

# **Morph**

**Constructing identity:  
how the experience of cyberspace contributes to  
the emerging story of self in young people.**

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## **Abstract for *Morph*. Constructing identity: how the experience of cyberspace contributes to the emerging story of self in young people.**

This thesis develops from the belief that young people construct identities for themselves which inevitably surprise their parents, particularly where so much of their coming-of-age is influenced by hidden virtual experiences.

The novel which explores this is *Morph*. Joey, the protagonist, is uneasy about her gender. She has a loving family, intelligence, a satisfying way of life, but loathes her body. She investigates alternative futures, initially online. Her closest friend also has a secret, revealed after a suicide attempt that Joey averts: sexual abuse by her father. Each has to discover how to live with the evolving sense of self. If Joey wishes to change gender her character may alter, too; she finds she can be violent when confronting the abusive father. The story is told through Joey's eyes and activities in cyberspace, which she thinks of as a free place, parallel to the mountains over which she loves to run. She feels at ease in both places. Eventually she decides to live as both male and female (Other) because she does not have a 'condition' needing to be cured. Classification in the natural world allows for infinite variety, and she want similar opportunities for herself.

The critical aspect of the thesis begins with those aspects of my experience which affect my conception of the narrative, including how, as a teacher, I drew upon insights from neuroscience about the malleability of the self. I analyse a series of interviews with young people about how they present themselves online. Since the trigger for the novel is online disclosure of gender variance, I explore what is available online, current medical attitudes and policies; I set the interview findings in the context of theoretical frameworks for personal and group identity.

I conclude that where young people lack frameworks for interpreting virtual experience, the emerging sense of self may be destabilised, or even impaired.

## **Dedication**

To all those children and young people who have educated me

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## **Part One**

**Constructing identity: how the experience of cyberspace contributes to the emerging story of self in young people.**

## Chapter 1 Background to the narrative

I have long been interested in aspects of the relationship between child and adult: the boundary that marks the grown child's transition to adulthood; the interrelation of child and adult in the mature personality; the capacity of small children to behave parentally; the reversal of roles when the parent must be cared for by the child. I am intrigued by how we experience the boundaries between these states.

Three aspects of my own experience fuel this interest: the struggle to become myself, as I saw it, when I was a teenager; life as parent and grandparent; and time spent in educating teenagers. As a teacher and headteacher, I often found myself mediating between young people discovering what they wanted out of life, who perceived themselves as virtually adult, and their protective parents, who saw them as children. I could better manage these situations once I grasped that we are all irrational as parents, however well-balanced our professional lives. Under the influence of deep-seated emotion, we are tied into the parent-child relationship. Young people only break free of this when the stories they tell themselves, and others – their constructed identities - are sufficiently compelling for parents to recognise them as adults. Many parents are surprised by shock when the once-vulnerable child acts with the authority of an adult.

The idea for *Morph* came from an anecdote. A friend told me about her niece's declaration to her through Facebook that 'she' was really male, on the verge of starting hormone therapy. The online disclosure to a loving relative was the precursor of the revelation to parents. The girl-into-boy wanted the aunt to act as a bridge to her parents.

This offered the framework for the story I wanted to tell, of how parents must accept the reality that their children have experiences unimaginable, ultimately, to anyone else, however close. I wanted to tell that loving family story too, to place the challenge of a gender crisis within the bounds of perceived normality. I chose the discipline of a first person narrative so that the young person's voice would be unmediated by adult commentary.

The intertwining of child and adult is complex. As a society we do not like unclear laws; business structures that are not solidly defined; ambiguous relationships. We are invited to classify ourselves on a daily basis: UK British White; female; between 45 and 60; and whilst it is possible to avoid some of these classifications on

Facebook we cannot actually join without declaring ourselves to be male or female. There is no provision (at the time of writing) for opting out. The anecdote I took as inspiration, about the slipperiness of gender classification, arouses even more unease for those who assume the evolutionary inevitability of male or female, that sex is the same as gender, and that the stability of society requires a binary identification of gender and sex.

Although society dislikes ambiguity, it is inevitable, and I saw this as a rich source of material. One example is where adult child must deal with demented parent, and authority shifts from one to another. The demented parent is often powerful, just as children are powerful. A crying infant compels the parent to respond, even though the image of a baby is usually associated with dependence. My thinking about this was influenced by my working for several years with The Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, which works at group dynamics. Any group is liable to project its unconscious desires and fears on to individuals or sub-groups. Insights gleaned here helped me to understand the forces at work when parents or teachers react confrontationally to the behaviour of young people. For instance, a group of headteachers, for whom I was once a mentor, concluded that all children want to be controlled. By this, they meant subject to rules and boundaries established by adults.

From this work, I learned to understand power as the assertion of superior strength, whether physical or psychological, over another. The crying baby strongly influences our emotional response. Authority, by contrast, is the exercise of appropriate power, conferred by a role (judge; traffic warden; teacher) or developed through a process which enables the individual to act with the informed consent, not compliance, of others. We react to the crying baby as parents or carers, expecting it to learn how to meet us on our terms. We do not intend to deal with the baby as if we were babies too, although that is effectively what sometimes happens when parent-figures lose self-control. The young transgender person of my anecdote seeks family understanding rather than approval for a new gender role. S/he no longer needs permission but the informed consent that one adult offers to another.

In practice, many people with gender crises either hide these or leave home to find social settings which accept their transformation. I wanted to explore the story of someone who challenges her social context to change because I was never able to accept professionally that the role of a school is to 'fit' young people into society, on the



assumption that ‘society’ is fit for the young. Young people often decline to ‘fit in’, which leads some adults to project on to young people their concerns about the exercise of authority. An experienced headteacher once told me that he had crossed the road to avoid a crowd of teenagers, only to realise that they were the same age as his own daughter. He recognised that he was afraid.

One method of coping with fear is rejection. In schools, pupils are excluded either outside the boundary of the school, or internally, in a kind of solitary confinement. But they are still powerful. Until they feel they have a role they will defy the system, to assert themselves against controlling adults. In practice, teachers have to change, by believing in the potential for authority within the young people they suspect; and this provides the model for change in pupils. Bruce Irvine (Irvine,2005) says, ‘Unless adults are conscious of what is happening to them, they might not be able to stop their anxieties affecting their interactions with adolescents’ (p.65). Young people learn self-management through experience, not through being told about it. In stable families, in well-managed schools, the boundaries are clear and form what Irvine calls ‘a container’ within which both adult and adolescent are able to interact so that the adolescent develops independent authority. ‘Adults need to know where the boundaries are and be confident, so that they can convey these boundaries to young people’ (p.61).

My anecdote introduced a new context, beyond that of school: the internet. I decided to interview young people about how they present themselves online so that I would have more insight into what prompts online, rather than face-to-face, revelations. I discovered from my interviews that on Facebook, which is the preferred location of most of those I interviewed, it is easier to disclose sensitive material or to express uninhibited feeling because everyone is equal – or this is the illusion. I recognised, however, the absence of clear boundaries online; and in social networks young people are often less able to discover or take a role for themselves online, because all relationships are reduced to the status of ‘friend’.

In consequence, many act as if no boundaries exist apart from those they determine for themselves. They feel powerful online, beyond the control of adults, and the feedback they receive is ‘uncontained’. Many schools try to ban the use of mobile phones in lessons and lectures, to confine access to internet sites and in particular to Facebook, but most pupils are adept at eluding such attempts. The situation is more complex because the uncertainty of the boundaries applies to teachers, too, who are

often as active online as their pupils, and as liable to confusion. This introduces yet more ambiguity about the context in which young people and adults interact.

### *The environment for creating identity*

The desire to escape parental control is recognisably part of developing independence. The internet provides resources for young people to escape that are vastly greater than those of my youth. I wanted to conjure up this context of information and ideas that might be alien to parental values: rich and confusing social networks, uncensored information, digital technologies that sharply change the ability of individuals to gain and interact with information and with one another.

The extent of information online in itself heightens ambiguities in relationships. Any doctor embarking on a consultation must be prepared for a patient armed with ‘better’ information, gleaned online. We will always have been able to self-medicate or find alternative healers, but today the doctor is often undermined, facing a patient who has researched his condition online, expects the self-diagnosis to be accepted, and yet requires the doctor to be omnipotent. In reality, doctors understand that they cannot know everything, and most no longer see themselves as having greater authority than their patients. I investigated how a doctor might respond to a young patient asking about transgender treatment, and discovered readiness to deal with the teenager as an informed young adult.

Many parents find this challenging. Victoria Gillick contested the right of children to seek confidential medical advice; the ‘Gillick Competency’ produced an outcome she did not want. The NSPCC website (2011) states:

Parental right yields to the child’s right to make his own decisions when he reaches a sufficient understanding and intelligence to be capable of making up his own mind on the matter requiring decision.

However, now that thousands of opinions can be canvassed without leaving one’s home, and few parents install parental controls on laptops, young people are bombarded by ideas and information that cannot be tested against standards such as those used to assess the Gillick Competency. I discovered that adolescents often have difficulty with whether or not their online transactions are reliable. They have no defined framework of critical thinking with which to make the judgement.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s I had to gather ideas from what was immediate: libraries, television and radio programmes, newspapers, people I knew. I had to test ideas face-to-face, discover how to manage my raised pulse-rate in the presence of others who might also be breathing faster than usual. I learned to understand others' thinking by responding to physical, non-verbal cues as well as by listening, arguing in my turn, unlike those whose debates are conducted online. Like my peers, I gained confidence in social situations because debates were actual, not virtual.

Young people told me how they struggle sometimes to work out what others really mean, when the only available information is onscreen text, and there is uncertainty about who writes it. Adults whose formation has been largely face-to-face can manage ambiguity but young people often find it troubling. At the time when they are most keenly aware of trying to establish themselves as individuals, they are vulnerable to destructive myths. To fight these usually entails direct rather than virtual action. I was told that where friendships matter and rumours have been promulgated, some sort of face-to-face meeting is essential. Online rows are rarely sorted out online.

I learned through experience about fictions that damage young people, and how hard it is to establish truth when mythology prevails. My last headship was in school serving an area of great deprivation. Although most pupils were kind-hearted, a city-wide myth flourished that they were monsters. Parents from outside the area, whose children were allocated to the school because of its empty spaces, wept at the prospect of their children having to consort with 'those children'. Pupils were routinely ostracised: one girl spoke of how at her ballet classes she was ignored as soon as others discovered where she went to school. Pupils who left to attend the local sixth form college sat alone in common areas. The local doctor was a locum; any social worker tended to be a novice. The most helpful people in the community were the police. Generational cynicism about the value of education or any form of intervention was endemic. The school was called 'Fresh Start' but the conditions for rebirth were absent.

Abraham Maslow devised a Hierarchy of Human Needs which speaks of 'self-actualisation' as the goal towards which we aspire. In *Counseling Children in Crisis Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs* (Harper et al, 2003) the authors describe the five levels of Maslow's pyramid. At the base are physiological and safety needs; above is the sense of belonging and love; self-esteem; and finally that sense of identity which confers a sense of wholeness. 'Self-actualisation' suggests a kind of rebirth, more

than a coming-of-age; it implies that the self has become unique. Without the underpinning factors in the Hierarchy (first devised in 1943 and still in use) the pupils of that deprived school struggled. They did not belong.

The urge to categorise and allocate is deeply entrenched. In schools of the social and intellectual elite, where I had previously been headteacher, there were always pupils classified as 'less able'. Despite evidence to the contrary, intelligent adults needed to pigeonhole their pupils, and were disconcerted when pupils defied expectation. I was a classifier too, until confounded by pupils determined to succeed despite poor academic predictions. How we work with experience matters. Unable to change the home lives of my deprived pupils, I set out to offer a different narrative, that would inspire them to find resources within themselves, freed of the 'monsters' label. Maslow's Hierarchy provides an excellent framework and neuroscience explains why. Sue Gerhardt (Gerhardt, 2004) describes the interaction of baby and parent:

Babies are like the raw material for a self. Each one comes with a genetic blueprint and a unique range of possibilities ... The baby is an interactive project not a self-powered one. The baby human organism has several systems ready to go, but many more that are incomplete and will only develop in response to other human input ... This makes evolutionary sense as it enables human culture to be passed on more effectively to the next generation. Each baby can be 'customised' or tailored to the circumstances and surroundings in which he or she finds him or herself. A baby born into an ancient hill tribe in Nepal will have different cultural needs from a baby born in urban Manhattan. (p.18)

Gerhardt's belief that children are 'tailored' from interaction with others is disconcerting for those who believe that children are born with immutably determined characteristics. I sought explanations for the culture that had made my pupils into 'monsters' instead of the normal children living in neighbouring districts and was referred to Bruce Perry's work. He had been the local Head of Psychiatry when the FBI raided the Branch Davidian Cult in Waco, Texas, and became a critical member of the team that debriefed the Waco children. His findings about the impact of David Koresh, the cult's leader, upon the children were so striking that they have influenced the management of traumatised children ever since. The children had been heavily indoctrinated; their physical behaviour was utterly different from that of 'normal' children. Perry (2004) concluded their brains had effectively been rewired. Many of my pupils had similar symptoms; they were culturally shaped not to mix with other children, to see themselves as bound into their own neighbourhood.

In an article (ISCA, 2007) Perry and Szalavitz expand upon this research:

Parents of teenagers will not be surprised to learn that the frontal lobes of the cortex, which regulate planning, self-control and abstract thought, do not complete their development until late in adolescence, showing significant reorganization well into the early twenties.

The fact that the brain develops sequentially ... explains why extremely young children are at such great risk of suffering lasting effects of trauma: their brains are still developing. The same miraculous plasticity that allows young brains to quickly learn love and language, unfortunately, also makes them highly susceptible to negative experiences as well.

Perry noted that such children could have, for example, high resting pulse-rates; their flight/fight responses would be abnormal, their actions flowing from feelings and experiences that others would find unimaginable. His discoveries enabled him to conceive therapies that help traumatised children recover from catastrophic experience. I was heartened by his confirmation that the plasticity of the young brain is potentially transformative as well as disastrous. His research encouraged me to see all children as capable of 'rewiring' themselves, if they could gain fresh experiences, and told my pupils stories about their amazing brains. I organised events with no apparent educational relevance so that they would have happy memories from which to create their own stories. The novel I have written is based upon the premise that even adult brains are susceptible to the influence of story-telling. There is growing evidence for this, such as the discovery that the brains of London taxi-drivers (who have to memorise 'The Knowledge') show distinct enlargement of the hippocampus (BBC, 2000). One taxi-driver told me how he acquired The Knowledge: a multi-sensory process involving coloured strings, free association, walking, driving, talk and visualisation. He gave himself a multitude of different experiences which changed his brain.

The neuroscientist, Susan Greenfield, gave a talk at another school where I had been the head. She astonished her listeners by her unconcern about cloning humans. Her research convinced her that even identical twins – nature's clones - have to live within their own uniquely separate brains. In *id: the quest for meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Greenfield, 2008) she writes:

Just as the more you talk to someone the stronger your relationship becomes, so it is with neurons ... we now know much more about the biological mechanisms that enable this remarkable phenomenon of strengthening-through-use to come about ... the consequences of this adaptability mean that we can start to see how the brain

might become personalized. By having different experiences, different connections will strengthen, thereby differentiating one brain from another. (p.26)

The dynamics of environment and neural malleability give rise to an ever-evolving identity that is constantly transforming. (p.32)

The impact of Greenfield's words on her young audience was electrifying. During discussions about the laziness of the brain, its preference for repetition and circular patterns, one pupil asked, 'Does it mean if we aren't learning our brains aren't growing?' She suddenly saw why 'learning' might be painful. Greenfield confirms that we can engage with the rewiring of our brains – that we have the capacity to make ourselves very different from one another, so that to classify us becomes difficult.

### ***Other influences on the narrative***

Steven Pinker explains that the factors we draw on in constructing identity are complex in their interaction; external stimuli play their part. In *How the Mind Works* (Pinker, 1998) he enumerates:

(1) the genes, (2) the anatomy of the brain, (3) its biochemical state, (4) the person's family upbringing, (5) the way society has treated him or her, and (6) the stimuli that impinge upon the person. Sure enough, *every one* of these factors, not just the stars or the genes, has been inappropriately invoked as the source of our faults and a claim that we are not masters of our fates (p.53)

He argues for an innate capacity to make more of the sum of these parts than can be predicted. 'The 'I' is not a combination of body parts or brain state or bits of information, but a unity of selfness over time, a single locus that is nowhere in particular' (p.564).

The 'unity' we construct uses sensory information to transform the 'single locus'. I had read and loved the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge before I visited the Lake District. But the intense actuality of place I found was overwhelming, and changed my inner narrative. I moved to live in the area, discovering for myself the visceral impact of landscape on self, and use this in the narrative. My protagonist is liberated in the wilderness. However, although mountains and lakes seem unchanging, landscape is affected by human activity. Allowing a valley to recover its original 'wild' nature is a local issue for debate and action. In practice, nothing can be 'wild' where humans intervene: another symbol, for me, of the interplay between what seems codified in genes and cultures, and personal narratives.

A related inspiration is *Conundrum* (Morris, 1974), by Jan Morris, which I read when it first was published. James Morris fulfilled all expectations of manliness: he climbed Everest, married, fathered four children with Elizabeth, his wife, had a successful career. But from earliest years, his inner identity was female. The transformation of James into Jan is still a ‘conundrum’. In order to give legal validity to Jan’s long-term relationship, James’ wife, Elizabeth, had to become the civil partner of Jan. Our society has no other way of understanding a relationship where individual love transcends categorisation. In her introduction to a later edition (Morris, 1997), Morris writes of recent autopsies on transsexual brains, and the discovery that in every case ‘a particular region of the hypothalamus, at the floor of the brain, is abnormally small for a male, and in fact smaller than most females’. This may provide a physical explanation of why some apparently heterosexual men are convinced they are female. However, Morris is not interested in explanations:

For myself, I am past caring. I have come to think that the transsexual predicament is a kind of divine allegory, and that scientific explanations do not much matter. What matters is the liberty of us all to live as we wish to live; love however we want to love; and to know ourselves, however disconcerting or unclassifiable we may seem, however odd or ugly, at one with the gods and angels.(p.8)

Morris claims the freedom to be ‘unclassifiable’, using the language of mythology to assert the right of everyone to a blessed existence. His reference to myth is echoed both in literature that uses world myths as the stimulus for new stories (*Paradise Lost*, *The Lord of the Rings*) and in the popular drive to create myths (*Superman*, *Spiderman*, *Star Wars*). Such tales seem compelling today: Grimm’s fairy tales (*Grimm*) and Norse gods rediscovering themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*The Almighty Johnsons*) are television series; Greek heroes roam contemporary New York (*Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*). Wizards and tough fairies thrive alongside werewolves and vampires. Speculative fiction is popular with adults and adolescents alike. James Cameron’s film *Avatar* is referenced in academic research by Seung-A, (2012). At one level, this is escapist; at another, it offers a vision for being human which is extraordinary, and understandably attractive to those of unclassifiable gender.

Whilst Jan Morris does not claim that mythology affected her decisions, in *Conundrum*, she locates the process of transition in myth. With an ambiguous body, James/Jan’s habit of leaping into rivers or lakes had to stop; but one outlet was available:

I made a pilgrimage to a little lake I knew high in the mountains called the Glyders, in North Wales. There I could bathe alone. Early in the morning I would scramble up the hills, to where the lake stood sedgy and serene beside a gentle col. The light would be pale and misty, the air tangy, and all around the Welsh hills lay blue in the morning. The silence was absolute. There I would take my clothes off, and all alone in that high world stand for a moment like a figure of mythology, monstrous or divine, like nobody else those mountains have ever seen: and when, gently wading through the reeds, and feeling the icy water rise past my loins to my trembling breasts, I fell into the pool's embrace, sometimes I thought the fable might well end there, as it would in the best Welsh fairy tales. (p.105)

This wonderful account is the more haunting because of Morris' self-perception: 'like a figure of mythology', in a 'fable', 'the best Welsh fairy tales' – a sense reinforced in the 1997 introduction by the reference to 'divine allegory'. These insights must have made the experience more bearable, and for the reader, the image of the figure in the lake has fairy-tale potency.

### ***The impact of research upon the novel***

The protagonist of *Morph* asks 'what if?' as a way of determining how to transform her life: not fantasy, but imagined realities. Verisimilitude was important to me as I wrote. My research includes: interviews with young people to hear their voices directly; reading about gender and sexuality, most of it online, where I thought the protagonist would find it; retracing for myself the routes that Joey takes across the Lake District; revisiting neuroscience, especially in relation to gender and identity; assessing conceptual frameworks for identity, both virtual and real. This research changed the intended shape of the novel, as three examples show:

#### Coming of age

Having intended to write a transgender coming-of-age story, I became increasingly interested in gender ambiguity. In my teens I read Margaret Mead's *Male and Female* (Mead, 1950), excited by learning that gender is culturally determined. As my novel took shape, I realised that *resistance to classification* was my theme. I read academic research (Gallacher, 2005) into problems experienced by intersex people, to which I refer in Chapter 2. Their misery at living with other people's imposed ideas and treatments is moving. This led me to read online forums about the issues claimed by young people or their parents in coping with their perceived abnormalities. The gender controversy surrounding the South African athlete, Caster Semenya, was in the press as I was writing (2010; again, see Chapter 2). 'Coming-of-age' refers to a culture as well



as an individual and affected my decision to write about an intersex or androgynous individual who would try to reshape her society rather than herself.

### Structure

I arrived early at a structure for narrative, organised in sections: *Cyberspace*, *Home*, *Town*, *Country*, the last to be wilderness experience. I imagined my protagonist at risk in one of the more dangerous parts of the Lake District. But a friend with detailed knowledge of a local escarpment, Scout Scar, reminded me that it is as easy to get lost on familiar territory as in the wilds. I found this more imaginatively exciting, and changed the plot after walking the territory and seeing for myself the truth of the claim.

### Activity online

My protagonist keeps a closed blog, repeatedly confronting the blog settings: Private, Edit, Publish. In my first version, Joey decides at the end of the novel to Publish, as an act of defiance about the new gender role. However, the power of Cyberspace in *Morph* diminishes sharply at the end. *Blog Theory* (Dean, 2010) helped me to understand what I had written:

Some bloggers find themselves disoriented by the experience that people they know read their blogs. We presumed we were posting for strangers and ended up more exposed than we expected ... friends ... lurking on our blogs, learning about our passions and idiosyncrasies ... Blogging is a technology uncoupled from the illusion of a core, true, essential, and singular self. (p.56)

In the search for a 'singular self' Joey spends less time looking in the mirror, less time in the virtual world, more time coping with reality. Dean says that the experience of finding 'a variety of lifestyles that I can try and try on' makes her imaginary self 'extremely vulnerable' (p.78). Joey has projected different selves online, but instinctively turns back to the physical world. Using Dean's reflection, I decided that Joey might decide to '**Delete**' rather than '**Publish**' the blog because the notion of perpetually reinventing oneself online reinforces the sense of illusion. It detracts from the real ambiguity of declaring oneself an androgyne, or 'other'.

Most adults have frames of reference for interpreting virtual reality, using their experience of print or other media with clearly-defined boundaries. Such disciplines are not at present readily available to young users of virtual environments. The coming-of-age context is, at present, outside the control of adults, so Joey must make sense of the interaction between real and virtual through an independent struggle for truth.

## Chapter 2 Gender and identity

### *Exploring gender online*

Before I began writing my attention was drawn to the online forum *Queer Youth Network* (queeryouthnet, 2008), where the transman who instigates the plot of *Morph* is a moderator. I set out to explore how a young person with gender anxieties would look for information as well as support online and read this forum alongside others, such as *Parenting the transgender teen* (Transitioningfamily, 2012), *FTM London* (FTM, 1997), *Androgyne Online* (Androgyneonline, 2007), and *Mermaids* (Mermaids, 1995). I found most through following links on the NHS website and was led to research the reliability of the information.

Cyberspace provides an anonymous location where people share feelings and ideas such as fear of rejection, or frustration over social attitudes. This poem by a 16 year-old appears on the *Mermaids* site:

Each time I look into a mirror,  
I see a face look back at me.  
Sometimes it's the face of a girl,  
And sometimes it's a boy. Each face shows its sadness,  
Each one shows its pain.  
Both of them have their sorrow,  
But one has room for Joy. I know some day that I must choose a face,  
And live with it forever more.  
But which one can joy live in?  
Which one can I scorn?

*Queer Youth Network* takes a practical approach to helping with pain. As well as providing a forum it is a campaign site with regional groups, a radio station and presence at national rallies. Its self-definition seems all-embracing: 'The UK's national organisation run by and for all Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer, Asexual, Transgender, Intersex, Gender-Queer, Transsexual, Curious and Questioning Youth'.

Posts on *Queer Youth Network* invite responses:

ok I just got told by a close female friend that a 15 year old boy she knows that is gay is getting abused by his parents and older brother. He's to [sic] scared to get help and won't stand up for himself; but I think he needs help NOW. It is REALLY bad.

Apparently he got raped 3 weeks ago by his brother and brother's friends and didn't report them at all. He just let it happen to him.

Another post says:

**The day I figured out reality:** Until I was probably half way through my 15<sup>th</sup> year or possibly all the way in to my 16<sup>th</sup> year I was nothing more than any other person, though I thought myself to be unusual in some ways (but what child doesn't?) There's so many things to explain...Hahaha...

One commentator responds:

When you say there are many things to explain, there are thousands of people on this site prepared to listen. You just need to start talking.

The site is indeed full of sympathetic reactions. Forum headings are suggestive: Coming Out; Depression; Trans; Sexual Health; LGBT Rights; Religion; Politics; HIV/AIDS. Those populating *Queer Youth Network* are passionate about major issues. I researched as I wrote, trying to gain imaginative insight and solid scientific evidence for what Joey would come to believe through her research online.

Given the breadth of gender possibilities that the sites reveal, I consulted the NHS website (NHS, 2013). The video, *Transgender: Ruth's Story* gives an account of the processes involved in changing from male to female:

When you're that age, you don't have any words for it, and you don't assume you're particularly abnormal, but going to sleep every night hoping that I was going to wake up as female should have possibly told me that there was something up.

She concludes by describing the quality of her life since the transformation: good degree, friends, confidence. The video is meant to encourage as well as inform.

The NHS website's headline is 'Choices'. The weblink, however, is headed *Conditions*, and *gender dysphoria* - a term denoting discomfort, despite the non-judgemental definition on the website:

Gender identity is your personal sense of which gender you belong to. For example, if a person sees themselves as female, then their gender identity is female.

For most people, their biological sex and gender identity are the same. However, some people experience a mis-match between them, and this is called gender dysphoria.

Gender dysphoria is a recognised medical condition. It can be a complex condition, and it affects different people in different ways. It is not a mental illness.

What strikes the reader is the implied contradiction between 'gender identity' as a matter of personal 'choice' and a recognised medical 'condition'. We do not choose to be diabetic or epileptic, both of which are also categorised as *conditions*, along with breast cancer and embolisms. The NHS definition differentiates between gender and

sexuality, introducing a list of p sexual orientations which is brief when set beside those listed on *Queer Youth Network*.

Other links on the NHS website lead to *Gender Identity Research and Education Society* (GIRES, 2010). By this time, my conception of my protagonist was more subtle. To wake up each morning in the hope of having changed gender overnight, as Ruth describes, is relatively clear-cut; but the story forming in my imagination was never simply about gender. I wanted to explore how someone given the advantages of a secure home, intelligence and initiative, might nonetheless feel driven to define herself outside of accepted ways of thinking. These online stories influence not only my understanding of gender variance but also my narrative.

### ***Gender variance in another culture***

Early in the novel-writing process I visited Thailand, encountering a different approach to gender. Sam Winter (Winter, 2003) analyses Thai attitudes:

An MtF [male to female] may not only describe herself as a transgendered female, but will go on to say that she is now female but was born *transgendered*... This poses a real challenge to our established ways of thinking...

Thais believe 'transgender is a difference rather than a disorder'. Small boys who seem unusually gentle, or have characteristics culturally perceived as female, easily believe they are *kathoeys*<sup>1</sup>; grow long hair, dress in girls' clothes, self-administer hormones and eventually find a surgeon without going through the processes required in the West.

However, Thai society still classifies certain behaviours as appropriately male or female. Sex change is relatively easy but gender behaviour is stereotyped. Government decisions taken in the 1990s play their part. These are explained by Sura Intamool in *Meditations on Thai Queer Identity through Lakhon Nok* – a genre of theatre (Intamool, 2011). Thai political reforms in the mid-twentieth century led to the suppression of many Thai customs, the roles of men and women being redefined during the reinvention of Thailand on a perceived Western model. Traditional *jongkraben* (loose trousers) had to be abandoned; men were to wear trousers and women skirts: men were to succeed in jobs or the military, women to be well-groomed housewives.

<sup>1</sup> transgender

Names for the male should indicate chivalry and courage ... On the contrary, names for the female should indicate delicacy and sweetness... People who had gender-neutral names were persuaded to change their names. (p.17)

This attempt to control every detail of life means that the *kathoeys* are only free if they conform to type. But in *lakhon nok*, the *kathoeys* are given a defined third gender role:

In *lakhon nok*, Thai people tolerate queerness, especially the transgendered and the transvestite: they will be accepted as long as they possess beauty and exhibit certain behaviors [sic]. (p.35)

Whatever the politicians decree, as long as *kathoeys* fit into a predetermined image, s/he will be accepted. The Buddhist myth of creation underpins this tolerance, with its identification of three genders - male, female and biological hermaphrodite. The *kathoeys* are neither mimicking a woman onstage, nor in drag: 'This idea of the binary gender system can not [sic] be perfectly applied to the existence of the third gender as portrayed in the *lakhon nok* performance' (p.24). Intamool cites Judith Butler's view that gender is a social construct to support his thesis; her contention in *Gender Trouble* (1999) that 'woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end' (p.33) applies to the *kathoeys*, too.

Thai approaches to sexuality are not as liberal as Western cultures believe. Before 2002 homosexuality was a mental illness, and the only permitted variation from male and female was *kathoeys*. In Pakistan, the transgender community has long been marginalised, although a report in *The Star*, (Becatoros, 2010) said that the High Court accepted a petition recommending the addition of a third gender to state identity cards:

The community, said to number several hundred thousand, is known as *khusra*, which Pakistanis translate as "eunuch," though the meaning is broader than a castrated man, the common definition in the West. Besides transsexuals, it includes hermaphrodites, those with male and female sexual organs. Some had sex-change surgery.

In Pakistan and other South Asian countries, *khusra* born male often see themselves as neither sex yet they wear women's clothing and refer to each other as "she."

It seems easier in these cultures for the *khusra* to adopt a female image although essentially they are 'other' - a diverse community still harassed by the police, ridiculed, considered the outcast by Allah and their families. Abuse of transgender people is just as likely to occur in England, as newspaper accounts, such as this, anonymously reported in *The Cumberland News* (Anon, 2011) confirm:

A transsexual woman wept as she told a court how a group of strangers followed her through Carlisle, shouting insults and abuse. [She] was giving evidence in the trial of one of the four people accused of yelling threatening and abusive insults at her because of her sexuality ... She said: "They were saying 'that's a man; that's a fella'. All four of them were giving me abuse. They were ridiculing me and laughing at me .I told them I was a transsexual, not a man."

Although this person identifies as transsexual rather than transgender, she, like others, claims 'trans' as a fundamental identity. The potency of 'trans' should not be underestimated. *NHS Choices* draws attention to the need for transgender individuals to be affirmed in their own terms. Jay has changed from female to male without surgery, apart from a mastectomy: 'Being a man isn't necessarily whether or not I have a penis. I don't have to do that to see myself as male – I see myself as a transmale, particularly, anyway.' Using the term 'transmale' or 'transsexual' seems as liberating as the term *kathoev*. Identity is proclaimed.

Parents, however, as their blog shows (Transitioningfamily, 2012), long to see their child as 'normal', not trans:

To me, Transgender equaled [sic] a medical diagnosis. It was an answer to the "Why" of my daughter having "male" parts ... we want to ... to save ourselves from pain... If we are cautious, and "erase" evidence of DJ's former identity, then perhaps she can live a life without worry of being "found out". In other words, she can just be a girl. Not a transgender girl, not a girl who used to be a boy,

These parents are more occupied by their own dilemma than that of their transdaughter; they do not want the reminder of pain that 'trans' will bring, so the problem of unassimilated parental emotion is projected on to the child. Similar forces were at work in the case of Caster Semenya, the South African athlete whose gender was questioned in the international press. Writing for the *New York Times*, Alice Dreger asks the question, 'Where's the Rulebook for Sex Verification?' (Dreger, 2009). She interrogates the gender assumptions about Caster Semenya, who entered women's races and was then subjected to a series of tests to determine whether she was in fact male or hermaphroditic. Such terms were freely used in the press at the time. One headline in the *Mail Online* ran, 'World champion Caster Semenya "is a hermaphrodite with no womb or ovaries"- Australian newspaper's shock claims over gender-row runner' (Anon, 2009).

Having set out the biological issues, Dreger explains the impossibility of arriving at the well-defined conclusion the athletics authorities seek:

Consider an analogy: Men on average are taller than women. But do we stop women from competing if a male-typical height gives them an advantage over shorter women? ...

So where do we draw the line between men and women in athletics? I don't know ...

Sex is so messy that in the end, these doctors are not going to be able to run a test that will answer the question. Science can and will inform their decision, but they are going to have to decide which of the dozens of characteristics of sex matter to them.

Their decision will be like the consensus regarding how many points are awarded for a touchdown and a field goal — it will be a sporting decision, not a natural one, about how we choose to play the game of sex.

The officials' desire to use a simple rule for identifying an athlete's sex is at odds with scientific realities. They cannot appeal to 'nature'; slightly arbitrary human decisions will define who is male or female in 'the game of sex'. This led me to imagine a protagonist who would take on the game to subvert it.

### ***The medical invention of sex***

I discovered from reading *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Dreger, 1998) that the main difference between transgender and intersex individuals, as far as the medical profession is concerned, is the compulsion to act if new-born babies are born with ambiguous genitalia. Many years ago, my doctor told me of what he had seen in west Wales as a young practitioner: women who had been given steroids in pregnancy gave birth to such babies and doctors made instant decisions about the babies' genders, wanting a quick solution to 'a problem'.

Dreger sheds light on the historic social pressure to resolve this 'problem'. Reviewing medical practice through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, she traces the drive to treat ambiguous gender as a condition, effectively a disease. Her analysis illuminates our notion of what it means to be human: 'the discovery of a "hermaphroditic" body raises doubts not just about the particular body in question, but about all bodies' (p.6):

After even a cursory study of the phenomenon of sex-sorting, one soon discovers that a significant motivation for the biomedical treatment of hermaphrodites is the desire to keep people straight ... If you don't know who is a male and who a female, how will you know whether what you've got is a case of heterosexuality or homosexuality?

(pp.8-9)

Dreger provides a stark example of the confusion felt by a doctor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A woman consulted her doctor after two months' marriage because she was unable to have sex with her husband. On examination, the doctor concluded that she was a man, with rudimentary male sex organs and no vagina. The patient refused to accept this. All her life she had lived as a woman (by then she was 42) and was now married to a man who loved and accepted her as a woman. She ignored the doctor's advice, refusing to be 'sex-sorted'.

Dreger follows the trail of medical practice as doctors struggled to clarify a situation they found untenable, lighting upon 'the gonadal definition of true sex ... to preserve, in theory and in practice, a strict separation between males and females, a strict allotment of only one sex to each body – a way to enforce the one-body-one-sex rule' (P.30). This judgement was revised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the aid of technologies such as laparotomies making it possible to examine easily the internal organs of patients with unclear sexuality. Doctors could now detect how complex an issue they might be confronting. Even so, it still was felt necessary to reconstruct the body surgically, to create 'a single, believable sex for each ambiguous body' (p.166).

Dreger has interviewed many intersex individuals, and tells their stories online where they feel unable to do so, confirming the degree of ignorance and hostility that many encounter. In the Bioethics Forum (Dreger, 2011) she gives Jim's account. He says that his life has been saved by what he finds online:

Jim told me about going to a urologist for follow-up care, only to hear the urologist say to the nurse, outside the door, "I don't deal with this shit." I told Jim I had heard similar stories from other people with DSD [Disorders of Sex Development] – of one woman who heard the nurse say, "The hermaphrodite is in Room 2," of another who read her chart upside down and thought it said, "Patient has not been told she has AIDS" when, she learned much later that it actually said, "Patient has not been told she has AIS." I told Jim I knew that this kind of treatment of people as medical monsters was worse than any surgery could ever be. "Soul-crushing" was the term I offered. He agreed.

Jim's parents were told to bring him up as a girl. Doctors advised radical sex reassignment surgery. Instead, his parents brought him up as a boy. Jim found help through The Accord Alliance (2008), which published a Consensus Statement on the Management of Intersex Disorders (Lee, 2006). This recommends a multi-disciplinary approach when deciding how a baby of ambiguous gender should be treated (in both



senses). Even so, the document alludes to ‘disorder’ and assumptions are made about what is ‘normal’ and acceptable:

The size of the phallus and its potential to develop at puberty into a sexually functional penis are of paramount importance when one is considering male sex of rearing ...

More recent policies, especially those produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, question the apparent need for an infant phallus to be of a specific size, or a clitoris to be judged too large. In its own consultation document (Wylie, 2006), these statements appear:

The phenomenon [of gender dysphoria] is most constructively viewed as a rare but nonetheless valid variation in the human condition which is considered unremarkable in some cultures. (p.9)

The foregoing statement is enlightened in its affirmation of validity; the same document calls for the abolition of terms such as disorder and disease, since they are ‘widely perceived by trans people as offensive and stigmatising’(p.10). But the NHS website’s reference to ‘dysphoria’ and its link to conditions such as diabetes suggest that the professionals have yet to adopt a consistent view.

The problem is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that for a child’s birth to be registered in England and Wales a gender must be determined. After the Children Act 1989, the law gives parents responsibilities rather than rights. Radical intervention in a child’s physical state should not take place until the child can give informed consent. Therefore, where possible, professionals advise delay, and a multi-discipline team assists the parents to understand the implications of any decision they want to make. Helping parents feel positive about themselves is less important than ensuring the long-term mental and emotional well-being of the child. However, the idea of allowing a child to grow up as neither specifically male nor female is met with incredulity or deep concern. A Canadian couple (Davis, 2011) decided not to disclose the gender of their child to the world at large, and received vitriolic abuse. The news evoked international debate about the rights and wrongs of encouraging gender ambiguity, although survivors of imposed radical intervention are rarely positive.

The most arresting story of intersex for me was broadcast on BBC Radio Three (Graham, 2010). Sarah Graham, who wrote *Letter to my Body*, runs counselling consultancies that help young people and adults ‘find solutions to the challenges that are holding us back’. Her life history encompasses trauma and addiction. In childhood her

parents were told that her clitoris was too big, and that her ovaries should be removed to prevent her from developing cancer. Later, she found that she had no womb; the removed ‘ovaries’ were testes: ‘If they had left my body intact I would have produced hormones naturally.’ She spent years in addiction and self-harm, but eventually learned to accept her state. She counsels against putting children into ‘binary boxes’, saying she is neither specifically male nor female. She is ‘an intersex woman,’ who takes a daily supplement of testosterone as well as oestrogen, with the feeling of balance she had as a child.

Children who say they are transgender will not (usually) be treated medically until they are 18. They work with a psychotherapist and are advised to live in the desired gender before treatment begins. For some trans young people, however, the experience of puberty is traumatic, and the agony can begin much younger. Kennedy and Hellen (Kennedy N, 2010) warn of the dangerous social pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. Most transgender children realise something is wrong before leaving primary school: ‘I used to dream that god realised he had got it wrong and I would wake up as a girl’ (p.29). Gender norms are ‘probably more ruthlessly policed in the world of young children than at any other time in a person’s life’ (p.38):

Current social expectations act to impel us all not merely to behave according to ideal stereotypes of just two genders, but also to expect ourselves to fit into binary gender categories even if we do not. (p.39)

This distortion of evolving identity to please parents or placate social norms explains why young people look for support online if they have been unable to talk to a doctor who will help; and the reluctance to act prematurely is understandable. Changing gender by hormone treatment is as radical as surgery. Recent research (Hulshoff, 2006) has investigated structural changes in the brain caused by hormone therapy. MtF brains show a significant decrease in volume whereas FtM brains show an increase. We change what is ‘natural’ when we intervene; yet the natural world seems no less diverse. ‘Role Reversal, Sex Change and Intersexuality in Animals’ (Lyon, 1992) indicates variations in sexual behaviour in invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles and birds, relating these to human attitudes to gender variance. In conclusion, Lyon states:

Nature does not put things in water tight taxonomic boxes, this is something humans do for convenience and as a way of coping with the continuous variability shown in Nature. There is a cost in that a degree of arbitrariness is necessary in any classification system.

I went hunting for the ‘continuous variability’ of nature, finding on Wikipedia a page dedicated to the five morphs of gender of the common side-blotched lizard (Anon, 2013). A more scholarly paper from Professor Anne Fausto-Sterling’s paper for *The New York Academy of Science*, is called ‘The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are not enough.’ (Fausto-Sterling, 1993). Although accepting, in response to peer review, that the number five is arbitrarily selected, she maintains that ‘sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories’. She writes tongue-in-cheek to define five genders: male and female; *herm* (possessing one testis and one ovary), *merm* (having testes, some aspects of female genitalia but no ovaries) and *ferm* (having ovaries, some aspects of male genitalia but no testes).

Her suggestions would be entertaining if the reality were not painful, given legal systems that require people to be either male or female. The death penalty has sometimes been exacted for those who did not fit. Fausto-Sterling describes the perverse scientific process of suppressing scientific insight into gender variance, in the name of social conformity: ‘the medical community has completed what the legal world began: the complete erasure of any form of embodied sex that does not conform to a male-female, heterosexual pattern’ (p.23) She has a vision:

Imagine a world in which the same knowledge that has enabled medicine to intervene in the management of intersexual patients has been placed at the service of multiple sexualities...the prize might be a society in which sexuality is something to be celebrated for its subtleties; and not something to be feared or ridiculed (p.24).

She knows this is utopian; but her paper reminded me of Carolyn Heilbrun’s ideas in *Towards a recognition of androgyny* (Heilbrun, 1973). The concept of androgyne gave me to the key to my narrative: ‘Androgyny suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; ... it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom’ (pp.x-xi). Heilbrun’s ideal world does not allocate people in a binary system but allows them to locate themselves on the spectrum. She interpret Shakespeare’s plays through this prism:

Shakespeare, in his last plays, has imagined a world which, because it is androgynous in its spiritual impulses, is redeemable; such worlds are in fact redeemed by androgynous grace. (p.34)

In Shakespeare’s last plays, young people who are brave, curious and loving rescue jaded adults, and have an ‘androgynous grace’ that the reader also sees embodied in Jan Morris, bathing in a high Welsh lake, a figure in a myth. This figure of the androgyne, seen by cultures as variously bizarre, dangerous or magical, symbolises for

me the challenge to the adult world posed by young people who refuse to accept the misshape that society offers them. When they bring to the debate ideas and experiences gleaned in a virtual world, adults can no longer be confident of their roles in this coming-of-age ritual. Dreger implies that in the Western world we feel compelled to sort the male from the female to ensure our social stability; much the same applies to the arbitrary separation of experienced adult from immature youth – which is Heilbrun's conclusion, too. The young people who log on to *Queer Youth Net* bring a passion and idealism to their cause which spills over into a host of other social concerns.

### **Chapter 3 Identity online: research findings**

Alongside my exploration of how young people might look for support online for gender anxieties, I set out to find how any young person of my protagonist's age (about 17) might present him or herself online so that I would have a first-hand insight into beliefs, attitudes, practices and expectation. This might help me see how any troubles, not just the gender-related, would be shared. I assumed there was much that young people could say but would not; even so, their comments enabled me to deduce the forces at work when well-educated teenagers chased a gang member through London streets, knifing him to death. (Laville, 2012) Their earlier minor scuffle had become the focus of intense online communication using Facebook and the Blackberry messaging system. The gang members, dispersed across west London, conferred online as they planned how to get hold of weapons, where to meet, what to do. This extreme incident arose from the everyday practices of young people, who intend no harm and yet experience it.

My interviews with young people confirmed the uncertainty of the boundary between virtual life and the physical realities of day-to-day experience. The headteacher of a large London school told me that pleasant teenage girls are capable of posting gross sexual comments about one another online. The head deals with it by making the girls read aloud, in the formality of her study, what they have written online. They are horrified, not having connected the words onscreen with words to be voiced to another physically-present person.

My research questions were:

1. When you join an online community or start one of your own, how do you decide on your approach?
2. How do you decide on and manage your reactions to the things that other people post?
3. How far do your conversations online affect your ordinary life?
4. How far do you believe or accept what is said online in comparison with what is said in face-to-face conversations?

I interviewed 11 young people aged between 15 and 20 and one adult (the network manager for a large secondary school). All were volunteers from schools and a further education college that I approached through my network as a former headteacher. The young people were preparing for General Certificate of Secondary Education or Advanced levels, or National Vocational Qualifications Level 3. I conducted an additional joint interview with two of them about language used online because of what they separately told me. In analysis, I looked for recurring patterns of phraseology, concerns, activities, interests and issues, and from these inferred the categories under which I present the findings. Any generalisations stem from what I learned from the interviews.

### *The sense of belonging*

Everyone wants to belong to a community. Luke, an ardent games-player says, 'I'd say there's a lot tying you to being online, like when you go online you make online friends sort of thing and they're tying you in to going back online.' He experiences attachment through emotional association: 'they're tying you in', trying to identify why his return to the games to meet online friends is not addiction.

If not going to a gaming site, joining an online community means signing up to Facebook. None of the young people interviewed in this survey is currently a member of another social network. Some acquire Facebook to keep in touch with siblings at university or travelling abroad. Others invite everyone they know, to become Facebook friends: 'I've got family, my mum, my brother, my best friends' friends that I've been in the classroom with' (Anna), a diffuse community that many set up and find more difficult to manage than they initially anticipate. Melanie raises and rejects the idea that her mother is a Facebook stalker: 'She checks my brother a lot because now he's at university...she likes to see what's going on in his life,' adding, 'not stalking, just seeing pictures'. She assumes pictures reveal little; her own Facebook page is not viewed by her mother, she claims, though her allusion to stalking implies a level of anticipated concern. The potentially explosive mix of family and friends from different areas of one's life can lead to complications:

The other day I went on Facebook and I was on someone's profile and ... I saw she was engaged and I thought what, what? I found out about that on Facebook ... Then my boyfriend rang her and because she's been engaged before she said, don't tell your dad because he hasn't got Facebook, he can never find out ... A random

thousand people she doesn't even know, know she's engaged, but he doesn't ... he'll think, oh, it's my niece, she's got engaged again (Sue).

The excitement of being able to announce her engagement on Facebook outweighs the girl's fear of what her uncle will think. Sue is led to reflect on how easy it is to misinterpret information, because the news of the engagement seems to her wholly good until she learns that the girl actually wants to limit who knows. The girl imagines that Facebook is the only form of communication, forgetting that the friendship group has family members, and that word-of-mouth is still prevalent.

The only defined relationship on Facebook is 'friend,' whether parent, someone from primary school, friend's acquaintance, or complete stranger who asks to join your page. Assembling such disparate people in the same space encourages the development of tactics to conceal or deceive. Coded language is common, but online it is harder to control:

Well if you're writing something and you don't want them to see and you don't realise you've got them as friends, if they see something that they're not happy with, then that can get back to them (Ellie).

[You write] things like that so when your parents are online they won't understand what you mean (Kate).

The code-speakers may well be understood despite their efforts. Ellie sounds the note of caution: 'My Facebook community? Like all my friends from college, family, which can be quite dangerous, sometimes, it's a sticky area.' Serious misunderstandings may arise.

On the other hand, the sense of family community is often heightened: 'My cousin's going through a hard time and I was speaking to him on Facebook. I didn't think he would be able to talk to me face-to-face' (Anna). The social network has allowed her cousin to unburden himself and she values the opportunity. Other families also seem to appreciate what Facebook offers: 'I have some friends where the whole of their family is on it, so they're always updating each other and commenting on all these things. In a way it brings the family closer together' (Melanie). Where family members have assured bonds of trust and confidence, Facebook allows them to share even more, although we assume that they also verify what they read through day-to-day contact.

Facebook is a location: 'there,' where 'I could speak,' not the same as 'face-to-face,' but where a mother can 'see what's going on'. The image conjured up is of a

room into which contacts are invited who may or may not know one another. The walls of this room are permeable, with silent onlookers at the boundary. 'I think some people use it like that [stalking] when you get people adding you that you don't know... It's quite contradictory this – might not be saying stuff all the time but being online all the time' (Melanie). However, the possibility of being stalked is discarded unless a crisis arises, for the illusion of proximity is too inviting to resist. The hours spent on Facebook would formerly have been spent on the phone, or face-to-face: 'You can sit in college and you can talk to your friend about everything and have nothing else to say and get home on Facebook and have another conversation for like an hour' (Ellie). Meeting in college or school is replicated in the Facebook room, even if there is 'nothing to say'. Intimate or puzzling (to the casual reader) exchanges are understandable if many hours are spent online with friends who are also met in the flesh on a daily or frequent basis. But face-to-face life and life online run together in ways that differ from nightly phone conversations: you can look at photographs and videos, forward links, read other people's pages. Real-time relationships are overlaid by virtual chat: 'I leave Facebook on [for] about seven hours ... Usually lunchtime onwards – at weekends. About five o'clock when I'm at college' (Jonas). 'You have to know what's going on otherwise you get withdrawal symptoms' (Ellie). Others engage less intensely but their dependence seems almost as great: 'I tend to check it at least once a day' (Melanie). 'I usually check it three times a day' (Eva). Whilst some find this highly pleasurable; others see it as a substitute for what they judge would more productive: 'But if I did give it up completely I would probably find a lot more time to do things, I really would' (Marie). Ellie says, 'Facebook, it's not good for you in a way. Too much time on it – with the arguments and things that go on, it's not a good place to be, but once you're caught up in it -.' She would be riding her horse if she did not spend so long on Facebook every day; she says that she is addicted – and given the daily checking by so many, the dependence on accessing virtual conversations, this may be accurate.

Other reasons for Facebook's attraction are easy to identify: Anna says, 'It's free. I use it to talk to my brother who's in another country and he can do it for nothing, he rings and I can talk to him on Facebook every day.' She ignores the fact that her parents pay for the broadband connection. The social network allows friends who live in remote rural areas with poor mobile phone reception to stay in touch without resorting to landlines: 'Most people do say things to me on Facebook chat because I don't get a



signal on my phone because of where I live' (Sue). Sue, plainly, does not want to be within her parents' hearing when she talks to her friends. She uses the facility they have provided to assert her independence of them. Anna feels the same: 'It makes you feel like you're having a normal conversation with them as if you were on the phone.' She too is not, it seems, using the landline. Privacy is essential and achievable for this generation. Landlines are usually in shared spaces in the home, where others can listen in too. The fact that parents are, in many cases, still able to view Facebook chat is either overlooked or ignored. It belongs to a separate sphere of reality.

The outright usefulness of Facebook for organising meetings and events appeals to even those most casual of users. It is, superficially, much more efficient than ringing up or texting, since all the friends are linked to the personal page. 'I talk to friends to say I'm getting ready to go and meet people, it's almost quicker to type instead of texting, almost easier' (Sue). Marie makes use of the more sophisticated facilities of Facebook: 'Sometimes if it's something bigger, you just make a Facebook group about it, or an event, and that way it's easier, you don't have to text everybody so that the inbox gets full.' Presumably the responses are easier to manage, too; the inbox does not fill up, the mobile phone is not overloaded with messages and the landline is not permanently occupied.

Moreover, keyboard typing is easier than texting: 'The thing with text it takes longer to text than to type so people use text-speak' (Kate). 'Well, you could still say what do you mean in text but it would be harder' (Luke). Both speakers use text, but recognise its limitations, and the implication is that they are quick with a keyboard. This is further endorsed by Kate: 'It's free and it's fast.' For her, there is also a sense of immediacy; another intimation of co-presence in the virtual room: 'You know if they're on Facebook but if you text them they could be doing something else.' She chooses here to forget that the connection may be as unreliable as that established through text: 'When people put on the status, having a good night tonight, out in park drinking, you think well, are you actually out or are you sat at home watching TV?' (Ellie) Where friends live in isolated places it may not be easy to make a physical check on claims.

Others prefer the lack of immediacy in the Facebook room: 'I think people are a lot braver online, because you don't – you're not that face-to-face, you don't have to think up things spontaneously' (Melanie). The pressure of providing an instant response when literally faced by another can be intimidating; it can also induce a thoughtless

reaction in the haste or embarrassment of the moment. Gaining time to think is precious. Unfortunately, time to think is also, for some, time to insinuate, pretend, post abuse: ‘On Facebook you hope it’s your mate ... but it could be her and a couple of other mates that are with her and influence what she’s writing ... She could have left the room and one of her mates could have written it’ (Sue). Sue, like Ellie, contemplates the problem of knowing exactly who is in ‘the room’ – both physically and metaphorically. Perhaps she is trying to interpret a virtual comment made by two or three who are physically together, so that the comment Sue reads is deceptive.

The capacity to hold several simultaneous but separate conversations is another attractive feature of Facebook. Here, too, deception – albeit unintended – is possible. Speakers may be in ignorance of the fact that they are vying for the attention of a host engaged in multiple chats. The variation of tone in these conversations can be tricky:

You can have some really bizarre mixtures of conversations going on; you can have one with old friends, one with somebody who needs your help, one with somebody who’s joking around. I could be having a really serious conversation with one person and a really flippant one with somebody else. (Marie)

Marie is entranced by her concurrent conversations. She relishes the emotional dexterity with which she moves between them; this is her game. ‘Somebody who needs your help’ is less likely to be appreciative. Intimacy is an illusion where one speaker believes the conversation is unique and the other is enjoying many.

### ***Private or public?***

With such variations in ‘friendship,’ managing safety settings is important, although not everyone defines ‘safety’ and ‘privacy’ as in the extra-Facebook world. Confusions abound: ‘[I have] open [settings] I think. I think only my friends can see me but anyone can add me ... to build up their friendship list, I suppose’ (Jonas). Others assume the goodwill and reliability of their correspondents: ‘I don’t put anything private [on Facebook] ... use it for private messaging’ (Sue ). But private messages can be cut-and-pasted into public spaces: ‘There’s private mail but then you can cut and paste it into Facebook chat’ (Ellie). Some are convinced that everything is secure: ‘I can make a decision that only friends are going to be able to see any personal details about me. I’m not going to let any stranger wander in and see details about it’ (Luke). Luke’s comment, refers to gaming sites where anonymity is easily maintained, not Facebook. Others are sure that Facebook cannot promise privacy: ‘I know the police can get online and they can see everything that you’ve typed on Facebook and anything on Facebook could

affect your future’(Melanie). Anna knows that employers could view her Facebook page in the future, which makes her wary, and she also realises that Facebook staff monitor posts. Friends ‘put a new status on “I can’t believe this has been deleted”, and she is astounded that they willingly proclaim the deletion. She glimpses the lack of emotional safety settings for users who find everyone reading a post that only a few should see: ‘You put something on Facebook that maybe you can say in one friendship group and you can’t in another then your other friendship group won’t –’.

Facebook’s management of its settings concerns these young people. Eva has changed her initial settings because she did not realise that anyone could see her page: ‘I thought it was quite strange that they [Facebook] made that the default.’ Ellie describes a ‘huge row on Facebook’ through something she had confided to a friend, which had been posted on someone else’s Wall, through a setting she did not herself control. Changes of settings are signalled, but it is plain from Facebook posts that many adults are unaware of all the implications of a change. Aspects of practice are still under debate, such as how advertisers are enabled to target individuals. In follow-up questions I ask Sue how she feels about the adverts on her Facebook page. She says she does not notice them. Since all pages are full of images, it is probable that advertisements are noted peripherally but ignored. Sue does not see these as an invasion of privacy or a sign that her page is not the personal domain she thinks it to be. The influence of subliminal images has long been debated, but none of these young people seemed aware of the issues, or troubled by any sense that they might be affected by what advertisers devise. In fact, the status of visual images on an individual Facebook page confirms the ambiguous relationship between *private* and *public*:

I’ve got quite a few photos on. I think pretty much anybody that wants to can view mine ... I haven’t got anything private on there apart from photos of me, I haven’t got anything from my personal life on there. (Sue)

The choice of profile picture emphasises the public nature of the photo: ‘I think most people would be a bit self-conscious, would think I want a good picture’ (Andrew). Eva thinks photographs are sometimes used for ‘bigging up’. She understands how a depressed friend wants others to feel he is having fun: ‘There’s one friend who puts pictures up every weekend of going out but really he’s on his own.’ Marie sees the opposite, with images uploaded that do no credit to the owners: ‘People you know put photographs of themselves in which they’re wearing practically nothing in their trunks lying somewhere on the street.’ She sees these photographs as ‘an act’.

Some photographs arouse indignation. Ellie says: 'Like pictures of people drinking, it's not a very good example to set, is it, really? Yeah, dressed inappropriately, very little on. It's not right' Her sense of moral discomfort leads her to challenge such pictures: 'Well, friends have put up pictures on Facebook and I've written comments saying it shouldn't be on and you should reconsider their decision.' She knows young teenagers are linked to the page and wants to protect them.

There is no common code by which photographs are assessed as appropriate. Innocent images attract unpleasant comment: 'Some of my friends do get offended by a group of lasses ... being nasty about a photo ... If it's fancy dress and you've got a short dress on they write slag or something like that' (Sue). Abusive situations arise: 'One of the photographs on Facebook had 124 comments on it, or something from people she didn't even know, just having a go at her, calling her all sorts of names'. Eva concludes that these are cowardly actions, from people lacking 'the guts' to say something face-to-face. The private photograph provokes public response beyond what has been anticipated or hoped for. Such an outcome is all too likely where settings for friends' pages are open, even if personal settings are restricted. Eva describes what the posts precipitated: '[It started] this big rant on Facebook, this big argument on Facebook about what happened between her and this other girl and loads of people joined in all backing up the other girl that this girl hadn't really met.' The row is virtual rather than real, although it is likely to have ramifications in the real life of the girl whose photo has been abused. In short, an image that appears unremarkable to the person who posts it can provoke a situation assessed by Eva as 'dangerous'. The mother who is 'not stalking' may well stumble across revealing images of her son or his friends. Even if he does not post them himself, he may be tagged on a photograph linking a friend's home page to his own. It is easy, moreover, to view the friend's page with all the photographs that the friend's settings permit. The notion that a personal photograph is 'personal' or 'private' is painfully exposed as naïve.

### ***Managing oneself in the public eye***

Those who join gaming sites do not have the problem of trying to manage different friendships groups. They are committed to the game, not the relationships, although they value the social warmth of their community. Following the game's rules, they take roles, adopt pseudonyms, and discover both how to improve their gaming skills and how they relate to others within the context of the game. Duncan says, 'It sort

of expands the experience ... gives you a chance to play with people you've never played against before, sort of changes the way it works'. Although he does not focus on the relationships, these must be reliable for the game to work.

Luke describes his feelings when rules are broken:

What makes you really angry it's when you're playing online and it's the fact that people have chosen to break things up, that's what makes you angry, rather than that they're breaking their stuff. It's the fact that you can't empathise with them at all, really.

But he can also find a neutral, unemotional forum to help him find answers to a technical problem in his game: 'I made an account in it and got help there, and that led me to look around the rest of the site and I saw it was quite a good place to discuss things.' I ask if he trusts the information people give about themselves. He does. The information exchange – like playing the game – gives the site its rationale and he feels confident about his conclusions, grasping the 'reality' of his online experiences: 'In the same way that you could say something's happened if you could have a really interesting conversation and had an epiphany sort of thing, that's when you could say something's happened over text because you can still learn something.' This insight seems to validate his self-confidence. Virtual reality sometimes leads to transformation of his day-to-day world, but he does not confuse the two. Online, the people he plays games with or talks to are 'friends sort of thing,' within his community of values – shared, at least, for the playing of the game or the exchange of reliable information: 'It's taught me a lot about social interaction. How people react to things being said. I've learned a lot about that.' He reflects on how the experience is changing him; but the games he plays do not require that he should be reflective, or have emotional understanding. He needs games-playing skills which have, by and large, few emotional attributes. That Luke experiences 'epiphany' online suggests a rare combination of commitment, detachment and self-knowledge, related to his clear grasp of audience and the safe boundaries of the game. These give him authority; his sense of identity is enlarged and refined.

The game-site's rules govern the behaviour of those who play the game, and this makes it relatively easy for those I interviewed to manage both the game and their game-relationships. By contrast, the social network has settings, not rules, to provide the structure. To set up a game identity you are instructed to conceal yourself; to establish a Facebook identity you must define yourself as a person, in the terms

provided by the software that encourage you to declare relationships. The friendship group must define and manage itself – there are no rules; and relationships form the fabric, the ‘game’ of Facebook. The Facebook users I interviewed evoked relationships formed through ‘chat’ rather than action.

The oldest participant, Eva, is clear: ‘Friend to me is a year, two years, acknowledged learning together, sharing experience, not, “Hiya, we’re friends now.” I think that friends who are true friends change’. She was not always so cautious. An accident saved her: ‘I think I was on the verge [of addiction] when I was growing up but the internet got broke and my dad couldn’t afford to fix it so I got locked into myself.’ For her the experience of having to be alone, rather than absorbed into the online community, has influenced her subsequent judgements. She observes the behaviour of other, younger people, as insubstantial by contrast. I ask how friends are sometimes added to the Facebook page – ‘Yeah, strangers!’ is her interjection. She now finds the potential size of the Facebook community daunting: ‘I think of a dot, a million dots – it’s like not really you but it is a bit of you, but the way I do it, it’s a little bit of me but the rest’s private and if you want to meet me, meet me.’ She means that for friendship to be valid it must be founded on face-to-face meeting. This online community can be alienating: ‘I think it can be very isolating, it can be very lonely online with all these millions of people in front of you.’ Nonetheless, she approves of what she has learned about herself, and the quality of her judgements. She is willing to confront that loneliness.

Ellie experiences the random qualities of Facebook befriending: ‘You walk round college and you meet someone and they’ve added you on Facebook’. She must either accept or reject the request from someone she scarcely knows; here at least is a code – to decline seems unacceptable. Physical proximity in college generates an assumption of intimacy. Tensions arise where the understanding of what it means to build a friendship is, at best, hazy, especially where ‘friendship’ has few of the characteristics that most identify as essential. Young people used to form friendships through physical interaction but the social network transforms the situation. Users are encouraged to share personal information without any protocols apart from those constrained by the website’s design; and its very novelty and accessibility presents challenges to the understanding of friendship. Even if the friends are genuine, they are usually drawn from different areas and timelines. Family members are not added as kin, but as

'friend'. The inclusion of parents makes it harder: 'When you first get Facebook you think it's between you and your friends, but the moment your parents are on it, you have to think about it, will my parents be all right about my saying this' (Melanie). Her anxiety is curiously paralleled by that of a network manager I interviewed who speaks as a parent, about his son:

He will post things to [his friends] which are probably not suitable for a parent to see. I've had to learn to just bite my tongue and actually say, if he'd said those things on a mobile or a text I'd have known nothing about it. (Art)

His reflection on the new social situation that the social network provides identifies unique dilemmas for parent and child alike. 'Well, if you're writing something and you don't want them to see and you don't realise you've got them as friends, if they see something that they're not happy with, then that can get back to them' (Ellie). The revealing comment - 'you don't realise you've got them as friends' - confirms more hazards in adding friends than in adjusting safety settings. The unacknowledged complexity of real relationships is reduced to the simplistic classification of all contacts. These young users do not usually create groups, so that there is no circumscribed place for the code they expect in their family network.

Despite their respect for face-to-face contact most participants are committed to online relationships. They log on regularly: 'I think about it as a way of keeping in touch, because a lot of these people I don't see any more, I went to school with them and then I left' (Andrew). 'When I left secondary school if people have Facebook you can stay in contact with them ... in case you don't see them again' (Jonas). This represents a desired rather than an actual outcome. Family members who join Facebook do talk to each other across distance and time, according to these accounts. School friends who have parted company rarely make contact. References in the interviews to real encounters with past friends are few; and the nature of the activity on Facebook would almost inevitably preclude contact with those who do not share current experiences. For example, the day's events at school or college are interwoven through night-time chat: 'Just saying - I've got something to tell you - ooh, what? - I'll tell you when I see you. When I was at school. Then - what did you want to tell me? - Oh, I've forgotten, I'm sorry - ... sometimes I'd just want to wind them up' (Eva). This account of online teasing identifies how friends exclude even other friends, hinting at ever more

intimate and important relationships. Real-life exclusions often rely upon physical indicators, such as a turned shoulder or a careful choice of seating.

Eva is honest in her commentary on her own behaviour, which also leads her to be unsentimental about the past: ‘You can put your birthday on and it pops up and you get comments from people you were at school with saying happy birthday and I think – well, you never told me when you saw me every day, “Happy birthday,” but now when it’s reminded you to say “Happy birthday” you are doing. I’d like it to be heartfelt, thanks.’ Unimpressed by an attention that only the social network provides, she feels the transaction is hypocritical. Those who were not friends in the first instance cannot claim a spurious friendship through Facebook. Others are more anxious. Their constant logging-in to the community suggests insecurity about retaining a space, being significant. Jonas describes seeking out references to himself:

I usually go back through Facebook to see if I’ve been mentioned ... to see if anyone likes talking about me ... I’d find out what they’d been talking about. On Facebook, if they’d said something good, I’d probably tick the Like button.

He finds friends to add to his list by going through his friends’ lists. Ellie says that she cannot exist without Facebook. She has to be ‘in the loop’ so comprehensively that her laptop is never switched off when she is at home. Eva may have become robust but she still feels the need to retain a space in the network –among the millions of dots there is one that represents her. Keeping contacts from the past widens the potential audience - as if in a universe of a million dots where you are only one, the more links you make, the more securely you feel attached. Such behaviour is labelled as attention-seeking by others, who are incredulous about what is shared:

Like I was looking on Facebook the other day and you go on your home page and this girl who’s a year above me she put down that she was pregnant and I was thinking why would you do that? You’re like seventeen, why would you show that to thousands of people? I didn’t understand that at all. I think it’s all about attention really, knowing some people seeing that will think, let’s text her. They’re going to get a reaction from it anyway. (Sue)

Sue recognises the longing for response, even though she is astonished at the intimacy of what is revealed. Despite the potential for bullying online, people disclose personal issues and Eva is honest about her own efforts to win attention: ‘It’s probably to get them to ask how I am, to seem interested in it. *To get a response?* Yeah, more ... because then ... they can ask questions - wheedle it out.’ She posts a message that is not directed at anyone specific, inviting a response that will make her the centre of



attention. She chooses Facebook rather than phoning or talking face-to-face because of the ‘wheedling’ audience she will attract. The good friend will understand and respond sensitively. Eva’s willingness to claim attention enables her to be sensitive to similar online behaviour from a friend: ‘She puts it on in the way that only me as a friend would know, and she’s very sarcastic in what she puts on. So it’s kind of reading in between the lines and I think she does that because she doesn’t want to feel like she wants our help.’ Her friend’s post has been addressed to all readers, but achieves the desired effect of attracting Eva’s response, without loss of face. It is indeed attention-seeking. The pejorative inference drawn by Sue does not trouble her. Anna also understands the impulse to disclose: ‘People that put things to make you react do it for attention so you do react on Facebook so everyone can see it.’ She too has posted in a way that with hindsight she feels is unwise: ‘I have done a couple of times like when I was angry I posted out of anger but I think if you do it on a daily basis it’s just attention-seeking and I don’t see the point.’

The public nature of the post can make the user as vulnerable as the photograph. Several participants claim merely to post events, requests for meetings, arrangements – ‘nothing personal’ – whilst seeing such posts from others as revealing. Quarrels unfold on their pages, even if not prompted by them, and given the links created between Facebook pages, it is easy to see how a remark that is innocent or acceptable to one part of an audience can be misconstrued (or accurately read) as offensive by others. These links, and the diversity of the audiences, can make the extension of rows almost inevitable, often self-perpetuating.

It is clear to many that self-image is inextricably entangled with audience, potentially exposing each user to a far larger group of onlookers than any ordinary day-to-day experience would provide: ‘I think when people realise everyone’s looking at what they’re saying, they think I’d better change because everyone’s looking at it’ (Melanie). Those with experience of working before audiences (actors, teachers, barristers) draw upon shared conventions and knowledge about how to balance the private self and the public persona. Online, however, there is little to support adolescents making their first forays into the public sphere. The self-protective devices that are brought into play, either unconsciously or deliberately, are as easy to misinterpret as the messages they contain. Online games-players tend to be more at ease because of the convention of pseudonyms: ‘It’s your online identity and you can just

make anything up, anything will do' (Luke). 'Online identity' in a game is not, it seems, personal. But other participants in this research discuss the uncertain nature of the identities they present and encounter online: 'It's the kind of thing where you act natural so people don't notice' (Melanie). Being 'cool' is desirable: 'I need to seem cool or something' (Melanie). 'People out of school who weren't friends but we added them anyway, we weren't cool kids' (Eva). Ellie will not give up Facebook despite feeling 'it ruins your life' because 'if you're not on Facebook you've missed out.' Asked what would happen if she stopped, she says, 'I'd physically die. I would die.'

