'll bet.

I need more Lego for my lighthouse, I tell him. There aren't even enough bricks for the roof.

News of the theft reaches all the houses in Belford Street. The wives tell their husbands, Do something. Josie's a good woman and her man's a good man even if he is a Welshman working in Peterlee.

After this a sack of coal appears by our back gate. Dad finds it there and scratches his chin.

The next day a lorry pulls up in the back lane. Two men jump down to give a free delivery. Dad isn't home. Mum's trying to say, No, no, it's a big mistake. Glynne doesn't even work at the colliery. He's not a miner.

No mistake, pet, says one of the men. You're Freddie Hall's daughter, right?

Then Mum is crying into her apron.

All the wives are at their back gate, nodding and smiling and saying, Alright, Josie?

In five minutes the coal shed is filled. We're a miner's family for a day.

Gloomy Silence

Mum has declared war on her curtains.

I've waited long enough, she says, and that's how we all end up in Hartlepool traipsing from one shop to the next. Then, yes, the bus ride home. We ride up the top. Only old people ride down the bottom.

Dad rings the bell for the bus to stop.

It's our stop coming up, says Mum, squeezing my shoulder. Quickly now, and no nonsense. That's right, Glyn. Hold Julie's hand like I showed you.

Don't, snaps Julie, pulling away from me. You're not my boss.

The bus starts to slow. We're the only family getting off at the crossroads.

I say, Look, the sea, Dad. Is that the sea?

Forget the sea, says Dad, whose arms are full. He's not wanting to drop Mum's groceries or there'll be war on.

Four people is a family, and that's how many of us are trying to get along the narrow aisle and down the stairs with the bus still moving.

I'm down first, followed by Mum next, then Dad. We're all at the bottom. Julie *should* be at the bottom, but she's suddenly going back up.

My purse! I've left my purse!

Forget the purse, says Dad, his arms loaded.

Mum tells me to get off the bus. I take a big jump and land in the grass.

Mum steps off after me. She has her curtain material in each arm. Dad steps down after her.

Where's she gone now? says Mum anxiously, when Dad's standing beside her, but no Julie.

Wait here, Dad tells her, handing over the bag of groceries. You watch Glyn.

I don't need to be watched. I'm not going anywhere.

The motor ticks over like an impatient insect. The bell rings. Then, with no warning, the bus is pulling away.

Hey! shouts Dad, before he's even back onboard.

Our Julie! shouts Mum. Tell him to stop!

Julie appears at the top of the stairs, holding her purse.

Dad is yelling, Stop, dammit!

The bus driver cannot hear. He isn't stopping. A lady turns around in her seat to see why there's a man running alongside the bus waving his arms and shouting like a mad monk.

If Dad was James Bond he'd leap at the moving vehicle.

But he isn't James Bond. He's Glynne Parry, a Welshman from Llanfair, the village in Anglesey with the longest name.

The bell is rung. Twice. Ding ding. It's rung again. And now everyone on the bus is looking around to see whatever's the matter.

A fast-thinking man rushes up the stairs to stop Julie falling. The bus stops again. The man hands Julie over to Dad, saying, Did you forget this little one?

Then the bus conductor is halfway down the stairs, face red with regret. He's not done his job properly, ringing the bell too soon, and I'm sure Dad's going to have words.

She went back to her seat, the conductor says. I thought—

Her purse, is all Dad can manage to say.

The conductor rings the bell. He's not coping at all. On a different planet he would probably choose a different occupation. The bus pulls away a second time.

What were you thinking of? Mum is furious at Dad. You're a bloody fool!

Mum's suddenly a wasp and his feelings are stung.

And you! she says, wagging her finger. Just wait till I get you home, Miss.

The outing ends with Mum smashing a plate. She can't find her packet of Embassy anywhere and by now the shop is shut.

It'll be the mad house for me! she is shouting. You're determined, Glynne! First you're never home, and then when you are home you have a face like thunder—

Dad goes out into the yard. He opens the gate and walks across the street to stand in gloomy silence in the garden shed. For the next five minutes he's Gordon's dad, stuck in the shed feeling sorry for himself.

Bed, you, says Mum, as soon as Julie's eaten her peas.

Dad doesn't stay in the shed for long. He goes for a long walk, as far as the beach, which means he'll be counting the coal buckets spilling waste into the dirty sea and reliving the scene where Michael Caine shoots the bad man dead. That, or he'll be seeing the dead horse Granddad told me about.

A man bought a horse and cart with the money left over after his wife died. The horse died on the first day. Its big heart gave out on Horden Beach. The load was too heavy. It took six sea coalers to unhitch the cart and drag the dead horse out of the water.

Is that what you're seeing, Dad? A dead horse?

On the Sunday Dad leaves the house before any of us is up. I hear the front door slam shut. Just as it does I hear Mum call out.

Glynne—please!

I hear her crying. She probably wants me to sit beside her on the settee and play with her hair, but I stay upstairs. If she walks into my own room I'll pretend to be asleep.

She should stop smoking. She should stop taking her tablets. There's lots she should do, but mostly she should let Dad be happy.

Witches Hat

Uncle Lloyd says, Your dad must think the world of your mum.

I'm at his and Aunt Alice's house in Thirteenth Street while Mum is away to see the doctor. The doctor wants her up on the scales. She needs to be weighed. She hasn't been happy for weeks, not since Dad increased his overtime at the shirt factory, and now she's not eating properly.

Here, have another biscuit, Glyn. Auntie Alice offers me the tin with horses on the sides.

No thankyou, Auntie Alice, I say.

She makes me take another one anyway. I like chocolate biscuits the best.

You're another quiet one, says Uncle Lloyd, and he says this in a way that makes me feel good.

Quiet as a mouse, I am thinking.

He's a top man, your father, continues Uncle Lloyd. The Welsh always are. They have a shine to them.

Auntie Alice tells him off for embarrassing me, but I don't mind hearing that Dad is a top man.

Are you all right, Son? she asks me, lifting herself up out of her chair and all its cushions. Can I fetch you a drink of water?

No, thankyou, Auntie Alice.

Righto, then, she says.

She has to pop next door for a minute, she'll be right back, and when she's gone Uncle Lloyd is talking to me about Dad.

He asks, What do you suppose he thinks of us all here in the north-east? A strange lot, I'll bet.

I don't understand the question. Uncle Lloyd gives me a nod then, and reaches for the biscuit tin.

Don't tell on me, he says.

I won't.

He steals two chocolate biscuits, one more for me and one for him. God sees him do it, but I don't think he'll mind too much. Uncle Lloyd has a bad chest the same as Granddad. The bosses have got him working above ground, grading the coal as it moves along the belt. The circulation is going out of his toes. Some days they're blue and some days they're purple.

When I'm as old as Uncle Lloyd, and no good for working down the pit anymore, I'll live in a cave at Blackhall Rocks and wait for my pirate ship to come in. It won't matter that I'm not Spanish. The captain will say, Take him anyway. He's keen! This is my only thought when Mum's back from the doctor's.

Soon we're halfway home, walking through the park. The flowers look pretty. The man in charge has done a champion job. We're getting closer to the swings and the roundabout. I like the swings. I was sick on the roundabout.

What did Uncle Lloyd have to say? says Mum. Did he mention Dad?

He did, I say.

Really?

He said Dad must think the world of you for coming here to live, I say.

Mum stops. Listen to me, Glyn. I did not make your father leave the Navy. He left of his own free will.

This makes no sense to me. Uncle Lloyd didn't mention the Navy once.

Now Mum's in a hurry, and I have to walk fast just to keep up.

We pass the playground. There's no going on the witches hat for me today, what with the bad mood Mum is suddenly in.

Top Cat

Later, Mum is onto Dad before he can even take off his coat.

She says, Bed, you two.

Julie wants to stay up.

Bed. Now. I won't tell you again.

Goodnight, Mum, I say.

Brush your teeth, she tells me.

Tonight there is no kiss for me. I'm the bad boy for listening to Uncle Lloyd's interfering nonsense.

I say goodnight to Dad and climb the stairs. Julie isn't long behind me.

It's easy to hear what Mum and Dad are saying. Their words climb the stairs after us.

I'm sick of it, Glynne. If you don't like it here, have the backbone to tell me.

Well, I don't like it here, Dad says. I hate it here. I can't wait to get the hell away from Horden. There! Satisfied?

This only makes Mum even more cross. Horden is where she was born. Horden is where her people live.

Not my bloody people, says Dad.

What? What then? I will not live in Wales, Glynne. Arseholes to that!

Josie, Josie, Dad says, and then the words are sinking into the carpet and walls.

I'm waiting for a plate to smash, but no, Mum is crying instead.

Julie walks into my room, very annoyed.

Look what you did, she hisses at me.

I'll ignore her. If she nips me I'll nip her back. I'm not scared to scratch her face. I want to.

She sits on the end of my bed.

Uncle Lloyd should say sorry, she says.

Uncle Lloyd didn't say anything wrong, I say, but Julie isn't listening.

We could be watching telly, she says. And suddenly she is pulling my hair, hard, daring me to hit her.

So I do. I hit her in the chest. She is so surprised by this that she let's out a scream.

Her screaming won't stop, even as Dad rushes into my room, saying, What? What now!

Mum is right beside him, rushing forward to prise Julie's fist open.

I fall back onto my bed and scramble free. I have my hair back. I stand next to Dad and watch Julie carry on screaming.

Julie! Be quiet! shouts Dad.

And Mum shakes her roughly, hanging on to both shoulders.

She's screaming enough to wake the street up, and they'll be thinking, It's a mad house, that number five.

They'd be right, too.

He's got a lot on his mind, Mum tells me the next day, smoking cigarette after cigarette. This job at the shirt factory, he so wants to make a good impression.

He liked his old job, I say.

Yes, well, we don't talk about that, do we? Not after he got the sack, poor thing.

I didn't mean Tudor Crisps. I meant the Belfast. I say nothing.

Don't worry, she tells me. Mum and Dad love each other very much. You know that, right?

I give her a big hug. It's Mum's favourite nice thing for me or Julie to do, apart from not murder each other.

I said a naughty word, Glyn. On purpose. Shall I go to bed with no supper?

I laugh. Mum laughs, too.

Yes, no supper for you, naughty. I point to the ceiling. Bed.

Boo hoo, pretend-cries Mum. Can I drink my coffee first?

I want a taste. Mum says no, coffee is addictive. She changes her mind straightaway.

Oh, go on then.

She pours some into her saucer.

I'm a cat, I say. Top cat.

I feel bad, Glyn. I called your father a bloody fool.

She lights up another cigarette. She's well on her way to ordering a lawn mower out of the Embassy catalogue.

Glyn, what would you say to us moving away from here?

Before I can answer, she says, No, I didn't ask you that. Let's not get carried away.

The Big House

The afternoon Mum says she's taking me to Crimdon I wonder how we're ever to brace ourselves against the wind. But, no, we don't walk onto the beach at all. We walk into the bingo hall. It's a long bus ride all for a game of chance.

Now you mustn't talk, she warns me, sitting me down on the seat beside her. Just watch and learn. And don't ask questions or the ladies will get cross.

All the ladies are bent over bingo cards and concentrating hard. The man on the microphone calls out numbers. All around me, busy fingers cross numbers off. The bingo caller has a funny way of talking. I like listening to the sing-song of his voice.

Mum's cigarette burns down, that's how hard she's concentrating. She plays more than one card at a time. All of the ladies do. Smoke tumbles and turns. My eyes sting.

The idea of bingo is to win the jackpot, and then you can have any fur coat in the shop window, with change left over for dinner and a show in Newcastle. The jackpot hasn't been won for weeks and the women know. They can smell a big win coming on.

Oooh, Mum says, when she only has two numbers left, and at last she steals a quick drag on her cigarette. As she does, someone shouts, Bingo!

Damn. Mum drops the pencil. She laughs and shakes her head, same as everybody. Then comes the noise, the talking, the jingle of coin. Outside it's spitting rain, but you wouldn't know it. Bingo is louder than rain.

Nearly had it, too, says Mum to the woman sitting opposite.

Never mind, pet, the woman says. Your turn will come.

Can we go now, Mum?

One more game, she says, then, yes, we'll definitely have to get a move on or your poor father won't have any tea.

She smokes what is left of her cigarette. Some ladies get up and head for the exit. No jackpot today, they mutter. Other ladies find seats.

Then we're leaving. Mum's good feeling is put on hold. We're on the bus back to Horden.

The sky is darker by the minute. It's while I am looking out the window at the clouds that I learn what happens to mothers who go insane.

You see the house with all the big trees and lawn, says Mum, pointing. Poorly wives end up in there.

Mum starts to tell me a story. Sometimes a wife can't be expected to be a wife and a mother, too. It's too much. Or sometimes the husband might be drinking away all the money, and that sends the poor wife round the bend. Women aren't made of iron, you know.

It's not really a story at all, but I don't mind.

Just be thankful you have a mother who loves you two kids very dearly.

I bet it's a nice garden, I say, because Mum likes flowers, and I bet in the springtime this garden's got more flowers than the park.

Not today, though. Today is just...drizzle.

Mum isn't finished. She says doctors have too much say these days, handing out their bloody tablets like they're magic beans.

Now I *have* to look at the big house we're passing. It's like a mansion you see in films. It has a long red brick wall, and one big tree, and the winter sun is reflecting off all the windows. The bus turns the corner into another road, but the house is still there. It fills the whole of one block.

I don't see any mums, I say.

Aye, and you won't. They're all locked up inside, poor souls.

The asylum, Dad informs me when I tell him all about the big house. For people who are sick up here, he says. He taps his temple.

Dad leaves me to think on that. He goes to find Mum in the bathroom. She's in the bath. He shuts the door and stays in there for a long time. They're talking, but very quietly.

He's only a boy, Josie, I hear Dad say. Think, dammit.

After that, nothing.

So now I can't stop thinking about how Mum is going to the doctor more and more for her tablets. I overhear her say to Dad, I'm so unhappy. These new ones aren't doing me any good. They're worse.

She'll end up in the big house, I warn Julie. Is that what you want? That's what you'll get, in case you don't know.

Julie slaps my arm. I slap *her* arm. She nips my thigh. Nip. Julie is a cruel nipper. She has nails.

Don't nip!

Nip.

If I had nails I'd make her cry and not even feel sorry.

You're stupid, I say, jumping off the settee to get away from her crab claws.

Action Man Isn't Afraid

If I don't stop my nonsense with my cousin Tony and start playing nicely, Mum says she'll give my Action Man away. She says she knows a boy in Africa who wants one.

As soon as Mum makes this threat, I'm not worried. There is no boy in Africa.

That's what you think, she says, letting down the hem on Julie's dress. Stand still, Julie, or you'll be pinned.

Julie has to stand on the table. All her dresses are getting too small. She's growing. If she's taller than me, life will be tragic.

Mum says, And I suppose I never went to Africa when your father was still in the Navy, is that it, Glyn?

Behind Mum's back I can see Dad wanting to tell me something. It's our little game. I *think* it's a game.

No one's been to Africa, I say, and the moment I do I'm wrong. Dad grimaces and Mum laughs

Ha! Even you've been to Africa, she tells me. And our Julie.

This is news to Julie. Did I see a lion? she asks.

No, pet. No lions, says Mum.

Josie, you didn't even get out of the airport, says Dad.

No, and I wouldn't want to. No black mama was stealing my bairns.

Julie says, Auntie Mary isn't happy with Glyn, is she, Mum?

I swing around in my seat.

Julie!

That's because he made Tony cry, didn't he, Mum?

Dad doesn't know this. He doesn't like when there's tears.

What did he do? says Dad, meaning Tony. He must have done something for Glyn to hit him. You did hit him, right, Son?

Mum won't let me say. But the answer is yes. I hit him with my fist. He hit me back. I kicked him. He kicked me back. I threw his Action Man against the wall. He started crying.

You two and those bloody star tokens, says Mum, and now being a happy family on Sunday morning isn't any fun at all.

Dad asks again why Tony was crying, and Mum says never you mind about that.

Julie's got a mouth on her, she says, helping her down from the table.

Tony broke his promise, I say.

Mum says, Tony will be keeping the star tokens for himself, silly.

He's being greedy, I say. How many Action Men can he want?

Mum can't argue with this. He's got five star tokens already, wrapped up in newspaper and hidden in a sock so robbers won't steal them.

What's the best Action Man outfit? Dad wants to know.

Deep Sea Diver, I say.

Mum says, Have you seen how expensive those outfits are? The doll is just the start.

Not a doll! Action hero. He has a scar.

A silly plastic doll for boys, she says, not listening to me.

What scar? says Dad, picking up Action Man for a closer look. Oh, yes, a scar on his cheek. That's very clever.

Every Action Man is scarred. No boy can say how it came to be there, but every boy is grateful. A scar means he's been in wars already. Action Man isn't afraid.

Mum's not happy with Palitoy for giving out star tokens. It's making boys all over the country unhappy, this business of merchandising to kids.

What's merchandising? asks Julie.

The Embassy catalogue, says Dad, and then he's shut up by the look Mum gives him.

Later, when it's just us two watching The Man From Uncle in the front room, Dad is expecting a straight answer.

He threw a lump of coal, I say.

So you hit him?

Yes, I did.

You used your fist?

I roll down my sock. Dad sees the bruise, purple and blue.

Fair enough. Don't do it again.

British Steel

Winter comes to Horden. Every tree has lost its leaves. Icicles hang off the lips of drainpipes.

Glyn, come and see what Grandad's brought you, says Mum.

The front door is open. Mum and Grandad are looking at something.

What is it? I ask, trying to see past their feet and around the corner. Is it a dog?

I'm hoping and hoping. A girl at school came home to a puppy in a basket.

No, it's not a dog, says Mum. Why would it be a dog? Come and see already.

Grandad has built me a sledge. He'd been talking to some men in the pub, saying, They all went to Cornwall, you know. No snow in Cornwall. He doesn't even own a sledge, poor lad.

The men all agree, sipping their pints and clacking their dominoes, that a bairn without a sledge is like budgie without a bell.

So, what to do? says Grandad. Are we going to make this boy's day, do you suppose?

We'll see what we can do, Freddie. Leave it with us.

Miners can lay their hand on anything. It's Aladdin's cave, the pit. And everyone likes Freddie Hall. He's a fair-minded publican, an ex-miner, one of their own. He's a card, too, playing the banjo in his Honolulu get-up.

So here you are, Son, says Grandad proudly. Your own sledge.

Well, what do you say? Mum is waiting for me to remember my manners.

Thanks, Grandad, I say.

Look at the runners, Son. See. They'll last a hundred years. Two hundred. That's finest British steel courtesy of the National Coal Board. You won't find a faster sledge in all of Horden.

Not too fast, I hope, says Mum, remembering when my cousin Tony came off at the bottom of Thirteenth Street. Mind, I don't want any broken bones.

Grandad talks me through the construction of the sledge, not that he needs to. It's a fine sledge, with a solid timber deck and perfect runners.

He says, Now all we need is more cold weather. He looks at the darkening sky like he's putting in his order to Alaska.

Mum says, It'll be snowing soon enough. In a week, most likely.

Aye, that sounds about right, says Grandad.

Mum makes us all come inside out of the chill. She won't let Grandad set the sledge down in the house. It'll have to live outside.

Leave it in the backyard, Dad. Glynne will find a home for it as soon as he's in from work.

Grandad isn't listening. He never listens. That's why Nana is forever slapping his arm, because he won't listen. He's through to the back yard and looking at the wall.

I could drill a big hook in here, he says, patting the brickwork.

It's no use even asking if we've got tools. Dad isn't a handyman. He owns a shifting spanner, a screwdriver, a hammer and a saw. These are his tools, kept in an old bag in the cupboard under the stairs. Now Grandad is looking at his watch, making up his mind to drive straight back to the pub in his Volkswagen to pick up his gear.

What's half an hour more? Nothing, that's what.

No drilling, says Mum, and she means it. Just put it down and come inside. You must be freezing, Dad.

Mum sounds like Nana. I get an odd feeling in my tummy.

I ask, Do you really think it will snow, Grandad?

Grandad looks at me, then at the sky. See that eagle up there?

I want to. I'm squinting hard.

Well, that eagle visited me in the Colliery Inn last night, Son. And do you suppose he told me there's snow already up there in Scotland?

Give over, Dad, says Mum, because it's not nice to tease.

There'll be snow, Glyn. Before the week's out, too. You'll see.

How It's Done

Snowflakes are tiny parachutes, all falling silently past upstairs windows. *Our* snowflakes—for snowmen and wars and sledging.

The first night of heavy snow is like a warning sign to every motorist silly enough to try our hill. They are beaten back down to drive the long way round. Belford Street is handed over. Out come the sledges.

Ready, Glyn? says Andrew, waiting at the top of the hill.

Champion, I say. Look what my grandad got me.

Is it fast? he asks.

Fast as British steel.

Have you had a go on it?

I'm about to.

A sledge is a rocket, a downhill racer, the werewolf's howl. It's wind on your cheeks and never mind the cold.

Mr Hardcastle steps out of his gate to watch us. He's watched Tommy go down three times now. Now he's after a go for himself.

You'll hurt yourself, Mr Hardcastle.

Will I heck. Howay, Son.

Before Mrs Hardcastle can be fetched, Mr Hardcastle is gripping the sledge and making a little run for it. He's got a good speed up, but his legs aren't working properly on the ice. He's clumsy-footed, dancing all over the place, and then he loses the sledge completely. He's rolling over and over on his side, his coat sleeve caught up in rope and runners. The sledge wants to run into the kerb. He grunts when he stops, and I am wondering, Is he dead? I think he's dead.

I've killed him, says Tommy. Oh.

Mr Hardcastle lives. He sits up and kicks the sledge away, red-faced and puffy-eyed, saying, Ha! How'd you like them apples?

And now here comes trouble.

Mrs Hardcastle is shouting at him. She's out the door and slamming the gate, standing on the pavement in her slippers and dressing gown, woolly socks the colour of custard.

Is that my silly Charlie? I don't believe it. Ee, but I'm blessed.

Shut your cake hole, woman! I was just showing the lads here how it's done.

How to break your silly neck, more likely. You're determined to show me up in front of the whole street, Charlie Hardcastle.

Get away with you. No one's bothered. Are you bothered, Son?

No, not me, I say.

Ha! There you are, then. Go back inside, woman.

Mrs Hardcastle's custard socks move off. She slams the gate hard and the front door harder.

Our Hill

On the first weekend of snow a boy comes into our road who doesn't belong. We look at him warily, me and Andrew and Tommy. He's with a man who knows Mr Hardcastle.

Make the lad feel welcome, Mr Hardcastle tells us, before going over to talk to the man. They shake hands.

Who is he? says Andrew.

This is our hill, I say.

The boy has a sad look about him. The man talking to Mr Hardcastle doesn't look too happy, either.

Mr Hardcastle comes back to where we're standing.

Who is he? asks Andrew again.

Never you mind who he is, says Mr Hardcastle, waving the boy over. Give him a go on your sledge, one of you. He's a good lad. His mum and dad used to live round this way. Now they live at Shotton. They live near the Colliery Inn, Glyn. I'm surprised you haven't seen the lad before, when you were living there.

I shake my head.

Well, that's his uncle he's with. I've worked with that man at three different pits. He's a hero of the Easington disaster, that man.

Hearing this changes everything. We don't get heroes in Belford Street very often. Now the boy is practically one of us.

It's a big enough road anyhow, I say, going over to meet the boy halfway. The snow goes crunch-crunch.

He wears a Newcastle United scarf around his neck, and the first thing I say is, That's my team, too.

Sunderland all the way! yells cheeky Tommy, lowering himself onto the deck of his sledge. He's away down the hill, yelling Tarzan.

I warn the boy and his uncle about a dog to watch out for along Morpeth Street.

It'll rip your throat out, I say. Don't run a stick along its fence. It'll have your hand off.

The uncle thanks me for the warning. We'll avoid Morpeth Street altogether, he says, smiling for the first time.

I would, I say.

What's that big wall down the bottom of your road? the boy wants to know.

His uncle answers for me.

That's the pit, Son. That's Horden Colliery. Behind that wall's where all the coal gets dug. Your dad worked there for a bit.

And I am thinking, He's never seen Horden pit wall before? It runs for miles. Horden Colliery is the biggest coal mine in the world. Men on the moon will point at the blue planet and see the ink stain. Ah, yes. Horden.

Can he have a shot of your sledge? the uncle asks me.

If you want, I say. I don't mind. I'm Glyn.

I hand him my rope.

It's fast, I say.

Thanks, Son, says the uncle to me. His name's John, by the way.

In all of this, the boy John says not one word.

Then we're both watching him taking fast little steps across the ice and he's away, down and flying, having some fun at last. All the time he's going, the uncle doesn't say dickie bird. He has lips the colour of liver.

Two days pass and then Auntie Mary solves the puzzle of the boy John and his uncle. She tells me the dad has miner's lung, poor soul. He's in the advanced stages. He's dying a most horrible death. The hospital has sent him home because there's nothing much more they can do for him.

No dad, I am thinking. If I'd known all this, I'd have given the boy John *two* shots of my sledge.

More snow. School hasn't even finished, and already it's deepest winter.

When it gets so dark that mums stand at the front door calling, not quite knowing which boy is which, the trick is to walk blindside back up the hill, collar up, head down.

Tell our Glyn he has to come in now, I hear Mum say.

I will, Mrs Parry.

As soon as you see him, mind. His tea's on the table.

I'll tell him, Mrs Parry.

Staying out of the street light gives me three more rides.

We have this much freedom.

Tingles

Snow blankets all. There's no let up. We still have to go to school, worst luck. In the park I'm trudging up to my knees. Then it is over my knees and I am falling backwards.

All right, Son?

A man has spotted me a long way off. He can see I am in trouble, with the snow so deep and my lips turning blue. He walks over.

My glove, I say. I dropped my glove back there.

You're all right, he says.

I tell him I'm late to school.

Howay, give me your hand.

A hand is bones and veins and muscles and joints and skin. A hand is a flipper left over from dinosaur times.

Don't you trust me? he says, after I hesitate.

He has Grandad's eyes. He's a Horden man, a miner off the night shift unable to sleep. I put my hand in his.

Right, let's get you to school now.

This man is a good man, happy to be rescuing a boy stuck in the snow.

I'm a bit cold, I tell him.

The man's guessed that already. Where's your mother? he asks.

At home.

Do you want me to take you home? I think you need hot soup and warming up by the fire.

No, I have to go to school, I say.

The man takes me to school. On the wall the snowball fights have happened.

Next we are all standing inside the headmaster's office. I've never been here before. The headmaster is eating a sandwich. He puts it down and steps around his desk to shake the man's hand.

The park, you say.

After he has worked out my story, and just who I am exactly, and who my new teacher is, he says, How are you feeling now, Glyn?

Cold, sir. A bit. I lost my glove.

Look, we'll take care of things from here, he tells the man.

The man knows that I'm in the right place now. He's ready to get back to seeing patterns in the snow.

Everything tingles, my fingers and cheeks. I know I'm in big trouble when I get home, because one glove is useless to a two-handed boy.

The headmaster says, Do you have any idea what the time is?

It's just us two walking along the corridor to my classroom. I don't have a watch.

Let's see if we can't warm you back up, he says.

Miss Stein is very surprised to see me. Glyn, where have you been?

She is being nice to me for once. It's because the headmaster is there beside me. I start to tell Miss Stein my story, but the headmaster says, Let's sit him near the radiator.

I am fifty-five minutes late for school. Miss Stein pulls a chair up next to the radiator. She takes my coat and puts it over a chair to dry. The headmaster is very impressed with class.

Good job, Miss Stein, he says, walking out the door. As soon as he's gone, the old Miss Stein is back in charge.

What's happened to Glyn, Miss? a girl wants to know.

Nothing. Mind your own business. Did I ask you to speak? He's fine, aren't you, Glyn?

I say I am, yes, then I start to cry. Because, no, I'm not fine at all. That glove cost a lot of money, and Mum told me not to go through the park, and now I am in for it. Julie will hear, and she'll race me to the front door, shouting, Mum! Mum, ask Glyn where his glove is!

Stop that nonsense at once, snaps Miss Stein.

But I can't stop. Gloves are expensive. I don't deserve nice new warm gloves.

A Boy Who Swears

If you say the bad word, God's listening. A girl in my class tells me this from expert opinion. Every Sunday she sits in church.

So whatever you do, Glyn, don't say the bad word. You like words too much, so I know you'll be wanting to. It's only a matter of time, if you ask me.

Sally is the strangest girl.

What bad word? What does it even sound like?

Any bad word. You want a home in heaven sitting at the foot of the throne, don't you?

Yes, please, I say.

I've never said any bad word before, and I tell her.

Well, that's good, then. Because you wouldn't want to start. God's got his angels listening in. They'll write your name up on his blackboard.

God has a blackboard? After walking one street with Sally, I learn lots. Sin is a worm that eats holes in a person's heart.

Look at all the bad men who went to prison, says Sally.

For swearing?

I'm only telling you because I like you, Glyn.

You do? Thanks, I say, and run off.

But now I *want* to swear.

If I say a bad word, Mum will find out. I'll be standing in the corner for a month.

And God? Sally says I'll be struck down. I don't want to be struck down. But what would she know? Her shoes are scuffed and she has a bad cough.

I finally say a bad word. I say arseholes. Mum and Nana haven't been struck down and they're always saying the bad word. So—arseholes.

As soon as it's said, I feel as if my life can move forward again. That's that, no turning back.

Arsesoles.

I say the word three more times, as loud and clear as any word can be said in a person's head.

The sky stays blue. Under my feet no cracks appear.

Sally is bloody well wrong. I'm walking tall, a boy who swears.

A dog spots me.

Hey, dog. Arseholes to you, dog. Off you bloody well go, dog!

God punishes me from above. As soon as the day ends and it's time for bed, the troubles start.

And after it's all done and I'm in my bed I am thinking, Blame me. Blame the boy who swears.

Because first Dad's tea sits ruined on a plate in the oven, second time this week, all the while Mum saying, He's married to his work, not me.

Already she has taken two tablets. They're not Aspro. They're a name I can't read.

I want to throw her tablets away.

And next Dad comes home to find me and Julie begging Mum to come out of the bathroom. She is having a good cry.

Josie, says Dad, just open the door.

The door stays closed. Mum stays in the bathroom for a good half hour, until her crying has stopped and her face is washed.

Silly me, she says, when the door finally swings open. She has her happy face on, but tonight she is fooling nobody.

No more! says Dad, rushing past her. This is a shock! He opens the medicine cabinet and snatches up her bottle of tablets.

Glynne, no—

Yes, Josie! It's the last time, he says, and the bit that I'm not expecting is Mum agreeing with him, saying, Yes, Yes, Yes.

So Dad pours the tablets down the toilet bowl and flushes them to the North Sea. Then he's hugging Mum, saying, Enough! Josie, enough of this madness! Alright? Okay?

And still Mum is saying, Yes, yes.

And now in my bed I cannot sleep. I watch the lollipop lights blinking up at the crossroads. Why can't I sleep?

God is keeping me awake to tell me off. Stop swearing, Glyn. You must not swear.

Part Ten



Australia

At breakfast the next Sunday Mum makes the big announcement. We're selling the house, she says. We're leaving Horden. Dad has had enough of the north-east and all this snow. He's had enough of England. He wants to be away and I don't want to lose him.

Where to? I ask, shocked by the suddenness of it all. Wales?

No, not Wales, says Mum, who looks tired and sad, all her happiness gone to a clever hiding place while she counts to a hundred.

Australia. The answer is Australia. Only, we can't get there just yet. We can only get as far as Shotton.

Shotton! No, not Shotton.

Just for a few weeks, promises Mum.

Back to the hated place, I am thinking. Back to the Colliery Inn.

The noises will come back.

Our friends from Cyprus days have written to us, says Dad, buttering me an extra thick slice of toast. They say Perth is a jewel of a city.

Next he's holding open a book for me to see.

Australia House in London has sent us this. And look, Son. Look how clean the city is.

Show me, says Julie.

Every page has full colour photographs to tantalise. A boy is lying down on his surfboard.

He's on a river, Son. Outside his own home, with his own jetty and a boat tied up. It's unreal.

But back to the pub, I say.

Our friends will put in a good word for us, he says, choosing this moment to ignore me.

Not Mum! She hasn't stopped looking at me. Aren't you excited? she wants to know.

What about Andrew and Tommy?

Oh, Glyn—

Send them a postcard, says Dad.

You'll make lots of new friends, says Mum. You both will.

Mum can speak so calmly. My cheeks are burning.

There are kangaroos, she says. Won't that be exciting. A new house like we've always wanted, away from colliery rows and pit walls. Sunshine, Glyn. No more snow.

Not any? asks Julie.

No, Julie. Australia is a warm climate.

Dad gives me more toast. I push my plate away.

You're upset. He's upset. Mum looks from me to Dad and back again. Please don't be like this, Glyn.

Julie says, He doesn't want to live at the pub. It's not nice there. You can't play. You can't do anything.

A few weeks, is all, says Mum. Come on, you two. You should be excited.

Dad hears her and says nothing. He gets up from the table and walks to the back door.

Glynne, where are you off to? It's Sunday. Glynne!

We all hear the door shut. We all watch Dad go, a proud man crowded with thoughts.

A Most Horrible Noise

Our house in Horden sells in a heartbeat. So now here I am back at the hated place. I'm back at the Colliery Inn with the witch.

A door no one opens is the reason Dad keeps the light on in the passage. Nastiness lives inside the room at the end. I've heard scratching and bubbling.

Don't be so ridiculous, says Mum, angry that I've frightened myself again. If this is what reading comics is going to do—

Mum, it's in there! The thing!

There's nothing in there. It's the boiler room. It's just the hot water system.

No it isn't. It's—noises.

Mum holds me by both shoulders. She turns me around and lifts my chin up.

Now, Glyn, I mean it. If Julie comes climbing into my bed because you've scared her, I'll be none too pleased.

And I am thinking, Julie isn't the one who's scared.

What noises? asks Grandad later.

Queer noises, I tell him. And again I try to do the noises.

That! Why, that's nothing.

Even Grandad gives up on me. There's no use in even discussing it anymore.

We don't like it here, I tell Dad, meaning the many rooms and passages and high ceilings. Julie is by my side.

Dad is sympathetic. It won't be for long, he says. As soon as Australia House gets back to us with a date.

But, Dad. The door—

We hear whispers, says Julie.

Now you're both being silly, you really are, says Dad.

Dad leaves the light on in the passage and we hear him going downstairs back to the bar. It's a busy night. It's always busy. Miners always have a thirst on if there's silver weighing down their pockets.

I think an old woman lives behind that door, I tell Julie. I think she's a witch, too. Nana has trained her well.

Julie doesn't believe in witches, not really. They're for dress-ups and Halloween and she's quick to say so.

She says, If there was a witch, where's her black cat?

Maybe Julie is right. But now I get even more scared thinking about what can be worse than a witch.

I say, What if it's the octopus lady? She could use all her arms and smother us. Have you thought about that?

Julie doesn't believe in an octopus lady.

You'd believe in her if you saw her, I say.

Why? Have you seen her?

No, I say. And I don't want to.

That night my face is hot in my pillow.

Someone shakes my shoulder. It's Julie and I shout, Go away!

The hand shakes me again. It isn't Julie. It's Dad. He makes me sit up.

Dad, I don't like it here, I say, rubbing my eyes. It's not a nice place.

It's a pub, Glyn. What can you expect? Look, it won't be forever.

He notices my wet cheeks. I can't hide my tears.

What, you've been crying?

It's the noises, same as before, bubbling, bubbling, and then I start to describe the octopus lady.

What lady, did you say?

I see her, Dad. In here I see her.

I'm touching my brow because that's where the pictures live. Dad gently pulls my fingers away. He says, Maybe you're thinking too much. Stop thinking so much, Glyn.

Mum says we're only going to be here a few weeks, I say.

Yes, not very long at all. Six weeks is all.

No school, I say.

Yes, no school.

Four-Eyes

No school is a mistake. Two days later a boy with a missing front tooth stops me on the pavement and says in a loud voice, Here he is now.

I stop and look up, not wanting any trouble. But trouble has found me anyway. A snowball slams into my chest.

Hey—

These are the boys who call Shotton home. I'm the boy who just got here, and where am I from? That black hole Horden.

Why aren't you in school? The boy wants to know.

Dad says I don't have to go to school in Shotton, I say.

This is the wrong thing to say.

What's that? says the boy. Aren't we good enough for you?

I never said that.

Two girls walking up the hill see the trouble I am in.

Henry, leave him be, shouts the one. She has red hair and freckles.

You! Pub boy! Run straight home! says the other.

And I am thinking, The Colliery Inn is not my home. Australia is my home, as soon as we get there.

All this I am thinking when I should be running.

A car beeps its horn, a long way off.

The two girls have crossed to the other side. All the houses on that side have no front yard.

What are you standing there for? calls out the boy Henry. You have to come up here and fight me.

He hasn't moved. He doesn't need to. Older girls across the street see what's happening and start shouting.

Leave him be, Henry, or we're telling on you.

Fuck off! Henry shouts. He called me four-eyes!

No I never!

The girls are going. They don't wait around to watch a fight start.

Why'd you call me four-eyes? says the boy Henry.

I didn't, I say. I have my own glasses to wear.

Another boy—he has a scabby chin—pretends not to hear. He holds his hand to his ear. What'd the pub boy say?

What'd you say? says the boy Henry, looking past me.

I don't try to answer because I don't know the right words to use. It's a game they're playing, but nasty.

You have to fight me, says the boy Henry again. That's how it works around here.

I don't want to fight. I just want to be let past so I can go watch the Wacky Racers on TV.

The boy Henry takes a first step toward me, then another. I watch him making his move. He's trying to trick me into running.

He tricks me anyway. He says, It's okay. I know you didn't say it. Don't shit in your pants, Horden boy.

Then he runs at me and clips me around the ear. The boys all start shouting at once. Another snowball hits me.

Go on, Henry!

Make him cry, Henry!

They run at me, to a boy, and I am in a circle. Every way I turn, a different one is shouting.

Fight me! shouts the boy Henry, spitting on my coat. You have to fight me!

Then it's on.

He hits me in the face. I fall the wrong way. Someone pushes me back onto him, so that he has to push me off, and then he hits me in the face a second time. He hits me on the nose with his closed fist. Behind my eyes I see Technicolour. The boy Henry hits me again, and I'm down. I'm sitting on the pavement crying.

I see a drop of my own blood stain the snow at my feet. Then another drop, and another.

Suddenly a hand is on my shoulder, hauling me clumsily to my feet, and a voice is saying, Get away, the lot of you! Go on there! I'll be telling your fathers.

I'm glad to be hearing this voice. It's a grown-up's voice. When I turn around, I see it's the uncle I met in Belford Street. And the quiet boy is there, too.

I know you, says the man, remembering. You gave John a go on your sledge.

My nose is bleeding. Drip, drip. My jaw aches.

Come on, then, says the uncle, handing me his hankie. You'll live. Let's get you home to a warm fire.

The boy John walks beside me. He says, Did you bring your sledge?

Strong

No boy is ever going to hurt me again. To make sure, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and say the word out loud.

Strong.

I believe, too. I can be as strong as any boy. I mustn't let them see me crying, these stupid sons of miners, who won't think to get away to Australia. Soon the pit will be throwing its workers out on the road and security men will be chaining up the gates, and what then? Shotton houses will be up for sale, or boarded up, or gutted by vandals. Where will they be then, the stupid bullies? They'll be out in the street in the snow.

That's why I am hitting myself on the cheek. It hurts. I do it again, harder, and the hurt is suddenly sharp. I'm seeing lights.

Strong!

I'm glad I've come to the mirror. It shows me for the first time what all the other boys must see, a crybaby.

Come on, then! I shout. Hit me hard if you want!

Fireworks light up behind my eyes.

Harder, stupid!

Until I'm no longer seeing the crybaby me in the mirror, I will not walk away.

The next day I am trudging through the snow past the school when a different boy stops me on the pavement. He pushes me over.

You're not going to hit me! I yell up at him.

Who says?

Me!

The boy is laughing. His two friends laugh with him. I know what's coming.

Okay. We won't hit you.

I am pelted with snow.

They walk away laughing, saying, See you next time, pub boy.

Ha! Snow doesn't hurt! I shout, finding my feet. Hey, you boys! Am I crying? I'm not even crying!

They don't hear, or they aren't listening. One of them looks over his shoulder, but I'm too busy shouting to hear what he says.

That night I'm just off to sleep when Julie bursts into my room to wake me. She won't get off my bed. She has my pirate book.

Come with me, stupid boy.

Where to?

Nowhere. Somewhere.

Where?

To see where I have to get out of bed and follow her. She's in the passage going the wrong way. She says, Come with me. You're going to kick that door.

What door?

You know what door. Don't act dumb.

I stop. I'm not about to kick that door.

Have it your own way. Be a scaredy-cat, mister.

Julie, wait!

Julie doesn't wait. She walks up to the door and kicks it three times. Hard kicks, too.

Well? she says.

She's waiting for me to have my turn. She wants me to kick the door, too.

Run, Julie, I say.

It's just stupid noises. She says this not to me, but to whoever's behind the door. You don't scare me, old woman.

Now the octopus lady will be awake, for sure. I won't have a sister anymore. All I'll have is memories and strangle marks on my neck.

We're in big trouble, I say, getting ready to run downstairs.

Julie kicks again and again, then she hurls my pirate book at the door.

We're not scared! yells Julie. Hello?

My book!

Julie turns around to smile at me. I'm watching her, watching the door, watching everywhere. She isn't even scared.

It's just stupid hot water pipes, says Julie, and she goes back to bed.

I run forward and snatch up my book of pirates. It's okay. It's not torn. None of the pages are creased.

Train Derailment

The shirt factory puts on its Christmas party. Julie and me are invited. All you need is to have a mum or dad who works there.

Our dad practically lives there!

We play games like Pass the Parcel and Musical Chairs, and at a long table we all sit down to pull crackers. The turkeys have already been carved. We're allowed all the lemonade we can drink, and we have jelly and ice cream, with a Rowntrees chocolate selection box to take home, and, best of all, Santa.

I like the Christmas party. When it's all over, Mum and Dad are waiting with all the other parents.

Did you have a good time? yells Dad over all the noise.

The best! I say.

Not me, says Julie, but Dad hasn't heard her properly.

That's great! he yells.

He wasn't the real one, was he, Mum? I say, going along with the big fib.

No, Glyn. How could he be? The real Santa will still be working in his workshop with all the elves.

My toy from the fake Santa is a gun that fires ping-pong balls. Mum doesn't like guns that fire anything, they're dangerous. You'll end up putting your eye out like Lord Nelson, she says.

That's a nice dolly, she says to Julie.

Julie says, I wanted lipstick.

Mum says, Look, Julie, wait and see. Santa's helpers hear everything.

Dad drives us back to Shotton and the Colliery Inn in the van he has borrowed from work. Tomorrow he has to pack the crate of all our belongings to go on the ship to Australia.

I didn't see where they make the shirts, I say, because it didn't look like a place that made *anything*.

You were in the canteen, Dad says. The factory part's a different section.

We take turns saying our favourite bit of the party. Julie's favourite bit was opening her selection box.

Yes, and if you eat one more chocolate bar you'll be sick, Mum warns her, but Julie isn't listening.

What about you, Glyn?

The Christmas tree, I say, remembering the glass balls.

We arrive safe without skidding off the road once. Dad drives into the backyard of the pub and closes the big heavy gate for the night. The gate is to stop robbers bashing Nana up again.

Downstairs there aren't too many drinkers. It's a quiet night, two hours away from closing time.

Good, says Mum. We won't be needed.

Upstairs, we are a family again. Dad comes into the lounge room to watch wrestling on TV. Mum stays at the kitchen table, finishing a cigarette. I fire ping-pong balls at my train set. There is a train derailment and seventy-seven passengers are dead in the wreckage.

If you really want to see where they make the shirts, tomorrow I'll show you, says Dad. But you might be disappointed.

Not me, I say quickly.

But somehow in all the excitement of packing the crate up to go to Australia, Dad forgets to show me. He goes in to work without me.

Cellar

The day a man in a suit drives up in a shiny car is the day Grandad's life changes forever. He loses his pub licence. He loses the Colliery Inn.