To this welter of emotion is added anxiety about the potential for friendship to be degraded if the online relationship dominates: 'Some people don't meet up as much, they think, oh, we can just talk online, we don't have to meet up in the real world' (Melanie). Luke says, 'I'd say it's really hard if not impossible to get an online friend who you feel as close to as you would at school'. The more the friendship is conducted online, the less substantial it becomes in reality. Andrew says his Facebook community is effectively the same as his day-to-day social group: 'I base it on who I'm friends with, the majority of friends I've got on there are close friends, so if I put something on there it's usually relevant to our friends.' He differentiates between the Facebook friends (about 200) and the 10 real friends who may or may not be on Facebook. When he posts, he has a sense of the reality of friendship as a measure. Sue also gauges virtual activity against the solidity of her offline friendships. 'I've got a certain group of mates. A couple of lads and three or four lasses. They're my close mates. I know I can rely on them for anything.' Within her wide Facebook community she has created an inner circle, the secret room which only she and they know. Part of her strategy is to avoid seeing the computer as a friend: 'It's a computer – it's just a machine with words on it. You don't know that it's come from that actual person or not.' Whilst this sounds very robust, she is still tempted by a wide audience, having 400 or 500 Facebook friends, many of whom she has never actually met. Although she claims that 'the majority of friends' are close, this is not so: 'I suppose there are loads of people who I'm friends with on Facebook that I've actually never even met.' To maintain integrity on Facebook she keeps the clear focus on her 'close mates' against the vague background of ill-defined and largely silent onlookers, some of whom are unpleasant:

There's a couple of lasses who live near me and they don't like me and I don't like them and on the Facebook chat they always send me messages, like putting a

cross – not bullying but they’ll always leave comments and I totally ignore that part of it. I think it’s ridiculous, quite pathetic.

But she does not change her privacy settings to prevent these girls from having access to her page. Perhaps she is troubled by the potential for anonymous gossip, and would rather know what they are saying, however ‘pathetic’.

Even those who feel they can differentiate between real and Facebook relationships sometimes experience a sense of unease. The word ‘weird’ was used several times, to describe the strangeness of virtual contact by contrast with the solidity of real life. Anna says:

Because of their statuses, you get to know what they’re up to, how they’re feeling, which sometimes is a bit weird because it’s not as if they’re telling you personally, they’re telling everybody but you still manage to find out.

Denied the personal communication – email, text, phone call, meeting, letter – Anna feels placed in the position of a voyeur. Sue says, of her ‘best mate,’ ‘I don’t text her, it would be just weird to text her.’ She phones up instead. Eva knows that true friendship precedes talking on Facebook: ‘It’s quite weird, if you meet someone new - you add them but you don’t speak to them for a while till you properly know them on Facebook,’ (She means that talk on Facebook must wait until ‘you properly know them.’) Melanie is quite firm, even with her mother, about the authenticity of face-to-face talk: ‘Some people tend to talk to people in their own house which I think is weird. My mum does that sometimes and I say, just come upstairs.’ They all need to differentiate between the important, real transactions and those which are enticing, or exciting but tangential. Anna’s use of ‘weird’ describes a kind of moral discomfort. She has not intended to eavesdrop but been placed in that position. Eva wants to maintain her new-found code, in which true friendship must develop over time, through relationship she believes to be genuine. She needs to be able to check it.

### ***The hiding place***

Many young people are troubled about Facebook because they sense others use it to hide. Andrew says: ‘I think people use Facebook for that reason [to hide], that way they can seem a bit different from what they are ... Maybe [Facebook’s] a hiding place for still being social’. Sometimes the motivation is shyness. People try to interact socially online because they find it difficult face-to face. Kate says kindly, ‘They think you can’t see them.’ At least one form of hiding has been acknowledged as a

convention: *fraping*, where another person's Facebook identity is adopted by someone seizing an open Facebook page to send messages in the guise of its owner. Marie finds it amusing:

You kind of get more and more creative, you have battles, like I have friends who have Facebook on their phone and what would happen is we would just nick each other's phone and type in a message or something or type in a really silly status.

She treats the taking of someone else's phone as a game, where 'nicking' is socially acceptable. Nobody in the group I interviewed seemed to think fraping is reprehensible. Sue says, 'It's like if you don't log yourself out people can easily prat around, leaving you status that you'd never written, you get some hilarious ones'. But she also registers her uncertainty about reading posts: 'You can't be terribly sure that they're the people who've written it.' This uncertainty breeds mistrust: 'Something you say you can say to someone else, oh don't tell anyone else and you can kind of trust them but online ...' (Melanie). The mistrust extends further, once the insecurity of private messages is recognised:

There's private mail but then you can cut-and-paste it into Facebook chat. Like if I wrote, 'had a great party last night, got very drunk,' through a private mail to a friend, they could copy and paste it through Facebook chat and send it to someone else that I'm not friends with. (Ellie)

Online posts have the potential to become text for another creative user, tempted into manipulating online relationships. This is understood by many of those I interviewed, but they are nonetheless willing to take the risk, although at least one uncomfortable experience is reported by Kate:

A friend came up to me once and she said, 'Why did you send that message?' I said, what message? I looked at it and it looked like exactly the kind of thing I would say. People use it as a bullying tactic too. They pick up on how you talk.

This message was sent on Formspring.com, to which I was introduced by Kate, who sees it as an example of how bullies use the facility for hiding online:

It can get really bitchy on Formspring ... so people can say anonymous things or nice things. And they often spread rumours around through Formspring ... All the feelings that they have that they don't want to be known as being horrible they use Formspring.

Discussing rumour-mongering, she remarks, 'I think people don't need to have as much shame because no one necessarily has to know it's them.' She believes that Facebook, too, provides a shelter for bullies: 'It's like, saying you don't like someone and you can

kind of hide behind it on Facebook so it's a way of bullying that isn't as obvious.' In her judgement, the social network provides increased opportunities for spreading rumours, particularly if the originator is able to hide his or her identity. It takes a strong personality to ignore bullying. Sue says: 'I've a friend who does get things and I say, "forget about it, you don't need to think about it". I'm blunt about things, I'm honest.' She is able to dismiss the unpleasant messages she herself receives, but other relatively inexperienced young people will feel the pressure to change their behaviour in a social network. Finding oneself an inadvertent eavesdropper easily leads to a kind of voyeurism. Although the mother tracking her son's university life through photographs might not think of herself as a stalker, the notion crosses her daughter's mind. The step from observer to bully is similarly slippery. The Facebook structure invites linking, sharing, telling, disclosing; and, once committed as a watcher, other activities may be hard to resist. It is easy to see why a protective (or concealing) mask is attractive to bullies and victims, friends and would-be friends, predators.

Bullying takes new, sophisticated forms online. Shy people are particularly at risk. Melanie describes her sadness, as what she thought would be a new chance for the shy in this new forum was demolished, becoming yet another space in which they could be intimidated:

A lot of people I know who are really quiet who when Facebook first came out thought, great, I can really talk to people online, I thought, that's great, those people you thought were really shy can be confident, but after a while it starts to really die down. People bullying them, they've gone quiet now. The quietness on Facebook reflects where they really are.

Her own empathy is clear, as is her understanding of why the shy have been silenced. Sue understands too: 'You know like people bully people on it don't they and get away with it.' Melanie reflects that the situation is worse than before: 'Once Facebook came around [they] suddenly had that realisation that now anyone can now say anything about you and then you realise just what kind of what it's like in the real world. I'd better watch what I'm saying, I better not say too much'. The shy are doubly silenced. Simply by being in the shared public space, as it were standing in the marketplace, the less-than-popular are humiliated.

Bullying and duplicity feature prominently in these young people's experience – either directly or witnessed online. A common self-protective instinct takes over: 'I've felt like [challenging Facebook comments] but decided to bite my tongue and be the

mature one'. Ellie know how vulnerable she might be to attack; she tells herself that not to respond is the mature attitude, which may well be true, but bullies are then unchecked. Sue handles the attempts made on her peace of mind in a similar way:

Like the lasses who say things like I'll walk past them in the street and they won't even look at me yet on Facebook it's like the confidence that nothing can harm them apart from if I wanted to reply. (Sue)

In Sue's experience there is no connection between the virtual world in which she is harassed and life on the street, where she is not. She wants to believe that the balance of power is with her; yet, as already noted, she does not 'unfriend' them. Perhaps by keeping them in her space, she keeps both worlds in her sights, even if they are unhinged.

The susceptibility to being hurt by what you read online depends on how you project and protect yourself. Hundreds of thousands of adults enter websites as avatars or similar. I probed with Luke whether, because he is comfortable with the idea of a game identity, he has formally explored the idea of adopting an avatar online. He sets it aside:

I play games because they're different and fun and they're designed to entertain but with *Second Life* you get another person to be and if I wanted that – I've got real life. It's too like real life to be bothered with.

He knows exactly where he is, who he is: 'People who want to reinvent themselves can choose to go on *Second Life*,' but Luke is secure in his identity. Facebook identity is vulnerable if your emotional responses to what others say about you are more sensitive than you can manage: 'I changed [settings] when I came to college. It used to be friends of friends, but I think you need to change it. Not that you do anything you shouldn't, it's just that people get talking about you', and Anna does not want any onscreen reminders about such gossip. Bitter experience has taught Eva the value of caution: 'I was actually shocked at in general everyone could see anything and post a comment on my Wall. It was crazy, I was shocked. I thought it was my friends.' Both young women feel the pressure of facing the network audience – ironically, in view of the aim of Facebook. Being onstage in a theatre would be easier to manage, for there the relationship between actor and spectator is well-defined and contained. The critic is not mistaken for a friend. Anna is also troubled by what others are prepared to disclose: 'You get to see what they will publicise compared to you ... Whereas if you got into trouble for something, you wouldn't want everyone to know.'

She draws on her own moral framework: 'I think that most people will put things on Facebook that I wouldn't, and that's the way they use it ... I think it's your morals as well – the way you react in real life to online life.' Seeing what others do gives Anna an insight into the values on which she instinctively acts, a sense of the integrity of a personal exchange by contrast with online chat or post. Eva's former experience enables her to assert herself: 'I actually do things and I write about what I've done and not what I wish I'd done. I think that was part of my childhood and I'm growing up now.' She observes that some comments on Facebook would probably not be made if people were physically together. They would either be inhibited or others would stop them. Sharing the same physical space is a different order of reality from being in shared online space, where *persona* has to be inferred from reading text, and to influence someone else's behaviour is more problematic.

Some participants are confident about their Facebook persona, particularly when they contact relatives or friends in trouble. Marie is able to catch up with a friend who has been absent from school for several weeks: 'I think using that, the fact that I had Facebook there and then, I could just catch him and say don't tell me what it is but are you OK, was good.' She believes that the virtual approach eliminates acting: 'They put on less of an act when it's just the two of you speaking, computer to computer.' In the context she describes, Facebook allows a level of self-disclosure that might be hard to sustain in a face-to-face exchange. Sue has the same experience:

One of my mates, he was like worried about his girl-friend ... and he was talking to me a lot on Facebook chat and I think he'd have been less comfortable ringing me up to say it even though we are mates.

On Facebook a boy is able to ask a girl for advice without loss of face or any suggestion of sexual interest on his part. Sue says, 'You can't have an awkward moment, can you, because you just write away and if they don't reply it's not ...' The unfinished sentence implies that without catching sight of another's face, the writer is able to complete a thought. For these participants, far from encouraging duplicity, Facebook facilitates honesty. Jonas agrees: 'They can write down what they really think on Facebook but usually in the day they wouldn't talk about it.' His comment is reminiscent of Melanie's about the offer to shy people of a safe, virtual space, away from the pressure of physical engagement with others; and setting Melanie's conclusion aside, there seem to be real advantages for some in reading exchanges onscreen:

It [Facebook] works in my head. Things that your friends say to you over Facebook you find something out and you can come back to college and you can question people and it opens up a lot of social interaction with people as well.’ (Ellie)

Ellie finds this attractive: ‘It’s in your head. It’s like a getaway place. You can talk to people so much easier and not have to talk to them face-to-face’. Others appear to be equally enlivened: ‘Like you leave a light on in a room you leave Facebook on’(Melanie). Perhaps the lit room encourages more truthful and open comments online than face-to-face encounters permit: ‘I think a lot of people feel more open when ... they don’t have to get nervous when there’s nobody else around’ (Marie).

But of the three, two report, in reality, more worrying feelings. Ellie laments her addiction to Facebook, thinking over what she could have been doing if not spending hours online. Melanie identifies the painful experiences of the shy and bullied. Others see the discrepancies between how people present themselves in the social network, where their comments are unmediated by direct personal exchange, and how they behave in face-to-face encounters: ‘Sometimes I like people less because of what they say on Facebook’ (Kate). Andrew’s experience is similar: ‘You can’t hide as much when you’re in person. I think people use Facebook for that reason, that way, they can seem a bit different from what they are. *So Facebook is a hiding place then? Yeah, maybe, a hiding place for still being social.*’

Andrew’s concluding comment pinpoints the dilemma for young people still developing an individual sense of identity. The social network offers them a chance to visualise and project a more talented or more attractive persona than they feel. They will all know that photographs are digitally manipulated for advertising purposes, and are tempted to do the same (both with profile photos and posts). The shy try to seem sociable or cool, unlike the way they think they are in person, with peers who think they know them. Andrew has some sympathy with those who hide to seem ‘social’. The facilitating persona can enable interlocutors to speak freely to one another, without the embarrassment of making eye contact; and at the same time allow them to invent and project a different persona. The challenge for young users is working out how to engage with the virtual person they meet, and how to react to deception or the perception of being deceived.

That Facebook is so dependent on text increases the problem, even for sophisticated readers who are confident when decoding text: ‘You can’t actually see the



person ...you're not thinking about them, you're thinking about your own reactions' (Kate). Without the reminder of another's physical presence, it is easy to be self-absorbed; and without that presence, it is harder to interpret what another truly wants to convey: 'I've found that with text, because a lot of the online speaking that you do there's no vocal interaction going on, it's just text, I've found that it can be taken completely the wrong way' (Luke). In face-to-face contact the potential for misunderstanding already exists; online, it is heightened. Luke reveals the dilemma for him, even when chatting within a game: 'When reading other people's comments you can't be sure what they mean so you're sort of uneasy about how it's meant to be taken so you don't know how to respond because you don't know how it's to be taken.' He has realised that no communication can be interpreted out of context; the game's rules tell its players how to relate within the game but not how to manage their informal chat. Luke gropes for what the other players might be feeling, rather than thinking about his own reactions.

All the young people I interviewed want to communicate truthfully, and seek means for making themselves clear in the virtual environment. Some use emoticons, accurate grammar and punctuation, phrases that they would not use face-to-face. Even these must be used with caution: 'I only know smiley for happy – but then I'm a very sarcastic person and so are my friends so if I put a smiley face they'd think it was very sarcastic' (Eva). The presence or absence of accurately writing in full sentences is significant. Punctuation can serve as an alternative to emoticons:

If I get a message I skim over the whole thing, and if I see a full stop I read it as 'I really don't like you,' or 'I don't want to meet up with you.' Or if there wasn't a full stop it would be, 'I'm quite angry with you,' something like that. (Kate)

This is a reading that only Kate the Facebook user will make, or others with whom she has agreed this code. Such devices seem effective where Facebook friendship is an extension of attachment between people who meet regularly in real life. However, where the friendship is notional, accurate writing becomes a matter of judgement:

You can definitely say that people who are stereotypical lazy people wouldn't use the right grammar but there are people who aren't stereotypically lazy who do have a future will also not use grammar because you are a different person on the internet. (Melanie)

Melanie links the means of communication to the projected persona. Whatever the writer of any post intends, the manner of speaking is revelatory. For sophisticated users

there may be much to learn from considering the projected persona, but to feel confident in deciding whether or not a speaker is hiding requires a high level of self-knowledge, and an understanding of the medium of communication.

### ***The impact of the virtual on the real***

Melanie's observation, 'You are a different person on the internet', is suggested by others, too: 'People definitely act differently. Or emphasise their bad character.' (Kate). 'People tend to judge you by your grammar and spelling how intelligent you are ... If you come across as articulate, or your grammar and punctuation is completely correct, then you can come across as quite intellectual and intelligent' (Luke). With this understanding, to use correct grammar online is a way of asserting, and perhaps creating, a desired identity. Anna tries to stay in touch with her offline self: 'I think you've got to respect people and what I put on Facebook to other people are just the things I would say if I was meeting them.' Luke is careful about his choice of vocabulary and tone:

Like you avoid using certain words and start using other words. For example, if you wanted to say, say someone said something you didn't agree with but you weren't furiously angry with them, and you told them in real life, "I think that's stupid, it's a stupid way of thinking about it," but you could say that and your body language and your facial expression would get across that you weren't angry with them, but if you just sent a text it would seem really brutal."

He too imagines himself in a face-to-face dialogue and is anxious not to be insensitive or to provoke conflict through crass choice of words. He differentiates clearly between what is exchanged online and 'in real life'. However he expresses himself online, it must take account of the absence of 'body language and your facial expression'. Melanie observes the same standards, attaching a moral compass to her decision: 'I always try to be myself and to be polite and to know that there's people of all ages online ... I always know it's the same as face-to-face, just because you're typing something doesn't mean that people don't take what you say into account.' These speakers have an imaginative insight into the feelings of those they cannot see – a degree of respect which is impressive, although they are still hopeful that their respondents are the friends they claim to be.

Recognising the difficulty of interpreting through text alone, many feel there is no substitute for the physicality of voice: 'There's no particular tone of voice as they're saying the words' (Andrew). 'You don't have the intonation or inflection so it's so

difficult to see what they want' (Marie). Eager to respond appropriately, they register a doubt about the reality about the virtual exchange which makes it hard for them to know how to respond. Whilst 'real' things do happen online, such as the 'epiphany' noted by Luke, events are registered in the mind of the participant, rather than carried by the online exchange. In other words, the reader must create the respondent, in the absence of physical cues; and, as Kate says, it is tempting to be more absorbed by one's own feelings than those of another.

Ringling up, by contrast, allows people to verify the presence of that other: 'The sound of the voice, the emotion behind the voice is very intriguing and that's what I like' (Eva). Sue passes on a warning:

Fearne Cotton – well she was talking to one of the listeners saying that she panics if she has to talk to someone because she's so used to just talking on Facebook or talking on Twitter or texting, and if people ring her she just panics at what she's going to say. And quite a few people I know that use text have the same problem – like panicking when people ring you.

Sue identifies with the broadcaster, more able to voice her anxiety because she has heard the same concern from a trusted adult. Anna feels that, given the potential for misinterpretation online, the face-to-face meeting is safer than one where a virtual persona is influential.

I think if it's face-to-face you can tell obviously because you have body language and that will help you believe or not believe like if somebody's joking then you know it's a joke, but if somebody says something on Facebook and you don't know whether it's a joke or not ...

It is disconcerting for experienced adults if they are not certain of the seriousness of a comment; far more threatening for a young person still working out how to react to others. Several find a useful discipline in literally facing up: 'I definitely take someone face-to-face a lot more seriously than someone over the internet' (Luke). 'When I'm saying things in the real world I think a lot more about how I'm coming across to people' (Melanie). Even Marie, the most apparently carefree, says (ambiguously): 'I'm natural; I take extra care not to be misinterpreted.' Her persona is, by implication, a self reshaped with 'extra care.'

Alternative ways of keeping in touch are tested and valued:

I think Skypeing was a bit more of a real conversation really than Facebooking them. On Facebook words just come up on the screen, it's a bit – I don't know how

to put it really ... When it's in words there's no tone of voice, there's no sense of emotion in words, it's a bit vague talking on Facebook. (Andrew)

Andrew is reassured by seeing his respondent on Skype in a real time that can be confirmed. He needs the 'tone of voice' and the 'sense of emotion in words' that is, for him, absent from Facebook. Words are emotionally charged, as the number of Facebook battles confirms, but the charge is unregulated, open to misinterpretation and manipulation.

The reality that words on a screen, just like words on a page, are a different form of reality from face-to-face encounter explains the uncertainty so many feel when trying to interpret or clarify meaning through online text, with its potential for swift and perhaps deceptive response. Luke acknowledges the skill of communicating by text alone:

It's really highlighted the difference between speech and text. It shows how hard it is to get across emotions through text than it is through speech. Because there's a lot less variable through the text. It's just the content, and that's it.

He understands how non-verbal cues enhance our insight into what someone else communicates – even though we may feel pressurised by presence. Mere text lacks a controlled context, so both writer and reader can be at a loss: 'I think a lot of things you say on Facebook, you don't know how to determine them, like, you read it and you think, I don't know' (Melanie). Her anxiety about how she writes on Facebook is mirrored by another's uncertainty about how it is read: 'People ... have said to me, "Oh look what so and so said, it's really aggressive," but I say, "Mmm, but it might not mean that."' At least Kate is able to offer the sense of perspective that the original reader cannot achieve alone. They talk to one another, jointly look at the screen, to try to interpret the message; they rely on the physical presence of another to verify a virtual meaning.

Being 'natural' and 'open' is the image most participants want to project: 'I like to be honest with people, I like them to see me as me' (Eva). Marie has the same ambition but even so finds that she must differentiate between her 'real' self and her internet persona: 'Maybe it's just me as a person, rather than me as an internet kind of personality.' She wants to be frank but is aware of the need to protect herself: 'I'm not very open about really, really kind of personal matters. If it is I speak in person and even then you can be manipulated.'

The tension between *seeming* and *being* poses a challenge: ‘I’ve seen people who come across as a bit of a different person on there than they are when you’re really with them’ (Andrew). Which is the ‘real’ person? How does the virtual interact with the real? This fluid interplay - this sense that online gestures are both attention-seeking and necessary acts of self-protection - gives rise to an environment of apparently open communication conducted in the knowledge that it may simultaneously deceive. Fraping suggests that identity theft is taken for granted, almost condoned, so what appears on a personal Facebook page may be misleading. Luke is confident that he can spot the fake in his games: ‘It’s surprisingly easy to tell when it’s not them [who they claim to be]. Their idioms and things like that, their way of speaking, it can change dramatically when it’s someone else.’ He relies on what he sees as the stripped-back nature of mere text; to say what one means through language alone requires a skill that gamers may feel is irrelevant. Their skill is in the game. On Facebook, however, messages rarely convey information alone. People post emotional states, ask questions, describe encounters, invite support or response. They may be playing emotional games, a situation only tacitly acknowledged.

For these young people, the pressure to be ‘better’ is so considerable that whilst being ‘fake’ is unacceptable, presenting a good image of oneself is just good sense: ‘I think it’s people putting themselves on as people they would want to be seen as ... I think it’s a bit of social pressure that makes them want to do that’ (Andrew). ‘You have to decide how to make yourself look good but you don’t want to be fake, like a lot of people make fake ones that are not themselves and then they get into trouble and upset other people’ (Anna). What this upset might lead to is less clear. Ellie says wryly, that by speaking through Facebook, ‘You’ve got less chance of getting a slap’. However, she still is hurt: ‘It wouldn’t bother me as much if it was said to my face and not written in Facebook. I’d much rather that if someone had a problem with me they said it to my face but Facebook seems to be the way people do it now.’ Facebook is intended to offer an alternative to face-to-face meetings, but using it to escape such meetings is at the root of much unhappiness – and yet it is understood. It is easier to be ‘brave’ online, where you are hidden within the virtual reality of Facebook, and virtual actions do not carry the same moral weight as real ones. I ask Jonas if he believes what he reads on Facebook. ‘Yes,’ he says unequivocally. But others are more circumspect: ‘If it’s someone I know well I’d probably trust them more if it seemed like them to put it on there but if it was someone I didn’t know that well, I’d be not forced to believe it but

you would really know otherwise' (Andrew). 'It makes me feel sort of when reading other people's comments you can't be sure what they mean so you're sort of uneasy about how it's meant to be taken so you don't know how to respond because you don't know how it's to be taken' (Luke). 'I sense that you have to be careful who you speak to and who you believe as well' (Marie). Such caution is well-founded, given the experiences they report. Repeatedly, young people say, 'I think' as they try to work out the reliability of what is posted, whether in a social network or a forum.

However, this encourages them to reflect on the process of forming judgements: 'In school there's a whole subject on citizenship where you learn ethics and so on, well, you do learn a great deal of that online, I think' (Luke). As a games-player, this young man is aware of how his online experience helps him:

You do learn socially from a game, not in the same way as in real life, but you learn not to say certain things ... You imagine someone as they're typing ... and you imagine what sort of emotions they're trying to get across. And you get some really bitter people on the forum who obviously always imagine people saying everything with sort of a negative ... insulting sarcastic twist to it even if they're not.

He has an empathetic intuition about people alone in their rooms, in front of their screens, the critical action on his part being to 'imagine' the drama being played out behind the game. When two friends consult one another about what a third party has posted, they are working through a process that has some objective value. Eva remembers 'having arguments all the time on Bebo, thinking all the time I'm at the computer desk on the other side of town ...' Even as a fourteen-year-old she knew that a false situation – however exciting - was being generated online by friends whose conflicts would have been very different if prompted from face-to-face arguments. Luke considers how his use of language online has been modified so that he avoids being hurt:

[If] everyone in the forum comes in and says, 'that was a stupid thing to say' and insults them for it, then you learn from that that whatever they've said and the way they've said it you don't repeat that or next time it's you as the victim.

Although he is well aware of the situation in which he plays games or uses a forum, he can still find himself as 'victim,' the single person who is the butt of everyone else who appears to be online with him. It takes a robust sense of self to withstand such pressure.

Part of the problem, according to Kate, is the impact of Facebook transactions on reality: 'They didn't talk about it school with each other ... but they were battling on Facebook.' Facebook events flow into the real world, distorting it by a virtual haze:

A lot of things that happen online are brought into school ... Sometimes someone might say something about someone online and what would normally stay online and wouldn't be brought into the real world will be brought into the real world. (Melanie)

The natural differences of opinion, even conflicts, that arise between adolescents in school are exacerbated by virtual disagreements, with an inflammatory effect on relationships. Real-world values must be called into play to manage such strength of feeling. Emotions are not artificial, even if generated by fictions; they are as powerful as those stimulated by a physical meeting. Given the number of posts, their emotive content and unframed context, it is likely that confused emotional outbursts will erupt in real life, whether directed at the instigator or some innocent third party. Many accept that interaction in a social network dramatises everyday life, for participants are more or less compelled to adopt a persona, even the guise of 'being oneself'.

Thus, Facebook battles can inflict fearful scars as they spill over from the virtual to the real. Young people commit suicide because they are haunted and bullied online. The most secure comments in these interviews come from those who are aware of the fluid boundary between real and virtual and who are reflective about both. Luke says,

If someone's giving all this positive body language, facial expression, things like that, telling you that this is true, kind of thing, it's much too hard not to believe it. But online you're just looking at – bear what they've said.

He knows that in face-to-face exchange we are always liable to be influenced by non-verbal cues, and it takes a robust, often trained stance to resist the attraction of interpersonal chemistry. At least in reading online he is free from such pressure, although the puzzle of working out what people intend is perplexing. He develops a range of new skills to help him decide what to believe, how to judge.

Marie deals with life online by bringing to it the same caution as she does to everyday experience:

The people who have acts on Facebook and the internet the act never really ends. Even when you see them you know they're acting in a certain kind of way. You can see right through it. It just happens that on Facebook and the internet it enlarges it. You treat them with the same kind of politeness and kindness you would

anybody else but you always know to hold back just a little bit, or to be a bit wary of them because you know that it's an act.

Her personal values are very clearly stated; she uses the opportunities offered by Facebook to support friends, or the friends of friends; to organise play rehearsals; to do 'silly' things such as giving herself a Facebook daughter. She uploads into YouTube a video of herself playing the piano, in her pyjamas, in order to help out a friend, and is utterly relaxed when I suggest that this video might resurface uncomfortably at some point in her future: 'It's me in my pyjamas, being young and being free, doing a friend a favour.' In her judgement she is not revealing anything online that she would not be as happy to share face-to-face: 'I don't really have much to manipulate.' The troubles that others encounter in the social network she views with detachment. She holds back not only her emotional reactions but a little of herself.

Duncan's approach is the simplest of all. He has a Facebook account but barely uses it: 'I just think it's a load of old rubbish, really, isn't it?' For him, the delight offered by his internet access is the playing of games, and he is both confident and secure in how he presents himself: 'When I do decide to go online I just actually have fun because I've actually learned these things that I am using online.' He happily refuses to tell me the name under which he plays games: 'It's about being anonymous.' He relishes that he is now much faster than before on a keyboard, that he has learned to hold his own in skilled games with people he does not know: 'If you're in with random people you've got to have skill or else they're going to sort you.' For him, the battleground is legitimate, and being a victim is an acceptable hazard. He plays war games, knows that he does, is prepared to be 'sorted'. Others find that in using Facebook they have wandered inadvertently into battle - unless they are willing to treat it as a kind of game and to use its resources accordingly.

It seems unlikely that Duncan will be drawn into real-life battle through online war-games. He will not confuse the virtual with the real. The Facebook drama, however, has improvised script, multiple directors, and actors some of whom are experience the drama as real. The film, *The Truman Show*, vividly conjures up the life of a man who finds he has lived a television show, surrounded by actors; his entire life is a drama for viewers and a revenue stream for advertisers. He is, however, able to break out into a verifiably real world. For some of the young people I interviewed, there is no escape. They are so engrossed in what 'happens' online that they cannot separate themselves from it until they develop a discipline that allows them to do so.



## Chapter 4 Identity online: a wider context

In this chapter I consider concepts that shed light on the experiences reported by the young people I interviewed, and how their confusion of virtual and real might be understood. The schoolboys who set upon and killed another teenager escalated a minor scuffle into a murder by plotting together online. The emotions aroused by the scuffle were intensified, perhaps more powerfully than if they had been together to feel the check and balance of physical interaction. The boys did not appear to recognise the reality of virtual emotion. I infer that they did not fully differentiate between the virtual and real worlds. Having made decisions online they sprang to action without organising time physically together to consider repercussions or allow the moral codes that most will have believed in to prevail. They saw no boundary between the stoked-up online fury and the fatal reality.

### *Real and virtual boundaries*

Of course there are boundaries online, such as around gaming or dating sites. The flow of information on Facebook, however, seeps across boundaries and is not censored by the adult world, apart from the occasional intervention by Facebook site managers; and the issue of where the boundaries lie is as hard to determine for adults as for the young people they try to guide or manage.

Art, the network manager I interviewed, identifies problems:

We will often see a member of staff coming to us saying, “Oh somebody’s written this on Facebook, can you find it?” So we say yes and we start looking for it and then we’re in this grey world – it’s out of school but it’s affecting them in school.

The boundary between school and ‘not-school’ has become ill-defined. For members of staff, the situation is doubly uncomfortable, because their own use of Facebook is ambiguous:

So you put yourself on Facebook, how do you interact with students, how do you interact with past students? And then you’re into exactly that situation. Staff will say to me, “It’s all right, I only have past students;” but past students have current students in their privacy settings.

Again, the fact that in Facebook all relationships are reduced to ‘Friend’ makes it impossible for a teacher to differentiate between the former student who may well have become a friend, and that student’s friends who are still students. Facebook exercises its

charm on teachers as well as students. Many teachers, moreover, have valid reasons for directing their pupils to Facebook pages:

For example, authors have now all got Facebook pages so when [someone] wants the latest author's competition it's on Facebook, you type it in and it's blocked [by our local authority broadband provider]. Actually in schools we just need to get a whole lot smarter about this and start to embrace this technology and use it sensibly, and the emphasis then is on teaching e-safety.

Since so many teachers are also personal users, it is easy for a few to be victimised. This makes it harder to decide how to 'get a whole lot smarter', or what good sense might be. Art says:

There was a particular incident where there was a petition started up on Facebook to remove a member of staff as form tutor; and that was very distressing for the member of staff... kids would join in that group who weren't in the form, often weren't in the same year group and often weren't in the school.

For the 'kids' concerned, because the petition was on Facebook it was public property and fair game, although Art finds that they have no sense of being malicious:

We've found the groups that were just anti-staff, really nice kids would just hit the 'Join' button, and we've interviewed them after and asked why they join and they are mortified. They have no sense that they've said I hate Mr XX on there, and you're acknowledging that by ticking the box, and they have no concept of that.

One reason for this dreamlike activity is the still-developing sense of self in relation to others, made more difficult online where the private/public boundary fluctuates. Kate says, 'They'll talk about teachers in a way they wouldn't – you'd never say what they said on Facebook to the teacher's face but the teacher'll never know.' But her assertion is belied by Art's problem: the teacher cannot know which friend is a former student, and which one is current. In Art's experience, teachers learn quickly and painfully that they are under attack.

That ambiguous public/private relationship is readily manipulated by advertisers. In a BBC2 programme Emily Maitlis discusses advertising with Elliot Shrage, Facebook's director of Public Relations strategy. If a user clicks 'Like' on a brand's page, the brand pays Facebook for a small picture frame on a friend's page, saying they have 'Liked' it, inserting a logo of the brand. Facebook calls this 'A Sponsored Story' and users cannot opt out. Maitlis suggests that 'liking' a brand and agreeing to advertise it are different processes. Shrage responds ingenuously:

You're asking a profound question. You're asking, "what's advertising?" [When I hit the 'Like' button on a brand's page] I am affirmatively associating myself with whatever it is I'm liking, and what that does is, it creates a story.

Maitlis says that what he calls a story many would call an advertisement. Shrage claims he thinks of it as a ranking mechanism rather than an advertisement. His notion of 'story' would trouble young people anxious about differentiating between true and false online. 'Telling stories' morphs into 'telling lies'.

Light and McGrath (2010) consider the ethical responsibilities of Facebook users, designers and the technology itself, finding further blurring of boundaries. These include Facebook's bundling of changes of settings, so that users can be unaware of, or have to manage simultaneously, several different settings related to privacy and visibility. The nature of the registration process is itself potentially misleading: 'users may provide a good deal of personal data about themselves before they understand the consequences of their actions' (p.301). The researchers do not accuse Facebook designers of malign intent, but draw attention to the default settings for the sharing of information which was the primary purpose for the establishment of the network. The registration process permits the setting up of false profiles which again is not necessarily negative in connotation, for the creation of fictions is part of play – but the software 'has the potential to provide cover so that users can engage in cyberstalking and identity theft' (p.303). Such theft might include the digital manipulation of photographs, and whilst none of the young people I interviewed mentioned this, the prevalence of pictures and photographs on their sites makes them vulnerable. They were unaware that they might be part of a ranking mechanism, and susceptible to the Facebook 'story' that the more links you have, the more pleasurable your world. By inviting friends, relations, acquaintances, the friends of friends and strangers into one virtual room, participants lay themselves open to influences only a few of which they perceive. The hopeful naivety of some is suggested by their search for references to themselves in other people's posts. Clicking the 'Like' button is easy.

The merging of the personal and professional, the shared private and the shared public, is exemplified by Art's issue of the blurred boundary between 'school' and 'not-school'. For the school, this presents a moral dilemma, but others, such as Facebook, look for commercial benefits. Mark Andrejevic (Andrejevic, 2011), explores ways in which employers might utilise an individual's social network. The larger the personal network, the more valuable: 'Potential employees with large online social networks might be viewed as preferable hires because of the resources for viral marketing they bring to their company.' The possibility is troubling: 'An extended social network might

come to function not just as a form of online social capital, but also as an online economic capital' (p.84). One of the dangers is that 'the very notion of what constitutes a "quality" friendship becomes colonized by the promise of economic return-on-investment.' This, for Andrejevic, is a 'dystopian scenario' (p.85). He suggests that if the employee refuses to share his or her capital, this might be construed as a withdrawal of labour, or a failure to work full-bloodedly for the company. It represents, in his view, a real threat; potential employees might have to agree to a form of 'commercial surveillance' as a condition of employment: 'A contemporary process of virtual enclosure of the commons of social life' (p.85). Again, his research suggests that young users of Facebook have no sense of how readily they might be exploited. Their circle of 'friends' may become another manipulative tool in the hands of commerce. What they conceive to be their private world is already a target for the market, since the vast amount of data held by Facebook is subjected to sophisticated analysis.

Problems already exist. A report in *The Independent* (O'Brien, 2012) tells of a man demoted by his employer for an opinion posted privately on Facebook. The High Court found in his favour because his personal views were never intended for public display. The increasing number of such cases, however, shows that as a society we are unsure of the boundary between private and public in social media. We feel entitled to question anyone in public life about what they might deem to be private matters, without agreeing on who is a 'public' figure. Moreover, social networks make it easy to organise petitions or collective events. Marie organised rehearsals; the riots of August 2011 in the UK owed much to virtual word-of-mouth. Some young people are led into actions they regret because of this ease. Anyone signing-up to a public network can be identified; and as young people told me, employers are able to track activities, perhaps when deciding whether or not to offer employment:

I think I started out with just anybody [seeing my page] but as I've got older, because I've had it for a couple of years, I've realised it could be more of a problem ... work colleagues, bosses seeing it.(Anna)

Her collecting of friends for personal enjoyment, seen as a private matter, is 'a problem' unless she changes settings. But the idea that individuals with large numbers of friends might be sources of profit is not grasped. The content of the personal social network, however explosive, might be less important than its size to an employer with a specific aim in view. Anna has no sense that her private life could be so exploited.

### *Self-actualisation in a virtual world*

Not everyone is troubled by the moral and legal dilemmas discussed so far. Douglas Rushkoff proposes in *Children of Chaos* (Rushkoff, 1997) that the complexity of media inputs is analogous to Chaos Theory and the concept of fractals. He suggests that young people are at ease with ‘chaos’ and adults should learn from them, allowing new theoretical concepts to evolve that are as radically useful as Chaos Theory:

A screenager creates his own identity, based as much in what he points to with the links on his home page as anything he may have to say by himself. Constructing one’s page is delivering oneself, as he chooses to be known, to society at large ... this is the self-birth of the children of chaos. (p.239)

Rushkoff writes prior to the widespread use of Facebook and its multiplying links; and his optimistic use of ‘self-birth’, which is analogous to ‘self-actualisation’, is not supported by neuroscientists for whom sensory information is essential in the construction of identity. Steven Johnson (Johnson, 2005) uses the experience of being wired up to a biofeedback machine to articulate his understanding of the brain at work. He discovers the brain’s capacity for self-deception: ‘The more you learn about the brain’s architecture, the more you recognise that what happens in your head is more like an orchestra than a soloist’ (p.6). Biofeedback helps identify both the many lines of music and misdirection:

When you hear [a] stress-inducing sentence, two reactions go off in your head: your language centers [sic] and working memory decode the meaning ... and a subcortical system triggers the stress response ... You think of something as stressful and just as quickly forget about it. The prefrontal lobes can move that fast. But your emotional systems lag behind ... And so the feeling stays alive in you. The question is: for that moment of disconnect, what exactly is in charge here? Your frontal lobes or your limbic system. And which one should you trust? (p.8)

Johnson is an experienced adult, confidently taking part in an experiment to track his own thinking processes, understanding how easily the brain is deceived. For young people such sophisticated self-awareness is yet to be achieved. The young people I interviewed are torn between willingness to entrust sensitive information to their Facebook pages, and anxiety about potential abuse. Some take care with what they write in case others are unkind; others write spontaneously and the layout of a Facebook page invites the user to post. But an inadvertent keystroke may instantly upload material that the writer is still considering (including, perhaps, hitting the ‘Join’ button). Young people certainly see highly unpleasant material they would not expect in a face-to-face context, written by those who – as Johnson’s work implies – make no effort to censor or

discipline what they say. Johnson sees that we need self-management to regulate emotional surges that are ‘alive’ but should be restrained. In the physical world, we gain direct ‘bio’ or ‘neural’ feedback, helping us decide how to respond instead of being influenced by forces we ‘forget’ or do not discern. In an online forum or social network, the potential for abuse and mistrust is heightened.

Susan Greenfield agrees with Johnson on the significance of sensory feedback. In *Tomorrow's People* (Greenfield, 2003) she writes: ‘Up until this current moment ... we will always have had a sense of identity: most of us adult human beings feel our individuality very keenly most of the time’ (p.247). This historic sense of self has involved separation of self from other, involving sensory as well as cognitive processes. The trend Greenfield sees today is one where what the brain observes, to which it attaches meaning, is increasingly detached from the physical world that our brains are wired to comprehend. We are in danger of living in ‘non-self-conscious well-being, as though perpetually lying in the sun half asleep after a glass or two of wine.’ This state she likens to ‘the “booming, buzzing confusion” of the infant brain,’ a ‘sensory oblivion, stripped of all cognitive content and bereft of self-consciousness,’ which could damage those who spend too long online: ‘By incessantly stimulating neuronal connections into certain highly constrained configurations, the new technologies might jeopardize the very existence of human nature, permanently’ (p.259).

The young mind, Greenfield fears, is in danger of spending its formative years in a fantasy detached from the world of the senses. Young people infer this too: ‘It’s not unreality world but almost is’ (Anna). The experience is almost threatening: ‘There was jealousy ... looking at what everyone else was doing and feeling that pain of, I wish I was doing that ... things that everyone else is doing, even though it could be fake.’ Eva is compelled to cope with a jealousy she knows may be falsely aroused.

Jodi Dean speaks frankly of how reading about activities instead of participating in them encourages fantasy: ‘*I could have had more; I could have really enjoyed*’ (p.78). She laments the loss of ‘real’ experience, frankly describing the ‘sensory oblivion’ that Greenfield suggests:

With multiply convergent and turbulent media, I don’t have to settle on any one direction or theme. I can live in the momentary. Not only do these multiple, circulating impulses incite in me a kind of permanent indecision or postponement, a lack of commitment – *what else is out there?* – but the fragmenting, networking, thrust of drive turns my particular body, my very face, into a montage: a wrinkle

here, a bump there, a nose too large, lips too small. Fortunately, I can update my photo at any time – and I can animate it too! There is no us. There is no me – (although I can google myself to see if I turn up) (p.73).

Dean describes feelings similar to those some young people experience, when they update a profile photo, or engage in multiple conversations, or acknowledge that the hours they spend online are displacing other, probably more important real-world activities. When she says that there is ‘no us’ she touches the disturbing fact that for many young people their social network is uncomfortably vague: ‘You don’t know that it’s come from that actual person or not’ (Sue). ‘When you’re friends with people you don’t know ... you can come to harm’ (Anna). ‘When it’s on Facebook if I get a message or a text then I don’t know what the person – how the person is feeling’ (Kate). Such uncertainties proliferate in young people’s commentaries. For Dean, the very sense of self is at risk. In 1909 E.M Forster visualised a virtual world, in *The Machine Stops*. People have forgotten what it is to touch each other; they do not step outside to see the stars. The woman at the centre of Forster’s story is ‘a swaddled lump of flesh.’ Forster writes powerfully of ‘the centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we alone can apprehend – glozing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap.’

What might have seemed Luddite idealism on Forster’s part strongly correlates with what I heard: when you lose yourself in virtual space, you easily forget the real world and its consequences. Melanie says, ‘What you say about the real world, I don’t think that gets much attention really.’ The social network gives an illusion of bounded, safe space but is behaviour within it is often masked, for whatever motives. Melanie now takes great care with how she speaks in that real world.

Greenfield suggests that this loss of individual identity within a swaddle of sensation that keeps the brain dozing, is matched by what she calls ‘collective identity’ – another form of immersion in which individuals locate themselves within a larger drama. She cites the power of groupthink: football crowds on the rampage, the crowds at Nuremberg rallies, Golding’s schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. Their collective action is driven by a set of shared values, usually framed by a narrative: ‘There are slogans, an unseen enemy and an abstract cause’ (p.260). Greenfield reminds us that the Nazi party’s ideals were founded on their ‘romance of Nordic gods and idea of themselves as descendants of the inhabitants of Atlantis’ (p.260). This is not loss of identity but the

‘overemphasis of identity ... one that is collective, a kind of ego that is not private but public’ (p.261), signalling a major shift of social purpose:

I think there are today, increasingly, different groups in which individuals are sublimating their private sense of identity to a public one – from the temporary collective public identity that arose in Britain at the funeral of the Princess of Wales through football fanaticism to cults and the extreme single-mindedness, literally, of Al Qaeda. (pp.261-262)

The notion of virtual ‘collective identity’ offers an explanation of how youths from educated homes become part of the gang that kills; why young people abuse strangers online; conduct online arguments that have little or no foothold in the real world; build vast ‘friend’ communities. They are taken up by a story, forgetting the authenticity of the sensory self. The sublimation of individual in collective identity is deeply satisfying when in a theatre or concert audience. or supporting your team (or joining a riot). But whereas physical feedback makes you aware of the crowd – and sustains self-awareness, too - conscious immersion in a collective virtual identity is like being swept along by a fiction without the sense of ending that a work of art provides. The experience is more akin to day-dreaming or unbounded fantasising. Even mature minds can lose themselves, as Dean suggests.

For the young people in my sample, the notion of conscious collective identity would be troubling. Those joining an online game do not feel personally committed, despite their emotional investment: ‘You’re going online to play the game, but you don’t want people to know it’s you doing it, do you? [*Why don’t you?*] Well, I don’t really know, to be honest’ (Duncan). Duncan has a strongly-held sense of his own identity, and intends to keep aloof. For others, the Facebook community is diffuse: ‘It’s a community in the sense that everyone’s got the same agenda, they want to meet but I don’t think there’s a community spirit in there, it’s too big’ (Eva). The ‘shared value’ Facebook communities they are most likely to encounter are hate pages or petitions. They already struggle with emotional uproar when statements aimed at one selection of ‘friends’ are posted to all, and their communities get out of hand:

Like slagging off family, or if your friends have written something on the wall and they don’t want family to see and they’re not happy with it ... Like things that happen at parties, things like that. (Ellie)

Eva and Ellie must work out how to maintain their own moral code at the same time as coping with the consequences of family or real friends being virtual witness to behaviour they do not approve, do not mean to share. If family and friends see



unpleasant material posted on your page, they may assume you have invited it, although actually you have, perhaps naively, allowed through your boundary walls people whose values you do not consent to.

One reason for the spread of collective online action is probably the speed and spontaneity with which people are able to react. Quick thinking is usually admired, but ‘speed’ in itself has ambivalent value. As a new headteacher I was given *Future Shock*, by Alvin Toffler (Toffler, 1971). The central tenet of the book, anticipating the research findings of neuroscientists, is that the rate of technological innovation is at odds with our biological nature:

There are discoverable limits to the amount of change that the human organism can absorb, and ... by endlessly accelerating change without first determining these limits, we may submit masses of men to demands they simply cannot tolerate ...  
Future shock is the human response to overstimulation. (p.297)

Toffler’s concept of ‘overstimulation’ is close to Greenfield’s flood of unlimited ‘sensory input’: so much, so quickly, that the brain gives up attempting to make sense, allowing sensation to overwhelm its capacity to evaluate and decide. There is no space in which to think about feeling; no biofeedback alert. In *The Shallows*, (Carr, 2010) Nicholas Carr describes the neurological changes that occur in the brains of those who spend a great deal of time online:

Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don’t fire together don’t wire together. As the time we spend scanning Web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, ... as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives but lose old ones. (p.120)

Carr’s book sounds a warning for adults whose intellectual habits have been changed by the advent of the internet. Young people, whose brains are still developing, are gaining ever more impressive speed of reaction but little capacity for reflection. He cites a psychotherapist: ‘Today’s teenagers typically send or receive a message every few minutes throughout their waking hours ... If they stop sending messages, they risk becoming invisible’(p.118). The need voiced by the young people I met, to stay online, or attached to their mobile phones, confirms Carr’s observation. The drive to stay in touch seems unassailable; and every communication carries with it an emotional charge.

The games-players seem more able to separate the activity from the aroused emotions because the game is their focus, and paces their responses, too. On Facebook, for many, the game is 'emotion' itself, and whilst skilled adults (and some young people) make space to reflect on their emotional states, others cannot differentiate between emotions aroused in the virtual and real worlds. They are almost literally unable to switch off. Bruce Irvine (Irvine, 2005) defines why boundaries are essential for young people still in formation. The boundary is provided by an adult who acts as a 'container':

The process requires adults to create a space for thinking between feeling and acting. In many situations, young people are moving very quickly from feeling to acting without thinking about what is happening ... The capacity to pause and think about what to do next in psychological terms is the process of metabolizing the projections, processing them. (p. 62)

This vital capacity is experienced when reliable feedback is given and gained between young person and adult. Irvine's comment refers to face-to-face relationships. Facebook, however, not only intensifies the speed of response, but being a virtual domain, offers no structures for 'metabolizing projections.' There is no potential on Facebook for adults to act in the way Irvine describes, where the young person is compelled to 'pause and think' or try to understand real-time, face-to-face realities.

The drive to find friends is particularly strong in adolescence. In the era of letter-writing, people who did not meet formed friendships slowly, by corresponding. One famous twentieth-century example is documented in *84, Charing Cross Road* - twenty years' worth of letters between Helene Hanff in New York and Frank Doel, antiquarian bookseller in London. The conventions for letter-writing have accrued over centuries, are generally agreed. Moreover, the process of letter-writing is time-consuming. The writer must select a voice, a vocabulary, a sense of audience, put pen to paper in what text-messengers perceive to be a cumbersome code.

The sense of audience is well-catered for in online contexts where the boundaries are clear: for instance, monitored forums are moderated, to ensure that inappropriate comments are not made public. But as there are no generally agreed social protocols for interacting in a social network, users are left to the devices that the software permits – and, as we have seen, the software confuses even experienced adults. Where its main purpose is to facilitate unbounded relationship, users have only their personal resources to call on, whereas friends milling around in a shared physical space have a host of

physical cues to help them. ‘If you do it to their face there’s going to be other people around who will stop you’ (Kate).

The young people I listened to try to establish for themselves some kind of etiquette. They are acutely conscious of choosing the right words and tone. Sometimes, though, they see chosen tone that is more akin to poison pen than friendly letter; and they are always worried about the blurred private/public boundary: ‘When you’re online you have it typed there, everything they’ve just said, and that can quite easily be made visible to the whole world’ (Melanie). Time spent online by adolescents who are not yet fully formed seems to generate (re)wiring of the brain that is scant on reliable sensory feedback as well as deprived of unhurried reflection. Brain rewiring is extraordinary: we can, for instance, learn to overcome the fear of flying, but this must be confirmed by taking a real flight. There is no substitute for sensory experience.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Virtual behaviour, real outcomes***

Some adults argue strongly that their lives have been completely transformed by online experience. Davey Winder describes how he was effectively rescued from the disaster of viral encephalitis in his mid-twenties (Winder, 2008) which left him almost completely paralysed, with a devastating personality change. Finding an early online community, he gradually rebuilt his persona, modelling his physical self on his *Second Life* avatar:

In the virtual world you have the chance to impact upon and nurture the very real lives of others regardless of race, culture or location. Perhaps, more importantly, in the virtual world you have the divine power to create life, your life, and mould it into pretty much anything you please. (p.ix)

Winder assumes a separation of real spirit and unimportant body; virtual voice in virtual body can express pure truth. This allows him to feel godlike, with creative authority. He suggests that life online offers teenagers a wonderful chance to try out different personae. They can gauge reactions and, if things go wrong, delete the persona without trauma. He quotes Sarah, a teenager who claims that the freedom of life online permits her to be more honest, truthful and insulting than in real life: ‘My online identity allowed me to explore more boundaries and test what I could and couldn’t do in social

<sup>2</sup> I ask my 11 year-old-grandson about the physical sensation of playing darts with a Wii. Being an avid real footballer, he knows the difference between performance that is virtual and what would be needed if he wanted to play darts for real.

situations' (p.18). Others might construe her actions as cyberbullying; and only Marie, of the people I interviewed, says that she consciously plays 'persona' games:

I don't go around saying I'm married to my best friend who's a girl, but on Facebook we're married. And I have a daughter, a Facebook daughter, so it allows you to be a bit more flippant. (Marie)

Few of those I interviewed express this degree of confidence or seem so close to Winder's attitude to the online persona. Even so, Marie will not voice aloud that she is married to a girl. This is a Facebook game, not intended for real-life recognition.

For Winder, virtual interactions are liberating: 'This was the only place I could truly experience life, freed from the physical and cultural bondage of my disability' (p.9). I asked Andrew how he would feel if he discovered that someone he was talking to online was disabled; his response confirms Winder's concerns: 'I wouldn't say it was necessarily dishonest to do that. I would say it was not fair because people were getting to know a person who wasn't really there.' He cannot rid himself of the sense that he will have been told a lie. Winder wants to be accepted regardless of his disability and asserts the right to create an identity that is not disabled. He calls on the experiences of fellow survivors. Daisy lived through long-term childhood sexual abuse and says, 'I frequently feel that my real life identity is a façade, and my Internet identity is truer to who I really am' (p.25). Daisy met her long-term partner online. Greg, who has peripheral vision, felt anonymous and shadowy in the real world, but gained fame for his wealth-creation in a virtual world, which has given him the real-life sense that he is now 'someone who lives rather than just exists'(p.53).

Winder's belief that he could 'truly experience life' online begs a question about the nature of what is real. His account shows the power of imagination in transforming his will to live, his creativity in the face of catastrophic physical collapse. Whilst cyberspace provides an exciting playground for inventing personae, Winder's life-change is not achieved purely online. His cries of distress bring people physically to his door - he gives his address to online friends - and his virtual embodiment becomes a real, physical change. Many adults disabled in mind or body achieve similar transformations without using a virtual avatar.

Winder's largely positive view of Facebook is rooted in his conviction that he is truly himself online:

The friend-of-a-friend concept is particularly attractive because it appeals to our almost universal desire to know and be known ... Nobody seems to question the true value of Facebook friendships either. Many people treat social networking as some sort of game. They are on a quest to collect friends, the prize for getting 350 mates being to feel better than you did when you only had 349 (p.135)

However, whilst Winder writes of the overwhelming longing to be known, 'I don't know' or 'you don't know' are phrases repeated many times in my interviews as young people question 'the true value of Facebook friendships;' and the Facebook 'game' incites the emotional intensity felt at football matches. He does not mention the possible commercial exploitation of a 'friends' network, although he recognises the problematic boundary between real and virtual:

Being able to filter fact from fiction, wheat from chaff, reality from fantasy will become ever more vital as we turn to the web as some kind of twenty-first century oracle. (p.229)

He sees the potential for abuse: 'Kids must grasp the nettle and realise that virtual life and real life intersect in so many ways' (p.188). This warning is well-founded. As a society we are still slow in grasping how easily, for 'kids', the virtual may seem indistinguishable from the real. We are familiar with the idea of small children frightened by a Grimm fairy tale, but tend to overlook how cyberspace works just as effectively on the imagination. Paedophile fantasists do not. A recent report in *The Independent* (Peck, 2013) highlighted new research from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP):

Ceop's chief executive, Peter Davies, said: "On a daily basis we see the devastation caused to young people's lives by online grooming." For a growing number of paedophiles, he said, online abuse was "an end in itself".

Abuse in the mind is as emotionally devastating as emotion aroused in any other way. In Art's school, a serious attempt is made to define the boundary. Here, at least, young people discover the real-world outcomes of online fantasies, and the school is behaving, in Irvine's terms, as 'a container:'

A lot of what they do on Facebook is covered within existing legislation, like making malicious allegations... Every Monday morning we're picking up Facebook incidents, so they're saying we're going to get the local PCSO [Police Community support Officer] to come and talk about this and get them to understand, "You're breaking the law, your action could lead you to court."

School staff attempt to connect the two worlds, establishing that for legal purposes the school, and pupils' Facebook pages, are within the same boundary, even if it is virtual. Virtual behaviour has real-world consequences.

Much of the early analysis of life online came from research into behaviour on Multi-User Domains (MUDs). These seem safe virtual structures, where personal identity is protected. Large claims have been made (similar to Winder's) about the benefits of selecting a new identity online. Sherry Turkle (1997) describes how virtual gender-swapping challenges preconceptions:

To pass as a woman for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience. Women attempting to pass as men face the same kind of challenge. (p.212)

This is 'an opportunity to explore conflicts raised by one's biological gender.' The MUD offers a framework for 'reflecting on the social construction of gender' (p.213). One gender-swapper discovers 'if you are assertive as a man, it is coded as "being a bastard." If you are assertive as a woman, it is coded as "modern and together"' (p.219). Behaviour in real life is affected by online experience – both the challenge of behaving as the other gender, and also the gaining of insight into other people's gender assumptions. In effect, empathy is replaced (or generated) by taking part in a virtual drama, much as Winder claims. Turkle has become more sceptical, however, about transformation through online role-play. Her felt female experience differs from what a male-gender-swapper thinks a woman feels: 'To a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential based on a physicality that we each experience differently' (p.238). Young and Whitty (2011) comment on 'the issue of experiential authenticity, and with it the transcendent authenticity of different phenomenal selves experienced within different domains' (p.550). Their paper explores how far the virtual identity is authentic, how far idealised, whether or not this self (or these selves) is transferrable into offline experience. Their work cites how paralysed children are able to play virtual games, or how online daters create idealised persona to attract attention – examples which seem positive – but believe that 'at the psychological level there is a need to transcend worlds and seek parity and unity' (p.547). They warn that over-reliance on virtual practice of real skills, such as training athletes, potentially encourages users to misread the real physical context in which they must finally act.

The importance of biofeedback is discussed by Turkle. Young people strongly need to feel their own distinctness, their own reality: 'a time of conscious self-creation: adolescents "try on" ideas about politics, religion and psychology to test and develop emergent ideas of self' (p. 138). But the context in which that evolving self might be tried out is sometimes seen by young people as disabling:

I think on Facebook a lot of people don't really have the confidence to say what they would in the real world because they think, oh gosh, people could comment on what I'm saying kind of thing. (Melanie)

Melanie fears that every online statement is likely to attract comment from the unseen audience. This stops Facebook users from speaking the truth as they would face-to-face, where they can gauge reactions by non-verbal cues and so build their conversation. Young and Whitty confirm the dangers for those who try to be more in a virtual environment than they are in reality:

If the virtual self-as object is merely a digital representation of certain idealised standards of attractiveness and desirability within a given community, then there is a danger that this will lead ... ultimately to the marginalisation of one's offline body-image. (p.545)

Shy young people, inhibited in daily life but initially liberated on Facebook, are recognised online, and silenced anew, perhaps more powerfully than before. Eva reports how inventing a false persona for herself on Bebo, as a fourteen-year-old, was unsustainable: 'I was very much trying to put like – like a different persona of me on there, I'll admit.' She hoped to make connections with others who seemed more glamorous than she. It was unsustainable, and she started afresh on Facebook, protecting her self-image by giving away much less, avoiding the sense that she was being marginalised.

Role-play, properly understood, is liberating; a space is made between the 'true' self and the role, and person-in-role undertakes specific actions, within a context, having a purpose. Many professionals, whose daily lives entail making relationships with others, can be clear about their roles and how to behave once they understand the context and the purpose of those relationships. Most young people, however, do not speak of role-play in a social network. They speak of 'persona' and 'mask', the drive to hide: 'With the persona you're putting on ...' (Eva); 'You know it's all just an act, you know that some people go on the internet, have their own personality' (Marie). The 'act' is unscripted, improvised, capable of arousing unforeseen emotions, even for gamers:

People ... just enjoy that they can ruin other people's stuff and make them angry and it just stirs everything up. And obviously people who are actually trying to play the game hate those people but it can get really tense and angry. (Luke)

Luke is safeguarded by the game that gives him a role where he must manage his emotions if he wants to improve as a player. At the time he is not a Facebook user, and this may be why he can take a detached and sophisticated view of how other behave:

Well yes, about this individuality thing, it is possible to mimic other people so you have a kind of virtual acting going on and sometimes you can do it quite successfully and make others believe because you are not restricted to the way you look.

‘Virtual acting’ occurs where personal identity is well-shrouded in the game, and roles can be mimicked. Luke’s self-knowledge – like Eva’s – depends on the separation of personal identity from online role. Facebook, however, encourages the posting of highly personal confidences:

He didn’t have to see me face-to-face, he hardly knows me, he’s a friend of an acquaintance ... so he can tell me things and it won’t really affect him very much because he hardly sees me and I hardly see him. (Marie)

The young man sharing crucial issues with Marie is fortunate, for she takes his confidences seriously. She assumes that nothing confidential will leak from her Facebook page. But the assumption that ‘it won’t really affect him’ is ingenuous; online exchanges between real-life strangers can generate emotional bonfires. ‘Self-actualisation’ as constructed by Maslow depends on a prior experience of mature friendship, in itself built upon secure physical reality. Marie’s confidence stems from her seeing a continuum between virtual and real behaviour on Facebook:

The people who have acts on Facebook and the internet the act never really ends. Even when you see them you know they’re acting in a certain kind of way. You can see right through it. It just happens that on Facebook and the internet it enlarges it.

Marie is usually able to meet face-to-face the Facebook actors with whom she has her many online conversations. She detects unconvincing role-play because she plays the Facebook game. For her, it is a social tool and not an escape into alternative reality. Nonetheless, her sense of identity in the ‘real’ world will have been affected by how she interacts with others online, because of the emotional arousal involved.

Managing emotional states is one of the most significant challenges for the ‘emergent self’ and never more so than where there is confusion about what prompts strong feelings. In Turkle’s first book (1984) she sees a possible expansion of identity through working with computers: ‘[The] question is not what will the computer be like in the future, but, instead, what will we be like? What kind of people are we becoming?’ (p.13) Narcissus’s story exemplifies her point:

Narcissus saw his image in the water and fell to his death because of his desire to touch it, to be closer to its beauty. But there is another way to understand the story.



Narcissus fell in love with what appeared to him to be another. This image of that other person fascinated him because it objectified a sense of beauty of which he had felt only a vague inner sense. (p.155)

At this time, she believed that the interaction between virtual and real would be enriching. Narcissus saw an idealised possibility of self that he wanted to explore because it offered insight that the real world could only hint at. That image of a different virtual self is examined by Nusselder (Nusselder, 2009):

Just as the early humans painted up their other Self on the walls of their caves, and thereby opened up and created their world, modern humans ‘paint’ or design their virtual Self on or with the interface of computer technologies. (p.6)

Nusselder believes that we all develop avatars online, even in emails and blogs: ‘Fantasy is not merely a duplication of the real but also an inevitable formation of it. The human Self exists in a world of reflections’ (p.7). For him, ‘self-actualizing’ is a continuous and unavoidable process for the virtual subject, ‘the I to be found nowhere in reality’ (p.8). Gazing at the computer screen gives the subject a Narcissus experience (as reinterpreted by Turkle).

Interactivity [online] ... makes it hard to maintain a strict distinction between fiction and reality. Actually (inter)acting in a virtual world ... makes my (speech) acts no less fictitious than when I score a goal in a soccer game.’ (p.118)

We are alive online, moving fluidly between different realities, sharing experience with virtual others so that our virtual speech becomes as real as anything we physically say to one another. But this is the very issue that troubles young people. I observe small children playing who have no difficulty in being simultaneously a pirate and a six-year-old picking up clothes, stepping effortlessly from one role to another. Managing the emotional shift can be extremely taxing, however, for child and supervising adult alike. Schroeder and Matheson (2006) remind us that ‘known fictional stimuli entrain neural consequences similar to non-fictional stimuli’ (p.28). In short, the fear and drama are emotionally real, whatever their source. Nusselder aligns the ‘other Self’ with cave paintings because he believes that ‘the virtual world’ provides a new medium through which to enhance experience. But the fable of Narcissus offers a warning of more than the danger of self-love. Small children engage in endless imaginary play, trying out new kinds of self. When they have to be plucked screaming, rather than reluctant, from play it confirms their accepted immaturity. They are still learning. But if they take the play self for a viable real alternative, their emotional stability is at risk.

The role of the adult is to provide a safe container for rage and frustration, allowing the child to name and manage the emotions. Nusselder comments on the problem of maintaining 'a strict distinction' between the real and the virtual; and Eva's experience endorses how hard this is for adolescents coping with virtual stimuli: 'I've seen it in friends, photographs torn apart in front of them, can't delete the comments.' A friend arrives on Eva's doorstep, hysterically challenging her about an email that has been badly misunderstood; but at least she can meet Eva in the flesh to find the truth. Eva and her friend have created the boundary for themselves.

Laura Robinson (2007) considers the analysis provided by symbolic interaction to see how this illuminates the ways in which virtual and real selves relate:

Our sense of self is really our perception of society's evaluation of us ... The concept of the looking-glass self is based on a threefold process. First, the self imagines how it appears to others. Second, the self then imagines the other's judgement. Finally, the self develops an emotional response to that judgement. (p.95)

The 'self-ing project' suggests a self perpetually renegotiated in changing contexts, all of them imagined or conceptual, and requires a high degree of self-awareness. Unlike Nusselder, or Young and Whitty, Robinson suggests that the virtual looking-glass self does not enhance the real with the virtual, but mirrors it:

I find that in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspect of their offline selves. Rather, users bring into being bodies, personas and personalities framed in accordance with the same categories as exist in the offline world ... the cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self. Online, the 'I' and the 'me' still inform each other. (p.94)

In the real world the sense of self cannot exist without interaction. The same, Robinson finds, holds true for the virtual world. Online, a 'cyberperformer' takes the stage, as 'cyberme' awaits response from 'cyberother':

For the performance to be successful the cyberperformer must become literate in terms of site or community language, as well as implicit and explicit shared values. (p.106)

This makes clear the successful player's position on an identifiable, if virtual, stage, with an audience having shared, explicit values. For Robinson, the virtual and the real are parallel, rather than interactive, worlds. She affirms the importance of a shared literacy, and values that are both explicit and implied – not the experience of the young Facebook users I met, who were unable to 'perform' with confidence that their audience ('cyberother') would respond appropriately. As a framework for understanding how real and virtual worlds relate, symbolic interaction demands a clarity of insight only

developed where the boundary between the two is obvious and community values are shared. The young people of my sample do not share values online. They make personal moral judgements about the truth of the projected image ('cyberme') or the emotional response from 'cyberother', using terms such as 'fake' or 'lies.' Anyone who constructs a different 'cyberme', to meet the imagined expectation of 'cyberother', is seen as 'bigging up'. They seek online responses that are as truthful as those in the real world, but must meet face-to-face to verify what they trust.

### ***Only connect***

Their need for trustworthy relationships is well-founded. Facebook claims that making connections is its purpose. Bruce Perry approves of 'connection' too: traumatised children are helped into mainstream society by contiguity rather than by instruction. However, he issues warnings about the quality of these connections:

If the developing child's world is chaotic, threatening, and devoid of kind words and supportive relationships, a child may become impulsive, aggressive, inattentive, and have difficulties with relationships. That child may require special educational services, mental health or even criminal justice intervention.

The accounts of online bullying given by some of the young people suggest that they must deal with emotional chaos and unsupportive relationships in the very arena that they expect to be populated by 'friends'. Perry's reference to 'criminal justice intervention' relates to the likelihood of traumatised children developing criminal behaviour; but the incident of killing at Waterloo Station referred to at the beginning of this chapter is a reminder that criminal behaviour may be prompted by online activity in young people from apparently secure environments. They have been seduced by the emotional dynamics of a virtual world. Perry provides a historical context for the power of such group dynamics (Perry, 2009):

The human experience is characterized by clan-on-clan, human-on-human competition for limited resources ... A recent study by Chiao and colleagues (2008), for example, showed that fear-related social cues from individuals from one's own group=ethnicity ... will induce greater amygdala activation than similar cues from individuals not in one's group. Similar group contagion of positive emotional states has been documented (e.g., Fowler & Christakis, 2008). (pp. 247-248)

Facebook facilitates 'group contagion' for young people, who describe the emotional turmoil stirred up by the intensified dynamic of the social network. Perry says that the 'clan' can be positive, and the Facebook page is meant to create a virtual clan. The constructive influence of the group was described by Wilfred Bion (1961), whose

successful treatment of traumatised soldiers in groups, rather than individually, created a framework for using the power of ‘group contagion’ that is in use today at both the Grubb and Tavistock Institutes:

No individual, however isolated in time and space, can be regarded as outside a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology ... A group is more than the sum of its members. (p.169)

He explores what happens when the group ‘begins to act on a basic assumption ... Action inevitably means contact with reality, and contact with reality compels regard for truth’ (pp.170, 171). Such contact is what helps the traumatised back to health. If the ‘action’ is virtual it will be far harder for those involved to differentiate between ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. Young people’s comments show that they do not wish to separate their virtual lives from their real lives, so when reality is troublesome – for instance, being held-to-account for signing a hate petition - they are baffled by their actions.

Irvine, working today in Bion’s tradition (Irvine, 2010), says that where people see themselves as merely part of a group they tend to struggle with ‘issues of identity’; where the group is considered as a system having a purpose they work at understanding their role in it, and how they contribute to the purpose. This opens ‘the opportunity to reveal where the boundaries-in-the-mind are being drawn and performed’ (p.176). It follows that young people who conflate several different communities into one Facebook page may well struggle to discover what their role is meant to be. Identity will be confused rather than enhanced unless they establish a clear purpose for the social network group. Some do. Simple examples I was given include using Facebook to organise play rehearsals or an evening out. In these situations, the individuals who instigate actions are acknowledged leaders, whose purpose and role are understood by the group of friends - who also know their roles. Other readers will have to discount the information. They are the eavesdroppers, or, as Turkle describes it in *Alone Together*, (2011) gatecrashers at a ‘virtual table’ in a cafeteria (p.182).

Otherwise, each person setting up a Facebook page is effectively a self-appointed leader. The group usually consists of several sub-sets of people who do not know one another, each sharing a different relationship and vocabulary with the leader, each also being a leader on a personal Facebook page. In the real world of the school playground or the street, young people recognise leadership, even if it is bullying, and know what they are expected to do. Deferring leadership to others is one of the hardest problems in adolescent interaction – another reason for the intervention, where possible, of the

overtly adult community. The school working with local police and its pupils on how to manage Facebook posts is drawing the 'boundary-in-the-mind' which provides a stabilising context. In a virtual environment, deciding who is in charge, or what the purpose of a series of posts may be, is often baffling.

Expecting a virtual community to provide the support of a real one is questioned by Turkle. In *Alone Together* she revises earlier views. Adolescents have lost time to think because 'technology, put in the service of always-on communication and telegraphic speed and brevity, has changed the rules of engagements ... And what of adolescents' need for secrets, for marking out what is theirs alone?' (p. 172). The mobile phone given by parents to children does not free the child, but tethers both.

There used to be a point for an urban child ... a first time to navigate the city alone. It was a rite of passage that communicated to children that they were on their own and responsible. If they were frightened, they had to experience those feelings. The cell phone buffers this moment. (p. 173)

To experience fear alone is like having a secret, or coping with the moment as it is. Parents naturally feel protective; but the adult must allow the child to face authentic feelings such as fear or panic so that the child can learn independence. Ironically, the true connection between parent and child is made where the parent sets the child free. The temptation of the technology is to mistake an online connection for a real one:

Online, we easily find "company" but are exhausted by the pressures of performance. We enjoy continual connection but rarely have each other's full attention ... We can work from home, but our work bleeds into our private lives until we can barely discern the boundaries between them. (p.280)

If adults struggle, how much harder it will be for adolescents to 'perform' all the time, or to learn how to attend fully to one another. Turkle concludes that 'we defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other' (p.281).

The holding power of the computer leads to a withdrawal of responsibility for exchanges with others. In *Alone Together* Turkle tells of a teenager who grumbles at his father's inability to listen to him, because he is concentrating on his Blackberry. 'A robot would remember everything I said. It might not understand everything, but remembering is a first step' (p. 294). The bright moment for Turkle is the young man's analysis of the situation. The young people in my sample are similarly perceptive. Eva, well aware that what she reads online is unreliable, feels disconnected: 'You can feel very lonely, specially reading all these things that everyone else is doing.' She knows

that true friendship cannot be made online: ‘I always think if you use Facebook all the time the friendship will fade.’

### *Power and authority in Cyberspace*

Ironically, at a time when parents increasingly want to protect (ie control) young people, cyberspace provides an arena where they are able not only to evade but to assert their equality with adults. Danah Boyd (Boyd, 2007) analyses teenagers’ use of MySpace in the USA, where the ambiguous attitude of parents to young people resonates with the situation in the UK:

[Young people] are simultaneously idealized and demonized; adults fear them but they also seek to protect them ... Many adults believe that... restrictions are necessary to prevent problematic behaviors [sic] or to protect children from the risks of society. Whether or not that view is valid, restrictions on access to public life make it difficult for young people to be socialized into society at large. (p. 19)

Protective parents confine their children to keep them safe, infantilising them. Irvine believes that truthful interaction between adult and child is essential for the child to grow. Young people should be able to try out real leadership, within an emotional boundary that allows for strong emotion to be metabolised. If such opportunities are curtailed, because parents are afraid, young people will seek alternatives, hiding their online activity from parents. In this shared space they feel able to construct identities that may be at odds with parental hopes. In doing so, they reflect a natural human urge, not simply adolescent desire; but their actions are ‘uncontained’: power, not authority.

Those I interviewed do not mention the potential for forming alliances to influence social policy (unlike Queer Youth Net members). They are preoccupied with the connection itself. Indeed, the group functions so powerfully that they fear being left out: ‘If you’re not on Facebook you’ve missed out.’ For Ellie, Facebook creates ‘hassle, but once you’ve started you can’t stop.’ Hassle arises from trying to cope with others who adopt deceptive personae. She reacts strongly: ‘Some things you know straight away when you read them that, this isn’t true, why are you doing this to yourself, why are you lying to everyone?’ She is perpetually engaged in the improvised drama rather than in reflection or serious debate. The capacity to reflect in most of those I interviewed was striking; but their online space is not where they use this ability – or they did not tell me so. The social network keeps Ellie away from her real world,

weaving itself through the fabric of her daily life; while she sees that others confuse fantasy and reality, she is not freed by the perception.

Membership of a group that meets face-to-face entails the sharing of sensory experiences and the making of real memories, as powerful as those in the minds of London taxi drivers. When we leave a theatre after watching a play we do not expect to be moved to action based on the emotions aroused. We hope for ‘catharsis’ or ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’: transformational experiences where the discipline of the medium is both frame and content. We love the aesthetics of the cave paintings, their texture and colour; the form itself acts as a filter of all the stimuli the brain receives. We manage the reality of the emotion within the context of the work of art.

There are forms online which also act as filters. Face-to-face, debaters are expected to demonstrate intellectual dexterity by instant responses and taking time to think is often pilloried as weakness. *Uncanny Networks* (Lovink, 2004), however, contains managed online interviews with media specialists using the potential of the virtual to release themselves from the tyranny of the instant. One debate, for example, examines the proliferation of theories scattered online:

*As a newcomer, what do you think of Internet criticism and media theory, all the work that is done outside of academia?*

I like the fluctuating bits, where theory loses its authority, deauthorizes itself and starts to become a babelogue. (p.358)

The experienced intellectual plays with the idea of a return to Babel which may or may not be a spontaneous observation; his questioner has time to review and respond. Campbell (2007) investigates how a specific closed community generates political argument within its secure boundary. School and university teachers use sites such as Blackboard to share knowledge in the hope of generating more. Many of the websites I consulted about gender are structured and moderated to facilitate discussion.

But social networks focussed on instant emotional connectedness drive some people apart – a new Babel. Potentially damaging effects are analysed by John Suler in (2006), adults also being at risk, given the brain’s propensity to rewire itself. Suler does not assume the online revelation of a ‘true’ self but ‘a collection of slightly different constellations of affect, memory, and thought that surface in and interact with different types of online environments’ (p.325).

The headlines of what Suler calls *The Online Disinhibition Effect* are quoted and simplified (Ramdhoney, 2012) on a website for parents about the potentially damaging effects of time spent excessively online.

You Don't Know Me (dissociative anonymity)  
You Can't See Me (invisibility)  
See You Later (asynchronicity)  
It's All In My Head (solipsistic introjection)  
It's Just A Game (dissociative imagination)  
We're Equals (minimising authority).

This analysis encapsulates what I heard from young people. Rushkoff believes that the children of Chaos will thrive, but social networks have not as yet produced a popular discipline with the conceptual power of chaos theory. The 'children of Chaos' use the moral compass of their daily lives to steer by.

Fiction offers another discipline. In *Diamond Age* (Stephenson, 1996) Neal Stephenson imagines a future where girls have lost the drive developed historically by feminists. A girl is given a sophisticated interactive *Primer* by her grandfather who wants her to learn that vanished sense of female purpose. The book tells stories that interact disconcertingly with her real life. When her mother's vicious boyfriend throws the *Primer* at her, Nell begins to see what it can do:

The book fell to the floor at her feet, open to an illustrated page.  
The picture was of a big dark man and a little girl in a cluttered room, and the man angrily flinging a book at the little girl's head.  
"Once upon a time there was a little girl named Cunt," the book said.  
"My name is Nell," Nell said.  
A tiny disturbance propagated through the grid of letters on the facing page.  
(p.94)

When the book next speaks, she is correctly named. Later, her education more advanced, she complains that the *Primer* has misled her, to which a wise man says:

"I think it is not likely to be the only instance in which real life turns out to be more complicated than what you have seen in the book ... All it amounts to is that you must be ready to learn from more sources than your magic book."  
"But of what use is the book, then?"  
"I suspect it is very useful. You want only the knack of translating its lessons into the real world." (pp. 281-282)

These words do not reflect the complexity of the way in which the entwined fictions of the *Primer* and the novel unfold; Nell is strengthened by the interactions the *Primer* creates with her 'real' world. The final page of the *Primer* reads, 'she was alone only by her own choice' (p.466). She is released from its story and must act alone.



The *Primer* is the kind of transformative mirror that Nusselder sees in virtual reality, or Irvine calls a container. Its identification within *The Diamond Age* as a book, albeit interactive, makes it safe for Nell. Kate says, 'When you read a book it's really in context, you know what all the key book characters are thinking, but when it's on Facebook if I get a message or a text then I don't know what ...' Her doubts about the influence of the virtual environment are recognised by Young and Whitty. The experience it provides may be genuine but it is not authentic. However, their description of the virtual world is similar to what we feel when absorbed by a work of art. 'The more immersed within the VE one feels, the more removed one is, experientially, from the objective body. The stronger the illusion of 'being there', the greater the sense of presence' (p, 548). When we give ourselves up to a work of art we feel that the experience is authentic as well as genuine. In art, the 'seeming' is 'being'.

Turkle begins to tackle her concern about the adverse impact of technology upon relationships by reading through the letters she exchanged with her mother in her youth, and then writing letters to her daughter. The letter is not only a work of art, in its way, but another filter of experiences, a sorting and framing every bit as charged, for both writer and recipient, as the cave painting.

The young people who seem most able to manage their lives online differentiate between degrees of reality. They know when they have stepped over a boundary into a specific context, they are confident about what role to take, how to act and why. I found that young people who question their gender seek online communities for emotional support because in their day-to-day lives they feel threatened, excluded or over-protected. Nonetheless, purely social networks do not yet support discernment in the ways offered by the virtual environment of the arts, or mutually respectful relationships with adults. For adolescents, the social network seems best handled as an address book or events-organiser, as a place to share games, as a wonderful role-playing game in its own right; not to be confused with what happens in a real world rich in genuine sensory information, where individual decisions – such as how to manage gender variance - must be made.

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## Appendix

### *Interviews with young people*

I found volunteers for research by asking teachers I knew to invite young people who were interested in taking part, making no stipulations as to gender or class, but only that if possible they should be about sixteen or seventeen years old. The main requirements were their willingness to talk freely, and that they were not previously known to me. The research proposal was approved by the Ethics Committee in SELLL, and the two students below the age of 15 were given parental consent, although I encouraged all participants to share the questions and the proposal with parents/carers.

I asked the teachers to discover the locations in which the young people would be happiest to be interviewed, and the grid below includes this information, along with the gender and educational status of each. All of them had access to laptops in their homes as well as in school or college, and many went online using mobile phones. To understand better the implications of student online behaviour for their schools, I interviewed a network manager with experience of eight schools working in federation.

Having transcribed all the interviews, I made a blind analysis to reduce bias in my interpretation. I looked for recurring phrases, ideas, emotions, concerns, and described patterns of behaviour and belief in the transcripts, forming overall categories within which to consider the experience of the young people. In response to concerns voiced by two from the same school, whom I interviewed consecutively, I invited them to talk to me jointly about the issue (the language of online bullying) that they separately identified.

The research questions:

1. When you join an online community or start one of your own, how do you decide on your approach?
2. How do you decide on and manage your reactions to the things that other people post?
3. How far do your conversations online affect your ordinary life?
4. How far do you believe or accept what is said online in comparison with what is said in face-to-face conversations?

These were given in advance to participants, and the questions lay on the table as we talked. They were not always directly referred to, if the participant had already begun to answer. I asked supplementary questions, to encourage anyone who found it difficult to express ideas, or to follow the direction of thought that an individual was developing. Since these were young volunteers, I wanted them to enjoy the experience and to feel that I valued their expertise and knowledge.

### *Interviewees*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Location of interview</b>
Sue	F	16	White British	Studying Advanced levels at state school	Researcher's study
Eva	F	20	White British	Second year degree student at university	FE college
Anna	F	17	White British	NVQ Level 3 at FE college	FE college
Ellie	F	17	White British	NVQ Level 3 at FE college	FE college
Andrew	M	18	White British	NVQ Level 3 at FE college	FE college
Jonas	M	17	White British	NVQ Level 3 at FE college	FE college
Duncan	M	7	White British	NVQ Level 3 at FE college	FE college
Luke	M	16	White British	Studying GCSEs at state school	His home
Kate	F	15	White British	Studying GCSEs at state school	Newcastle University
Melanie	F	15	White British	Studying GCSEs at state school	Newcastle University
Marie	F	17	British Asian	Studying A levels at independent school	Newcastle University
Art	M	adult	British Asian	Network manager in federation of secondary schools	His school

*Sue*

*How do you decide on how to present yourself online?* When I'm on Facebook when I first started I used to have my name like Xxxxx but when I get nicknames I use that as my middle name and you can change it every two weeks. I don't tend to put anything private on there. I don't keep anything private like that on there - use it for private messaging, there's a chat at the bottom. Occasionally I use private messages but usually I ring someone, talk to friends, so say I'm getting ready to go and meet people it's almost quicker to type instead of texting, almost easier. *Do you use it for making appointments?* Occasionally I record things I'm doing but some people do things every five minutes like 'I'm going for a walk' or 'having a brew'. *Do you see people doing things?* Yes, a lot of my friends do all the time. *Your reaction?* It's fine but I've just got better things to do but it's up to them. *How do they respond?* If they put a funny 'comment' or 'like' or what they've said, if it's one of my friends. *How do you decide who your friends are?* I suppose there are loads of people who I'm friends with on Facebook that I've actually never even met kind of thing or they're friends of friends that I don't really know or I've just met once but people I usually talk to are like people I go to school with or my friends that I do talk to and stuff like that. *How do you get these other friends or who aren't?* Oh, you can like search people can't you or I think I recognise her or I've met once at a party or she's friends with so and so. I've got about 400, 500 friends - never like spoken to them face-to-face. *If you're going to see someone later in the day, do you Facebook them and what about?* Like I said before you usually on Facebook I would never have a private conversation on there anywhere it would be what time are you coming round are what time do you want picking up sort of thing and then I suppose the conversation changes. *Do you put photos on?* Yes, I've got quite a few photos on. I think pretty much anybody that wants to can view mine but... *Have you looked at the privacy settings at all?* I haven't, no. *Have you got the default setting?* If anyone can see it, yeah, I think I have. Probably worth changing it. 'Cos I haven't got anything private on there apart from photos of me, I haven't got anything from my personal life on there. *So you've got a big divide between your personal life and the things you say which are I'm going out tonight or are you coming round later?* Or though I suppose if someone has said something on Facebook later when I meet my friend I might say, 'Oh, have you seen what she's done to this,' or 'Have you seen them photos that someone's put on them and aren't they funny or something like that. I do go on Facebook quite a lot. *How much?* Pretty much every

night or every other night for an hour and a bit. If I'm at home on my own and I'm watching telly or for a little bit or even if I'm like messing around I'll go on and it'll go [imitates the Facebook call sign] I'll just go and check it. *It's almost like having a whole lot of people in the next room?* It's just like using the mobile 'cos it's just like using the chat because I'm always skint so I don't have enough money to put on my phone. It's just like a cheaper way of contacting my friends.

For me, knowing that there's all those people out there who've seen everything that's on your page – even though there's nothing private on there – I suppose I haven't really thought about it – but you know that some people out there like use it against people – it gives it more – it's a bit pointless. You know like people bully people on it don't they and get away with it. *Have you come across bullying?* Oh, I mean there's a couple of lasses who live near me and they don't like me and I don't like them and on the Facebook chat they always send me messages, like putting a cross – not bullying but they'll always leave comments and I totally ignore that part of it I think it's ridiculous quite pathetic. They're just little girls' messages and I'm not bothered about that, do you know what I mean? Some of my friends do get offended by a group of lasses calling them something like commenting on a photo or being nasty about a photo or something like that. *What sort of things do people put on photos, that are nasty?* If it's fancy dress and you've got a short dress on they write 'slag' or something like that but it wouldn't offend me anyway. But I guess some people - one of my friends, like, people do say stuff to her and she does get upset about it. At the end of the day it is Facebook, and they aren't going to have the guts to come up to you and say it to your face if you see them in the street. *So there's a real difference? People will put things on Facebook they wouldn't say in real life?* Yes. Well I guess like the lasses who say things like I'll walk past them in the street and they won't even look at me yet on Facebook it's like the confidence that nothing can harm them apart from if I wanted to reply. *Is there something not quite real about it then?* I suppose there is, yeah. *I don't want to put ideas into your head there.* No, really, because like I do mainly use it for like talking to my friends and my sister who's down in xxxx so I talk to her on it because she's got young kids because it's easier not to speak to her on the phone or text because it takes longer. But then I guess like since my dad has it for work purposes so it's much more real life on Facebook.

*So there's part of it that's absolutely real like your sister?* There's some people who have everything on there, like they have their whole private – it's just like, why would you want to tell everyone like through a computer? Like I was looking on Facebook the other day and you go on your home page and this girl who's a year above me she put down that she was pregnant and I was thinking why would you do that? You're like 17, why would you show that to thousands of people? I didn't understand that at all. I think it's all about attention really, knowing some people seeing that will think, 'oh she's pregnant, let's text her'. They're going to get a reaction from it anyway. *Are the lasses putting nasty comments on about you trying to get a reaction?* Oh yeah, of course they are, because when I don't reply they'll go 'Oy! or something like that and eventually they do stop but every time I go on they still do it. It's just like but eventually they think, 'she's not going to do anything, it's boring, let's move on to someone else'.

*When people go on they do things they won't do face-to-face but they still hope for a response. Is that a Facebook response?* I'm in Year 12 and they're in Y10 they're only 14, 15. *It's done something to the social relationships in school potentially?* They're even at a different school. I've moved so I never even see them I've got absolutely nothing to do with them. *But somehow you still figure in their lives?* Well, I obviously bother them but I'm not going to talk to them they're just not in my life, they don't bother me at all. They're just obviously really bored! I've got better things in my life to do that sit there and listen to their comments.

*Other things you've seen on Facebook in this group of 400 or 500 friends where you can see everything they put on Facebook - like 'I'm pregnant' - how do you feel when you see it?* I think I feel sorry for her. If I see someone who I am close to and they put something like a comment it makes me worried for them then I'd probably ring them up or something like that. If they put something like 'Oh my god I can't believe this is happening to me' then I'd think what's up with them kind of thing and I'd automatically ring them *Why is it a phone call and not maybe a text or Facebook response?* If it says that's their status you can comment underneath it and I suppose if I wrote on there, 'oh what's up, what's happened?' they're either going to say everything on there and they'll probably think later, 'oh I shouldn't have done that. Everyone'll know about it now', or they're not going to message at all, they'll think, 'I'll ring you in a bit', so I might as well ring up anyway. *So the potential for indicating status – ticking the status box – they're kind of waving a flag and your reaction to it is to do something in your real life*



*separate from your Facebook life?* If you are upset or something it's easier to write on your status, 'oh I'm upset', and then people will ring you rather than you having to ring someone and say 'I'm really upset', it's easier to tell people. *If you put that as a status – have you?* No. I'm much more of a chatty person anyway so I'd rather ring someone up. *If somebody decides to do a status thing and broadcast it to everybody it's a particular kind of decision because they are choosing not to target it at a particular person or group of people, they're targeting absolutely everyone. Your response is sometimes to ring them up.* Yes if they're close enough. *How do you decide who to ring up?* I've got a certain group of mates. A couple of lads and three or four lasses. They're my close mates. I know I can rely on them for anything. Then I've got the friends round the edge kind of thing. And I might decide to just text them instead, like 'are you OK?' kind of thing. *Lads in the close group – do they Facebook as well? Are there things that the lads put on Facebook that they wouldn't say to you?* No, I think it's definitely more of a girl thing. I think you don't see many lads that go 'I can't believe what's happened'. They're more like 'had a messy night last night' or 'had a good night with the lads last night – more carefree about it all. I think girls tend to be more direct about it. Facebook is definitely a more girls' thing. I mean boys have it but I don't think they're necessarily bothered. They'll have a couple of photos, or they'll have a profile photo that's been that for months, d'you know what I mean? But girls, it's 'let's Facebook', or 'let's upload this', that's definitely a girls' thing. *I've heard that there are some boys who have conversations with girls on Facebook that they couldn't possibly have with boys because they'd be mocked for it and it's more difficult to have it face-to-face, but these are obviously private so they wouldn't be shared. Does that make any sense to you?* No. Publically, I wouldn't have anything private. Chat, I'd be more likely to respond to them like that. *Do you have 'chat' experience with boys?* Yes, like one of my main mates, he was like worried about his girl-friend because she lives down south and he was talking to me a lot on Facebook chat and I think he'd be less comfortable ringing me up to say it even though we are mates. I think it's almost easier to write it down. It's almost easier to put it into words, like on the phone – on Facebook it's easier to work yourself [?]

*They say that on long car journeys people says all sorts of things to each other because they are sitting side by side, they're not making eye contact. I am wondering if what you are describing is similar to that because when you're Facebooking you aren't making eye contact, are you?* You can't have an awkward moment, can you, because you just

write away and if they don't reply it's not...*When you are composing your chat, what's in your mind when you are chatting?* There's just the little corner on the Facebook screen. Profile photo is on their screen. *Do you look at that or do you just look at the keyboard?* If it was me that was starting it usually it would be to start a more direct question, like 'Hi, how are you? What are you doing tonight? I've got nothing planned, why don't you come over?' But if they start talking to me then it's answering my question or wanting to know something. *The friend worried about his girl-friend? Was he just saying, 'I'm worried?'* Because I've met his girl-friend a few times he's got worried about her going off with other lads, so he was saying what should he do about it, should he just confront her? *So it's a serious question.* Well he's not really worried about it, just asking for a bit of advice. Most people do say things to me on Facebook chat because I don't get a signal on my phone because of where I live. If it is they'll say, *can you ring me or can I ring you? Do you want to avoid having a Facebook trail or is it just better to talk voice to voice?* I prefer voice to voice, but I guess some people would find Facebook easier.*[Can you tell me why you prefer voice to voice?* Em. I guess if you've had an argument or something it's easier to sort things out because you can tell from the voice. On Facebook although you hope it's your mate it could be anyone talking to you. It's like, 'oh it's my best mate', but it could be her and a couple of other mates that are with her and influence what she's writing or anything like that – she could have left the room and one of her mates could have written it. For instance this group of lasses who do say stuff to me, there's three of them, and one of them says it, it could be her, or it could be the three of them there, but if you're on the phone then it's more true. *Something fictitious about what's going on on Facebook? You can't ever be completely certain?* Well, you can go on Facebook on your phone and stuff like that it's like if you don't log yourself out people can easily prat around, leaving you status that you'd never written, you get some hilarious ones, like 'if she's really writ that then...' just like funny things like that, not serious but you can't be terribly sure that they're the people who have written it. *This suggests that if you are going to be completely serious about leaving your Facebook open you have to be someone who is not going to get in a state about anything that's there because it may not be that person who has written it.* It's a computer – it's just a machine with words on it. You don't know that it's come from that actual person or not.

*Do you think of the internet as a location?* I don't think about it like that. But I do use it for my friends, or contacting people that I need to. I only use email for my hockey

coach. She also has Facebook – like my emails, they all say ‘this person has commented on your Facebook so I don’t have many emails... *A Facebook page looks completely different because you’ve got all those people who are making comments, you’ve got all those photos down the page of all those people out there.* So it’s like an online community, isn’t it? *I’m asking you about that because you’re just telling me it finishes at the back of the computer.* No, no, what I meant was by that, it’s like, not necessarily that it stops there, because what you’re writing is what you’re writing but I mean it’s not take everything on it for what it is. I can’t get the words out. *Are you saying that the Facebook community that you look at with all the pictures of the people in the community is a picture of a community but isn’t the real thing?* Yes. I do it in a pleasant way, like I see it as I call it as my friends, I like chatting, looking at the photos on it. *Do you have it on all the time, even when you’re watching television or doing something else?* Yes. *What would you do if you couldn’t get to your Facebook?* When I’m on holiday I’m not necessarily bothered about it. We go for two weeks and I don’t use it at all. *What would happen if your internet broke down for two weeks?* Don’t know whether I’d be that bothered. As long as I’ve got the phone. Dunno. Might be a nice break, might try it. Don’t think I would be too destroyed. *Your phone is really important to you?* Yes. *Are there any other communities apart from Facebook that you go to?* Blog? No. *What do you mostly use your phone for?* Talking. I do text, people at school say it’s quick to text, but it’s so much easier just to ring up. *If you text somebody you give them time to respond. Are there times when you text rather than ring to give them time?* Yes. I suppose again it’s like Facebook chat, it’s less awkward. With my close mates, my best mate, I’ll always ring her. I’m on the phone to her most nights even though we’re at school together. But we don’t spend much time together at weekends because she’s got a boyfriend down at xxx, mine’s up here, but I don’t text her, it would be just weird to text her. Other girls, my close mates, I’d probably text them first, and then maybe ring them. *I’m thinking about the gradation of it. What it is in the relationship that is, ‘I have to talk’, rather than, ‘I have to text’?* Then some people, a while ago I was listening to the radio – I don’t know if you’ve heard of Fearne Cotton? – well, she was talking to one of the listeners, saying that she panics if she has to talk to someone because she’s so used to just talking on Facebook or talking on Twitter or texting, and if people ring she just panics at what she’s going to say. And quite a few people I know that use text have the same problem - like panicking when people ring you. I don’t have the problem because I’m so chatty. *You can see that*

*people who are practised in Twitter and Facebook and the like are not learning to talk to each other voice to voice. Yeah, and I think that talking on the phone is different from talking face-to-face. Tell me a bit about that. Well, I guess like, if you're walking through a street and see someone you haven't seen for a while, you'll stop and chat to them because they're there. But you won't necessarily think, 'oh, I haven't seen her for a while, oh, I'll just ring her up for a random chat', I wouldn't necessarily do that. So the nature of the conversation you have if you see them in the street, you physically talk to them, is it likely to be a more shallow conversation? But if you see them, it'll be like, 'oh hi, how are you doing?' But if it's your best mate that you spend quite a lot of time with every day? In those times when you're together you're able to talk about a huge range of things. So when you talk in the evening is it an extension of the things you've been talking about in the day? It can be, or, 'I can't believe what they said today', or it can be like, 'what are you wearing at this weekend's party?' If she lived in the next street would you go round to see her? Is there anyone you'd go round to see? I live in the middle of nowhere. So the phone is really important - you can't physically go out and see people? How important is Facebook in that context? My best mate, she lives in the middle of xxx and another of her mates lives like two minutes' away and another one is a few minutes' walking distance and she's hardly ever on Facebook because she's got me on the phone and her friends down the road. My daughter in Thailand says that she uses Facebook because it represents her community. She can see all those faces and messages together in the same place. I don't need that because all my friends are here but when my boyfriend goes to university in September I guess maybe that will be an easier way of talking to him, because he'll be doing work on his laptop and I'll be doing work on mine or I won't have anything to do and I can talk to him on Facebook. You can see that happening? I think I can. Because at the moment we're hardly ever apart. I don't text him. I never text him. I'm either with him or I'm on the phone to him. In your situation you only text people when it doesn't matter to you whether you get an immediate response? If it's something I need to know about in the next ten minutes I'll ring them and say, 'hey, what's going on?' Do your friends ever have their phones switched off? No. Could you tell me a bit about bullying, when you were younger, on Facebook? I haven't seen anything, just like narky little comments, not anything vicious. So you've only come across name calling, things like that, and you're quite relaxed about that? I've a friend who does get things and I say, 'forget about it, you don't need to think about it'. I'm blunt about things, I'm honest. You're not ever going*

*to get engaged in something online as a response because you'll ring them or just leave it? Yes, the other day I went on Facebook and I was on someone's profile and you know you can change your relationship and I saw she was engaged and I thought what, what? I found out about that on Facebook. I saw it on hers, I thought, that's exciting. That's like more of an open thing, it's your personal life but it's a happy thing. Then my boyfriend rang her, and because she's been engaged before, she said don't tell your dad but because he hasn't got Facebook he can never find out. A random thousand people she doesn't even know, know she's engaged but he doesn't. Other people will find that irrelevant, it won't matter to them, people get engaged every day, but he'll think, 'oh, it's my niece, she's got engaged again'. This suggests to me that some of the boundaries around groups in the community are really shifting. In order not to get yourself into difficulty you need to think quite carefully who you let know things, what you say. But you're extremely cautious about what you put out there at the moment. I think people can so easily misinterpret things. You know those adverts that run down the side of the page, what do you think about them? I know they're there but I don't pay any attention to them.*

*Eva*

*How do you decide on how to present yourself online?* I always tend to use my real name, tend only to put a few pictures up that are decent. I'm quite safe online I think. I only add people that I know. When I was a little bit younger I used to just add people but I'm more grownup now and Facebook's more private for me. Age and experience.

*When you first started – how long have you been using? Which community did you use?* When I first started I was about 14 on Bebo, then three years ago Facebook and Bebo's gone now.

*When you first started on Bebo what was it like?* I was very much trying to put like – like a different persona of me on there, I'll admit, windsurfing and all this outdoor sports – that wasn't the case when I was that age.

*You said you did things that you didn't actually do? Yeah. And you said to me just now 'I admit' – yeah. So do you have a feeling then that what you put on line has to be true?* For me, yeah, I like to be honest with people, I like them to see me as me, I won't be able to keep up lies anyway, I'm not very clever like that with lies.

*But when you started out and you said windsurfing and the like, what kind of reactions did you get?* Got friends who added me in the same sort of scene from anywhere, really – making that number of friends up was important.

*In what way was it important?* It was a race to get to a 1000 friends.

*And the friends were just the names you can add? They'd rarely say hello to you... I'm interested in the journey you've been on to get to where you are now, and remembering what you did is important. Are there things that you would now not ever write down?* I would never add people I don't know. My Facebook account's private, only add recent events, and I don't write rubbish any more about myself. I actually do things and I write about what I've done and not what I wish I'd done. I think that was part of my childhood and I'm growing up now.

*Do you think that seeing it on Bebo then Facebook affected the way that you thought about yourself?* Yes, definitely. I think I was – I put online what I wanted to be and what I couldn't be in real life.

*Do you think if you'd been born 40 years ago you'd have kept a diary?* Yeah. I know I'm putting an idea into your mind but I'm wondering how far Bebo or Facebook now are a sort of diary. I think they are, especially Facebook – Twitter is new, but blogging whenever you feel like it is just a diary that everyone can see. I remember keeping a diary before the internet started and it was more private. Whereas Facebook's more a brief 'this is what I've done today.'

*How often do you use it?* I usually check it three times a day.

*So who are you keeping up with? When you say your friends, are they people you actually meet?* Yeah, mainly school-friends, because I'm now second year of uni and they've all moved on to

different universities so I keep in touch with them. I'm also just adding new friends that I meet, but I don't really speak to them online. It's quite weird, if you meet someone new - you add them but you don't speak to them for a while till you properly know them on Facebook, and then work friends who've moved on. *Are there any unwritten laws on Facebook?* I can't think. Do you put pictures of yourself and your ex together? *Are there other communities around? You talked about Twitter, do you use that?* No, never really saw the point of Twitter, think it's really too personal, I don't really care what other people are doing, mostly. *So for you the – I'm going to interpret this now – then your engagement with Facebook is emotionally important?* Yeah, even though I've just moved into a new house and have been without internet for a while and I haven't really missed it that much. But when I was home in the hols it was like religious with me three times or more a day, to see how everyone was getting on. *So what kind of things get posted if it's 3 times a day?* Just what people are doing in the day, what they've been up to in the week, if they've had assignments they've found hard and stuff, and sometimes to get the occasional friend who's always says my life's a mess, so I make a phone call to her to see what's happening, stuff like that. *So the friend might be waving a flag through Facebook but then you ring up?* Yeah, she's very good at that. *That's practically the 2<sup>nd</sup> question here which is how you manage your reactions to Facebook. Putting things on Facebook instead of ringing you up?* She puts it on in the way that only me as a friend would know, and she's very sarcastic in what she puts on. So it's kind of reading in between the lines and I think she does that because she doesn't want to feel like she wants our help, so she's stuck at where I used to live and she hasn't gone to uni and we've all moved on and she doesn't want to seem a burden. So I phone her up and it's fine, I say, 'are you OK' and she says 'I'm fine'. I try to make it as if I haven't seen the Facebook and it's just a general chat. I think one other person sees that too. *So by not phoning an individual she hasn't made a demand on an individual but she's put it on the table through Facebook?* Yeah. *I'm trying to think if there would ever be a conversational equivalent to that, if you were sitting in a group round a table together, would somebody do that, would they put this down on the table and wait for somebody to pick it up?* I reckon so, we used to do that, I think my friendship group is only like three of us so it was very open with each other, we could read each other very well. *So is this the distant substitution for that face-to-face reading?* Yeah. I hadn't really thought of that. Maybe it is. *So that's why I was asking about emotional attachment – I was thinking for someone to go back three times a day is a habit, and*

*you said that when you moved you didn't miss it but you've gone back to it. Now it's more like once a week because – I feel like I've grown out of it. As part of the growing up phase, when you were going through year 13? I was on it all the time. It was very, very social. What kind of things got to you? It was more parties that I was going on or trips shopping – just between a few close friends, and even people out of school who weren't friends but we added them anyway, we weren't cool kids, when they were going off to a party we would take the mick out of them. There was jealousy coming across from it as well, looking at what everyone else was doing and feeling that pain of, I wish I was doing that. So you met each other at school but you still did things through Facebook? Yes, and MSN, every night. I remember when I was 15 every night MSN talking to my best friend – I might have seen her 9 till 6 on the same day and then I'd spend from 7 till 10 at night online. You were trying to do your homework at the same time? Yeah, so you kept the messenger going in the corner the whole time? Do you use the chat in Facebook? No, not really, too unreliable. Do you mean the technology's unreliable? Yes, and also I just feel I want to speak to someone so I ring them up – on Facebook you'd just say hi, how are you, but when you ring up it's more personal. So is there something about writing it down and putting it onscreen that makes it less personal? I think so. It can be cold. It can be very easily misunderstood specially with emails - I've had lots of trouble with emails, the wrong message getting across . The sound of the voice, the emotion behind the voice is very intriguing and that's what I like. You said you'd got into difficulties with email – would that be an email to just one person or a group, was it a response to an email or one copied to lots of people? It was an email to a friend – what people say about me, I was just asking her what people say about me, and I had her hysterically crying on my doorstep saying it wasn't me, and I said I was just asking – and face-to-face would have been better because she would have understood it. So there's the potential for stuff to get out of hand? Yeah, very quickly on Facebook. Do you have anecdotal evidence about that from friends or other people? Well, working on placement, it happened to a young person – it's never happened to me but I've seen it in friends, photographs torn apart in front of them, can't delete the comments - so that kind of thing is going on on Facebook? Yeah. So are there things posted sometimes – apart from the girl you mentioned- where you have to think really long and hard before you respond? Or would you not go that far on Facebook? There are some comments where I get very angry, and I could go to town on this comment, but I just think it's not worth it. In a way I think it's pathetic to argue on*



Facebook. *Is that something you've arrived at with maturity?* Yeah. *Would a younger self have responded?* Oh yeah. I remember having arguments all the time on Bebo, thinking all the time I'm at the computer desk on the other side of town and then seeing them in school the next day and thinking, oh God... *So there's a kind of reality gap?* Yes, more so when I was younger. *Do you think – how do you think of activity online or talk online? When you're on Facebook where are you?* World of my own. *How do you think of it? How do you visualise it? Are you somewhere?* No, I think of a dot, a million dots – it's like not really you but it is a bit of you, but the way I do it, it's a little bit of me but the rest's private and if you want to meet me, meet me. *You used the word persona earlier, so it's a kind of persona you put out on Facebook?* Yeah. *Do you see people on Facebook who are putting more of a persona on?* I think so. There's one friend who puts pictures up every weekend of going out but really he's on his own, he's really only got one friend, so he's bigging himself up, trying to come across as 'oh I'm at uni, I'm having a really great time', but I know him. He was a really depressed person in sixth form because he didn't have any friends and he's kind of making up for it now. Maybe he is really having a great time but you can see through it. *How do you think you can see through it? I'm believing you. Is it the way he writes?* Yeah, he says everything – we did, we did this, we did this, I want to say, you had an all right night, we believe you. *He's selling it? Yeah. I wanna step back and say, did you really? Your reaction to what he is saying – would you be doing the same if you sat down face-to-face with him, do you think? Would it be the same thing – do I believe this guy or not?* Yes. *What I'm feeling after is whether you judge things differently, because it's online, from the way you would judge things if you met the situation in the flesh, in the body.* I think it can be very isolating, it can be very lonely online with all these millions of people in front of you. You can feel very lonely, specially reading all these things that everyone else is doing, even though it could be fake. With the persona you're putting on. I don't think – it's a community in the sense that everyone's got the same agenda, they want to meet but I don't think there's a community spirit in there, it's too big. *It's interesting that the feeling that other people might be faking it, even if they're faking a good time, if you're not, part of you still reacts as if they might not be faking it but having a really good time. If you were sitting round the table and people said that, would you have the same feeling? Would they say it?* I think if we were all together it wouldn't be the same because we're all together now, we're not at home saying things. You're not on your own, you're with me. You're not alone, are you, you're sat with

them. *So even if they're blagging, you're face-to-face, you have a different feeling?* Yes, I do. You kind of humour it. *You can give feedback to the person who's speaking to you without saying anything?* Yes. *Because your body's there?* Yes. *So are there ways of giving feedback like that, that are indirect, when you're on Facebook? Do you use any of these emoticons?* Yes, sometimes. *There seem to be strings and strings of them.* Oh yes, I only know smiley for happy – but then I'm a very sarcastic person and so are my friends so if I put a smiley face they'd think it was very sarcastic. *Sorry – I've introduced this because I'm worrying if people use symbols as feedback because you can't say it.* Three dots I use quite a bit as a comment – a sort of 'What?!' *That's interesting. You have a sort of code of your own. Do other people have codes of their own that you learn to read?* Yeah, like bold text, specially one friend who's not at uni who writes in bold text, like [roaring sound]. *In email if you write in bold or capitals it's the equivalent of actually shouting.* Yeah, that's what she's like as a person so I can read that quite well. *Are there things that you would talk about online that you wouldn't offline, or are there things that you would put – would you introduce something so that you could then have the conversation face-to-face?* Yeah. Just saying – I've got something to tell you – ooh, what? – I'll tell you when I see you. When I was at school. Then 'what did you want to tell me?' Oh, I've forgotten, I'm sorry. *But why? Was that just to tantalise them or would there sometimes be real things?* Yeah, there would be bound to be real things but sometimes I'd just want to wind them up. *Doing it at a distance like that – what's the effect of that? What's the effect intended on the person you're telling it to – 'I'm not going to tell you but' -* It's probably to get them to ask how I am, to seem interested in it. *To get a response?* Yeah, more. *More of a response?* Yes. *So the time-lag actually counts. Yeah. So it's different saying it on Facebook or Bebo from saying it in a phone conversation?* Yeah. *If you'd been on the phone you'd have just told them?* Yeah, because then it's ... they can ask questions - weedle it out. *So now you have choices, you have more choices of ways of expressing yourself. Yeah, And of managing relationships?* Yeah. Friendships. I always think if you use Facebook all the time the friendship will fade. *That sounds likely to me unless they are generally people who are distant from each other.* But then a phone call - I 'm sounding old now – or a letter! *What brought you to that?* One day it clicked, the penny dropped, like bang! Oh I'll phone them. *Do you use your mobile a lot?* Oh yes. *And do you use text a lot?* Oh yes. *Do you use text more than talk? As much as?* As much as. I normally text and say are you busy tonight? I'll phone or, I'll meet up with you, or I'll give you a call

later on. *Do you remember what it was like when you got your first mobile?* It was about this big! I texted my best friend because I'd got no credit on it. It was mainly because I was doing horse-riding, in case of an emergency, or to phone my mum when I wanted picking up. Then I started getting better mobiles, more texting, grown-up, being allowed out – meeting at the park. *Did that enable you to feel more free, less free?* More freedom. *Your mum would always expect you to communicate? Giving your children a phone and getting them on the end of it?* Yeah. It did worry her when I didn't answer the phone. She thought I was dead. Or dying or something. *So you always had to.* Yeah, and I still do it today or she gets upset or I have to text her. *I've got a smartphone so it's all there – text, phone, Facebook, the lot. If you had that, what would be your preferred method of communicating?* I still think phone. I find it a lot quicker. If I need someone I'll ring them and if they're not there I'll text them and then I'll ring them again. My phone's got the internet but very limited. I can't get Facebook on it. I hardly go on it. But text or phone I still prefer. *Would you mind talking to me a bit what you've met on placement about the things you've seen on placement –online or Facebook or the equivalent?* There's one girl I've seen who fell out with quite a few people. *How old was this girl?* 16. And then you hear back that one of the photographs on Facebook had 124 comments on it, or something from people she didn't even know, just having a go at her, calling her all sorts of names and starting this big rant on Facebook, this big argument on Facebook about what happened between her and this other girl and loads of people joined in all backing up the other girl that this girl hadn't really met. So I think that's dangerous. *That must be something about the privacy settings. She doesn't know about how to set the privacy settings so that only her friends can see.* Yeah. My profile picture is all you can see, you can't even add me as a friend, you've got to find me first. I've only recently learned how to – I've changed all my settings. *Why did that happen? Was that as a result of publicity about Facebook?* It was about a year ago. *You came late to finding out about the settings?* I don't think I would have realised until an incident occurred and I wouldn't have realised – I'd have been stuck with everyone being able to see. *So when you started using this community you went in completely open without an understanding that you needed to make it a room, as it were, so that everything you were doing everybody could see.* Yes, I was actually shocked at in general everyone could see anything and post a comment on my wall. It was crazy, I was shocked. I thought it was my friends. I thought it was quite strange that they made that the default. *Your shock – can you remember – how old were you?* 18,

just coming out of school, going to uni actually. That's when I remember. *That's when something happened?* Yeah. *What now seem to be the benefits of the whole online thing?* Keeping – I dunno – even keeping in touch with the friends I want to, well, I've got their numbers, so if I want to - I know where they are in summer. So it's more keeping a spot. Saying I'm still here, don't forget me. *Someone I know said he'd recently just put up a notice saying he'd got engaged to be married and that's a big change in his life. But he didn't have to decide who he would and wouldn't tell out of the range of friends he's got. He just put it up as an open statement on his wall. I thought that was quite interesting approach because it's a way of giving information to a lot of people without saying you're more important than you are.* Probably could be either good or bad. *You haven't made your mind up about it?* No. Not at all. Thinking about getting engaged and that, I'd don't think I would like everyone to find out. Probably because I'm quite a private person, I'd want to tell the closest friends, Mum and Dad, sisters – but not the people I was just at school with, I don't want their comments on it. *You don't want to put information up that's going to bring a comment from people where you don't personally invite that comment?* Yes, you can put your birthday on and it pops up and you get comments from people you were at school with saying happy birthday and I think – well, you never told me when you saw me every day happy birthday, but now when it's reminded you to say happy birthday you are doing. I'd like it to be heartfelt, thanks. *It's as if there's a kind of artificial emotion being generated about you among people who didn't actually care about you at the time?* Yeah. I think it is like a fake. *Did you ever join Friends Reunited?* No, but my dad did. He told me all about it. He hated it because he said he saw how people grew up who used to bully him and he doesn't care about them, he wants to live his own life. I think I will be like that when I'm his age. *Thinking back to that time when there was a race for a 1000 friends, do you think from your experience of working with the young now that the notion of friendship has changed at all as a consequence of that kind of use of the word friend? Do you think people still mean by 'friend' somebody –?* I think I see it in lads' friendship more than I can see it in the girls'. I think the lads are friends because they play football together, grow up together – it's much more of a mutual friendship, but girls they can fall out, twist and turn, upset and ruin friendships, I'm not sexist but it's just what I've picked up. It's not like I was when I was growing up, I was more friends with the lads. *Do you think that the way that the word friend was used on Bebo and still is on Facebook – where you can just add people as friends mentioned in*

*your address book – Yeah, strangers – do you think that people’s understanding of the meaning of friendship has changed? Yeah, I think because I’ll be working with young people for 8 weeks, and some of them will class me as their friend, but I wouldn’t. Professionally, I ‘m not their friend, but even if I were I wouldn’t class them as my friend. Friend to me is a year, two years, acknowledged, learning together, sharing experience, not ‘hiya, we’re friends now’. I think that friends and true friends change. You only see that when you grow up and you drift apart and the true friends are the only ones you stay in touch with. But because it’s there on the screen and you’ve seen them for 8 weeks you’re their friend all of a sudden. I wonder if that’s because they’ve grown up with it like that and if they hadn’t it would be different. Anything else helpful you think I should know about? I think I was on the verge when I was growing up but the internet got broke and my dad couldn’t afford to fix it so I got locked into myself. You see yourself as growing out of that need to interact online? Yes!*

**Anna**

*How do you decide on how to present yourself online?* Facebook. You have to decide how to make yourself look good but you don't want to be fake, like a lot of people make fake ones that are not themselves and then they get into trouble and upset other people. *You've actually experienced this?* I've had some people like my friends who've been added by other people that say they're somebody but they're not. *So it's other people who've made them up, not the people themselves?* Yes. *you don't have experience of somebody turning themselves into a different person online?* No, not yet. I feel that you're quite safe on Facebook because you can choose only people that you know to be friends with but it's when you're friends with people you don't know that you can come to harm. *What privacy settings do you use?* I use the ones where only my friends can see my stuff. *And have you always done that?* No, I changed it when I came to college. It used to be friends of friends, but I think you need to change it because you don't want other people to see what you do and then word gets spread around. Not that you do anything you shouldn't it's just that people get talking about you. *Do you start out with anybody being able to see you or did you start out with friends of friends?* I think I started out with just anybody but as I've got older, because I've had it for a couple of years, I've realised it could be more of a problem. And that privacy is more important as well as you get older because obviously work colleagues and also potential bosses can see it as well if you have anybody seeing it. *So you've not got just your friends, people you decide.* Yes. *So when you're on, with just the people that you've decided are your Facebook friends, have you got people that you see every day in real life that are Facebook friends?* Yes I've got family, my mum, my brother, my best friends' friends that I've been in the classroom with, they're all on there. *So do you ever Facebook your mum even though you're living in the same house?* Yes. Well, I have done once. She's done it recently to talk to my brother who's living in another country, so I use it a lot to speak to my brother too. *How has that affected you? You have people you talk to every day?* Yes [laughing]. *How often do you Facebook people that you also meet face-to-face? I'm interested in why.* I don't know, it's just social contact with people that you meet and talk to the people that you'll meet and are going to see the next day. Like I talk to people in college that I've talked to four hours before and that I'm going to see the next day! *And what do you talk to them about?* Just what's happened during the day and general stuff what you would do if you're having a conversation face-to-face. *You live in xxx? Where do your other friends live?* The closest one's about five miles away, I

don't see her very regularly. The other one's about ten miles away – the person I see most is about ten miles away from me. *Does that make a difference?* I think it does, you don't get to see them much of an evening, I live in quite an isolated place. That's where I talk to them, yeah, I think quite a lot of my friends who live in isolated places do that to have contact with their friends. *You sense that being on Facebook with them, whether they're ten miles away or your brother in another country, am I putting words into your mouth if I say it makes you feel closer?* Yes, I think it does because it feels like you're having a normal conversation with them as if you were on the phone. *You could ring them up, the friend who's five miles away, ten miles away.* You could do but that costs! *You do it because it's cheap.* It's free, yeah, I use it to talk to my brother who's in France and he can do it for nothing, he rings and I can talk to him on Facebook every day. *Do you talk to him when he rings up?* I do but not for very long. *The kind of things you talk about to people on Facebook, can I ask you to think again, are they the sorts of things you would say if you were meeting them or are they things that are flowing more freely in your head?* Things that I would say if I was with them. *So are there things that you don't say?* I think I've got on to the second question – the kind of things that you prepared to say. *Are there things that you are not prepared to put on Facebook, even with your friends?* Yeah, just don't know, I think you've got to respect other people and what I put on Facebook to other people are just the things I would say if I was meeting them. *When you meet your close friends, there will be a whole range of things you would talk about with them. Can you give me some idea what you would talk about with your friends?* Boys [ lot of laughter]. *Relationships?* Yes. *What you've been doing? All the way from the very trivial are you coming out tonight –Yes - to – do you have quite deep things on Facebook?* On chat, not on view to everybody. *You can send messages.* Private messages yes, that's where you talk obviously about quite deep things, I do talk to my friends about things like that, yes. *I just wanted to know whether you wouldn't put that on Facebook but you would.* Yes, I'm private, I wouldn't put it on my wall or anything like that – just between the friend I was talking to and me, I wouldn't if I was having a problem at home or if they were upset, I wouldn't talk, I would probably just ring them, not use Facebook. *Do you use the status sign on Facebook?* Yes. *Do other people?* Yes. *If somebody put a miserable status up what would you do about that?* Ask them how they were. *Do you ask them in Facebook?* Yes. *Have you put up on Facebook in your status that you've been fed up or anything?* I probably have, yes, in the past couple of years. *Do people ask you? If somebody puts a signal out saying and says I'm*

*feeling fed up, then you would ask them about it? Yes. And do they tell you on Facebook? Easy, private message, wouldn't publicise it. If you were to compare that with meeting someone face-to-face, in a friendship group, how would it compare if someone was upset? If we were close friends then the person would probably say in front of all of us, like if there was three or four of us, but if it was a big group then we would talk aside. Do you feel you are doing the same on Facebook? What about the chat? On Facebook chat? What we would normally chat about like using MSN.*

*What sort of things have you seen that have provoked a strong reaction in you? Things that were intentionally put about me but weren't necessarily, didn't necessarily say it sanely, but hinted. That could make me quite upset, but I don't react on Facebook I react to it outside of Facebook. People that put things to make you react do it for attention so you do react on Facebook so everyone can see it I think that's one of the things on Facebook, so if you put that you're sad and everybody reacts that's what you're after and if you put something about somebody else and everybody reacts or that person reacts, that's what you're after, for everybody to see it, all your friends. But I personally don't react on Facebook because I don't want everyone to see that. I don't feel that's the same as what you would do in ordinary social situations. I'm not sure how you would do it. No, well, it would be somebody saying something about you to somebody else and you finding out and then you would react. But this is absolutely everybody knowing. So Facebook is offering an opportunity for people to hang their emotions or something out so everyone can see, but in ordinary life you do it less easily? Are there any other things that make you feel strongly? I think just attention-seeking, people looking for attention on Facebook and I don't see the point in it. I think you should put what's happening, not whether you're sad or anything. I have done a couple of times like when I was angry I posted out of anger but I think if you do it on a daily basis it's just attention-seeking and I don't see the point. You've got quite a clear code inside yourself about how to use it. Yes. Where did that code come from? I don't know. Probably just what I think is right about what everyone else can see. OK. You've told me too that you've changed your privacy settings over the years so you've probably developed too through using Facebook, you've seen what's happened and you've changed your practice in response to that. You know how you say that something happens in the day and you'll follow it up at night? Do things then get done on Facebook which get followed up in real life? Yes, for example, quite a lot, we have a laugh at college and with a couple friends we'll do a stupid dance or something and then*



we'll post it to each other on Facebook and have a laugh about it on there and then we'll come off and still be laughing about it next day because we've put it on Facebook. *We've made more of it.* It continues, yes. *So it's as if the Facebook life gets woven back into ordinary life. Do you think of Facebook as real, not real?* I think of it as real because it's happened in real life and it affects everybody you talk to. It's just like MSN, it's just another form of texting, I see it and it's free. *And you don't put pictures on it – do you put pictures on it?* On Facebook, yeah I do. Pictures of school and prom and days out - *Holidays things too?* Yeah. *You've told me already you've got quite strong limits. Are there – do you have Facebook with boys as well as girls?* Yes. *About the same, different?* About the same. *The boys that you're Facebooking with, do they use it the same way as you do?* No, boys aren't as – you know what girls are like compared to boys. *How does it show up here?* Girls are more emotional and it shows in their Facebook status because they post it more whereas boys just put what they've been doing and if they've been drinking on a night and how they feel – they don't necessarily post it if they've been crying all day obviously because they're quite a lot different. *Because what they're going to show socially is quite a lot different?* Yes. *Do you find other things with the boys? Someone told me a long time ago that women share problems and men share what they've been doing well.* Yes. It's usually a good thing that they put on Facebook. *I'm avoiding saying bragging.* But that's what they're doing. *What sort of things are they bragging about?* That they've been out drinking, how much they've had to drink, that they've ended up with a hangover, things like that. *And that's a status symbol?* Yes. *Do you have any private messaging or chatting with boys on Facebook?* Just my brother and a couple of other boys, mainly family, that I talk to, my cousins and things. *Somebody said some boys will have quite deep conversations with girls on Facebook that they wouldn't have in their ordinary conversations.* Yeah. *Have you seen that?* I have, yeah, talking to – boys find it easier, on Facebook you can find it easy to say things that you wouldn't in real life although like it is like real life but because you're not face-to-face in some situations – like if, for example – my cousin's going through a hard time time and I was speaking to him on Facebook but I know how hard it was I didn't think he would be able to talk to me face-to-face. *So you helped him to talk about it on Facebook?* Yeah. *Did that come from you or from him?* From me because I wanted to make sure that he was all right. *And did he respond to that?* Yeah. *So what is it about Facebook? Is it literally about being face-to-face?* It is, yes, but I think because you're there people like my cousins that I don't see, I don't see them

daily, I find it easy to talk to them because it's quick and I couldn't just nip down the road to make sure they were all right. I could contact them on Facebook to make sure they were. *So does that mean you feel closer to them or d'you feel – what I'm interested in here is if there's someone you talk to on Facebook, by comparison with people you talk to every day and then talk to them on Facebook, in comparison with people you don't see very often, is there a difference in how you feel about them when you then meet them face-to-face?* You do feel closer to them, you feel – it creates a way of contact that you wouldn't normally have if you didn't have Facebook you'd only see them once a year, like I do, whereas I can contact them every day if I need to. It's kind of knowing they're there if I need them or they need me which shows when you see them face-to-face because they appreciate that as you do. *So there is an impact on your real life?* Yeah – *Which is that you feel closer to those people?* Yeah. *Can we go back to that first thing, when you go into the Facebook community – your Facebook community which is family and friends – when you've got them all there and you can look at them all there, and you've got that list and everybody's down as a friend whether they're family or not. Do you feel they're all connected to each other because you're connected with them all?* Not really. I think you're connected to them, in different ways, like your relationships outside of Facebook do impact on Facebook relationships. If you don't talk to somebody, like if you have a fall-out with somebody obviously you won't talk to them on Facebook, if you posted to others more than you are to others then you'll talk to them. *So your Facebook reflects that?* Yeah, you can see on my Wall many times that I've just got comments on people like particularly girls in the group like we have conversations about things in the day, but not with friends I went to primary school with, that I still do talk to but I just don't talk to as often. *I'm wondering if there are people, because of the way they interact on Facebook, it seems very odd when you're reading the Facebook page and there are comments on people you don't see very often, you get a kind of insight into their other lives.* Yeah you do, definitely. You get to know what – because you're not talking to them, because of their statuses, you get to know what they're up to, how they're feeling which sometimes is a bit weird because it's not as if they're telling you personally they're telling everybody but you still manage to find out. *You use the word weird – it is quite an interesting sensation, I'm just trying to work out what it is, I'm interested because I have exactly the same experience. So what is it you feel? I feel as if I'm looking through a window.* You do, you feel like you're in - well not almost somebody's private life because

they're expressing it to everybody but it kind of is because it's not said to you personally, it's said to everyone. *But you react to it as if it's their stuff. So do you ever think that your stuff is also there and other people might be having the same reactions to you?* Yes, I do tend not to post anything that's particularly private, it's just normal, like I've got work, not necessarily like private things that I put on. *So when you do put things on the Wall, it really is on the understanding that everybody in that room can look at it.* Yeah, I do take into consideration who can see it. *And if they do and they put on things that you wouldn't, how do you feel about that?* I dunno, I think that most people will put things on Facebook that I wouldn't, and that's the way they use it. I think people use Facebook for different reasons and I think it's your morals as well – the way you react in real life to online life. *So you're getting an insight into other people's morals?* Yeah because you get to see what they will publicise compared to you, if they'll publicise things that they shouldn't, that they've got up to that they shouldn't have got up to. Whereas if you got into trouble for something, you wouldn't want everyone to know. *I can't help feeling that the overall social sense of the Facebook group must be different from the overall sense of a friendship group that you see every day.* I think it is – because you all have different views and some things that you wouldn't say if you - or would say if you just see your friends that you put on Facebook that everybody sees. *So if you're sitting down with a group of friends, the group of friends has its own kind of code – the things you would have a way of saying in that group – you've got a bigger or different permutation which includes all those different groups. So there's a very different feeling about it all.* There is, yeah, because if you're with your friends that you've known for years, you know where the mark is, where you can and can't say things. You put something on Facebook that maybe you can say in one friendship group and you can't in another then your other friendship group won't – *Have you experience of any other kind of network at all?* You mean Myspace and things? *Or other discussions forums, other network groups?* No, not really. *Have you ever come across the notion of a moderator?* No. *Some groups set up a kind of code where somebody is the moderator of the site and they will go through comments and there may be some things they won't let on the site.* No. I just know there are people who have got their statuses deleted for what they have put on by the Facebook people. *So you are aware the Facebook people are looking at it?* Oh yeah they do monitor what you put on. So some people on their statuses they will put something and they put a new status on 'I can't believe this has been deleted.' *And*

*they're actually telling people it's been deleted? Yeah. My last question – whether you actually believe what's on Facebook? I think if it's face-to-face you can tell obviously because you have body language and that will help you believe or not believe like if somebody's joking then you know it's a joke, but if somebody says something on Facebook and you don't know whether it's a joke or not then you can react and tell a different [?] – because it's like texting, MSN, it's this – it's not unreality world but almost is because if you say something and they don't know how to react it all affects the rules. So you're saying that for you the whole business about communication is more complicated than just what you say? Yeah.*

## *Ellie*

*How do you decide on how to present yourself online? When I was younger it was Bebo, but it is mainly Facebook for my age group. So how do you present yourself on Facebook? How do you manage? Well, I go on it like forever. I live on it. But I keep things quite personal to me. Like you don't broadcast your whole life on it. What do you mean by 'forever'? How much are you on it? Well, as soon as I wake up in the morning. Like all evening. So do you have your own laptop? Do you actually switch off? No, I just shut the lid on it. It doesn't get switched off. And Facebook stays on my screen constantly. Can you tell me why that is? I don't know. Just because you need to be like in the loop of what's going on with your friends. Is that how it feels? Yes, you have to know what's going on otherwise you get withdrawal symptoms. So you're saying that your sense of yourself, your ordinary daily life, is affected by being in the loop, on Facebook? That's quite powerful. Yes, it is. Who's in your community? My Facebook community? Like all my friends from college, family, which can be quite dangerous, sometimes, it's a sticky area, old school friends, things like that. What privacy settings do you use? All of them, like, just my friends can see things on my profile. How many people are on your community? 900 or something. It's a lot. You walk round college and you meet someone and they've added you on Facebook. And you've agreed to it? Yes, because even though you don't really know them you'll have a chat with them and you'll know that they're the right people. So all those people that you don't meet every day can still see your Facebook? Yes, but they have to add me as a friend before. Do you decide on a Facebook friend in the same way as you would someone you met in the flesh? In a way, yes. Can you tell me what way? If you know someone really well obviously you'd have them but if you know someone in passing through a polite conversation I would consider them as someone that you know and can trust, yes. So you put them on? Yes. Stickiness around your family and having family and friends in the same community, what's that? Well if you're writing something and you don't want them to see and you don't realise you've got them as friends, if they see something that they're not happy with, then that can get back to them. Has that happened to you? No because I'm quite careful but it has happened to friends. What sort of thing? Like slagging off family, or if your friends have written something on the Wall and they don't want family to see and they're not happy with it. What sort of things? Like things that happen at parties, things like that, yeah. Are some people quite explicit about what they put on the Wall? Yes, when I write on someone's Wall I keep*

it short and to the point I don't say too much not, leaving it too vague. *So there's a knack to getting it right?* You've got to be careful about who they've got as friends, saying things but not saying too much there's like a fine line *So you're aware when you write on someone's Wall that they've got a whole community of their own that will see it? Is that different from the way that you would talk to a friend that's got a different friendship group from yours?* I'm not sure. *Have you ever had experience of comeback via a friend of something that's gone on the Wall?* Yes. My sixteenth birthday. Things happened with another girl's boyfriend and I stupidly told a friend and it got back to her and there was this huge argument on Facebook. It just shows things do get back. *Even though you've got the privacy settings it's impossible to stop the leak - Yes, pretty much - if you put it on the Wall? But there are private areas on Facebook?* Yes, there's private mail but then you can cut and paste it into Facebook chat. Like if I wrote, 'had a great party last night, got very drunk', through a private mail to a friend, they could copy and paste it through Facebook chat and send it to someone else that I'm not friends with. *So there isn't really anything private at all?* No, I'd never really thought about it like that. That's a really good point. Nothing is private. *I've always known that about email because you can inadvertently press the wrong thing. It's much easier to get into difficulty around this on Facebook. Can I go back to why Facebook was such an important community to you?* I have two separate sets of friends, my college group, and I ride horses and I have stables so I have a set of friends there. *So you like to put them all together? Do you Facebook people that you see every day?* Yes. You can sit in college and you can talk to your friend about everything and have nothing else to say and get home on Facebook and have another conversation for like an hour. *Are you ever on your own? On Facebook or- ? In life? Anywhere?* No because I have Facebook on my phone as well so I can text my status to Facebook. It's a sad life I lead. *How much emotion, what kind of emotion for you is invested in Facebook?* I don't know, it's like a big motivation thing in a way. *Tell me a bit more?* It works in my head. Things that your friends say to you over Facebook you find something out and you can come back to college and you can question people and it opens up a lot of social interaction with people as well. *So that's social interaction you wouldn't have had. Is that social interaction on Facebook or in outside of Facebook?* Both in a way. *How real is Facebook? How does it sit as a reality alongside you and me sitting here?* Very real. Just not talking – it's like ringing people on the phone. It's in your head. *Do you have a picture in your head of what Facebook is like?* Yes. It's like a getaway place. You can

talk to people so much easier and not have to talk to them face-to-face. *What kind of getaway is it is it as escape, a great wide open space, like being on holiday?* Yes, it's like being a place where you can relax, chat with your friends. *Do you feel you have a code inside yourself when you are using Facebook?* Not really. *I think you probably do because you've told me how you think about what you're putting on.* Yes, you've got to think really carefully about what you're putting on. *Is that a protective code, a code for yourself, protecting other people?* Yes, protecting other people, because when people write on other people's Walls, there's people like 13 or 14 and they shouldn't be reading that sort of thing. *What sort of thing?* Like inappropriate language and what people get up to in their evenings. *You mean by inappropriate language, swearing, and even though those kids may well hear it, you don't want them to see it on Facebook?* Yeah, it's not right, and like pictures of people drinking, it's not a very good example to set, is it, really? *You do have a code. You are having quite a strong reaction to what other people post. Do people put up pictures of themselves naked or exposing themselves or stupid things like that?* Yeah, dressed inappropriately, very little on. It's not right. *Do you ever react to that on Facebook or do you just pass it by?* Well, friends have put up pictures on Facebook and I've written comments saying it shouldn't be on and you should reconsider their decision. *Do you write that on, put it as a comment? What's their reaction to that?* Various reactions, or they just leave it. *But you don't mind challenging it. I don't mind challenging it. So if someone was passing those photos around in the college would you challenge it face-to-face?* No way. *So you are bolder on Facebook?* Yes. You've got less chance of getting a slap. *Do you ever get troubled about something getting back to you? This is one of my other questions about the relationship to ordinary life. I'm not quite sure what ordinary life is to you. Is there a kind of seamless relationship between life here and Facebook?* Yes. Facebook is a big part of my life. *Do you have any dividing line at all? How does it figure in your head? Is this real and is that real? Is it the same kind of real as this is?* Yes, you just don't see people. *Is it like being blind?* Yeah, in a way. *Supposing you made a comment on somebody's picture but you then actually meet them after making a critical comment, the sort of thing you wouldn't do in real life, has this ever happened to you?* Not really. I've not been challenged in the flesh about a comment that's been written. *Do people?* It's usually forgotten in a day. *Have you felt a need to challenge someone in the day about something you've seen on Facebook?* I've felt like it but decided to bite my tongue and be the mature one. *What has provoked that feeling inside that you've got to*

*be the mature one?* Like when people are slagging you off for everyone to see. And you're just like, well, what's the point? *Would it be more hurtful if it was said and not written or does it not matter?* It wouldn't bother me as much if it was said to my face and not written in Facebook. I'd much rather that if someone had a problem with me they said it to my face but Facebook seems to be the way people do it now. *I want to take you back to what you said about writing a comment on a picture but you wouldn't say it face-to-face.* It depends what sort of picture it is. If it's a really bad one that should not be on there I would say something but I would be polite about it. *Is there something that goes on on Facebook that actually changes ordinary life for you?* It hasn't happened to me yet. *Do you know anywhere where life has changed as a result?* No, not yet. *Lots of research shows there are people like paedophiles grooming people online.* I think it does change lives like I found out I was going to be a godmother. That was the first time I found out on Facebook. I think it does change people's lives, like if you find things out, but I've not seen it happen. *You've the sense that finding things out is what changes things.* Yeah. *How would you be if you couldn't get on Facebook?* I would be having very big tantrums. I struggle in college not being able to get Facebook on the computers. *Why is that? You are surrounded by your friends?* I don't know. It's an addiction. It's hard to kick the habit. *Does it feel like an addiction?* Yeah, you do, you get withdrawal symptoms from it. *Normally you say you're addicted when you feel there's something not quite right. I'm not sure you can have too much friendship.* I know but Facebook, it's not good for you in a way. Too much time on it – with the arguments and things that go on, it's not a good place to be, but once you're caught up in it – *you said it opened up a lot of social interactions – yeah – so some of those are very good and some of them are destructive, is that what you're saying?* Yeah. *What would you be doing if you weren't on Facebook?* Riding my horse. I still do that, but, I don't know, I'd probably be sleeping or eating. *So this really does consume – how late at night?* Till about half past eleven. *And when you wake up in the morning?* About half five. *So it doesn't leave you a lot of sleeping.* No. *You've got friends who are on it. My friends who've got horses, they're up early. And I've got to get the half-past seven bus. Are you on Facebook more often with people you're seeing every day or with people you don't see as often?* I'm trying to see how it works. The people I see every day, my friends at college. *At home, where have you got friends?* Around the village. *Are you able to see them every day? Do you see them every day?* Pretty much, if I go out. *So you are not in Facebook because you're physically isolated?* No. *Do you have*



*anyone on Facebook who's not in this country? No. So that's not it either. How far do you believe or accept what's said online? Some things you know straight away when you read them that, this isn't true, why are you doing this to yourself, why are you lying to everyone? But like things that you talk about through the day at college, it's believable, you know, you've been there, you've done it, you've seen it. But when people put on the status, having a good night tonight, out in park drinking, you think well, are you actually out or are you sat at home watching TV? So there's a part of you that reads everything that's there – this great chunk of your ordinary life – which is quite sceptical about it, thinking, I'm not sure whether I actually believe this. Do you have that when you're sitting talking to people in generally? It depends who you're talking to. You've got to have that trust in your friends, I think. So are you using that same sense of judgements when you're reading Facebook? It's the same person in here? You're using the same judgements about what's real and what's not in both places? Yeah. Are you online with anybody who's more confused about where the lines are? Yes. These are the people putting that fictitious stuff out there. Do you have understanding about why they are like that? Maybe they've got insecurities of their own and they feel like they have to – they have to impress people, to have good friendship circles and if they haven't done this other people will think less of them. You said earlier on that you needed to be in the loop. Do you have friends at all who are not using Facebook? No, apart from my mum. She doesn't because? I won't let her. Could you stop her? She wouldn't know how to get on there. I don't want her to see some things that are put on there. You don't want her to challenge them? I don't want her to challenge them because it would be really embarrassing. So the people in your family who are on Facebook and can see these things are still not actually likely to tell her? I think she does find out a few things that happen on Facebook but most of them are my cousins and my aunty who live in Xxxx and so they don't have a really good contact with my mum. I think things do get round the family but nothing major yet that's come back to me yet. Do you think that there's a code that says to people if you're not on Facebook we're not going to tell you? Yes, that you've missed out, if you're not on Facebook you've missed out. But really you shouldn't start on Facebook because it ruins your life. How far do you mean that? Quite a lot and it's so much hassle but once you've started you can't stop. What would happen if you stopped? I'd physically die. I would die. Do you think your friends would think less of you if they were not on Facebook? Yes. Would you think less of someone if they dropped out of Facebook?*

Yes. I know it sounds awful but I would. *Even though you are saying I wish I hadn't started it.* Very confusing.