Grandad spots the car and gets down quickly from his stool behind the bar. He says, Quick, Glyn. Go tell Nana it's the man from the brewery.

The man from the brewery carries a black bag, like a doctor. He has instruments for measuring the content of beer. He stands on the pavement and watches racing pigeons fly over Shotton. The men in the bar are saying there's a pigeon near here that might be a world champion. I believe them. There's nothing those men don't know, except how to get their jobs back.

Yes, the pit is definitely closing. Shotton Colliery will be know more.

Go on then, Son. Grandad gives me a little push. Tell Nana it's the man from the brewery.

Soon the brewery man is coming in out of the cold. He hasn't seen Grandad, who has gone down the cellar and shut the door.

I run up the stairs, calling, Nana!

Nana and Mum are already coming down.

Nana, there's a man—

I know who he is, says Nana, passing me without stopping. Now be on your best behaviour.

Mum says, Come on, Glyn. You can help me and Julie write out Christmas cards.

Mum chases me upstairs. I hear Nana say to the brewery man, Fred's not in. Mind, you've just missed him five minutes ago.

Marjorie, we need to talk. There's little point in postponing things.

Fred's away, says Nana.

Marjorie, please, can we go somewhere private. There are papers to sign.

I can't sign any papers, says Nana. Not today.

I tell Mum where Grandad really is, that he's hiding in the cellar.

He's not hiding, says Mum. He's avoiding.

But the man—

Glyn, we don't talk about that man, okay. He's bringing bad news, I'm afraid.

What kind of bad news? says Julie, sharp as a blade. Are they taking the pub off Nana and Grandad?

Yes, Julie. Yes, they are. It's stopped making money.

That night Dad's tucking me in tight and I tell him what happened.

Dad tells me it really doesn't matter. If a man from the brewery comes, he's only doing his job.

I'm *still* confused.

Dad sighs. Worry about more important matters, Glyn. Like, your favourite toys for Australia.

Can I take my Action Man?

Yes, he'll be fine.

And my book of pirates, Dad?

Definitely.

For the next few days Nana isn't happy with Grandad, I can tell. He's emptied one of the beer barrels and made a big mess. The cellar stinks of beer.

You're useless, Fred Hall. You'll have us thrown out on the streets. It's a caravan in Crimdon we'll have to rent.

What, and you didn't see it coming? he says, risking a slap for his cheekiness. This pub is finished, Marjorie. We're finished. We'll be out before Easter.

Shut it, Fred. Just shut it.

If I was Grandad, I'd get in my Volkswagen Beetle and drive to Spain. Who's worse, the man with his bag of bad news or Nana with her acid tongue?

Dad has listened to enough of Nana's nastiness and he goes out into the back yard to break up old crates that are stacked against the wall. I watch

him from the upstairs window. He kicks the crates in, stomping them down one after the other. By the time he's through, he's sweating.

Roll on Australia, he tells me when we pass on the stairs. God, now I remember why I loathe this place, and we've only been back a month. Your nana's got some mouth on her.

Dozy Cunt

On the second last Saturday night the Colliery Inn is open for business, all the wives and girlfriends show up in their fancy going-out gear. They take off their coats to shake off the snow. They're there to help their men sing like Tom Jones. They have their faces done up, all lipstick and eye shadow, and some have had their hair done in Peterlee.

They really are closing the pit down, Dad tells me. Can you believe that? After a hundred years. It's the only life they've known, poor buggers. They'll be desperate.

Is it a wedding? I ask.

Dad doesn't hear me. He's listening out for Grandad.

Grandad says the only time to like the pub is when it's a wedding. The bride wears white and the bridesmaids wear long shiny dresses. Someone's nana falls over laughing. Best of all, sugar almonds wrapped in tissue. Also, people play tricks. The best man writes JUST MARRIED on the back window of the honeymoon car. Another man ties empty cans to the back bumper to make the happy couple think their exhaust has fallen off.

Yer idiots! yells the groom over the din. Down the road the car stops and he gets out to snap the string.

Grandad says, watching them go, That lad's a sinking ship and she's a sunken treasure.

Dad, is it a wedding? I ask again.

No, it's not a wedding, Son. There'll be no more weddings seen under this pub roof. Now stay in bed. No getting up or Mum will be cross.

Dad leaves my door open a little ways.

Dad. Light!

Dad switches the passageway light on. I hear him going downstairs. The life of the Colliery Inn is always downstairs.

Tonight Dad works alongside Grandad. They are a team, pulling pints for the miners and opening bottles for the wives. The wives drink Babycham.

But then a fight breaks out. Two heavy-set men square off at the foot of the stairs, and the one hits the other on the nose. There are fierce blows after that, with both men rolling around on the floor, wrestling and punching. Grandad phones the police.

After so many years in charge of the Colliery Inn, the police are well used to Grandad on the phone. How long have they been going at it now, Freddie? The desk sergeant will be asking.

Five minutes, Grandad will say.

Righto, Fred. We'll be there as soon as we can.

Tonight the police are in no hurry to get to Shotton. It's a dying village, after all, with festering unrest. How are we to live? the faces of the wives seem to say with their dull expression and faraway stares. Their men get too much beer into them, all thoughts turning to pit closures and the bastard NCB. So it's little wonder the desk sergeant tells Grandad, We'll be there as soon as we can—then delays.

No, the police will arrive when the fighting is all over. That's their style.

The man's arm is suddenly broken. It's not something I see, but I definitely hear the break. There is the crack of bone and a most horrible noise coming up out of the man's throat. The other man, the one doing the violence, isn't finished yet. He shouts, I'll kill yer! I'll fuckin' kill yer, yer dozy cunt! He draws back his fist and makes the man's face an even bigger mess.

Julie is suddenly out of bed and looking over my shoulder. Let me see, she says. Shift up, stupid. I want to see.

A woman noticing movement on the stairs landing runs back to the bar, saying, Josie, your bairns are seeing it all.

I run to my bedroom. Julie stays where she is, determined. All she sees is a big man standing over a small man.

I hear Mum say, Julie, bed! Now!

German Bullets

In the morning no one wants to talk about the big fight and the man who had his arm broken. That's because soon we will be on a BOAC plane to Perth, Western Australia. Mum and Dad just have to go to London to see the people from Australia House.

Julie is left with Auntie Linda in Horden.

Me, I'm left at the pub.

For once Nana is being nice to me. That's because it's been two days already and I'm missing everyone.

John's dad is dying, I announce.

Yes, we know, says Nana, looking across to Grandad. We've known for a while.

Let's not talk about that, says Grandad.

Grown-ups don't like talking about anything to do with dying. It upsets them.

Your mum's been on the London stage, says Nana. She was in Babes in the Wood, with Jon Pertwee.

Who's Jon Pertwee?

A star, says Grandad. He's famous.

Was Mum on telly? I ask Grandad.

Because that will be some news to tell the dinner ladies in Perth, Western Australia. They'll say, No! Really? Well, who'd have thought?

I'll get more custard.

Grandad spoils everything. No, Son, she was never on the telly. But she was on a film set.

She was, says Nana, listening in while she counts money into different piles. With David Niven, no less.

Go on, Marjorie. Tell him, says Grandad.

Nana knows the story better than Grandad, because she was right there while Grandad was underground at Horden Colliery lying on his side in two inches of black water.

Anyhow, your mum was two years old and David Niven spotted her on the pavement, says Nana.

In London, I say, remembering I've heard some of this story before.

Yes, London. This was outside Denham Studios, Nana tells me, happy for the story to tickle new ears.

Where the Queen lives, I say.

Around the corner, yes. This was your mum's big moment. Mr Niven says, My, my, what a pretty little girl. May I? And that was that. He took her on the set to meet the other stars.

What stars?

How should I know? says Nana. All the stars, most likely. It was your mum who met them all, not me.

You missed out there, mind, says Grandad bravely.

I ask, Was John Wayne there?

Now you're being daft. If you don't want to listen to the story—

I was listening. I shut up and try and listen harder.

So anyhow, says Nana, there we were, meeting David Niven. A real gentleman, I might add.

When Nana has finished telling the story, she says, The same day across the park Neville Chamberlain announced the war.

What war?

The war, says Nana. There's only been one war as far as I'm concerned.

World War Two, says Grandad, who didn't fight because miners were needed at home. War burns up mountains of coal. Miners kept Churchill happy.

That afternoon Grandad drives me to Horden to pick up Julie. On the way he parks his Volkswagen in front of a house I don't know. We get out and he shows me where German bullets ripped into the brickwork above a doorway. It's an ordinary Horden house in an ordinary Horden street until I see the damage done.

They weren't evil, the Germans, says Grandad. It wasn't their assignment to mow down women and bairns.

There's a good reason why Grandad is telling me all this. He likes German people. He's met a few on his holidays abroad, which is not the same as a holiday in Whitby or Llandudno. Abroad means on a ferry across the channel with sea sickness all the way.

Do you see, Son? says Grandad. A bullet made that mark. And that one. And here's another.

Hearing this makes me look into the sky. Grandad looks too, saying, They flew in from that way. We always had the air raid sirens, but sometimes they came too late. They wanted the collieries shut down. And the steelworks in Middlesbrough. They bombed the docklands at Sunderland, too.

Next Grandad tells me about the woman who was nearly shot to death.

She was pushing her pram, Glyn. And do you know who that woman was?

Nana, I say.

Nana. Yes, Nana. With your Auntie Linda.

I've been told this story before. Today I have the proof.

Grandad isn't so much telling the story as living the story. I see where the bullets went, spitting bits of red brick all over the woman and her pram.

We all went hungry. The Germans went homeless. And for what, do you suppose?

I don't know, Grandad. To win, I suppose.

To win? We lost and they lost. Everyone lost, except for America.

As we're getting back in the car, Grandad says, Now, Glyn, what shall we do on your last day tomorrow?

The baths, Grandad.

The baths it is, he says.

We Jumped

Grandad keeps his promise. He takes me to the baths. John comes with me. He's still quiet, but nowhere as quiet as before.

Can you swim? I ask.

Yes, a bit. I've had lessons.

Me, too, I say.

I think John could be my best friend if he talked more and if I wasn't leaving so soon.

My nose is better, I tell him. In case you were wondering.

Next I tell him what I've been thinking. That those bigger Shotton boys are wrong about me. That I'm not a scaredy cat.

I could fight them if I wanted to, I say.

John doesn't say a word.

And I am thinking, One day they'll wake up to the ground shaking and the earthquake will be me.

But first, the high board. We start the lonely climb.

Ahead of us climbs a man with a tattoo on his arm. Mine will be Robbie the Robot spitting sparks.

Climbing the steps to the high board gives me the shivers. When I look down a funny feeling jumps into my tummy. I daren't look down again.

We reach the top and wait our turn.

The man with the tattoo doesn't hesitate. He walks out to the end of the high board to stand over the deepest part of the pool. He's standing straight up. He lifts his arms and then he is gone. I don't hear his splash.

Soon a bigger boy joins us at the top. He says, You two going?

Yes, I say.

Yes, says John.

Right. So go.

You can go first if you like.

He looks me up and down then, saying, You shouldn't even be up here. You're too little.

I'm allowed.

You're allowed if you jump. Are you going to jump?

Aren't you supposed to dive?

Dive, jump, it doesn't matter. It's your neck, he says.

I hadn't really thought about breaking my neck, and I say, I was going to jump anyway.

Now he's checking me out. He doesn't believe me.

So jump. I'll watch. Both of you. Jump.

This puts us on notice. I can't do this if anyone is watching. I'm not sure what to say. The boy thinks I'm a coward, and maybe I am.

Out of my way, babies, he says, brushing past.

We let him through.

He steps past me to the end and takes a moment to look down. Bye bye, Tokyo. He jumps.

So now it's our turn. Two more boys are climbing the steps and I know they'll make fun.

I walk out to the end. The pool is where my toes begin, but with a long drop in-between.

This is a very bad idea. I hear the boys behind me, laughing and making dares.

One, two, I jump.

I stomach the ugly dizzy rush, then the shock of water pulls me straight under.

I bob to the surface, gasping, just in time for another splash beside me.

John has jumped, too.

You two! shouts the pool attendant. He's spotted us and wants us out of the pool.

Sorry, I splutter, paddling to the side.

But it isn't me and John he wants.

Yes, you two! Down! Now!

He is shouting at the two other boys still daring each other up there on the high board. They didn't jump. They couldn't do it.

Me and John, we jumped.

Grandad is waiting for us at the side. He's seen it all and he's not happy to have two lunatics jumping into the deep end. What do we say?

Quack quack! I say.

Quack, says John beside me.

Dust

The pit pays off the last of the workers. No one has money for beer anymore, and this is all too much for Grandad. One morning he has a dizzy spell in the bar.

Nana gets Dad to rush him to hospital in the Volkswagen. He's kept in overnight. When he's back the news is cruel. His chest x-rays are a death sentence.

We all know it anyway, but no one wants to believe it. Not our grandad Freddie Hall, who can sing and dance and play the banjo in a hula skirt.

I don't come out of my room all afternoon.

Some days later, Dad walks me away from the pub and into the dene.

There's a conveyer belt, he says, kicking a stick off the path. Sounds like thunder. The coal moves like a freight train down there, sending up mountains of dust. You know how it is if you smash a lump of coal. It makes dust. Dust on top of dust and no escape. That's why your Grandad's chest is so bad, and we're only kidding ourselves that it'll get any better.

He's badly poorly, isn't he, Dad?

Yes, Glyn. I'm afraid he is. He's dying, Glyn

Dad tells me this, and I have no words left in me. He's telling me the truth, father to son, and I'm not going to tell Mum or Nana or even Julie. This is between me and Dad and the woods.

John's dad is dying of the same thing, I say.

That's too bad, says Dad. John's the boy you've been hanging out with, right?

He is, I say. He's my only friend in Shotton.

Well, hang onto him, then. This is a very blunt Christmas. There have been too many nasty surprises.

Dad helps me across a log in the snow. My foot slips, but I don't fall. He has a hold of me. We get to talking about submarines.

He says, The oceans are very deep, Glyn. Mostly, they're still unexplored. There isn't a sub built yet that can go down deep enough.

Deeper than the pit? I ask.

Yes, definitely. Strange creatures live in absolute darkness.

But Horden miners work under the sea, I say.

Yes, yes they do. Five miles out under the North Sea. God, what an existence.

It's not like here, I say, meaning the bare branches and icicles and secret paths the monks followed.

Come on, says Dad. It's freezing out. Let's get back to a warm fire. Enough outdoor life for you today.

I promised John's mum I'd go around to his house, I say. For tea. He's two streets over. He's got his Scalectrix set up special.

Dad thinks about this for one second. Well, he says, if you made a promise, then.

Sickness

I've never seen sickness up close before, but I'm seeing it now. John's dad is close to dead. It could be a month or three months. It could be a week. No one quite knows for sure. He's bedridden, coughing up bloody phlegm into a big mixing bowl, and this I notice more than anything—he hasn't shaved. A hero of Easington has not shaved.

A helper gets up to close the bedroom door. I don't know who she is, seeing only her reflection in the mirror, but she's after some peace and quiet.

John says, She'll tell. She's always telling.

After that we have tea. There is sausage and mashed potato. Then we play with John's Scalectrix. I'm jealous. No one has a better slot car set-up. But I mustn't be jealous, because his dad is about to die a horrible death and my dad is off to sunny Australia to box a kangaroo.

We race each other's cars until we are bored. Then we listen to a record.

Don't you have the Beatles? I ask. My mum's seen the Beatles.

John pulls a record out of its sleeve. Soon I'm listening to a band called Uriah Heep. I don't like their sound at all, only the album cover, which is of an army tank.

Your dad hasn't shaved, I say.

John's mum knocks on the door. She doesn't come in. She says, Glyn should go home now.

She's not cross, just worried that I'll be walking home to the pub in the dark. If it's a full moon rising, I might run into the Wolfman. Or, worse, the boy Henry.

As I'm heading for the front door, she stops me. She wraps me up tight against the weather, and says, Tell your nana and grandad we're all very sorry to hear about them losing the pub.

I will, I say.

Tell them the place has a lot of memories. A lot of Shotton people are upset to hear of it.

Yes, I say, fixing the last button of my coat for the two streets of snow.

You're a good boy, Glyn Parry, she says. You've been a kind soul to my boy John. And she kisses me on the forehead.

Somehow I already know I will never see John's dad again. I'm hoping someone will give him a nice shave.

I walk away. I pass all the houses and wonder at all the front rooms I'm passing. There's one little Christmas tree with lights in someone's window, to remind us all that it's the season to be jolly.

Goodnight, Shotton.

Goodbye, John.

Heat And Hypnotism

In the morning some workmen come to board up the bottom front windows. The Colliery Inn is no more. Nana and Grandad are allowed to live upstairs as they've always done, because there's still jobs to do before the brewery can put up the FOR SALE sign.

Howay, says Grandad, overtaking me on the stairs. We've got some fun ahead of us.

This is more like it. I'm wanting to help, bored as I am.

See all these chairs. He means the rickety ones the brewery can't be bothered sending a lorry over for. Well, they're going. People only want plastic nowadays.

Matches alone won't start the blaze we need. Grandad's already thought of that. He's got a milk bottle with blue liquid.

What's in the bottle, Grandad? Is it petrol?

Never you mind what's in the bottle. Just stand right back over by the gate.

I've seen this on the news. In Belfast they are having the troubles. Boys throw petrol bombs at the British soldiers. The British soldiers fire rubber bullets at the boys. There have been lots of killings. That's why Dad's glad his dear friend Paddy Fox lives in Dublin, away from the troubles.

Dad says Northern Ireland is a war zone now. It's an abomination of decency, which sounds serious. Everyday people are dying, with long slow marches to the cemetery, and some days they can't even bury their dead without the troubles flaring up again as soon as the priest opens his mouth.

Isn't that right, Grandad? Belfast's a bad place to be.

Aye, Son. Grandad has been listening. But this is Shotton, not Londonderry. You worry too much.

Dad says the same. I'm a natural-born worrier.

Stop biting your nails, he will say, then, Now what are you worried over? You don't own the troubles of the world, Glyn. You're just a boy.

I know that, I say.

I bite my nails anyway.

Soon Grandad is pouring the blue liquid over the chairs that no one will ever sit on again. They're about to go up in flames. To make sure they do, he walks around the pile giving it a good soak.

Will there be a big noise, Grandad?

Only from upstairs when your nana looks out the window.

But it *does* make a noise, a heavy whumpfff! that sends pigeons into the sky and sets Shotton dogs to barking. The flames shoot up higher than Grandad has reckoned on, wanting to paint the eaves black.

The back door is flung open.

Fred, you stupid man! Nana is shouting the moment she sees me standing back from the heat.

Mum appears at her side, saying, Don't get close, Glyn.

He's alright, says Grandad, because the best bit is over, so no need to bother the fire station. Part of me is disappointed.

Come on, Josie, says Nana. Let's away before I fettle that silly man once and for all.

I've got my eye on the fire, which by now is now all heat and hypnotism. I like that it's suddenly warm in the yard on a freezing day, and that there are patterns to see and big circles of orange.

Those chairs might have been saved, Grandad is saying, when it's too late to do anything about them. He can't pull them out of the flames now.

Can we burn everything? I say, getting into the fun of emptying the boarded up pub of its useless furniture and fittings.

Grandad has not heard me. He says, If you don't have the customers, you don't have a pub.

Then he explains to me. Shotton Colliery is finished. *Every* colliery is finished. Horden will be next, mark my words. The decision has been made. Leave the coal in the ground.

We're going nuclear, says Grandad bitterly. That, and the natural gas. The Durham coalfields are finished, and we hadn't even begun to get at the wealth that's down there.

Aey, it's a sad day, I say, in my best grown-up's voice.

Who'd have thought? says Grandad, and he's not such a big man standing next to the blaze, my lovely Grandad, the publican without a pub and no more ship's bell to ring.

Crybaby Families

You never know when you might be standing on the pavement in the bitter cold, the Colliery Inn boarded up and ghost silent, and no one daring to be the first to hug and say goodbye.

No one has emigrated before, so no one has had to say goodbye before.

And I am thinking, I'm not scared. We will live in a big house beside the river, with our own jetty and a boat, and if pirates sail too close—bomb them with flour.

Dad is looking at his new watch the shirt factory gave him as a goodbye present. He's doing the maths. Mr Muncaster his driver switches off the motor.

We're not in a hurry, Dad tells me, after all the suitcases are lowered into the boot. But we don't want to be late. That would be a disaster.

Mr Muncaster has been doing his own sums. I wish I knew numbers the way Dad and Mr Muncaster do, able to add and subtract in their head.

Plenty of time, Mr Muncaster tells Dad. It's an easy drive to the station from here. You do what you have to do.

What Dad has to do is hurry everyone up, and hope Mum doesn't change her mind about catching the train to London.

Let's get this over with, says Dad, and then we are walking over to be with the others. There is no traffic.

Already Julie is crying because Grandad has ruined everything by saying, Don't go. Don't leave. How will we ever see you again? We won't. You'll be gone.

Fred, shut it! says Nana, slapping him hard on the arm.

He's crying now, and I don't believe he even felt the slap.

Dad won't cry, and neither must I. Australia won't be wanting crybaby families landing on the doorstep.

I am determined.

Well, Norman, this is it. Dad holds out his hand for Uncle Norman to shake. Thanks for all your help.

I don't get to hear what Uncle Norman says back, because Mum is crying now, saying, Please, Dad. Please don't be like this.

See, Nana says. See what you're doing, Fred.

All I see is Granddad crying and Mum crying. They're holding onto each other tight.

We should go now, Dad says, waving back to Mr Muncaster.

Mr Muncaster gets out of the car and stands waiting for us all. He has the rear door open for Julie and me.

Next I am being kissed on the cheek. Auntie Mary is hugging me hard.

You're a good lad, our Glyn. Don't stop reading. And don't forget your cousin Tony.

The curtains move two houses along, nose-y so-and-so, and it's old Shotton I see, but not for long. The face pulls back as if in a mist.

Come and say goodbye, says Dad, pushing me forward.

I don't know if Granddad even sees me, he's crying so hard.

Aye, is all he says, when I tell him we have to go now. There are no words left in him, and no breath, too. He can't breathe.

I try and say goodbye to Nana.