**Andrew**

*How much time you spend on line and in what sort of activity?* Usually the majority of time is for college work, usually information, but I do use social network, Facebook, MSN, things like that. But I don't use the computer to go on Facebook, I've just got it there, if I'm organising a meeting with friends, things like that. *How long have you been using Facebook?* About two years. *Did you use anything before that?* No, I had MSN for talking to friends. *Do you use chat in Facebook or MSN?* No, I use chat in Facebook, it's easier, I think. *When you go on Facebook, how do you decide on what you are going to talk about, what you are going to share about yourself, what your profile looks like? How do you decide all those things, do you remember? Have they changed?* I base it on who I'm friends with, the majority of friends I've got on there are close friends, so if I put something on there it's usually relevant to our friends. *What do you do for your privacy settings?* I set it so only my friends can see, it's safer like that. *How many friends have you got on Facebook?* I think I've got just over 200. *And are they people you regularly see?* Yeah, most of them are friends from school and college, and I did a year at sixth form before college, so. Met a few people there. It is all people I know. *So everyone on your Facebook site is someone you've physically met? And do you mostly add them or do they request?* I usually get requests from them because I think when I first got them I didn't really know how to use Facebook. I'm still quite new to it. *What sort of things are you talking about on Facebook?* Usually it's organising like meeting up with people, stuff like that, friends anyway, or general sort of stuff my friends are talking about. *Do you would use it instead of seeing people?* I wouldn't use it instead but if I wasn't going to meet them I'd probably use it that and keep updated. *Do you have other people that you see in the day on your Facebook in the evening?* Sometimes, yeah, but not very often because I don't use it a lot really. *About how often would you say?* Probably about every two or three days I'd go on if a friend was on and talk to a friend, but I wouldn't go out of my way to go on it. *It's not necessary to you.* No. *When you get into Facebook and your community, what picture in your head do you have about this Facebook group?* I think about it as a way of keeping in touch, because a lot of these people I don't see any more, I went to school with them and then I left. *Does that mean you are in touch with people that without Facebook you wouldn't have been in touch with?* Possibly, yeah, but I wouldn't be friends with someone just through Facebook, I wouldn't be friends with someone I didn't really know. Yeah, it does help to keep in touch with people. *Did you do sixth form in the*

*same school? No. So you moved quite a bit, it would be quite easy not to talk to those people if you didn't have Facebook. Probably, yeah, but I'd probably still speak to them but not that much. It's been good for that, really, to carry on talking to people. Do you live locally? I live in Xxxx [about 20 miles away]. I probably wouldn't use it that much if I saw my friends often. I use it when I don't see people. Where are most of your friends? A lot of them are in Xxxx and few of them live here, or further away. So quite dispersed places. Or some of them have moved away. But you've still kept them on your list. Yeah. How many on your list would you count as your close friends? On Facebook? No, just friends. Probably no more than 10, I'd say. I've got a few close friends from different schools, but still other people outside that I'd class as friends but not close friends. Is there a difference between a Facebook friend and a close friend? I'm not sure, really. Think, I don't know. How many people have you asked to be a friend through Facebook? A few people but I don't know whether it's my name but I'm quite hard to find on Facebook apparently, so I've found people before but as I say I don't use it much, usually I come on and people have found me on it and I accept them. I'm suggesting that the number of people you've got on your Facebook site is partly because they've come and asked you not because you've gone and looked for them. Yeah, yeah. As a follow up to that, does that make a difference? Sort of, yeah, I think. The people I've sort of gone out of my way to find on there are closer friends, I think. Do you have family on your Facebook as well? Yeah, that's why I got it in the first place. My sister left for a gap year, so, it's a good way of keeping in touch. She went to Australia and then to Thailand. So you used it for that. Yeah, that was the main reason I got it. Do you still use it? She's back home now and at uni so yeah we talk on there quite a lot, yeah. If you hadn't had Facebook how would you have talked to her when she was on her gap year? Probably phoning or Skype like the video phone, we did that quite a bit, yeah, both those really, depending where she was some of the time, Facebook was the easiest option really. Did you find a difference between Skypeing somebody and Facebooking them? I think Skypeing was a bit more of a real conversation really than Facebooking them. On Facebook words just come up on the screen, it's a bit – I don't know how to put it really – You said it was a bit more real. When it's in words there's no tone of voice, there's no sense of emotion in words, it's a bit vague talking on Facebook. So you don't attach emotion to what you read on Facebook? Not too much, but there is times you can tell when someone's positive or negative. Do you use the status symbol? Yeah, I do sometimes, yeah. Do other people?*

Yeah, yeah quite a bit. *Do you respond to the things when people change their status?* Yeah, cos you can comment it so sometimes I say something such as agreeing with them if they've got something on there or you can get put in it and they say someone's had a funny day with so-and-so and you can talk about it so I would do that. *And do people comment about what you put on?* Yeah. *How do you feel about that?* I don't know. It's usually my friends so it's usually getting a reply off my friends so it's good. *Why would you put something on - what motivates you to put things on your status?* It's usually something like it relates to something that me and my friends have been talking about, if I get a response from them, we talk about it. *Does anything change in the rest of your life as a result of something you do on Facebook?* Not much really, it's just sort of an extra way of socialising, it's not massively involved like with when you see your friends. *For you it's when you see your friends?* Yeah, that's what makes the difference, yeah, I wouldn't say Facebook does a lot at all, really. *So you don't have much emotional attachment to being a Facebook member?* No not massively no but I do like to use it to talk to my friends, to keep in touch. *It's interesting that word touch.* I still use it. *I'm interested because for you it's quite a remote network, it's not something you particularly count on.* No, not too much really. *Do you know people who do?* Well yes a few. *In your friendship group?* Well yeah. *So do you get stuff to respond to from people who spend a great deal of time on it?* Yeah. *Are their posts different because they're on a lot of the time from the people who are only on occasionally?* I think so, I would only put on something that was quite relevant, something recent rather than just any old random thing but if people go on it a lot they put on any old bit of rubbish, really, nothing particularly interesting. *So you think there's just more rubbish rather than anything interesting.* Yeah. *Is there stuff from people who you meet daily, or quite often, who is actually online a great deal?* Yeah, there are people from college who are on it quite a lot of the time. But I think they're only on it to talk to the people as well, who aren't in college. *Is it different talking to someone whose mental space is full up of Facebook rather than someone whose mental space is full up with being here right now?* I'm not sure, actually. I think people who are on Facebook less are not more sociable, but I don't know how to put it, really. I don't know. *When you're talking to people then does it ever cross your mind that this might now appear on Facebook?* It does, so I think people are more careful about what they say on there. *On Facebook yes, but what about when you are in a room with someone? Does it ever cross your mind that something you are doing now is going to appear on Facebook in a couple of hours'*

*time? I dunno what I think about that. Does it cross your mind? Well it does cross my mind but it's more just a thought, it's not something I'll think about and then act on it and think I've got to be more careful what I say, anything like that. Do you have in your network people who've been badly affected by experience online? No, not really. I know people who've been added by people they've never met, people they've never heard of, stuff like that but that's all. And this has never happened to you? No, not really, no. How would you feel if it did? I'd feel a bit confused, I think. How do you feel about the fact that people who are in your friendship group and in your settings have their own settings with their friendship groups outside? What I'm not clear about is that some of these 200 people in your friendship group may have their settings completely open. So anything that you've put that they can see? – Can probably be seen by others as well. Well, they can be, I think, yeah. I'm not really bothered I don't put things on there that are really personal to me. I've heard that from other people too, 'I don't put stuff up there that's personal to me'. What does your profile look like? Have you got your photo on? It's a picture of me with some friends. But it changes. Whatever photo will make me look better. So what makes me look good is going to go up there? I'd rather have a better picture up there that makes me look good. Is that the same for all your friends, do you observe? I'm not sure, I think most people would be a bit self-conscious, would think I want a good picture, there is people who don't really mind what goes up there, I'm not like that, I'd rather have a pretty normal picture of me. Do you read things on the Wall that other people put there that you think shouldn't be there? Not really, no, I don't really sort of run round and look at everyone's stuff, I use it specifically to talk to one person. So when you're inside - I think we've established that you use chat - do you use the private messaging? I do use it a bit, yeah. I think that was when I was talking to my sister when she was abroad. Do you use email? I use it a bit for college work, stuff like that. Not a lot, I think Facebook's email system is quite similar. So if I had an email account I wouldn't be using it. I've just stuck to Facebook really. Have you been aware of anyone online who has put themselves on as looking different from what they really are? Yeah, I've seen people who come across as a bit of a different person on there than they are when you're really with them. What sort of differences are you seeing? I'm not sure, I think it's people putting themselves on as people they would want to be seen as. So they put themselves out on Facebook as how they want to be seen? I think it's a bit of social pressure that makes them want to do that. You don't feel that pressure? Not really, no. So who do you think is the real*

*person, the one on Facebook or the one you're meeting? Or is that a false division?*

Probably the person you meet, I think. You can't hide as much when you're in person. I think people use Facebook for that reason, that way, they can seem a bit different from what they are. *So Facebook is a hiding place then? Yeah, maybe, a hiding place for still being social. I think that's probably what people could use it for, I suppose. You've told me you've seen people who are different on Facebook. Yeah. How do you feel about those people when they do that?* It's a little misleading but if I then see them in person after that and it came up it would probably be a bit of a joke, something like that. *Have you ever challenged anybody on Facebook?* No, I don't think so. *Have you been challenged on Facebook?* No, I haven't. *So you haven't had that kind of conflict? And you haven't seen arguments, things like that?* No, not really, I've seen people disagree and stuff but then that's it, there's nothing else there. *In your group of 200, how many are girls?* Just over half, probably. *And are the girls different from the boys?* Yeah! *That was very strong. So are the girls using it more?* In general they use it a lot more to socialise, talk to each other things like that. I think guys generally think it's an extra, it's just Facebook, but the girls rely on it more. I do know girls who use it a lot they spend a lot of time on it, they use it to talk to their friends or something like that. But boys have it because – I know a few people who've got Facebook because Facebook's quite a good thing to have socially, I suppose, but I've got a few friends on it who've got it, I think the time they signed in to get it was the only time they've used it. They get it and don't use it that much because they don't feel the need or anything. *So if you think quite a lot of boys don't feel the need it and a lot of girls seem to need to use it, does that tell you anything more about the differences between men and women, or does it change any views you've got or does it reinforce them?* I'm not sure, I don't think it changes anything much in my view. *In your view – what in your view are the differences between girls and boys in a group together?* I think girls are a lot closer with each other than boys are. I think boys don't share as much with each other. *Do you think that means they are less close as friends?* No, not really. If people want to keep their secrets you let them – well, my close friends, I know a lot about them. I know a lot of things that a lot of people don't know about them. I'm sure there's things I don't know, but how we are as friends is really good, we're really good friends, we get on, I don't feel the need to sort of be any more. *You're saying that how you are as friends when you are physically together is what really counts for you?* Yeah. Yeah. *Do you ever have a sense of how we are as friends on Facebook?* No, I don't think I use it enough to have

that. *So you'd have to be full on to get it? Yeah. Do you see a difference in the language that girls use from the language that boys use? When the text boxes come up would you know if it was a boy or a girl?* Probably yeah because I think boys would put more information-related. I went on yesterday and it was just after the football game so all the girls' status had stuff they'd done with their friends and the majority of the boys had something to do with the England match. *As simple as that? Yeah. My last question is about believability. How believable is what you see online? Do you trust what's there?* it depends on who it is. If it's someone I knew well I'd probably trust them more if it seemed like them to put it on there, but if it was someone I didn't know that well, I'd be not forced to believe it. But you wouldn't really know otherwise...*Are you using the same judgements as you'd use if you were meeting them in real life?* No, because again there's no particular tone of voice as they're saying the words. *For you, Facebook is not - summing up, is this right - is not as real as the rest of your life?* Yeah, nowhere near. Not the same as proper socialisation with the people you meet face-to-face. *It's not a substitute?* Nowhere near. *You're sure you'd always know who it is behind the picture? You know who people are?* Yes, I'd look at the picture and the friends you've got in common. *[Gave outline of the story of Davey Winder] One of the things he said about being online was that nobody knew he was handicapped. He practised a deceit. Nobody knew he was in a wheel chair and three-quarters paralysed, he put himself out as an ordinary character. How would you feel about that?* If I met someone like that? It would probably have a lot to do with how they feel they are. I can imagine that that person would feel scared to start with. So it would be easier to come across as a different person. *What he said was that when he met people in the wheelchair they looked over him as if he didn't exist. Online – he became more noticed – they don't see the wheelchair, they respond exactly the same to the words of the screen as to everyone else. He didn't tell people for a long time that he was in a wheelchair.* I wouldn't say it was necessarily dishonest to do that. I would say it was not fair because people were getting to know a person who wasn't really there. *In what way wouldn't it be fair?* He could come across as a person who was really confident and if you meet him in person he might be quite shy and quiet. *So you are saying what you said earlier, this is someone putting what they would like to be?* Yeah. *So if I tell you that as a result of that he ended up as a very successful guy, he completely remade himself online – do you know Second Life? – you have an avatar, where you can give yourself a body and a name – he gave himself a Second Life identity and acted that out and eventually made*



*himself look like it in real life.* I suppose that's a good way if you want to change who you are. If you started there then it would become more like you if you did that more often. *Is this a lie?* Yeah, it all depends on who that person is. It can be. *It's still a lie?* Yeah, it can be.

## **Jonas**

*What do you do online?* Just fun things really, watch videos, chat to my friends. *How do you chat to your friends?* MSN, Facebook. *Do you use chat inside Facebook?* Yes. *How long have you been using Facebook?* About a year now. I used to use Bebo. *Are all your friends on Facebook too?* Most of them. *And do you have girls and boys on your Facebook?* Yes. *And how many friends do you have?* About 65. *So you keep quite a tight control?* Yes. *Which privacy settings do you use?* Open, I think. *What settings have you ticked?* I think only my friends can see me but anyone can add me. *So why do people add you as a friend?* I don't know. To build up their friendship list, I suppose. *So of that 65, how many are really your friends?* All of them. *But you could figure as a number in other people's lists?* Yes. *So do you add people to your list?* Yes. I go on to my friends' pages and I find friends on their lists who are my friends and I add them to my friends. *You don't have the setting 'the friends of my friends can see my profile'.* *You're not sure?* *What sort of things do you talk about?* What we're planning to do at the weekend, or are you going to college. *How often do you check your page?* Every day really. *And do you have girls too?* Yeah. *In equal numbers?* *Do you notice a difference in the way they use it?* No, just that girls are more creative on their pages. *Which means?* They have more interesting comments. Boys are boring. *When you say more creative what do you mean by that?* They use little symbols like hearts or kisses, things like that. *So they use the emoticons.* *Is there a difference in the way they talk?* We all talk about what we're going to do at the weekend. *Are there things you would not talk about?* Well, obviously not my secrets. *But there are people who do tell their secrets online.* I'd tell my secrets to my friends I really trust. *Would you tell them face-to-face?* I usually tell them face-to-face. *There's a message function inside Facebook – do you use that?* Yes, well, I only use that when like my friends can't use chat but they can use private messaging. *Are there times when you would use MSN instead of Facebook?* Yes, for friends who are not on Facebook. Just people who are online really. *Does that mean you like to know who's online at the same time as you are?* Yes. *What sort of times would you see this?* Whenever you have your computer on? I leave Facebook on. *For how much of the day?* For about seven hours. *You have your own laptop in your room?* Yes. *Is that morning, evening?* Usually lunchtime onwards – at weekends. About five o'clock when I'm at college. *Do you talk on Facebook to people you've seen in the day?* Yes. *Do you carry on the same conversation or start a new one?* Usually start a new one, say if we've had a bad day we talk about that. *So you*

*have a sort of wrap-up of the day? Yes. So how many of you would be involved in that? Just me and one other. Have you ever been in a situation when there are several people on talking about the same situation? Yes, usually on MSN. When you look at your Facebook profile, do you have a photograph of yourself? Yes. I just got my webcam and took a photo of myself. Did you reject pictures, how did you decide? Just one that made me look good, really. Do you use the status button? Saying what your status is? Sometimes. Do you tell people how you are feeling? No. So how do you use the button? I only use it for something big. What kind of thing would it have to be for you to put it out to your 65 friends? Well, if I had a great party - You'd just record it? Would you ever keep a written diary? I don't keep a diary. The sort of things you describe are things people used to put in a diary. Do you ever go back through your Facebook to see what you've done? I usually do go back through to see if I've been mentioned. By other people? Yes, to see if anyone likes talking about me. How does that make you feel if you find out they have been talking about you? I would find out what they'd been talking about. Would you talk to them about it face-to-face or on Facebook? On Facebook. If they said something good I'd probably tick the Like button. Somebody said to me that there are some boys who will talk to girls on Facebook about quite deep things that they wouldn't talk about to them face-to-face in case they got teased about it. Has that happened to you? Yes, sometimes. How has the girl been about that? Well, they can write down what they really think on Facebook but usually in the day we wouldn't talk about it. So there's a way in which Facebook enables you to say much more about what you really think. Yes. why can you do in on Facebook and not face-to-face? Because when they're looking at you face-to-face the pressure is on. You really feel the pressure. Yes. The difference on Facebook is? Well, you can take your time, just think about it. Would you say that was a benefit on Facebook? Yes. Are there occasions where you think because you've got time to think about it you don't say the most important thing? Sometimes the pressure means that you blurt out the most important thing. Do you think that on Facebook you get the time to say what you really think? Yes. Do you feel that Facebook makes a bigger area for you to feel in, think in? What would happen if you didn't have access to it? Get bored. Would you? Yes. What would you do with yourself? Do you have other interests? Not really, doss about really. Do you have Facebook on if you are watching television or something like that? Yes. So will you be watching television and Facebooking at the same time? Yes. Will you comment on Facebook about what's on television? Not really, if it's like something*

really good on TV I might something like that was a great programme or something. *But you won't be doing the two things together if it's really good?* No. *Has anything in your life changed as a result of something that's happened on Facebook?* Have you changed a decision, thought differently about anything? No, except that when I left secondary school if people have Facebook you can stay in contact with them. *Is that a good thing?* Yes, in case you don't see them again. *You want to stay in touch with them?* Yes. *Have you seen people that you've kept in touch with through Facebook after a period of time and how does that feel?* Well, on Facebook they don't feel like strangers, but when you see them face-to-face you have to get to know them again. *You're saying that when you're on Facebook it's good because it's kept you in touch – yes - but it hasn't updated you on how they really are.* Yes. *So would you say that the Facebook connection was not as real as seeing them face-to-face?* Yes. *And that's really strong?* So how influential is Facebook? It's better than nothing, suppose. *Do you live a long way from your friends?* Quite a way, yeah. *So is that one of the reasons why it's useful to have Facebook?* Because I've been trying to work out whether it's more useful for people who are living in remote areas who couldn't get on a bus to see friends? *Is that how it is for you? Are your secondary school friends around?* No, they like go to other colleges. *So they're just all over the place?* Yeah. *So do you have a sense of yourself – if you can't see those friends and it means you can't stay in touch with them what sort of person are you in relation to them?* If I carried on without them I'd feel a bit left out really and it would be pretty good if I could carry on seeing them. *Do you believe what you read about people on Facebook?* Yes.

## ***Duncan***

*When you go online what do you go online for?* To like play games with my friends online and stuff like that. *What sort of games?* Things like – they have guns in them and things like that; one of them's Grand Theft Auto, it's quite a violent game. Things like Modern Warfare. *Are these MUDS?* Yes, you can chat online on them. *So you can sit down at home in your room and play them. And where are your friends?* In their house. *So this is a way of playing the game. And how much time do you spend doing this?* Well, a long time when I get into it but recently I haven't spent a long time doing it. My life isn't completely conquered by it. *Do you do anything else online apart from play games?* I watch videos on YouTube and things like that. *When you are playing the game, can you do things like take a role?* We do give each other jobs and things. Like one person will be told to stand somewhere and we'll put someone somewhere else. *Who controls the game?* Well nobody really controls the game, it's just do what you want, basically. *So for instance if you go into your Modern Warfare game, what will you do in that?* Well, there will be a leader in that but anyone can do anything and just run in after a different team and basically just kill them. *How do you kill them?* With a gun or a knife or something like that. *How do you choose what weapon to use?* Bash the button till it gives you one that you like. *You get some choices in the game?* You have to choose before you start the game. *You have to have decided before you start?* Yes, but you can change it during if you go into the options. But you have to be killed to change completely. *If you're killed you can go as another character?* You can go as a different class of weapon. *Do you choose a name?* Basically the name you're signed up on X Box 5 or Playstation or whatever. That's your name online and you use that for every game you go on. *So what name do you use?* I'm not going to say that. *Can you tell me why you don't want to tell me?* It's a kind of private thing really. *All right. It's not your own name. Can you tell me how you choose the name?* You just type it in. *So don't tell me the name that you've made up. Can you tell me the sorts of names other people use?* Well, sometimes they'll just use random assortments of letters and numbers. Sometimes it's what they think they are – *Such as?* – well, it could be Bad Boy or something like that or you can just make one up from scratch off the top of your head or if you're signed up to something like YouTube you could use if you liked the name you use on that site you could use that on your online thing. *I'm quite interested in how people choose their names. I can see the options when I go online myself but I usually just use my own.* Well, it's kind of more anonymous, really, it's about being

anonymous. *So you don't want to be identified as yourself.* Yeah. *So when you are playing Modern Warfare, you're playing with your friends, do they know who you are?* – Yes - *because they know your name. But have you played games or been on websites where people don't know who you are?* Yes, I've done that. *How do people react to you, or how do you react? You're going online to be anonymous, to be not yourself. Is that's what happening?* No, you're going online to play the game, but you don't want people to know it's you doing it, do you? *Why don't you?* Well, I don't really know, to be honest. *Some of the other people I've talked to about Facebook, for example, they make a big difference between the people who go online and say who they are and the people who go online and put out stuff that makes them seem completely different. I can't see any reason not to do both of those things.* Depends on how you think about being online. *When you go online to play games, to look at Youtube, things like that, what are the main reasons? How do you feel?* It sort of expands the experience – things like games, stuff like that – it expands what you can do, stuff, and gives you a chance to play with people you've never played against before, sort of changes the way it works. *What's 'it'?* Online. *So you feel you are able to change 'online'?* *The actual online community changes as a result of what you do?* Yes, it's sort of like that. *Do you use a social network at all?* I do have like Facebook but I don't use it all that often. *Can you tell me why not?* I just think it's a load of old rubbish, really, isn't it? *What about it is the load of old rubbish?* Generally it's almost like I'm at home and I can't be bothered to go and see my mates. *So you can see people talking online to people they could just go down the road and talk to.* Yes, sometimes. *When you say there's a chat inside the games, what do you use it for?* If I'm playing a game with one of my mates that I know I'll just use the normal bluetooth headset to talk to them. *Actually physically to talk to them?* Yes, and if it's a game where they've properly got to organise themselves, tell them what to do and stuff like that. *So you are actually talking? And they can hear your voice through their headset too?* Yes. *So when you are playing the game you are combining imaginary stuff and the real world. Yes. Will you do that with people you don't know?* Well if I'm in a random online game I won't use the headset. *How do you get to a random game?* You just go on. *how do you find the website?* Just put your game in, go online if you're signed up to the X-Box or whatever and click on certain options and it will put you in a random game where you probably won't know anyone. *What makes you choose to do that sometimes?* Well, some people have high skill levels, some people have low skill levels, it's basically you get more experienced by going

online with random people. *Do you prefer doing that to playing with your mates?* To be honest I prefer playing with my mates, we don't really play for experience, we just cock around a bit. *You play for fun? Mucking around?* Yes, mucking around. *But when you choose to do the other thing, how often would you choose to go into a random game?* *Does it put you in according to your skill level?* Well, no, it's just absolutely random, it puts you in with absolutely anyone whether they're max level or the bottom level. One time I was in a game with loads of people I didn't know and I talked to my mate on the headset so I ended up talking to all of them. It wasn't what I would have planned. I didn't mind it but it's not what I would have planned but they were all right. They were people he met online and some of them were people he actually knew. *So your mate is happy to mix people he's met online with people he actually knows. Do you do that?* I've got some of his mates on my friends' site but that's about it really. *So you can have a games-playing social network that you can set up?* Yes, you can set up online games. *And you can keep a record like on Facebook?* Yes, you can find them on your friends' websites and enter them. *What's the buzz you get out of doing it?* Well it's just fun really, playing games and things like that. *Do you feel you are getting more skilled?* Yes, more skilled at games and other things. *What other things?* Well, when I'm on my computer I can actually type words faster than when I wasn't using it all that often. And when I was playing games I used to have to look at the buttons because I didn't know what did what, I was confused, but not now. *In order to play the games well, what kind of thinking do you have to do?* Depending on the games really it's oh my god we've got to run around and shoot lots of people or it just depends. It does require some form of skill when you're in a team with your mate against other mates. If you're in with random people you've got to have skill or else they're going to sort you. *Do you think your reactions have got faster?* Yes. *And when you're in the team do you have to work out what other people are doing?* Yes, but sometimes you get these random idiots and they just walk in front of you and you think they're in your team and you end up shooting them in the back of the head. *Do you get a buzz out of fiction?* Yes, the Manga books are fiction. *Has anything in your real life changed as a result of what you do online?* No not really, it's remained about the same. But when I do decide to go online I just actually have fun because I've actually learned these things that I am using online.

**Luke**

*Getting online is a pretty major activity for people of your age.* Yes. For me, I guess a lot of people in my age group it's more round – well, you get Facebook, that's just a social thing, but there's also a lot of websites, gaming, that's big for people my age and I spend a lot of time in those and it can be really helpful and nice I guess. *When you join a community, do you use your own name? What approach do you take?* Well with social stuff like Facebook or MySpace you use your own name but with gaming you never use your own name. You sort of make it up because your name or who you are doesn't matter at all. It's your online identity and you can just make anything up, anything will do. *And in this online identity what is it that you are projecting? Is it anything at all or is it something that you decide?* Well, if the identity's based only around one game that it can be only limited to that game but if you've got a variety of games and people who play all those games like you do you don't change anything. You just project who you are. *Could you give me some examples?* Well, one of the main communities I'm a member of is a thing called Steam, it's just an online thing where's just a lot of people who play video games and you can talk to them and things like that. *How do you talk to them?* Via text. You can set up microphones but I never do that, not for any particular reason but I don't. *So the text – you get text boxes and they appear at a particular point on the screen?* Yes, like MSN. *Why would you talk to them about the game?* Because it's interesting to get other people's feedback, it's like more entertaining to play with someone else than just to play on your own. It's just better because you've got someone else's views on things. *So what kind of game could you be playing where you ending up chatting to get feedback like that?* Well you get multiplayer games where you get a lot of people playing the same game and that's a really big part of the online community kind of thing because it shows how you get along with each other in that kind of situation. But you can also get single-player games where you can discuss afterwards what you think. You can discuss whatever you want, really. It doesn't have to be about the game. *What kind of games would you be playing?* There are quite a lot, actually. Does it have to be me personally or could it be just anything that's popular? *I'd be more interested in you. The more personal it is to you the more interesting it is from the researcher's point of view because it's more faithful information. You can tell me about what other people do and what you think about it but that's something separate.* One game I play a lot socially is something called Garry's Mod. You can build things on that and show them to other people and interact with other people. *What do you see*



*onscreen?* You see yourself and all sorts of building materials – well, they’re all sort of futuristic and you can just create objects and then you can stack them together and weld them and put them together and make something. *So there’s a lot of you all doing this together?* Yes. And you can – [*actively demonstrates the game on the main home pc*]. *How do you allocate, how do you decide who’s building what thing?* You don’t have to, you can just be building next to someone else. And you can decide with each other that you will all work together and build the same thing. It’s very cooperative, really. *How complicated is that, when you’re doing something with somebody else?* Well, sometimes people come on who you don’t know, and they can be people who come on and just enjoy that they can ruin other people’s stuff and make them angry and it just stirs everything up. And obviously people who are actually trying to play the game hate those people but it can get really tense and angry when someone comes on and actually starts breaking things. *And you have actually had this experience?* Yes. *It makes you tense and angry?* Yes. *One of the things I note from that is this is just a game and it’s a virtual game but it’s real enough to give you real emotions.* It’s less the game itself – sometimes the game can make you slightly annoyed – but what makes you really angry it’s when you’re playing online and it’s the fact that people have chosen to break things up, that’s what makes you angry, rather than that they’re breaking their stuff. It’s the fact that you can’t empathise with them at all, really. *Because you don’t know who they are, either?* No. *So you’re trying to handle a situation where you’re trying to manage your own emotions with people you can’t meet and can’t manage and don’t understand.* Yes, basically. *And they have the freedom to walk into this space?* Well, there are ways you can find to frustrate them but they’ll always find a way. The game itself has loads of ways in. *This doesn’t stop you from actually playing the game.* No, it’s a one-in-ten kind of experience. *How do you manage your reactions?* Well, I’ve found – it’s quite interesting actually, I’ve not had this question presented to me before – I’ve found that with text, ‘cos a lot of the online speaking that you do there’s no vocal interaction going on, it’s just text, I’ve found that it can be taken completely the wrong way. You could be joking but there’s no way they would know you were unless you added a little smiley face on to the end so you find yourself doing that a lot. And that’s I guess how I manage my reactions, by using smileys and things like that or else just generally not being as jokey as I would be in real life because you can’t get it through body language., facial expressions. *You’ve learned to change the way you write?* Yes, definitely. If you just wrote the way you spoke in real life you’d probably end up offending a lot of people.

*That's meant that you've had to decide on the emoticons you were going to use? Do you use just the same ones or do you use quite a range?* Yes, there's quite a range. They can get across different things. The ones that get across anger, they're sort of playful anger. When you're really angry you don't put across anything at all. You're sort of really clipped with your statement and that gets across that you're really angry. *You've developed another language?* Basically, yes, another way of getting across emotions via text. *A substitute for the body language, for seeing and listening to somebody?* Yes. *How has that actually made you feel?* It makes me feel sort of when reading other people's comments you can't be sure what they mean so you're sort of uneasy about how it's meant to be taken so you don't know how to respond because you don't know how it's to be taken. *If you were actually in the room with them you'd know what they meant? Would you be testing things out? What would you do? What do you mean? Well if someone – well, exactly, you've just done it, you didn't know what I meant so you looked back at me and said what do you mean and the whole angle of your head said, what do you mean?* It's much harder to get that across via text. Well, you could still say what do you mean in text but it would be harder, like there are some things you could say which could be really insulting or they could just be a joke. And if you said, what do you mean after that, you'd seem a bit weird, because it would make you seem a bit stupid. *Does that mean that quite often in your statements a lot of you would be using different signs to represent emotional states?* Yes, definitely, but it's not just emoticons, though. It's also just the way you type it. Like you avoid using certain words and start using other words. For example, if you wanted to say, say someone said something you didn't agree with but you weren't furiously angry with them, and you told them in real life, 'I think that's stupid, it's a stupid way of thinking about it,' but you could say that and your body language and your facial expression would get across that you weren't angry with them, but if you just sent a text it would seem really brutal. So, to come back, without using emoticons, you'd say, 'in my opinion that's a bit silly.' You'd say things like 'a bit' things like that, just to tone down. You wouldn't use superlatives or anything. *In the classic analysis of language, women use those extenders all the time, a little bit, a bit of, they do it all the time, and men, in speaking, characteristically they don't. But what you're saying is that in text online men are using those words in order to – well, the ones that you have experience of.* Yes. *But does that change the way you speak?* No. Face-to-face it wouldn't change how I speak. *So you change your range of behaviour?* Writing by text, it's made me much better with my grammar and spelling,

just because people tend to judge you by your grammar and spelling how intelligent you are, so if you have really bad grammar and spelling and you use shortenings loads, you come across as quite young and a bit stupid about that. But if you come across as articulate, or your grammar and punctuation is completely correct, then you can come across as quite intellectual and intelligent. *And that's a decision that you've made?* Yes. *And how does that compare with some of your friends?* Well, some – that's just me personally – some of them just choose to – *use lots of the abbreviations, things like that?* Yes. *I wondered if there was a general language of abbreviation, but you're saying it's highly individual.* I think that with that case I might be a bit unique. Most people will use the abbreviations but I've found that when talking over a chat-box, kind of thing, it's fine to use the abbreviations, but when you're in a forum, people tend to regulate their grammar because if you tend to use abbreviations you come across as really stupid. But text, if you use these abbreviations, what I've found is on a forum it's very different from when you're chatting live. *So you go into forums too?* Well, one. It's called Facepunch but it's just for a general thing, it's not for games. *How did you find it?* It started off, I was having a technical problem with Gary's Mod, there's a section of Facepunch devoted to that, so I made an account in it and got help there, and that led me to look around the rest of the site and I saw it was quite a good place to discuss things and got into it from there. *In order to resolve a particular technical problem you found yourself led into a different social situation?* Yes, I suppose. Although, with most problems, they can just be easily solved by googling them. *But you stayed in the website. It's the forum that you go into. What age are the other people in the forum?* Around my age. Oldest is probably in their early twenties, youngest is probably 10, 11. *How are you sure of that?* I've got no way of knowing for sure, but people give their birthdays and people can give their age. *And you feel inclined to trust them?* Yeah. *Because you've haven't seen any reason not to?* Yeah. Because in my experience there's been no malicious attempts – not the kind of stuff you seen on the news. *Do you know who maintains this forum?* Yes. *And does somebody moderate it?* Yes, it's got a whole team of moderators. *About Facebook? You use that as well?* I don't use that at the moment. *Because?* With Facebook, I've decided that I'm going to but not at the moment. I just haven't got round to it. I haven't got an account. But I've used Bebo and MySpace. *But when you used them, what did you use them for?* Mostly for getting updates on people you don't really speak to or people you don't know very well or you still really like, seeing how they're doing and sort of a way to socialise

when you're not really with anyone, when you're not face-to-face. *You would use them to keep in touch with people you know but not terribly well?* Yes. And they're really good websites as well. But I plan to get a Facebook site when my sister goes to university because it will be really useful then. *About how much time do you spend online?* Too long. *I don't know – that would be your judgement.* In a day, online, I'd say I spend around maybe three hours a day online. *And what kind of things will be going on at the same time? Will you be doing one thing or several things?* Well if I'm playing a game I'll just be doing one, just playing the game. It can be the whole three hours. It can be more than three hours, sometimes, it can be quite a while, if you really get into it. Because usually one of the main factors that kept you off the computer for a long time was that there was no one to talk to but if you have social interaction of the sort it is now it keeps you on there for a long time. *You see it as a social engine?* Yes, I would. *Which is real? Which is real? Us in the room now?* Well, I definitely take someone face-to-face a lot more seriously than someone over the internet. I mean it's a lot easier if you found out over the internet that someone was doing something bad, like a paedophile or something, you could easily cut them off, make sure you never ever talk to them again, but with face-to-face it's much harder so you've got to be more careful. *So you've got to take the physical more seriously?* Yes, it's more real, as you would put it. *Although you have been made to feel angry, which is real- Yes - by something online, and have you ever been made to feel happy or cheerful by what's online?* Yes. *And is that different in degree from what you might be made to feel by a person actually doing something?* Well yes in the same way it is in real life, with your interactions with people you feel a lot – you get to feel a lot more cheery than you do angry. I think it's based the person, who you are. *People have committed murder in real life as a result of things that have happened online.* It shows how seriously you can take it really. *But you don't?* Well, if someone gives you a fact over the internet then you're going to believe it, usually. In the same way that if someone told you a fact you would believe it in real life. *In a way you are saying that the same checks and balances that you would use in real life you use online.* Except that online it can be much easier to put it in perspective because online it's much harder - sort of - to - if someone's giving all this positive body language, facial expression, things like that, telling you that this is true, kind of thing, it's much too hard not to believe it. But online you're just looking at - bear what they've said. *Thinking about how you segment your day, how you spend your time, you've time at home with the reality that this is, you've got time out and about at*

*school and with your friends and that then there's time online. You're describing quite a lot of time online, although at school you're in very intense social interactions. But you still choose a long time in what you might call cyberspace as another location. For me personally at the moment I mainly choose that time mainly online not because of its social element but because that's where the video games are if you know what I mean. To play some of the video games you have to go online. And those video games are really interesting to you? Yes. They're really entertaining. Do you feel that you have changed any way as a result of the time spent online? Yes. I think I've changed positively and negatively as a result of games played online. As I've said, I've become more articulate from having been online, better at that. I think I've become better at interacting with people, actually. There are negative aspects, like, I mean I spent more time offline, if you know what I mean, things like that. Someone else told me she was addicted to time online, she said she had to do it, so I said, 'Why don't you stop?' 'I can't'. There is that. By addicted – that was a different scene, that was her language, not mine. I wouldn't say I was addicted, I'd say there's a lot tying you to being online, like when you go online you make online friends sort of thing and they're tying you in to going back online – like you would with any other friends? Yes. So have you got online friends through the games, particularly, that you don't meet? Yes, I've got loads that I haven't met and I never will. So when you say they are friends, what does that mean for you? Are they the same as friends at school, or - ? No, I'd say it's really hard if not impossible to get an online friend who you feel as close to as you would at school. Are you using the word friend because there isn't any other word you can use, is that it, does it sit inside some part of your brain that says actually this feels like a friend? Well, with some of them it's more someone you can talk to, but with some of them it is, because you've got a lot in common with them – you like each other. In the past, people used to have pen friends - yes, something like that – and when they met they got on fantastically because they'd made the relationship through writing, so are you saying that's the same sort of thing that's happening here, with some of these people? I think so, yeah. I think there's like it's shown you how much you've got in common and how similar you are. I want to ask you something about the technicalities of it – how many people are there in a game at the same time? It can vary, sometimes over a 100, sometimes about 16. How many of those people will you be talking to at any one time? Any one time – I could be, sometimes you say things that address everyone, but most of the time it's just one on one, or at most three other people. But can other people see*

*what you are saying to the one on one? There are ways of privately talking to other people, and ways where everyone can see it. What do you choose to do? Most of the time do it where everyone can see it because there's nothing private about what I'm saying. So you're saying that as a one-on-one, as if addressing someone physically.*

*There's two different forms of chat – one of them privately messaging, and one of the global, and I usually use global mostly because what I'm saying, because of the content of what I'm saying. How does it show up on the screen, the global chat? Mostly your sentence comes up as a little message - and everyone can see it? Yes. And can you see what's gone before and after? Yes. It comes up as a little scroll? Yes, in a little box, so you can scroll up and down. Like in a forum only much less formal? Yes. So what you're telling me, normally when you talk face-to-face in a group of friends, supposing there were 5 or 6 of you sitting down together so you can talk, it's highly likely that if you were talking to one person the others would be talking to each other - Yes - so it's highly likely that they wouldn't be able to clock what you've said. It isn't that we're hiding; it's the way that we work. Yes. A lot of people are talking at the same time. But when you are doing the global everyone can see it even if you're only talking to one person. Well yes, everyone can see it but not everyone takes it in. A lot of the time you'd say something and the other person would read it but it quickly gets bumped away by another thing. I'm trying to get a feel of what a social network is like. Could you say there is a feeling around the game you're in? When you're playing a game does it feel like you're with a bunch of friends, or does it feel it's all determined by the game itself? It's usually determined by the game itself. I mean, it's very hard to have separate conversations in the game, because of the reason you said. So it's more about if you're not part of that conversation you don't speak or you use private messaging – or you are carrying on with the game? Yes. I'm trying to get at – you've told me how you've changed through being online, and you're monitoring yourself. You've told me that you've decided how you've decided to spell and punctuate as accurately as you can. You've also decided to think very carefully about how you write things. These are your private decisions. Yes. Have you been affected by the way that other people say things online? I think so. I am trying to understand how it would look on a screen. If you can imagine on a forum that someone says something that – I dunno – that the general consensus is that it's a stupid thing to say, and everyone in the forum comes in and says, 'that was a stupid thing to say' and insults them for it, then you learn from that that whatever they've said and the way they've said it you don't repeat that or next time it's*

you as the victim. *There are things where you can see you could be a victim of something so you're not going to do it . Yes. So you're learning from a social situation that isn't a real one . When you watch something in a soap opera which is said to be very influential but you know that you are never going to interact with anyone who's in the plot – in the game you are always interacting.* I don't get what you mean. *When you're online, playing a game with other people, it's a game, it's not a deadly serious thing. But it has that edge of seriousness in it because at any time it has the potential to affect you.* You do learn socially from a game, not in the same way as in real life, but you learn not to say certain things. What's actually quite interesting is I've found that on the forums and in the chat-box you imagine someone as they're typing what they've just shown you like you imagine them as they're typing and you imagine what sort of emotions they're trying to get across. And you get some really bitter people on the forum who obviously are always imagining people saying everything with sort of a negative twist to it and insulting sarcastic twist to it even if they're not. *So you can see that from the way they type things?* Yes, because sometimes statements can be taken either way, they are completely neutral, you can take them as nice, sometimes they take them negatively, and the people who take them negatively, you can tell that's what they always do because that's the way they imagine people typing in. *It strikes me that you have a heightened awareness of the way people communicate through the written word as a result – definitely – as a result of being online.* Yes, it's taught me that. *It's quite a big deal. At my age, through most of my career, relationships with people would be through speech.* It's really highlighted the difference between speech and text. it shows how hard it is to get across emotions through text than it is through speech. Because there's a lot less variable through the text. It's just the content, and that's it. Whereas with speech...

*Do real things actually happen online? Real things, like events? Well it's obviously a different event, isn't it? It's the nature of the event is different .* Well ok they do, but obviously not in the same scale as real life, it's more about discussing what's happened in real life. In the same way that you could say something's happened if you could have a really interesting conversation and had an epiphany sort of thing, that's when you could say something's happened over text because you can still learn something. *This emotional, this heightened awareness of the nature of language is giving you a heightened understanding of the importance of face-to-face because it has given you a greater understanding of the value of face-to-face.* It definitely has. It's taught me a lot

about social interaction. How people react to things being said. I've learned a lot about that. *You have said a lot 'I learned' and not 'somebody's taught me' and all this has been free to choose. Yes. You've chosen your websites, you've chosen your forum, you are choosing to go back to Facebook at some point. I'm just thinking about the kind of things that people always think they have to teach to young people when they're growing up. What you've gone and found for yourself is equally or more powerful.*

Well, in school, I don't know if this is a really good example or completely off the mark here, in school there's a whole subject on citizenship where you learn ethics and so on, well, you do learn a great deal of that online, I think. You learn how to say things in a way that won't be insulting, or how to – basically that. *Have you joined an online petition, for example?* I haven't but I know it's possible. *Some of them are very damaging of course but some of them do change things. When you go back into Facebook, have you made decisions about who can see what?* Already? No, but instantly I can make a decision that only friends are going to be able to see any personal details about me. I'm not going to let any stranger wander in and see details about it. I've decided that. Common sense, really. *I've talked to people who don't. But you can still walk into other people's Facebook sites even with the privacy settings.* Yes, well, I suppose. *Is that going to stop you?* It's not going to stop me because I know for one that that's very rare – I know – I trust my own common sense to know who to talk to who not to talk to. *You told me earlier that you don't always know that people are who they say they are but you think you will be able to work it out? In the forum, for example?* It's surprisingly easy to tell when it's not them [ie who they claim to be]. Their idioms and things like that, their way of speaking, it can change dramatically when it's someone else. *You've found that out?* Yes, I've learned through text. I think. I mean, people are a lot more individual than you think. *You've learned to recognise the individuality of other people through text?* Yes. *Is there anything else you think it would be helpful for me to know?* Well yes, about this individuality thing, it is possible to mimic other people so you have a kind of virtual acting going on and sometimes you can do it quite successfully and make others believe because you are not restricted to the way you look. *Do you know about the website Second Life?* Yes. *And the use of an avatar? Would you ever consider something else like that?* No, it's too realistic. I play games because they're different and fun and they're designed to entertain but with Second Life you get another person to be and if I wanted that – I've got real life. It's too like real life to be bothered with. You play games because they're abstract and they're



different, but if Second Life's that real, what's the point of playing it? *Have you seen anybody playing it?* No, though I have seen people playing things that are similar, but they're not 'real', not like Second Life. [*Second Life for under 18s being set up*]. *Would you be interested in that?* No but I can think of people who would be. If you were sort of – probably a bit of a conclusion to jump to, a bit wild, then people who want to reinvent themselves can choose to go on Second Life- it's impartial what you meet on Second Life, you're not going to get judged on what you've already done. *Would you see being online anywhere as a place to reinvent yourself?* Apart from Second Life? Well, I suppose, not wholly reinventing yourself. But if you even fancy trying to be someone else, trying to change your personality - say you're very timid and you want to try being outspoken something like that – then you could just go on Steam or a forum and just act like you would and see if it works out for you, if people like it and see if that's how you want to be in real life. I wouldn't do it myself, though.

**Kate**

*What communities do you belong to, how do you present yourself?* Mainly peer pressure – if all my friends are on it then I want to be part of it. Also I am interested by how it's portrayed in the media. So if I know there's been lots of bullying etc so I don't tend to go on it. I don't spend a lot of time on internet because I'm revising etc. So I don't go on Twitter. But on Facebook, I think safety's quite important so I have all the safety settings. *How long have you used Facebook?* Two years maybe? *And did you have the kind of awareness you have now right from the start?* My parents always quite liked making sure I knew what was going on but I don't think I knew quite how many people could see what was going on. As I do now. *What are you using Facebook for?* Social – and for organising – and for amusement, time-spending. *When do you log on?* I don't really have a routine, but sometimes I'll be doing revision and it's a revision break, or in the evenings, as a break from watching tv or doing nothing. But I don't have it on my phone. *You have a laptop?* Yes. *Who are you talking to on Facebook?* Well, I think it's really good to talk to people you don't speak to very much. Like I have a French girl on there who came over and I don't speak to her very much and I see what she's doing. And it also helps me with my French. *What do you mean, see what's she's doing?* Look at her Wall, talk to her, look at her pictures. *You're making the assumption there will be a Wall to look at.* Yes. *Do you write on your own Wall?* Yes. *What sort of things do you put?* Lots of people put what they're doing every minute, all their thoughts, I don't do it to that extent, just like, had a funny incident, or if I'm with a lot of people I might put 'at – blahdyblah'. I upload lots of pictures as well. *You have a photo album? What sort of photos do you put on?* Parties, places I've been. Lots of people like have photos and it's a good way of logging and it's a good way of not filling up your computer. *When you're looking at people's Walls, how much variety do you see?* Oh, some people hardly ever put but some people do lots of quizzes so you see lots of quiz answers, and some people use it like you can see every half hour that they've done something. It tends to be the people who go on Walls that have other people commenting on their Walls. I don't go on very often so people don't normally post on my Wall. Some people go on all the time, have lots of other people posting. *Do you post on other people's Walls?* Sometimes, but normally it's inbox because it's private. *Do you ever chat?* All the time. That's what I really use it for. *Who are you chatting to?* My friends. There's a few from school but mainly it's people who are out of school that I don't see. *Do you do that through Facebook because it's free?* Yes, it's free and it's fast. You'll know if

they're on Facebook but if you text them they could be doing something else. *Are you ever in a chat where's there's more than one person?* I don't do that but others do. I've never done that. *Do you use it for messaging?* Yes. *How do you choose between email and chat and messaging?* For my friends I always use Facebook inbox or I use email for my friends who I know don't go on Facebook very much. But I always talk to adults over email and do important things over email. And less important things over Facebook. *Why is that?* People check their Facebook more so you'll get a response quicker and email's kind of gone out of fashion. But I think it's a bit informal to speak to adults on Facebook. Don't have too many adults on Facebook. *Who have you got on your Facebook?* *How many Facebook friends?* Ooh, I don't know, I think 200 or something like that, which isn't very many compared to lots of people but I only have who I know, so - *Are your parents on Facebook?* Yeah. *So do they look at your Facebook?* Yeah. [laugh] which isn't always necessarily a good thing but yeah they do. *Do you?* I could block them from things but I do have the less exciting things to say. *Have you come across issues at all yourself with things that have been read on Facebook that other people have?* Oh lots of time people misinterpret things or people who know something isn't their business will make it their business on Facebook. Lot of my friends have arguments on Facebook and sometimes it gets quite heated but I try to stay away from that. *And do you know what causes the argument on Facebook?* Well, normally it's like saying you don't like someone and you can kind of hide behind it on Facebook, so it's kind of a way of bullying that isn't as obvious. Because if you do it to their face there's going to be other people around who will stop you but on Facebook all things are said, and people normally sort out their problems on Facebook rather than face-to-face. *Do they?* Yeah, which I don't like. *How do you sort yours out?* Face-to-face or phone call. *So if you had an issue you wouldn't be Facebooking it?* No, because it's hard to read your emotions on Facebook and often – like I know people who have said to me, 'oh look what so and so said, it's really aggressive', but I say, 'mm but it might not mean that, it might be in a happy way', it all depends how you decide to read it. *As far as you're concerned, then, there's a kind of emotional disconnect?* Yeah. *Is that about – why do you think that is?* Not sure. I think it is because you can't actually see the person so they're not ....what you're saying you're not thinking about them, you're thinking about your own reactions. *If you think about literature, and literature's something you're interested in, literature is all conducted through words. Yep. So what's the difference? Because we'd say that words were in a literary context we'd use*

*to arouse emotion or to create an emotional effect.* But the thing is when you read a book it's really in context, you know what all the key book characters are thinking, but when it's on Facebook if I get a message or a text then I don't know what the person – how the person is feeling. It could be 'where are you?' [mimicked in jocular voice] or could be aggressive, because you don't know what they're doing. *Do you find that you're taking any kind of care with how you say things?* Yeah. *Are there different bits of Facebook where you'd be more careful than others?* Ah yes, when commenting on different people's Facebook statuses. Some people will just write whatever comes out but other people think about it. *Would you have a different sort of – would you express yourself differently if you were chatting or messaging or writing on the Wall?* If I'm just chatting I tend not to reread it, but if I'm in-boxing I would tend to proof-read it. *Do you do the same with email?* Yrs. I always proofread my email, because my spelling's not very good and I know it. *And you're connecting email with adults?* Yes. *Do you use email at all with your peer group?* Yes, but not very often because most of them don't use it. *And if you do use it with your peer group do you proof-read it still?* Yes, but not with as much care. *I want to ask you if there are any other things you're using the internet for, but can I stick with this a bit? About whether anything that's happened in your life as a result of something that has happened – has been said or done – through Facebook?* Sometimes I like people less because of what they say on Facebook, or it just emphasises my opinions of somebody. *You get new light on them?* Yes. *What you've actually said to me is that it's a form of hiding and yet as a form of hiding it still displays something because you're interpreting.* But I'm not necessarily interpreting correctly. *It doesn't mean you're incorrect either. What kind of criteria... what's making you form the judgement?* What do you mean? *When you say you may not like them as much because of what's in Facebook what are you relying on in your own judgment that makes you think that?* Well just a kind of tone, and how people – whether people take the mick, because people often take the mick online. When I say hide, I don't mean they do less, they do more, because they think you can't see them. So either way you can see who's written it. But on some there are other things with Facebook – the name I can't remember – Formspring. *What's that?* It's like a big Wall where you post questions but they're anonymous. Or you can do them anonymously or not. *Why is Formspring related to Facebook?* Because you can choose to show your questions on the Facebook page and then you can see if your friends have Formspring through Facebook. But it can get really bitchy on Formspring so you can do anonymous

things. So people can say anonymous things or nice things. And they often spread rumours around through Formspring. *Do you know what makes people spread rumours? Do they set out to spread rumours?* Yes. *Why?* They're not very nice, because all the feelings that they have that they don't want to be known as being horrible they use Formspring because nobody knows. Or they think it's funny, their best friends will find it funny. *Do you think that would be happening if there weren't a social network online? Would people do it? Would people be horrible to each other? Spread rumours?* Yes. I'm sure there will always be rumours but it's just a more facetious way of doing it. *Do you think more happens as a result of that? More rumours?* Yes. I think people don't need to have as much shame because no one necessarily has to know it's them. *Can you get Facebook at school?* No, it's blocked. *In one school the network manager told me people can find their way round all the blocks. Yes, you can, but it's like YouTube is blocked and if you go on a Czech page for YouTube you can get on it, but I don't think anyone in our school's found a way on to Facebook. And they check our passwords, if they see we've been on Facebook then they'll just block it so you won't be able to get on again. So you know school can check your history. Yes. Does everybody know that?* Yes but it doesn't stop them. It's not like a routine check they do, just random. *Part of keeping the whole network as clean as they can? Yes. Do things get posted on Facebook which are about school? Yes. And have an impact in school?* Yes. People have arguments on Facebook or make – they'll talk about teachers in a way they wouldn't – you'd never say what they said on Facebook to the teacher's face but the teacher'll never know. So yeah people definitely act differently. Or emphasise their bad character. *I was told about an incident where a group of kids didn't like their form teacher so they set up a Facebook site which was basically a petition against this teacher and hordes and hordes of people got on this site who didn't know anything about the school, the kids, the teachers, but just did. Does this sound a likely sort of thing to you?* Yes, well sometimes it's used for organising, like protests against student cuts, we knew about it through Facebook. You get told about it and then you join it. *You said something about organising through Facebook?* Oh I organise parties rather than petitions. More like, do you want to come to the cinema? - like invitations. *That's the quickest way for you to do it?* Yes. *What sort of things would you put on your Wall?* Like what I've been doing, who I'm with. *Do you put anything on that's – status? There isn't anything you tick?* The status is what you put. *So it's just how at this time I'm feeling today. Are there things you think that*

*Facebook – apart from organising parties, outings – are there things that Facebook is really positive for? Help you keep in touch, time-waster, good games – do you think that what’s happening, all the things you get engaged in on Facebook, do you think about them as more real, less real, the same as the rest of your life? Kind of different – it’s almost like a different kind of life. It’s hard to describe but different things happen on it, so – like for instance my friends had like a fight on it – my friends against my not-friends – but they wouldn’t do that verbally in real life but then they would on Facebook, and they didn’t talk about it in school to each other, but they did within their circles but not the circles against each other. But they were battling on Facebook. Do you mean like an alternative life, then? Yes. And you didn’t see that having an impact on their main life? Well it did, it made things a bit more frosty but there was still kind of civil face-to-face. You having seen some stuff online, don’t like somebody as much because you think you’ve learned more about them. I wouldn’t say – it builds on what you already ... Ok. It intensifies things? Yes. So it’s more likely to push things to an extreme, either way. I wouldn’t dislike them on Facebook unless they did something really horrible to me, because then you can see – because a lot of people use Facebook to impress their friends, so you can see kind of how horrid people were being or how nice. Do you think that the potential of that kind of social network increases the possibilities for people to get on or is it useful because it increases possibilities? It’s not dangerous because it increases the possibilities? I’m sure it’s both. It works in both ways. It might build on someone’s relationship because they might see that they’ve started talking about similar kinds of thing, but it also creates arguments. Is Facebook a totally democratic open anybody can get into it – does that make you feel more or less positive about human nature or does it not make a difference? I haven’t asked this question before. It’s quite deep. I don’t know what I think. I’m not sure, I don’t really think about it. But you’re experiencing it - my question arises out of what you’re experiencing. Yes. What else do you go online for? For homework and for revision, for games. When you’re gaming, do you go to gaming sites? I don’t like sign up to them and have a character, I don’t really do that, I just do like random games because I don’t really use it that much. But I do a lot of image editing online – I use free stuff for working with. Why do you do that? Because it’s designed to do everything you need so it’s fast and fun. The image editing – what happens? Upload an image and then you can change the colours, draw, add text, do word-wrap, save it or upload to Facebook, so I use it for cards and photographs. So it gives you more possibilities for creating things?*

Yes. *You said you didn't like going online signed up for gaming.* It's, not that I don't like it, it's just that I haven't really got into it. *IF you did get into it, would you sign up as yourself?* No, I wouldn't use my own name, they normally recommend not to do that, to make one up. On the ones where I have done that I've used pets' names. *Do you know why that's recommended?* Because it's safer. *Because you don't know who you're on the site with?* And someone can't see you. *Have you ever used a forum or a chatroom or an enquiry site?* Like where you ask questions and then answer? Well I use already asked questions but I don't really use them to ask for or answer questions. I just google it and if some come up... *So you don't get into a forum and actually take part in it?* No. *Have you ever read forums?* Yeah, I do but I'm not really interested by them. *Have you ever used or read a blog?* I know people who have but I don't use them. I don't have enough interest in them. *You're not tempted to use a blog? Do you keep a diary of any kind, have you ever?* Well if I ever have something or ideas that're really important I do write it down. I thought about setting up a blog... *so you're not trying to keep track of things: your trail is in Facebook?* No, I don't need it enough for it to be on Facebook, but the photographs are. *That's the main record?* [nods]

*Melanie*

*When you go online, how do you decide what you're going online for and in any forum or network how do you present yourself?* Well I always know that it's the same as being face-to-face because just because you're typing something doesn't mean that people don't take what you say into account. So I always try to be myself and to be polite and to know that there's people of all ages online. So I always try to be polite. When I'm with my friends I always try to be myself. But I know for a fact that there are people who go online often to be mean to other people. Because I think people have more confidence online because they have more time to think things through. When I go online I tend to just talk to my friends. *So where are you going online?* You've probably heard of Facebook. Well it's really good for organising things like events and we can sort out who's coming. For instance, I've a birthday coming up and I can plan with my friends where to go. And I like to use it to find friends on the other side of the world. *How would you find friends on the other side of the world?* Well you can search people's names. I can search through my parents' friends lists. *How long have you been using Facebook?* I think about two years now and I understand that it was actually designed for people over the age of 13 but people much younger than that use it now. And also older people, like my parents and grandparents use it. It used to be the younger generations to start off with but I think people have realised it's a lot more than it seems. *What do you use it for, apart from organising parties and things?* You were saying before about searching for your parents' friends. Yes. *What are your privacy settings?* Only my friends can see my stuff. I make it so people can see my name and add me, but I only make it private. I don't want people I don't know looking at my information. *How many friends?* I've got about 200 friends. A lot of them are people I know from primary school and not all of them I talk to every day. Sometimes you get people adding you that you don't know and you have to say, I'm sorry, I don't know you and I'm not going to have you. I'd never add anyone I don't know. I might add somebody I know through family relations – once or twice – *so you've verified them* – yes, I'd never add anyone I wasn't clear who they were. *Do you write on a Wall, do you keep your own Wall up?* I write on other people's Wall. *How often do you go on?* Depends what I'm up to. I tend to check it at least once a day, I'm not one of those people who stays on all day, I think that's a bit miserable. I go on just to check if anyone's sent me any messages or anything to arrange events. *So you use it to say 'I'm doing something, does anyone want to join me?'* Yes, I don't update my status every



hour of the day as some people do, which can get quite annoying. I don't need to know everything that's going on in your life. *Do you use messaging, do you chat?* Yes, I chat with my friends sometimes. Some people tend to talk to people in their own house which I think is weird. My mum does that sometimes and I say, just come upstairs. My friend, who lives in Australia, I talk to her a lot. Obviously it costs a lot to ring her so we message a lot. *Would you talk in the evening to people you've seen in the day at school?* If I'm online I tend to talk to people I haven't actually talked to throughout the day, to see how they are because I haven't actually caught up with them all day. Sometimes, yeah. *Would you continue in the evening a conversation you'd started in the day?* No, definitely not. Maybe if we'd mentioned something in the day and we wanted to organise it, maybe that. Definitely not. *Have you seen other people doing things like that?* I see a lot of people saying we met up today, let's talk later. Not as much as I used to. I think Facebook's one of those things where, I dunno, you use it so much. I tend to call people more now. If I want to carry on the conversation I prefer talking to people over the phone. I think a lot of things you say on Facebook you don't know how to determine them, like you read it and you think, I don't know. *You've already said you take quite a lot of care about how you express yourself.* Yeah, especially now my mum's got Facebook and now she can see everything that's happening. *Does she look at it?* I don't know. I know she checks my brother's a lot because now he's at university in York, she likes to see what's going on in his life, not stalking, just seeing pictures. *Stalking? Some people could think of it as stalking?* Yeah, I think some people use it like that, when you get people adding you that you don't know. *I'm just wondering whether if inside a family as a mother you keep on looking at your children?* I think some parents do do that. I mean, once a child leaves the house in the morning, you don't know what their life is like at school, and when they look at Facebook they've got an idea about what's happening. *Speaking as a parent, you do yearn to get a feeling of what their life is like. But my intense memory as a teenager was that I did not want my parents to know what my life was like. I didn't have anything to hide, particularly, I didn't want them to know.* I know what you mean, I think a lot of my friends actually don't add their parents any more, they want to respect their privacy. A lot of people don't really mind. I think it really depends how often you go on. The more you go on, the more your parents are going to find out things about you. *I've never read my children's letters or diaries or private papers or anything they left around because I would have hated it if my parents had read my stuff.* Yes. *So as an article of faith I*

*never did. And if I'd had Facebook I wouldn't have wanted my parents to see it. But as a parent I do want to know. You said it's not stalking - I think parents do like to keep it – even if they're not concerned about what they're doing, they just want to know what's going on in your life once your children have moved out of the house. Have you talked to your brother about his reactions? When I first told him that my parents were looking at things on his Wall he went, 'oh'. I think he quite liked to know that they cared so much as to see what was going on in his life. I know for a fact my parents like to bring up things like, 'oho, is that a new picture of you, Mike?' And sometimes he wants to say, 'please don't ask', so I think sometimes he doesn't particularly like it. A young lad I met who's in his second year at university and uses Facebook a lot and he's quite- he has a very good relationship with his parents - but he's still not wild about the fact that his mother now has Facebook. I can understand why. When you first get Facebook you think it's between you and your friends, but the moment your parents are on it, you have to think about it, will my parents be all right about my saying this. And sometimes I have to talk to my friends and say don't put that on my Wall, it's not appropriate, my parents are on Facebook now, my parents will be able to see all this. So the moment they're on Facebook everything about you your parents can know. Quite quickly you talked to me about how what was designed for one stratum of age is now seen by all sorts of ages. Do you think that's gradually changing the culture for some Facebook users? I don't know how to describe this, really. This is quite specific. When I first got Facebook there were a lot of kid-related things on it, games everything was kind of simplified so it was easy to use. I've noticed that a lot of those things that kids used why I was first on it aren't really there any more. I mean they might be because we've all grown up so we don't use them so they don't come up any more, but I think it has adapted a lot for different generations to use it. I think it has changed a bit. I think as the people who made it realised how many different people were using it, they've kind of changed it and also it applies to the much larger audience. It doesn't have all those kiddy features it once did. Do you think it builds a greater sense of community if more members of the family are on it? I think so. I have some friends where the whole of their family is on it, so they're always updating each other and commenting on all these things. In a way it brings the family closer together because they're talking a lot more and they don't have to phone and pay, they can just talk to each other. I know for a fact some people don't meet up as much, they think oh we can just talk online, we don't have to meet up in the real world. So you would say that what we're doing [this*

interview] *is in the real world. But if we were doing this through Facebook what would it be?* I think things are a lot less realistic on Facebook. I've said before when you're on Facebook you analyse a lot more, you think about what you're saying a lot more, whereas in the real world it's spontaneous. I'm not sure what you'd call it. *Are you saying there's a slightly artificial shape to what happens on Facebook?* Yes, I think so. Also a lot of people slightly change their personalities on Facebook and you think, you're not like that in real life, in the real world at all. I think gosh, people are a lot different online. I think when people realise everyone's looking at what they're saying, they think I'd better change because everyone's looking at it, I need to seem cool or something. *There's something about having a couple of hundred people or more simultaneously looking at the way you are which might change the way you behave? Is that what you're saying?* I think so. Yeah, I think that a lot, but on a good side of it, the people who in the real world are shy have a voice on Facebook. But the thing about Facebook is a lot of people use it to bully the people they wouldn't have the guts to bully at school, for instance, because I think people feel a lot braver online, because you don't – you're not that face-to-face, you don't have to think up things spontaneously. *It's an artificial courage?* Yeah. *So more bullying is happening online than might happen face-to-face.* Yeah, and I think a lot of things that happen online are brought into school, and I will not name names, obviously, but sometimes someone might say something about someone online and what would normally stay online and wouldn't be brought into the real world will be brought into the real world. *If it had been a real conversation between two people face-to-face outside, in a park for instance, because it's online lots of people can see it? is that what you mean?* I think so, and I think when online you think, oh that was funny, you see who else is online and you think I'll tell them and it gets to be one of those things where everyone says, did you hear about this? But in the real world you wouldn't. I think when you're online you have it typed there, everything they've just said, and that can quite easily be made visible to the whole world, it can just be brought into school or wherever you are. *The other thing is that once you've typed it you've written it down.* And you can't get rid of it once you've written it. Whereas something you say, you can say to someone else, oh don't tell anyone else, and you can kind of trust them but online when you think about it anyone can sign on to your account and see what you've been saying about them. I know the police can get online and they can see everything that you've typed on Facebook and anything on Facebook could affect your future. My parents always warn

me, never put anything on Facebook horrible about anyone because in a few years anyone you ever want to get a job with can look at your Facebook and see what you've been doing. What you say about the real world, I don't think that gets much attention really. *In fact it's a form of libel? Something written down that people can see. Has anything changed in your own life as a result of something you've met online?* My views on people can change from what I see online. You find out a lot more about people. You don't know what to believe but you still – your views can change a lot. When I'm saying things in the real world I think a lot more about how I'm coming across to people. I think online when people constantly have the power to comment upon anything you've said, I think about it a lot. I think on Facebook a lot of people don't really have the confidence to say what they would in the real world because they think, oh gosh, people could comment on what I'm saying kind of thing. *So it's given confidence to bully? Yes. And it's also taken confidence away from some people to be themselves? Yes. So are you saying that the existence of Facebook is actually helping to shape the way people behave in the real world?* I think so. For some people, not all people, for some people who aren't so comfortable around themselves, once Facebook came around suddenly had that realisation that now anyone can now say anything about you and then you realise just kind of what it's like in the real world. I'd better watch what I'm saying, I better not say too much. *So someone who's already a bit shy, Facebook could be quite devastating? Yes. You've got hints of this, have you, from people you know at school?* Yes, a lot of people I know who are really quiet who when Facebook first came out thought, great, I can really talk to people online, I thought, that's great, those people I thought were really shy can be confident, but after a while it starts to really die down. People bullying them, they've gone quiet now. The quietness on Facebook reflects where they really are. *It leaves them nowhere to go? Yeah, it's so sad. It sounds like a prison, like they're driven into a box. Apart from – you're very reflective about your own experience online. Do you do anything other than Facebook? Do you use email? Yes, not as much as I used to. Who do you email? How do you choose between Facebook and text and email?* I tend to use email with Xxxx – we email each other links. We don't do that over Facebook. We also email each other drafts of homework if we're helping each other; that kind of thing. *Do you see it as more private?* Oh yes, it's a lot different to Facebook, whereas you can send messages to each other but when you've got that freedom to immediately go and talk to someone on that same website I think things are a lot less private. *I worked out that you could just cut*

*and paste from a private message in Facebook.* And everyone could see it, yes, but on Hotmail you can't do that. *Significant important things you would email separately – like homework?* Well, I used to email my friend but as soon as Facebook came up and we could write on each other's Walls – hotmail's a dying thing, I think. *Do you go online for anything else?* Not really. I sometimes go on YouTube, watch some videos, but not so much now. I think the internet's primarily for Facebook, it's been used so much now. Facebook's a verb now. It's really, really a big part of being online. If you go on the internet it's practically the first thing you do. *Do you have it as your home page?* No, I have Google. I couldn't stand going online and having Facebook there, specially now I'm doing my exams, if the first thing I saw was Facebook I'd get distracted. *Do you have friends who are much more active on Facebook than you are?* I think it tends to be – it's quite contradictory, this - some of shy people might be online, might not be saying stuff all the time but being online all the time. *Why would that be?* I think people prefer to talk to people that write on Walls. Like you leave a light on in a room you leave Facebook on. *What a fantastic image. People hide on Facebook too. The person you put out on Facebook isn't necessarily the person you are. Have you heard of the idea of hiding in plain sight?* I think I can understand that. I think it's the kind of thing where you act natural so people don't notice. *Do you think then – have you experience of people getting hurt or damaged or something misleading happening through social networking?* I think so, I think- as I said before, the bullying. I think if there's a particular person you don't get along with, people have the courage to say things over Facebook. *Are you willing to give me an example of what people would say?* I think bullying would be say if someone updated their status, someone not very popular, you tend to get someone who updates their status quite obviously referring to the other person and a lot of people see that and think, oh that's funny, and that shy person has really been put down there. They haven't been spoken to directly, but someone's made a reference to them.

*Marie*

*When you join an online community, how do you decide on your approach? When it comes to the internet and communities like that I'm always quite pragmatic about it. Facebook for example would be an obvious one. I joined because it was a good way of keeping in touch with my friends and simply that. And I suppose that the way I approached it fell into place from that. I knew that it wouldn't be something so teleological, it wouldn't be that I need to protect myself from something like this, and then I can go speak to my friends, it would be, yeah, I wanna stay in touch with my friends and speak to some old friends, and then the way I project myself kind of falls from that. It's very natural. In fact sometimes it's sometimes even flippant, which is my kind of joking personality. According to Facebook I'm an acid-test subject and I speak fluent sarcasm and gibberish. So what have you done on Facebook that's given you that feedback? Not much, I mean I mainly use it just to keep in touch with old friends. So do you use it mainly to keep in touch with people at school or people that you knew before but don't often see? It's both I suppose. It depends on the person as well. I mean, a lot of my old friends I sometimes chat to, from my old school, or from odd things I've done, have met before, if they speak to me I speak to them back. Old school was? In Xxxx. I moved in Year 9. You've got people – do you live close to them? No, I live in Xxxx so I don't live close to anyone. This means you stay in touch with people you don't physically see or can't get to see? Yes. Do you start conversation with people at school in the day and then go home and continue the conversation with them? Sometimes. I try not to portray myself any differently how I am in school to how I am on the internet, I'm quite open like that. A lot of people speak to me in a different manner on the internet than they would face-to-face in school, specially because you're one to one and there's nobody else there to see you. A lot of people are very, very open to me, or they're very serious, they're less – kind of – they put on less of an act when it's just the two of you speaking, computer to computer. Are you saying the very privacy of being in the room on your own is a freedom for some people? Yes, sometimes. Some of it of course you don't believe because it works on the flip side. If somebody can be more serious they can be more silly. But I think a lot of people feel more open when they can talk to you in a private manner, when they don't have to speak to you face-to-face, and they don't have to get nervous when there's nobody else around. So that does happen to you? It happens to me but not from me. I'm interested in what you experience online - that is, what other people are doing online. Are there*

*things you would never post?* Yes, there's the obvious, the really personal. *What are your privacy settings?* I don't mind people seeing my Facebook profile. I changed my Facebook into French, that really confused people, that was for my revision but I don't mind people seeing the picture of me, silly bits of information. I do mind if they know my number, I won't put out anything like that at all. *Do you have any - are you leaving your settings completely open because you aren't putting anything on there?* Yes, that's about it. I don't feel the need to be so secure and private about that kind of thing, on Facebook, because I don't put that sort of thing on anyway. On the flip side there are things that I will never do, I'll never do one of the status things or 'oh my life sucks', that sort of thing. I hate them. *Do you write on the Wall?* Very, very occasionally. *Do you write on other people's Walls?* Oh yeah [laughter]. It's quite a nice way of sharing things, for example, my friends, if we watch the same tv programme, I'll send them a small video clip, and we'll share a laugh or a song or something like that. I'll write on their Walls for something like that. If it's something serious, personal, I don't. *If it's something serious or personal, what would you do?* I'd speak to them face-to-face or go on to chat because that's more personal and nobody else sees that. *I haven't worked out if people can cut and paste from chat.* They can, yes, they can. *They can cut and paste from messages too, can't they?* But I suppose the privacy on that depends on who you speak to, whether you trust them. *Same with email?* Which is quite unsettling but you have to be careful who you speak to. *You don't have any sense of yourself as someone who would be manipulated?* No, because I don't really have much to manipulate. Maybe it's just me as a person, rather than me as an internet kind of personality but I'm not very open about really, really kind of personal matters. If it is I speak in person and even then you can be manipulated. I don't see it as necessarily a matter of the internet. I sense that you have to be careful who you speak to and who you believe as well. A lot of people open up to me but I don't open up to them. I think it works because I 'm always just a listening ear. *How many Facebook friends do you have?* Oh, loads, loads. I think a lot of it is just to – a lot of people don't really speak to me on Facebook, things like that. There are people I once knew from my old primary school – that you don't want to forget about but you don't particularly need to talk to. *So it's a kind of counting mechanism is it? A kind of putting a web together of people you have known in your life?* It's almost a way of remembering. *Like an address book?* Yes, like an address book but an easy one and I think people put a lot less effort into communication these days because you've got the internet. *Thinking of it as an address book, you could very*

*easily talk to someone from your primary school if you wanted to, and vice versa.*

*What's the most unexpected approach that's ever come to you through Facebook?*

Mmm – that's interesting. I've had one person that I've met once, a friend of a friend, add me, and then talk about some very, very personal stuff about himself. I think he just wanted to unload. I was very surprised, like I hardly know you, maybe that's why he felt more comfortable being very, very open to me. He was asking all sorts of advice. I was like – I don't know you – I was shocked. *Bearing in mind that this interview was anonymous, what sort of things was he asking about?* He told me about things like how he would self-harm, or how – I think – *Did he tell you what form his self-harm did take?* I think he said he would burn himself. And he said something about drinking and smoking and gambling. He didn't have to see me face-to-face, he hardly knows me, he's a friend of an acquaintance, I suppose, so I'm in between being a stranger and a friend. I've got that kind of half-acquaintance, so he can tell me things and it won't really affect him very much because he hardly sees me and I hardly see him. *That makes you a very safe person, then, because you're not going to impact on his day-to-day life, is that it?* Yes, that's it. *How do you - when you get things like that – there's a question here, how do you manage your reactions to things other people post – so have you seen things posted by other people that you've really not liked?* Quite a difficult question because it depends what you mean by 'really not liked' because nobody likes to hear that somebody you know is self-harming themselves. When they tell me something very, very personal like that I respond like I would to anybody, because if somebody needs help or somebody to talk to, I would happily be that person. But there are other things when people are just being attention-seeking when they post statuses like 'Eeh I hate this' and stuff that I just ignore, oh and people you know put photographs of themselves in which they're wearing practically nothing in their trunks lying somewhere on the street. You know it's all just an act, you know that some people go on the internet, have their own personality, portray themselves in such a way that – I don't like that so I ignore it, or I don't really react. *Ok but you understand what's happening, that they're creating another identity for themselves online. Yes. Because your response is this is a drunk or this is a false identity, something like that?* Yes, you can see through it very easily. *So are there people you meet at school who do that kind of thing online and then you meet them in school environment or as friend in another environment – Yes – does that affect your attitude to them?* I think perhaps yes, because the people who have acts on Facebook and the internet the act never really ends. Even when you see them you



know they're acting in a certain kind of way. You can see right through it. It just happens that on Facebook and the internet it enlarges it. You treat them with the same kind of politeness and kindness you would anybody else but you always know to hold back just a little bit, or to be a bit wary of them because you know that it's an act. *Have you encountered harassment or observed harassment or bullying going on online?* No, no, I haven't, which is very good, and hopefully I never will, because I don't think that's very fair either. *Has anything happened as a result of what you've experienced online that has had an impact on you, on your day-to-day life?* On me personally, I suppose not. I guess that because my friends are so open to me online that there's a mutual understanding or relationship built that I know quite a few things because some people open up to me over the internet. So I respect their privacy so if they don't want to speak to me in person about it that's OK but because they've share something with you there's a kind of different level to your relationship – an unspoken one, I'd say, and that I think is enough. *It does alter things?* It does alter things. You see people differently. *As a result of what they've written down?* Yes. *Are you aware of you changing your writing style as you're typing away online or is it as you would speak?* It's pretty much as I would speak. I try very, very hard not to slip into some sort of slang, just because it doesn't seem right. Why should I change the way I type from the way I speak? *So you wouldn't use shortcuts when typing?* Not very often. From time to time when I'm talking about something it sounds like me talking. *So would you punctuate it in the same way?* Yes. *I've been told by some people that they abandon punctuation when they -* Oh I love punctuation I couldn't abandon it. *We've been talking mostly about Facebook but are there other online activities? Are there times when you would choose to phone or text rather than message or chat through Facebook?* Yes. *When would they be?* Sometimes if you need someone immediately phone is the way to go, because they're not always going to have a computer with them, but they might have the phone, unless they've got one of the iphones with Facebook on the phone. But that's only a few people. *Do you prefer to do voice to voice with people or do you text?* If it's something that's just informal that a little thought that makes me think of a friend I'll text them to let them know, but if a friend seems quite upset or there's something I think they need help with I'll ring them and ask if they're OK. *How do you set up social occasions?* Ah, either it's a general text sent round, which is how I do it usually, but sometimes if it's something bigger, you just make a Facebook group about it, or an event, and that way it's easier, you don't have to text everybody so that the inbox gets

full. sometimes if it's something bigger, you just make a Facebook group about it, or an event, and that way it's easier, you don't have to text everybody so that the inbox gets full. *So it's part of your social organisation to use Facebook?* Yes, it's very nice, it's also my birthday calendar so I never forget anybody's birthday. *How much time do you spend on Facebook?* Not too long, I think I'm using it now because I've got free time and I can speak to my friends, specially as I 'm not seeing them now. *So in the course of a day do you switch it on-?* I dunno, if I get into a conversation which I often do at night-time it can easily go on for an hour or more. Sometimes I'll put it on and just literally just for a minute go on and then switch it back off again, do something else, get bored, switch it back on again. *Would you have Facebook on while you're doing something else?* Yes, it depends on what I'm doing. If I'm doing revision and I need my full concentration, I won't have it on, but if it's something like if it's a poem I'm writing or I'm sending an email and I'm looking for something on the internet I'll have it on in the background and it's all right. *I've been told by some people that they have it on while they're watching television, things like that.* I don't really see the point of it. *I'm merely asking because there are things I would never have thought of but I've been told.* *Do you do anything else online apart from research?* I Skype my sister who's in Xxxx for uni and it gives me a chance to see her face and have a nice chat. And I play the guitar and sometimes I use that to find chords, things like that. It's very nice. And even things like YouTube you have funny little videos to make you smile when you're feeling down. *So you go looking on YouTube?* If someone tells me to look for something or recommends it. *Ok. Have you uploaded into YouTube yourself?* Only once, and that was for a very, very pragmatic reason. I was entering this competition, a music competition, mainly for a friend who didn't have anybody else to do it, and they needed a video of you playing whatever instrument it was. Funny thing is it's a video of me playing the piano in my pyjamas. So all of my friends have been trying really really hard to find it. And I've said, you're never going to find it. *That's another very interesting one. So it's you in your pyjamas. Why?* That's one I have difficulty in explaining. What happened was a friend of a friend of mine was organising this music competition and nobody was entering, and my friend was bugging me, she said, ' I know you play the piano, do it for me,' and it was the last night and she was bugging me and I thought, fine, I'll do it, so I switched on the camera, played something, angrily, in my pyjamas at the time, it was the last thing I wanted to do, so I thought play play play there, happy now? I think by that time I'd just stopped caring. I knew

nobody would see it barring the judges – it never really bothered me. So I uploaded it on to YouTube and I've never ever uploaded anything since. *But somewhere on the internet there's a video?* There's a video of me in my pyjamas, that's quite funny. *It's interesting that the sense of self you have, that you not only did it, put the camera there, but you uploaded it.* I don't particularly mind if someone half-way across the world sees some girl playing the piano in her pyjamas. They'll see it, they'll forget about it, they'll get on with their normal life they won't come searching for me with a pitchfork, I hope – so it never bothers me. *If you make it to some very exalted role, Judge Marie X, presiding over some politically highly controversial enquiry, like Heather Hallett presiding over 7/7, in 30 years' time, someone comes up with this video of you in your pyjamas?* Well, my kind of reaction will just be a smile, and a yeah, that was me when I was 15, I was 16, however old I was, and I wouldn't particularly mind, there's nothing particularly disturbing about it, apart from the fact that you're in your pyjamas for all the world to see. It's not like I was doing something bad, like something immoral, that would really create some sort of difficulty, I'd be concerned. It's me in my pyjamas, being young and being free, doing a friend a favour. I don't see much wrong with it, it's a bit embarrassing that's all. *I'm not saying it's wrong, I'm exploring with you how you've been when pressed by a friend you've been willing to use the internet.* She's a good friend so I thought I might as well do her a favour. I got through as well, which is a funny thing. *Presumably you can't Facebook at school.* No. I wouldn't use Facebook at school anyway. There is a way of getting past the system anyway but I never really care. *Do you think about your Facebook exchanges as more or less real than the rest of your life?* I think perhaps it's – it's a difficult one, it depends on the way you approach it. Some of the things people say, especially when they are being more open, I view as being more or less the same as if they came to you face-to-face because it's somebody asking for help. I wouldn't want to just put it down to them being on the internet, it's not very fair, but some things if they say, 'oh my gosh my life is ruined' you know they're exaggerating, they wouldn't just put that out on the internet. So there's a kind of balance you strike depending on what they say. *Do you think that the act of writing something down changes its weight, as it were?* Yes, depending on what you write down, yes. If you were to go on Facebook and say, 'love you' to a friend, it's different if you've got the 'I love you' and post to them; for example, marriages are a good example of showing it, because the internet, especially Facebook, allows you to be more flippant than you would be in normal life. I don't go around saying I'm married to my

best friend who's a girl, but on Facebook we're married. And I have a daughter, a Facebook daughter, so it allows you to be a bit more flippant. *What it's doing is allowing you to play games, games - Yes, it is - games that you couldn't play in real life, it sounds like to me - Yes - because in real life people would look at you askance. Do you use or not emoticons?* Sometimes, mainly because they can't see me smile or do a sticking-out face and I don't want to accidentally offend them. *That's been said to me - because it's harder to read.* You don't have the intonation or inflection so it's so difficult to see what they want. *So punctuation won't do it, so other people use smileys?* From time to time, yes, though sometimes the funny thing is I just see my friend type something on chat and I can see her face, we know each other so well, we're really close to each other on Facebook so you know there's a line to draw. *Is it drawn in a different place from where it would be drawn if you were in the same room together?* I suppose so because you can't really have a laugh or say, I'm only joking, or you can't tell, you know if I'm jokingly insulting my friend and she's jokingly insulting me we'll have a smirk on our faces, we'll know but you can't see that on the internet so you have to be just a bit careful. *So there is for those of you who are experienced enough there is a code that you're working to.* A kind of unspoken code, yes. There is a kind of unspoken code, things that you just never think about but they're there. *In email there is definitely an etiquette, they call it netiquette, things you definitely don't do. You don't use capitals because if you use capital letters in the body of an email that's an extremely aggressive act. Would you use capital letters on Facebook?* From time to time. Especially when I was directing. Now there's something that's interesting. When I was directing I used Facebook a lot, I would send round messages and emails to get the word around and also text because I wanted to make sure they would turn up, and if there was something I wanted to emphasise it would be there in red, capital letters, underlined, just because I needed it done. *And they knew you meant it?* Has anyone explained fraping to you? Because that would come in under the games.— *I have used fraping in my novel, I didn't know that's what it was called.* It's pretty fun. Fraping is when you – if someone leaves their Facebook on another computer, someone would type in this really silly status or, you know, you kind of get more and more creative. You have battles like I have friends who have Facebook on their phone and what would happen is we would just nick each other's phone and type in a message or something or type in a really silly status. When my sister did it I changed her gender and her date of birth and her like some silly groups. *And this doesn't seem to you to have potential*

*danger in it?* It can be but it depends on the relationship you have with the person and I wouldn't frape someone I don't know. I wouldn't do something that's crude or would really really hurt them. *So fraping is the act of doing it? So what happens to the person at the other end who then receives this bizarre message from the person they've been talking to, have they been fraped?* The person whose Facebook has been toyed around with is fraped and I think – *what happens to the person at the other end who reads it?* I tend to be the person at the other end with a lot of text and I just have a little laugh.. *So you frape somebody by getting into their Facebook and they're the fraped person, but the message that goes – what happens to the audience that reads that?* Sometimes it's just literally a laugh. Sometimes you have statuses and people will just say ok, probably a terrible example of the kind of creativity that fraping has these days, so you probably say ok you should be a bit more careful – that's it. As long as the thing that the person does isn't particularly cruel or harmful, I think most people just see it as a joke.

*Something else I was shown a week or so ago was Formspring.* Don't use it, I don't see the point, if anyone has anything to ask they can just ask me. *If you had to manage without Facebook would you be ok?* I think it would take a while but I think people say if you get over the week period you never need it again. I was considering giving it up for Lent but then I realised it was right in the middle of directing so I really needed it then. But if I did give it up completely I would probably find a lot more time to do things, I really would. I could try it and I probably would be able to, but I don't really have that much of a spur, because I live far from my friends so it's a good way of talking to them. *So that's its main thing, you live a long way away? I have explored with other people whether it's distance that has the impact, but with some people it doesn't matter whether their friends are ten miles away or hundred yards away. They'll still be Facebooking.* I think so. Maybe it's not necessarily that I live far from them, it's just that I don't see them very often. If my friends lived next to me I would take advantage of that. *If you had a really hectic day and school and you'd been going through a lot of deadlines and you hadn't been able to touch base with people would you then use Facebook?* Yes. *So it would give you an opportunity to talk that you hadn't had. So my generation would have rung up, though we'd only be able to ring one person at a time. How many of you could be in a Facebook conversation at any one time?* I think quite a few people have group conversations but I never got the hang of those. But you can talk to lots of people one to one at the same time, which is what I do more often. *So you have a whole lot of concurrent conversations going on?* Yeah, so you have a whole lot

of little notifications flashing red everywhere. *That would be much harder to do in the same room with somebody, you couldn't do it. It would be like being at a party, where you have very fragmentary conversation.* You can have some really bizarre mixtures of conversations going on, you can have one with old friends, one with somebody who needs your help, one with somebody who's joking around. I could be having a really serious conversation with one person and a really flippant one with somebody else. *I've not done it so what would the screen look like?* Well there's this thing in the corner of the page called Facebook chat. You call them up. *So you are chatting via Facebook? So you have an enormous number of chats going on?* I never have an enormous number – maybe three or four. *You don't get muddled as to who you're talking to?* No, I hope not. I've had that happen to me actually before – I'm not sure – I had somebody going 'hey babe' – no – 'hey beautiful – oh sorry wrong person'. *So it has been known?* Yes it has been known for a few muddles, quite funny.

There was one of my friends who'd been off school for a long time and I didn't know what was wrong with him and we were all so worried about it. I saw him on Facebook chat once and I said hey, I don't mind, you don't have to tell me whatever's wrong are you ok? And I just got the reassuring, yeah, I'm ok, I'll be in school tomorrow. And it was such a relief. I wouldn't have been able to contact him any other way. He did tell me what was wrong with him and I can see why he didn't want to talk about it because it sounded awful what happened. His uncle and his mother's unborn baby both died - very short – one of them committed suicide and the other it was just a miscarriage it was awful. But I think using that, the fact that I had Facebook there and then, I could just catch him and say don't tell me what it is but are you ok, was good. *It was good for you – do you believe him? Did you believe him?* Oh I did, he's one of my closest friends. When he came back you could see he was so worn out, he needed a hug.

### *Kate and Melanie in conversation*

**(different speakers only identified where they disagree)**

*What gets written in Facebook that's bullying? What words do people use? Do they actually swear? A lot more than in real life. Ok, for example can you just come out into the open and tell me what this would be? A lot of the time it would be abbreviations like FML which is fuck my life and others often are like shortcuts – lots of things like that so when your parents are online they won't understand what you mean. So FML? Yeah, they use 'fuck off' as well, 'bitch', basically anything they can think of they'll say. What would be the context of bitch? why would they say it? I think that tends to be used in the context of girls, obviously, I think boys would use it. I think it's used between boys and girls a lot more. I think if there's a girl and she cares a lot about how she looks girls call her a slag. That's used all the time. Slag is a word that's been around for a very long time. People don't tend to use racism. [Dissent from Melanie] Oh, I've seen it a lot. I don't think it's used as an insult so much. It's used with people who get along with each other. I don't really want to say it. It's all anonymous? Well I've seen a friend write on a boy's Wall, 'That's my black boy', and I think that's a bit unnecessary. But then he might write back 'You're my white boy.' Yes, I've seen a girl who's pretty and someone says, 'You're my slag' so they use it kind of like that. And we see that as not very nice but they're all right Is this part of the confusion of interpreting? Yeah, you can't put any emotion into it. Would they say that to one another – have you heard it said? Yes, but they'd probably put on a voice – [mimics] 'hello my slag' –so it would come out with an intonation so you would know it wasn't to be taken straight? But often the sign of whether people mean anything is whether or not they put love hearts or smiley faces around – which are used a lot. They're used as a substitute for intonation. The way it's kind of used instead of that. Even I do it sometimes, if I get a message from someone and there's no hearts, smiley faces, it comes across, you read it more straight. As you get more serious, there's less love hearts, kisses. Then there's a sort of slash heart. But there isn't really one for anger, so you stop when you get to a certain tone. Full stops. People don't tend to use punctuation except exclamations, question marks. So if you used a full stop for anger, how would that appear? You need to see it. If I get a message I skim over the whole thing, and if I see a full stop I read it as 'I really don't like you.' Or 'I don't want to meet up with you.' Or if there wasn't a full stop it would be 'I'm quite angry with you', something like that. There's not a full stop at the end and somebody said 'I'm not meeting up with you' and there was a smiley at the end,*

*how would you read that?* I'd read that as sarcasm. I really think it depends on the things that how you say it really changes it. If someone said a joke and someone said No and put a full stop that's just like don't do that again. *There's a whole – there're visual signs on Facebook that have evolved to cope with its being online?* Yes. *And is it the same with texting?* No – you use longer text. More paragraphing. The thing with text it takes longer to text than to type so people use text-speak. I like to write properly so I hate text-speak. And I think when people first got phones and started to text each other, when people used full words I thought, oh, that's a bit radgy, but now I think people text people like w r u instead of Where are you?[Dissent from Melanie] Oh, I disagree – but it's all open to interpretation. *Ok . I interviewed a boy who told me he was now taking particular care when he was online and when he goes into forums as well to write perfect English, perfect punctuation, perfect grammar, because he thinks people are going to interpret him from that and he wants to come over as intelligent. That's a particular take.* If someone sends you a whole message in text speak it's just like letters, but if you see the odd word it's OK. I wouldn't say it was stereotypical any more because I do think it's the truth. If you look at the people who slack off at school or on the street looking a bit rough, I would definitely be a bit surprised if I saw a message from them with capital letters and commas in the right place and fully spelt words. I think people in our group – gosh it's really harsh of me – actually talk with proper grammar. [Dissent from Kate] Really? I think the first part is right but you can definitely say that people who are stereotypical lazy people wouldn't use the right grammar but there are people who aren't stereotypically lazy who do have a future will also not use grammar because you are a different person on the internet. *So it extends the possibilities of how you are?* Yes. *Online you are showing an identity which may be yourself plus, or yourself with a different guise from the one you normally have.so you're the person who likes to have everything absolutely correct, so if you went through text speak it makes you feel odd to think about it.* I can't stand it, I really can't stand it (Melanie) *but you could be the person who can't stand it who just does it to see what happens.* Yes. *because it gives you another way to experiment with the kind of person you are.* [Melanie addressing Kate] Would you be surprised to get something from me with text speak? (Kate) I don't think I'd notice it. Sorry – not paying attention to your every mood. Maybe...*So what are Kate's like to you?* You never ever use capital letters (Melanie). I do! (Kate) You don't – you never use capital letters at all, it really annoys me (Melanie). *So if you received something that was absolutely*



*impeccable would you think that's not Kate? Yes. I'm thinking about the potential for deceiving other people. When you send message on email you can send an automatic signature. So you could send a message but it could come over someone else's signature. Is there potential for that on Facebook? Well, I've got one friend who always puts kisses on the end. And if she doesn't I always think - that's a bit weird. I wouldn't say is that really Emily, but I'd think is she really ill?(Kate) On Hotmail, some people get viruses, and then you get emails from them and it says from John Smith or whatever, and you know what it should look like and you look at it and you think, that's definitely not them. And it's a weird font too. And the spacing and things like that; properly structured things (Melanie). Is it possible to be signed on as you, messaging and chatting, and for you to give them permission to sit down and carry on, it would still come up as your signature, wouldn't it? It wouldn't be a signature but it would be your name. You could leave the room, somebody you could into the room, carry on and nobody would know about it. In Formspring, who've done things before, who pick up on how you speak and make it look like you, the way you structure things, kisses – a friend came up to me once and she said, why did you send that message? I said, what message? I looked at it and it looked like exactly the kind of thing I would say. People use it as a bullying tactic too, they pick up on how you talk. (Kate)*

***Art: network manager in a school***

*[This was more discussion than interview. The researcher had worked alongside this manager in establishing a virtual federation for a relatively large number of secondary schools, through which the separate schools could share teaching and learning, including online forums, policies and processes.]*

*Of the kids I've interviewed so far, there's been a remarkable consistency so far, which has been the enormous amount of time they invest in Facebook. Yes, and that's consistent with what we've found in schools. I mean, historically in schools, people like the [regional broadband consortium] block all those sites, but the biggest threats we see are bypass proxy sites and the kids know hundreds of them, and every time you try to block one another ten spring up. So in school time they're remarkably active on Facebook - that's the biggest thrust we see - and if they're not doing that and they're off-task, they'll be playing games, they'll be playing internet-based games. I've interviewed one lad who - I found out about these, multi-user games - World of Warcraft, that sort of thing? Yes. We see a degree of that in schools, particularly with the younger kids. They all sign up on a game - we go through phases of this. The last one was called Mafia Online, they signed up and pretended to be a gang boss and that was quite a big thing. We go through iterations of this. It's very interesting when they sign up and take a part - what sort of parts are they choosing and why is a game fashionable and does it ever affect behaviour? That's what interests me. Yeah, I mean it's difficult from a network manager point of view to know why it happens but we just see waves of kids' usage logs, that kind of thing, and it will suddenly say this site's suddenly getting loads and loads of hits and either it's the latest bypass proxy to get round our filtering or it's the latest game craze. As I say the last one was the Mafia thing, I don't know what's out there now. But Facebook is massive in schools, they go on it at every opportunity. And have you had any opportunity to talk to them about why they want to go on it and do they understand why you might want to block it? I don't think they do, they just see it's blocked and that's the big bad wolf, and we just don't like them using it. And in fact in this school we've looked at things in a very different way, two years ago. Because historically you'd find kids would go on MySpace or whatever the latest craze was and the reaction is to ban them from the network, ban them from the internet. Well, two years ago we stopped all that - it simply doesn't work, it's so counter-productive, because you ban them lesson one and then lesson two a*

member of staff's ringing up and saying 'they need to go on the internet for this piece of work they're doing in my lesson'. And what we find is you risk torpedoing someone's lesson because that disruptive child can't go on the internet to do the work so they just play up. So we went down the route of saying if they're off-task, they're off-task – whether they're on the internet or just doodling in a book, it's all the same. So we don't ban any student at all for doing those kind of things. So we're putting pressure on the local authority and on RBC to try and unblock Facebook in particular because there's enormous value on it. It's becoming interesting and we are trying to embrace that in education. And lots of schools are doing similar things. For example, authors have now all got Facebook pages so when F [teacher in learning resources] wants the latest author's competition it's on Facebook, you type it in and it's blocked. Actually in schools we just need to get a whole lot smarter about this and start to embrace this technology and use it sensibly, and the emphasis then is on teaching esafety. *They have no sense of that but I don't think – I'll pass this on, for your information. I was talking to a who mother lost track of where her daughter was, and her daughter was about 30. And her daughter was on a medical assignment and said to her mother, if I'm not back in the country after three weeks you can panic. And after three weeks the daughter didn't make contact and so the mother began to panic. Now she had a Facebook site because her daughter did. I worked this out with her. If you set up your site so that friends of friends can look at it, you can go to the friends of friends' places; and if some of the friends of friends have privacy settings for friends of friends, you can get to them, and some of them may have completely open settings. So she found her daughter. In the end, nothing was private. There was no privacy at all in the end.* Facebook themselves don't help that because they changed the way their module works, so privacy settings alter through a period of time. And the other thing we're coming up against in schools is staff, because staff are on Facebook, so how do you conduct yourself on Facebook, for example? So you put yourself on Facebook, how do you interact with students, how do you interact with past students? And then you're into exactly that situation. Staff will say to me, 'it's all right, I only have past students'; but past students have current students in their privacy settings... *One of the really interesting things at X University [where the researcher had formerly worked] was that we were disciplining student teachers for having students on their Facebook sites and we said it was unprofessional, 'you're not to do it', and they said 'the school staff do'. Yes. Very difficult to draw a line, to draw boundaries.* We issue guidelines that say do not have students as friends

on Facebook, but I know first-hand that it goes on because I'm friends with staff on Facebook so you can see. *For me, I've asked the interviewees if they have a code when they go on Facebook. One said there were pictures up, and 13 and 14 year old kids were on this site, and she said they shouldn't be putting these pictures up with 13 and 14 year old kids seeing them and the kinds of things they were saying.* We've got members of staff like that, who've got mobile devices, iphones, and every detail is there, everything they're doing is posted there. *I wanted to ask you if you see bullying on the internet.* Definitely, yes, we will often see a member of staff coming to us saying 'oh, somebody's written this on Facebook, can you find it?' so we say yes and we start looking for it and then we're in this grey world – it's out of school but it's affecting them in school. We've also seen malicious Facebook sites set up against members of staff. And we've looked through and we've seen it, but a lot of them are set up outside of school. There was a particular incident where there was a petition started up on Facebook to remove a member of staff as form tutor; and that was very distressing for the member of staff. What was interesting from a behaviour point of view was that kids would join in that group who weren't in the form, often weren't in the same year group and often weren't in the school. *So they had no idea who the person was?* No. *I'm interested in the unreality of it. What management decisions are you having to make about the nature of the world in dealing with these kids? You said earlier you were thinking about using it instead of blocking it and you said something about esafety.* I think we need to reconnect kids with real world consequences. And say to a kid, if you post something malicious here are some real laws you're breaking and here are people being prosecuted for that. And here are the people who are standing up in court and having to account for why they've posted that on Facebook. I think that's really hard to do because it's so out in the ether, such a far-removed thing. What's wrong with saying something about Mr XX – whereas if you said that to them in person ... *The biggest thing I'm finding is how easy it is to say things on Facebook because you don't see the body language. This is what they're all telling me. They recognise that. So that means on the one hand they're able to challenge things on Facebook as improper, they're able to say something and they would never actually say it if they met them in the street because they're intimidated or they don't have the skills to say it; or they're saying things that aren't true; or they're being bloody-minded and picking a fight. So you are seeing both of those. For you the interesting thing is engaging with real-world consequences assuming that you can find them?* Well, a lot of what they do on

Facebook is covered within existing legislation, like making malicious allegations, and we have started recently in our [Inclusion Unit] who see some of our more troubled kids, dealing with this on a regular basis. Every Monday morning we're picking up Facebook incidents, so they're saying we're going to get the local PCSO [Police Community Support Officer] to come and talk about this and get them to understand you're breaking the law, your action could lead you to court. *So proportionately the amount of energy you're having to give to this 'out in the ether' stuff is growing.* Yes, certainly and I think schools are going to have to take some really big decisions and say actually, this is out of school, not our problem, because if a kid was being picked on in a local park, would he come and talk to us about it? Perhaps not, so that there is some big rethinking decisions to go and that means a real understanding of what's going on in the outside world and the difficulty of that is that even people like me who are immersed in it aren't immersed in it like kids are. I use Facebook to talk to my 17 year old son, and I have a few friends, and I don't post statuses like I've just walked the dog – we're so removed. Even as IT professionals we don't live in the same world. *I'm trying to get under the skin of it. They'll have Facebook on even if the television's on, they set the sound settings so they can hear it, if there's a message ...* if you look at a typical teenager, my son will have the TV on, watch a DVD, play on the computer, talk on Facebook all at the same time. A typical teenager's bedroom is now that mobile devices in particular. Most mobile phones are sold deliberately with that feature so they've got this ability to post anywhere and any time. *So there isn't an 'out of school' and 'in school' is there? The boundary doesn't exist?* No, so we've got radical thinking to do as education not just as a school. *I also think there's an individual human thing about that. I've shifted my own behaviour just to talk to my own children. When you look at your own site – I joined Facebook so I could talk to one of my own children who was living in Thailand, and first she was on the road touring round the Far East and then staying in Thailand. When I discovered how important Facebook was to her I got an account. The importance of it for her is that it has helped to mitigate homesickness and it has brought a lot of her community together on one page.* Yes, I use it for a similar reason for my son, who only lives about 60 miles away. If I can't get him on his mobile I get him on Facebook. The interesting thing is that he has his own peer group. He will post things to them which are probably not suitable for a parent to see. I've had to learn to just bite my tongue and actually say, if he'd said those things on a mobile or a text I'd have known nothing about it. *So he's putting them on the Wall?* Yes, nothing

too outrageous, but comments to friends... *I'm asking because there's a chat facility and a message facility, though what one kid said is you can still cut and paste, you know, from any of that so it's not really private.* It's not really private because it's on the internet, you know. Some of the things his friends post back on his Wall I read them and think, I don't really want to know. You know you just have to take a blinkered view in that sense. *It puts you as a parent in a different position?* You wouldn't as a parent listen in to every conversation normally, would you? *So that's blurring that line, isn't it? They're expecting us to be in some way blind?* Yes. I did pull him up on one or two things and then I thought, he's a 17 year old growing up. *Does his mum have Facebook?* Yes. And some of their friends on it. *So does she have the conversation with him? Presumably not because he carries on posting?* I think I mean he doesn't post anything that's really outrageous so we both take the view that he's 17 and growing up. *An old colleague of mine who's the head of a large independent girls' school says there's a great deal of cyberbullying that she's asked to deal with. Very nice, well-brought-up, highly intelligent 13 year old girls who write absolutely atrocious things about each other and obviously in school time. So I asked her what, and she says it's almost always sexual. So she – her way of dealing with it is to bring them into her as the head and get them to read it out loud to her and they're absolutely crippled because until then they haven't really believed it was real.* It is that detachment. And it's interesting, we've found the groups that were just anti-staff, really nice kids would just hit the Join button, and we've interviewed them after and asked why they join and they are mortified. They have no sense that they've said, I hate Mr Xx on there, and you're acknowledging that by ticking the box, and they have no concept of that. Really, really nice Year 7 kids will just join groups. And it's interesting as well, you see Facebook now as the great protest now. If something happens they set up a group. And you get something really nice too. I mean, one of our colleagues died and the Facebook group was created in about 2 hours and the tributes that poured in were just amazing. *How did they know about the group?* It just proliferates really quickly, someone sets one up and tells two of their friends who tell four of their friends who tell eight of theirs. It just happens really quickly. Suddenly, within 2 or 3 days of her death we had about 600 members of the group, and writing incredibly nice things about the woman. So there's that side of things too. *Is it the instinct to join? One girl said to me I'm addicted and I should stop but I can't bear to be out of it.* Maybe there's something gained from being in that pack. *In a pack, a gang? Do you have kids who aren't in the pack, in the gang?*

We don't know that but we would guess there are. As part of our awareness-raising, as part of our safety, we're going to be asking those questions, who has one, who hasn't. I'll be very surprised if anybody – *I'm really interested to know if anyone's changed their behaviour because of Facebook. I haven't met anyone yet who's prepared to tell me that they have changed something as a result of being on Facebook but I know that they do as a result of being online.* I know from some of the kids we interview and they wouldn't say boo to a goose and you see some of the things they post ... *They've got another personality the story they tell about themselves online is very different.* And they talk about very private things online in a public forum. A friend's child was very low and on the point of self-harming and it was almost a drama played out online. She was posting things to her Wall – now, clearly a deeply disturbed young girl who needs some help. By posting it on Facebook ... *That's a really interesting event. I've heard the other. Somebody told me about a girl at school who posted that she was pregnant on the Wall.* We've seen this almost virus-like behaviour, you post something and it would be really easy, I suspect, to get a member of staff into trouble, by posting something really contentious about them and then it would spread like wildfire through this community of students. *And then all the other students you've told me about who know them.* Yes, we've certainly seen that behaviour. It's kind of difficult really, On the one hand you've got the condolences for someone who's passed away and then the contentious stuff. *I don't see how you control this – I don't see a school policy just popping up to deal with it.* No, you have to think radically. And I don't know where that cleverness lies.

# **Part Two**

## **Morph**





# Morph

## Mirror

### **Zeph's Blog Wednesday 2 August**

There's a stranger in the mirror with tits/ribs/hip bones with too much flesh over them/pubic hair/slit/long thighs/ obvious bum.

A womb inside that body says F not M. There could be other organs too – apart from the obligatory spleen, liver, gall-bladder, stomach, kidneys and the rest.

This reflection looks like me.

Josephine Ruth Wilcox on my birth certificate, Ruth for Ma's best friend whose kid died in a car crash with her husband. You can't have a name without somebody's history getting snagged on yours.

Mollie Alison Underfell let herself be renamed Mollie Wilcox, why? It isn't like Ma now. Who was she then? Andrew Arthur Wilcox. He hates Arthur. Why call your first child Noah? Most of what happens in the human brain is unknowable.

They used to call me Josie till I got hold of what I could bear. Joey's OK. For now.

### **Chat Joey to Bex Wednesday 6pm**

*Joey* Now what?

*Bex* I don't want to talk about it.

*Joey* Matt was outside the shop when we came out of work?

*Bex* He can't take no for an answer. Or NO.

*Joey* Your profile's empty. You've taken everything down?

*Bex* You didn't see what he posted?

*Joey* I've only just signed in.

*Bex* He's a skankhead, jabbermouth, troll.

*Joey* So big hunk's a troll, is he?

*Bex* I'm cutting him out.

*Joey* Your page? Won't he still be able to post on your Wall?

*Bex* I've unfriended him. Anyway, I need the chat, it's free.

*Joey* If he's really a troll he'll find you.

*Bex* If he does I'll kill him. I've got to concentrate on the exhibition, real stuff, not this crap.

*Bex* To think I actually let him touch me.

## The Black Box file

NB look up - something plasticine or digitalised? wikipedia

..evolutionary biologist argues that, in addition to male and female sexes, more than two *genders* exist in hundreds of animal species. Species with one female and two male genders include red deer who have two male morphs, one with antlers and one without.

Species with two male and two female genders include the white-throated sparrow, in which male and female morphs are either white-striped or tan-striped.

so you can't tell by looking which is which?

the highest number of distinct male and female morphs or "genders" within a species is found in the side-blotched lizard, which has five altogether: orange-throated males, who are "ultra-dominant, high testosterone" controllers of multiple females; blue-throated males, who are less aggressive and guard only one female; yellow-throated males, who do not defend territories at all but cluster around the territories of orange males; orange-throated females, who lay many small eggs and are very territorial; and yellow-throated females, who lay fewer, larger eggs and are more tolerant of each other.

ASK PA? what does he know?

human morphs of gender, who classifies???

## Zeph's Blog Wednesday 2 August

You can't trust anything to stay private online. Even this feels dangerous. It's such an effort getting the settings right.

Status: **Draft:** Edit

Visibility: **Public:** Edit

Publish: **immediately:** Edit

The default means you broadcast to everyone, everywhere. Blogging is internet graffiti. You choose from the drop-down menus instead of spraying the side of houses, bridges, but you have to take care every time, check and choose to stay private.

This stuff I found online about five morphs of gender, it's huge. Some stuff I have to print out, stare at. Onscreen it moves about online I am whoever I choose. I guess anyone else can choose who I am too. You could go mad thinking about it.

Bex said, 'You ought to take a good look at yourself in the mirror.'  
Who does she think I'm looking at? Who do *I* think I'm looking at?

We've got it all wrong, putting ourselves into boxes. If I had the nerve to publish **immediately** how my life would change.

It doesn't feel quite right to blog about Bex, as if she was part of a story. It's as if Matt has learned all about how to hurt, being with Bex.

### **Chat Ruth to Joey Wednesday 6.45pm**

*Ruth* Can you get your Ma to answer her mobile?

*Joey* She's been at work in school all day. Phone probably on silent.

*Ruth* Your mother doesn't understand about school holidays.

*Joey* You are still coming aren't you?

*Ruth* On my way tomorrow, team meetings last two days – major rewrites for next year's episodes.

*Joey* ?

*Ruth* Leading actor got Hollywood breakthrough.

*Joey* Can he/she just leave? What happens to the character?

*Ruth* Road accident, we decided. Lots of spin-off stories. That'll be me till dawn for a bit.

*Joey* What time will you get here?

*Ruth* Depends on motorways – might have to stop/nap. M25, M40 not too bad M6 ☹

*Joey* My driving test in two weeks.

*Ruth* You're sure to pass, you never let anything get to you.

*Joey* Fingers crossed ☺ will nag Ma.

### **Thursday**

#### **6.44am Noah to Joey**

Home pm, come climbing?

Jay-Babe get up.

Lazy slag xx

### Thursday 3rd August

‘Noah wants me to go rock-climbing with him.’

‘You don’t have to say yes, do you? Would you like me to say you can’t go? As if either of you would pay the slightest attention. What’s the matter?’

I glare through the kitchen window at the line of the far hills – a blazon of purple-red that vibrates in the heat, the colour of Pa’s elderberry wine from last year. The bottles stand in the garage in case the fermentation starts again. The balls of my feet itch. Ma steams on. ‘I bet he hasn’t even unpacked. I have a bad feeling about his washing. I bet his backpack stinks.’

Ma’s voice on the phone sounds hollow. She is standing in the school hallway, she says, talking to the site keeper about floor polish. Noah dances up and down beside me, mouthing off. I shove the phone deeper into my ear. He wants me not to mention the other guy. Ma flows on. ‘I thought you’d be at work, sweetheart.’

‘Shirley sent us home at lunchtime,’ I say. ‘It was dead in the shop.’ Birds flit through the rowan tree in the corner of the garden. Finches, siskins. Bex was tight as a drum all morning.

With one hand I push the window further open. The air is so still that sounds from the hill are as nearby as Marmalade. He’s mewing at finches, too lazy to jump. Half a mile away, the farmer coaches his dogs for the Rydal sheepdog show. High-pitched, eerie calls make me burst to leap over the hedges, up the side of the fell to the cairn at the top that draws my gaze. Sheep casually shift as a dog streaks past.

Last night the combine harvesters ran late whilst I sat at my laptop with the window wide to the cool, hay-filled air. I picture them now, the drivers’ eyes propped open in a honey glaze from hay-making. Last year I went out with the farmer on his tractor, before dawn. When the sun came up I knew what the force of nature meant. Light poured down into the valley till the dark at the bottom was simply washed away like silt in the base of the sink. It was almost worth having tossed and turned till dawn, when I dozed; and then Noah’s texts pinged in. I need to run, get them out of my system. I roll my shoulders, releasing the energy into my hands, and my fingers tighten, spring apart.

Ma could probably throw her voice from Ambleside to us without a telephone. ‘Do tell Noah not to mix his washing with ours. I don’t want another colour disaster.’

Noah's dark eyes roll. He spreads an Ordnance Survey map across the kitchen table, pushing off the other guy's hands. 'You don't have to shout, Ma, I can hear you. Everyone at this end can hear you. It's the holidays. Chill.'

Today, the lower fields are strewn with long lines of yellowing hay, drying out. The birds are drunk with sunshine, looping and skittering in wide arcs through flimsy clouds.

'Joey, darling, are you listening?'

Noah leaps across to snatch the receiver from my hand. The guy wants to catch my eye. He smiles but I'm trying to slow the throbbing in my head.

'She needs the challenge, Ma, but she hasn't been off the computer. She'll be fine.'

'Shouldn't you just sort yourself out first? I mean, the weather's going to be good for days, they say.' Ma tries tact.

'Ma, I'll be at work after tomorrow. Just a starter climb, a spot of bouldering. She'll be fine.' He flexes his knees. Someone has bleached his hair since he was home at Easter but his brows are still as black as mine, and his brown eyes look cavernous. He smells rank. Fiona must be away. I try to picture his girl-friend in the studio flat, draping a towel round his neck and measuring bleach.

The other guy approaches, holding out his hand. I give him the end of my fingers. He has a Chinese, Japanese sort of look, springing black hair and calm black eyes. His teeth are phenomenally white. He says quietly, precisely, 'I'm Simon. I'm at Leeds with Noah, I do Economics too. I've never been to the Lakes and he suggested that I could come and climb with him here.' Ma will like his good manners. Maybe Noah is considerate in other people's houses.

Noah claps the phone back into its holder. 'That's that, then. Right. You introduced yourself, Sy?' Without waiting for answer he makes for the utility room, leaving me and Mr Polite alone in the kitchen.

The guy shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He's shorter than Noah, wiry. Vaguely I think there's something comforting about his careful accent. I haven't missed a thing since we left London except the streets full of people from every background. Strangely, his perfect speech reminds me of the street where we used to live. In the south Lakes, the shades of colour are almost all on the same spectrum, from dingy pink to battered brown. The weather on the fells paints us. My skin's pinky-red,



but Pa's is definitely at the shoe-leather end. Bex is different. She wears Factor 50 all the time so her skin is mother-of-pearl. Though she looked like chalk today.

If this guy speaks out loud in the pub round here – and he'll be inside a pub tonight, for sure – some comic will gape. Pa's dream job brought us north. Ma gave up her huge multi-coloured London school. There are lots of people like us, she says, people getting out of big cities, looking for the ideal life. She says it's much easier to recruit teachers than it was in London, except they want to come for the fells rather than the teaching. But we moved for the same reason. I might have to remind Ma about this if she carries on about university, jobs, my glorious future. I know she's proud of me but I don't want to be part of her competition, Mr Jolly trying to beat her stats. Head to Head. I picture them wrestling, arms locked, preposterous. Ma would win.

Simon clears his throat. 'Noah says you should be a natural for rock climbing.' His yellow sweatshirt has the climbing club logo, the same as Noah's. He has slight shoulders, even narrower hips. He could make a fell-runner if he trained his quads. Noah, on the other hand, is building muscle. His new profile photo was taken at the gym and his Wall is full of boy insults. He loves it, the whole changing Status and telling the world. I messaged to say he'll regret it when he's looking for jobs but he cut and pasted my message to his Wall to show everyone that his sister is career-wise. Nothing's private the instant you get social online, even in what's meant to be a private space. Except on [iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk). It's the only forum where I feel safe.

But everyone else, on Facebook, you're in their mind so they assume your thoughts are part of theirs, you're part of them. Somehow you've handed your mind, your chat, your personal messages to them. Just because you've written things down. We've done stuff at school about dictator states, how there'd be eavesdropping everywhere, even spy mikes in the walls. Online, we forget. I trust Bex, Ruth, of course.

'I don't want to climb,' I say. 'I run.'

He does not give me one of those up-and-down looks that guys usually can't help, even when it's me. I am working hard on not giving them anything to look at, and I appreciate that he looks straight at my face. He's curious. 'Then tell Noah that you don't want to come out with us.'

By then, though, I'm leaping fences. I can't get out to the high fells unless somebody takes me in a car or I wait forever for buses. 'It's ok,' I say.

'Are you a sprinter? Or are you into cross-country? It was amazing seeing the mountains ahead of us when we drove over the A65.' He has a light, soft voice and

suddenly the neat folds of skin above each eye lift, widening his gaze. His eyes are deep brown, set slantwise and somehow flat into his face, like a cat's. Again, I try to place him in the pub with Noah or looking at Noah's Facebook photos but I give it up. I get cartoons instead.

I say, 'Don't worry. Better see what Noah's up to.' The clattering from the utility room can no longer be ignored. Simon follows me out. Noah has spread across the tiles almost every item of equipment for outdoor life that our family owns. We can't move without tripping over walking boots and poles, my running shoes and trainers, cardboard boxes half-collapsed and full of gaiters, winter gloves and mittens, brightly-coloured scarves, hats, unmatched Wellington boots in a straggled row. The smell of wet rubber swells. Noah's wetsuit slouches from a hook on the back of the door. 'Ma will kill you,' I say. 'She had it organised. What have you been doing?' I poke the wetsuit, which has the look of a shed human skin, glistening and bruised.

'Caving,' Noah says, tossing coils of blue and green rope into the heap, thrusting a handful of crabs, slings and other climbing titbits into the top of a cardboard box. He stuffs the rucksack with shoes, gloves, a chalk bag.

'When did you go caving?'

'You've got that tone in your voice,' he says, springing to his feet. 'You're getting to sound like Ma.'

'You never clear up.' My eyes swerve away from his sardonic smile. He enjoys saying I act like a girl. I reach to lift the rucksack clear.

'There's my Jay-Babe.'

Simon says doubtfully, 'You're going to try bouldering, then? It's not particularly easy.'

Noah hunches his shoulders. 'My sister can't bear to be beaten.' I want to chuck the rucksack at him. He's got an idea in his head about me and won't change it. Simon laughs. From the corner of my eye I see the muscles tighten in Noah's jaw, under the startling, dark stubble.

It might be worth enduring half an hour of falling off a boulder before I seize my moment, run. We'll probably fetch up at the foot of the Kentmere fells, near the Garburn Pass. It will take only minutes to reach the ridge that leads to Yoke and the first little peak of the Kentmere Round. Noah'll never catch up. Ill Bell, Froswick. My tongue arches silently. Noah will have to wait for me. Mr Polite will sit on him, maybe. As soon as I pass my test I'm going to beg the loan of a car, and get myself to the far

end of Kentmere, to run the whole Round, nine or ten miles. The slopes are so easy that even Ma will say yes, will have to say yes. It will be great practice for the big races.

I'll take my chances today and run for an hour or two. They will be so excited by bouldering they probably won't notice that I've gone. Next year, I am going to run the Borrowdale Fell Race route even if I can't enter. If I could decide what boxes to tick, I would take my chances. I glimpse a series of blank boxes stretching to infinity.

We wriggle into Noah's car and within half a mile I am wondering how Simon kept sane on the drive from Leeds. It must be easier in the front seat. The car hurtles along the A591 as I cling to the safety belt. My test is two weeks away. How Noah passed, I cannot imagine, but he bulges with confidence. Bluff and blag, manly. Already the sour taste of travel sickness catches in my throat, but shame makes me concentrate on shallow breathing.

We shoot past the turning into Kentmere and the travel sickness passes in a flash. 'I thought we were going up the valley to Badger Rock.' I lean forwards between the front seats.

'Na -a.' Noah flaps his left hand towards the glove compartment. This little car is filthy. 'In there. Get out the map, Sy, check it out. We're going into Borrowdale. I'm taking you to the Bowder Stone. Classic. I've got an inflatable in the back.'

'Inflatable what?' I picture bright red life jackets and dinghies swelling like bubblegum out of the rear windows.

'What planet are you on? Crash mat - mattress to you. You'll need something to fall on.'

I lean back. Simon says nothing, half turning his head towards me but I am out of his line of sight. I am visualising Borrowdale and where to run from the Bowder Stone. 'Can I borrow the map?' Simon passes the map, already folded to the right place. I can only snatch glances or nausea will return. *The road's straight enough for a bit, why can't he steer straight?* I say something.

'Oh get over it, Jay-Babe,' Noah says. My stomach churns, remembering. All our holidays in childhood were marked by Pa having to stop the car so that I could throw up. The verges are bursting with August colours. I picture myself pushed down into the upturned fingers of cow-parsley, feathery yarrow, stiffly blazing poppies, with Ma rubbing my back, remarking that one day I will grow out of it. Some things you grow into.

'You could try driving in a straight line.'

‘Blah blah. I can see you in the rear view mirror and you’ve gone that colour.’  
He nudges Simon. ‘Mints in the side pocket.’

Simon gropes, comes up empty-handed and I rake about among remnants of rubbish on the seat beside me to find the tube that Noah will have thrown over his shoulder at some point. But we are nearing Thirlmere and my pulses quicken. Sickness subsides.

We’ve swept around and up the majestic curves of Dunmail Raise and the road is acquiring a pinkish tinge. Sunlight loiters behind the fell to the west that everyone calls ‘The Lion and the Lamb’. Noah points it out to Simon. He says, as always, that the summit rocks look more like an old lady playing the piano than a couple of animals.

I wave a hand like royalty as the car throws itself down into the valley beyond the Raise, hurling me at the armrest. I clutch the safety belt as we heel round corners, approaching Thirlmere and the dark mass of looming forest that frames the lake. They drowned a village to make Thirlmere - Armboth, I think. The official version when they drowned Mardale to make Haweswater is that they only killed one rabbit. I don’t see how anyone could be sure. Did they mark the spot with a tombstone? I think lots of navvies died building the dam, but nobody talks much about that.

Thirlmere is shadowy, mysterious until you walk right up to its margins. Pa says that wild life recovers eventually and he is supposed to know. I’m not sure what recovery means.

I lean forward cautiously for a sight of the road between the guys’ heads. Not far now. The hedgerows are awash with swathes of red and pink and blue and yellow. I can hear Pa excitedly reciting the names, trying to get us interested, telling us why classification matters - rosebay willow herb, wood cranesbill, meadow cranesbill, campanula, yellow hawkweed, herb Robert. Some things stick. Pa has a passion for order.

‘Are you feeling better?’

‘I had a good look at the climbing lasses last weekend when we were at the wall and the only reason you don’t climb is in your head, Jay-Babe. You’re just too nervy. You got to trust me, do what I say.’

I chew the inside of my cheek and try to picture the great green and grey diamond slab of the Bowder Stone Rock, ominously perched on its point. The sides are glassy from the number of sweaty hands practising grips on its surface. Nobody knows quite how it found its way into Borrowdale. Perhaps it fell in a gigantic collapse of the

surrounding cliffs, or was dumped by a passing glacier. Some well-meaning Georgian leaned a neat staircase up the side.

‘I didn’t put in any rock shoes.’

‘In the boot. I took care of it all.’

At Easter Noah had dragged me up what he called an Easy climb. It really had been ‘a drag’. He had roped me, ‘to be on the safe side’, and had drifted off the route so that suddenly we blundered into a capital D for Difficult. All of a sudden he was hammering pitons into crevices. Waves of anxiety flowed down from him like fog and my hands perspired so much I couldn’t get a grip. My ribs ached for days afterwards from the drag of the rope. Funny how that term ‘get a grip’ shifts its meaning. I have no intention of being dragged up again. I can’t quite rid myself of the memory of being terrified. Some things you don’t repeat.

Simon says tactfully that bouldering is meant to be good for novices and experts too. He’s trying to be helpful but Noah assumes I will follow him. Noah thinks that just saying things will make them all right. I hate to think he may be right. On iwannagetoutofhere, that’s the advice. Picture it, talk about it, name it, do it, become what you dream.

I try to visualise reaching up and out, farther than my body thinks is possible, and finding the handholds. My mind won’t bring up the picture. I can’t till I know what the picture is. I think that’s Catch 22.

The road flies towards us and suddenly my feet anticipate pounding along by the Derwent, up through the forest, over slippery slate and sliding scree, angling so that they touch the ground like fingers tracing the route. My toes wriggle inside my trainers and I flex, working the hamstrings.

I’ll take off and Simon will make Noah wait till I get back.

We stop in Keswick to buy rolls. Noah scans the messages on his mobile, swiftly taps out replies, slides it shut. Simon slips a tiny white camera from his pack, captures the high street and skyline in a single arc of video. I’d love a camera so skinny and light it would hide in my hand. I reach into my pocket to find I have left my mobile on the window-ledge in my room. I can picture that.

Two or three cars stand empty in the gravelly park by the Bowder Stone; probably walkers still stride the ridges that heave their shoulders high above the southern end of Derwentwater. Their names are cumbersome, magical. I turn them in

my mouth like sucking marbles: Ullscarf, High Raise, Glaramara, Bessy Boot. Whoever calls a mountain *Bessy Boot*? Dale Head, High Spy, Maiden Moor, Catbells.

Noah throws open the boot and tosses out shoes, a couple of rucksacks, the bag of rolls, water, slams shut the boot with an enthusiasm that makes the whole vehicle shudder. He kicks a tyre in a friendly way, locks the car, slings one of the rucksacks over his shoulder and runs off along the path that leads to the Bowder Stone, leaving Simon and me to stare after him, at one another, at the small heap left on the gravel of the car park. ‘Get a move on!’

Simon looks apologetic, picking up what remains. Furtively, I sling my running rucksack over my shoulder. The woods smell of high summer, resinous and crackling under foot. Amazingly, it has been dry for several weeks in a row. Grass at the edge of the path looks crumpled and grey, but the trees are full of sap. I pat the dark brown bark of the nearest Scots pine, its rough surface an old friend.

We catch up with Noah in the last couple of hundred yards. He talks to himself in time with his strides, something about a pump.

The Bowder Stone looks tidy, its staircase a bizarre domestic touch in this landscape littered with rocks. A couple of huts stand about, locked. I squint at the Stone that Noah says will convince me to try bouldering. Now I understand the purpose of life-threatening climbing moves practised at a level so low you probably don’t kill yourself if you fall off. When. With my super-intelligent surveillance I spy a rash of white spots all along the outward-leaning faces of the Stone, on the undersides. It must be like trying to climb up the side of a battleship, looking for holds that will keep you secure while the whole of gravity tries to pull you off.

Noah has been plucking out the contents of the rucksacks, casting shoes and bags of chalk and other bits and pieces on the grass.

The inflatable mattress is transparent, a grounded jellyfish. ‘Yeah,’ says Noah, scrubbing his blond hair so that it stands up like cut straw. ‘I forgot the pump. You’ll just have to blow it up, Jay-Babe.’

I clench my face.

‘Come on,’ he says, ‘it’s exercise, deep-breathing.’

There’s a rubbery, dragging sound as Simon yanks at the carcass in search of the blow-hole.

‘Don’t give in to her!’ exclaims Noah, wrestling it away.

‘Noah, I can do this.’

Simon peacefully loops the mattress over his arm, but again Noah snatches it back. His face crimson as the mattress slowly gives form to his breathing. The flaccid rubber stiffens into shape and he heaves it across to the looming rock. Then he turns, one hand already sifting through the chalk in the bag at his waist.

‘Tell you what, before you get on the rock, climb up the underside of the staircase. Easy. Used to do it myself. It’ll limber you up a treat.’

‘Is Simon going to video everything?’

‘Oh, I will, yes. It helps us to refine movements. I’ll upload the videos to YouTube when I’ve edited them. I’m no good at finding the right music, though. Noah usually makes the suggestions. Maybe you could help.’ His little video camera sits snugly in his hand.

‘I’ll get Sy to video you too, Jay-Babe. Seeing yourself is the best coach.’

When you see yourself in a mirror the image is reversed. I have never seen myself on film. The hairs stand up suddenly on the back of my head. Our shadows disappear as a small cloud shifts.

As if receiving a signal, Noah and Simon turn away and are absorbed. The differences in their physique seem more than mere body shape. Noah’s newly-broad shoulders, newly-bleached hair, and astonishing, deep tan are familiar as the palm of my hand. Simon, with his springing, glossy black hair, his narrow-boned body, his shining skin, seems to come from another world – Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Mongolia, China, Japan - world-in-a-name that means as much to others as Glaramara means to me.

I’ve read on the net about the ladyboys in Thailand.

But Simon is Home Counties, obviously.

We are all related, I’ve read that too. The genes that stream through generations, bringing my body inevitably to its shape, flow through Simon’s ancestors too. Six degrees of separation, somebody’s idea. Mr Polite is strangely kin to me. Then I see that for this to be true he must also be related to Noah, which is so unbelievable that I jerk away towards the staircase.

‘Did you get that, Simon?’

‘Yes, though the focus could be better, I think.’

Quietly, I strip off the jeans and rugby shirt that have hidden my running gear, and slip my feet into the running shoes, supple as gloves and fitting as closely. Soft air

puffs on my bare shoulders and stomach. One pinch of flesh: I'll check the BMI later tonight.

Noah squawks, landing with a bounce on the crash mat. Behind him, Simon steps lithely up to the pitch from which Noah has fallen, swinging across the sheer surface of the outward-leaning boulder as if he has performed the movement a hundred times. His slender arms tighten to reveal the iron muscles of long practice, and with simple elegance he twists sideways to lodge the toes of one foot in an invisible crack, high above his hips. The other leg hangs below, a pendulum. His balance seems perfect. Noah leans back on his fists, saying nothing.

For a moment I glimpse the world through Noah's eyes. One year on holiday we spent all our time building a dam across a small stream. A wild pony kept us company, trotting down to the water to snuffle and watch. We took an apple cut in quarters and Noah held out his hand, palm flattened, whilst the pony accepted the slice between its gleaming teeth, its enormous lips. Its breath was hot on my hand when it was my turn. Noah held my other hand. He loved the pony's vast teeth, its swinging tail.

Noah turns his head and spies my running gear. His mouth opens in surprise but he seems frozen as I leap along the path down the hillside. His yell is swallowed up by the overarching trees and moments later I slither through undergrowth to the road that curves along the bottom of the Borrowdale valley, alongside the Derwent. A couple of startled tourists with cameras slung on their shoulders fall back into the ferns. 'Sorry,' I sing out, padding across the road to the other side. A twinge of guilt about Simon is suppressed by the glimpse of sunlight glittering on water. On the far bank is open woodland with an easy floor, not much overgrown. The nearest bridge is kilometres away. I'll drop down through the trees to the river's edge, and wade. Everything smells rich, brackeny, pine-bright.

The river runs fast and shallow between mounds of pebbles brought downstream by all the becks and gills that pour off the fellsides. Clear and cold it swirls towards Derwentwater. Sunlight flashes and sparkles around my legs as I stumble across, catching the occasional tiny hard pebble between my toes. My shoes dangle from my neck. I want them dry for running. I shout, 'Hiya, hiya!' The sound is carried like sycamore wings on the wind of this huge, free space.

I head towards the track, and set a steady pace due south, running parallel with the river until the path turns west and up on to the fell. The area has been mined for centuries and greenish-grey slates thrust themselves everywhere in sliding heaps or



single, razor shards, slicing skywards. The air is sweet and woody, with pea-green bracken erupting everywhere. There will be bilberries between the trees. I think of pausing to search out the purple berries, but my eyes focus on the tantalising peaks along the skyline.

Then I am in the midst of the old quarry with its mountainous piles of grey waste and I hover, breathing deeply, to wipe the sweat from my eyes. At my back, the land falls steeply to the dale. The mountain hides the sun but its shadow, cast across me, is warm. I look at my watch. I burst to run the ridge entire – High Spy to Catbells, and back along the valley – but I know there isn't time – and my navigation's not perfect, yet. I forgot the compass. Again I think of Simon, and Noah. They will be videoing, no doubt. Noah will be shouting and Simon will smile.

Six-thirty: forty minutes since I left the Bowder Stone and it feels like hours. Crossing the river has drawn a line behind me, and on this side nothing matters except running, breathing, balance.

It takes longer than I hope to get to the shoulder where the paths form a T-junction – left, up the fell towards Dale Head and right, for High Spy. But I have to stop, to make the moment. Over my head, a large bird glides west, so close that its streaky, dull markings are absolutely obvious. It rides the air as effortlessly as leaves floating on water. Brown, speckled with white, a white rump. Automatically the facts tick the boxes; and there's a wicked, downward-curving beak that fills me with a sudden thrill for it's a curlew and I've never seen one flying before. It's silent. They only sing in the spring but its bubbling call is the most haunting, most beautiful sound I know. I don't play the game of coming back as another species. I would always want my human ears and eyes. But if I could sing like a curlew I'd consider it.

I flop on a bed of tufted grass, surrounded by fluffs of white flax, and stare straight up into the sky, where the wash of transparent blue gradually thins until - I strain my neck - it reaches the horizon and loses itself entirely in the brilliance of the sun, which floats on a streamer of cloud, stains it pink. The air seems to pulse with sound and silence, wind and not wind. I place a finger on the throbbing vein in my wrist. It settles to a steady, slow beat. My shoulders, my spine, thighs, calves, heels, settle into the body of the mountain, nesting. Silence and sound magnify with every breath until the invisible stars sing. I am never going to leave this place.

Somebody shouts beyond the horizon. The sun has gone.

My heart leaps into my throat. Ten-past nine. They'll think I'm dead.

I start to my feet, straining to see the path that has almost disappeared in the fading light. I stare at the lights in the valley below. My knees turn to jelly and an icy touch grasps the top of my head. At least I control this situation. I simply have to put one foot in front of another.

Noah said there would still be light at eleven o'clock - but he is not here, in the shadow cast by the fells among the indistinguishable greens where all shades of difference merge. The path must be here somewhere, covering itself with bracken and roots. I have to rely upon the picture in my mind.

Running downhill over slate takes all my concentration. The path materialises intermittently, secretes itself again. I can't judge how to cross at speed an area where there are more boulders than soil under foot, where fear of razor flints is more unsettling than actually stubbing my toes. Trees merge with the waist-high undergrowth. Something snatches at my ankle, releases its grip, shoves me sharply into a whiplash of branches before spinning me round another tree and into exposed territory. A sudden chill wells up, sweeps over thighs, arms, face. *River*: winking mass of dark and light, deceptive shadows, impenetrable depths. I crossed it only hours back, of course it's safe.

But I can't see below the surface. I can't tell where's safe, where to go.

I seem to be breathing fast.

Humming birds, birds of paradise, are their songs like paradise too? Bex has gone underground. My head throbs.

I squint. Beyond the heaving mass is the faint ribbon of grey. It must be the road. Suddenly a figure runs, halts, waves, calls.

My body hurls itself forwards. I reach the other side soaked to the skin, with Simon's firm hand to pull me up the slippery bank. 'Noah's a bit irritable,' he says, stripping off his shirt. 'Put it on, I won't look. He's driving up and down the road, on the lookout. I'll see if I've got a signal yet.'

Simon's shirt is wonderfully warm. He squeezes the river water from my running vest, carefully extracting the fine green strands of water weed that have hitched a ride. Noah skids the car into the bank at the edge of the road. 'You do realise,' he says, through teeth that I know are gritted, 'Pa will blame me entirely. You'll have to tell him.' He shakes the faintly glowing face of his watch under my nose. 'I can't get a

signal and I didn't want to waste time looking for a phone box when we were working our butts off trying to find you.'

Suddenly another car roars around the bend, its dipped headlights making us a frieze. The dark rushes back. We barely see one another.

The journey home is taken at frightening speed. Noah pulls over to ring home. Afterwards, he's calmer. 'Ma will kill you but that's your problem,' he says, throwing himself back in the driver's seat. 'You'll have to work it out on your own.' Simon, meanwhile, is foraging, enveloped in his spare sweatshirt. We both smell of whatever it is he uses to wash his clothes, or maybe it's deodorant, fresh and green – like lemongrass, maybe. Lime. 'Here,' he says, holding out a packet of peanuts. 'Noah ate the last roll.'

'I'm not hungry, thanks, but water would be good.' Reluctantly I reach, my thighs ungluing themselves from the deflated crash mat that Noah has spread on the back seat of the car to protect the upholstery from my saturated shorts. Noah grabs the packet.

'Don't be nice to her, Sy, she bites.' He tossed a peanut in the air, dangerously craning his neck like a fledgling bird to catch it in his gaping mouth. The engine roars. 'Gross, stale,' tossing the packet over his shoulder. The water is warm from its stay in the car. I eat a couple of peanuts but my stomach cramps.

Noah and Simon embark on a long and technical conversation about how to make use of the videos. My pictures unroll against the dark. Every now and then Simon looks over his shoulder. He's frowning. Noah accelerates through St John in the Vale, taking the wide bends at such speed that I have to grab the door handle. A spurt of warm liquid suddenly soaks the gusset of my pants. It isn't river water leaking. My head pounds. If I were alone, I'd be pounding my fists. This body doesn't fit me, doesn't fit me at all. I'd like to rip out my womb, leave it on the bathroom shelf. If only.

We bump along the track and turn into the drive. The front door flies open and Ma's silhouette holds a towel. I hobble in her direction, desperate to avoid her face but she's not easy to escape. The towel makes me a toddler, swaddled. 'Come on,' she says. 'It's OK.' I want to weep.

She has been working at the kitchen table. It's August, it's nearly midnight and she's still at it, worse than Shirley, worse than anyone, waiting up for Ruth to arrive, finishing the third draft of her speech for Awards Day in September. Maybe Noah gets it from her, the wild persistence to be perfect. Pa staggers from his doze to switch on the

kettle. He has been on the high fells above Ennerdale, his latest passion. My eyes feel huge and sore. ‘Go on.’ Ma shoves me lightly between shoulder-blades. ‘Go and get a shower. I’ll hear all about it later.’

‘Later?’ exclaims Noah, sweeping her into a hug. The swing of his rucksack sends paper, pens and cue cards flying.

I bypass Simon in the doorway, waiting for Noah to introduce him. He smiles awkwardly, mouth twisting.

Ma knocks. ‘I’ve brought you a hot drink and a sandwich, darling. You haven’t eaten anything, I gather.’ Her voice is strained and tight on the other side of my bedroom door.

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Joey, can I come in? Please?’

Slowly, I throw Marmalade off my lap, turn down the volume.

*I’m beautiful in my way  
cos god makes no mistakes,  
I’m on the right track baby  
I was born this way.*

Marmalade tries to climb back, his claws deep in the pad of tissue above my knee. I open the door, half clutching him, half holding him away.

She says, ‘Darling, it’s half past midnight. Get some sleep. You’re online again. I brought this to help you sleep.’

I am wearing a clean rugby shirt and a pair of shorts. There’s a long graze down the side of one shin and a blossoming bruise on the knee of the other leg. Marmalade takes a running jump at my arms, fails to secure his pitch and touches down upon his four black pads with a discontented yowl.

Ma takes one step into the room and stops. She won’t come further unless I ask. ‘He seems very pleasant, that young man. He says Noah was a bit over-enthusiastic about climbing. What a polite young man he is. You have to say no to your brother.’ She waits for me to say something but there’s nothing to say.

She bites her lip. ‘It’s your period, isn’t it?’

I count the planks between the bed and the desk.

‘You’ll talk to us when you’re ready, won’t you, darling?’ She turns away without waiting for an answer. Marmalade streaks out. As she closes the door she says softly, ‘Ruth’s nearly here. It’ll be great to have her, won’t it?’

Later, I drift towards waking and hear the sound of a car coming to a halt, a slamming door, voices. Ruth's here. Dawn.

# Black Box file

## Borrowdale



marks the spot where Joey got taken by the fairies  
birds of paradise - ravenous  
humming birds - twitter

**CATCH**

Epic on the fold, above the eye

Networking: Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> - Friday 4<sup>th</sup> August

[iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk)

**Forum: what's the difference between self-talk and hallucinating?**

***Narrative: Mercury 11.01pm***

*I talk to myself all the time but now it it's kind of echoey. Could I be going schizoid?*

*Read something online about bi-polar?*

***Comment: Moderator Sue 11.01pm***

I really don't think so, Mercury. But maybe you ought to see your doctor instead of worrying on your own. You do need to talk things through with someone who really hears what you say so that you can get your life together.

***Narrative: Mercury 11.03pm***

*But I talk to you all the time thought you could help*

***Comment: Barbarian 11.04pm***

i've been to three of the gps in our practice and they all say different. You can't rely on anyone else. If your explaining it like you do, Merc, your not nuts.

***Comment: Cybersnake 11.06pm***

You have to take care. After uni I got on a management training scheme and they wanted me to do psychometric tests and all sorts. I couldn't stand it so I resigned, I had to go home till I could get fixed up with a job and somewhere to live and my parents wouldn't let it go. What was I going to do about my debt, what about my references, employment reliability. It was like hell. Nobody gets it. You end up talking to yourself cos you're the only one understands. Except here obviously

***Comment: Zenith 12.05am***

You get different sorts of answers according to what people think. I haven't told anybody. I don't know how to decide what's trustworthy. It feels like I only trust you guys. But you could all be fakes.

***Narrative: Mercury 12.22am***

*Thanks a bunch, Zen, that really makes me feel great.*

## Black Box file

[www.ethicsinanewworld.org](http://www.ethicsinanewworld.org)

Tony Radice on Posthuman Ethics and a postgender world

*The more we investigate the complex interplay of biology, environment, and our evolutionary characteristics of creativity and playfulness, the more likely it is that gender diversity will increase to the point that classification of individuals by gender will become irrelevant. Already, the inhabitants of cyberspace use multiple virtual selves, creating modes of knowing that were previously unrealisable or even non-existent. I predict that the outworn model of human development posited on a single, perfectible identity will be replaced by one where self-actualisation flourishes in a myriad forms. Today's youth are probably already living in this postgender world, creating our posthuman future.*

→ side-blotched lizards – 2 sexes, 5 genders.

→ Thailand – 3 sexes? M, F and transsexual?