Yes, she says.

Dad turns me around by the shoulders. Get in the car, Son. Go on. We have to get away to the station.

I walk back to the car with Julie. I'm the first one in. Mr Muncaster says, Here we are, then. Time to meet the train.

But then Granddad can't find the sky. His body buckles, he is suddenly unsteady on his feet, and Uncle Norman has to stop him from landing on the pavement.

Mum cries out, Dad, what's wrong? Dad, come on now. What is it?

Auntie Mary looks very frightened.

Granddad's face is going blue. His hand is a fist. Then he finds the big breath he was wanting, and he's back, but only just.

Josie, go! says Nana. She isn't asking, she's *saying*.

This upsets Mum worse.

Go! says Nana again.

Dad puts his arm around Mum's waist, gathering her in like a heavy curtain. Come on, Josie. Your dad's fine.

He brings her to the back seat. I shift up to make more room.

Let's be off, Bob, says Dad.

Mr Muncaster understands. He's already behind the wheel and starting up the motor.

I'm sitting in the back seat with Mum crying beside me, wishing we were on the train already. It's time to leave these empty streets, this ghost place, all my unhappiness.

Too much, Mum is saying. It's all too much.

She has to have a cigarette. Just one.

The car starts moving.

Who Am I?: A Collection of Essays

Glyn Parry

The Seeker

When I was a boy of fifteen I blunted many a diamond stylus (to say nothing of the tiny bones in my inner ear) as I discovered the turntable pleasures of The Who. *Tommy* was a revelation, and *Quadrophenia* a reason to be. But it was ‘The Seeker’—that last slice of listening joy on Side A of *Meaty Beaty Big & Bouncy*—that intrigued me the most:

I’ve looked under chairs
I’ve looked under tables
I try to find the key
To fifty million fables
They call me the Seeker
I’ve been searching low and high
I won’t find what I’m after
Till the day I die¹

Listening to those words day after day in the loneliness of my room I wondered if Pete Townshend hadn’t somehow tiptoed past my bed in the wee small hours and looked at my writing. Already I had a drawerful of scribblings: letters, notes, the innocent beginnings of a novel, several short stories, and a secret diary.

How I wish I had kept any of it. Recently I stumbled across a Jim Morrison interview where he wished more than anything he could have all of his high school writings back, and I thought, Yes! Yes! How arrogant, how unconscionable, the bonfire I lit in our back garden at the end of Year 12 .

Who am I? This was a question I didn’t think too much about all through my busy childhood—surely a none-too-serious question that begged a

¹ Pete Townshend, ‘The Seeker’, *Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy*, by The Who (Track Records 2406 006), vinyl recording.

Sunday School teacher's stock answer—but at fifteen in the space of two school terms I suddenly cared. A boy in the year above me coming home from football practice rode his bicycle into the path of a car and was killed instantly. A girl in the year below me strayed onto the road after a party and was killed instantly. The boy who lived next door drowned on a school excursion. Another boy, one street over, drowned in a backyard pool. Selfishly, I began to question my own mortality.

Or maybe, simply, I was a teenager. And like every teenager this side of Memphis, I didn't have a clue. There I was, a boy on his way to becoming a man, and there it beckoned, all the thrill and terror of the flying circus trapeze—failing, falling—poor pitiful me wishing for a safety net.

Certainly I was someone who needed a safety net.

At fifteen I fell in with the wrong mob, the Lynwood skinheads, a pathetic crew that terrorised old ladies in the Hay Street mall. We wore our Doc Marten boots and Arsenal scarves, our Ben Sherman shirts and Oxford bags.

At sixteen I thought I had a mind of my own and listened to no one. My teachers at Rossmoyne Senior High School began to worry. Even my English teacher shook her head in disapproval. My grades were slipping. Couldn't I see where it was all headed? Yes, I could see. I just didn't care.

At seventeen I flunked the TEE in effortless style. (I didn't bother to sit.) Then I lost my first job—pouring concrete for pavement slabs at a factory in Cannington—and laughed about it. The mad Scotsman I had for a boss paid me off. Next I got thrown out of the house, and laughed about it. Soon I was living at a mate's house half a suburb away. In the process I broke my mother's heart. Alas, all was cliché.

Years later I penned some words using those times:

The end goes like this: first a grin, then a word, then the thunder of disciplined movement. It's a dance, a heavy ritual, a troupe of louts

playing to the wings. Someone singing. Someone's head being kicked in.

I knew the song well, knew the words. I was seventeen. It was the worst year. Back then when the maniacs ruled the world.²

Last year we came very close to losing our boy. He is twenty-one now, our middle child, and we count every day a good one if we hear word that he is safe and drug-free and not living beneath the freeway's dizzy song. He cannot tell us what his problem is, only that the bad feeling has been with him for as long as he can remember. He, too, was fifteen when the troubles boiled to the surface. He, too, didn't bother to sit the TEE, preferring to sit in Forrest Place with his goth mates. He drank in the songs of Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails. Maniacs played pinball inside his head and most days he heard their shouts multiplied. He watched movies assembled in purgatory. And, yes, he broke his mother's heart, too.

His own cliché, no less.

'Dad,' he said, last year after Missing Persons directed me to a Kesey-like psychiatric ward near Sydney's King Cross. 'Dad, I don't know who I am. Who am I?'

There it was again, the big question.

As a parent you scramble for some meaning. What's going on here? As a reader you cling to every new clue in the hope of saving your child. Yes, you turn to books. I turned to Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries* and found it oddly uplifting. Then a friend put me onto Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*, the ground-breaking memoir of Generation X. Wurtzel described herself as a defective model, 'like I came off the assembly line flat-out fucked and my parents should have taken me back for repairs before the warranty ran out.'³ This was Dean! This was how he saw himself.

² Glyn Parry, 'Back Then', *Summer Shorts*, ed. Peter Holland, 205 (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993).

³ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation*, 1 (London: Quartet Books Ltd, 1995).

It was James McBride's *Colour of Water* that finally offered a titbit of hope:

The little ache I had known as a boy was no longer a little ache when I reached thirty. It was a giant, roaring, musical riff, screaming through my soul like a distorted rock guitar with the sound turned all the way up, telling me, Get on with your life: play sax, write books, compose music, do something, express yourself, who the hell are you anyway?⁴

See! See, Dean, it's the same for everyone, I wanted to shout. We are all of us in the same song. You just have to direct your energy into something worthwhile.

He's drawing now, our boy. He's enrolled at TAFE. He's trying to put years of nasty living behind him, to damper down the voices, to exit the darkened theatre and embrace the sunshine, to reconnect and wherever possible, repair. He wants to be his own narrative again.

In this respect Freud would be happy. Our boy the patient finally understands himself as the central actor in his own comedy. His life, he now realises, is an unfolding drama of meaning. He is slowly regaining control of his thoughts, and, by default, his actions.

There have been less jellyfish stings this year. The red monkey has climbed back up the chimney. All I know is, I never again want to be signing our son out of a psychiatric ward and into my care. He did not speak the whole of the flight back to Western Australia. That worried me more than the scars on his arms or even his sunken look. Not one word for five hours and even the flight attendant sensed my despair. She offered me peanuts.

What could she say? What could anyone say?

⁴ James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, 208 (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

I feared I had lost him forever, the sad boy Dean who loved to build cubbies and draw pictures and study nature in our large rambling garden in the Perth hills. In the morning, he was gone. Back on the streets. Back to the soup line.

Every time we lose him, I am plunged into depression.

‘Dad, I’m all better now,’ he is quick to tell me.

This time around I so much want to believe him.

He says he wants to write his own memoir, however, a graphic novel, the big cartoon. He has borrowed my copy of Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS*, and I worry about this. It’s too much too soon, he’s too close to the subject, he’ll only bury himself in the misery of execution and the pain of defeat.

‘Dad, I have to do this,’ he tells me.

‘Do what? Relive the nightmare?’

‘Tell the story,’ he says.

Our son doesn’t really want to ‘tell the story’ in any traditional sense. Fiction can hardly contain his pain. That would be too limiting. No, he wants to tell it all, to drill down to the bedrock of consciousness itself. Or, yes, he wants to throw off his gravity suit and float like Major Tom in a most peculiar way—connect with the cosmos and reach the stars! It’s his mind he wants to tell, not his story, and an almost impossible undertaking it will be. Because, who can possibly know their own mind? I only *thought* I did, when I was his age. I quickly came unstuck, boarding a ship in Fremantle at seventeen to say goodbye to a cement factory and go off to conquer the world. So, yes, I worry that he is setting himself up for a fall.

He may yet prove me wrong. After all, I survived!

In the last four years I have sampled the best and the worst of literary memoirs of childhood. Indeed, in some cases ‘literary’ should come with a disclaimer. More than half of the books I read were about the sins visited in childhood, confessional and, yes, compelling.

Without exception these works read like what my son is proposing: pilgrimages to the id. They all start off with much the same optimistic premise: I need to get my story out, I need to get it down, I need to give an account of my miserable childhood, be it Catholic or otherwise. Because the world needs to know, dammit. Only then, finally, will I be able to move on.

‘So much for good ideas,’ is Harry Crew’s candid assessment, after the torturous delivery of *Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. As he wrote some time later:

There was too much I did not understand. I wanted to understand it so I could stop thinking about it. I thought if I could relive it and set it all down in detailed, specific language, I would be purged of it. I wrote *A Childhood* in the most specific and detailed prose I could summon and relived it all again. It almost killed me, but it purged nothing. Those years are still as red and raw and alive in memory as they ever were.⁵

Life is not tidy. Life is never tidy, despite our very best intentions. I’m revising these words, and in the last week eighty-eight people are dead, stampeded to death at a Philippines game show; three hundred and forty-five people are dead, crushed to death in Saudi Arabia; eleven hundred people are dead, tipped screaming into the Red Sea. There it is, life unmasked.

And yet a lot of us strive for, save up for, invest our lives in, measure our success by, happiness. Whatever happens, let me be happy. Isn’t this the baby boom mantra? It’s not such a bad notion to cling to, even as ice plates capsize, genes mutate, seagulls start to sneeze, and depleted uranium comes back to haunt us.

There’s no crime in being happy, I have decided.

⁵ Harry Crews, *Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader*, 15-16 (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

To search, to seek, the seeker. Seven years ago, when I turned forty, I thought about my life story so far. I reasoned that enough had already happened to me, enough ghosts had already taken up residence in my life, for me to seriously consider writing my own literary memoir. So I braced myself for even more poverty and approached a university.

As for a memoir of childhood, well, how hard could that be? All I needed to do was start remembering, pick up my pen and write. Easy!

(I wish.)

From the outset I made it my goal to impose some discipline on my past, a meaningful narrative. This is what the how-to books told me to aim for, at least. Books like Tristine Rainer's *Your Life As Story* and Anne Lamott's *Bird By Bird*, for example. Glyn, turn your life into a story, they essentially said. It seemed like reasonable enough advice. And I was determined to impose a simple rider: it must not be exorcism. Like Townshend, I was trying to find the key to fifty million fables. Like McBride, I desired to find out who the hell I was anyway. But unlike Crews, there was precious little to purge. If I had a miserable time growing up, the horror was well kept from me.

Indeed, the biggest threat that I could foresee back then, was not having anything to say. Was my childhood even worth writing about? In this respect, Sherwood Anderson worried me a lot:

A year or two ago I determined to try to tell the story of my own childhood. Very well, I set to work. What a job! I went at the task bravely but presently came to a dead halt. Like every other man and woman in the world I had always thought the story of my own childhood would be an absorbingly interesting one.

I began to write. For a day or two all went well. I sat at my desk scribbling away. I, Sherwood Anderson, an American man, in my youth did so and so. Well, I played ball, stole apples out of orchards, began

presently, being male, to think of the female, was sometimes afraid in the dark at night. What nonsense to speak of it all. I grew ashamed.⁶

I decided to go for it anyway. I was committed. Too late to turn back, I convinced myself. Have some faith.

This too: I decided from the beginning to document my progress, to be very open and truthful in my discoveries, to conceal nothing along the way. Why hide? Why lie? Why not just be transparent and tell the truth? All very noble and worthwhile, I thought.

And finally this: I wanted to know if it is possible to sustain a child's voice for the length of the work. Or would I simply lose my reader? How interesting a self-experiment, never before tried in my own writing, to remain a child and childlike on the page. Could my memoir be written within those bounds? I hoped so. Haven Kimmel certainly managed to in her beautifully-written *A Girl Named Zippy*, so why not me? Because, imagine! The vicarious experience of holding my hand page after page after page, and be four years old, five years old, six years old... To hell with those killjoys who would have us all believe it is impossible for an adult to recover the vision of childhood. I would give it my best shot. I wanted to push the adult me—with my expanded understanding and superior logic—as far away as possible.

Of course, this was seven years ago before I had penned even a hundred words. Now that I've written a hundred thousand words—and lost forty thousand to the wastepaper basket!—where have I been?

All over the place, actually. I had no idea how difficult a task it would be. I was so naïve. I was so trusting. I was so completely alone—crouched, slouched and slogging. Every time I looked up at the clock, it was 3.00 a.m.

'How's the book coming along?' my father asked me for the millionth time already.

'Great, Dad. Hunky fucking dory!'

⁶ Sherwood Anderson, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, ix (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).

Memoir or novel? I definitely recommend the novel.

Here, then, is my personal journey through several decades of living and seven years of research. This exegesis is one writer's search for meaning in the landscape of memory as he clumsily attempts to answer that most basic of questions: Who am I?

Probably it's a question that will remain obstinate and unanswered twenty thousand words hence as I begin this exegesis. I fully expect so.

To know oneself. To be stripped bare. Isn't this the point of the exercise? So now I am writing again. I am forever writing. Once again I'm reminded of the lyrics that blasted out of my HMV speaker cabinet all those years ago:

Focusing on nowhere

Investigating miles

I'm a seeker

I'm a really desperate man⁷

Townshend's words, accompanied by Moon's relentless drumbeat, have resonated powerfully through all of my adult life.

Truth is, forty-seven years into my life-search, I'm still searching. Sad, pitiful me, I still do not know who I am. How can that be?

I am my own cliché.

⁷ Pete Townshend, 'The Seeker', *Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy*, by The Who (Track Records 2406 006), vinyl recording.

Flower Power

For my mother it's simple: God gives us memories so we can smell the daffodils in December snow. Maybe so, and it's a beautiful thought. But for my own satisfaction and to assist the writing of my memoir of childhood, I wanted to know what is happening at the brain activity level, even as my mind conceives that same beautiful thought?

Precisely what is happening when I think 'daffodils' or 'field' is impossible to say. No one fully understands the workings of the brain, with its strange currents and chemical cocktails and mysterious oscillations. Somehow, don't ask me how, we even bend time. We can be three years old again. Or thirteen. Or thirty-three.

My former editor's partner is an astrophysicist. Over dinner in Lygon Street I asked him what he did, exactly. He said, 'Glyn, I dissect smoke rings in outer space.' I was stumped. Somehow it all connected to time.

Last week the ABC gave us a story about a lady who is one hundred and three. She is bright as a penny, as my mother would say. Whatever our age, we have consciously been and we can consciously be. Surely that makes us all time-travellers?

What a marvel it is, then, our in-built time machine, our living brain.

Here in Cape Burney, living beside the sea on the west coast of Australia, it's possible twelve times a year to arrive very early and walk out onto the ledge of a certain reef. (We don't tell too many people of the exact whereabouts.) Early-morning means low tide, and by then the gravitational pull of the moon keeps the water away, leaving the rarest parts of the reef exposed. The reward for setting the alarm early is a necklace of deep pools where you can see living brain coral.

Seeing inside the living human brain, however, is exponentially more elusive than peering into a Cape Burney tidal pool. When, at the age of sixty-five, Pulitzer prize-winner Jimmy Breslin needed brain surgery, the hunt was on to find the best neurosurgeon in the land. In the whole of

America, that amounted to a shortlist of three. One was the direct descendant of three generations of Swiss watchmakers.

Throughout the ordeal Breslin made a pact with himself: If I survive this, if I'm still able to write one decent sentence after another, I'll tell the world my story. Here's part of what he wrote:

And now I do not have my face on me. They took the face off me like it was wrapping paper.

The face that looked into rain, or that searched the faces of my children and tried to see if they looked like me, and I couldn't tell because no matter how often I use a mirror I really don't know what I look like, this face now was gone. Instead the light gleams on a white skull.

I had no more face. I was a live skeleton.

Inside the skull, an aneurysm sat like a loaded gun at the front of my brain.⁸

Part of my journey these past seven years has been the workings of my own brain. I tap my forehead. I know the machinery is in there, inside my skull, safe and protected, protecting me. There's no need to peel away my face. But what is the machinery? What *exactly*? I sat down to write this exegesis and immediately I realised, Yikes, I don't know much of anything about my brain. Yet I use it (it uses me?) every moment of every day.

In reading Behind Blue Eyes it's clear that my understanding of the brain did not amount to much when I was five years old:

I know something about brains, I tell her. There's enough electricity inside a man's brain to make a light bulb glow.

Really? says Mum. Well, there's something I didn't know.

Julie is instantly suspicious. Anyone can be taught to do a trick.⁹

⁸ Jimmy Breslin, *I Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me*, 187 (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1996).

To my shame, at middle age my understanding has barely advanced beyond the light bulb. I am the words, I am the story, but how does anything work?

Someone who definitely comes closer than most to an understanding of brain activity is Rita Carter. In her book, *Mapping the Mind*, she informed readers that the brain does millions of different things in parallel. ‘It is probably so complex,’ she wrote, ‘that it will never succeed in comprehending itself. Yet it never ceases to try.’¹⁰

My skull houses one hundred billion neurons. In other words, yes, it’s the Milky Way in there. And these neurons are all shapes and sizes: spirals, spheres, spiders, even octopuses. They work in groups. When one neuron fires, they all fire, creating a specific pattern. These patterns add up to make us who we are:

Thoughts, sensory perceptions, ideas, hallucinations—any brain function (save the random activity of a seizure) is made up of this same thing. One pattern—a group of neighbouring neurons firing together in the auditory cortex, say—brings about the experience of a certain note of music. Another pattern, in a different area, brings about the feeling of fear; another, the experience of blue; another, a particular taste—a hint of tannin, say, in a sip of wine. A memory is a pattern like these. The only difference is that it remains encoded in the brain after the stimulation that originally gave rise to it has ceased.¹¹

Who am I? Take away my face, reduce me to the skeletal, and this is who I am, a series of firings inside my skull. Hardly a romantic description, but accurate, nonetheless.

Which brings me back to daffodils.

9 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 35

10 Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind*, 8 (London: Phoenix, 1998).

11 Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind*, 261 (London: Phoenix, 1998).

It's all still a big mystery to me that I am unable to remember beyond daffodils. Why daffodils? Yet they are my earliest memory:

The first thing I like about the place is the daffodils. They grow in the field behind our caravan. They grow beside the river.¹²

This is the point where I chose to begin my memoir, in a field in Cornwall. Before this, nothing. Prior to Cornwall we lived in Cyprus for the toddler years of my existence. Before that, my first six months of life, I lived in a pub in the north-east of England. Billy Elliott country. But I don't remember any of it. Nor should I. No cognitive development expert would expect me to. Simply put, my hippocampus—the bit in charge of conscious long-term memories—had not kicked in yet. Or so say the experts.

I asked around my family and friends: 'How old are you in your earliest memory?'

The answer came back: 'Three.'

To be difficult, my sister said, 'Two.'

Why not one year old? Why not eight months old?

In high school I read the second chapter of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* with a sense of creeping horror. In its most disturbing scene, eight-month-old babies are placed on the floor of the nursery in front of flowers and books, and the moment every child is engaged thus, a lever is thrown. The room explodes into a violence of sirens, alarm bells, and mild electric shock. In an instant the twitching, shrieking, scarred-for-life babies have learned their first lesson for survival: Stay away from books and nature.

Surely, this is far-fetched. A child of eight months would not be able to remember any of this. Why would you want to? The brain would simply bury the horror somewhere, never to be recalled.

Maybe not.

¹² Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 3

If he is to be believed, Samuel Beckett's hippocampus kicked in whilst he was still inside the womb. He claimed he had 'perfect memories of himself as a foetus in a dark and painful place, hearing the voices of dinnertime outside.'¹³

Maybe he did. And I'm betting if I dig deep enough at Amazon.com there's a memoir based entirely on the first year of someone's life. Does it really matter?

Well, actually, yes. Absolutely. Advances in medical science are such that we can now 'see' thoughts with new imaging devices sent in to spy. Moreover, we can 'listen' in on individual brain cells and find new meaning in the chatter. If, at some future date, perception can indeed be traced back to the womb, the legal and philosophical ramifications alone will prompt headlines and tie up courtrooms for years.

As for my beautiful wife, she's already convinced. Our daughter danced to David Bowie all through the last trimester, whereas our eldest son liked The Beatles the best. The middle boy—the one causing us so much trouble—wasn't fussy.

'It's true!' says my wife, because I am deeply sceptical. 'They were into their music before they were even born.'

Yes, no, maybe. All I know is, I can't remember that far back. Nor does my mother remember me remembering that far back, which is to say, I can't remember dancing in the womb to Bill Haley and the Comets.

I am three. Three is the magic number.

So, daffodils. I am stuck with daffodils. My daughter says her earliest memory is the moon—we were down Margaret River way on our camping holiday and yes, she was also three—but for me it's daffodils. The kind that grow in a field in Cornwall.

I like daffodils.

13 Barry Hannah, 'Mr Brain, He Want A Song', *The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, ed. Frank Conroy, 70 (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

It's amazing what the brain will recall, years after after the learning has taken place. In his book, *Elegy For Iris*, which is an account of the progression of Iris Murdoch's Alzheimer's disease, John Bayley shares the following observation:

Trying to cheer her up one day, I thought of an inane childhood rhyme, forgotten for years.... Iris not only smiled; her face looked cunning and concentrated. Somewhere in the deserted areas of the brain, old contacts and impulses became activated, wires joined up.¹⁴

Bayley's description is an apt one. Over a lifetime Iris Murdoch's billions of impressions—okay, so let's call them memories and no more talk of octopuses—were stored in the multitudinal locations of her vast internal library. I'm not surprised at all to read that towards the end she recovered nursery rhymes. This was a woman, after all, who loved language from the earliest age. As a child she would no doubt have remembered and revisited her favourite rhymes often—for recital, for skipping games, simply to show off. They would have given her much pleasure. Etched deeper and deeper into the neural structure of her brain, as the Alzheimer's progressed, at times she and her nursery rhymes became one and the same.

Reading John Bayley reminded me so much of a scene in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Dave Bowman, realising the onboard computer Hal has malfunctioned, decides to unplug the machine:

'Dave,' said Hal, 'I don't understand why you're doing this to me... you are destroying my mind... don't you understand?... I will become childish... I will become nothing...'¹⁵

Soon after, as Bowman wipes more and more of Hal's memory, the best the Hal 9000 computer can come up with is childish song.

14 John Bayley, *Elegy For Iris*, 54 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

15 Arthur C. Clarke, *2001 A Space Odyssey*, 170 (London: Orbit, 2000).

Is this how it will be? Nursery rhymes and children's songs in those last days and hours? Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall?

Years ago, in Melbourne, I sat in a crowded auditorium and watched Elizabeth Jolley honoured by the Who's Who of Australian literature. Though she protested vehemently, clearly she also enjoyed the fuss. A great evening was had by all and afterward I gave her a hug. Of all my memories of Elizabeth, this particular evening is the one I will treasure most.

And yet, show me the preceding sentence thirty years from now, and chances are I won't be able to name a single person who attended the evening's get-together, perhaps not even Elizabeth! Already I am unable to recall the date, and I'm hard-pressed to recall even the year, except to say it was held during the Melbourne Writers' Festival some time in the late 1990s. It was then that I did most of my touring as a 'celebrity' children's author—wasted years I'd like to bulldoze into the sea.

'Melbourne Writers' Festival,' I might say, if prompted. 'But I've never even been to Melbourne. Sydney, yes, the Opera House, I've been to the Opera House, but the Malthouse? You say it's in Melbourne? No, never.'

Sadly, as I type these words, Elizabeth Jolley has no recall. She is finished as a writer and only the backlist remains. That, too, will soon disappear once the sales slip below what is profitable for the warehouse to stock. She will become another casualty of Book Scan. I can't help wondering about her carers, if they even know who she is, this marvellous writer of books with her little dances.

It's a sad and scary business, to be faced with your crumbling memory, to become Charlie Gordon and be beaten by a mouse. Hemingway knew, I am convinced, that his powers were waning, just as Iris Murdoch knew, and Elizabeth knew, and if the time comes, yes, I'll know, too. It's not something I'm looking forward to, now that I've seen the bastard disease Alzheimer's close-up. For all of its marvellous architecture, the human brain fails spectacularly.

Enough! I'd like to go back to the daffodils and my earliest memories. The daffodils must not be so easily dismissed. They may, after all, be the last sparking, my final neuronal activity before the terminals go dead and I cease to be. Like Wordsworth, I might be lying on my couch and the only reality I need is what my inward eye shows me: a sunny field of daffodils.

'Ah, look, look, the daffodils are in bloom,' I will say, pointing to the ceiling.

This much I know: forty years or so after the event, a field of daffodils in Cornwall is imprinted on my brain. Why I will never know. Maybe it was all that colour, and sunshine, and the scent of fields in the springtime. But I'm not complaining. It's a pleasant enough earliest memory to have, and as I have already mentioned, I like flowers. Go ahead, Mustapha Mond, throw the lever. I'm not fussed. Expect no twitching, shrieking, primal cries from me.

So will it be back to Cornwall I go? Probably, yes.

Annie Dillard, the essayist, thinks she knows where her mind will take her in her final days:

When everything else has gone from my brain—the President's name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family—when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.¹⁶

Dillard and my father have much in common. He is past seventy now, and increasingly his memories turn to his childhood in Wales. He remembers with much affection where he came from and who he was back then, and he especially remembers his own landscape: the raging Menai Straits that

¹⁶ Diana Hume George, *The Lonely Other: A Woman Watching America*, ix (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

separate Anglesey from the mainland, and the snow-capped peaks of Snowdonia.

A while back I was asked to contribute a personal essay for a book celebrating fatherhood. This assignment led to several interviews. I asked Dad many questions about his beloved village of Llanfair PG. It gave him the greatest pleasure to find the answers, to provide me with photographs, newspaper cuttings, postcards and brittle correspondence. When I had enough, I sat down and wrote.

My father owns a copy of the book that now contains his reconstructed childhood. He is very proud. The pages fall out at the place where my contribution sits, so well read are the words. The essay begins thus:

I have tripped where my father ran, through slanting fields of cold sunshine and leafy woods hung over with dew. I have slipped where my father sailed, down tumbling slopes of wildberry to reach the ruddy banks of the Menai. I have stood in my father's climbing shadow, where on a fire-breathing night stone lions failed to guard leaping tunnels atop the tubular bridge. I have dreamed what my father lived, shrieking banshees leaping London-to-Holyhead steam trains across raging straits. I have sat where my father explored, in a mantle of granite and magnificent oak, air thick with Snowdonia frost and salt lifted from the Irish Sea.

All this one hour when I was very young, away from the village with the longest name. I was taken to the shore by my grandparents, my nain and taid—to skim stones, float driftwood, watch whirlpools cling to the turning tide. Then, too soon, Nain's thoughts fell to supper and Taid's hunting dogs led me back to the crunch of leaf litter and ever upward to the main road.¹⁷

¹⁷ Glyn Parry, 'And The Wild Boys Innocent', *Fathers In Writing*, ed. Ross Fitzgerald and Ken Spillman, 158 (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1997).

This, then, is my father's dreaming landscape as he approaches his twilight years. I do my best to record faithfully all that his memories reveal. Increasingly, they are his reality, I am sure. Just as a quarter-century from now I will run skipping through fields of sunshine, impatient for Mum to catch up.

And as for dear Elizabeth Jolley?

They gave flowers, that night in Melbourne, when the booklovers assembled to pay their respects. Expensive flowers, I imagine. But I like to think there may have been one daffodil in there.

I shall buy a bunch in the morning for Mum.

The Square Mile Of Childhood

In Welsh it's called *y filltir sgwar*, the square mile. But you won't find *y filltir sgwar* in any atlas. The idea is this: before we reach our eighth birthday we will all of us know one square mile in more detail and with more resonance than we can ever hope to achieve again.

When I sat down to write my childhood memoir, *y filltir sgwar* immediately threw up a conundrum. From Cornwall we moved back to the north-east of England, and a very grey landscape it was. I am a boy from County Durham. I grew up in Horden, a colliery village. Our street, Belford Street, ran down to the pit wall and across to the allotments. All the children in our street had strict instructions never to play on the front street, where there were cars and danger, but to stay in the back lane where no car ever went. Besides, it was easier for all the mums to keep an eye on us that way. Thus, the back lane was the beginnings of my square mile of childhood. In the memoir I've tried to describe from memory what it was like:

We play in the back lane where it's safe. Our mums don't mind which end we play at, top or bottom, as long as we can be seen and are playing nicely.

Our back lane.

We map out the Wembley pitch. We take off our coats for the goals. Julie and her friends tie one end of a rope to a gate. Dogs bark and mums fold their arms and watch, always watching.

This is how it is in the back lane of Belford Street, and there's no place I'd rather be when the sun is shining and the day never wants to end.

I'm watching you boys over there, a mother will say. I'll be telling your fathers if I see you do it again. Play nice.

No stranger can walk into our back lane and not be spotted. No salesman selling brushes is welcome. Sunday morning comes the papers; Sunday afternoon the ice cream man.

Where's our Tommy?

Andrew's house.

Where's our Glyn?

Tommy's house.

Ours. There's no safer place to be, and Mum is saying, Out! Out! Get some sunshine into your bones.¹⁸

They tell me they tipped the pit wall down the mine shaft in those final days of the colliery's usefulness. They tell me the allotments are all factories now. They tell me they have taken my square mile away. It's gone now, gashed open and moved aside, finally to be buried and sealed.

'You'll not recognise the place,' Aunt Mary told me, when I mooted the idea of revisiting y filltir sgwar. 'You'll be wasting your time.'

Should I go back anyway? Should I visit the bulldozed, brutalised landscape of my formative years in the north-east of England—my father for his sins married a geordie lass—or should I stay away and only write from memory?

'Stay the hell away,' all my writer friends told me. 'Keep it pure.'

But who listens to friends or even Aunt Mary?

Before I wrote the first word, I fully intended to catch the first available flight to Heathrow and trains to the north. My journey would be a fact-finding, memory-provoking mission for the truth. I needed to go. How could I possibly proceed with creative non-fiction if all I had was vague snatches of memory, dreamlike and out of focus? No, what I had to do was go back to my own square mile, with rolls of film and a tape recorder.

Oh, and how the memories would come rushing back!

I had a romantic vision of myself retracing the footsteps of my childhood, with bemused relatives and the local newspaperman in tow.

¹⁸ Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 127

‘See,’ the middle-aged stranger from down-under would announce, ‘the coal shed roof I climbed up on when I was a mere boy of eight to search the stars.’ And someone would say, ‘Aye, lad, that’s right. You’re poor mam had to run a bath and scrub you clean. Aye, I remember now.’

Or, yes, I would wave a photograph borrowed from my parents’ album and say, ‘Where is this, exactly? This picture palace, The Empress? Didn’t I see *Zulu* there? And everyone was smoking. And, yes, Maltesers. Mum gave me Maltesers.’ Again, someone else’s own memories would leap into the conversation. ‘Ee, the lad’s right. Michael Caine.’ And, of course, the mere mention of Michael Caine would arouse memories of the day the actor stepped out of a Bentley to shoot of the climactic scene in *Get Carter*. Or was it a Jaguar? Anyway, the baddie got shot right there on Easington Beach, on the very spot where the colliery tipped its relentless tons of solid waste each year.

It needn’t be a photograph. I could roll up my trouser leg and point to some long-faded scar, and recall the moment of injury on a football field, and again the voices would chime in. ‘Aye, that must have been the recreation ground, lad. That’s where they kicked the football.’ And the very mention of football might start a conversation about the year Sunderland brought the F.A. Cup home to Roker Park, the prize for beating Leeds United 1-0, all glory to Jimmy Montgomery the hero goalie, best there ever was.

‘Mind, we were the giant killers that year,’ someone might say.

And no one would dispute the fact. No one would dare.

All this I fancied. My homecoming would be written up in the local rag for people to ponder.

‘From Australia? He’s a long way from home, then.’

I would be the topic of much discussion around dinner tables. People would seek me out, eager to slip me their bit of the jigsaw puzzle. I even drove down to Tandy and bought myself a voice-activated tape recorder. I would track down everyone! People would be just so happy to have their story told.

I am a true migrant child. I left England at the age of twelve, left everything behind, and was whisked down to London, then jetted halfway around the world. It's the point where Behind Blue Eyes ends, all of us in a borrowed car, about to make our way to Durham Station for the train to London:

I'm sitting in the back seat with Mum crying beside me, wishing we were on the train already. It's time to leave these empty streets, this ghost place, all my unhappiness.

Too much, Mum is saying. It's all too much.

She has to have a cigarette. Just one.

The car starts moving.¹⁹

Except for a two-week return visit when I was seventeen, I have remained in Australia ever since. In a very real sense my childhood was snap frozen in March 1972. On the Friday I was a twelve-year-old boy living in a coal mining village in Durham. On the Monday I was a twelve-year-old boy living in a sandy suburb in Perth.

Thirty years, that's how long I have stayed away. Yes, I definitely needed to go back. How else could I ever hope to achieve that all-important authentic voice?

Then I picked up Mark Hudson's *Coming Back Brockens*, the tale of one man's search for his past in the Durham mining village of Horden.

My Horden!

The same Horden where my mother was born.

Hudson's book, which went on to win the 1995 AT&T Non-fiction Award, described a Horden I scarcely recognised. My mother was very agitated.

'He's made us out to be common as muck,' she said.

Perhaps, but the story needed to be told.

¹⁹ Glyn Parry, Behind Blue Eyes, 261

Following the embittered miners' strike of 1984-85, Horden Colliery closed down forever. There is no pit there now, only a memorial and scattered litter. And, if Hudson's account is accurate—I'm sure it is—Horden today is a place without hope, a lost cause, a finished town where everything is closing down, falling down, tear it down, a nowhere town of fading memories and old people. Young families moved away as soon as the pit money ran out and their demographic has never returned.

I can't imagine the village without children. My memory is not false in this respect: during the heyday mid-sixties, when coal production peaked and the village prospered, every back lane swarmed with children. Horden was the success story. Everyone wanted to work there. Not anymore. There are no children now.

The Hudson book prompted fiery debate in the House of Commons. Hudson had captured a dying village where one third of men was categorised as long-term unemployed. What job do you give a broken down ex-coal miner with poorly lungs? Hundreds were on long-term sickness benefit after a lifetime working with coal. Just under half of households had a resident with chronic illness. Horden was listed as the third poorest district in the country in terms of average disposable income. More than 200 hectares of land was derelict. As one speaker put it, 'With the demise of the colliery, many hundreds of colliery houses have been left to God and good neighbours.'²⁰

'We're finished,' everyone told me, but none louder than my elderly relatives who still lived there.

'A bomb's hit this place,' said Aunt Mary. 'You stay in Australia where the beaches are clean and there's good money to be made. God knows why you want to be writing about us lot anyway.'

²⁰ John Cummings, 'Coalfield Communities', House of Commons Hansard Debates for 10 Jan 1996, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199596/cmhansrd/vo950110/debtext/60110-02.htm> (accessed 16 April 2006).

One passage in particular stopped me wanting to ever go back there. It's the place in the book where Hudson describes the school. *My old school*.

We passed the church and turned up by what used to be the village's main school, now boarded-up, the weeds springing up thickly behind the railings among piles of rubbish uncleared, apparently, for years.²¹

Reading those words, I felt miserable for days. How could there be no more school? Every village has a school.

On my mother's last visit to Horden she and her sister Mary gathered with a group of older people to witness the final act of destruction. Most of my school was toppled in a day. It's gone now. Finished. All of my Google searches these past four years have thrown up only one small JPEG.

Where are the marble shooters, the Batman card swappers, the boys who teased me for wearing glasses, that one boy who brought into the playground a real live lizard? Where is the magnifying glass that burned the back of my hand and made me cry? Where is my precious Miss Anderson?

Miss! Miss! I am shouting the morning I spot her across the playground.

When she sees me I put my head down. I get a good speed up, too, because it's all downhill. I'm the fastest billy goat she'll ever see.

Glyn! What on earth—

Then I'm stopped sharp. It's a thick wall, the business end of a classroom, and suddenly I'm dizzy.

Glyn, can you hear me? asks Miss Anderson.

I'm feeling my head. It's hurting a lot, and I think even my brain *knows*, black being the first colour out of the tin this morning.²²

Gone are the 1960s. Gone is my old school. Gone is the Horden I remember, with its population explosion. The village had a vibrancy all its own back

21 Mark Hudson, *Coming Back Brockens: A Year In A Mining Village*, 37 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994).

22 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 99

then. Horden Colliery, after all, was the biggest coal mine in the world. Five thousand men worked twelve hundred feet down and five miles under the sea. Each of those men paid a little from their pay packet each week for the upkeep of Horden's expansive parks and gardens.

If I have one perfect memory of Horden, it was the evening the showground came to the field above our street. Perfect for any number of reasons. It was a beautiful summer's evening (rare), and I was old enough to go on all the rides, including the Waltzer and the Skyboats, and because both my parents took me. *And* I had fairy floss.

Did you have a good time, Glyn? asks Dad.

Yes. Thank you.

Julie has a plastic daschund to take home. Mum offered a man sixpence and he said, Why not? You knock its head, up and down, up and down. It's supposed to live on the rear shelf in a car and make people smile. We don't have a car.

Get it out of your mouth, says Mum, because Julie has started already. She's nibbling. That dog's going to have no paws after a week.

I'm exhausted, says Dad happily, as Horden families drift back to their homes. The sun is a light show behind the colliery. Over by the caravans, lights have started to come on.²³

Gone, gone, all gone. I'm happy not to have seen the Horden it has become—a shadow on the lung. I'm glad I didn't witness *that*.

So what am I left with here? One lousy JPEG? No, not at all. A hundred billion neurones, remember! Good old memory. Hip hip for memory. *My* old school doesn't have to be bulldozed, *will* never be bulldozed. *My* old school will remain standing for as long as I want.

What I don't want, is to be standing on the pavement next to an empty lot.

23 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 125

When Richard Adams was a child he lived in a big house in three acres of garden. Beyond the garden were the fields and the rabbits where *Watership Down* begins.

Not anymore. It's all suburbia now. Adams' square mile of childhood has gone forever. Or should I say, has been preserved forever? As Adams has said:

In a way I'm Fiver and it's my warren that's been destroyed. When Holly describes the bulldozer that destroyed the field, so that it wasn't the same place anymore, I feel this most bitterly.²⁴

Not surprisingly, Adams made the decision never to go back. He had no wish to see the end result, the garden and fields gone, the rabbits all poisoned. Better to remember the glory days: the wonderful house with its gardens, and countryside all around. As for the rabbits—*his* rabbits—he sent them away.

Go or stay? I stayed here in Western Australia. Like Adams, I chose happy memory over bitter regret. After reading Hudson's book, a bleak spiteful affair, happy memory was always going to hold sway.

One hot Perth summer evening I sat Dad down and said, 'Speak into this little machine, Dad. I need to know.'

His square mile has changed, too. The centuries-old oak trees are gone. The field where he ran his butcher's paper kite is no more. The population of the village has trebled, and that means, more houses, smaller gardens, less forest.

What did it mean to him, y filltir sgwar? Where did it begin and end? What were the boundaries?

'Tell me everything, Dad.'

²⁴ Eleanor Cameron, 'A Writer's Journey', *Innocence & Experience: Essays & Conversations On Children's Literature*, ed. Barbara Harrison and Gregory Maguire, 34 (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1987).

So Dad spoke. And I listened. And somehow midnight came and went, and then it was one a.m., with neither of us really caring about the time. And in the morning, he dragged the old suitcase out of the wardrobe, and out came the handful of photographs.

Here he is, then, my father, a little boy again, asleep in the big bed in the back bedroom with his older brothers, Ken and Len.

My nain and taid moved into the house on their wedding day. A small house, grey granite covered in pebble dash, original slate roof. My father was a teenager before running water or electricity came to the village. When I ask about his favourite childhood thing, my father replies, 'The house where I was born.'

Here he is with his two baby brothers, Tudor and Owen... Scrumping apples from the orchard. Firing catapults at lampoles. Listening to Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano on the radio.

See him fly, my father, up the stairs and into the lobby of old Madison Square Garden, hauled in off the subway by the scent of neighbourhood toughs, Irish cops, blinded boxers, scarfaced gamblers, pimps in velvet collars, gangster molls. And after the fights, a flurry of scissors and a filling of scrapbooks...

Friday-night wildings meant supplies of Durex and the eternal hope of getting laid.

Every Saturday, Menai Bridge cinema held its matinee. Now showing: *Deadwood Dick and the Skull*.

Every Sunday, the barrow boy brought *The Hotspur*, *The Dandy*, *The Beano*, *The Wizard*.

One summer night, American jeeps drove into the village and Negro servicemen filled pockets with candy and chewing-gum.

And then, one day in April 1953, it's finished.

'I remember as if it were yesterday,' says my father. 'For the very first time I left my parents' house and turned to wave goodbye to my

mother before turning the corner at Miss Owen's shop. I was eighteen and on my way to the railway station, small suitcase in hand, to catch a train to Wrexham.'

So sudden, so final, the end of childhood.²⁵

In a very real sense, my father has never been back. As a tourist he's been back many times, to the village, but the village of his childhood has changed. His square mile belongs to other children now, just as mine does, and yours, dear reader. We are none of us Peter Pan.

But it's perfect, too, the idea that anywhere in the world, wherever children are, there the square mile will also be.

The childhood memoirs that worked best for me, the books that I have decided to keep now that my research is finished, were the ones that gave a clear sense of child-centredness or filtered immediacy.

Here, for example, is Sandra Cisneros riding a bicycle through the Hispanic quarter of Chicago:

We ride fast and faster. Past my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr Benny's grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous. Laundromat, junk store, drug store, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango.²⁶

To read her words is to climb onto the handlebars and hang on tight. It's an authentic voice, a child's voice.

That's not to say childhood memories cannot be mediated using a vocabulary that very much belongs to adults. Consider the sophistication of Laurie Lee, and his now-famous Cotswold Valley:

²⁵ Glyn Parry, 'And The Wild Boys Innocent', *Fathers In Writing*, ed. Ross Fitzgerald and Ken Spillman, 162-163 (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1997).

²⁶ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, 16 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004).

That was the day we came to the village, in the summer of the last year of the First World War. To a cottage that stood in a half-acre of garden on a steep bank above a lake; a cottage with three floors and a cellar and a treasure in the walls, with a pump and apple trees, syringa and strawberries, rooks in the chimneys, frogs in the cellar, mushrooms on the ceiling, and all for three and sixpence a week.²⁷

Here is a brand-new place to explore, room by room, one discovery after another. This is exactly what the child would do. Yet this is no child's voice, but the voice of a poet.

And so is this. Dylan Thomas never tired of revisiting *y filltir sgwar* in his broadcasts for BBC Wales. Like Lee, he was a magician who strove to compress so much of his childhood into a single radio broadcast. His piling up of carefully selected images never failed to deliver a sense of immediacy:

I was born in a large Welsh town at the beginning of the Great War—an ugly, lovely town, or so it was and is to me; crawling, sprawling by a long and splendid curving shore where truant boys and Sandfield boys and old men from nowhere, beach-combed, idled, and paddled, watched the dock-bound ships or the ships steaming away into wonder and India, magic and China, countries bright with oranges and loud with lions, threw stones into the sea for the barking outcast dogs; made castles and forts and harbours and race tracks in the sand; and on Saturday summer afternoons listened to the brass band, watched the Punch and Judy, or hung about on the fringes of the crowd to hear the fierce religious speakers who shouted at the sea, as though it were wicked and wrong to roll in and out like that, white-horsed and full of fishes.²⁸

And, closer to home, my good mate Tim:

²⁷ Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*, 12 (London: The Book Club, 1959).