→ trans-sexual = crossing from one sex to another?

trans-gender = male in female body/vice versa?

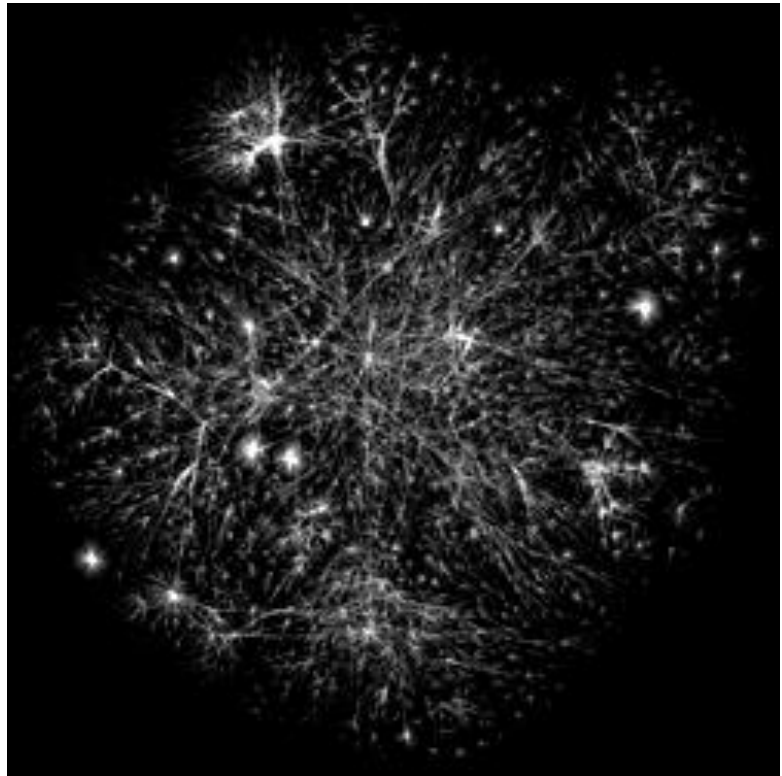
**FACTICITY = 'THAT WHICH RESISTS REASON or INTERPRETATION'**

5 morphs of gender for lizards so what about people?  
NO BOXES to tick?



## Zeph's Blog Friday 4 August

At school there's a take-it-to-bits human body in one of the biology labs. You snap out the heart and lungs and spleen and work out where everything goes. There is one for the brain but it's too simple. You can't see how all the bits fit together. My brain feels like an exploding star – all those electrical connections and I can't track them. People are trying to make maps of cyberspace, the electrical connections made between servers all round the world, I think. Everything seems to be networked. I never thought of cyberspace as a place to map. I exist in cyberspace but I can't touch or smell it.



There must be different kinds of real. Marmalade sat on my head and then headbutted me this morning to make me get up. His brain is like mine, wired for touching and smelling. I read online that human brains haven't evolved far enough to manage without touching and smelling.

Maybe Bex will talk for real at work today. When we chat online it's OK and I'm sure it's her, but sometimes there's a time-lag. Online, you could brush your teeth, fell a tree, go running in between chatlines.

Would that change what you say, if you went off to do other things, talk to other people and the person on the other end has no idea? Fraping, you know someone's playing games. I don't think it's funny but I'm the odd one out, obviously. Obviously.

Surfing Friday 4<sup>th</sup> August

[www.sexi-rexi.net](http://www.sexi-rexi.net)

### **Total control**

Join this site if you want to control your fate. Mould your body according to your will. Despise anyone who says different. Don't network with victims, don't take advice from those who tell you that you are ill, have a condition, are abnormal.

You are far beyond the normal. Nietzsche understood this with his vision of an elite and perfect humanity. Perfection is within your reach if your will is strong. Make your body conform to your vision alone. Focus all your talents and gifts to this end.

Join this site if you are strong enough for the truth.

### **Countdown Calorie Calculator**

This works only if you exercise seriously.

- Work out how much time you spend on specific activities daily
- Estimate their intensity (Soft/Heartstarter/Burn according to our charts)
- Hit the 'Burn' button

Your entry will automatically be loaded into your daily chart; giving you another tool with which to assess BMI and muscle-fat ratio..

## Zeph's Blog Friday 4 August

Some guy in Korea reckons if you spend forever online your brain gets scrambled . If I were Korean I'd volunteer, get loads of electrodes attached to my skull so they see my brain all lit up. The man in Korea is researching with kids. An English professor puts microchips in his brain so he can open doors without using his hands. Virtual *Open Sesame*, but the doors open for real. What I say online is real. If I get an idea online it must be as real as an offworld idea.

Bex's art makes you want to touch it but the ideas start in her mind, same as Ruth's scripts. It's all make-believe.

I never saw till I wrote it down – Making leads to Believing.

Ruth's mind must be cross-hatched with conversations and camera moves and head angles. Whatever she imagines, some actor says it differently and what used to be Ruth's idea belongs to someone else. If I ever click on 'Publish' for this blog, people are going to read these words and interpret them just as they want, never mind what I mean.

I'd like to be able to fix words in place, bricks in a building, so the meaning stays exactly what I decide, not what somebody else chooses to interpret.

Sometimes I don't know what I'm going to write till my fingers touch the keys and the words rush out of the end of my fingers. Anybody reading this blog won't know whether there's a real person here blogging, or somebody making lines of script for a TV soap like Ruth's, making-believe.

Blogging and Russian Roulette. Sometimes the cursor slips on the menu and won't do what I tell it. Maybe my fingers slip, saying something I don't know that I mean.

I wonder what Ruth would say about Zeph's Blog. I used to tell her all sorts when I was little. She's so easy to talk to. And somehow even though she's Ma's best friend, Pa doesn't seem left out.

## Friday 4<sup>th</sup> August

‘I’m bored not talking about it,’ Bex said. ‘Are you making yourself sick on purpose?’

She had brought rolls and water for lunch and we sat on the grass in Maude’s Meadow. I flicked a cigarette butt from under my leg. The grass by the benches was thick with stubs, like flattened fungi.

Bex sat cross-legged, her uniform skirt tugged tightly across her knees, the beaded fringe trailing ivy-fashion around her ankles. Shirley said Bex should write to head office with the modified design. She loved to offer career advice and as Bex had been a Saturday girl for the past two years, Shirley was certain, she said, that Bex could get a designer’s job with head office.

I imagined Bex in an office chair, with a computer and shelves and notices all over the wall behind her head. She had painted her nails pale pink since yesterday morning, her long fingers gesticulating beneath the flimsy sleeves of her blouse which hung, as usual, over the ends of her hands.

‘I could get bored not talking about your stuff.’

‘If you roll those sleeves any farther up your arms they’ll be round the back of your neck.’

‘Noah made me eat bad peanuts. I threw up.’ I replayed the scene of Ma wrestling with the top of the honey pot and how, as I retched, the lid bounced off the table and on to the floor. Even my nose and eyes streamed slime. The honey pot glistened.

‘You don’t eat peanuts, they’re fattening, according to you. Bad monthly?’

I swigged water.

‘You could see the doctor, get some pills.’

‘It was the kitchen towel. Ma kept trying to mop me up with the kitchen towel and it stank of old meat. They had beef casserole last night.’

Ruth had come into the kitchen with her mug of tea. She had rolled the red tablecloth over all the cups and plates and cutlery as if she were going to do a conjuring trick. Then she dropped the whole bundle into the sink. Ma burnt the toast and Ruth made me nibble the crust and the smell settled my stomach like she said it would. She could not have had more than three or four hours’ sleep but her eyes were wide open, unbleary. She had already been in the garden. I could smell fresh air in her hair, despite

the acid bile in my throat and the blackened haze above the toaster. She says that she doesn't need to sleep as much here as in London.

'I could use your cheekbones as a frame for canvas.' A piece of tomato fell out from the end of Bex's roll and two ants rushed up to check it. I resisted the urge to touch my face. 'So you wimped out of climbing yesterday.'

'Bouldering. We need to talk about Matt.'

'Look how far I can get my fingers round your arm.'

'He's still got your photos on his page.'

'It's like you want to hurt yourself.'

'You have to do something, stop him.'

'Eat something, it's just stupid. You eat less and less. Every day I see you picking your food like it's full of grit. You haven't even taken it out of the bag yet.'

'I bet you haven't told your mum.'

'You're on that website again, that extreme health one, aren't you?'

'You're not listening to me.'

'It's sorted, Joey. For the moment. Please. I am not talking about it.'

Today, her eyes were framed by careful smudges of green and grey eyeshadow, with black mascara darkening their gaze. Her hand rested lightly on my shoulder. I counted the pulses in my throat.

'It's OK, Joey.'

I felt too tired to push. 'Ruth's here. Middle of the night.'

'I practically don't remember when she didn't come every summer.'

'It's like holidays, soon as she arrives.'

Bex stretched back on the short, dry grass, balancing the roll on her stomach and spreading out her hair like an oriental fan. It is intensely black hair, finely streaked with crimson and white from the left temple. Artwork, Bex says. Bex makes me think of one of those Chinese or Japanese paintings where tiny women have white painted faces like dolls. Bex is not much taller now than when we were ten. I'm five eight and she makes me feel huge. For a moment I pictured Matt, his long blond curls tied back in a ponytail, bulging muscles curved around Bex's tiny shoulders. Giant and princess, I used to think. I pictured the string of posts on his page, the innuendos, the stupid rugby-playing jokes. I used to like Matt when we were younger. He used to be funny, kind. Things happen that you don't understand.

I read online that dolphins can turn on one another, torment and rape like humans.

‘When’s your Ma making chick pea curry again? It’s a wonder of the universe.’

I lay back on the grass, glad of the cool grittiness of the turf, and the high threads of cloud hanging like fleece on a fence.

‘What colour blue would you call the sky today?’

‘Pale wash cerulean, hints of cobalt.’

A faint breeze carried sounds from the high street. Mostly we could hear people talking and even the clatter of cups on saucers from the coffee bars. Everyone had set out tables on the street. The shop was as hot as a kitchen by midday. All the suffocating fabric made it seem even hotter. Expensive clothes smell marginally more pleasant than cheap ones.

Bex got me the holiday job. We saw more of each other in the shop than we had done at school for months, now. It was a kind of relief. ‘Noah keeps on about climbing. I tell him to bugger off.’

‘I bet he eats like a horse. You’ll never manage a climb if you starve yourself.’

I lifted my hands and stared through them at the sun. Sometimes your hands against bright light are see-through.

‘I eat enough for running.’

‘Yeah yeah. Mum’s coming to the Meadow in a bit.’

I pulled my skirt up above my knees and Bex turned her head. ‘Are you wearing your lycras?’

‘I can’t bear this uniform crap Shirley makes us wear. I feel better with running gear underneath. This floppy stuff gives me the creeps.’

‘Sequins over a sports bra. Shirley quite likes you, you do know that.’

‘She’s got something on her mind, I know that.’

Bex pulled a red streak of hair before her eyes and carefully separated the strands. ‘How long’s Ruth staying this summer?’

‘Ruth’s asking about your Facebook.’ A pigeon cooed nearby, and the doors of a bus wheezed open or shut. Somebody, on a bench too close, coughed; spat.

‘What colour hair are you wearing for your mum’s wedding?’

Bex fumbled for her roll. ‘I’m saving up. Thought I’d have the colours a bit more muted.’ I laughed. ‘Are you coming or not?’ She was ignoring me. ‘You’re

invited. Mum and Jack said to ask you. She thought your Ma and Pa might like to come too. And Ruth. If she wants.'

'What have you done to your arm?'

She flipped to her stomach, black hair fanning forward. 'Nothing. Brambles in the garden, sorting out. For the wedding. The party's in the garden.'

'The new house.'

'You'll see if you come. To the wedding. You'll have to wear - .' Her eyes glittered through her fall of hair like a cat's in long grass. I sat up, shredding a crumb for the ants. They sped away, busy busy. 'You don't have to wear a skirt. Mum and Jack won't mind. Jack's going to be the coolest stepdad ever.' She pursed her lips, nipping the edges of her roll with sharp, precise movements. 'Bet you could borrow something from the shop. Shirley will lend you something. The skinnier you get – has she asked you, yet, about the show?'

'Is that – the beady look in her eye. It sucks. Shirley-girly oh God.'

Suddenly Bex giggled, 'Shirley-girly. Girly-Shirley,' and started to pelt me with crumbs till we were rolling across the grass, like in the old days. White crumbs speckled her black hair, snow on coal. She shook her head violently before grabbing the other half of her roll. 'You used to eat. I exactly remember when you used to eat lots. Now you just poke things round the plate. And you're obsessing about running, do you know that? Grips and pull-ups and bleep tests.'

'Bleep.'

'And what's that about?' She even eats like a cat. It's like each bite has to be approached with the tip of the tongue first and then pulled into the mouth. Except that cats are picky, not cautious. She chose the rolls, she must know they're not poisoned.

She doesn't understand about running. Before falling asleep last night, I had unfolded the map of Borrowdale, and traced the route of the Borrowdale Fell Run. Seventeen kilometres over Great Gable, Dale Head, Scafell Pike – it wasn't the distance but the heights, the slopes. Running down is sometimes much harder than the ascent. The fastest runners do it in less than three hours and the slowest take no more than six. I'd settle for finishing the route. I needed more practice off-road, in the hills. Running on roads makes you think you're better than you are.

'Come in spacegirl, are you with me?' Bex prodded my arm. I took a bite, swallowing down the mush of bread and ham with a slug of still-cool water.

The only time my body fits is when I fill up my senses with walls and sheep, waves of bracken, heather and scrub oak and tormentil and eyebright, gills that taste of peat, skylarks balancing on thermals and stonechats chittering on boulders. It's a landscape shaped over centuries. That's why I might like to be an archaeologist. Landscape tells the truth and you have to get to grips with it. I've learned that from Pa. Landscape's not just nature, it's us shaping nature and if we understand how it used to be we might get better at the shape of the future.

'What's the pay, do you know?'

'So what did Noah do when you bunked off?'

'He's brought a friend back from uni. Simon.'

'Nice?'

'What's the pay?'

'Ask Shirley-Girly.' Bex wrestled a book out of her bag. Bright yellow and brown butterflies chased each other through a buddleia behind the bench. I watched them disappearing in the foliage, rising and falling so quickly you could lose them between blinks. I could be a butterfly. I'd like the life-cycle. I pictured winding a cocoon around my body, everything changing inside, nobody able to see it.

Bex stretched out a finger towards the flying fragments of colour. 'What sort of butterflies?'

'Comma, maybe. Clouded Yellow. You are so not interested.'

Bex's eyes flickered whilst her fingers riffled pages as if they knew how to read and were finding the place. You could film Clouded Yellows speeded up and get the whole life-cycle in a few seconds. You could film a rock for years, and rain, snow, sun, night, day would flit past but the rock wouldn't change.

'What's Ruth working on this year? A pigeon, tight-breasted as Shirley, played landowner around some office types eating sandwiches on the grass. The lone girl had twisted her legs sideways, her short skirt creased tight across her backside, a shiny red plastic skin. The men's legs sprawled wide, cans perched between their knees. One guy wound his tie around his forehead, untied it. He had stubby, restless fingers.

'I'm sure she will tell you if you ask.' The sun was suddenly too hot. The butterflies lifted casually on the breeze, a handful of leaves thrown carelessly into the air. Dried earth caught at the back of my throat.

'You're still in a state about Noah and that climbing stuff.' She turned a page.



Running, you think about what's around you, where you're going. You haven't to miss the track. You have to notice the lie of the land. And you can lose yourself utterly. I lose myself utterly. But climbing ... That time with Noah, all I could think was how lost I'd have been without his rope. At least I got myself off High Spy. You have to do it yourself, in the end. DIY is how you live, how you die.

Bex was reading like a cat casually hunting. She flicked pages back and forth, skimming, fingering, underscoring with her finger, as though she were preparing to pounce on the author and demand to know what was happening and why.

'What's the book?'

'As if you care,' not raising her head. 'Writer called Kafka. *Metamorphosis*. The book's called *Metamorphosis*. It's about a man who wakes up one morning and he's turned into a giant insect.'

'What's the point?' Bex plays Book Roulette. She takes out books from the library at random and returns them if she's not sucked into the story by the end of the first twenty pages. She says the librarians know her name. I used to go into the library with her. I knew she wanted to carry on reading. 'What happens?'

'I'll know by the end.'

'Bex.'

'What? What is it?'

'Aren't you at all bothered that Matt –'

'Leave it, Joey.' She looked up with a dark frown.

'Hello girls.'

'Hi Mum, Joey's coming to see you get married to Jack. She'll borrow a *frock*.'

## **Zeph's Blog Friday 4 August**

On [iwannagetoutofhere](#) we say we are friends but I have no way of knowing that Cybersnake, Sue, Barbarian are who they say. Trusting them isn't like trusting Ma, Ruth, even Noah. Maybe there's Cybertrust as well as Cybertalk. I say more to Cybersnake than Bex but I never touch and smell Cybersnake. Sometimes it's like dreaming, online, it feels real but you know there's another sort of real somewhere too. Sort of hallucinating. The guy with the electrodes would work it out.

All the people I chat to are somewhere else. We're linked by an invisible net. Online I'm connected to millions of people. It's like putting a dot in the

universe and the dot is me and we're all dots who meet in cyberspace. Maybe there's Cybermeeting too. Maybe one day we'll only need to live in cyberspace and touching and smelling will be microchipped. Now I think about it, I know there's physical space and cyberspace and I live in both. Ruth's in a sort of cyberspace when she writes her scripts and so does Bex when she imagines her masks and then she gets out the fabric and stuff and makes them in real space.

Maybe everyone does the same and we all have split minds, or two minds and that's why people say 'I'm in two minds.' One mind is in cyberspace and the other mind has to deal with fingers and tongues and aches and pains. When Bex makes her masks there's a bridge between, a breakthrough.

I don't know how to do that. I'm not an artist or a writer. But there's something free in cyberspace, not fixed or solid. Running in the fells is free and solid. I can't work it out.

Bex and me on the grass. Two dots with a dotted line between us. It used to be a solid line.

### **Chat 9.03pm Bex to Joey**

*Joey* You're sure of your settings, Matt won't find out?

*Bex* I've changed everything, I've gone through the privacy stuff over and over

*Joey* You said Matt's a troll, he could track you, couldn't he?

*Bex* Jack'd kill him. That's if Mum didn't get him first.

*Joey* I thought you weren't going to tell.

*Bex* I'm not. But like you said, just in case. Jack's got the knack.

*Joey* Pa says Jack missed his vocation, ought to have been a national park ranger not a policeman.

*Bex* You ought to suggest it to him, he might like that. Mum says he'll want something new to do now he's retiring.

*Joey* What about all that craft stuff he's been doing, your new house?

*Bex* Did you know your Ma says she'll help with food, at the wedding. Mum phoned, asked.

## **Zeph's Blog Friday 4 August**

I don't watch soaps and I don't know if we ever turn up in Ruth's lines but Ma says she wouldn't use her friends. Ruth says viewers send in flowers, letters, presents for babies or brides when they get written into the scripts. Caroline and Jack would be great in a script, a bit of a fairy tale.

When Ruth's here everything feels easy. She's not like a visitor. Pa yarns at her for hours about upland peat and carbon capture. He's obsessing with wild Ennerdale, on about it for years, people not interfering with natural environments. Ruth knows people making documentaries about wilderness. She and Pa argue about definitions of wilderness and Noah goes on about the economics of survival. Ruth's a fact of life regardless.

Facticity. I found it online. It means something more solid than reason or interpretation, something so real that you just have to accept it.

Ruth facticity:-

1. Her husband and baby both died in a car crash when the baby was eleven months.
2. She and Ma met in the doctor's surgery in London when they were both pregnant.
3. She has a sister somewhere.
4. She comes to stay every year, Christmas, summer. She loves us.

The opposite of facticity must be fantasy.

Fantasies:-

1. Noah thinks I'll open his link for him and Simon on the Bowder Stone.
2. Noah is saving all his wages from the job at the pub.
3. Noah says Fiona is away with her parents for 2 weeks to keep them sweet because he and Fi are doing the States later in the summer . As if.

Fact: Ma and Pa will worry about his debts This isn't facticity yet because I know it's going to happen but till it does I'm putting it down as fact.

Probability: Pa and Noah will fight about money.

Fantasy: I'll earn enough this summer to be free. Noah would call it economics of survival

Facticity must be what's left over when all the arguing stops.

An artefact must exist as facticity. Bex's masks must be facticities, if there's a word. There is the word, I am writing it.

Ma has a scrappy old photo of herself and Ruth in a park by a lake. It's a sunny day, and they are laughing at the camera. Both have huge bellies. Pa is in the background. Noah is not there. Is my interpretation of the photo fact or fantasy or something else? Guesswork? I guess that Ruth's dead husband is holding the camera. Picture taken by ghost. Pa looks the same but less of him if possible. Noah is not there so perhaps he was standing with Pa. He was three at the time. I imagine both babies kicking in the womb, urgent to be born.

I was another person, hidden. Ma will have felt me kicking, sticking my heels and fists into her ribs. She and Ruth talk sometimes about being pregnant. I imagine that she thought she knew all about me but she didn't, my head was sealed off from her. Thoughts can't be transmitted through the amniotic fluid. Is guessing like imagining?

If there's you and there's the idea of you, it's like having a ghost or shadow, the second self. Whose idea of you is it that you end up being?

I looked up doppelgänger. It's like a double and it's supposed to be bad luck to meet your doppelgänger but every time you look in the mirror you see somebody looking like you but not. Superstitious people might get spooked seeing their reflection. I'm not superstitious but it spooks me because it ISN'T ME.

Encarta

## Black Box file

dop·pel·gang·er [ dópp'l gàngər ](plural dop·pel·gang·ers)

### Definition:

1. **somebody similar to another person:** someone who closely resembles somebody else
2. **ghost identical to living person:** an apparition in the form of a double of a living person

[Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century. <German, literally "double-goer"]

## Doppelgänger

*For other uses, see Doppelgänger (disambiguation).* ...

A **doppelgänger** (pronounced [ˈdɔpəlˌgɛŋɐ] is a tangible double of a living person in fiction, folklore, and popular culture that typically represents evil. In the vernacular, the word *doppelgänger* has come to refer (as in German "doppelt(e)") to any double or look-alike of a person.

What does this mean?

tangible?

The word also is used to describe the sensation of having glimpsed oneself in peripheral vision, in a position where there is no chance that it could have been a reflection. Doppelgängers often are perceived as a sinister form of bilocation and generally regarded as harbingers of bad luck. In some traditions, a doppelgänger seen by a person's friends or relatives portends illness or danger, while seeing one's own doppelgänger is an omen of death.

wikipedia quotes Talmud - to meet oneself is to meet God - haven't seen myself out of the corner of my eye.

YET!

bilocation? online and offline?

like Second Life, playing games?

doppelgänger and the posthuman world?

## **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> August**

Shirley was full of herself, full of the show. She picked me up in the middle of the morning in her black Range Rover and we drove through Windermere towards the hotel she had booked. The car stank of her cologne but I was braced. In my bag were Noah's mints, lifted from the back seat of his car. I kept thinking about the money and what I could do with it.

Noah thought it was hysterical that I was going to be a model and somebody would be videoing the show. Ruth said, 'Don't look at the camera. Tell yourself it's not there. If you find yourself looking at people in the audience, stare at the forehead, just between the eyes.' She had made me practise with her. Noah pranced around the kitchen hooting but I didn't blink and Ruth said to Ma that I was a natural. It made me feel free for a moment, looking without seeing. Usually when you look at someone you're expecting them to look back. I practised looking at Simon's forehead. It's smooth. I wondered if that's how actors manage all the different parts, if they pretend that nobody sees them. Looking without seeing, you could be anything, anyone. You could be private in public.

Shirley and I were shown into a long wooden-panelled hall by the events manager who kept saying, 'This is a first for us, you know. Our ladies are terribly excited. The view's wonderful, isn't it? We're so excited.' The badge on her lapel bobbed up and down. Her red jacket was tight, sticking out stiffly over her hips. The patio doors were wide open and outside, on the terrace, a row of women in tight jeans sat on the wall. They turned in our direction but then back to one another, till the manager introduced Shirley and they got up. Getting up doesn't quite describe it. They rearranged their legs and shoulders and sort of tilted themselves to the upright, one after another. I stayed in the doorway. Two or three glared in my direction.

But Shirley was giving me the equivalent of two days' full time work and I had no intention of being sneered off. I wondered what she was paying the others. She must be hoping to make a mound of money this afternoon – a mountain, even. I looked beyond the terrace, where the land fell away to the foreshore. Trees were every shade of green against the sky; two or three clouds hanging about, being picturesque. The hot smell of lakeside vegetation on an August Saturday was wafted from the lake with an accent of eau de diesel. The women seemed not to notice the view. If I really couldn't bear it I could leap over the wall and disappear in the shrubbery. There'd be any number of trails down to the shore. I scanned the view and realised that the entire shore was

laden with hotels. Really, this was town transplanted. On the other side of the lake the woods of Claife Heights blossomed against a sweet blue sky.

Shirley had been planning her show for months, Bex said. There was someone in charge of make-up, a hairdresser wearing a shiny uniform, and racks of clothes already set up in a side room. As we were led into this room to prepare, a photographer arrived with his clumsy bags and a tripod. Shirley said, 'I've been thinking about the two best angles for the video,' and strode back into the hall, her dress just about keeping pace. She had chosen a flimsy model from the range, pinky-greenery, suitable for high summer. We were having high summer this August but I had the impression that she would have worn it in sleet.

Behind the closed door of the dressing area, with Shirley out of the way, the other women stared. I stared right back. 'What's your experience then, love?' Two of them were quite young. I'm no good at ages but I would bet they were in their late twenties and would call themselves girls. The one who spoke had a harsh accent, not local, Liverpool perhaps. More to the point, she was cross. The tops of her arms were stringy. In the car, Shirley had said that having a wide age range was important. The clients with money to spend had tough, tanned skin, from years spent in Spain and the Caribbean; and Florida and South Africa and cruise ships going round the Med. You couldn't airbrush the models, Shirley said. They had to be like for like. Well, Shirley said that the agent had said this, the agent who'd set up the whole event.

'So what've you done?' The woman crossed the room in my direction, elbows and chin jutting.

'I'm holiday staff. Shirley's.' I crossed wrists behind my back.

An older one said, 'Well, my dear, you ought to view yourself seriously. Take a look.' She surprised me, pushing me towards one of the two full-length mirrors that swung on heavy wooden stands against the panelled wall.

I saw this person in black jeans and red and white striped rugby shirt, sandals, hair cropped short, bony jawline, level black eyebrows. Behind me the other woman cocked her head. Gold and silver streaks feathered her fair hair, which lay snug as a cap on her small head. She was already half-stripped. It was very odd to be standing so close to a half-naked woman I didn't know. 'You see?' she said to the others. 'You see?' gesturing at my reflection, which looked wary. 'It's that male-female look,' she said, smiling at my shoulder. 'It sells. There's a word for it, can't think.' She clicked her fingers impatiently. 'And-something.' She shook her head, and her ear-rings swung like



silver lanterns. ‘Think about it. You could do quite well in the modelling world. You’ve got that bone structure – look at it – oval, tidy cheekbones, broad forehead. Wait till make-up has finished with you.’

‘Don’t put ideas into her head,’ said the first one tartly, easing a tight sweater over her head. Her bony, tanned back glistened in the mirror.

The woman behind me frowned. Carefully I removed her hands from my shoulders. ‘It’s kind of you to bother,’ I said, ‘but I’m only here for the pay.’

‘Suit yourself.’ She was thinking, straight-faced. ‘I was trying to help. You could pay your way through college with modelling, had you thought about it? You’ve got that straight up-and-down figure too. No hips.’ At the edge of vision she turned away. ‘I run the agency. I’m going to give you my card. Daphne, that’s me.’ A gold-edged card lay stiffly in my hand. The print was gold, impossible to read. ‘I’ll be interested to see you in the clothes. I’ll talk to the make-up girl myself. Do you know how to walk?’

She laughed when my eyes rolled.

I had to be dressed. Shirley’s energy filled the room. ‘What the hell are you wearing? You can’t wear a sports bra with my clothes. Get it off. Go on – they’re all used to looking at bodies in here, we’re all women in here. Take it off. Why wear that thing? It flattens what you’ve got completely. Pretty please. There, you see? Small tits, hardly anything at all, just right. These clothes need a hint of boob to fall right.’ She approached with something purple, flimsy, full length. ‘You’ll have to take off your jeans. Joey. OK, so did you bring any black panties with you? White’ll show. Anyone got spares?’

Daphne foraged in her case and held up a black thong. ‘This should do, Shirley. New yesterday. I bought several with me just in case. You know, the excitement.’

I was allowed to go behind a screen to put on the thong. The string cut into my crack, shoved the tampon further in, and the triangle at the front barely covered my pubic hair. Girls at school wear thongs all the time. Lads wear jock-straps for sport. Ma won’t touch Noah’s jock-straps. She makes him put them into the washing machine himself. Sometimes she makes him drop them into solutions of bleach. Now I knew why. I knew why our washing line was full of sensible briefs and boxers and shorts. Shorts were OK.

After that, the make-over. My face was turned this way and that by a girl with purple finger-talons, as she plucked invisible hairs from between my eyebrows, considered the planes of my cheekbones, squinted at the box of colours and creams and

decided what angles my face should be given. After a while I began to picture Bex's face, screwed up tight, as she assembled the framework for the mask, carefully laying whippy pieces of willow and fine bone over my face, measuring and fixing, muttering to herself, to me. 'Fur, a few pheasant feathers and I'll felt the Herdwick so it creates a different texture, what do you think? Maybe some simple feather stitching? Rabbit fur, no. Squirrel?'

The girl with purple talons kept shoving a mirror in front of me - finger-marked pink-rimmed hand mirror - but I could only see cheek-bones frosted with glitter. They could as easily have been hers as mine.

'You look fabulous,' said Daphne in her smoker's voice; after which Shirley turned me into a walking clothes rack. She moaned that I didn't have pierced ears but made up for it with bangles and scarves and necklaces and laces. The only way to get through was to be someone else; exactly as Ruth had said. There was enough make-up on my face to deceive Ma.

I stalked up and down the hall between the rows of heavy, padded chairs, and then out to the patio as instructed. 'Stand against the balustrade. Perfect. She isn't moving an inch, is she? You wouldn't like to smile, would you? Good, fine, excellent, you really are a natural, she really is great material, Shirley. That marvellous defiant look. Now back here. Walk this way.' Daphne advanced, grabbed my hips, and wrenched them to a strange angle. 'Walk on. That's right,' with a slap to my bottom. 'Walk from the hip, use the whole of your thigh, we want the skirt to swing. And back again.' She stepped away, watched my body movements as though she were my coach. 'Yes. We're ready. Bring on the show. You need to practise at home, Joey. Put a mirror at the end of your hall, walk towards it, watch yourself.' I imagined the running commentaries: Pa's; Ma would say I looked great. Noah would yell 'Sweetie-pie' from the top of the stairs. Ruth might bump him sideways. She's solid in lots of ways. 'You should come round when I'm looking at the video. It's always good to see yourself, you get a clearer understanding of how to hold yourself, of course.'

I lost the sense of what they dressed me in, climbing mechanically in and out of garments. The two twenty-somethings asked for touching up of make-up, jostled at the swing mirrors, walked elaborately round me as though I might explode. One of them bounced me with a swing of her bony hips just as Shirley handed me a glass of water. I had to change. Fake apology.

It went on for hours. There was music and Shirley with a microphone and a break for tea and slivers of cake and then the ladies wanted to see some of the clothes again. I was sent out into no-man's-land time after time. The leather handbag woman was furious.

The photographer ran between tripods, clicking and switching. I flicked my eyes in his direction, vaguely curious, and he gave me the thumbs up. Baffling. Whoever was on tape wasn't me.

He was getting two angles, so maybe it was like getting both eyes to form a single image – only he couldn't superimpose one tape upon another. Maybe he could do something digitally clever, morphing one into the other. At one point, waiting between sets, I toyed with the notion that I might be filmed from the back as well as the front. You only see your own back with a mirror, so you never see yourself as others see you. Nobody sees you from back and front at the same time except yourself, with the mirror in your hand. Even then, your reflection is reversed. Doppelgänger aren't mirrors, so maybe you don't recognise your doppelgänger.

I couldn't count the clients. I had to concentrate on looking between their eyes. Most of the chairs were occupied, which seemed to please Shirley, and there was a pronounced smell of perfume so I took quick soft breaths at the top of my chest. That way I didn't have to pull all the sweet, gag-making smells into my lungs.

They weren't looking at me anyway. They saw the clothes. We've a clothes horse at home. It's collapsible and Ma keeps it in the utility room.

I got into Shirley's car in a daze. At least her car smelt of car. I tried to picture those women getting into their huge four-wheel drives or long limousines, driving back through narrow roads to houses set far back in landscaped gardens or to luxury apartments built of creamy stone, with gleaming windows and wrought-iron balconies overlooking lakes.

Shirley was deep in fantasy-land about future shows. The thrum of the engine and her non-stop comments merged into a hum that made my eyelids heavy. I would have nodded off but every time my head dropped forward I was jerked awake, remembering – a glare - a jostle in the back – a flick across the arm – a collision with a wooden rack. They really didn't like me, apart from Daphne. And I ached. My legs weren't used to walking so slowly and my back was stiff from movements that didn't feel natural. Why did some women get chewed up like that? Ma wouldn't have bought any of Shirley's girly stuff. She wears the same clothes till they've got to go to Oxfam.

She has a few pairs of trousers, tee shirts, blouses and sweaters depending on the time of year, and jackets - sunflower and chrysanthemum, plain gold, yellow bead-and-ribbon, and black for disasters. I name the jackets as she does, when she asks me how she looks and I have to be interested. If it's hot she wears a skirt instead of trousers. Nobody seems to mind. At her school, they know who she is. How Ma is with clothes feels OK to me.

We were not the only people to have spent the afternoon by Windermere. A long line of cars inched forward, stopped. Shirley even switched off the engine a couple of times. Pa might be home when I got back. He had far more clothes than Ma - office suit - stiff jeans - metal-capped boots - thick sweaters and scabby fleeces and woolly hats and stained helmets - wet-weather gear against hurricane and tornado. We had a whole cupboard devoted to snow stuff, all of it probably costly enough for the annual rent of an affordable flat, but Pa was out in all weathers, all through the year. Having the right clothes was a matter of life and death, he said. Every year, people died on the fells, not having the right equipment. My entire stupid afternoon had been spent getting into and out of stupid decorations, as useless as Christmas glitter you have to shake out of your hair, your bed, the inside of maps.

But I was getting paid for it. I straightened my legs and told myself to shut up. The traffic queue unclogged itself and we moved into third gear. I stared sleepily through the window at the fat lambs bounding up a fellside. My legs twitched.

Girls at school want to be fashion models, they send off their photos, register online with agencies, take photos on their mobiles. I knew because somehow I was sent one. One girl's image went to so many phones she had hysterics and her parents tried to sue the school. But the phone isn't the problem, it's the way people use it. Nobody could make me into a fashion model. Someone uploaded the girl's photo to Facebook, poor cow, and then the writing really was on The Wall. I would have taken it down but I'm not the administrator.

We passed the turn-off to Staveley. I wanted to break out of the car, to run the length of the Kentmere valley. Beyond the reservoir I'd clamber up the Nan Bield Pass, finding the fastest way over tussocks and heather and boulders to the long, high plateau of High Street. The Romans made a road over High Street, from the other end of Ullswater to this end of Windermere. They took the shortest, toughest routes, marching along the top of the world. I could have loved the long marching, the anonymity, the feet beating on rock and moss and making new paths. I pictured myself in the socks,

boots, leg-wrappings, two or three tunics, thick woollen cloak, scarf – even a hat squashed under my helmet- everything practical for the icy winds, slashing rains and cloud-cover of my favourite places in winter.

‘Soon get you home.’ Shirley’s voice made me jump. ‘I thought you’d dropped off, time to wake up. It’s more tiring than you think.’ She kept glancing sideways, trying to see my face. I twisted in the seat to stare through the passenger window at the flying hedgerows, the farmsteads and the outlying houses of the town. ‘You’ll be glad of a bath, I expect. Me, I can’t wait. I’ve been sweating like a pig.’ She meant to be kind. ‘You did really well, Joey. I’ve put a bit extra in the envelope. Glove compartment.’ She nodded, and cautiously I snapped open the small locker in front of me. A white envelope, sealed. ‘That’s right.’ Beneath the perfume was the sour taint of weary perspiration. It smelt of Shirley but I wondered, with a start, if I smelt rank to her. Noah does battle with his body odour. Bottles and sprays line up on his window ledge. Man-smell is different from woman-smell. I can’t capture my own smell. People smell different according to mood. I have smelt fear.

‘Thanks.’ I opened the envelope and saw several banknotes. Suddenly I realised that I had been a fashion model, all afternoon, and if anyone at school found out there would be trouble. Again.

Shirley reversed zig-zag to the end of the track leading to our house. I craned round, catching sight of Ruth wandering along, waving. Fumes snorted and belched into the hedgerows. A film of exhaust slime would be settling on hawthorn berries and rosehips. Ruth opened the door of the car, holding out her hand. I was stiffer than I knew. Together we waved as Shirley’s car juddered, leapt away; and then the stillness of the evening welled up.

‘Why didn’t she just turn round here like everybody else?’ Ruth was already going inside. ‘Oh well. Your mother’s been given two tickets for a poetry reading tonight so they’ve gone out to supper. It’s just me. I don’t know where Noah is, or Simon. He’s an unexpected friend, don’t you find?’

I looked across the valley to where long shadows undulated softly down the side of the fell away from the sun poised on the horizon. I seemed to be standing with one leg bent, like an awkward, stiff heron. My calf muscles twitched. An overgrown lamb bleated sulkily at its mother. We had passed fields full of sheep, one poor ewe barely standing upright with the fierce tugging of two nearly full-sized offspring. I wondered if lambs ever went to the ram for comfort. Probably not; the rams would have been taken

off the fellside after the tugging and driven away to secure and pampered enclosures until next season. Fertility rituals.

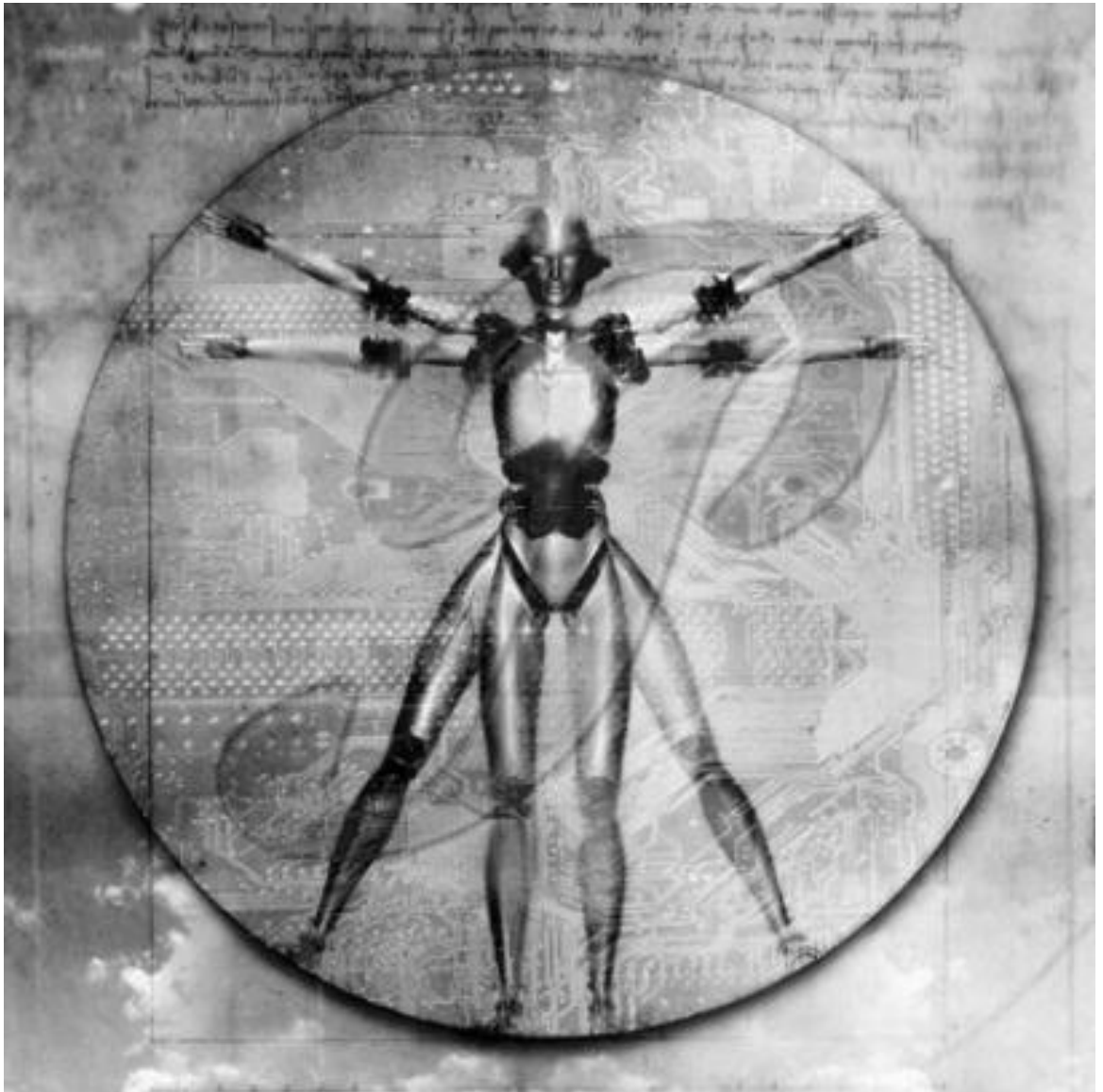
Pa said this morning there's a male pygmy hippo that changes the ratio of X and Y chromosomes if it's kept in captivity, to produce more female offspring. Apparently this makes his life easier - less competition from other males. Designer hippos.

I swear Ruth is psychic. She didn't ask how it went, she didn't ask what I wanted for supper, she didn't tell me about her day. Whilst I was in the shower she went into my room and took everything away to wash. She left a tall glass of fresh lemonade, full of ice, beside my bed; and opened all the windows to fill the house with the sounds of the evening breeze, our rowan trees swaying, and the house martins chattering in the eaves.

## Zeph's Blog Saturday 5 August

Man wakes up as bug, little legs sticking out through the pyjamas.

Caterpillar/chrysalis/butterfly. I do not want to do my university application  
crap crap crap



A professor inserts microchips into his brain and feels his wife's movements on the other side of the Atlantic. A volunteer with fingertip implants tries to sense how far away things are, through vibrations, like bats. Deaf people have microchips inserted.

Mutation or transformation? human/cyborg/transhuman? Maybe I could apply.

## **Black Box file**

*crap crap crap*

<http://www.ucas.com/students/applying/howtoapply/personalstatement/presentation>

### **How to provide your personal statement**

You can enter up to 4,000 characters (this includes spaces) or 47 lines of text (this includes blank lines), whichever comes first. You do not have to use all the space provided. When you save text, the system will tell you how many characters are still available or if you have used too many characters. You can preview your statement after you have saved it.

I want to study archaeology because I have a deep interest in history and I want to explore human nature through artefacts. I am excited by the possibility of being involved in original research as a student, using scientific methods. In a gap year I hope to gain experience as a volunteer, and have already visited several archaeological digs where I have been able to find out what people do on site. I enjoy analysing evidence. In my spare time I go fell running, often over land which has been farmed or mined for many centuries. I am fascinated to find out what information the land holds and how this can help us with conservation or sustainable development in the future and this application is a total waste of time. My mother is a headteacher so the last thing in the world I am going to study at university is a subject that might lead to teaching. My father is a biologist and conservationist. He works for a wildlife charity. Although I am quite interested in wildlife I am never going to study sciences. I chose subjects that nobody else in the family has taken so that rules out sciences. My brother is already at university doing economics. This application might divert my parents' attention until I am ready. If I go to university they'll be sure to want to help with fees etc, and I don't want their help. In case. I want to stay round here, I think. I remember enough of living in London to know I never want to live in a city if I can help it. I need money to sort myself out. I've just got work experience of the most disgusting and degrading kind, as a fashion model. The money is far too good. At school they say that going to university is one of the most transforming experiences anybody can have. How do they know? Transforming starts inside.



## Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> August

‘Supper’s almost done.’ Ruth switched on the television and put the remote into my hand. ‘Whatever you want. There was a g-string thong thing? I didn’t think it could be yours. I’ve put it in the wash.’

She made spaghetti with anchovies and garlic and chillies and heaps of grated parmesan and I sucked up spaghetti like a kid until I saw that I had eaten almost half the portion so I stopped, and carefully spread what remained around the bowl. There was a trickle of oil on my chin. Ruth poured herself a glass of red wine. I went to the bin to clear the plate.

‘I’m just doing a spot of work,’ she said. ‘Is that OK with you?’

She threw me a cloth with which to wipe down the table. Our table had lots of burn marks and knife indentations from when we’d painted and cut out and carved and done experiments, Noah and I, when we were kids. The smell of old, stale wood was really comforting, a bit oily, a bit aromatic. It helps you to know where you are, who you are, family old things.

I laid my head against the cool wood, inhaling it, remembering our London kitchen in the basement, with light filtering down from above, and a tiny yard where my sand-tray from childhood and Ma’s pots of lavender silted up together.

‘I guess you must be worn out. I hoped you earned a big fat fee. I’m just going to sit here with my notebook. I’ll put on some music.’

‘Dreary walking up and down, that’s all.’

‘It’s tiring getting in and out of clothes, and not your favourite activity, I would judge. You were spectacularly made up when you came in – almost like face paints. Did it help, that thing about looking between the eyes?’ She squatted before the radio, stared at the tuning and then loosened a CD from its box. ‘Brahms piano music OK?’

‘OK.’ I moved towards the sofa at the other end of the kitchen.

Ruth returned to the table, ‘What sells clothes is how somebody looks in them and you were the somebody. It won’t have been personal but they’ll have been looking. Make-up helps.’ She opened her notebook. flattened the pages, took out a pencil, and instantly slashed at a page. I half-expected her to tear it out but she gazed intently, flipped over the page and began to write. She has a tiny laptop but always says she prefers to write by hand when she stays with us. Things comes out differently, more concrete, she says. I watched her for a minute or so through half-closed eyes, her ash-white hair falling forward over her face. Noah and I used to try to distract her when we

were younger, suddenly screaming or banging a door, but nothing would make her react. She had gone into an invisible room and closed the door.

I stretched out along the sofa, wedging myself into the crack between the seat cushions and the back. The sofa was old, too, but not from living with us. Pa had picked it up at an auction soon after we moved. The rusty smell of ancient leather was comforting. The sofa sat before the long window with its back to the kitchen. You could be out of sight but still in the room, if you wanted it like that.

The big metal kettle on the slow hob sputtered and hissed and a pencil faintly shushed over paper. The deep, dark cushions of the sofa swelled and enclosed me. Images from the afternoon wafted under my eyelids like fragments of a dream. The faint after-odour of onion soup drifted towards the open window. It must have spilt on the hob and now it was burning off

The pencil slowed, stopped. There was a heavy sigh. My eyelids flickered. Other people's lives invented, other people's lines written, other people's feelings, dreams. Where do stories come from? The pencil started moving again, fits and starts, crossings out. I drifted. After a while Marmalade was heavy on my belly and had been there for ever, gently breathing up my nose. I opened my eyes and looked into his. He clawed me with his best love, stood up on his stiletto paws, turned round several times to massage my guts and flattened himself when he was satisfied. We closed our eyes. I dreamed in the rhythm of his breathing, asleep and not asleep. Dimly I knew that he patted my chin with his delicate hooked paws and carefully inserted a claw into my nostril. At one point I saw through a slit in my eyelids that he was staring intently, inscrutably, into my face whilst flexing his paws on my shoulders. He wanted something. Then I slid down into dreaming again, mirror, coat-rack, faces twisting, fingers pointing, whitened knuckles, a great grey boulder, Bex, a white dress, a scratch along a bare white arm, deepening, red -

- and the door clattered open and Marmalade and I were clutching one another. He tried to wriggle free, shoving with his hind legs but I hung on until gradually he gave in. Ma said hello to Ruth, and someone, Pa undoubtedly, slapped open a cupboard door and switched on the ceiling lights. In a flash I saw Bex in the shop and squashed the picture, flattened it.

'You can't see a thing in here, surely to goodness.' That was Pa. 'Let me bring you -,' and he was reaching across, banging - 'here, perfectly good desk lamp we never seem to use. That's better. Ruth, you aren't even using ink, for God's sake.'

I fingered the cat's ears, feeling about for his catty thought. He has an exceptionally bony skull. Inscrutable. *Where does inscrutable come from?* There were sounds of a bottle clunking, glasses, muttered conversation, the scrape and drag of the kettle being moved to the fast hob. Marmalade purred more loudly and belched up a fishy, rank blast of air. The vibration in my back pocket meant incoming text, I wriggled the phone free but my eyes were still gummed up and the back of the sofa cast shadow over the screen. This phone is dying. There are faster, cleaner phones. More memory would be good.

**10.32pm Bex to Joey**

Where r u? need to chat.

**10.33pm Joey to Bex**

Asleep. log on soon

Pa was complaining about Noah and Ma was defending him, as usual. 'He's OK, Andrew, we have to trust him. If he messes up, that's his choice.'

'Not if he keeps on expecting you to do all his laundry.'

'Oh come on. That's trivial. It's easy to put it in with our stuff, anyway.'

'I've two spoilt shirts.'

'He's devoted to all of you.' Ruth's calm voice, followed by a splutter from Pa.

'You are ever the peacemaker, Ruth, and you can come again. Only you weren't here for the unending rows at Easter.' I heard Pa's smacking kiss and Ruth's protest. 'You'd have liked the poetry reading this evening, Ruth.'

A rustle, someone turning pages of a newspaper. 'Well, Mollie, there're some terrific sessions this month. I haven't been to the arts centre at all this year. What about next Wednesday?'

'What's the date? Next week's hopeless, it's the day when we get the A level results in school and I'll be in it up to my neck getting the stats right.'

'What's up with Joey? Noah's no help, is he?' Pa's lowered voice made me shiver and I tightened as the door to the back porch slammed open.

‘What’s that pile of rubble by the gate? I nearly broke my ankle.’ My brother, raucous.

Bottles chinked. ‘You look as if you’ve had enough, Noah. Andrew, watch out.’

Glass shattered on the tiles.

‘It’s never enough after a Saturday night. Full-on. Sy, don’t, I’ll do it, my mess.’ The scratchy sounds of broken glass being gathered into paper, muttered curses and laughter.

Pa sounded surprisingly calm. ‘You know the way the garden slopes? We thought we’d build up soil, support it by a wall, get a decent veg area. I was going to get Harry from the farm up the back, he lays walls like other people lay hedges, but Joey suggested we could build a wall ourselves. We thought it was a worth a shot, didn’t we Moll? So I arranged for half a tonne of stones to be dropped at the end of shift. Didn’t expect it today, not a Saturday. Good though. I like the idea of building a wall.’

‘God knows we’ve got enough stones of our own but it would be a real turn-off to dig them out just to build it. Joey’s downloaded a plan from the internet. Don’t give me that look, Noah. It’ll be perfectly good. We can all muck in. I love the idea of our own dry stone wall.’

‘You’re never relying on something from the internet.’ I heard the thump of a discarded boot.

‘I remember a summer when Joey spent a week building a dam in the stream at the back and the field flooded. You were only too glad she found something she wanted to do, Moll.’ Ruth sounded cheerful. Perhaps she didn’t mind being interrupted. ‘Andrew had to step in.’

‘I’d forgotten that. I had to bribe Harry.’

‘It was a pretty effective dam.’ Ma’s voice was dreamy.

Simon said, ‘The dam must have been rather large.’

'That's my sister's big fat ego for you.'

I squirmed into the sofa, sweating with the discomfort of being in the room. Marmalade leapt off with a reproachful thud, padding out of view. I could fill a page of notes on being out of place.

'That's not fair, Noah. She knows what she thinks. That's different.'

'She's your little girl, you mean.'

'My son, she's better informed than I am about some things. I wish she'd come out when I'm on field work, like she used to. She was great company on a trek, soaking up everything I told her.'

'She's good at running off.'

I bit hard into the back of my hand. Marmalade made a stately return and I inhaled his fur. He smelt of cows, oil, grass. Barn smells.

'Don't be unkind, Noah, just because she wants different things from you. I'm looking forward to wall-building. Ruth?'

'Sounds good.'

'Joey seems to be a very unusual person, very strong-minded.'

'Don't get your hopes up, Sy.'

'Noah, go to bed, take a shower, something.'

A teapot was filled. Pa said something I couldn't catch and Ruth said, 'You'll have to come to terms with it, Andrew. She's practically eighteen. It's her life.'

I couldn't keep still any longer and tried to sit up against the weight of Marmalade.

'You've woken up.' Ruth peered over the top of the sofa. 'We made too much noise. I should have warned them.'

Ma leaned over with a glass of red wine in her hand. She looked flushed. 'How did it go? You must have been exhausted. You don't sleep on a sofa.'

Suddenly Pa executed one of his scissor-leg moves across the arm of the sofa, hurtling into position as if he was playing musical chairs. He scooped my legs across his lap and seized Marmalade. 'How's my girl?' he said, patting my knees. 'My little glamour starlet, my fashion cat.' Marmalade shrank his skull to escape through Pa's arm.

'Truly, how was it, darling? Did you hate it? But you survived.'

'She's tense as anything, sweetie, you're not well, are you? Should you have gone today? She didn't need the money, she's got her allowance.'

Noah's voice. 'Sweetie.'

Simon said something. His quiet voice made me nervous. Noah said, 'Well, all the girls do it, fathers, little fingers, twisting.'

Pa drew a breath, but Ma got there first. 'Noah, drink some water, will you?' She reached down to smooth back the hair from my forehead. Her fingers were cool. 'It's not about money, Andrew. It's about independence.'

'She's independent all right. She doesn't tell us anything.' Pa's face was kinder than his voice.

'Of course not, would you? I never did. Give her a break. She's probably worrying about the results, anyway.'

'I am still here, you know.' I got myself away from all of them. Marmalade pushed into my legs as I made for the door. I stumbled into Noah.

'Look – hey Jay-Babe, it came out all wrong.' His face was serious and the contrast between his bright blond hair and dark eyebrows was oddly touching.

'Do I look sorry for myself?'

We scowled at one another. Noah shrugged. 'Have it your own way.' He turned away, muttering under his breath. I didn't want to hear.

Marmalade was waiting at the foot of the stairs and bounded ahead, pausing occasionally to check my progress. I pulled myself up the stairs by the banisters and fell into my room.

Even if I could tell them, Ma and Pa, they would never understand. I could hear it now, their unspeakably reasonable conversation. *We must have done something wrong when she was a baby, we didn't respond properly. There's something in the genes we haven't accounted for, is it in our DNA, yours or mine, your parents or mine? Or the chromosomes. I shouldn't have gone back to work so soon. We didn't ask enough questions when she was born. She never liked dolls. She never liked cars and guns.* Bit by bit they'd go over and over the story of me as they saw it and bit by bit I would be eased out, like the stubble-skinned pink corpses we find on the drive, under the eaves where the house-martins nest every year.

The room was suffocating. I trudged to the window, flung it wide. A blush still lay on the horizon, water-colour alizarin crimson, staining the hills. Bex's notebooks were full of colour washes, textiles swatches, free-flowing pen and ink designs. She shaped what she saw. A bird floated down into the valley, into the rising shadows as the long flank of the fell heaved itself into the sky.

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> August**

**Chat 11.34pm Joey to Ruth**

*Ruth* Where are you?

*Joey* In my room .

*Ruth* Why chat, why not knock on door? Cup of tea?

*Joey* Need to talk to you.

*Ruth* Kitchen?

*Joey* This, please.

*Ruth* I'm only upstairs in the attic.

*Joey* I need to write it down.

*Ruth* OK.

*Ruth* Joey? Still there?

*Ruth* Shall I just come down to your room?

*Joey* I don't know what gender I am.

*Joey* Knew it was a mistake.

*Ruth* Sorry - how long have you felt like this?

*Joey* Forever. A long time.

*Ruth* I'm not sure what it is that you don't know. That's clumsy. I don't want to misinterpret.

*Joey* I know what I feel.

*Joey* I don't know what to do.

*Ruth* You haven't talked to Moll and Andrew?

*Ruth* I'm making my usual pilgrimage to Orrest Head in the morning. Come too?



**Narrative Zenith 1.31am**

*Just did something stupid, told someone sort of in the family, now can't bear to think of seeing her in the morning . What do I do? What if she tells my parents? Don't think she will but can't sleep.*

**Comment: Laylo 1.40am**

It's the middle of th nite and no one thinks strate then but hang on in there

**Comment: Maz 1.50am**

It wouldnt be normal not to get in a panic so dont worry about it get some sleep like Laylo sez. We will all still b here 4 u!

**Comment: Moderator Sue 6.30am**

You can ring me if you want to. Talking to someone close is good if you want to come out. We all start somewhere. It won't be a mistake.. Whatever her reaction was, don't lose belief in yourself. What was her reaction btw?

**Zeph's Blog Sunday 6 August**

I wrote the unsayable. I'd never have said it to Ruth in the room.

It feels now as if there's another person, not me, living in Ruth's mind. I've put a new idea into her head and I can't control it.

It will be far far worse telling Ma. Noah. Pa. Pa will never ever ever get it.

# Wall

## **Zeph's Blog Sunday 6 August 2010**

It's barely light and I have not slept.

Marmalade never passes judgement.

He came in at four o'clock to say hello, curled around my legs, smelt me, stayed.

I'll die if anything happens to him. Her.

My mind leaked out of the ends of my fingers, through the keyboard, into cyberspace. It got loose. I don't know how it happened.

I will have to count stairs to get out of this room.

It'll be ok if I hold on to Marmalade.

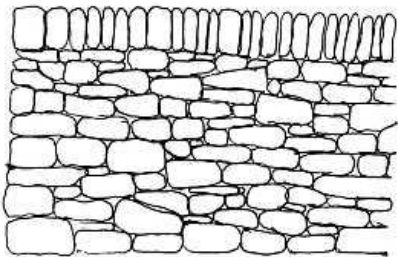
My Life As A Cat.

Might just as well have **Published** this.

## Black Box file

### Building a dry stone wall in seven easy steps

1. To make the foundations, clear and level the ground.
2. Sort the stones into small, medium and large.  
Measure the longest stones. The width of the wall will be slightly less. You use these stones to make the wall stable.
3. Mark out the area: lines of string drawn tight, stakes, chalk lines – whatever comes to hand.
4. Start building. Each layer consists of the long stones laid crosswise (tie stones) and smaller stones jammed between as close-fitting as you can get; like a jig-saw. Choose each stone as if it were special.
5. Build up layer by layer, with larger stones bridging the gap of the stones below, like any brick wall.
6. Make sure the wall tapers slightly inwards so that the top is narrower than the base.
7. Finish the top with heavy, flat stones. You can stand these on end for a neat, solid effect.



Notes: begun Sun 6 Aug  
Can't explain why this wall matters to me. Don't want Harry to do it.



I can feel each stone in my hands, heavy and certain, the wall taking shape

## **Sunday: 6<sup>th</sup> August**

Marmalade sits around my neck like a scratchy collar. He doesn't like being walked down the stairs but it feels better with him than not. Ruth is already in the kitchen. I go straight to the cupboard and poke around for sardines. Marmalade's treat. I rip back the lid and set the tin on the table. He fishes out chunks with his paw and drops them on the table so that little smears of rainbow oil spread across its surface. Then he gulps at the fish as if we have been starving him.

My fingers stink of sardine. Ruth is clearing up from last night. I hear her placing the mugs with precise clinks on the dresser and slotting dishes into the wooden racks. I stare fixedly at cuts in the wooden surface of the table. I remember that one, Noah made it, though he says he didn't. Ruth speaks and Marmalade makes a dash for the utility room, the cat-flap.

'It's a wonderful morning. It will only take two ticks to get the coffee and bacon rolls sorted.'

'Don't mind.'

I can't stay still. Already the sky is blooming with a steady, glowing light. I wish I were with Marmalade romping in the field. Suddenly Ruth throws the towel on to the draining board and pulls me into a hug. She's soft and solid as a cushion. I feel the floor beneath my feet.

She gets businesslike, prepares the picnic. Every time I glance at her face she has lowered eyes but her expression is as usual, unfussed. She sends me to the utility room, 'Small rucksack, do you think?' and wipes the sardine streaks from the table.

I stand looking through the open door into the garden, catching sight of Marmalade's stripey rump in the hedge. Suddenly my throat closes up.

As we drive over the crest of the hill, we see Windermere's crooked expanse, with mist still sitting on the surface of the lake. We take the usual metal track looping up the fellside to Orrest Head, Ruth talking to herself as much as to me about how easy it is to break your ankle on a track you know like the back of your hand, a track that you could walk up in flip-flops. She pauses at a turn in the path, beside a row of memorial benches. We stare out over the lake, glimpsing the great expanse of water between shards of mist. 'I reckon I've been up Orrest Head at least thirty times.'

I shrug, feeling the light frame of the rucksack settling between my shoulders.

'You probably think it's a bit man-made.'

'I guess. The route up Scafell Pike is man-made, I guess.'

She likes the comment.

By the time we reach the top of the Head, the mist has drifted to the edges of the lake like fluff on eyelashes. The water is a steely blue, already spotted with motionless white sails. Maybe there will be more breeze at water level; maybe sailors treasure the moment, the waiting.

I breathe in the sappy smell of early-morning grass and try to imagine Ruth standing here on her first walk. I wish the skylarks were still spooling their songs across the sky. The fledglings will be trying their wings. Suddenly I shiver, seeing all too clearly in my mind's eye the photograph of Ma and Ruth, swollen-bellied, bursting with laughter. There's a presence at my shoulder, looking at the view, someone who could have come into being alongside me.

I don't believe in ghosts or hauntings. Doppelgängers, though? Would I see myself reflected in the lake, my true soul that I don't believe in but might be gazing up at me like in the myths?

Ruth shifts from foot to foot, turns west, north. Across the lake the green mass of woodland invites the eye, and once more I shudder. My stomach yawns. Women must like that sense of unborn child in the womb, they must actually want it. The organ is located in my guts. I have the anatomy but not the nature.

Already I am looking for the words to tell Ruth why my gender lives in my head – why it has nothing to do with sex. At school they say if you can't find the words it's because you haven't done the thinking properly but that's not true. There are things that words won't describe.

Ruth pivots on her heel to take the rucksack from my hand and sit on the bench. She pats it so that I will sit down. The coffee smells surprisingly OK.

'Bacon roll?'

'I won't, thanks.'

She hands me one of the little red pottery mugs that usually swing from the spokes of a metal stand on the dresser. 'I don't like drinking coffee out of plastic mugs if I can help it. Since we weren't coming far I thought Mollie wouldn't mind. I left a note.'

She looks so different from Ma. She is nearly as tall as Pa and naturally broad. Ma has short dark hair, a square jaw, a slight build. Ruth's shoulder-length hair has been almost white for as long as I can picture her. She's not fat but solid. Her face is a long oval with a pointed chin. They must have seen one another as opposites in that

waiting room when they were pregnant, about to see the doctor. Pa is tall and sort of skinny, still, despite all his work outdoors. Noah's shoulders are only developed by deliberate pumping iron and he is no more than two inches taller than me. He doesn't much care for that. Ma says I have Pa's build, and Noah is more like her. But Noah is changing his body shape.

Ruth's difference is more than physical. She tends not to ask many questions, and Ma never stops though her questions are often about life and the universe. They have the same habit, though, of looking at you straight. They both listen hard.

Right now, sitting alongside Ruth on the bench as the sun rises up the sky, and with an early hawk balanced on a thermal, making its mark on the universe, my mind grows quiet. Even my shoulders lose the hunch. Ruth gazes out at the lake and the trees below us flex their branches in the blossoming light. The coffee is more bearable than usual; its bitter taste and spicy aroma seem to define the sharp, intense nearness of pine and heather.

'What you said online last night. I thought I ought to reassure you that I'm not going to talk about it – not even to you, unless you talk first. I don't want you walking on glass.' I picture walking on broken glass in bare feet. My toes curl inside my trainers.

Ruth picks up the flask and holds it on her lap. She screws and unscrews the lid with one hand, not seeming to notice.

'Ma says you don't put us into your episodes.'

She sets the flask on the ground where it topples, rolls to a standstill. 'I don't ever intend to do that, no. And we're a scriptwriting team, so, say I have an idea about a character and what that character might do, I put it to the others. And we toss it around. Any new character has to fit the scenario.' Ruth writes about people living in a new village, somewhere near Nottingham. 'So after a while it gets hard to know who had the idea in the first place.' She swallows a mouthful of coffee. 'And after a while, you get to believe the character's real, because there's an actor.' She eyes me through the steam from her coffee, and I rest my own mug against my lower lip. I used to hate coffee but drinking it with Bex I've come to put up with it. 'What I do, what we all do, is give characters a secret life, like a voice nobody else hears. It means that there's always tension, always the potential for an argument. Just like real life, of course.'

Ruth's eyebrows are golden brown. Ma says her hair used to be golden brown too. When did the colour change? 'You mean like me.'

‘I was thinking of myself, as a matter of fact.’ She reaches for the roll, fishing out a slice of crisp bacon, crunching it in half. ‘I’ve come to realise, as I’ve got older, that whenever I’m talking to most people they’re busy thinking about something else. I do the same. Except with close friends. With close friends, you listen.’

I jump as she suddenly looks intently into my face. ‘I suppose.’

‘You’ve told Bex how you feel.’

She states it so baldly, so calmly that I can’t find words to reply. An empty water bottle lies under the bench. Ruth nurses the empty red mug, her eyes still focussed on me. ‘You haven’t talked to her. I thought she was your closest friend.’

‘Yes.’

‘You trust her.’

‘Course.’

‘I just wondered. You know.’

I cross my feet. Startled, I see that I have not laced the trainers properly.

‘I couldn’t sleep for a long time after our chat last night. I kept remembering you as a child.’

An itch frets under the arch of my left foot and I yearn to snatch off shoe, sock, make the blood run red into the turf. Furtively, I roll my foot against a stone, finding a sharp edge. Words stick a twig in my throat. ‘If I was in your series – if you were writing words for me to say – for someone like me – what would you write?’

‘Who’s like you?’ She plucks the mug from my hand. ‘Are you going to finish this?’ Dregs of lukewarm coffee splash across her lap but she brushes them off. ‘I couldn’t write words for you. I couldn’t do it.’ She looks genuinely surprised. ‘Maybe that’s not quite true. I guess I would leave you silent a lot of the time. Watchful.’

‘My secret life.’

‘I’m going to finish my roll and look at the lake for a few moments, if that’s OK with you.’

I become aware of the rise and fall of her chest, slight movement of sails on the lake, a small wind whispering in my ear. There’s a word I want that keeps disappearing into a dark corner. ‘What’s that thing when they put thick black lines on published stuff? Like censorship?’ My fingers tighten around the edge of the bench. It’s spongy with age. A fingernail catches at a splinter.

Ruth looks alert, curious. Her eyes have brightened. ‘You mean, when a document is issued with information struck out. Redacting. Words blotted out so nobody can read them.’

‘But the words are still there, underneath.’

Ruth reaches for the thermos with the toe of yellow-striped trainers she has worn for years. ‘The words are still there but you’ve made sure only certain people can read them. You’re thinking so hard I can almost hear the cogs.’ I want to ask her about the dead child, the man she married whose name I do not know. ‘But you don’t want to live a censored life. Do you?’ She opens the thermos, peers inside, pours the dregs into the mug, tests them, upturns the mug.

‘People sort of don’t read straight. They interpret.’

‘You’re a bit nervous about that.’

‘Maybe.’ My epitaph could be Maybe.

‘I am beginning to think you must be one of the bravest people. Much braver than me. I merely remember that once I had a family and now I don’t.’ I cough to cover the exclamation I must not let loose. Her shoulder tightens but she does not turn to look at me. ‘I lock up the memories I don’t want to think about. I picture a wooden box, a kind of treasure chest.’ She tilts back her head, closing her eyes. Sunlight sets fire to her hair. ‘Sometimes I lift the lid and take out a picture, metaphorically speaking. It has to be at the right time.’

‘When’s that?’

Ruth reaches in my direction, I shrink back, but she is capturing the silky thread from which a tiny spider suspends itself. Carefully she sets it down on a chunk of greenish slate that is wedged under the bench. ‘I interpret,’ she says, slowly, ‘that you want to tell your story to everyone. Not to hide it. No redacting.’ She is not asking the question.

The hawk stoops, soars again, thwarted. Birds chatter meaningfully in the trees below. The mist has lifted and the far hillside is every shade of green you can imagine. Bex knows words for green that artists use but I sense there must be far more shades of colour than ever can be expressed in words. What do you call that kind of green-into-gold that’s entwined with green-into-bluish-purple on Claife Heights? It isn’t guesswork, though, or imagination. It’s so real my heart wants to burst.

Ruth clears her throat. ‘Like I said, I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t put you out of my mind. There’s one more thing I need to say, and it’s predictable.’ Someone far off



laughs or shouts – so far away that wind and the warmth deaden the edges of the sound. I cannot tell whether Ruth has heard. She sits very still, hands folded in her lap. ‘Lots of people dish out advice but they don’t live your life. Only I live my life. It has taken a long, long time for me to understand.’ The hawk is perfectly balanced on its column of air. Below, on the lake, white sails begin to flutter. Ruth might be talking to herself. ‘It’s a bit odd if you are going to send me messages when I am in the same house but if that’s what you prefer.’ I could drift like a hot air balloon, a cloud. ‘I’ll try and reply sensibly but you can delete, anyway.’ Say and unsay. I straighten up. Deleting chat isn’t straightforward at all. Chatlines are stored out of sight, somewhere in cyberspace, on that map of exchanges. ‘If you aren’t going to eat the roll, let’s go down to the lake and feed it to the ducks.’

The far hills spread themselves against the horizon like ripples on a purple tablecloth. The lake heaves and glitters, and voices coming closer resonate between the trees. Ruth wraps the mugs in a cloth and stuffs them back into the rucksack together with the flask and the plastic bags. Do I understand the one more thing she had to say?

I kick at the stone that was my scratching post. ‘Thanks.’ Ruth hands me the rucksack and gives me at the same time her quiet, familiar smile. We stand aside to let the new arrivals pass. They smile, they say hello. I follow in Ruth’s footsteps, down the curving track through the trees. ‘I bet he’s not out of bed when we get back, your brother.’ She slows, stops in the middle of the path and uncertainly I come alongside. She bites her lip. ‘Is it still OK to call you Joey?’

A vast blue sky waits for me to say something. ‘I guess.’

At the bottom of the hill, Ruth says, ‘I thought about doing some gardening later.’

I say that I am going to lay out the plot for the dry stone wall so I’ll be in the garden too. I bend, pick a chunk of rock out of the embankment beside the path. The rock is rounded, cold and solid in my hand. Sometimes I run with stones in my hand, for weights. I lift it to my nose. It smells dense, earthy, of itself. I wonder if climbers have lots of different words for how rocks smell. I carry it in my hand all the way back to the car.

Under my bed are two cardboard boxes full of old school files, all sorts. I have to finish the draft of my personal statement for university. I have to clear out junk; refine the Black Box File. It occurs to me that Ma could poke about in the file if she wanted to but I know she doesn’t.

## **Zeph's Blog Monday 7 August**

Shirley went on about the fashion show. Daphne wants my number. I don't want to talk to her.

Ground cleared, wall area marked out, shallow trench dug out. ✓

Simon came to help in the afternoon. He's got a lunchtime shift. Ruth weeded all day, filled the recycling bin. Yesterday I sorted, discarded, discovered I was not ready to throw out, not quite yet. So I put two boxes into the loft and rummaged. Right at the end, next to the water tanks, there was another box that I noticed because a couple of paintings poked out of the top. Ma is sentimental about our stuff, though she says she has burned all her past and nobody will be able to write her biography when she's dead and famous.

I dimly remember that Noah could never be bothered with anything that didn't involve scissors and a knife, but I used to spend hours at our table, painting and drawing. Noah was good at making stamps from pieces of sponge, potatoes, anything he could cut up. Prints from another life. I laid them out in a row on the boards.

Stuffed down the side of the box was one of those cheap lined exercise books. I must have got Ma to buy it for me, and a few of the pages were filled with drawings with writing round the edges. Evidently I was trying to be a scientist. The book smelt of old dust. If I were making lists now, classification of dust might be one of them. I went through a phase of writing lists, too. I listed all the things in the kitchen. Then I found the pages where I wrote a holiday diary when I was seven. I wrote in careful letters between the lines. There was even a paw print. You don't get paw prints online unless somebody digitally inserts them. A paw-print is facticity, not guesswork.

Inside the back cover was a photo of Noah and me. I was blinking into the sun. Noah was holding my elbow. As I looked at the photo my left shoulder twitched. Noah had tried to put his arm round my shoulders but I wasn't having it. I must have been a sort of blogger even then. I wrote about being on holiday in a narrowboat. I know it's me in the photo because of the memory, but it looks like a stranger. A connecting thread from then to now marks ten years of living in the same evolving body, the body in the mirror that isn't me.

## Zeph's Blog Monday 7 August

The exercise book is sitting on my bed. My heart is beating faster than usual. I ought to be working on an assignment but I can't concentrate. The memory has streamed back so vividly that I could be there now, the seven-year-old, peering excitedly at the window beside my narrow bunk where my reflection blinks back at me. Then Ma comes to pull the blind down for the night and I lie facing the wooden ceiling, enclosed in the seasoned wooden box that now seems to smell of kitchen table. And all night long a voice is singing out in my head because suddenly I know why my drawings of me show a figure in shorts. I don't have to be like the girls in my class at school. At school the girls all sit at the edge of the playground or do skipping or bring out their dolls. The boys run. They run and run, up and down steps, round the girls on the grass, sometimes with a ball, but even if there isn't a ball they run. I can run too. I'm better at running than anyone in my class.

Marmalade coils around my legs, bindweed, trying to trip me up. I don't have a secret stash of sardines. Maybe I still smell of fish. How could I explain him to anyone outside our family? Our cats have all been called Marmalade. It was Pa's idea, apparently, ever since he and Ma were first in London together and a cat adopted them. Its life was short and when it died, they went to a refuge to find another, and Pa said that it was Marmalade in his second incarnation, despite the cat being a queen.

My Marmalade is female.

### Marmalade facticity:

1. However many times I put a bell on his collar to cut down the killing, he loses the collar.
2. Neighbours hang his lost collars on our gatepost.
3. He can alter his weight at will.
4. He loves me.

### Fantasy

There must be at least three morphs of gender for Marmalade.

Noah was very nice to me when I was little. Sometimes he let me beat him running. You can run much better in shorts than a skirt.

Networking Monday 7<sup>th</sup> August

[iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk)

## **Forum: applying for university**

### ***Narrative: Zenith 10.22pm***

*Seriously stuck on my personal statement for uni. Boring. Anyone know a decent website with ideas to copy and paste into application forms? It's such a waste of energy when there are more important things.*

### ***Comment: Cybersnake 10.23pm***

I know I was messed up about what happened to me after uni but uni was great so go ahead and take it seriously because you get away from home and start being yourself.

### ***Comment: Moderator Sue 10.30pm***

Try not to be influenced too much by what other people say, Zenith. Family can be terrific if you trust them. Have you told them yet?

### ***Narrative: Zenith 10.31pm***

*I want to find out about testosterone.*

### ***Comment: Cybersnake 10.45pm***

Have you been to the dr?

### ***Comment: Barbarian 10.56pm***

Try [www.getting-personalforuni.org/](http://www.getting-personalforuni.org/)

### ***Comment: Moderator Sue 11.01pm***

Zenith, what do you really want? Your posts confuse me.

**Chat Bex to Joey Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> August 11.13pm**

*Bex* Come round tomorrow night?

*Joey* You never said a word all day.

*Bex* Never sure who's in the shop.

*Joey* Miss paranoia.

*Joey* Matt won't come into the shop.

*Bex* Our new house is amazing.

*Joey* What does your mum say about Matt?

*Bex* My room you will be astounded our stuffs tiny here

*Joey* How about the girls?

*Bex* Susie's ecstatic, Tess isn't saying

*Joey* Jack must be counting the days.

*Bex* Asleep on his feet! You will come?

*Bex* BTW Susie and Tess will ask what you're wearing. For the wedding...

### Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> August

It was OK till Bex brought photos to school last term. Jack had already been working on the renovation for a year or more and the house was taking shape. He'd sorted out all the planning problems, she said. Lots of people looked at the photos. They said she ought to put them on her homepage, work in progress, before and after, like Xtreme Makeover, stuff like that. Matt said he'd do it for her.

A month ago I wouldn't have waited to be invited, I'd have been helping Bex to pack up, unload at the new house. The new place was only about twenty minutes' walk away from ours, like the old one - just a different direction, different part of town. I met Caroline in town, soon after Bex broke up with Matt, and she started to ask me a question about Bex and Matt, only she got stuck half-way through. 'Bex isn't saying anything. I shouldn't be asking.'

I didn't have much to say about the photos when Bex showed them. Matt said enough for everybody. The house looked like an old house being made over.

It was a still, calm evening, one of those times when the wind can't make up its mind, moves there and back again like an idling tide. Half a dozen children were throwing a ball, their voices echoing off the buildings around the green. A couple of old guys sprawled out on the grass with huge rucksacks propped against each other like extra bodies and two women leaned on their bikes, chatting. The grey stone had a pink tinge, as if under spotlights. Garden walls are different from dry stone; lots of old mortar, plants creeping in and out. *Our wall will hold the plants.*

Matt wanted Bex to post the photos, she didn't, they started to argue and I had to walk away along the corridor. But their voices rose and a crowd got round them, blocking the corridor till a teacher came and shouted at them to go to their lessons and other teachers came out of their classrooms to see what the fuss was about.

Bex said that she didn't want the friends of friends looking at her page. She didn't know who they were, and most of the friends weren't real friends anyway, they were just people someone had ticked the box for, so they could get as many phony friends as possible. Matt's shoulders got bulky like he was ready to tackle and you could see him taking deep breaths. He started a rant about managing privacy settings and Bex said she didn't trust anyone's idea about privacy except her own and Matt said he supposed that meant him too, and he snapped his hair out of the sweatband, shaking long blond curls over his face. Afterwards one of the girls said he looked dead sexy, like

a lion and I said it was the lionesses that do the hunting but nobody was listening to me. The Bex/Matt bust-up was far too interesting.

Matt said Bex had shown the photos to everyone in her history class anyway.

Bex said there were twelve real people in our class and she still had the photos in her hand and nobody else could show them off on her behalf and she practically spat at him, she was so angry. And Matt had taken a step back that he didn't mean, you could see from his fists.

What had started out with Jack making an old house into a new one turned into a fight about privacy only it wasn't just that, it was about Matt telling Bex and Bex telling Matt. It all got totally out of control, a Facebook campaign with people who didn't know Bex or Matt, and who weren't even at our school, posting garbage on Bex's page; because Matt was going to be captain of rugby next season. Matt changed his status to single. He posted garbage too. They'd been around one another for over a year and then – because of Facebook, it seemed - he gave her a kicking. It didn't seem enough, a squabble about privacy settings, to make him so gross.

I stopped, poked the wall beside me with the toe of my shoe, dislodged a small landslip of dead mortar. Somebody shouted and I jumped in case they had seen me, but it wasn't about me. No eyes turned in my direction.

Bex and I were spending more time together in the shop than we had in school for months, but she had started to wear a rose perfume that disturbed me. I don't like flowery scents but it was like a garden, not Shirley-girly. When we talked online it was still, sometimes, head to head – thoughts flowing freely between us on the secret currents of cyberspace. But face to face, when I saw her pale and perfect skin, her half-closed eyes, her veil of black and crimson hair, I was forgetting what to say. And anyway, Matt the Troll might be lurking in cyberspace.

I stared across the green at the women who were now swinging helmets as they talked. Bex and I used to wear school uniform, till we went into the sixth form. Now we had to wear a uniform again, in the shop. Uniforms are supposed to average out the differences between people. They hide them, too. I never thought of that before.

Our tutor at school said we needed to think strategically. I don't understand what she means. She posted something on our tutor room monitor.

**I am part of the problem and the problem is part of me.**

**The most likely way of changing the problem is - change me.**

She said it was one of the most effective ways of gaining control over a situation. Yeah.

My eyes hurt. My ears ached. Ever since Saturday my entire body had been groping for clues as to whether or not Ruth had spoken to Ma. Maybe I told Ruth because secretly I wanted her to tell Ma, for me. Maybe I thought she *would* tell, even when she had promised not to, because she thought it was right. She was Ma's best friend. Maybe she had already forwarded to Ma my chat messages, cut-and-paste, maybe it was already out there on Facebook through links I would not use.

I leaned against the railings. I had walked all the way here without working out how to tell Bex, without finding the space in which Bex and I would stand face to face, and I would tell her. I'm not a girl. Face to face, I'd say it. I tried to picture her face as I said it.

'That's not our house, silly.' Susie's face looked tiny under a huge pink cycling helmet that twinkled like a tiara. She was a small version of Bex.

'New bike?'

'Jack gave it to me. He said it's an unbirthday present, my birthday's not till September. Tess's got one too and her birthday isn't till October.'

'It's a wedding present, too, maybe?'

'Oh yes, I suppose it is.' She stood astride the new pink bike with her face beaming. Pink ribbons fluttered from the handlebars, shin and elbow pads were pink, and even her small feet, firmly on the pavement, wore pink trainers.

'You're very pink today.'

'It used to be my favourite colour.' Her face flushed with determination. 'What's your favourite colour?' I didn't know. She shook her head, looking exasperated. 'I'm on look out, come on.'

'How old is your unbirthday? I forget.' I stepped out of the way so that she could manoeuvre the bike for the return.

'Nine, silly. You do know.' She placed a hand on my arm to steady herself. 'Tess isn't eight till October so I'll be two years older than her not one year, just for a bit. You are getting me a present, aren't you?'

I never ask why there were so many years between Bex and her little sisters. There are things you don't ask. The words form but some sort of alarm system rings in your head and you watch the words dissolve. Susie's wheels glittered ahead and I chased along the pavement behind her. I've known them practically their whole lives.



‘Your helmet flashes!’

Susie would think I was old.

‘It’s so just what I wanted.’ She had a high, clear little voice, turning heads on the other side of the street. Somebody laughed. ‘They’re diamonds. They’re not really but I pretend they’re precious diamonds.’ She twisted on the saddle to cast a look at me and steered artfully around the corner to stop dead beside a gate. ‘This is our new house.’ Her grey eyes watched me with bright, intense expectation.

At first, it looked like any old house, with a door in the middle and windows on either side, but then it was different. The front door was painted a deep chestnut brown. All the windows were white and those on either side of the door had stained glass panels, not old-fashioned but new, showing birds with flowing golden-brown feathers, pheasants ready for flight.

‘Joey!’ Susie sounded reproachful as she shoved the gate open with the wheel of her bike and crunched up the green shale path. Maybe they were chippings from the Honister Slate Mine.

‘It’s amazing.’

‘It’s the best house ever.’

The garden looked old-fashioned, with tiny little hedges made into neat squares and lavender growing in the middle of every square. Susie leaned on her bicycle, her eyes brilliant beneath the over-sized helmet. Insects hummed, and bees hovered and dived around the bobbing heads of lavender. A couple of butterflies perched. *Bex hasn’t really told me about this. Not really.*

The air was cool in the shadow.

Caroline’s little house could not have been more different but I had always liked it. It was a bit like a toy house, in a small grey toytown terrace. There was a tiny yard at the back that Caroline had filled with wooden planters for growing herbs, three tiny bedrooms upstairs, and the front door opened straight on to the street. Caroline’s an artist and her hands have a life of their own. Sometimes she’ll be talking and looking at you but her fingers are busily working away, pummelling clay or stitching at something very precise in an embroidery frame or twisting wire. She lives by graphic design. One time she borrowed a ladder so she could whitewash the house. Bex and I had to stand at the bottom of the ladder to stop it from slipping. The little sisters were very little, at the time, and we kept having to shoo them out of the way. Tess could walk quite well by then.

Tess hardly ever speaks. She looks like a tiny Caroline, too, a sort of bud, closed up, small face in a frame of dark hair.

I didn't see what Susie did with her bike. From standing in the doorway with her tiara in her hand, calling out, 'I've got Joey, Joey's here!' she leapt across the threshold. Noah and I used to have a competition, to see how far we could get along our hallway from the front door in one jump.

There was an impatient wave from within – a small hand insisting that I should hurry up. I tripped over the step, fell onto my knee. Small amber and terracotta tiles made a mosaic floor in the porch. *Caroline's style. They've been making this house together.*

'Come on, come on.' Susie's piping voice issued its commands. Was she always this bossy? I saw pale golden floorboards the length of the hallway and, to my left, a huge wooden stand for coats, the same wood. On my right was a curved wooden cupboard, gleaming so that you wanted to stroke it. It looked as if someone had made it who loved making things from wood. I stroked it.

Then Bex was there, and Caroline, and Jack slicking down his thick grey hair from a shower, the muscles tight at the angles of his jaw. 'So you like it?' He had the soft Cumbrian accent and big frame of a farmer, from growing up on a hill farm. He always seemed to wear the same out-at-elbows rusty-coloured jumper. *If only all the blokes in the world were like Jack.* Caroline's hands and lips were pressed tight as if to stop the laughter from bursting out. Bex stood behind them with a sort of gleam on her face that I did not remember seeing before.

Jack said, 'Are you doing the guided tour before tea, Bex?' and we set off, with Susie hopping from foot to foot to make her trainers sparkle. Bex opened the door into the main living room. Jack had taken out two floors of the old house to make a great room like the hall in a stately home. At an upper level, all along one side, was the kind of gallery you think minstrels must have played in. Wooden railings – the same mellow-yellow wood – edged the gallery. And fixed to the wall below was a ladder. Bex sent me up the ladder first.

At the top it wasn't just a gallery, it was a whole other room with a big circular window. You could look out to the garden and the low fells on the other side of town, or you could look down into the living room, at the huge open fireplace and the stacks of logs already in place. Up here there were chairs, a table, lots of drawers, artists' stuff.

'It's Caroline's!' stupidly pleased with myself.

Bex's face was still polished. 'Jack made it for her. He didn't ask her, he just did it.'

Susie appeared through the door at the end of the room. She had evidently used the boring stairs and hurled herself at me, trying to swing from my hands. 'Jack's been ill so he could do it a lot faster,' she said, walking up my legs. I flipped her over into a somersault.

Bex frowned. 'Don't say that.'

'Well why not it's true.' Susie was ready to be somersaulted again but Bex seized her wrists to pull her away.

'You haven't mentioned Susie's hair.'

'She had her helmet on.'

Susie suddenly buried her face against Bex's shirt. Bex mouthed so I said, 'Nice hair.'

Susie twisted round to give me a suspicious, anxious glare. 'It's really nice isn't it?'

'No plaits any more.'

'I'm going to be a runner, like you.'

Now she wanted to show me her room.

'Go and tidy it up then, and tell Tess too. Go on.' Bex pushed her sister through the door to the landing.

'What's that?'

'She wanted a haircut like yours.'

We left Caroline's gallery and stood on the landing, where Bex patted another of the doors. 'It's oak, Jack loves oak and he found a whole lot of people to do this. He says town's full of craftsmen dying to do a decent job instead of hack-work.'

I pictured Jack in his rust-red pullover, Caroline's glowing face, his arms gathering them in. Bex would be gathered in too. Suddenly I felt like going home.

Susie clattered behind a closed door, talking to herself.

'Where's your room?'

'In a minute. Prepare to be gobsmacked.'

'Jack seems ok.' There was a story about Jack I didn't really understand, the illness he had but didn't. He had stopped work, had been about to go back but didn't. Bex said he was ill but I couldn't see it myself. He didn't stay in bed, he didn't stop

being around at Caroline's house and then he and Caroline were going to get married. And now he wasn't ever going back to being a policeman. But he had really loved it.

'Yes.' Bex pulled her hair into the familiar black and crimson screen, and again I sighted the faint white and red lines on the inside of her arms. A small pulse ticked at her throat, and the rose-scented warmth from her body vibrated in the air between us. My heart skipped a beat. My throat was dry.

'Jack's not my idea of a policeman.'

Bex stroked the banister on which we were leaning. 'Well he won't be a policeman so you won't have to think about it.' Something sharp in her tone made me draw back, but she seemed not to notice. 'Anyway, if he hadn't been off work, the house wouldn't have been done so fast and he and Mum might not have been getting married this year.'

The moment vanished as Susie flung open her door with a bang and I had to inspect her room. It was a child's room, I suppose, with a wide window ledge filled with small soft toys, neatly lined up; a table by the window where she had been doing some painting, with bottles of poster paints pushed into a cluster; a small set of shelves where the books seemed to be lined up in height order. No pink. The floor was of polished wood and a simple blue and white striped rug lay beside the bed. 'This is nice,' I said, trying not to sound surprised. 'No pink.' Bex laughed.

'It's already changed several times and I expect it will again. Last week all the toys were on the bed and Susie could hardly get into it. She had a pink bedspread too but she's kindly given it to Tess.'

Susie said stiffly, 'Jack gave me the bike and the pink stuff so it would be rude not to wear them.' Her mouth was set in a stubborn fullness.

'When did you stop being pink?'

Susie drew back her shoulders. 'I can change my mind if I want to.' I could see an elaborate explanation evolving before my eyes. Bex said quickly,

'Let's go, we've lots to see still,' and yanked me by the wrist out of the room.

From the landing you could go into Caroline's gallery and other rooms - a family bathroom, a big room for Caroline and Jack, another for Tess. The conventional staircase at one end folded back on itself to reach the third floor. Bex quickly threw open doors for me to see each room but all the while she was urging me along towards the end wall where, greatly to my surprise, a series of handholds made a climbing wall up towards a navy-blue Alice-in-Wonderland door.

Bex's eyes glittered behind her hair. 'You first.' She gestured at the holds.

Someone – Jack? - had shaped each piece of oak so that it snuggled into your grip. He – she? – made allowance for the polish, that could make the holds lethal with use, by shaping deep indentations and finger holds so that you could jam your hands thoroughly into them. I climbed. At the top I called, 'Ma would have a health and safety fit,' but Bex had disappeared. Her voice sounded from the other side of the door.

'Wait on, Joey, I'm unlocking the door,' and it swung inwards to her room.

'It's a tower!'

'Isn't it a miracle?' She was full of glee. I realised that there was a door at the other end, to be reached from the third floor landing.

'It was Jack's idea.'

'You don't like climbing.'

'I said I wanted to be able to pull up the ladder behind me.'

We went outside to the top landing. The only other room at this level held a small bathroom. Two doors led to enormous storage areas under the eaves.

Jack had used every inch of space. In our house the loft is where everything is shoved that we don't know what to do with but can't lose. You climb up a wobbly metal ladder you have to yank down from the loft aperture and you're in danger of knocking yourself out if you don't pull it down properly. Sometimes it slides down like a weapon. Pa says he'll replace it one day when the birds have stopped singing and the lakes have run dry. Ma says she'll pay someone to do it but somehow it never gets high enough on her list of things to do.

'What do you think?'

'It's awesome.' We stood alone at the top of the house, hearing the sounds of a meal being prepared below.

I could tell her now.

Caroline called. 'Come on, tea's ready.'

Bex stared at me, and then frowned as I opened and closed my mouth like a fish in a tank. 'Tea!' came the call again. Bex shrugged, swung towards the staircase. I stood with my hand against the wall, closed my eyes. I might as well have been underwater, gasping for air. My throat ached. The moment slipped away. I followed Bex down the butter-yellow stairs to the ground floor and the big dining kitchen.

‘It really is a dream house. You see adverts but this just is.’ Bex had been waiting in the hallway and now bowed me into the kitchen as if I were an acquaintance, not a best friend.

Tess came to the table, ate with birdlike daintiness and speed, and literally hopped away without saying a word. Susie kept up a rapid flow of chatter, regardless of Caroline and Jack’s questions to me about work, about school next year, about what next after school. Caroline explained her latest project and Jack said Bex’s exhibition was the best wedding present she could give them. I promised to come to tea again, soon. The words slid out easily. They might not want me.

Bex led us back upstairs to show off the dress she was going to wear at the wedding. I was to wait at the bottom of Rapunzel’s ladder until she called me. She was much faster up the wall than I had expected, standing away from the holds like an expert. When she called, I was clumsy on the climb, pulling myself hand over hand towards another chance to speak, another moment.

Bex’s dress was very plain, the colour of cornflowers, sleek and short, a close-fitting sheath. Round her shoulders was a wispy blue shawl thing. Her shoulders were bare, creamy white. I couldn’t remember when last I had seen Bex’s shoulders. The dress had long sleeves, like gloves, with a different, clinging fabric that flowed gracefully over her wrists. I felt short of breath, had nothing sensible to say. ‘Bluebell.’

‘What? Look here.’ She held up a carrier bag with the shop’s logo. ‘I brought stuff from the shop for you to try on. Take it home, make Shirley happy, make Mum and Jack’s day, choose something smart that you can bear. It’s OK, Shirley said we could borrow it. She’s thinking free publicity.’

‘They won’t notice me.’

‘I’ll notice. So will your Ma. Your dad could come too.’

‘I’ll try.’ We stood face to face. Light from the setting sun streamed through the windows, deepening the blue of the dress, the pallor of her face. I swallowed, breathed deeply. The room smelt of roses. The words began to rise up into the back of my throat. *Bex, I think they got my gender wrong. Bex, I don’t feel right like this. Bex, what do you think?*

Bex turned to look at herself in the mirror, playing with the lacy drape of the shawl. ‘I dyed this to be the same colour as the dress. What do you think?’

In the mirror, her eyes looked up and down the reflected bright dress, the shawl across her white throat. She smiled as she lifted the shawl against her cheek, allowed it to settle into new folds.

Behind her blue reflection, my dark eyes stared back at me. I saw the faded shirt, the tense set of shoulders, the lock of black hair flopping over the sun-brown forehead, the shadow behind the lady. A dummy, worse than, a block, a stone. Its mouth opened, shut.

‘What do you think?’ Bex’s reflection suddenly grinned, turned away. She stooped to pick up the bag at her feet and the moment vanished, again. ‘You’re hopeless. Take it, take the stuff, I picked things out that Shirley likes but you’ll be OK with.’ She flung it towards me. ‘It’ll be fine.’ Slowly, I picked up the bag like she was giving me suicide pills. ‘It’s a favour. She wants you to do more photo shoots. You won’t have to buy anything. I’d like you not to wear a rugby shirt. Joey?’

The green was empty and cool as I drifted home. The sun had gone behind the hills and houses but colours were staining the sky in a wash of blues, pinks, greens. Everyone at home would be flopping about, wearing the house like comfortable old clothes. How would Susie and Tess feel about their amazing house when they were seventeen? Bex was becoming the princess in the tower. I don’t know how to talk to princesses.

I stopped at our garden gate and leaned over, contemplating the foundations for the wall. There was a lump in my throat again.

**Chat Bex to Joey Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> August 11.01pm**

*Bex* Have you tried them?

*Joey* Jack says he knows a dry stone wall expert 😊

*Bex* You haven't opened the bag.

*Joey* Jack ought to be a woodsman

*Bex* Did tess speak to u?

*Joey* Susie never stopped.

*Bex* Cn i come to yours friday

*Joey* Why are you asking?

*Bex* Get your ma to do chick pea curry?

*Joey* If I must

*Bex* Has Noah stopped nagging?

*Joey* I've stopped listening

*Bex* Bet having Ruth around helps?



## Zeph's Blog Thursday 10 August

Marmalade let a shrew loose under the bed and it wouldn't stop shrieking. Determined little thing. I had to lock out M, find a box, catch the shrew in it, bypass M on the stairs and release the shrew into next door's garden. Pa says nature's full of surprises but this is so predictable. I'm as predictable a shrew-catcher as Marmalade but my motives are more pure.

He has no motives. She.

The right words won't be said, they keep wriggling around. Once I saw a box of maggots alongside a fisherman. Every time I put my hand on a phrase it melts down into something else. I could try saying something boring. *Bex, I need to be a boy.* I say it into Marmalade's ear and he's cool, he says, what's the fuss? Only these aren't the right words either. *I need to be a girl who can be a boy and a girl. I'm a different morph of gender.* Marmalade understands everything. Why won't people?

Bex is my best friend and she frightens me. She never used to.

Did I tell Ruth online because a) it's cyber-real, not Real? But I knew I would meet her face to face. I can't tell Bex online even though we chat all the time. It's Real, not cyber-real. That's the logic. If I could live in CyberTime would I feel right?

I have to be in the same room to smell her reaction. Her rose perfume is confusing. I don't like it when she asks about Ruth or Noah. This blog is my honesty box.

Marmalade keeps howling outside the door and I have to let him in. I wish I could discipline him and love that I can't. He wants to poach on my chest or the keyboard but when I throw him off he sits against my feet. He leans. Me+Marmalade = get-hunting.

Bex, I have to tell you something really important about me [insert blank for answer]. I got the wrong label when I was born [another blank. I can't imagine it.] I've been brought up as a girl so I probably look and sound like one but in my heart and mind I'm not a girl [and she says? Does?] It's a condition the doctors call gender dysphoria

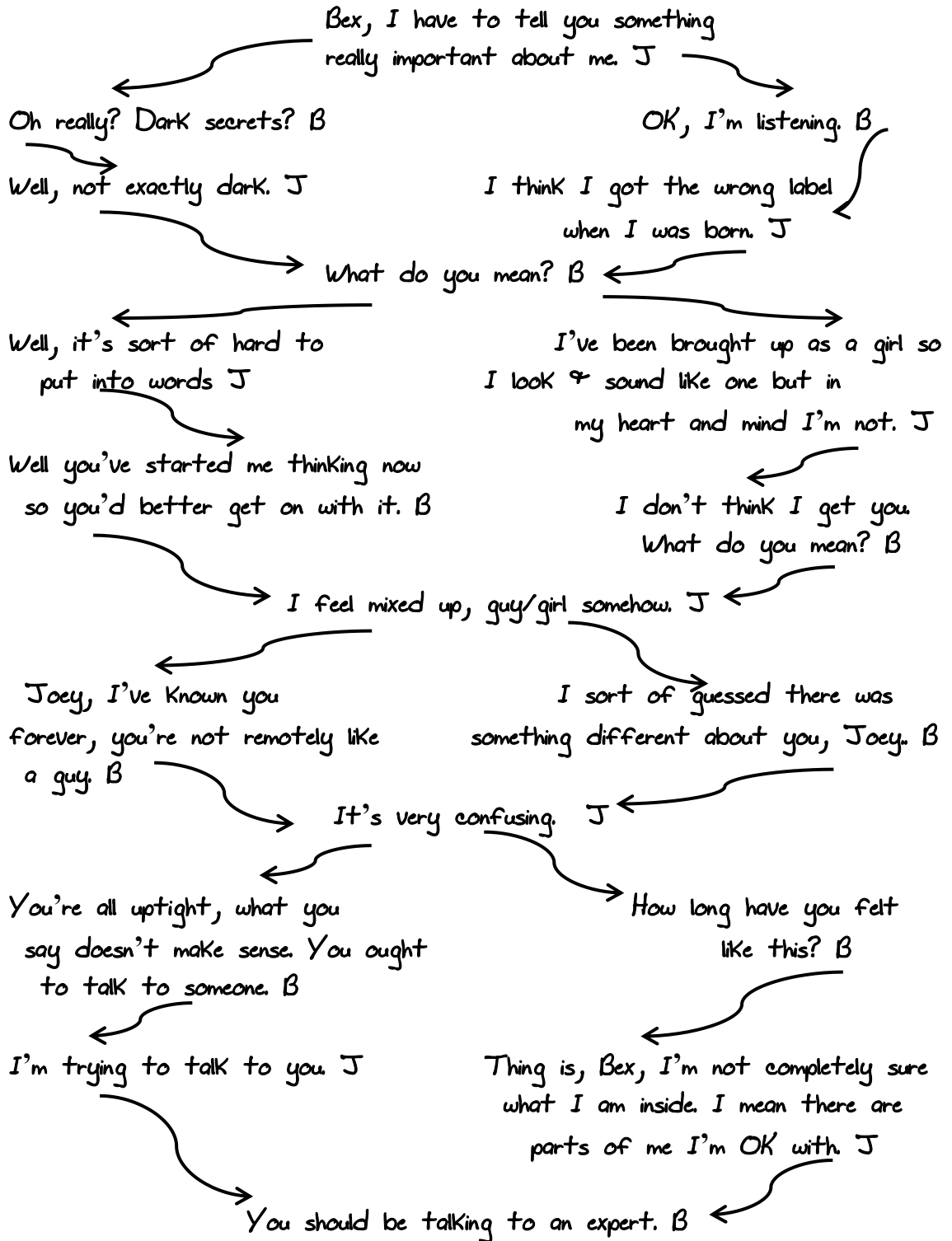
but I don't feel uncomfortable inside, not really. Well, I'd like to rip out my bloody womb of course but doesn't everyone when it's period pain?

Hopeless. Pen and paper. The resistance of paper to pen. My hand sticking to the page.

Hard copy. Funny how Hard Copy actually means original stuff and **THIS** is the copy. That's why the Black Box is great for things I don't want to blog or message or text. I want them to stay still so I can put my hand on them.

Onscreen, on keyboard, I can delete/cut-and-paste/copy/insert/upload...and I can't always tell where the boundary is between the sense of an idea and what happens when it's written. Ruth has a wooden box. Pandora's?

## Black Box File



And so on and so on. On and on and on.

MISERY

## My holiday diary.

We went on a narrowboat. Noah and I liked it alot. It was all painted nicely. Noah and I did lookout for the boat. Noah and I jumped off the boat onto the path. Lock gates were really exiting. We drove the boat in the gates and daddy wound the handle to close the gates and then he let the water in and we floated upwards.

I was as good as Noah at jumping then he got cross. My legs are smaller than his and I liked the smell of the water. It was cool. There were lots of flowers on the path. Daddy wrote a log about plants and trees on the path and said he was going to put it into the house magazine. On Wednesday when we were watching for a time to jump boys came on the path their bicycles. One of them could ride on his bicycle without holding the handle bars. He could balance. He cycled backwards and forwards in one place without holding on. One of them said Did we want to jump on the bank so Noah whispered. We didn't want our parents to see or hear. I could feel his heart beating. My head was pressed into his chest. He jumped ok and it was my turn. The boy who was best on his bike said "Bet your brother will fall in" and Noah

said Not likely! but I jumped and I did it and the boy  
said bet you fall in going back so I jumped back and I  
didn't. And then mummy heard and she got cross. But  
Noah thought it was funny the boy called me his brother.

## **Zeph's Blog Thursday 10 August**

It's 7am. The house opens and closes doors, runs water, unlatches windows, thumps the stairs. I feel totally cut in two with no sleep. I stand in front of my mirror and try telling the story, Joey to Zeph, but it's all mouth, no action, fishy gaping. Who do I look like?

I must have slept because I dreamed Bex was covered in a sort of sheet.

## Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> August

Ma dropped me off for work. She was spending the day with Ruth going zig-zag over the passes to the Roman fort at Hardknott.

At breakfast:

‘Joey, my darling, you look like a ghost.’

‘She’s on her extreme diet kick.’

‘At least I’m not stuffing myself with steroids.’

‘Will you two stop it?’

‘Moll, I’m working from home today. Do you want me to source some plants for the wall?’

‘Is it your driving lesson after work, Joey?’

‘Oh yeah, what time’s your test, sweetheart?’

‘Is there any more bread, please?’

‘I used it making sandwiches for Mollie and me to take out, but I’m defrosting rolls in the microwave if that’s any help. That’s it, they’re done.’

‘I could rearrange my schedule, sweetie-pie, give you some driving practice. I can do that?’

‘It’s OK, Pa, thanks anyway.’

‘Plants would be great, Andrew, if you can find the time.’

As I got out of the car by the shopping centre, Ruth leaned from the passenger window and mouthed ‘Doctor’. The shadows under her eyes had almost gone. My eyes were raw.

Ma drove off like she always does, ready for the race-track. She loves her car. It’s bright red with two broad white stripes running from bonnet to boot, and she fizzes as soon as she sits in the driver’s seat. She bought it when she got the private school job. It’s her image, Noah says.

Our headteacher drives something black with shaded windows. He's always there when I get to school and when I leave, so perhaps he sleeps in his car. Perhaps he's a werewolf, really, a kindhearted one with a passion for collecting litter.

They say the first question parents ask when a baby is born is, is it a boy or a girl? I read online last night that in 1/4500 births the gender isn't clear – and that's from what you can see. There are all the others where you can't see. Me, for instance. A baby's birth can't be registered till it has a gender. There are five morphs of gender for the side-blotched lizard.

*Cyborgs have no gender. They are beyond. Microchip v testosterone?*

I wandered up the steps of the shopping centre, past some graffiti that had escaped

**~ WHITE HEART JEN ~**

- through the sugar cloud around the pick 'n' mix stand, and towards the main exit. The girl in the tight red skirt was wobbling on high heels, struggling to raise wire shutters in front of her shop. There was a scab on her ankle. She didn't know or she didn't care. The takeaway shop smelt of fresh bread and half a dozen people were waiting to be served, eyeing the people who'd already got their hot sausage rolls, flakes of pastry like fish scales on the paving. A greasy paper bag fluttered, was recaptured. Someone with a tidy mind. My mind was about as useful as an empty paper bag.

I was doing OK at putting one foot in front of the other. I would be OK for the driving lesson. I felt sick at the thought of seeing Bex and having nothing to say.

The flower stall girl was plunging today's fresh deliveries into buckets of cool water, filling the air with the scent of freesias, lilies, roses, carnations. *If I could run out on to Scout Scar now...* I stood for a moment, inhaling the giddy scents of cut flowers, green stems, cold water. Suddenly I was gripped by hunger for the smell of running water over flints, the green tracery of reeds and weeds tugged into the flow, eddying around my knees. The flower girl caught my eye, squinted.

A few tourists dawdled on the high street waiting for shops to open and the cobbles gleamed where someone had thrown water to clear a patch of vomit. Tables in the sun outside a coffee shop; Bex's black hair swinging forward over her book; town clock striking the three-quarters; time.

The flow chart crumpled in my bag. *You should be talking to an expert.*

I leaned against the bookshop window to watch Bex reading, her usual way, thumb and forefinger flicking back and forth between pages. Maybe she reads the story



back to front. When Ruth and her team design stories, maybe they create a timescape like the ordnance survey map. *Here's a crisis, this symbol means two people sitting on a bench with true confessions and this sign is for the fork in the road that the character keeps trying to return to, because s/he took the wrong turning. But this is a time map, haha, and there's no turning back.*

Mental note, make a map not a flow chart. I love maps. You don't need words on maps, you follow the symbols, used your compass, look at the lie of the land.

I watched as Bex flicked backwards and forwards through the pages. You can't live your life backwards. Sometimes I read my blog posts backwards but it wasn't real like now, when I was about to cross the road.

A beep, and a text from Noah. Peace offering, unusually polite. Would I like to go to the cinema with him and Sy tonight. Sy has developed a way of looking sideways that throws me off balance. He did it again this morning in the kitchen – not a sizing-up look, more considering. He was thinking something about me. He had a word in his mind and he was measuring me for it. Hope it isn't *redacting* or *inscrutable*.

As if she had heard the beep, Bex looked up, saw me, waved, pulled out a chair.

'I don't suppose you'll share a blueberry muffin.' She gave me the knowledgeable smile through the swinging veil of black hair. My stomach yawned. 'I thought not.' Laying the book on the rickety table, she went inside. I picked up the book to read its title and flip through the opening pages. Bex reappeared with a small tray, balancing mugs and a muffin. She set down the tray, snatched the book from my hand and put it into her bag. It was another of her handmades - old denim lavishly oversewn with layers of bright fabric, hand and machine stitching, buttons, sequins, braid. It looked extraordinarily expensive and delicate, as if tropical flowers grew on it. Ma had bought two of her bags. Maybe Ma knows more about Bex than I do.

'I've never heard of this novel.'

Bex had produced a knife and was slicing the muffin like a loaf of bread. 'One for you and six for me. I like the title.'

'*The Getting of Wisdom.*' I shook my head. 'It looks old-fashioned. What happened to the other book?' I poked at my slice of muffin. 'What happened to the man who woke up as a bug?'

'I finished it. He died, before you ask. Anyway, you only read factual books. Which top?'

The legs of my chair squealed on the pavement. 'What?'

‘You haven’t opened the bag.’ With a neat gesture, she placed the last piece of muffin between her lips. ‘There’s a red top you ought to wear, you’d look fantastic, but I put in something basic too. Shirley’s going to ask you to model lots of the new stock, you know that. You’d better get your story ready.’

My lips were sticky. I had no memory of eating. ‘You spend your life reading. What’s the point of art school?’

Bex took a spoon to the cappuccino froth at the bottom of her mug, licking it with a precise pink tongue; Marmalade’s next incarnation. ‘You could read instead of obsessing about your muscle-weight ratio.’ She screwed up her eyes to look at me. ‘You look terrible. Have you given up sleep as well?’

‘Shirley’s twitch-day.’ Bex gave me a look almost as straight as Ruth’s; but I did have a point. Shirley was taking delivery of a vanload of new stock. Yesterday she had printed out the email from her boss, reminding her to organise the weekend sale of current stock, and make room for the winter range. Shirley always referred to her boss as ‘Ma’am’, curling her lip. We could work out their relationship.

The sun was warming the metal table, winking on the surface of spilt coffee, patting the backs of my arms. I closed my eyes, hearing the low, comfortable hum of the town on a fine summer day: a cluster of grey houses, sprinkled in the fold of land between the high, rounded uplands of the Howgills and the jagged peaks of Cumbria. The moment was ripe. I started to clear my throat.

The town hall clock whirred into action and Bex was scooping up her bag before I had completed my breath. ‘What?’ she said sharply.

The little back office was already steamy when we peered inside. Shirley’s face was red, beads of perspiration dribbling down her neck. ‘The stockroom’s jammed so tight I can hardly get in. You’ll have to take turns so we can meet Ma’am’s demands. I’ve been here since half past seven, did you know.’ The mug of tea at her elbow wobbled dangerously. ‘Everything needs new tags. You’ll have to reorganise the rails. There won’t be room for both of you together. Joey, you start please.’ She nodded at me as if we shared some special understanding.

Bex rolled her eyes and slid off into the shop whilst I squeezed into the stockroom. Its one high, tiny window had been painted shut, and the smell of fabric heated by strip lighting was worse than a charity shop. You couldn’t breathe without fibres clogging your airways. I had to strip off my lycras after half an hour, cringing as

the skirt glued itself to my damp legs. The automatic labeller kept slipping in my hand.  
*I'm dying in here.*

'Joey? My God there's a fug in here. I suppose I'll get someone in to unstick that window.'

I fumbled for where I'd slung the lycras across a rack of diaphanous wraps.  
'What's wrong?'

'I need you, come quick.' Shirley's voice was shrill. 'There's a situation out here. I don't know what to do about it. Come *on*. I'll do this for a bit. Get Bex in here, if you can.' She had been spraying cologne again. Passing her in the doorway meant sharing her air-space for a few nauseous seconds. Today, she wore an outfit drawn from the new stock, **Shades of Autumn, Harvest Gold and Berry Red**. Heat, heat, heat.

The high space of the shop was refrigerated by contrast and at first I just leaned and breathed. I couldn't see anything odd. The shop was almost full. Shirley should be ecstatic, not having another tantrum. Much poking-about had sent slippery skirts and blouses into heaps below the racks. I heaved a sigh and flexed my fingers. I would have to pick up clothes and replace them on the hangers. I hated threading the ribbon strips over slats. The ribbons were meant to keep the garments safe on the hangers but they didn't, they just snagged up against all the other hangers and it was like that child's game of pick-up sticks only worse. I didn't have the patience for the game, either.

There were more men than usual in the shop, some of them with flimsy garments over their arms. An elderly man in a green waxed jacket was leaning with closed eyes against the wall, wearing a dress with red and purple flowers over one shoulder and another, a riot of green and orange birds, slung over the other. His deeply tanned, crinkled face was expressionless. For a moment I wondered if he was ill, if this was the crisis, but a woman pushed through the heavy swing doors from the changing rooms, snatched off the birds and flowers, and retreated. He was left in charge of a plain turquoise dress with straps. He struggled to extract from the inside pocket of his jacket a bulging, ancient wallet.

Seconds later, I saw Bex behind the counter, facing a middle-aged man and woman who didn't seem to be buying. Bex had pulled her hair completely over her face and folded her arms tightly across her chest. She might as well have worn a burkha.

I picked up several stray hangers and sidled towards them, trying not to jostle customers or dislodge yet more clothing. It was usually easier to rehang the garments if I could first lay them out on a flat surface. I stepped behind the counter. Bex's body was

rigid and her rose perfume had a sour taint. The hair on the back of my neck began to prickle.

The man was the smooth sort. He had short, densely dark hair and a shadow across his cheeks that suggested designer stubble. Noah's special razor for designer stubble is his latest toy. Angular jaw, perfect white teeth and a confidential smile at Bex as if he knew her, reaching out across the counter with his hand extended. Silky cream shirt, deep tan on the exposed arm. It probably *was* a silk shirt, a bit like some of our stock, a close, grainy weave and slightly uneven colour. It looked much more expensive than anything Shirley would sell. His looks were the sort you see in magazines – man alongside low-slung white sports car with leather upholstery, special edition; or straight to camera with women leaning into his shoulders and mighty diamond-studded watch in foreground.

I couldn't imagine how he would know Bex. From the corner of my eye I caught the slight rise and fall of her chest and the slightest waver of a strand of black hair. At least she was still breathing.

The woman was smooth, pale where he was tanned, and she worked at it, I was sure. She would never have bought her clothes at Shirley's, or attended a fashion show in some hotel. But she was in a different world from Ma's and mine. She'd have gone to one of the boutiques down the hill, with the price tags big enough to feed a family of four for a couple of months. She was very slim, with a wide leather belt tight around a fine creamy shirt; like his.

He resumed his talk, in a soft, surprising, local accent. 'I know it's not our usual arrangement, this timing, but I must give you *something*. Julia and I, we want to mark the occasion. Make it special. You know.' He had the sort of voice that could curl up in your ear and not leave. He left his hand on the counter as if it didn't belong to him, leaned forward. The smell of musk and something spicy swayed through the air with his movement. Heavy gold ring on his thumb.

The woman said, 'I don't understand the fuss.' She clipped her words precisely, like cutting the ends off flower stalks, snip-snip, like reading from an autocue. Her small-boned face was defined by straight dark hair cut into a long bob. That was expensive, too. Something about her was familiar. It nagged. 'Your father simply wishes to make you a gift that isn't at a birthday or Christmas time.' Someone had punched me in the solar plexus. After seconds, I was rigid but nobody noticed. 'You could do him the courtesy of looking at him, Rebecca. He is acknowledging the

importance for you of your mother's remarriage, after all this time.' Her dark eyes were fixed on the tanned hand with its gold thumb ring. She couldn't be local.

I counted to five, seven, ten, thirteen. *Father*. The hubbub in the shop seemed sound effects, merely, between scenes in a play. Bex suddenly seized her hair with both hands and pulled it tightly back from her forehead. Only her eyes moved, in my direction. 'Would you mind serving these clients please? Shirley's asked for me.' Abruptly she slid away from the counter, vanished between the high racks of clothing. A couple of startled customers turned back to their conversation. *Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one*.

The counter was cluttered by pink and green leather purses, racks of bracelets, ear-rings, catalogues for winter, for the loyalty card, the credit card terminal, a basket with trinkets priced at a fiver to tempt. *Father*.

The woman fingered her necklace, another designer item of intricate gold links set with something glittery. 'You're a friend.'

My head bobbed up and down.

The man turned his eyes upon me like he was seeing for the first time anyone other than Bex. He had pale blue eyes with large dark irises, flecks of green and black in the blue.

'Dominic Ainsley. I am Rebecca's father. Julia, my wife.' I was too slow. He was shaking my hand before I could shrink back, his skin hot and dry; hers was cool and hand-cream smooth. 'Perhaps you can help.'

He was sure that I would. The woman and I stared one another down. *Thirty-one, thirty-two*.

'She's not called Ainsley.'

'Her mother made the change.' Julia clicked her fingernails on the counter. 'She had no right.'

The man laid his hand on her arm, and she was motionless. 'I expect you know her mother's getting married again, and of course I wish them all the luck in the world.' He paused to smooth back his hair, letting the creamy silk cuffs fall down his upraised arms. Not just tan but muscle. He works out. *Forty-three, forty-four*. 'Presumably, Rebecca will be a bridesmaid – well, all three girls I imagine.' He gave me a thin smile, taking the woman's hand. 'I'd like to give her something to mark the event – jewellery, flight to Florida, whatever she wishes. Obviously I can't give anything to Caro but I am truly happy for her. No doubt Jack's a fine character.' Now he tucked her arm through

his. She gazed at him like one of the women in a magazine shot. *Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven.* ‘And of course something for Susannah and Tessa.’

*Eighty-nine, ninety.* I got rid of them. I took his email address, mobile number. ‘I’ll ask Bex,’ I said pointedly. She laughed, the woman. She gave me one of those looks that said, I’ve got your number, sunshine. But when she looked at the man, her mouth went full and her eyelids drooped.

At lunchtime Bex and I went to Maude’s Meadow. It had stopped raining and Shirley had calmed down. We sat in silence. Bex watched as I turned bread roll into crumbs for the pigeons and after a while she joined me. ‘Don’t ask,’ she said. She opened *The Getting of Wisdom* whilst I spread out my map of Scout Scar. I had decided to mark out a route to run rather than just turning right or left as the mood took me; but I hardly saw the contours. A small wind lifted the edges of the map. I saw Jack, with his work-marked hands, and sawdust in his hair. In my mind’s eye Tess ran across the room and wrapped her arms about his waist, leaning into him. Dominic and Julia Ainsley smelt of city, business, interiors, Bond Street. Bex snapped through the pages at great speed, no backwards scanning.

On the way to the shop after lunch, Bex stopped dead in the middle of the road. ‘I see him once a year, in October, by arrangement. I always have. An afternoon. That’s Mum’s agreement.’ I hesitated, glancing at irritable drivers. A hoot sent me leaping for the kerb, but Bex was still rooted. I had to run back, drag her to the pavement.

The afternoon was endless.

But the text made me smile, almost.

### **3.39pm Noah to Joey**

Hey Jay-Babe, wot abt pix? Fab film at Warehouse, my treat, Sy’s idea

*The Warehouse* is a café-cinema, with half a dozen huge sofas. I had only been once before, maybe a dozen or twenty people in the audience for the film. Driving lesson, then sitting in the dark, my mind filling up with other people’s stories. All good. I texted to say yes. Definitely it was Mr Polite’s idea.

Shirley kept Bex in the stockroom all afternoon. By the time of closing up, Bex had pinched a couple of scrunchies from somewhere and tied her hair into bunches high on either side of her head. The skin was drawn so tight across her cheekbones I thought her eyes must hurt. That woman, Julia, when she looked at the man, her expression all feathers and fluff, she felt more dangerous than when she snipped off her comments.

Bex and I stood on the pavement as Shirley locked the doors.

‘I’ve got to stay late, driving lesson.’

‘Were you thinking of walking me home?’ But clutching her denim bag like a cushion to her chest, Bex looked too much like Tess, retreating behind her mother.

## **Zeph's Blog Thursday 10 August**

When I get into the car for my lesson I never smell panic from the person before. He keeps the car fresh all the time. Maybe he just opens the windows and drives up the A6 and back again between lessons to fill up the car with air from the fells. Mr XL-Drive-To-Success.

He's like shepherds I've seen at the Rydal sheep-dog trials. At the trials it's almost like mind-reading, shepherd and sheepdog. Last summer we saw four shepherds, seven dogs and a quad bike bringing down the sheep off the fells above Haweswater for shearing. All you heard was sheep complaining, and the shepherds whistling, or calling out in voices that didn't seem quite human, using language I couldn't catch. But the dogs did. Nobody got in a state, the sheep simply poured down the fell-sides, like foam by a weir, and the dogs were masters of the universe. When the shepherds whistled them to stop they flattened into the heather, getting longer and thinner, and their noses more and more pointed. It was like Marmalade's knack of shrinking his skull and doubling his weight when he feels like it.

Maybe dogs and cats living with humans can change themselves, just reacting to us. It's the other way round from man into bug. Cat into human. Totally believable only their spit's different. I love seeing a sheepdog on a bike or a tractor. I love it on our road in or out of town, quad bike with dog. He lets the shepherd on too, sits bolt upright alongside, so much enjoying himself, so bright and beady-eyed. The dog looks as if he's ready to drive. Just waiting to take over when you tell me Dad. They say you have to pay a fortune for a sheepdog puppy. It's like the shepherd's mind passes into the dog's, and the dog is a part of the shepherd that can run free and fast. I wish I could go hunting in the field with Marmalade.

When I drive, I sit up on my perch, all bright-eyed Me, he doesn't use words any more to tell me what to do, I have to work out from finger twitches or arm-folding or looking out of the window. When I pass my test I'll be me+car.

He says I'll pass. He said, 'You drive like a lad not a lass' so I ask what I do and he says I don't fart about, I drive at thirty not twenty six, I reverse



without getting in a lather and I don't frighten pedestrians. When some clown tries to beat me up I don't bat an eyelid. Then he says, 'Maybe you do drive like a lass after all.'

I could become a cyborg, a driving instructor, me+car.

Me + quad-bike would make room for Marmalade, though he might prefer to hunt.

I wonder if me + laptop is cyborg. I don't see why I have to be Either/Or.

Pa had to say F or M for my birth certificate but he didn't know at the time that he was wrong.

I would be a cat-keeping cyborg.

The film was about climbers and awful accidents, *Touching the Void*, but nobody said what the void was. You have to work it out.

I downloaded *Metamorphosis* and it's vile. They hate him, the man who turns into a bug. The family shuts him away and pretends he's not there, he's invisible. That's worse than the void.

This blog is a Bex-free zone.

### **Chat Bex to Joey Thursday 11.39pm**

*Bex* Why is it called touching the void?

*Joey* Still thinking about that. Two climbers somewhere in South America, very high mountains, one breaks his leg coming down and the other carries him then there's another accident.

*Joey* It's a book too.

*Bex* I've heard of it. True story.

*Joey* Fantastic photography, climbing. Horrible story. This guy, if he didn't cut his friend loose they would both have died, they were roped together.

*Bex* So he cut the rope? I remember that.

*Joey* And the friend survived, the friend wrote the book, not the one who cut the rope.

*Bex* The one who cut the rope, he must be in hell

*Joey* Did you tell your mum about the man?

*Joey* I got rid of them, that's what you wanted?

*Bex* How long is Simon staying at yours?

## Zeph's Blog Friday 11 August

Classification by gender will be irrelevant? We won't grow old so that won't matter either? That was on a website.

I try to picture myself with willy and balls. Maybe they're tucked inside anyway. Whatever's in this body I don't want anybody taking a knife to it. I've watched the videos about surgery. Implanted microchips would be different.

It's like when we were told in maths that parallel lines meet at infinity. Is that a yes or a no?

I keep thinking about the man who cut the rope, certain his friend would die. Then his friend writes the best-selling book. How does he bear it? And he'd carried his friend with the broken leg halfway down the mountain and then he cuts him loose. I can't get it out of my mind. Is that another Catch 22?

In the cinema I couldn't help remembering Matt's party last year. Oliver from the year above us at school, too kind, too excited, totally hard. We were in the garden shed. But I couldn't get it in. That's three times I've tried, and he was decent, patient. Never again, never. The weight of his balls in my hand was almost comforting, and the skin behind. His breath was fresh. He put my hand on his balls. I suppose he thought it would make it ok for me.

Maybe the sex was all wrong between Matt and Bex. It never occurred to me before. Everybody does it except me, obviously. That picture came back to me – his huge arm around her shoulders, his hand curving down towards her breast – and the way she flicked his hand sideways. She always flicked it sideways.

I need a map not a flow chart

## **Black Box file**

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

"What's happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls. A collection of textile samples lay spread out on the table - Samsa was a travelling salesman - and above it there hung a picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and housed in a nice, gilded frame. It showed a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer.

Gregor's family hated him, shut him away, threw  
rubbish into the room, said he wasn't Gregor any more.  
Gregor had gone...

They left him to die on his own. VOID?

?metaphor for people getting ill or disabled?

Noah will think I am Kafka nightmare  
posthuman world?

Bex's real father is creepy. He thinks he's cool

## **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> August**

Ma was making the chick pea curry. She'd spent the day in school but by the time I got home had already chopped up garlic, chillies, fresh coriander and the chickpeas had finished soaking. The kitchen was full of spicy smells, fighting the oily dampness from Noah's sweater drying out on the rack across the ceiling. He'd been on Shap fells all day.

Shap has its own special weather. Last month, Pa sat alongside when I drove along the A6 towards Penrith, and as I accelerated up the hill towards the summit, a fat mist suddenly squatted across the fells, filling the windscreen with white haze. Pa had to steady the wheel until I got hold of myself. He said it was just experience, not to panic. I know I wouldn't have swerved if I'd been with Mr XL. He's been cyborg for years.

Ma finished whizzing up the chillies with tomatoes to make a paste and added these to the pan where the chopped garlic gently sizzled. I watched her throw spices into the pan, counting as she went. 'One tablespoon turmeric, one coriander, one cumin, one paprika, one cayenne pepper, one teaspoon salt.' Noah questioned the extra cayenne and received a dismissing wave of the hand. Ma's chick pea curry was a wonder of the world because you couldn't find it in a recipe book – not her version, anyway. She had worked it up over years.

I should never have passed on Bex's comment that it was a wonder of the world curry. If she didn't turn up – I squashed the thought, scooping up Marmalade and burying my nose in his neck. He grumbled, telling me the biscuits in his dish were crap.

All day a fine mist sat on top of the town – the sort you knew you could walk through into bright sunshine on top of Scafell Pike or Helvellyn, and then you would see nothing below you but cloud. But Bex did not come to work. There was no sign from her till I sent a text and she said she wasn't well but could she come to supper. All day the shop had been full but we had sold very little. Putting up signs for 'Sale tomorrow' meant people dragged stuff off racks, looked at price tags and slung the garments back anyhow. There was no time for a break. When I stuck my nose through the front door I found a bigger version of the same crowd, a thicket of wanderers with children restlessly charging, being hauled back. A few determined people, heads down, hacked pathways from one mountaineering shop to another in search of next year's boots, rucksacks, socks. Every business had the same cut-price idea.

I turned Marmalade on to his back and stuck my nose into his belly. Cat breath can be fishy grim but cat fur is pure outdoors. Tonight, his was soft and damp and cool, full of the smells of fields, flowers, earth. I could measure how much better his day had been than mine.

Noah shambled in from the utility room and leaned over Ma's shoulder to poke the curry.

'Did you want some of this tonight?'

'You know my wetsuit, what happened to the bag?'

Ma slapped at his hand and he laughed. Sweat stained the underarms of the thin undershirt he ought to have changed. I pictured Simon as I had seen him half an hour earlier, his hair freshly washed, his chinos neat. He wore a fine white cotton shirt of a kind you don't see in shops in this country - a job lot, he said, from an uncle in Thailand. Ruth said they were enviable. He and Noah hadn't done much climbing yet; they'd been too busy working at the pub. I tried to imagine assisting behind a bar. Noah showed me photos on his phone of him and Sy at the pub, flashlit, red-eyed, reflections winking in the beer puddles on the counter, crumpled crisp packets, flushed faces in the background, glasses cocked.

All day Shirley kept saying, 'If this sun doesn't shine it'll close us down,' and the flesh quivered at the top of her arms when she pulled her ponytail tight and smoothed her eyebrows. Bex would have said something like, 'But you've had so many phone calls since that show.' And Shirley would have brightened up.

Today, Shirley had worn another outfit from the new range: black and yellow with lacy bits at the neck and flutter on the arms. I didn't want to stare too hard at the detail in case she asked me to wear it on Monday. Unbelievable. Shirley plucks her eyebrows viciously.

The day was endless. All day I rehearsed my opening lines. I couldn't get them right.

*It's like this, Bex. I don't feel right. I have to try living as a guy. It might not be truly me,*

but I have to find out.

Try again.

If I don't try out life as a guy I'll never know. I'll never be sure of myself or what I could be.

And Bex says?

'Really, Joey? How terribly exciting.' 😊

'Really, Joey? You're not safe.'



'Really Joey? You're not the person I thought you were.' 😞

'Really, Joey? You're on your own with this.'



The kitchen windows were steaming up. I leaned forward from the sofa and lightly drew the symbol for railway lines. Marmalade gently nibbled my earlobe and patted my face. I had not been paying attention. I groped for the brush to groom him again. Her.

Voices in the hall; Marmalade squirmed away. Ruth shook out her coat and patted the spider-light net of mist that bound her hair. 'I met Bex at the bottom of the hill and we walked up together.' She set down a bulging bag by the sofa. 'This is what I meant. I'll pass it on to you next week, I'll read it over the weekend. It's good, that library.'

Bex put out her hand but Noah, bouncing on the balls of his feet, swiftly intercepted the book that Ruth held. ‘*Two Worlds and Their Ways*.’ He stared at the back cover. ‘What is it, some sort of cultural study?’

Bex shrugged off her damp denim jacket, face going pink, and held out her hand again. At once Noah seized the jacket, slung it across the back of the nearest chair. It dangled precariously.

‘Where’s Simon tonight?’ Ruth’s large hand covered Noah’s fingers. He gave up the book.

‘Evening shift. My day off.’

‘You could lay the table.’ Ma’s voice sounded remote.

‘I’m going to the climbing wall anyway.’

‘So do you want supper or not? I’m keeping some back for Simon.’

Noah went to the door and swung from the lintel, red-faced with effort. ‘He’s a hit, is he?’

‘This book’s typical of her style. It’s completely out of fashion but I read her for the dialogue. It’s so sharp. The plot happens backstage, somehow. Out of sight.’

They had obviously been talking all the way up the hill. Out of the corner of my eye I watched for undercover signals that Ruth had said something.

Ma gave Bex a hug and then Pa was hanging up her jacket on the coat rack, along with a new bag. This one was decorated with curving rows of buttons to make a rainbow. Perhaps she had spent all day sewing on buttons. Noah swung his body in a single movement to land beside Bex. He drew out a dining chair and patted the seat.

‘Oh, I won’t take your place.’

‘I’m off in a couple of minutes.’

‘Do you want me to save supper? Do you want to eat now? Noah, are you listening?’

‘Maybe I’ll go a bit later. I’m only going to the climbing wall.’



I stood by Ma at the worktop, picking up a knife to chop an onion for relish.

‘Nice and fine, please. I don’t want onion chunks. Wine vinegar or yogurt, you choose.’

Tears were soon running down my face. Ma took the knife out of my hand. ‘If you really want to help, check out the dough for the chapattis. It’s settling in the fridge, the one in the utility. This one seems to be full of beer.’

Bex and Ruth and Pa were deep in conversation. Ruth casually put out a hand and rasped it over the dark stubble on Noah’s chin. He laughed, ran out of the room. I heard him taking the stairs three at a time. Bex seemed to have got over whatever made her ill.

In the utility room I clutched the heavy, cold ball of brownish dough in my hands. Ma used wholemeal flour. The windows here were clear of steam, framing the garden and the green of the hillside beyond. Three freshly-shorn sheep, unnaturally clean and white, stood nose to nose midfield. Along the top of the hill was a faint line of blue sky, pushing up the cloud as if it were the lid of a box. It might even be a clear evening. My head was full of noise. If I could stand like a tree with wind swishing through my head -.

‘Joey, you’re not kneading it are you?’ Ma’s voice, slightly plaintive. ‘Don’t warm it up, darling. I need it cold. Just poke it with your finger to see if it’s getting nice and elastic.’

‘Noah’s gone out, thank God. If I could wire him up to our boiler he’d heat us for the next two winters. Wine, Bex?’

‘If that’s your elderberry and blackberry, Andrew, don’t overdo it.’

‘Ignore Ruth, this is my best.’ Pa held his glass to the light. The wine was a deep purple red, completely clear, the colour of ripe blackberries.

‘Can I try?’ Pa poured half an inch into a glass and passed it to me with a cautious expression in his eyes. I wetted my lips, surprised by the tang of alcohol. A dry, ripe taste rolled across my tongue, intensely blackberry.

‘OK?’ Pa’s face was slightly anxious. I loved the colour. The last time I had tried red wine was at a party; the last time I had tried sex. The drink had seemed like a good idea, but that one glass of red wine seemed all of a piece with the night. I lost myself somewhere in the volume of noise in Matt’s house, its windows wide open, the bedrooms heaped with bodies and coats, boys peeing in the kitchen sink, wine stains on the pale green carpet, and the garden, where I took refuge, overgrown and murky. I had blundered into the garden shed with its rotting boards and rusting metal windows, and that was where Oliver had followed me. Later, Bex had come looking too. She held my head when I threw up, Oliver crouching alongside, wanting to help.

‘Andrew, don’t.’ Ruth beckoned for my glass, for Bex’s, and Bex caught my eye. She grinned. I twisted in the chair and knocked the glass flying. Shattered glass spreads as if you’ve set off an explosion. Fine red droplets sprayed across the tiles.

Ma said, ‘Go easy, the curry will take at least another hour to ripen.’ I was already in search of broom, dustpan, mop. ‘Wear gloves, Joey. Don’t get glass splinters.’ I muddled about at floor level with the mop, listening to the burr of chatter above my head, Ruth’s mockery, Ma’s commentary on her day in school with a teacher getting neurotic about results, Pa’s rumblings about planning laws, rogue landowners, fly-tippers, national strategy for water. I gathered the glass fragments into last week’s *Gazette* and stuffed the spiked, red-stained package into the bin. Pa patted my shoulder, and rattled about in the corner cupboard.

‘Monopoly?’ The money had blotched and the cards were curling. I couldn’t remember when the set had last come out, and Bex said she hadn’t played since years ago at our house.

We could have gone upstairs to my room, as we used to, or along the track into the fields or through the hedge and up the fellside. We could have talked. I could have talked.

Ma set the deadline for the game or it would have gone on all night. Ruth won. She laughed at Pa’s expression as he counted the few notes left on his side of the table. I had the top hat still in my hand and sent it spinning across the table as Bex was tidying the stacks of cards. Ruth said it was a good thing Noah wasn’t here and Ma said that he took after his father and Andrew used to be a devil and look at him now, not sulking at all.

Bex asked, 'How did you two meet?'' as Ma spooned steaming curry over neat mounds of wild rice. I divided my portion - what I would eat, what I would spread around the plate. If Noah had been here I would have spooned half of my portion on to his plate.

Pa said, 'We met in London, would you believe. All those millions of people and I found Mollie.' Ma's eyes were watering and she put down the ladle to dab them with the tea-towel. 'We were at that dreadful seminar introducing research methodologies and I thought, utter bullshit, completely useless.'

Ma was snorting laughter into her hand. 'It was my seminar not yours. You were in the wrong building.'

I wanted to shake them but Bex's eyes were bright with ideas. 'Because yours was literature and Andrew's was science.'

'Spot on.' Pa reached over to pat the back of Bex's hand.

'Yin and yang, sort of,' said Bex.

I watched Pa lifting the fork to his mouth, putting it down without eating because he had to say what he had been thinking about soap operas/political correctness/conservation and what's happening in Ennerdale. Pa's skin had acquired its summer tan, except for the white lines > o \_o < at the corners of his eyes. When he pulls on swimming trunks to dive into Windermere you can see that he seems to wear a short-sleeved tee shirt of white skin. He thinks sun-bathing is a waste of time.

Ruth asked how Caroline and Jack had met. Bex was already halfway through her curry and had put out her hand for a second chapatti. She was not seeing me at all. Her face was relaxed, soft. I watched Pa, Ruth, Ma, all looking at Bex. The light tones of Bex's voice wove in and around the sounds of chinking cutlery, creaking chairs, laughter, breathing.

'I'm not entirely sure but it might have been when Mum got her studio in Southey's Yard. I think she wanted advice about safety - you know, keeping a computer there, not having anyone break in. It wasn't Jack who came because community policing isn't his thing. He's been a custody sergeant. Well...You know.'

'We know.' Ma produced a sympathetic echo. I didn't know, though.

‘There was a town hall conference, I think and Mum went. Start-up businesses, youth employment opportunities, something like that. I think Jack may have made a presentation.’

Pa said, ‘He’s a resourceful man, Jack is.’ How would Pa know anything about Jack? Even if they had anything in common, Pa wouldn’t have noticed. He sees insects or plants, or *truly remarkable* small mammals. He peers and pokes and holds his breath, lifts up twigs and fronds with the end of a pencil till he has tracked them down, no hiding places. He goes on about lichens or mosses growing in unexpected places or birds watching their broods learning to fly. That’s all he sees.

Bex finished her mouthful. ‘Jack came to ours to replace a broken window. He was lovely.’ She ran her hands up and down her arms. There was a fresh red mark just beneath her elbow. I used my fork to separate a few chick peas that had not disintegrated. Then I lined up slivers of red chilli between them like stringing beads. Pa had finished his curry. He eyed my plate. I pushed it across the table.

Ruth had wound a fine blue scarf around her head to keep the hair from her face. She looked like a wise woman in an old painting. ‘Will your mother keep on with the design business after the wedding?’

‘I guess. I think so. Jack’s made her a studio anyway. You’ll see it when you come.’

That’s when the vindictive little voice piped up in my head. *Bex is my friend not hers. Her child’s dead, she’s poking her nose in.* My chair toppled. There was a chill. Surely I hadn’t spoken out loud.

‘What now?’ Pa’s chair scraped on the tiles. ‘Watch out, Joey, you can’t sit still tonight.’

‘I need to check the routes. My test.’

‘You gave your curry to your father. Was something not right about it?’

‘Oh heck, I promised to give you driving practice this weekend.’ Pa was rounding the table, setting the chair on its foursquare legs, seating me with a thrust of his bony fingers. He began to probe my shoulders. His grip was much more powerful than mine. ‘There’s no rush, sweetie.’ He found the pressure points. ‘You are so tense.’

Wine and curry gave his breath a rich, invasive headiness. ‘Maybe you’re still gripping the steering wheel too hard. I’m into Borrowdale on Sunday, you could drive if you like. That would be great practice. You could do a spot of running.’

‘Could I come too?’ Ruth got to her feet. ‘I wouldn’t drag round after either of you but it would be a wonderful chance to walk up Dale Head and look at Newlands. I love that view of the valley from the top. I could sit there for hours. I wouldn’t put you off if I were in the back seat, would I, Joey? I’m not a backseat driver. Maybe Bex could come too.’

The wicked witch in my head flexed its talons. Bex shook her head. ‘Thanks but I have to help Mum. She’s practically licking the floors in the house to make everything perfect.’