²⁸ Dylan Thomas, *Quite Early One Morning*, 8 (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1974).

In my memory of childhood there is always the smell of bubbling tar, of Pinke Zinke, the briny smell of the sea. It is always summer and I am on Scarborough Beach, blinded by light, with my shirt off and my back and map of dried salt and peeling sunburn. There are waves cracking on the sandbar and the rip flags are up. My Mum, brown as a planed piece of jarrah, is reading a novel by John O' Hara with cleavage on the cover and someone is spraying coconut oil on the bodies of girls in wide-side bikinis. Out there is west, true west. The sea is where the sun goes at the end of the day, where it lives while you sleep. I have a fix on things when I know where west is.²⁹

We all of us have it in us, y filltir sgwar, the square mile. Brutal, I know, but they can keep their 200 derelict hectares, I don't really care. Just so long as I can save in my memories the one square mile.

An—drewww!

Andrew's mum is at the back gate, shouting for him to come home. It's the first of the many. Every day ends with our mums at the back gate calling us in.

Gl—ynnn!

It's no use pretending I don't hear. Mum's call is unique. She's like a bird calling her young.

Gor—dooon!

There's no more war with Germany this day. Soon Zebedee will be jumping up to say goodnight to Dougall, and next it will be, Go wash your hands, Glyn. Use plenty of soap. They're filthy.

There might not be much more TV after that, if Mum is too tired for Julie's nonsense. Dad is working extra late at the crisp factory. Mum might be getting one of her headaches.

²⁹ Tim Winton, *Land's Edge*, 9 (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1993).

It's ending. The long day is ending. Down, down, sinks the sun, bye-bye.³⁰

Y filltir sgwar. It's the somewhere place we knew so well, tramped and scrutinised, invaded, defended and won. Listen carefully, and you can hear your own voice—shouting discovery in the trees, across the meadow, along the lane, over the back fence.

You were never so alive.

³⁰ Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 128

Home

We romanticise. We get teary-eyed. I hadn't counted on the sadness that comes with saying goodbye. I hadn't allowed for the emotion of simply closing a door for the last time.

Last year we sold our home in the Perth Hills in order to buy our cottage by the sea here in Cape Burney. Our daughter lived with us there all of her teenage years, and she feels the loss most deeply. She simply did not want us to sell. So much so, that on several occasions she has voiced her intentions of buying the house back at some future date.

For my own part, on the day I handed the keys over to our real estate agent, it felt very strange to see the house empty of contents and spookily quiet. Where were the kids? They'd all grown up. I suddenly felt like a trespasser. With a heavy heart I reversed out of the driveway for the very last time. I uttered a childish private goodbye to the house, and to my favourite tree, the maple. Our magpie family combed the front garden near the For Sale sign, and it was all I could do to concentrate on the road ahead.

A different family lives there now.

I have driven past the house only once, on a flimsy excuse, and all the rest of that day the experience made me melancholy. Nothing felt right. I won't be going back soon if at all.

'Too many memories,' I hear people say, when they keep away.

If I'm particularly feeling my way toward patting Churchill's famous black dog, all I have to do is play the right song, touch the right photograph, turn the page to the right passage, sniff the right air.

Melancholy is easy.

So that on my first Christmas eve in Australia, lying on my bed with the sheets kicked off and no breeze to be found anywhere, the small Horden boy inside of me wished and wished for the impossible: snow.

'Why are you crying?' Mum wanted to know. 'It's Christmas. You should be happy.'

‘It’s not Christmas,’ I said vehemently. ‘There is no Christmas. It’s all wrong here. Australia is stupid.’

Because, a Christmas without snow? How cheated I felt, just the idea of it. My first Christmas in Perth felt like a million miles from home. What I missed especially was snow. This snow:

Snowflakes are tiny parachutes, all falling silently past upstairs windows. *Our* snowflakes—for snowmen and Artic wars and sledging.

The first night of heavy snow is like a warning sign to every motorist silly enough to try our hill. They are beaten back down to drive the long way round. Belford Street is handed over. Out come the sledges.

Ready, Glyn? says Andrew, waiting at the top of the hill.

Champion, I say. Look what my grandad got me.

Is it fast? he asks.

Fast as British steel.

Have you had a go on it?

I’m about to.

A sledge is a rocket, a downhill racer, the werewolf’s howl. It’s wind on your cheeks and never mind the cold.³¹

For years, as a new Australian, I refused to acknowledge Christmas cards that depicted the outback or beaches. I rigidly stuck to northern winters and snow. The idea of Christmas, like the idea of home, was not complete without the blessed stuff. How foolish was I! Obstinate, possessively, I saw myself as the migrant English boy delivered to a landscape not of his own choosing. I even told people I had been kidnapped... by my parents. My misery was perfect, albeit misplaced. Little wonder I quickly converted to the skinhead subculture.

31 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 217

We underestimate the power of home. We certainly underestimate the power of place. Last year, visiting schools in Kununurra, the opportunity arose for me to see Wyndham. Somehow I got talking to a teacher there about the weirdness of the landscape. The road from Kununurra to Wyndham is strangely beautiful and unsettling. It's not a place to break down.

'Glyn,' said the teacher, 'there's a dirt road you passed on the way here that the locals stay away from.'

By local she meant, Aboriginal.

She went on to tell me that a bad spirit lived there, ten kilometres off the main highway, and the spirit chases the unwary away. Indeed, only weeks ago, English tourists broke up camp in a hurry, swearing that they had felt the presence of something watching them. This was barely half an hour after arriving there, in daylight.

Yeah, yeah. Whatever.

Driving back from Wyndham I noticed the turn-off and curiosity got the better of me. Soon I was driving into country that was regarded as off limits. I estimated the distance—yep, ten kilometres—and I switched off the motor. I got out of the car. An eagle soared on the thermals high above me. I felt smug. Chase *me*, I thought. Come on, then. I dare you.

It's impossible to describe the feeling of standing in that barren place in the middle of the day and knowing, but not understanding, that I had somehow trespassed and, worse, I had been spotted. Suddenly I tasted fear—a very real taste of aluminium—and to this day I don't know exactly why. All I know is I couldn't get back into the car quick enough and start the motor. I even locked the doors.

When I got back to Kununurra I joked about my experience that evening at a barbecue. Everyone seemed to know the story. One of the locals, a big man well-respected, said, 'You couldn't pay me to camp there for one night. There has to be a reason why blackfellas stay away. They're just not saying.'

And all I could think was, What? What could possibly have happened to make the place so bad?

Behind Blue Eyes has one scene in which I describe my father introducing me to the atomic bomb. As a young man serving in the Royal Navy he witnessed the explosion of Britain's first atomic bomb over Christmas Island:

Everyone had to stand on deck with their back turned. There was a big flash and a hot wind that reached into shirts. Then the men were ordered to turn around and see. What they saw looked like a big mushroom in the sky.

See, Glyn, says Dad, showing me the front page of the Daily Mirror. Doesn't that look like a big mushroom to you?

It does!

It cost a lot of money to explode that A bomb. But the scientists were very happy. They like anything that makes a big splash on the front page of the Mirror. It put Britain back in the race.

What race? I ask.

The arms race. We have to make sure the Russians know their place.

Who are the Russians?

The other side, Son.

None of this makes any sense to me, but I don't want to spoil the story. It's exciting. I want to know what happened next, after the sky caught on fire and the mushroom grew and grew.

Ah, well after that we come to the pigs, says Dad.

Fish were dead in the water and wild pigs screamed on the island, and then the scientists flew in a helicopter and went ashore to have a closer look.

At the pigs?

At anything and everything, says Dad. Scientists are like that.

The name of the island was Christmas Island.

Weren't the people scared, Dad?

Oh, no, the islanders all got moved to a different island. They were fine. The British government provided them with somewhere else to live.

The Queen must own a lot of islands, is all I can think.³²

I know now that the British government used young men like my father to test the effects of the atomic bomb. The evidence is all there. But he was also very lucky. His part in the tests was very short-lived and there was minimal exposure. His ship sailed away soon after the explosion and toward the reward that was Honolulu. But what of the islanders themselves? How did they cope with the knowledge that the soil under their feet might be dangerously radioactive? As it turns out, Christmas Island suffered very little damage. The winds blew the right way, apparently.

Not so the island of Bikini, where far greater testing was done with much higher payloads. There the families were relocated hundreds of kilometres away, with the promise that they could safely return once the testing was completed. Then, over eleven years and twenty-three tests, hundreds of bombs were detonated. The islanders had no idea of the extent of the damage being inflicted on their island home in their absence. So much damage, in fact, that the environment has been ruined for centuries to come.

They lost their home.

Today the island of Bikini is uninhabitable. No one can ever be allowed to live there. And I am wondering, What does that mean? What strange and sullied connection must exist between the islanders and the island they are not allowed to return to? What will become of them? And what must the folklore be, now that the place is off-limits?

³² Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 110

Another true story: a minibus headed to Geraldton from Perth was filled with Japanese tourists. Suddenly, three hours into the long drive, one of the passengers had a panic attack. The woman kept saying the same words, over and over. No one could console her. Her tears forced the driver to pull off the road.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ he asked, perplexed by the sudden unusual behaviour.

Her group translated for him.

‘Too big! Too big!’

The country was too big.

I can relate to this. My own parents seem afraid of its distances at times. They have no wish to see it at all, preferring to hug the coastline, and even then a small part of it. Busselton to the south, Geraldton to the north, and no further inland than Northam. This is the length and breadth of their Australian adventures to date. They have lived here since 1972.

‘There are no villages,’ my mother will say.

‘Dad, where’s home?’ I asked one time.

He looked at me so strangely. He said, ‘Do you think we made a mistake, coming here to Australia?’

‘But we had to leave, Dad. We had no choice. There was no future.’

‘Yes, well, the north-east was dying.’

‘Exactly.’

So you close the door. You walk away. You might even be thinking, Thank God I’m leaving this shithole colliery village. But for all of your goodbyes, part of you remains. It’s there in every other song Mark Knopfler wrote. It’s there in the Philip Larkin poem. The power of a place, even if it’s doomed. Like I said, we romanticise. We get teary-eyed. We don’t count on the sadness that comes.

Truth is, our house in the Perth hills was difficult to maintain. We lived on almost an acre, heavily-treed, with branches hanging down dangerously low

over our roof tiles. I couldn't reach to lop them anymore. In winter the gutters were forever choked with leaves, and after particularly hard weather the rain often managed to get into the roof cavity. We heard dripping and we saw ceiling stains. The house became damp and cold. We burned jarrah to keep warm, and jarrah meant weekends of hard physical labour, a chore nobody wanted. *Every* weekend meant some kind of labour. Clearing the block after winter growth was not only energy-sapping, but expensive. As for summer, the pool saw little direct sunlight and the water was never warm. And always, always with the February easterlies, the threat of bushfire.

I do not miss it. I thought I would, but I don't. Give me the coast any day.

Ah, but the precious memories, the happy times, our daughter is quick to remind us.

'Dad, you must remember...'

Already the house in the hills has become an article of faith for our daughter, who is the self-elected keeper of stories. She will tell the story of the day two frogs hopped one after the other along the pool wall, before jumping in for a swim. She will tell the story of the night the owl kept guard in the tree outside her window. What about the possums, Dad? Each time a story is told, it is more idealised. The trees were only ever beautiful, the garden always nature's paradise, the pool an oasis. We never had storms, only butterflies.

I am jealous of my daughter's ability to see only butterflies.

Travel now to a different house shouldering different hills. Yambo, a sixtyish rare-book dealer, can remember the plot of every book, but has forgotten his own name. His wife and daughters are strangers to him, as are his parents. He has absolutely no recollection of childhood.

Thus begins Umberto Eco's puzzling novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*.

The patient goes home to his house overlooking Milan. The sprawling attic offers clues: boxes of old newspapers, photo albums, diaries, comics, old records. Despite the best efforts of his family to help him remember his real-life past, it's the imaginary life created through sixty years of reading that dominates.

Day after day, hunting through the attic, Yambo's most lucid memories and deepest attachments rise up from the books, comics and rhymes of his childhood. He may have lost the 'now' of the daily grind, but in his attic of paper-made memories he feels very much at home. Recapturing it all—the boy reader he once was—becomes his obsession. He is at risk of falling into the pages and never returning.

Question: What drives a grown adult to recreate the lived pleasures of childhood? What drives me, for example, to search through ebay listings for, say, a scarce novel like Andre Norton's *Star Man's Son*, or a particular issue of *The Beano* comic, or, yes, the 1968 *Joe 90* annual?

Or what drives someone like Diamond Jim Parker, a former clown who has lived the circus life? He has become an obsessive collector of circus ephemera and the creator of miniature circuses. He has even moved to Gibsonton, Florida, a town famous for circus retirees, to be closer to his kin. He says Gibsonton is the only place where he feels at home.

And I can almost hear John Denver singing, 'Take me home, country roads...'

Home is so powerful.

Consider: My father has entrusted me with the task of carrying his remains back to Wales when the time arrives, to a particular spot on the Anglesey shoreline. I can't imagine his spirit resting in any other place, even if he hasn't lived there since his youth.

We cling to the idea of home, even as it's being lost all around us. Often, all that remains of a home after a devastating bushfire is the blackened chimney. Yet it's a brave fire brigade crew who attempts to tear the

chimney down without the owner's permission. It's not uncommon for an owner to scream, 'Leave it alone.'

Like everything else, the idea of home is at the mercy of forces beyond our control. My father's memories of home mean more to him today than they did even five years ago. It's all starting to slip away from him. He's starting to feel like old currency.

He's not alone. The success of television shows like *Grumpy Old Men* and *Grumpy Old Women* may well be the last gasp of a certain generation, a peculiar mindset having its final say, a demographic brazen in defeat. Clearly, *Grumpy Old Men* and *Grumpy Old Women* voice what many older Britons readily complain about: their quality of life diminished as this hi-tech, super-franchise, multiplex world expands. They complain that the high street life is disappearing before their eyes. They are losing their sense of community.

There is substance to what they say. A recently-published report, *Ghost Town Britain*, has revealed rapid landscape changes are now well underway. The Britain we see on calendars is not the Britain we see on the streets. Here are some of the findings:

We used to be a nation of shop-keepers. We have become a nation of shop-busters. Local shops and services—including corners shops, grocers, high-street banks, post offices, pubs, hardware stores—are fast disappearing. The change is happening most visibly in villages and market towns, but just as dramatically in many larger urban and suburban areas.

Between 1995-2000, we lost roughly one-fifth of these vital institutions—the very fabric of our local economies. If current trends continue, we will lose a third of the tattered remains of that fabric over the next ten years. The result is Ghost Town Britain—an increasing number of communities and neighbourhoods that lack easy access to local banks, post offices, corner shops and pubs that provide the social glue that holds communities together.

If you combine the decline in the number of banks, post offices, pubs, food retailers and general non-specialised stores (usually corner shops), what emerges is a cumulative loss of over 30,000 local economic outlets in the five years to the year 2000 alone. Applying a ‘best-fit’ forecast to that trend suggests the likely loss of a further approximately 28,000 shops over the subsequent five years. And if current trends continue, the number of local shops will have fallen by nearly one-third between 1990 and 2010.

If this trend is correct, many communities in the UK of 3,000 people and less will no longer have any such institutions by 2010, sounding the death-knell for essential elements of the local economy. In a few low-income neighbourhoods, that fatal moment has already arrived. Over the next ten years, it will become commonplace.³³

It’s fair to say the Britain of my own childhood has all but vanished. *This* Britain, for example:

The bus pulls up and we all get on, Julie and me first, mind the step, you two, then Mum with our bucket and spades. Dad has everything else.

Lots of other mums and dads have the same idea. Let’s away to Crimdon to steal the last of the sunshine. The sun is powerfully rare. We catch the bus. If it was a coach to Whitby we’d all be singing Yellow Submarine.³⁴

This is how it was back then in 1964, day trips to the seaside, and a double decker bus to take you on your way. Not anymore. In 2006 you’re more likely to be going to Portugal for a week.

33 Andrew Simms, Julian Oram, Alex MacGillivray & Joe Drury, *Ghost Town Britain: The Threat From Economic Globalisation To Livelihoods, Liberty And Local Economic Freedom*, 2 (London: New Economics Foundation, 2002).

34 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 144.

Not everyone is happy with the new-look Britain, least of all J.G. Ballard, who warns:

The future is going to be boring. The suburbanisation of the planet will continue, and the suburbanisation of the soul will follow soon after.³⁵

If Ballard is correct, then the idea of home starts to niggle. Do I really want my idea of home to be lifted from the pages of IKEA? I once put together some of their bookcases, and I was not impressed. Volvo strength they certainly were not! Tim Winton's bookcases, on the other hand, are as solid as the jetty they are recycled from and I am very jealous.

What follows is the transcript an interview with a farmer who lost his land and home to make way for a dam:

I still think about the farm, very much. All my history, my background, my roots are there. Everything that happened is down along the river... It's sad to see it now. They cut down all the trees... They burned everything... Even to this day, I go there, move the stones—trying to make it look good again.

Our house was just ordinary with plain windows like most older homes; little nine-by-nine or eight-by-eight inch panes. Every one was knocked out. The walls and doors were kicked in. It was very, very sad to go to the farm and see all this. To see it all vandalised. I just stood there, the doors flapping around...

And I still think about the little attic in our house. A room was fixed up there, and it has a little window. I used to sleep there, and when I think of that room, I think of a poem I memorized at school. I forgot who wrote it, but it went something like this: I remember, I remember

35 Guardian Unlimited Books Special Reports JG Ballard, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/authors/author/0,-15,00.html> (accessed 18 June 2006).

the house where I was born, the little window where the sun came peeping in at morn.

People had dreams. They'd build a house, and a barn, and other things. People were born there. They were married there. And they died there. It's my history, my life... It becomes part of you. All you have to do is look at something, or touch something, and it will bring your past life back to you.³⁶

When they closed the colliery down, they killed the village that was my childhood home, Horden. The old ones stayed because they had nowhere else to go. The young ones, they left. Or they tried to leave. Some returned anyway, defeated. Not me. I've stayed away these thirty years and more.

Fare thee well, Northumberland.

Yet am I an Australian citizen? Yes, this year, as a matter of fact, but it's taken this long. We do not give up the idea of home so easily, some of us migrants. And it takes us many years before we feel our new country is, in fact, our new home.

The idea of home has weighed heavily on my mind these past few weeks. Just before Christmas, my nain (my father's mother) passed away, one year short of her centenary. The house she moved into on her wedding day, where Ken, Len, Glynne, Tudor and Owen were all born, is to be sold. After more than eighty years, 2 Bryn Goleu will pass out of the family's hands. Another family, strangers, (God forbid, English foreigners!) will have the upstairs view of Snowdonia. Or, possibly, the house will be demolished for the land.

It's all so sad. Larkin was right.

Home is so sad.

36 Louise Million, 'It Was Home: Reflections on Losing Place', *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 1994, http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/Million_int.htm (accessed 18 June 2006).

I am not looking forward to the day that I have to carry Dad's ashes back there.

Share Moments, Share Life

Last summer we almost lost everything. The fires that had raged for four days in the State Forest surrounding our hills community intensified. Hundreds of volunteer firefighters from all over the State did what they could.

Then, on the fifth morning, my wife woke me and said, ‘There’s smoke everywhere. Look at the trees.’

Soon I was out the front of our house, not wanting to believe Roleystone lay directly in the path of a fifteen kilometre front. It wasn’t seven a.m. yet, but already the day felt hot. Another scorcher was forecast. Smoke drifted through the trees. The sun was blood red.

Then the phone rang. It was Dad. ‘Turn on your radio,’ he said.

Roleystone was on high alert. This was a first.

I turned to Sandra and said, ‘This looks bad.’

Charred gum leaves were beginning to fall out of the sky, an ominous sign. It had begun to rain ash. I knew from my friends at the ABC in Canberra that this was how it had started for them. And that by the end of the day whole streets were engulfed. Now it was our turn. Our usually quiet suburb echoed with the sounds of helicopters and water bombers.

The first police car turned into our street approximately half an hour later. My neighbour and I received the grim news firsthand: Yes, it was serious. Yes, we might have to evacuate. Less than five kilometres away, the Brookton Highway was now closed to traffic. Emergency vehicles only. The Salvation Army was already brewing large pots of tea in readiness for the big day ahead.

‘What should we do?’ I asked the cop.

‘Be prepared to leave in a hurry,’ he said, then, ‘But I’m sure it won’t come to that.’

As soon as the police car drove away I went back inside. I told Sandra, ‘We need to pack the boot. Now. Whatever you think is important.’

Sandra was way ahead of me.

She filled the boot with photographs.

This year, as soon as I have some spare time on my hands, it's the Internet and not the boot that I will fill with photographs. In particular, I will subscribe to webshots.com, an online photo archiving site that already has over one hundred and twenty million archived photos available for view. Every day, people upload more than half a million photos to the site.

I intend to be one of those people.

Online archiving is the sensible leap forward, the viable solution to the shoeboxes of memories we all of us store—in cupboards and wardrobes and under the bed.

Because, to lose a memory. Gone. Forever.

An enormous challenge in the writing of my memoir of childhood was the absence of proof. Very few photographs exist to say, Here he is, then. Glyn Parry, the boy. This is what he looked like when he was four, when he was five, when he was six. The explanation is simple enough. For years my parents did not own a camera:

We each have a red coat, and there are four shiny buttons made of wood.

Oh, yes, very smart, Mum says, when the last button is fastened. She swivels me around to stand up straight next to my sister. Yes, here's my handsome prince.

I don't want to be her handsome prince. Doesn't she know that I'm Monkey Boy?

They seem to be the right size, Dad says, and Mum brushes fluff off my shoulder.

Dad calls Julie and me a picture. We look like twins.

Yes, well, if we had a camera, says Mum, clicking her tongue.

This isn't the first time she has said we need a camera. Christmas came and went, and so did her birthday.

Josie, please. Not now.

Glynne, the only pictures we have are what other people give us. It's embarrassing.

Yes, okay, says Dad. You've made your point. He gets up from the table and fixes my collar. There. It's straight. We don't need a silly camera, do we, Glyn?

Say yes, Glyn!

Yes, I say.

Traitor, says Dad, standing back to see how I look with the buttons all done up.

Mum leans forward and kisses me on the cheek.

Good boy. There's more lemonade for you.³⁷

I must not be too hard on my loving father. In my own case, after I became a dad, there are definite gaps in the recorded history of our own three children. Christmases seem to be well-covered, as are birthdays and holidays away. The rest is sporadic.

I took a lot of photographs of our first-born. I took a lot of photographs of our daughter. But the middle child, Dean, seems to have missed out along the way. Should I be feeling guilty? I do, very much so.

One year our camera was stolen and money was tight. I regret that year a lot. One holiday to Rottnest Island I failed to load the film properly and there was hell to pay.

Photographs are hit-and-miss.

I have only ever purposely destroyed one photograph, a Polaroid snapshot of Sandra sitting in a field of wildflowers. She was seventeen years old and topless. I was twenty. We'd been going steady for two years, and I couldn't believe my luck, to have her finally say yes.

³⁷ Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 31

But my joy was short-lived. That evening Sandra phoned me. She'd been thinking. Worrying, to be exact. The Polaroid had to go. Sandra's orders. What if someone found it? Worse, what if someone stole it?

'But Sandra, it's perfect. You're perfect. It's a great moment and you look so beautiful.'

'Please, Glyn. Anyone might see it.'

The next day the two of us burned the photo in a small backyard ceremony. We watched the Polaroid turn from a thing of awesome beauty to a blackened, twisted blob.

Sandra was satisfied. I was gutted. Maybe I still am, these twenty-five years later.

How I wish I could have the photo back.

As far back as the 1860s, the American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes extolled the virtues of photography as a triumph over death, observing, 'Those whom we love no longer leave us in dying, as they did of old.'³⁸

And yes, it was like a small death saying goodbye to that girl in a field of wildflowers, my wife-to-be as she was back then, seventeen and perfect.

Here's something: What if I had kept the Polaroid anyway? What would become of the original memory under such circumstances? To hold the Polaroid in the palm of my hand, convenient and immediate, and not have to work on the memory—could this actually work against me? The repeated viewing of a photograph surely implants that image in the memory. Is there a risk that the photograph *becomes* the memory, eclipsing the original impression? In a word, do photographs destroy?

Yes, I believe so.

When the ABC screened a documentary on the life and works of Frank Hurley, I was shocked to learn the First World War photographs of the battlefields of France were not a true record. The man was more of an artist than a journalist. He manipulated his negatives at will, layering images in

38 The Mirror With A Memory, Forget Me Not? Photography and Remembrance, <http://www.ingenious.org.uk/Read/Seeing/Forgetmenot/themirrorwithamemor/>

order to produce the stunning pictures we have today. Hurley's pictures are considered the best, the most sought-after, the instantly memorable, the ones that have survived. To anyone who lived through the hell, they resonate with truth. Technically, however, they are false.

At first, Hurley acknowledged his own handiwork. His photographs were labeled as such. The public did not seem to care, however, and eventually the labels disappeared. In essence, Hurley implanted false memories upon a generation of Australians hungry for any image from abroad. They got what they asked for, a post-apocalyptic vision of a Europe gone mad, and he got what he wanted: fame.

And now, of course, we have all gone digital. With Photoshop we can be just like Hurley, imposing our own commentary and inventing our own reality, without any label to say, 'It ain't necessarily so.'

I have become suspicious.

I am more conscious than ever before of testing the memories that reside within photographic images. Even writing that line, upon reflection, is a mistake. Memory does not live in a photograph. The Polaroid of Sandra sitting in a field of wildflowers is not the memory, and I need to remind myself of this whenever I regret the destruction of a single image. The Polaroid was certainly not the sound of Sandra's voice, nor her perfume, nor the way she walked. No, the loss of a single image has not meant the loss of memory.

Because, there are too many other better ways for me to construct that day in the field and situate it in my present. All I have to do is go for a walk in the springtime. Or pick a wildflower. Or feel the sunshine on my shoulder. Or watch my wife undress. I am glad. My hundred billion neurones are looking after me in middle age. They really do bend time. In a sense, I am the camera. I photograph and record what I see. My primary shoebox of memories weighs approximately 1,300 grams and stays with me everywhere I go.

Why, then, the paranoia over losing all of our photographs in a bushfire? Why the regret of destroying a single image of my seventeen-year-old sweetheart?

George Eastman, the founder of Kodak, coined the phrase, 'Kodak doesn't sell film, it sells memories.' Clearly he had done his research. Most people take pictures in a vain attempt to preserve family memories. Hence, my paranoia.

Maybe I should not be mentioning this in a document bound for public perusal, but the three years that I served on the State Library Board of Western Australia often kept me awake at night. As a Board member I presided over the removal and destruction of canisters of film entrusted to its care.

'What's in the canisters?' I always asked.

And always I was reassured that the canisters contained nothing of historical significance.

'Glyn, we can't keep everything. There just isn't the space.'

An understatement if ever there was. I have seen the space. It's a small cold store room one might expect to find in any butcher's shop. It's tiny, tucked away in one corner of the Battye Library. And it can't possibly cope.

So, then.

I never felt reassured. I felt guilty. I felt powerless. I felt that I was betraying the memory of ordinary West Australians. And always, always a sense of gloom (despite the reassurances) that the library staff may have missed something. What if the images I and my fellow Board members signed off for destruction were indeed hugely significant to ordinary folk?

My own memories of Perth aren't particularly significant historically, yet to me they are precious. I hope they are stored safely. I suspect not. Where, for example, is there any Bibra Lake Speedway footage from my youth? Show me a single photograph. Or, yes, have we kept a single photograph of that strange spaceship house that stood on the corner of

Leech Highway and Karel Avenue back in 1972? I wanted to live there so bad!

If we are having trouble holding on to our past, we are in even more trouble holding on to the present. Since we all went digital, we have been deleting our images at an alarming rate. This is a new and very worrying trend. Consider: before the digital revolution, 98% of Kodachrome eventually made it to print to be stored away. In comparison, only 13% of the images sitting inside the digital camera survive to print. The home-based hard drive is now the shoebox of choice, limited and vulnerable as it is. I can't bring myself to trust any hard drive. A wardrobe I can trust. Paper I can trust. But a box of circuitry that hums and occasionally beeps and mostly freezes up?

Ah, but we have Verbatim, guaranteed for ninety-nine years.

(I hope so.)

Only this month, I took it upon myself to preserve the more than one thousand photographs I had taken during 2005 at John Willcock College in Geraldton. I burned the images onto a set of disks, and begged the school secretary to store them away in the school safe.

'Ten years from now, or maybe twenty-five, a lot of people in this city will thank you,' I told her.

No one can tell me what has happened to the 2004 photographs, or the 2003, or the 2002, and so on it goes. Some schools, it appears, aren't too big on preserving their past.

This much I know: apart from the small scattering of photographs that made it into school newsletters and year book, no print record of 2005 exists. No picture went from the school camera to the Kodak shop to any child's home. That saddens me.

For Christmas, our daughter wished for a mobile phone that allows her to take photographs. Already, the phone is full to capacity. Our daughter has left home now, and has no way of downloading the photographs. She will eventually delete them all, to make room for the next moment, and the next, and the next, all to be deleted, deleted, deleted. That saddens me, too.

We are living in an era that no longer invites us to save our happy memories with a Kodak, but instead steers us to share moments, share life. It's all very spontaneous, happening in real time, but I wonder at the estimated twenty-eight billion images that were taken around the world last year. How many will exist twelve months from now? Okay, so we are not erasing memories. We are merely deleting images. But to delete so many, to hold on to so few, one has to wonder at what all that will mean for those who come after us. No doubt they will feel cheated. Perhaps they will even feel cut adrift. They might search and search for that one image that stitches together meaning: the past connecting up to the present, paving a way into the future.

History matters. At a time when photographic preservation seems to be diminished, publishers have reported a huge increase in the sales of literary memoirs. It's as if we feel this desperate need to hold onto the past, to have a firm handle on our own history, even as we feel it all slipping away from us.

Our family album survived the bushfires and I am glad. Long after this thirteen-hundred-gram shoebox of memories has ceased to exist and I am declared braindead, photographs will remain. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will have a puzzle to work over. I do not expect any of the photographs to have any historical significance for the State of Western Australia. I *am* confident, however, that they will bring some small measure of happiness to a family gathering years from now, perhaps on a rainy Sunday afternoon when no one quite feels up to a game of Monopoly or Scrabble.

As for that other photograph, the Polaroid Sandra made me destroy, I'm still trying to get over it.

Our Collected & Collective Past

It all starts with my son coming out to my studio, where I am tidying up the day's writing. He tells me there's been some kind of an accident. It's on the TV, coming to us live, every station.

'What kind of accident? Where?'

'New York, Dad. A big plane has crashed into a skyscraper.'

I turn off my computer and decide to take a look-see. Normally I can't stand American coverage of anything, too many inane voices getting in the way, but I sense immediately that this is a big story. It's New York, after all.

We walk out of my studio and I hear the rustle of our resident possums in the branches overhead. We walk past the pool that needs a super dose of chlorine if it's to be ready in time for summer. We walk into the house which is always like a sauna after the jarrah logs have turned to hot coals. Sandra has a mug of Milo waiting for me. I sit down beside her on the blue lumpy sofa I long to dispatch to the Armadale tip. And here it is, the same TV coverage on all channels. I quickly assess the situation. One of the twin towers that make up the World Trade Centre is in flames. Yep, a terrible accident. And then I am watching—we are all watching—the second plane slamming into the remaining tower.

'Shit! Fuck!'

I stand up. I have to be on my feet.

'What the fuck! Is it war? We're at war!'

Sandra asks me, please, not to swear in front of the children. She doesn't like me swearing, period.

'Sandra, don't you see? This is Pearl Harbour happening here. This is...fuck, what is this?'

It's mid-evening, and though we're half a world away, we're right there on top of the action. *Underneath* the action, as it turns out. And nothing, nothing at all, is making any sense just now. I can tell already that it's going to be a long night.

Meanwhile, in New York...

One of my favourite novelists, A. M. Homes, is inside her New York apartment. Like thousands of New Yorkers, she is able to see through her window all that is happening downtown:

I spend the afternoon moving back and forth from the window to the television. By late in the day I have the sense that my own imagery, my memory, is all too quickly being replaced by the fresh pictures, the other angle, the unrelenting loop.

I become fearful of my mind's liquidity, my ability to retain my own images and feelings rather than surrendering to what is almost instantly becoming the collective narrative.³⁹

Homes' day approaches evening as my long night slides into daybreak, and already the events of September 11 no longer read as a first draft, but a polished piece, a narrative that we share. It's War, screams the headline of New York's Daily News.

Yes, war, I am thinking. Someone will have to pay for this.

'What is history,' said Napoleon, 'but a fable agreed upon?'

And so it becomes.

September 11 happened there in my lounge room and in that first eight hours or so, I was hooked. Perversely, I even found the TV coverage to be comforting as the long night wore on. Sandra needed her sleep. Me, I needed the TV. It gave me something to plug my intellect into, allowed me access to the vast network of undeciphered blips and splashes. Without the TV—the endless loop—I doubt I would have had the capacity to manage such a large body of information. The anchors in the studio and the journalists at ground zero did what they are paid to do: they told me a story. Sure, I suspected my responses were being orchestrated—Americans are experts at that—but they needed to be. In those first early hours, maybe at

39 A. M. Homes, 'Seeing the Unimaginable Freezes the Imagination', *Writers on Writing, Volume II: More Collected Essays from The New York Times*, 100-101 (New York: Times Books, 2003).

odds with Homes and even my own better judgement, I found it easier to surrender to the collective.

But then, after eight hours so, it all got so very frustrating. I wanted more, expected more, wondered when we were ever going to get the personal stories. Where were the ordinary folk? Sure, there were glimpses. New Yorkers started posting photographs and handwritten notes wherever they could, but the journalists just didn't seem to notice. They didn't zoom in on any particular photograph or note. Perhaps they felt swamped.

Hundreds were missing, believed dead, but no one wanted to give up hope so easily. Have you seen? Have you seen? The photographs and notes all asked the same question, begged the same answer, and I realised there were hundreds of stories waiting to be told that were not being told. Why weren't they being told?

Indeed, TV crews tended to sweep over the victim element of the story, the dead people. Cameras swung away from the photographs and notes. We could vaguely see what they were—desperate messages from loved ones—but we weren't allowed to read them. Look but don't touch.

A kind of censorship emerged. What I noticed was the elimination of these core elements—the actual victims—so that the greater tale could be told. War. Terror. Attack. Punishment. President Bush's response. We were still in the grip of the collective.

As it transpires, the censorship was real. Perhaps the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, and how did the TV networks choose to report ground zero? With censorship. No one jumped. No one died. The American public was shielded from the central aspect of the horror: people leaping to their deaths from the top of the towers. We saw some of it here in Australia, disturbing as it was, before our own network chiefs also caved in and opted to censor. From the outset Americans saw none of it.

How could that be?

Phone calls were made. Television executives were asked not to use the most disturbing footage. Early in the piece, even before the telephones

began to ring, the CNN newsroom had already made its decision: show no one jumping out of those buildings. Americans must not see their own plunging to their death. Yet, scores jumped in that awful period before the twin towers collapsed. Surely the jumpers were central to the news story at that point in time? Yet, as one *Esquire* staffer rightly observed, ‘the jumpers’ experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten.’⁴⁰

Many, many office workers jumped. When their bodies hit the ground, the sound was real and recorded. The anguish of those who heard this happening, a sound never to be blotted out, over and over, was real. However, television chose alternative realities. Television put on its invisible cloak.

And then came the silliness. The devil’s face was captured on film in the smoke just before the first tower crashed. A UFO was seen flying away from both buildings. Crosses were found in the debris of twisted steel. Suddenly there was all the hoopla surrounding the number eleven. It seemed obscene, yet utterly made for TV.

Two thousand nine hundred and ninety-six people lost their lives, including the jumpers. So who were these people? At first it didn’t seem to matter, unless it was your mum or dad, your son or daughter, your sibling caught there in the doomed twisted superstructure. Later, of course, it mattered greatly.

In those earliest moments, before the network servers went down, workers inside the twin towers rushed off e-mails to family and friends. ‘A plane has hit the World Trade Centre, but I’m okay,’ reads one. ‘This is horrific. 13 people are stuck in my office at 90 William, putting wet towels under the doors to stop the smoke,’ reads another. They didn’t make it.

Those who did, who emerged on the street, desperately wanted to tell anyone who would listen:

40 Tom Junod, ‘The Falling Man’, *Esquire*, September 2003: 180.

My husband called me from where he stood on the Plaza, and I said get the fuck out of there. Hang up the phone and start running north. When you get twenty blocks away, start walking, and call me and tell me you're in the clear. Then buy a bicycle, ride it uptown, and take the train home.⁴¹

The collective gave way to the collected. Days, weeks and even months after the twin towers fell, hundreds and hundreds of collected stories demanded their say. It was as if—finally—the camera had decided to zoom in after all.

We needed to zoom in. Their stories needed to be told. Without them, all that would be left would be a cartoon, a comic strip, a Hollywood blockbuster, someone's idea of good television, creative non-fiction, maybe even a litany of lies. As the poet Czeslaw Milosz has observed:

Every family archive that perishes, every account book that is burned, every effacement of the past reinforces classifications and ideas at the expense of reality. Afterward, all that remains is a kind of popular digest.⁴²

What a mistake it would have been for September 11 only to be remembered by the images decided upon by the media. What a cruel omission if the nearly three thousand stories were simply bulldozed away along with the rubble.

Nay, a dangerous omission.

Worse, now they are making the mini-series. Or is it the movie? Five years on, Americans apparently are ready for the truth, which is laughable. What they'll get is actors!

41 Scott Anderson, John Falk and Walter Russell Mead, 'War Comes to America', *Esquire*, November 2001: 108-109.

42 Pat Holt, *Holt Uncensored* #204, 12 December 2000, <http://www.holtuncensored.com/members/column204.html> (accessed 18 June 2006).

In his Nobel lecture, Elie Wiesel made mention of the historian Shimon Dubnov, who, until the moment of his death in the Riga ghetto, said over and over again to his companions: ‘Yidden, shreibt un fershreibt.’ (Jews, write it all down.)

Recounted Weisel:

His words were heeded. Overnight, countless victims become chroniclers and historians in the ghettos, even in the death camps. Even members of the Sonderkommandos, those inmates forced to burn their fellow inmates’ corpses before being burned in turn, left behind extraordinary documents. To testify became an obsession. They left us poems and letters, diaries and fragments of novels, some known throughout the world, others still unpublished.⁴³

To my mind, the collected past is our safeguard against collective amnesia and political mischief. Painful as it may be, we owe it to ourselves to remember the pain of a day like September 11. Or the Bali bombing. Or the Tsunami. Or New Orleans. We need another Dubnov urging us to write it all down.

What we don’t need is strategic forgetting. Five years after the event, all kinds of people with all manner of vested interests have attempted to shape September 11 for their own ends. But it’s hard to argue against the truth when it’s multiplied by two thousand nine hundred and ninety-six.

Or even one. On the morning of September 11, photojournalist Richard Drew’s editor told him to go downtown and start shooting. He photographed a man falling. The next day *The News York Times* published the photograph on page seven. The man was never identified. Moments after Drew captured the image, the building tore down.

Have you seen? Have you seen?

⁴³ Elie Wiesel, ‘Hope, Despair and Memory’, Nobel Lecture Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1986, <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html> (accessed 18 June 2006).

I don't want Satan in the smoke to win. I don't want UFOs over Manhattan to become the story. Fuck the hocus-pocus of number eleven. I, for one, will not hand over my fifteen dollars to buy the movie ticket.

'For us,' Elie Wiesel told his audience in Stockholm, 'forgetting was never an option.'

So true.

Right now New Yorkers are determined to construct their collective and collected past. How they choose to remember will be the subject of much debate and frustration, heartache and sacrifice. They will rebuild their skyscraper, no question. The design competition has already been won. But will New Yorkers be able to rebuild their lives? Their city has changed forever. Their country can never be the same.

And what was the first blockbuster to feature a New York skyline after September 11?

King Kong.

It's going to be a most revealing time to be a social historian.

Unreliable Memoirs

A couple of years ago in a Sydney cafe, my publisher handed me a memoir and said, ‘Glyn, you have to read this.’

The memoir was James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, and as I started to read it on the plane headed back to Perth, I could see why the book was a bestseller. James Frey’s life was nothing short of tumultuous. He always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had to be the unluckiest average Joe on the planet. But it made for very good fiction.

I didn’t trust the writing. I thought, No way! This guy has to be lying.

By now, of course, the reliability of James Frey’s memories have been called into serious question. He has been admonished in a very public forum. Even his publishers have wisely distanced themselves from the fallout (although they couldn’t resist publishing the sequel).

Somewhere at the back of my mind I have an E.L. Doctorow quote, ‘You have to invent everything, even memory.’⁴⁴

In essence, this is precisely what Frey did. He invented memories to suit the story he wished to tell. Little wonder, then, that his life read like a bestseller, was championed by Oprah Winfrey, and will no doubt be turned into a movie.

It’s all a lie.

In a classic television moment, Winfrey stared straight at Frey and asked, ‘Why would you lie?’

Her question was sincere. She needed to know why Frey had strayed so far from the sacred duty to tell the truth.

‘I made a mistake,’ Frey replied, citing his need to develop a tough-guy image of himself so that he could better cope with alcohol and drug

⁴⁴ Sally Levitt Steinberg, “Doctorow: Inventing Memory”, *The New York Times*, December 20, 1987, www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/05/specials/doctorow-memory.html

addiction problems. He told Winfrey, ‘When I was writing the book, instead of being as introspective as I should have been, I clung to that image.’⁴⁵

So, was that lying? Probably, although it’s safer for his publishers to call it, creative non-fiction.

We live in strange times. For the last four years I have served on the ABC Advisory Council. Again and again, we begged Sandra Levy—former Head of Television—not to cheapen the ABC’s image with ‘reality shows’ like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. For the most part she listened, before being headhunted to one of the commercial networks.

I suspect Frey lived in some kind of ‘reality show’ as he penned his memoir. He saw himself as an outlaw, a menace to society, someone who so desperately needed redemption if he were to avoid long-term incarceration. In reality, he was a very average middle-aged male who dabbled in recreational drugs and copped the occasional parking fine. So what happened?

Tristine Rainer’s blueprint for writing memoir, *Your Life As Story*, probably comes close to providing the answer:

Through the autobiographic process you restore the ‘romance’ and ‘fictional flair’ of story to your own life, and you replace old stories of powerlessness with stories of consciousness and revelation in which you are the protagonist.⁴⁶

It’s fair to say Frey tried on the costume of somebody else, and liked the fit. He didn’t need to be accurate or fair. Remembering was not a sacred act. He simply needed to look good (that is, bad) on the page. *Every* page. The role

45 Edward Wyatt, ‘Author Is Kicked Out of Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club’, *The New York Times*, January 27, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/27/books/27oprah.html?ei=5088&en=ddd9b3b2c1f92c9a&ex=1296018000&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&pagewanted=print>

46 Tristine Rainer, *Your Life As Story*, 15 (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998).

he gave himself was criminal with a capital ‘C’. In reality, his run-ins with the law amounted to little more than parking offences.

Parking offences do not sell millions of books. So what’s a wannabe deperado to do? Frey invented passages like this one:

Some cops walk in with a guy I’d never seen before. These were Small-Town Cops, fat stupid Assholes with mustaches and beer guts and guns and badges. I knew them and they knew me. In the years I had spent in that town, I had openly taunted them and had dared them to try and catch me on something, which they never had. Now they had this new Guy, and they marched up to me, full of bullshit Cop bravado, and they pulled out a warrant, and they said I had to come down to the station with them to answer some questions.⁴⁷

And on and on it goes. His publisher loved him for it. He did a superb job of fooling everybody for the best part of eighteen months that he was the meanest badass middle America had spawned in the last decade or so.

Yes, Frey lied. But so what?

In recent times the book industry has made enormous profits out of lies dressed up as fact. Fiction has not been the big winner. Memoirs written by nobodies have been where the sales are.

Frey is a liar. A very accomplished liar, because for a while there he fooled just about everybody.

And so, too, is Isabel Allende, a notorious inventor of memories and stretcher of truths, who at one point even resurrected her dead grandmother because she needed her to be alive in her book.

I can picture these two writers—Frey and Allende—struggling as we all must do over the puzzle of their words. I can be sympathetic to their struggle as they look for just the right piece, the perfect moment. And it’s

⁴⁷ James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, 206 (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 2003).

not there. So they invent one. Invention is very easy. They create a memory in the moment and at the point of need and slip it in. There! Perfect!

To dispel their guilt, I imagine them telling themselves, I'll fix it up later. It's early days, after all, only the first draft. Ask any writer, fiction or fact, and the response will be the same: I am obliged to put something down, then something else. And so on, until the scene is finished, the word count arrived at, hooray, let's take the dog for a walk.

Am I so very different? Throughout the writing of Behind Blue Eyes, my own memoir, I subscribed to the same drafting process. Time for fact-checking later, I told myself. But for now, Glyn, get the words down. How else was I to proceed?

There is nothing permanent or binding about a first draft. It's playing with words and ideas, all very creative and non-committal. I'm not after the truth, so much as I'm looking for a means of moving forward. 'Just write,' I hear my tutor telling me from years ago. 'Anything. Kill the blank page.'

Is that lying? No, it's creating. It's putting words down. It's what we do best. And it reads something like this:

The very next morning Dad was gone on the train out of Durham, back to the Navy far away. Mum cried and cried, saying she was fed-up of missing her husband, which is only silly emotions talking, and Nana told her so.

Josie, she said, all women cry after their bairn is born.

Nana gave her two aspirin and a glass of water. She made Grandad fetch another pillow to prop her up.

Dad phoned the pub that night. He said he fell asleep on the train and when he woke up he was in London.

I've been delayed, he said, and then his pennies ran out.⁴⁸

48 Glyn Parry, Behind Blue Eyes, 59

I confess: all of the above was a creative writing exercise that sounded good to my ear when I had finished. Still does, reading it afresh just now. And yes it's still in the manuscript. Should I take this passage out? If I am to be true to my memory, yes, I should take this passage out, because none of this I remember. How could I possibly remember? I am describing, after all, the day after I was born!

I won't take it out.

I wrote the passage based on what my mother remembers. It's her memory I am relying on here, as told to me in one form or another over the years. I have to trust that there is some truth to what she reported. And even if there is no truth—my own mother lied to me!—it sounds true. So, no, I don't think I am misleading my readers at all and the passage can stay.

Frey, Allende? Look, I'm as guilty on the page as everyone else. I have invented. This little scene of Mum crying, and Nana's lecture with the aspirin, and Dad's phone call from far away—all of it was constructed many years after the event, based on information received.

Ouch!

This was never my noble intention. Have I tripped myself up? Perhaps, but show me any other way to proceed.

What comes next is the old mindgame where I justify the way I went about my business of getting my life story told. I will convince myself, Ah, but the words and the scene are emotionally true, Glyn. They ring true. You shouldn't beat yourself up over one little passage.

It's a poor defence, I know, but it's the one that is offered up most often. By now I know the drill, and it goes something like this: Well, of course I can not verify the accuracy of every little scene. Some of it may well have been a fiction. I'm a writer, after all, and I have a writer's knack for make-believe. No, no, I did not set out to deceive. That was never my intention. I merely wanted to make the scene immediate for you, my dear reader. Because, I'm sure you will agree, this little scene fits perfectly. There's no question of me taking it out. Yes, it's artifice, but surely you must concede

that the artifice is necessary for the good of the whole. Anyway, who is to say this little scene was entirely made-up? Maybe it did happen, exactly thus, just as my mother described. Memory itself is a spinner of yarns, a poet and a liar, we all know that, but there has to be some truth in there somewhere. Surely you can pay me *that*.

The beat goes on.

There are plenty of other ways I can trip myself up. Memories, for example, change considerably with age. The day after the Challenger explosion, for example, someone thought to do a memory experiment with college students. They wrote down all they could remember from the previous day's tragic event. Two-and-half years later those same college students were asked to do the same. Their memories had changed considerably.

So what about ten years? Twenty?

Said Doris Lessing: 'I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?'⁴⁹

Very different.

'The process of falsification,' writes Rita Carter, 'gets another boost each time a memory is recalled.' In her book, *Mapping the Mind*, she goes on to say:

As we go over things that have happened we add a bit, lose a bit, tweak a fact here, tinker with a quote there and fill in any little bits that may have faded. We may consciously embellish the recollection with a bit of fantasy—the biting comment, perhaps, that we wished we had said but that was actually only thought of later. Then this new, re-edited version is tucked back in storage. Next time it gets an airing it may pop up with the fantasy comment still attached, and this time it will be difficult to

⁴⁹ Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin*, 17 (London: Harper Collins, 1994).

distinguish it from the ‘genuine’ and memory. So, by gradual mutation, our memories change.⁵⁰

What about the many little scenes that I wrote that weren’t wholly invented? The many little scenes where I tried to be as faithful as possible to my own memory of the episode? This scene, for example:

I’ve never seen sickness up close before, but I’m seeing it now. John’s dad is close to dead. It could be a month or three months. It could be a week. No one quite knows for sure. He’s bedridden, coughing up bloody phlegm into a big mixing bowl, and this I notice more than anything—he hasn’t shaved.⁵¹

This little scene has haunted me all my life. I know it’s true and I wish I could push the memory away for good. It’s probably the single-most horrific event of my childhood, stumbling upon a dying man coughing up blood. Should the scene even be in there? From the purely technical standpoint, probably not. It doesn’t sit well in my memoir. Does it advance the plot? No. Does it reveal anything new about my character? Not really. For all its intensity and truthfulness, the little scene will probably go. An editor will make the decision for me, I have no doubt.

Scratch away at the emotional truth. Every morning write a scene, read it aloud, ask yourself, Does this sound right? Every evening read the scene again. Nah, that doesn’t sound right at all. Fix it! In the middle, you sleep. You dream. Dreaming helps. Wake up. Do some more scratching and dig into the wounds. Hardly a scientific approach, but in the absence of supporting evidence, the best you can hope for.

Here endeth the lesson.

50 Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind*, 274-275 (London: Phoenix, 1998).

51 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 254

Because I do not respect a writer like James Frey. His so-called truth reads like a lie, a Hollywood script, and a bad one at that.

Not for me, the easy road out.

Memoir-writing left me exhausted. In the middle of the day I would have to switch off the computer and crawl to bed. I'd sleep for three hours, sometimes four. Nothing made sense. I have written ten novels and I have to say they were never easy, but this business of internalising every wretched thought, forever testing, testing, was infinitely harder to pull off. By noon I was a mess. There was nothing for it but to curl up on my cushions and sleep. I *never* sleep during the daytime!

I have since learned that this is a trait shared by other writers who turn from fiction to memoir. Mary Karr had almost the same experience, for example, writing the wonderful *The Liars' Club*:

I would lie down on the floor and go to sleep after an hour and a half's work. Literally go to sleep like I had been driving all night. I couldn't keep my eyes open. I went to a shrink and said, 'Am I repressing something, bah bah bah bah.' And she said, 'Well, I think you are just really exhausted by it.' So I don't know why. I think this is true for a lot of writers. I've talked to writers, and they get to a difficult place in the book emotionally – or something about it is hard – and they are sitting there for an hour and a half and it's all they can do.⁵²

And on the writing of *Experience*, Martin Amis went through much the same ordeal:

I thought I had suddenly succumbed to some ravage of age, because while I was writing the book my sleep patterns changed completely. I suddenly needed about fourteen hours of sleep a night. I was like one of my teenaged sons on a weekend, staggering out of bed at four o'clock in

52 Dwight Garner, 'Mary Karr: The Salon Interview', salon.com, 21 May 1997, <http://www.salon.com/may97/karr2970521.html> (accessed 18 June 2006)

the afternoon and wanting more sleep.... But the minute I stopped writing the memoir, I went back to how I was before. My whole metabolism switched. Because it was front brain emotion rather than the novel which is much more subliminal. You're using a different part of the brain.⁵³

None of us should be surprised. Waking and dreaming are uncannily alike when it comes to brain activity. Awake, my brain works on sensory input. Asleep, my brain works on memories. We know this now. In the 1950s neurosurgeons opened up the skull to apply electrodes directly. Touching a point in the temporal lobe produced vivid childhood memories. Said one patient:

I heard my mother talking on the phone, telling my aunt to come over that night...my nephew and niece were visiting at my home...they were getting ready to go home, putting on their coats and hats... in the dining room... my mother was talking to them. She was rushed – in a hurry.⁵⁴

Wouldn't it be great if we could be simply downloaded like this, for someone to know which buttons to push and—Hey, presto—my life, the master tapes? We could strap James Frey down and retrieve every one of his million little pieces in its purest form. A kind of acupuncture for the past. No effort, no fuss, and a lot less accusations flying back and forth on prime TV.

I'd volunteer. I'd be standing next in line right after they'd finished with Frey.

Because, remembering is hard work, dammit. And no one yet understands how it all works. It's an active process of doing and undoing,

53 Linda L. Richards, 'January Experiences Martin Amis', January Magazine, <http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/amis.html>

54 Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind*, 33 (London: Phoenix, 1998).

creating and destroying. To arrive at any memory we must first select, condense, distort. It's a messy process. It's not so much a case of sitting in a darkened cinema and watching my life flicker past, but sitting in a brilliantly-lit soundstage and shouting, 'Action.' To remember is to make new. This came as a big surprise to me and was thoroughly unsettling.

So I write. I write a scene like this one:

Another time I get in trouble is the day Mr Healy buys in some new toys. The World War II planes are in the shop window on a tray, threepence each, and ten models to choose from. I want them all.

Mum says, Come on, Glyn. What are you standing here for?

Look, Mum. Can I have one? Please.

As soon as Mum sees what they are, she tells me no. Forget it, they're Hong Kong rubbish. She says she hasn't got threepence to waste on rubbish.

I say, They're not rubbish, Mum.

Glyn, they're cheap and nasty. Don't ask again.

But—

I don't say what I'm thinking. If I do I'll be whining, and then Mum will never say yes.

Inside is worse. On the counter is another tray, and more models to choose from—Spitfire, Stuka, Mustang, Fokker. Suddenly all I can think about is the war I'll have.

Mum, look. These ones are better.

Mum doesn't want to look. We are there to buy potatoes—and a packet of Embassy cigarettes—not some silly plastic airplanes that will break soon as you look at them.

Warplanes, Mum. These are for war.

One more good reason not to buy them, she says. Now, don't embarrass me.

From my piggy bank, Mum. Please, Mum. Just that Spitfire.

He's got his mind set, says Mr Healy the shopkeeper.
Mum isn't listening. She has me by the wrist and is leaning into my face.
Just wait till I get you home, she says.
Mr Healy is laughing. Then he isn't laughing.
Don't encourage him, says Mum, taking her change. To me she says, As for you, outside. Now.
The shop bell clangs behind me. A scruffy dog trots past me with its head down.
Through the shop window I see Mr Healy on the sharp end of Mum's bad temper. I like Mr Healy. He gets in penny bangers for bonfire night, and selection boxes for Christmas.
Then the shop bell is clanging again, and it's *my* turn to be told.
Home, now, says Mum. Don't walk slow.⁵⁵

The scene is a fake. Those lines of dialogue there on the page were never spoken. How can I be expected to attend to every little detail? But I do remember very clearly the encounter. This business of me wanting the warplanes definitely happened.

Attention to detail is what the publishers look for. Open up any page of *Angela's Ashes* and what do you find: McCourt delighting in the details. Many refute the details, of course, to the point that when Alan Parker arrived in Limerick to film McCourt's life, he was chased out of some churches and streets. Critics have argued that there is as much invention in that masterpiece of memoir as there is fact. McCourt concedes to adding colour to remembered scenes, of course. He has exaggerated and embellished, as we all must. He has linked up events from his Limerick past in order to invent a story.

55 Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 141-142

And so to invention we must fly. We have no say in the matter. I think Alison Lurie summed up the dilemma best:

Over the years you've noticed, say, something about the way children behave at their own birthday parties, but none of your examples is complete in itself. So you invent a children's party which never took place, but is 'realer' in the Platonic sense than any you ever attended. Fiction is condensed reality; and that's why its flavour is more intense, like bouillon or frozen orange juice.⁵⁶

In my own case, my own remembered birthday party in Behind Blue Eyes, I struggled to recall any particular birthday party of itself. But I did remember a particular birthday present, a toy yacht, and that was enough. It gave me the reality I was looking for. It gave me my hook:

Twelve weeks is six weeks is five sleeps is today! The front room is full.
Mum has sent invitations to every boy and girl in Belford Street.

Games everybody! she shouts, clapping her hands. You, too, our Mary.

Auntie Mary says she's too old for playing games.

Howay, Mary. It's the bairn's birthday.

Dad walks in from work early, the first time in many weeks. The bosses at the crisp factory must have heard about my birthday party. Mum says he can be in charge of the music. We have music from the radio in the kitchen.

Right! shouts Mum, in charge of all the fun and games. Are we all ready? Mary?

First we play statues. Dad turns the radio off quick, and then it's hands on head and be a statue. If a statue so much as blinks, they're out.

Julie blinks.

⁵⁶ Sally Soames, *Writers*, 100 (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

Out, Julie, says Mum.

I didn't move!

You blinked. Out.

Glyn blinked, too.

Play nice, Mum says, smiling grimly at one of the wives who looks as if she'd much rather be at home in front of the fire, and wouldn't you know her dirty boy has picked his scabby face.

Would you have a tissue, pet? she says, walking into the kitchen to see Dad.

Dad fetches a clean hankie. Soon he's dabbing at blood and germs. He doesn't care. He's feeling sorry for a boy's scabby face.

The next game starts. Julie cheats again. She makes a girl cry.

Julie, I won't tell you again, says Mum. Play nice.

I was playing nice! she yells.

Mum pulls her into the corner by her arm. Listen. It's your brother's birthday. Be nice.

I know who's birthday it is, says Julie.

Then, smile!

Julie doesn't know how to smile. That's because she's naturally miserable.

She can be as miserable as she likes. I have a toy yacht to sail.⁵⁷

Have I invented a children's party which never took place? Absolutely. However, it's highly unlikely that my father would have been there. But his presence is a nice touch and I wanted him there. So into the mix he goes. He's flavouring. He's orange juice.

The boy with the scabby face? Julie cheating at a game? A girl crying? I cannot say any of that really happened. I confess that it's all a fiction.

The toy yacht, however, is real.

⁵⁷ Glyn Parry, *Behind Blue Eyes*, 103

One writer who has no problem with the invented scene is the memoirist Lauren Slater. If ever there was a writer who champions the cause of lying! ‘The illusions we hold,’ she writes, ‘are more important than accuracy.’⁵⁸ (Fans of Frank Hurley’s work would surely be in agreement.) Elsewhere Slater has written:

What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most glaring example of historic truth being overshadowed by narrative truth in my own memoir Behind Blue Eyes is the absence of my brother, Shaun. He does not appear at all. He is younger than me by seven years, and simply did not feature in my childhood. He should have been there—born, crying, learning to sit up, learning to crawl, breaker of my toys—but my mind draws a blank. Every time I tried to include him in a scene, the scene failed. He should have been in the birthday party scene, but he isn’t. In the end I decided to leave him out of every scene. I left him out of the manuscript. There is no brother in Behind Blue Eyes. This was a very difficult decision to make. Historically, my work is surely flawed. Structurally, however, the memoir comes together quiet nicely even in the absence of a baby brother.

Of course, Shaun will be mightily upset when he searches in vain for my recollections of him. My family—Mum and Dad especially—will have a very hard time dealing with this. This is going to make for a fun Christmas.

In 2001, Jennifer Lauck wrote her childhood memoir, *Blackbird*. The first readers to attack were her own family, who kept a running tally on the

58 Donna Lee Brien, ‘Being Honest About Lying: Defining The Limits Of Autobiographical Writing’, *TEXT* Vol 6 No 1 April 2002, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/april02/brien.htm> (accessed 18 June 2006).

59 Lauren Slater, *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, 219 (New York: Random House, 2000).

number of errors found. By the time they had noted over a hundred, Lauck's patience with them ran out.

'Are you going to deny an 8-year-old child her reality?' she reportedly screamed down the phone to her stepbrother.⁶⁰

I am not looking forward to my own phone calls when they come.

So, yes, strap me down. It would all be so much easier if we could indeed download our childhood. Alas, there can be no download, although the technology is most certainly headed that way. Fifty years on, neurosurgeons have come to know the brain as a far more complex, unyielding customer. (It's that Milky Way thing.) There are no pure recordings. The brain clones and hides and disguises. We assume there must be sunny freeways in there, each with clearly marked entries and exits, and all we need is a road map. Not so. It's the foggy road to Bates Motel, where nothing is as it seems.

Yet Frank Moorhouse enjoys this part of the writing process the most. He calls it 'unconscious research':

It is my experience that once the mind is committed to a creative project it begins to gather and to seek—without our directing it or seeing it at work. When we begin to write the unconscious proudly delivers to us the results of all its silent work—going back into our own past, going back into books read and forgotten, uncovering things that we did not realise we had noticed. In this sense, 'the past is never dead'. Buildings or monuments seen once and forgotten, stories told to you in bars and forgotten, people you've met and forgotten—the process of writing can and does draw on these according to its own private rules of recall. The unconscious is a personal archive and a social archive. It also contains the impressions and whispers and sensations and things said but not understood, which came from parents and grandparents during our formative years. These are impressions on the wax cylinder of the

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Manus, 'Family Feud', salon.com, <http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2001/12/12/lauck/print.html>

unconscious from earlier generations—and through the imagination they can be replayed.⁶¹

The brain plays games by its own rules. It is deliberately elusive, preferring the murk, the fog, the lost highway. Which brings me back to that other vexing question: Who am I?

My brain is not at liberty to tell me.

Who am I, dammit?

Today, at this precise moment in time, uhmmm, let's see now. Who do I imagine I am?

'Maybe,' wrote Rick Moody, 'we need a part of us that will never be known, so that the more we reveal, the more we are enveloped in veils.'⁶²

Here I am in confession mode. Every fact-finding foray into Behind Blue Eyes inevitably got turned into fiction. I reconstructed my past. I imagined the child I once was and built a narrative around him. This was never my intention.

Have I failed as a memoirist? No, not at all. Every memoirist does the same. But I have paid dearly for my invention. My past now seems more elusive than ever. Four years on and I now know even less about myself. If I think about that too much I will cry.

So who am I?

One is forced to conclude our brain does not much like the question, Who am I?

E. Annie Proulx has written:

If we write simply about what we know we never grow. We don't develop any facility for language, or an interest in others, or a desire to

61 Frank Moorhouse, 'Tales of History and Imagination', *Meanjin*, Volume 64 Number 3, 2005: 101.

62 Rick Moody, *The Black Veil*, 298 (New York: Little, Brown And Company, 2002).

travel and explore and face experience head-on. We just coil tighter and tighter into our boring little selves.⁶³

How guilty of this am I now that my journey is finished? My memoir is written and yes, this little collection of personal essays. Have I coiled tighter and tighter? I hope not.

Every person is their own personal myth. Who am I? Well, we want so badly to answer, this is who I am!

It's finished, the story of my childhood. It's up to the publisher to decide if the story is of enough public interest to warrant a print run. Me, I'm just happy to move on to my eleventh novel.

I believe I have been truthful, yet Behind Blue Eyes is far from the truth. The story is based on my own self image, my own self esteem, and, yes, I have been very selective. Some might argue that I have deceived myself and, by default, my reader. I concede this point.

Pick up a copy of Augusten Burroughs second memoir, *Dry*, and you will note the following rider:

This memoir is based on my experiences over a 10-year period. Names have been changed, characters combined and events compressed. Certain episodes are imaginative re-creation, and those episodes are not intended to portray actual events.⁶⁴

In other words, memoir as fiction. In terms of being upfront, I couldn't say it any better.

Thinking about the story of my own 10-year period, my childhood years in England, I am loathe to use the word fiction. But fiction it mostly is, I realise that now. I am in excellent company. 'Like every one else in the

63 Laban Carrick Hill, 'In Pursuit of the Novel', *Vermont Quarterly Online Magazine*, Winter 2003, <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/vq/VQWinter03/literature.html> (accessed 23 June 2006).

64 Augusten Burroughs, *Dry* (New York: Picador, 2004).

world,' wrote my hero, Sherwood Anderson, 'I had so thoroughly re-created my childhood, in my own fancy, that Truth was utterly lost.'⁶⁵

Years ago Anaïs Nin informed us that there is not one big cosmic meaning for all, 'there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.'⁶⁶

I have written that book now, or, at least, the first saga.

Who am I?

I am someone who needs stories in my life. This is what I have learned after seven years and hundreds of hours. Take away stories and I am nothing. In this respect I am no different from anyone else. I totally agree with Paul Auster's brilliant assertion:

Stories are fundamental to human life. I think we need stories as much as we need food and air and water and sleep, because stories are the way we organise reality. Reality is a thunderous cacophony of millions of impressions surging in on us at every moment. By isolating fragments of that invasion, and being able to articulate them and then link them over time, which is what a story does, we are enabled to think about ourselves in the present, in the past, in the future. Without stories, we literally wouldn't be able to live.⁶⁷

Rembrandt did 62 self-portraits. I wrote 100,000 words, then cut it back to 60,000. I no longer think of myself in terms of cliché. I am complex. I am my own mystery. I have awesome respect for my brain, the light bulb, the riddle that refuses to be solved. I have arrived at the conclusion that the riddle can never be solved. It's just not meant to be.

⁶⁵ Sherwood Anderson, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, xvi (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).

⁶⁶ Tristine Rainer, *Your Life As Story*, 1 (New York: Tarcher Putnam, 1998).

⁶⁷ Robert McCrum, Letters from America, *Observer Online*, 16 December 2001, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4320695-102280,00.html> (accessed 23 June 2006).

So, who am I? My name is Glyn Parry and I was born in a pub in the north-east of England on May 22nd 1959. Officially that's where I start. It's written there on my birth certificate. Where I *really* start, however, is the place with the daffodils. They grow in the field behind our caravan. They grow beside the river...

Enough, enough! It's 3.00am. Tonight I am 47 years old.

Time to put the pen down.

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