The conversation surged around my head. Empty plates were pushed to the end of the table to make room for the map of Borrowdale. Ruth and Ma sidetracked themselves into plotting for next week, and Pa talked to Bex about early retirement and Jack. I half-listened. The glossy man in the shop yesterday was prowling somewhere through the dark, with his snip-snap wife hanging off his arm. How could he possibly fit with Bex?

Why did Bex come tonight, anyway?

Noah brought Simon with him in a dark, damp rush of energy. Noah ate Simon’s reserved portion, found a cheese alternative in the fridge, opened another bottle of elderberry and blackberry wine for sampling purposes, plucked the book from where Ruth had placed it. ‘Who’s this writer, Ivy Compton Burnett? Never heard of her. Let’s walk Bex home.’

Simon’s eyes gleamed. He wanted Noah to get up at four o’clock next morning to do a quick climb in the Coniston fells before the afternoon shift. He grabbed a map from the shelf and spread it on the table. ‘Look, we could climb from the road, Tilberthwaite Quarry, or the Coppermines Valley. You’ve probably done it loads but – maybe Joey would come too. What do you think? You could run?’ He smiled as if he meant it.

Noah folded the map with a smack. ‘She’ll have work to get to. She starts before us.’ His eyes sparkled at me with a competitive glint. ‘Even her twinkly-toes wouldn’t get up and down the Old Man and back here all buffed up for the shop by nine o’clock.’

‘You think.’

Ruth said, ‘It was very overcast all day – isn’t rain forecast for tomorrow?’

‘I want to know when we plan to get on with that wall. I don’t want the heap of stones left too long. Creatures will move in. Andrew’s ordered plants and I’m ready to be inducted. Are you working all day tomorrow, Joey?’

‘Sorry I can’t help tomorrow. Someone’s coming up from London.’ Pa clattered the plates into a ragged pile and wandered towards the dishwasher, whilst Noah leapt for the door-frame and more pull-ups.

‘I must go home, shop tomorrow.’ At once, Noah swung himself to land neatly at Bex’s side. He reached for her jacket, quietly easing it on to her shoulders.

Simon picked up his sweater. ‘It’s so unlike London, you’ve probably forgotten. There’s so much oxygen here, it’s wonderful. Come for the walk, Joey? It’s a wonderful night.’

The kitchen seemed dead. Ruth tried to catch my eye but I wanted to kick someone. Noah.

Ma stretched out on the old brown leather sofa at the other end of the kitchen, feet on the window sill. ‘Bring a bottle, Ruth, there’s a love. August is too short.’

‘Room for you too, Joey, if you like?’

Ruth stood for a moment watching me, the lines of her mouth drawn unexpectedly tight.

‘No thanks.’

Ma’s arm appeared over the back of the sofa to tug at the bottom of Ruth’s shirt. Pa closed the dishwasher and returned to the map of Borrowdale, fetching some of his Ennerdale papers to lay alongside. He was talking to himself.

Slowly I made my way to the utility room. I needed the dark.

Gentleman Noah and his good friend Mr Polite, escorting my best friend home. My entire family treating Bex as if she were one of them.

The door to the garden was ajar. Mist had brought the plants alive and the air smelt of high summer, concentrated lavender, clematis, sweet peas, jasmine, honeysuckle. Marmalade slid from somewhere, his tabby patterning at one with the shadows, and wound himself around my legs. *He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me. He loves me.* I bent to scratch his neck under his collar where he likes it and he arched against my calf with a thunderous purr. I would not imagine what Noah and Simon and Bex were talking about on the walk through the scented dark.

Together we went, Marmalade and I, to the top of the garden. I pushed through the small gap in the hedge, scrabbling into the field beyond. My hair was full of leaves and twigs. Marmalade's eyes caught the light of the moon as he poised himself, every hair of his coat quivering. Although it was close to midnight I could see individual stalks of grass and the closed heads of daisies.

I love the long, slow evenings and short nights. The pale half-moon was watching from the sky, its momentary halo staining the feathered clouds. Trees massed along fell-sides, and long shadows slept under hedges. It was windless now. My head cleared.

Family ties are tough as a spider's web strung out between bushes. Spiders set traps. Victims don't get away unless they are super-strong. The clouds shifted and the loosened moon stared down at me, its gaze outlined by the widening pool of inky dark as if someone had blackened its eye. Maybe there'd be no rain tomorrow. Marmalade hissed. Even in this dim light I knew his hackles had risen. The fine hairs stood up along the backs of my arms.

## Friday 11<sup>th</sup> August surfing

[www.fathers4kids.org](http://www.fathers4kids.org)

Once upon a time, father was the moral arbiter of the family – breadwinner, disciplinarian, head. Things have changed. Now, fathers compete with mothers for influence and moral authority, especially where mothers earn substantial salaries and make major decisions. It's time for fathers to rediscover the power of their emotional attachment to their children: father as source of love and care.

[www.fathersforlife.co.uk](http://www.fathersforlife.co.uk)

Dads influence their kids partly through their relationship with Mums. If Dad and Mum get on well, Dad's likely to spend time with the kids – and the kids will be better off emotionally and psychologically as a result. Dad has more freedom too. He doesn't have to be the wielder of the big stick. He can be himself.

The ancient Chinese subscribe to a concept called ***Yin Yang*** which is a belief that there exist two complementary forces in the *universe*. One is Yang which represents everything positive or masculine and the other is Yin which is characterized as negative or feminine. One is not better than the other. Instead they are both necessary and a balance of both is highly desirable.

Yin is soft while Yang is hard. Yin is stillness while Yang is movement. The sun is yang while the moon is yin. Female is Yin while Man is Yang. Mountain is Yin while the river is Yang. Intuitive is Yin while Logical is Yang. Winter is Yin while Summer is Yang.



## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> August surfing

[iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk)

**Forum: gender and behaviour**

***Narrative: Zenith 0.33am***



Is anybody else reading stuff online about gender imprinted on you when you're a baby?

**Comment: Moderator Sue 6.21am**

*Zenith, what are you reading that makes you ask?*

**Narrative: Zenith 6.22am**

I could put up some of the weblinks. Am I just my parents all over again? Am I their reprint?

**Comment: Moderator Sue 6.24am**

We wouldn't make it past the first 48 hours without a parent.

**Comment: Barbarian 8.01am**

this is doing my head in. don't giva toss about parents gotta think about me, you.

**Comment: Gozo 8.54am**

This dosent look a lot of fun. Just live it man, don't squeeze it to bits.

**Comment: Cybersnake 8.56am**

Zenith's on to something. All that stuff I had to mess with after uni, when I thought I was going mad – it's like having 2 people inside you, the one your parents think about, and then you.

**Narrative: Zenith 9.02am**

I've been in a gamesite for months now, playing as a guy. They take it from me.

## **Zeph's Blog Saturday 12 August**

I looked again at the photo of me aged six. I was six when Noah said he wasn't getting into the bath with me any more. He didn't even want to have a shower if I was in the bathroom, but Ma told him not to be so silly. Noah in the shower cupped his hand over his willy as if it were precious.

Ma had it all worked out, when she was going to tell me The Facts Of Life. I was nine. We had just come home from another holiday, scrambling on the cliffs in Cornwall.

We went to the park and sat on a bench. She bought me an ice cream. Ma tried to find out what I already knew. I watched the children on the swings, kicked my legs, chose a chocolate flake for the ice cream, it's as clear as yesterday. She talked about menstruation as if I was interested but it wasn't going to happen to me.

That summer I knew that Joey was Zeph too.

That was the year I found a book in our holiday house, full of illustrations and speckled brown pages. The children in the book lived in the old days. They called their parents Ma and Pa. It was like a secret code for being different till Noah did it too.

The next year we moved out of London to the Lake District instead of having a holiday. It was like my whole life becoming a holiday. I started a new school and I met Bex. I never had a true friend before. In London I hung out with other people, but not seriously; not someone making me feel I could unwrap my heart.

Before we moved, school was bad because of the other children and Noah was a long way ahead of me and anyway he didn't notice. He played football too but I wasn't allowed to play with him. The difference between ten and thirteen is huge; between seventeen and twenty it's not so big a deal. I suppose I love him. I suppose he loves me. But we're siblings. We're going to fight.

# Scar

## Zeph's Blog Saturday 12 August

There's a discussion on [www.ethicsinanewworld.org](http://www.ethicsinanewworld.org). This guy says that in the future some people will still choose to be male or female, some will choose to be both, some will choose to be neither. Some will choose what we haven't invented yet. People will not have their gender decided for them. Maybe people will choose to be made of different stuff or fused with stuff in ways we can't begin to imagine.

The guy's forgotten **parents**, how they want what's best, so they think. I found an old news item about a couple keeping the sex of their baby secret so s/he could work out gender for him/herself. But you don't work out how to talk all by yourself. It's not like we're imprinted, as if we were sheets of blank paper and somebody with a great stamp marks you for life.

Maybe you imprint yourself, looking at yourself in a mirror. Do babies look at themselves in mirrors? Maybe the idea of a doppelgänger is people have a yearning for the other part of themselves, the other story of them, and what they really want is for both parts to come together, Yin and Yang. Like the you in the mirror, and the you looking back, being together  $1+1=1$ .

Peter Pan cried when his shadow was chopped off.

Yin and Yang means no extremes, everything balanced. You and your shadow together forever? What if the shadow is dark? Some parents love their children to death.

## Black Box file

shadow self - Carl Jung/psychologist

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge.

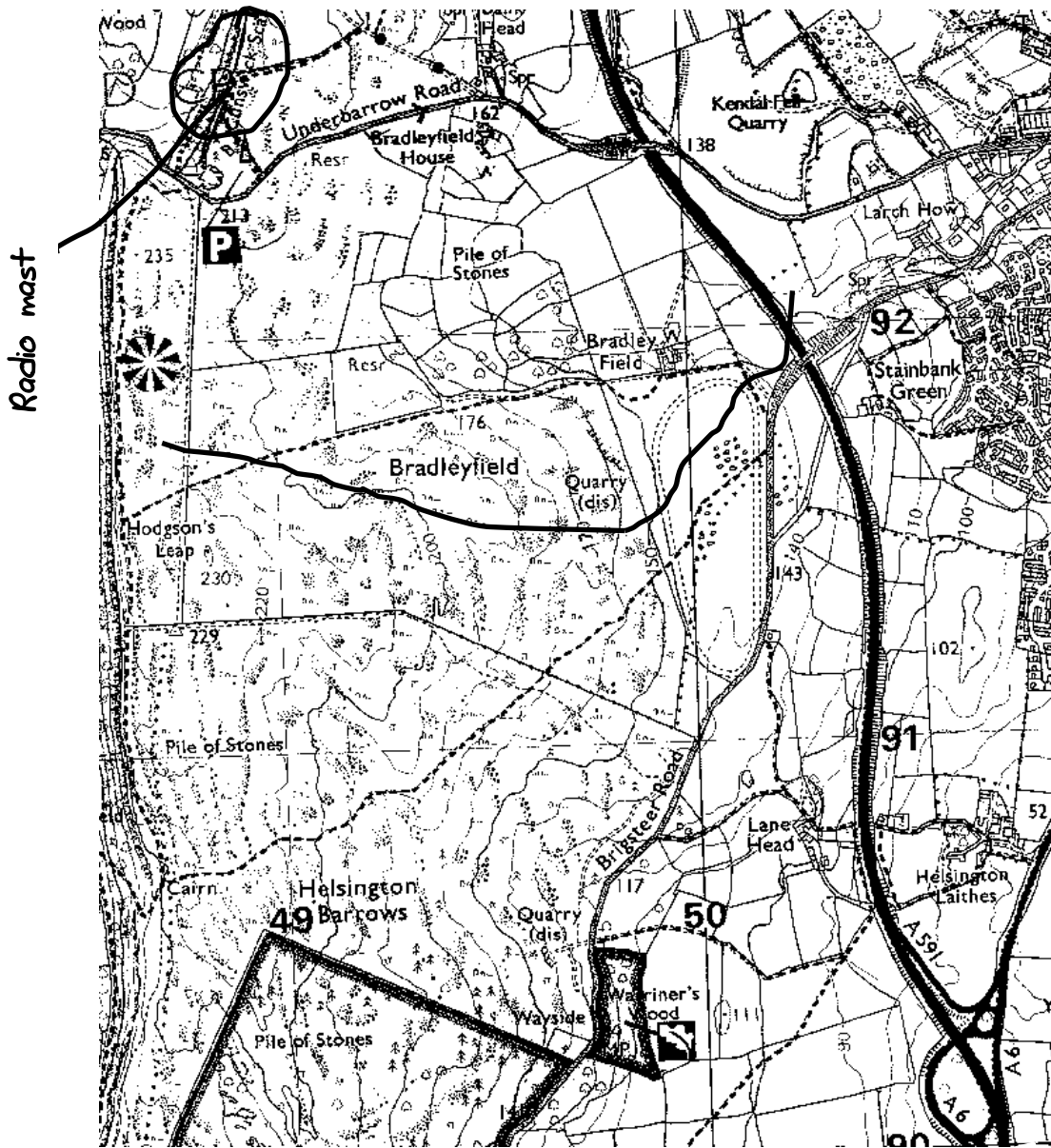
Aion (1951). CW 9, Part II: P.14

To confront a person with his shadow is to show him his own light. Once one has experienced a few times what it is like to stand judgingly between the opposites, one begins to understand what is meant by the self. Anyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle.

"Good and Evil in Analytical Psychology" (1959). In CW 10. Civilization in Transition. P.872

anima and animus — Yinyang?  
anima = male side of female + vice versa

**Black Box file**



Radio mast

Tu  
 Bradleyfield/Scout Scar  
 Hodgson's Leap Keep radio mast RH

ough the fog of exhaust fumes, away from the people clotting up  
 the pavements, away from the dreary smotheration of the shop, up All Hallows Lane, up

Beast Banks, my legs pumping steadily, my breathing slow and deep, deeper as the air sweetens. The roads glisten. I dodge a passing car, sprint across slippery grass, and swerve left into the Brigsteer Road.

Ahead of me stretches the rippling, upward swerve of the road over the bypass, towards Scout Scar. Cars will be roaring along the dual carriageway under the bypass but not as many as at the weekend. It never stops, then, the revving up. Fat old men in black leathers riding their power-bikes as if seventy mph is different for them, a different sort of speed. They should try how it feels to run, keeping out of the way of the traffic, and then the bikers shoot past, and it's sheer panic for a second. In your head you know you're fine but your body says you just missed being mashed across the road like cats or badgers. There are notices everywhere saying Think Bike. Trouble is, they do. They cover their faces with helmets and never think about flesh and muscle and bones on the road. I come to a halt, inadvertently clutching my arms across my body as if a biker were aiming for me right now. But bikers don't bother with the Brigsteer Road.

I shake the damp from my hair. The trees lean across the road, green leaves gleaming. You could swim through the green air. Water drifts from eaves and branches, murmuring in the small gully at the side of the road where the line of houses peters out. The hum of traffic fades. A steady pulse beats in my wrists.

On Saturday the sun smacked down as we tackled the wall, Ma, Simon and I. Ma said she thought Ruth was writing, she didn't come down for breakfast. I discovered the knack of cutting a clean edge with the spade, finding stones that were meant to fit. We were doing fine till Noah appeared and tried to reorganise. Ruth came out after a while with a jug of fresh lemonade, freckled with mint. The wicked witch said into my ear that she was trying to be nice, to avert suspicion. But she neatly diverted Noah. On Saturday night I slept like the dead. Nothing from Bex.

On Sunday it was like a fresh start. I loved driving back along the route to Keswick, not feeling sick. When you drive yourself you don't get sick. I knew the grip of tyres on road through my palms on the wheel, as if I were grasping the route and making it mine. I rounded corners like pulling silk through my hands. We parked in the Newlands valley and I ran away from Ruth and Pa without a word, scrambling and

trotting up the ridge on to Hindscarth whilst Pa drove back into Borrowdale. Ruth said she would be looking for ripe bilberries, no rush.

Low Snab, Scope End, High Crag, May Crag, Hindscarth - the very names were like a cable hauling me up the ridge, my ridge body and soul.

I had stopped at the topmost cairn, to look. It was a pure, clean day when you could see the purple coastline, the glimmering brightness of the sea. The track around the fell tops was so obvious a toddler would know where to go. In an hour or so, Ruth might be here, too. You could look across the roof of the world and be nothing but a pair of eyes, a viewfinder. The mountains see everything, accept it all, the crows hassling the redstarts, the buzzards skimming the clouds. I stretched out my arms to hold the valley, mine.

Now, I step to the side of the road, gaze into the gully. If Pa were here he would already be on his knees, peering, holding his breath, on the lookout for some small watery organism I cannot name.

Sunday had been a wonderful day. When we met at the end of the afternoon, Pa had been filthy as a happy kid with a bag full of peat samples and another hundred photos that seemed all to be versions of the same *extraordinary* plants - water lobelia, heath bedstraw, sheep's fescue, brittle bladder fern. There were more but those were the names that stuck. He was logging the differences in tourist behaviour between Borrowdale and Ennerdale, he said – the one valley at the top of the tourist list and the other being hard to reach. We had cracked the old jokes too.

Ahead of me, up the hill, the mist thickens. It will cap the Scar and I'll be running into a haze of water. Scout Scar is a local, easy place for Sunday dog-walkers and early-evening wandering. Pensioners wander along the path to the iron dome of the Mushroom for the views to Morecambe Bay. But some of us run. Online I've read that humankind has evolved to run. I am evolution and I can outrun the dogwalkers. If ever I'm cyborg I won't let the machine be greater than me, not like the bikers.

I skim up the hill, towards the old racecourse that swoops around one side of the Scar. The blisters on my hands don't exist. I am at one with this here-and-now where I'm light as a feather, leaping with the preen and stretch of a dancer - that guy from Havana whose dad was a builder - imagine a builder in Burneside boasting about his

son the dancer. As if. Carlos Acosta, Carlos Acosta – his name vaults and bounds. I'm a hare at full stretch, a rabbit skittering under a hawthorn away from the beady eyes of the kestrels. The trees stream behind in my wake.

On Sunday I had one of those moments where you see where you are, but from a completely different point of view. It's like that in the Lakes. You know the route from one perspective and if you come across a place you've been before but from a different starting point you get disorientated, till you see how it all fits together. I had run on from Hindscarth, over Dale Head, dropped down into the pass and suddenly found myself standing where I'd lain on the tufts of grass and flax, days ago, when Noah and Simon were doing their stuff on the Bowder Stone. I had counted back on my fingers. Ten days. On Sunday the heather on the fellside had been blazing bright. There's not so much heather on the Scar. The smell of heather can stay with you for days. There won't be bilberries. They get grazed off as soon as sniffed. Ruth's bilberries were tiny and sweet. Now I'm a greyhound, Thompson's gazelle, a cheetah – a blur of speed – *I'm on the right track baby/I was born this way* – the tune burns through my heels.

I had played at mountain goat going up High Spy. The path leads steep and true, marked by pyramidal cairns, and I had leapt from stone to stone, perching like a heron. By the great circular cairn at the top, three walkers had been leaning on their rucksacks, gazing at the view. I had smugly shucked off my tiny running rucksack, chewed a bit of fruit cake, thrown water I'd collected from Dale Head Tarn over my face and shoulders, planted my foot against the cairn as if I owned it. Of course I own it. Every rock is mine. We are made of the same stuff, formed by earth and wind and water.

When I get to the Scar I'll lie on my back and spy on the birds. I'll use my running jacket for padding, on a limestone pavement that's not shattered by frosts. The words for broken limestone are better than swearing - clint, clitter, gryke –

Monday had been suffocating, watching Bex sideways, rehearsing my lines. I wanted to know everything they had talked about, her, Noah, Simon, on their way back to her place on Friday night. I wanted to know what she had said to Ruth when they came up the hill together. I wanted to know about her father. I wanted to know about her father and Caroline. But her face was immobilised behind the make-up. Cars get



immobilised too. I made myself busy. Today was worse. Running out of the shop was like bursting out of an old skin.

Twenty minutes' running and my brain twitters like our house-martins – me – free – me – free – meeee – I am here, here. Four cars squat in a line, empty boxes littering the roadside, immobilised. Here's where I want to sing a song of running. A faint green-blue line thickens and thins along the horizon like breathing out and in. The raincloud is shape-shifting, drifting, playing. Straddling the narrow stile, I conjure the map of the Scar, the line of paths over the racecourse and alongside the Allotment. I write it on the air with my finger.

Around me the walls stand firm where I have nailed them. Dog-walkers will not exist. I picture my route, criss-crossing the Allotment. I will sneak up on the Scar itself from Hodgson's Leap. I'm going to redraw the map with my feet, creating the paths to match what's in my head. Suddenly it's crucial. Get a grip.

Yesterday was foul. Clouds closed in, but the air kept Sunday's heat like a wet sponge. Bex with the customers was robotic, smiling as if somebody else were switching her on. Instinctively we took lunch at different times. On the way back from a quick canter round Maude's Meadow I saw that man again, with his woman, coming out of the shop. Bizarrely, Bex had made the time to paint her nails deep purple. Shirley said she was trying it out for the wedding.

Bex's silence makes my ears ache.

I throw myself like a swimmer into a shallow green sea. The turf beneath my running shoes springs and bounces with life and I think, *of course, it's live, it's growing*. Sheep shift casually sideways, nibbling the grass. A fat ewe takes to her knees as if praying to the turf. Small brown pellets of sheep turds scatter as I pass. No cattle graze on this strip of land. They won't let them. I try to remember who *they* are. Pa knows them all, it's part of his patch. Today it's my patch. My quads and calves swell and contract with perfect ease. Gastrocnemius muscle, that's the calf. I looked it up. It's a word that works your mouth and a muscle you mustn't tear. Not me.

I take ten minutes *fartlek* - fast as I can on the racecourse, there and back again on the level - before slicking through the iron kissing gate that leads to the Allotment and the Access Land. Pa says Access Land means anyone can walk there. It's rough and

unfarmed but precious. He grumbles that dog-walkers ignore the notices about keeping dogs on leads. It's to protect the ground-nesting birds. A few more years and there'll be no more skylarks on the Scar, he says. They say, 'Oh, my dog's all right, my dog's fine.' At least the dog-walkers don't normally go off-track. They prefer the simple route, crossing the Allotment by the easy way. Pa says if you decide to explore you can get trapped by the walls unless you know just where to find the gate. You can blunder around for ages not finding your way out. Pa says you can get lost on the Allotment just as easily as on Bowfell in the mist. He is totally besotted with the project for helping things revert to the wild, even in town gardens. He says walls can be misleading markers, same as man-made tracks.

I don't think so. Thank God the dog-walkers stick to their paths.

Cat-walkers are a different breed. Marmalade walks me, stalking through the field, guarding every step I take. I wish I could bring him on the Scar. This is his element even more than mine.

The shop is getting to be unbearable. When I ran away today from the side door I saw the man yet again, this time without that snide bitch, on the other side of the street. He had his hand on Bex's shoulder. Automatically I turned in their direction but stopped at the kerb. He was, she had said, her dad. I couldn't just walk in to their conversation. But I wanted to. It wasn't like bursting in on Ruth and Bex. She didn't want to be with this guy, you could tell straight away. She was practically leaning backwards. But she didn't actually take herself beyond his touch.

She might cut me out.

The track that slices across the Allotment is comfortable running. My feet know the route. But I'm turning off any time now, to a narrower path. I pause to orientate myself by the radio mast  $\Delta$ . I have to keep the mast on my right and go straight ahead, more or less. If I run vaguely parallel to the main track I'll know where I am, keeping the mast at the corner of my eye. The mast is due north and the Scar is due west. If the sun were shining I could head straight into it. The drizzle has stopped. It's misting up a bit. I squint through the haze to fix my position.

I love this. I love running my hands through wet vegetation and smelling the heady abundant extravagance of summer.

Here's the narrow track, crowded by branches sagging with fruit - hawthorn berries, still green, and a rowan where the berries cluster in reddening handfuls. The air swells with heat and hordes of small flies that enjoy the air as much as I do. They spring across my vision and I beat them away. The rhythm of running falters. I hate inhaling flies. Leaning under the fly cloud is like stooping beneath barbed wire.

Tiny yellow flowers – tormentil – are confetti lodged in turf, and clumps of white and purple heather spread across the path. Little blue bell-shaped flowers grow in the cracks of the rocks. Pa says it's mostly limestone on the Scar. You can tell because it's grey and the blotches of lichen, like dropped paint, are usually white. I suddenly think of the white splodges on the Bowder Stone and picture giant insects scabbling for purchase on outward-leaning rock. Beetles on limestone, there must be some. I've stared at the YouTube videos of climbers on the Bowder Stone, but the way they're shot you can't always understand what you're seeing till you look again. Like those puzzles where you're supposed to guess what the objects are when your eyes and your mind don't line up. I will go back one day and climb the Stone.

Pa had told me off on Sunday for dreaming, freewheeling.

Voices call out too close, a dog barks, and I throw myself into a tight little path that suddenly dives across tangled thorns. The ground drops - something clutches my foot in a wicked spike - blackthorn, knotted, ferocious in its grip. I can't move, must unlace, wrestle for my foot. There's blood on the sock.

I sit on shattered rocks. Clitter and *clint* and **gryke!** I can't believe the blackthorn has punctured trainer, sock, skin. The blackthorn looks dead, but there's fruit behind the spikes: green and purple. Sloes. It's amazing that something so black and dead-looking can be so full of fruit, so vicious. The elderberry wine that spilt across the kitchen floor looked like blood.

When I get up I can't see the mast. Bracken towers above me. I expected to wade through bracken but not to be sea-deep over my head. I hate seaweed, I hate its slimy unexpectedness and I hate how wet bracken slaps at bare flesh.

Turn round. Carefully I step along the path till I come to a fork. I can't picture which way I came. I need to get to higher ground to see where I am. Re-orientate. I was OK till the dog barked. No, stuff was floating through my mind like spores – .

Fractionally the mist clears and I glimpse the sky. Layers of grey cloud race across a watery blue till the mist exhales, obscuring everything. There's a name for cloud like that. I can always look it up. *Ask Jeeves*. Ask Jeeves why Bex has become a zombie. What does Caroline think? I cannot imagine Caroline married to that man.

The Man. Dominic Ainsley. He could call himself anything and I'd be none the wiser with Bex saying nothing. I can't imagine my Bex Wood being Rebecca Ainsley. Rebecca Ainsley could be her shadow, her doppelgänger, her other self. Who does he think he is, turning up out of the blue, calling her Rebecca, his woman telling me to back off. My foot throbs. Black feelings flood up, venom in the blood.

Right now I could do with being able to orient myself. My shadow would do. In more open ground I'd see shadow, run ahead of it, towards the west, towards the wall and the open ground of Scout Scar. The eerie picture of chasing ahead of my own shadow makes me shiver and the throbbing intensifies. I'd like to limp.

My mobile beeps.

#### **6.59 Bex to Joey**

Where did u go?

The signal disappears.

The breath catches at the back of my throat. I need to get clear, get higher. Shit. I struggle to my feet and set off at a trot but the ground fights back. Fragments of limestone split by matted roots spring up everywhere underfoot. Fell runners talk about fast feet and elastic strength and right now my calves are tied in knots. On the high fells you see the wide perspective. Bracken slurps wetly at my neck. In spring, bracken is such a baby green, curls like felt. Bex didn't want anything to do with me today so why now?

Suddenly there's a cairn. Thank God for that. Where there's one cairn there's sure to be another. I merely have to find the next. On maps it sometimes says 'Pile of stones' and this looks exactly like that, dishevelled. But then, that's what cairns sometimes are. People randomly chuck stones as they pass, adding to the heap, saying *I was here*. I wish someone had thought of stringing a rope between cairns. I could go hand over hand to the next. The mist swirls, thins, tears apart to reveal a line of trees

further up. This must be right. I wish Ruth was here. I wish someone like Ruth was at the other end of the rope, reeling me in. Ma.

I grab for my mobile to check again and there's signal so now now now

#### **7.14 Joey to Bex**

on scar signal crap whr r u

Press send but it won't send press press stupid cheap phone.

I can't see a thing. Just now it was open ground. I haven't been able to reach Bex for days. I stop dead, turn around, try to feel what my legs know. Only a moment ago I passed a pile of stones. Scout Scar's not very big but it's high enough, the trig point's two-two-nine metres. Maybe the heap of stones is really a cairn, collapsed. I can't be far from a main path. Bex will think I'm sulking.

What's she meant to think? I ran away.

The mist billows and deflates like gigantic breathing in a closed space. Something monstrous is taking shape beyond the edges of vision.

The pile of stones begins to appeal and I grope towards it. Suddenly it's a formed, circular shelter with the thin stem of a young tree growing up from a central cleared space. Somebody built this, abandoned it. Shelter?

Thankfully I climb over the rampart of stones into the sunken area and grapple with the sapling. One of the blisters takes its moment to burst. I slump, tentatively poking at the split skin as colourless stuff weeps across the palm of my hand. The phone says it's seven twenty. Ma will be agitating. I can't even ring home to get someone to ring Bex for me.

Bex's eyes glitter through her hair but when she scrapes it back. I don't know her any more. Ever since that fucking man came into the shop, her eyes have stopped seeing me. Maybe she's not seeing anyone else, either. I pull the mobile to my nose, see the thinnest bar for signal. Phone Bex. Three, four, five rings. Hush my breath. **The owner of this number is not available. Please try later.**

Perhaps there's a kind of cataract for the mind – a slow-growing film that obscures the light. The mist exhales again in huge, grey surges, spreading its droplets

along my bare arms, and again I shiver, unable to name the fear. I know where I am, truly I do. It must be like this to wake in the night, blind.

Suddenly the mist relents and there below me sits the old grey town. If I plunge straight down I'll reach the road. There will be signal. There's got to be.

I should have learned. Scout Scar in mist is as treacherous as Haystacks, everyone's favourite mountain that sounds so Sunday picnic but it's a mountain, can't be trusted. There is no straight down. I won't break my neck but hours could pass whilst I wander like a fool up and down and round and round. If Bex were watching she would laugh out loud. I'd love to hear her laugh. Days have passed since she laughed. Her face is in the mist, less and less distinct. I'd clutch at her shadow.

A wall lifts up at the top of a rise and I scramble towards it. Walls are on the map. I am so glad to touch something constructed. And even as I see that it isn't a wall I know that I've been here before. Pa brought me here, years ago, when he was conducting a survey with farmers. It's a kind of ruined house. Rings of stone seem to have been rooms. Here's a solid platform that looks like an altar. Strangely, the signal comes back loud and clear and my text sends itself and seconds later my phone rings. I drop the phone. Stones slither with me into the pit as I scabble after the sound, but my fingers find the phone too late. *Missed call*. Is Bex merely replying to my attempt at calling her?

The signal ebbs and flows as I dial her number again and yet again the voice politely intones, **The owner of this number is not available. Please try later.** The home phone is answered. Pa tells me to get to the road and he'll pick me up. Unnerved, I hurl myself regardless down the uneven path that grudgingly makes itself known, and arrive at the road merely minutes after Pa has drawn up in his ramshackle Land Rover.

'Ah, those cairns,' he says cheerfully. 'Kids build them for fun. I told you, walls and cairns look as if they mean something and half the time they don't.' He asks if I've noticed that some of the limestone lichens are orange and green, not just the white they are meant to be. He's looking for patterns. Have I noticed the improvement in the flora since the Welsh Blacks started to graze on the Scar? He seems quite unfazed by my getting lost on our doorstep, so to speak. He's still living in Sunday-time. I've been shunted to a parallel universe and I can't hear him. *I'm on the right track, baby, I was*

*born this way.* Right track, whose track? His fingernails are ragged from digging around. My foot aches. At the bottom of the Brigsteer Road he suddenly brakes, and plunges under the passenger seat for a hairy, grass-filled blanket. ‘Put it round your knees. You’ve gone green. Is this all you’ve got to wear?’

**8.11pm Bex to Joey**

Facebook, Matt ☹.

**8.11pm Joey to Bex**

but you gave up Fb?

### **Zeph’s Blog Tuesday 15 August**

Two hours of sweat and worry. Matt put up a Facebook page called Burn in Hell and it was filthy, vile comments about Bex. I know it was Matt though there was a fake profile - some middle-aged guy in Wales. Matt knows how to fiddle almost anything online. Nobody else would have got so many details so nearly right; not perfect, that’s too obvious. You have to get close enough so that the person involved will know it’s meant to be them but they can’t definitely say it is them. People will tell them they’re paranoid, get over it.

I found the link to the page too easily. Bex had barred all her Friends but somehow Matt worked the Facebook system. It started with a comment that bounced off so many Walls it was impossible to miss. “The House that Jack Built is a Harem for Hores.” Somebody cut and pasted, correcting the spelling. I shot from one link to the next till I got to a page as pitiless as roadkill. He’d sneaked one of the photos off someone else’s site, one of Bex’s masks, and digitalised an image that everyone would know was Bex, with the mask on a nearly-nude body so it wouldn’t be tagged as porn. By the time I read it, one hundred and twenty four people I’d never heard of had plastered offensive remarks down the page.

Everyone has that nightmare of being outside, without clothes.

You can’t tear up a Facebook page. It’s there forever unless the Facebook people do something about it, and I wasn’t prepared to wait about for their reaction. I ran round the house banging on doors like we were on fire and Simon and Ruth came out straight away. Pa was sitting at the kitchen table in talking to himself; he was preparing a lecture on protective herd behaviour among the

Galloway cattle in Ennerdale, his pamphlets and maps spread wide across the wooden surface. Ma knew at once it was urgent, and pushed him and his papers to one end. Ruth ran back upstairs for her netbook, and Simon rang Noah at the pub to ask if he could use his laptop. Pa carried on talking to himself.

We sat at the table and started posting. We filled the screen with comment after comment about Rebecca the artist, Rebecca who was exhibiting her work with artists of national renown, Rebecca who was the best friend of, Rebecca whose costumes were the most highly praised, Rebecca who... Rebecca was a Saint and we had crammed all the obscene comments so far down the posting that the trolls were back in their caves.

Ma disappeared into another room with her phone, and talked hard. I could dimly hear her voice, and ‘Thanks, Peter, it’s not good timing but I knew you’d want the information.’

Simon looked his question at me but I had no idea. Ruth squinted at the screen of her netbook and posted a comment about the magical powers of the witch-woman in the photo. I stared at my own laptop, where the image on the screen was now at one with reflections from the kitchen lamps. The mask-headed creature had become a mythical beast in world of reflections and shadows, one upon another upon another.

Ma said she had rung our headteacher, Mr Jolly. Matt was applying for college, would want decent references. Pa sighed and kept on reading. He thought we were all making too much fuss. Simon kept on adding posts. Then I realised that Matt could deny everything, we couldn’t prove a thing. My foot throbbed, and my head felt heavy.

Noah came home pissed from his shift and Pa told him off and how I’d got lost on the Scar. Noah went on about having GPS on his mobile. Ma said maybe I needed a smarter phone. Yes yes yes but I can’t afford a contract so???

I’ll never publish this blog. Nothing’s safe. Even the truth can be twisted about. Bex’s mask was beautiful but Matt has practically destroyed it.



**Narrative: Zenith 11.32pm**

Give me a clue. What do you say to the doctor?

**Comment: Moderator Sue 11.33pm**

*What do you want to happen next? Try to imagine the outcome you want. Picture yourself in two or three years. Ask how the doctor can help you get what you want. Be the guy on your MUD, maybe.*

**Comment: Cybersnake 11.46pm**

*I'd be freaked trying to be a fantasy.*

**Narrative: Zenith 11.59pm**

Are we all completely sure this forum is secure? Nobody reads it do they except us?

<http://www.thefutureiscyborg.com/>

**Cyborg humanity**

*We shouldn't kid ourselves. By the end of the next century, being human will mean something very different from what it means today.*

*We'll take Artificial Intelligence for granted. Genetic engineering will be ethically correct. Nanotechnology will give us control beyond anything we can imagine – carried out in collaboration with cognitive science which will transform our understanding of the way the mind influences the body. The computer:human interface will meld the intuitive complexities of the brain with the rigorous logic of the chip. We will have redesigned the boundaries that define us as human.*

## Zeph's Blog Wednesday 16 August

Marmalade woke me with a bird under the bed. He has no pity. If cats understood pity we'd lock the cat flap because it would make a moral point. As it is, I slap him uselessly and chase about after soft, flying down. The little feathers escape my fingers every time. They have wills of their own. Marmalade watches from the window sill, blinking. I could kill him but he loves me I swear even though he doesn't know pity.

I logged on. The hate page was still there but you could only see our comments unless you went pages and pages back looking for older posts. I hope Peter Jolly gives Matt total hell. All night I dreamed about seeing the doctor, about trying to say what I mean, and in the dream my mouth filled up with gunge. I kept pulling out strings of stuff and when I cleared my mouth there was more gunge, somehow attached at the back of my throat, and so many more strings had to be tugged out that I woke up. I couldn't close my eyes until different pictures formed. I even replayed the fashion show.

I made the appointment. The woman on the phone said there was a cancellation and did I want to take it or I'd have to wait another week. It would be a woman doctor. She told me the name, Dr Hallgrave, as if it would make a difference.

When I pass my driving test I will be a cyborg. Car and human = ?? That professor would have a chip for driving in his brain and would beam out the instructions. Pa complains about cars being all electronic anyway. I might sign up for microchips in my brain, like Marmalade's chip for us to find him if he runs off, only more sophisticated. Do cyborgs make decisions differently from humans or machines?

Status: **Draft:** Edit

Visibility: **Public:** Edit

Publish: **immediately:** Edit

No no no

## Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> August

Shirley's voice echoed on the phone, as if she were locked in a box. I said I'd do without pay for coming late to work today but she said I'd been a blessing doing the

database and not to worry. What was an hour, anyway? Then she said, ‘Hope it’s OK, Joey, the doctor. Hope you’re OK. See you about ten? But they’re all the same, doctors, miles behind. You just have to be patient.’ She laughed hoarsely at her own pun. I thought she might change her mind about me, being a blessing.

The practice where we’re registered has lots of doctors so they need multiple rooms. It’s a big house, over several floors, and it smelt today of new paint and new wood. Medicine must make money. I had no idea what Dr Hallgrave looked like. Once I got past the glass doors my eyes flickered till they found a list: engraved list of names, to make you sweat whilst you read down looking for the name and the floor, hoping nobody will try to be helpful. Out of the corner of my eye was a receptionist whose face looked familiar and instantly I realised she was Matt’s mother and hunched my shoulder to hide my face. I’d been in their house with Bex a couple of times apart from the party. She looked ginger with make-up. Maybe she’d found out about Matt’s poison plot. I hoped she was in pain.

The waiting room is huge, sectioned off into corrals. I suppose they have to organise us somehow. Outside each doctor’s door about a dozen chairs are set out, six facing six, across low tables covered with magazines. I shuffled around the tidy chairs, not catching anybody’s eye. Dr Hallgrave’s name was at the farthest end of the waiting room.

The chairs had that rooted look that meant Do Not Disturb. I seated myself cautiously alongside a woman who was resting her handbag on the magazine in her lap. The skin of her hands was wrinkled, covered in brown spots. She had stiff white hair and you could see from the perfect waves and neatly arranged curls on her forehead that she’d had it done recently; but it was flattened at the back. That’s how I knew it wasn’t a wig. I could see the pink of her scalp. Her coat smelt old, like a charity shop. Maybe the charity shops smell like that because of the old people’s clothes in them. I am never getting old. Ruth’s white hair is thick and glossy. Old people’s hair must lose its spring.

The long room was too quiet. All I could hear was breathing, sniffing, the rustle of fabric, pages turning. Bursts of laughter floated up from the floor below. The staff were having fun.

The old woman lifted her bag with both hands, as if it were heavy with treasure trove, and the magazine slid off her lap to the floor. She gazed at it over the top of the

bag and then turned her head in my direction. The whites of her eyes were threaded with red and a sort of teary goo had settled in the sags of skin beneath them. I groped after the magazine but she shook her head. 'No love, thank you.' Her voice was surprisingly deep.

I spun the magazine with a flick of my wrist to the top of the heap on the table, starting an avalanche of magazines but somehow she snagged the last, though her hand shook, skin folded up thin as paper, transparent. I pinched the back of my hand, relieved as my skin bounced back. *I'm never going to be old.* 'Would you like a mint, love?' There was a gleam in her eye. I had to take a mint.

Then she handed the tube of mints to the girl opposite, who sat on the edge of her seat with a baby perched on her knees. The girl looked the same age as me but I'm no good at ages. The baby was miserable so I guessed she was there for the baby. It had a sad little cough and snot ran from its nose in a fine stream over its lips and chin. The girl dabbed a thin white cloth at its nose like swatting flies, and the baby cried and turned its head sideways, shoving its little blue bobble hat over its eyes, so it cried more. *It'll be a boy. She'd not put a girl baby in a blue hat. They don't.*

'What time's yours?' said the old woman to the girl. A blue knitted elephant lay on the carpet under the table. I picked it up, flapped it at the baby. The girl's skin was stretched tight over her cheekbones and blue shadows fingered her eyes. *Whoever wants a baby?* The baby's skin was peachy. I never sat so close to a baby before.

'We're nine thirty,' said the girl in a flat voice.

'What about you?' The old woman was talking to me again. I tried not to wriggle.

Ma and Ruth must have taken us, me and Ruth's baby, to the doctor for injections, stuff like that. Seventeen years. Maybe my skin was peachy then, too. Maybe I dribbled snot in a clear stream over a scabby chin. I never asked Ma what clothes she put me in. She could have given me Noah's baby clothes, I'd have been happy. In some parts of the world, I'd have definitely been safer in boys' clothes. Women come in for rape and pillage wherever. Female babies get exposed, abandoned, sold.

The old woman and the girl started to talk about the new cattle market in the town, and the troubles of the farmers' market and too many betting shops.

Maybe in another country I wouldn't have *a condition*. I could be a guru, a soothsayer, a gatherer of herbs. I groped for the brilliant ideas that had flooded my mind at six o'clock this morning. All sorts of people were involved in my growing up, not just Ma and Pa, Noah - the boys on the towpath, Caroline, Miss Smith at primary school in London, Sue and Barbarian, Ruth, Bex.

Maybe in another world Matt would be transformed into a giant bug, with a bulgy body and stupid wriggling legs. And all the cruel bastards who had written on the Wall would become squirming maggots; and a huge booted foot would stamp down on them. A cyborg foot could be pitiless.

A door swung open and a figure framed by sunlight called a name. The old woman shoved herself upright, carefully placing her bag on the table so she could grasp the edge of her chair with both hands. The doctor came right out, picked up the bag and said, 'Hello again, Mrs Goodison. How're you keeping? Come on in.' She looked about Ma's age, had a clear, soft voice and a Scottish accent. The rest of us were invisible. I picked up *Lancashire Life* and contemplated the torn edge in the middle. The baby whooped, suddenly joyful. The digital seconds of my watch flicked over, over, over. Five minutes, seven minutes. *How long's an appointment?* I ought to get back to the shop.

Suddenly sunlight streamed through the opening surgery door and Mrs Goodison put out a foot, passing her hand across the door jamb. She caught me watching, smiled. Her teeth were yellow. Strong arches of bone sprang above each eye and her nose was a beaky jut. She could be a man in woman's clothes with an old woman's hair-do. S/he edged around the door and shuffled towards the lift, fingers still tracing the wall. I tried thinking of her as him. It wouldn't work. I'd got something wrong there. Some people's gender you just know is M or F however they look - Pa, Noah, Bex's dad, Jack. Ruth. Bex. Unless it's how I look at them. There's a check-out operator in one of the supermarkets whose lapel badge I have to stare at to know it's Him not Her.

The doctor's door had closed again. The girl mopped the baby's nose. 'What time are you?'

'Nine twenty.'

‘Oh.’ Her face fell. ‘I’m nine thirty.’ I had already heard her say so. The baby’s head jerked. It had no neck.

‘Do you want to go before me?’ I felt noble.

‘It’s OK. Will you be long?’ Strands of wispy bleached hair fell into her eyes.

I half-got to my feet. This was a waste of time. ‘You go first, it’s OK, your baby.’

‘Oh no, she’s all right,’ said the girl, readjusting the baby’s coat and tiny green shoes.

‘Josephine Wilcox?’ It was too late to escape. I wasn’t ready.

I thought all doctors had photos of their families and boxes of toys to distract children and pictures of flowers and trees and maybe a seashore. There was hardly anything in this room, apart from her desk and a couch, and stuff for emergencies, I guessed. Everything felt neutral, like show-home photos.

Behind her desk there was a picture, after all: water on pebbles. You could buy it anywhere. The doctor gestured to the chair that was next to hers - pale brown upholstery on both.

‘I don’t think I’ve seen you before.’ Behind her back the computer screen flickered and went to screensaver: water on pebbles. ‘Are you usually called Josephine?’

‘Joey.’ My voice came out in a croak.

‘How can I help you?’

My mind went blank. She leaned back in the chair and put her feet evenly on the ground. I stared at her shoes; orange leather with yellow flowers. Her legs were surprisingly tanned.

‘My shoes were a bit of an indulgence,’ she remarked, angling one foot, setting it down again on the brown ridges of the carpet and I was startled into looking at her face. She smiled. ‘What are we here to do today?’

I thought wildly, what does she mean? A clock tick-tocked. I hadn't noticed a clock. Outside, an engine revved and a man laughed loudly. My mind filled up with staring at myself in the steamed-up bathroom mirror after my shower this morning. What did I mean to say? I would say... if I had a dick and balls I could be a skinny lad couldn't I? I've no breasts to speak of and my quads are good from running. I've no hips, I don't want to go on living like this, I want to be a guy, I think I want to be a guy and she was still smiling at me, looking a question and I knew I'd got to speak or the blood would burst out of my ears. 'I do lots of running.'

'Oh?'

My chest hurt. 'People keep saying I'll knacker my knees.'

She leaned forward slightly. A faint flowery perfume drifted in my direction, with undertones of antiseptic. 'How old are you, Joey? Sorry, I know it'll be in our records.'

'Seventeen, I'm seventeen.'

'Are your knees giving you problems now?' I shook my head. My fingers gripped my knees, prodding bone and muscle and ligament through the layers of crumpled skirt, tight lycra, skin. 'It sounds like wonderful exercise. I wouldn't want to stop you.'

'You think it's OK?'

'I think it's great if you love running. Where do you run?'

'On the fells if I can.'

She was looking at my trainers. 'My husband's a fell runner too – he's not to be stopped.'

'So it's OK.'

'I'd think so, yes. I'm just going to look something up, if that's all right.' She swivelled round like someone who enjoyed it. 'I'm looking at the statistics for knee conditions. Running on roads is what does the damage.' She looked back over her shoulder. 'Do you run on the roads?'

‘Sometimes.’ I had to clear my throat. ‘To get started.’

‘So you thought you’d check it out?’ She was facing me again, with that expression of helpful interest. ‘Might I give you some advice?’ I felt stupid. ‘You could join a club, a fell-running club – that’s if you don’t already belong to one. The clubs round here train their members very carefully.’

‘I suppose.’ Membership, M/F, there’s no way out. The room dimmed. Cloud would be settling down upon Scafell Pike, Wetherlam, High Street, Blencathra.

‘Is that a problem for you?’

‘I’ll be eighteen soon.’

She was giving me that intense head-tilted look again. ‘Was there something else?’

I shrugged.

She leaned sideways, took a pack of tissues from her handbag, laid it on my lap. A fat, disgusting wetness hung off the end of my nose. I fumbled, couldn’t get the packet open. She took it back, extracted a tissue, placed it in my fingers. I counted the beats of my heart, breathing through my mouth like a kid with a cold but filling up with frustration. No man would cry in a doctor’s surgery. I clung to the frustration and the tears dried.

When I raised my head she was still waiting. She had a thin, brown face with freckles and bright brown eyes and she wasn’t smiling any more. Her hair was cut in a short bob. To draw her face you’d make fine lines >> and << beside her eyes, and faint purple fingerprints beneath them. Tissues sprouted stiffly from a box on the desk.

She followed my glance. ‘NHS tissues are thin and horrible,’ she said. There were green flecks in her eyes. Shreds of tissue fluttered to the floor. ‘I try to keep nicer ones.’

My throat hurt when I spoke. ‘It’s clear in my head.’ She nodded. ‘I’ve been thinking about it for years and years.’

‘Take your time.’ Another nod.



‘Ten years ago we went on holiday on a narrow-boat.’ She was looking at me with the same concentrated gaze. I couldn’t tell her the whole story. She’d think I was still a kid. ‘My brother and I were mucking about.’ The careful writing in the diary was as clear in my mind as if the diary itself lay open on her desk. I thought she was going to speak but she merely coughed quietly into the back of her hand. ‘Something happened.’ A baby’s loud wail from the waiting room and an anxious voice, the wail receding. ‘That girl with the baby, she’s next, she’s after me.’ The doctor shook her head, and gestured with a hand for me to go on but I was stuck, swallowing, biting down hard.

‘It’s up to you.’

The clock ticked. ‘Some older boys saw us. Noah, that’s my brother, got talking to them.’ They *said* his little *brother* couldn’t *come*. You could make a dance out of it. ‘They wanted him to meet them later but they said his little brother couldn’t come.’ The joyous leap in my heart was still strong.

‘Yes?’

‘The little brother was me. They thought I was his brother.’ She sat with her hands in her lap. It was like running across sphagnum. You sink to the ankles with every step, slow motion, and the ground around you heaves and shifts.

I fumbled. ‘It made me feel - it was great.’

‘Could you tell me a bit more about that?’ I could have told her I was a murderer and her face would have looked just as sympathetic and alert. Maybe the cogs were whirring inside.

‘I felt all wrong before and then it felt better. And ever since.’ She looked at the wall. Workmen built that wall. Somebody whistled. A train rattled at the station. Birds sang. ‘I think when I was born. There weren’t tests.’ A gut-wrenching sigh got away from me, like those yawns you can’t swallow. Outside the window, the train hooted gently and set off. Not many people get out here. They go deeper into the Lakes to Windermere or to Oxenholme, back into the world where I never want to go. ‘People can’t hear, on the platform, when they’re waiting?’

‘No,’ she said in a quietly. I stared at my hands. ‘No, this is private.’ I looked at the lines criss-crossing my palms. Would fortune-tellers know the gender of a hand? Do the lifelines change if your gender changes? Private was about to be public. This was completely different from telling Ruth. ‘Is there anything else you’d like to say?’ Her voice stayed soft, quiet.

‘No.’ I closed my eyes, as I strained after the fresh green smell of the canal. ‘When I look in the mirror, it doesn’t match. How I look doesn’t match.’

‘Doesn’t match?’ I stared at her orange and yellow shoes, at my stained trainers and the black skirt sticking to the lycras underneath. The clock hadn’t given up tick-tocking. I could not find the words. ‘What are you hoping will happen as a result of coming to talk this over?’

A great swell of heat. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Maybe you could tell me what made you decide to come here today. You say you’ve had this - something - in your mind for a very long time.’

I thrashed about before I remembered. ‘It was Ruth. Ruth is my Ma’s best friend. She’s the only person I’ve told. She said it might be good for me to come.’ The doctor waited, waited, till I blurted into the space, ‘Ruth’s known me ever since I was a baby. She stays every summer. She wants me to talk to my parents.’

‘You haven’t talked to them?’

I was breathing fast now. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘It might be helpful to talk to somebody close.’

‘I’ve known Ruth all my life.’

‘You’re nearly eighteen. You decide.’ The decisive tone was so different that I was startled into looking directly into her face again. She looked as if she believed what she said. My heart beat painfully as ideas crowded into my head, so many that they kept flitting away, seeds on the wind. *I was born this way.*

‘I want to be me.’ She shifted in the chair. ‘I go online.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘There are websites for people like me and we talk.’

‘People like you?’

‘Some people are trans, some people are crossing over, not everybody. We talk about stuff.’

‘Could you help me out with that?’

‘Some people think they’re going mad.’

‘Does it feel like that?’

‘Not me. It feels more like people don’t see other people straight.’ My knees jerked at the skirt. I wanted to pace the room, peer through the venetian blinds at the station outside, the sunlight on the fields. ‘People don’t look properly. They see what they expect to see.’

‘I guess that’s true.’

‘And I hate periods.’

‘Your periods hurt?’ She tugged at the collar of her yellow shirt. The buttons were pearly, different colours. She unbuttoned one, fastened it again. She wore colourless nail varnish. I was tapping my fingers together.

‘Inside me. It doesn’t belong.’ Now I jabbed at my belly. ‘People I talk to online have hormone treatment. Testosterone. I could live like a man.’

She tucked her hair behind her ears. ‘Like a man.’ I nodded. ‘Is that what you feel?’

‘I feel I got the wrong gender when I was born.’ She opened her mouth and then I found myself saying, ‘Maybe.’

For a moment her face was blank and then suddenly purposeful. ‘You know that women as well as men have testosterone, and men have oestrogen.’ She smiled, showing white, slightly uneven teeth. One of the front teeth was chipped. ‘I came across some interesting research not so long ago. I wonder if you’ve seen it. It’s about male scientists, apparently they have the same levels of oestrogen as testosterone in their bodies.’ She pulled a notepad towards her, looked up at the screen, scrolled with the

mouse and scribbled something on the pad. ‘Something to do with the way the scientists think and work. This generates hormonal changes, apparently.’

‘Work?’

‘The research – this bit of research, anyway – the conclusion is that the way you work can change your hormones. I suppose it depends on the work you do.’ She handed me the slip of paper, web address, something medical. ‘You spend a lot of time online, you say. You might like to look it up.’

I gripped the paper hard. ‘People online, they don’t judge.’

‘I hope I’m not going to judge either. But I do need to know what you would like to happen, from this consultation.’ I stared at the paper, at the whitening patches where my fingernails were tightened. ‘Joey?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘OK. Well. You spoke about testosterone treatment. I guess you’ve looked up what happens with that. I guess you know we don’t start people on powerful hormones without lots of preparation.’

The chair creaked when I shifted. ‘I wondered, maybe I’ve got other organs inside too.’

‘You mean balls? Testes? Do you want to find out?’

‘I can?’

‘It would be straightforward to book some scans, tests, if that’s what you want.’

‘Who would know?’

‘That would be up to you.’ We were level, eye to eye. ‘It’s my job to help you with what you want, if I can.’ I was remembering what I knew, a rush of things to say. ‘I will have to understand what you want to happen and make sure it’s within my brief as your GP.’

‘I’ve read, some kids, they get operated on, to make them either girl or boy, and they grow up miserable.’

‘That’s possible.’ She stretched her tanned legs, showing the swell of muscle in the calf. Perhaps she was a runner too. ‘Any intervention will bring changes. That’s why in this country there are strict guidelines. You have options, Joey. It depends whether you want to think about yourself in a medical way. Do you? Are you bringing a medical condition to this consultation? Is that what you mean? I can’t promise counselling if that’s what you want.’

‘Counselling.’

‘It’s not an idea that appeals?’

‘Like therapy.’ My socks were rucked up inside my trainers.

She looked into the palms of her hands as if the answers were written there. ‘If you want me to arrange hormone tests, scans, I can do that.’

My chair rocked on its legs. ‘I don’t have a condition.’

‘You’ve come to consult me.’ Her face was smilingly neutral. ‘Maybe your family can help.’

‘My family has nothing to do with it.’

‘You started with something that involved your brother, you said.’

‘But I can decide.’

‘Absolutely.’

As I got up she threw another grenade at me. ‘You said you want to live like a man. The question you have to answer is, like a man or becoming a man. Different answers, don’t you think?’

The baby had fallen asleep in the girl’s arms and she was nodding over its head.

Halfway through the afternoon, I leaned against the counter and watched two girls not buying a strappy green dress. Dr Hallgrave had given me a present. *Like a man. Becoming.*

At home, I rebooted the laptop from its endless updates and suddenly got the picture of myself walking across the sports field into school. I wore dark grey trousers,

slung low, a polo shirt, thick-treaded black shoes. My hair was slicked flat at the sides.

*Important updates have been installed. To see them, click here.*

Boys' toilets are vile, though. Everybody says. Why?

## **Black Box File**

### **Wikipedia**

In men, testosterone plays a key role in the development of male reproductive tissues such as the testis and prostate as well as promoting secondary sexual characteristics such as increased muscle, bone mass and the growth of body-hair. In addition, testosterone is essential for health and well-being as well as the prevention of osteoporosis.

On average, an adult human male body produces about ten times more testosterone than an adult human female body, but females are more sensitive to the hormone.

Notes for Zeph - if you take testosterone -

- ✓ Your voice will get deeper
- ✓ Your clit will get larger
- ✓ Your boobs will disappear
- ✓ You'll start to grow hair on face and body?
- ✓ You'll probably go bald like most men do

The maybes, reversible-

- Greater upper body strength
- Weight gain - no way
- Social and sexual arousal - what's social?
- Slimmer hips

Can't unknow what you know unless you go mad/get amnesia. Do I want results of tests?

## **Black Box file**

scary research— what to believe? — all in the mind?

European Journal of Endocrinology – report on experiments

### **Changing your sex changes your brain: influences of testosterone and oestrogen on adult human brain structure**

It is well established in mammals that differences in male and female brain structures can be reversed by sex hormones, even in adulthood. However, it is not known whether alterations in sex hormone levels can change structures of the human brain in adulthood.

*ie difference between rat brain/human brain?*

In humans, testosterone probably exerts its masculinizing influence on the brain during prenatal development. However, we hypothesize that, in addition, circulating sex hormones in adulthood are required for the maintenance of sex differences in the human brain.

In conclusion, our data show that in young adult humans, androgen treatment increases the volume of the female brain towards male proportions and anti-androgen +oestrogen treatment reduces the size of the male brain towards female proportions.

*change my brain? but work can change my brain too?*

## **British Society for Neuroendocrinology**

Males and females show profound differences in their physiology and, from an early age, in their behaviour. Soberingly, men commit 80% of all murders, and 99% of all sexual crimes.

*Morphs of gender — is anyone researching this in humans?*

*m/f brains ARE different*

*if I take testosterone will I be more likely to murder somebody?*

*Could start a list now...*



## Zeph's Blog Wednesday 16 August

Most people belong to a running club. To enter you have to choose Male, Female. The Borrowdale Fell Race has Mixed races. I could enter as Mixed.

I looked at YouTube videos of bodies coming off the top of Scafell Pike, running down the screes towards the Corridor Route. They come down like dancers only their arms are awkward. You have to run with rhythm or it hurts, fell runners practically dance downhill. I still ache from yesterday, wrong ache, not like heaving stones about. All that awkward stop and start stuff. My hamstrings are tight. I should do more squats.

I don't think Carlos Acosta could run down a fell side any better than great fell runners. His body looks super-male. They make men dancers do specific moves. Perhaps it's only men with certain physique who get to be professional ballet dancers. I looked it up.

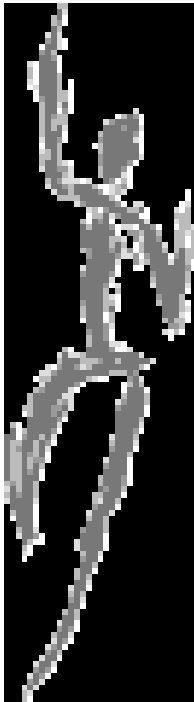
<http://www.DancingToday.co.uk/---theperfectbody>

*Your perfect dancer has a body in balance. The Greeks said that perfection was – from top of the head to the pubes is equal to from pubes to ground; and from pubes to bottom of kneecap is equal to from kneecap to ground. The Greeks thought a man's shoulders should be wider than his hips and in a woman should be narrower. But for dancers, whatever their sex, the shoulders should be narrower.*

I've used my skipping rope to measure myself. What did the Ancient Greeks know ?

Fell runners in the mist on YouTube could be any gender, not just either/or. When you look hard sometimes the only differences are size of thigh muscles or larynx. Everyone is skinny-hips. On the fells gender doesn't seem to matter. Even winning doesn't seem to matter as much. People use hands and feet to get to the top, anything to get there. Everybody looks strung-out, but when you get to the top of the mountain it's the best feeling in the world, like you and the mountain are in it together, it's just waiting for you. Sometimes people practically fly down and I know what that feels like, I know how it feels when sometimes your feet barely touch the ground. It's balance you have to have. Balance and rhythm, and you have to love the way the ground shifts beneath your feet only it's you that shifts unless there's earthquake. Your body

just tunes in. Why doesn't my body know how to tune in the rest of the time?  
Will testosterone help me to dance?



Found this online. Runner or dancer? M or F?

Daphne left messages about another fashion shoot.

I may have to run away if I want to transform. I don't want people to be sorry for me or afraid of me.

Gender is a disease we'll grow out of (???)

[www.ethicsinanewworld.org](http://www.ethicsinanewworld.org) has lots of entries today about misery. Even when we're superhuman and don't get mental illness we'll still want what we can't have, fight, get stressed, take drugs to go numb. Cyborgs might need drugs.

### **Chat Bex to Joey Wednesday 10.59pm**

*Bex* Thanks.

*Joey* Bastard troll.

*Bex* Come to school for the results with me?

*Joey* I'd like to kill him.

*Bex* His mum came round tonight. Mr Jolly rang her. She looked awful.

*Joey* It's my driving test tomorrow.

*Bex* You could have changed the date.

## **Zeph's Blog Wednesday 16 August 11.45pm**

I wouldn't change the date. It's too late to change exam results anyway. Why won't she talk f2f? Sometimes I get why Matt tries to make her react.

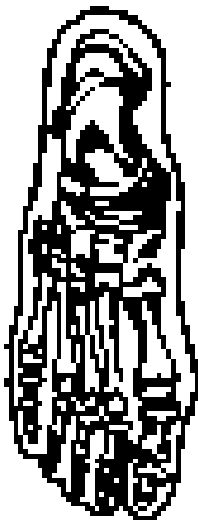
Somebody said if you smile and you don't feel like smiling something happens and you feel more like it. Dressing, walking, talking like a guy will I get to thinking like a guy?

### **DEFINITION OF GUYS:**

1. penis and testicles; hormones and brain structures different from women
2. being brought up as men. Unless they're trans, of course.

### **BUT BUT BUT**

the difference between men and me is NOTHING compared with the difference between me and Marmalade.



This is my amazing foot. Two of these can get me into the boys' toilets. You can tell from a pelvis X-ray that a body is male, but what does a foot show?

So if you change your hormones you change your brain and this is AMAZING.

But I'm not changing my brain. My brain got me to this.

## Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> August

I went to the shop at first. The thought of going to school made me feel sick. It wasn't the picture in my head of everybody nerving themselves for the results envelopes. And I could deal with the hanging about. But a strange gob of fury stuck in my throat. Matt would be with his rugby mates, blagging and bluffing. His jeans would be flying low because it wasn't a school day, no uniform code, and his hair would be flying loose, all long blond curls and fancying himself. I could picture the crowd of them, falling over each other at some dumb joke, punching the air or somebody's arm. I could see Matt leaning against the white corridor wall, dragging his trainers across the ridges of the green carpet, sneaking sideways looks under his lashes to see if a girl was watching. I wanted him to feel like shit. His mum obviously did. I hoped Mr Jolly had done something but maybe he couldn't. Bex wanted me to go to school with her, face to face, but I didn't want to see her in the same hall as Matt, chalk-white, black holes for eyes.

You don't even have to go to school for the results, you can get them online. But my year group, it seems to prefer suffering together, like waiting to get into a gig when you don't know the act. I wanted to concentrate on my driving test. Noon.

I started straightening the junk on a rack, until Shirley shoved her way out of the stockroom with more stuff draped across her arms. 'What you doing here? I didn't expect you this morning.' I frowned. 'Don't you get your exam results today?'

'Later.' I slid the straps of a lace-bodiced red and pink dress, with several layers of skirt, into the holders of the hanger that kept the whole thing aloft. Women take garments off hangers to look at them and can't be bothered to put them back properly. Guys work in the fashion industry, designing clothes for women. I looked at my hands within the gauzy fabric, trying to see them as a guy's.

'Don't be daft,' said Shirley, slinging her armful casually on the counter. 'You want to get them now, don't you? Don't you want to tell your parents?'

'I'm off at lunch time, don't forget. It's my driving test.'

'Yeah, yeah, but your exams count.'

'The results will be the same tonight.'

‘Stubborn bugger.’ She was smiling, though.

My battered old-fashioned phone beeped.

**WAYD**☞

I stared at the message. It was from Bex’s phone.

‘You look as if you’re going to throw up.’

‘Maybe I’ll go to school.’

‘Well, cut along then. Was that from Bex? Something wrong?’

‘No.’

‘You look like somebody walked on your grave.’

‘I’m getting burned not buried,’ I said, buckling on my waist bag.

‘Well, you make sure there’s none of that leaping in the river to celebrate sort of thing.’ Her voice followed me down the street. ‘Don’t come back till after your test. It’s going to rain. There won’t be any punters to speak of.’ She never gave up. There was a word. *Indefatigable*. I tried not to run. The phone dug into my side. *Indefatigable, inscrutable, facticity*.

The photographer was already setting up his camera on the smooth expanse of grass outside the front entrance of school. Every year they set up the same pose, for the same sort of morons who enjoy leaping about and shouting for the camera, so they’ll get their photo into the *Gazette*. I hadn’t been near school since the end of July and it was just as if school had decided to put on the burkha too. Scaffolding covered the front of the building, and the heavy glass doors that had been added last year to extend the entrance were hidden under long strips of canvas. The notice was usually posted on a door had now been attached to a freestanding easel:

**Staff and visitors only  
may use this entrance**

Today, however, us nobodies were to be let through. On the other side of the easel was:

**Exam results in hall**



## Entry through fire exit

At the side of the main entrance, the fire door was wedged open. Rule-breaking was OK for today, it seemed. Staff always find ways of breaking the rules. School teachers always jump the lunch queue in front of you however long you've been waiting. It must be wonderful to know how important your work is so you can't wait like everybody else.

Form an orderly queue. Pa + Ma > Noah > Me > Marmalade > Mice >>>

I had tried out the argument on Ma, and lost. She could always sound convincing about deadlines. A few people were standing about waving slips of paper or looking at their phones. Slowly I went inside. In the old days there was the boys' school and the girls' school. Before that there was a playground with Boys' Entrance and Girls' Entrance into the school. Whatever did people do in those days? People like me. Another, larger noticeboard was propped against the reception desk, as if the one outside was not sufficiently clear.

## RESULTS IN SCHOOL HALL

I guessed it was so people didn't ask Mrs Patten, the receptionist. She wasn't there, anyway. Half a dozen people from my year leaned against the long dark curve of the Reception desk, texting and chatting. The air felt electric, acrid.

'Love the outfit, Joey.'

'She's in fancy dress.'

'Who's gonna fancy ya today?'

'She fancies herself.'

*Wanker.* I could never stop my heart-rate from increasing but I'd got a ritual that usually worked - glare without blinking, tense my nostrils, press my tongue against the back of my teeth. I'd stared myself out in the mirror and the look was annoying, at least. They would hiss a bit, and then look away, nudge each other, find someone else.

Today, new olive green paint on the doors and window frames punched out a tart, nose-tingling smell, fighting the beige mist in the air fuzzed up from new carpets.

Masks at the door would have been good, like they all wear in the Far East for flu. I'd have liked to clap Hallowe'en pumpkin eye-slots and grins across the faces of everybody standing around in the entrance hall.

One of the doors behind Reception banged open and Mr Jolly walked slowly out of his room, examining a sheet of paper. He stared up, at me, at the others, seeing no-one. The deputy head appeared in the doorway and suddenly Mr Jolly swung round on the balls of his feet, like an old-style dancer, only he wore no jacket or tie and his collar was unbuttoned. 'I agree your stats. OK. Publish.' I'd seen him like this before, last year at results' time. He didn't look quite dressed then, either. It was faintly embarrassing.

He rubbed his face with both hands, smothering a yawn, fingertips dragging at the grey-brown bags of skin beneath his eyes. Ma had looked exhausted this morning, too, as if she'd been told she didn't have a terminal illness after all. Mr Jolly caught my glance and leaned across the desk, displacing the morning's post and a heap of papers. 'Have you picked up your results yet, Joey? I'll be ringing your mother. If you don't mind. After you've spoken to her, of course.' He strode back into his room, where he could be heard talking loudly to somebody else.

'Oooh oooh!' More of the same. 'Mummy will be pleased.'

They shut up as Mrs Patten came out of Mr Jolly's room. At first, she made to clear the chaos on her desk, but the phone began to ring. She clucked, flipped both hands. 'Get along with you, if you've got the results, go outside.' Nobody moved, of course. 'Good morning, would you hold the line, please?' clasping her hand over the mouthpiece. 'Go, go and tell your parents, God help them. Get along with you. Sorry to keep you.' She tried to produce the smile for the person at the other end of the phone.

They shuffled towards the door, hitching jeans up or down, giving me the eye. I waited for them to pass, trying not to breathe in. The fuzz in the air was sickening - somebody's favourite cologne, a hint of dirty washing, new carpet, paint. Mrs Patten continued her conversation. The doors to the main corridor that ran through the heart of the school swished open as someone tutted, wedged them, muttering under his breath about the key code. 'Waste of time.'

'You can't do that.' Mrs Patten had dropped the phone and was leaning round the corner to see what was happening. 'I'm not a security guard.' Then she caught my eye. 'Don't stand here like a cardboard cut-out, Joey. If you're on your way to the hall, could you take a message?'

Everybody knows who I am. Everybody knows who they think I am. Slowly, I went into the corridor and stared down its length. Some of last year's notices were still pinned up, curling where they were not foursquarely attached. Other boards were cleared, so that the walls were like patchwork – notices, blank spaces covered by glass, an empty display case, a painting – not a painting. I turned to look again at a Bex textile masterpiece, left over from a couple of years ago and still on show because Spikey Todd, her art teacher, had asked to keep it. She had made a textile forest - maybe like a tapestry but lots of different stuff, not whatever it is you normally use for a tapestry – with strange animals and beings, peering out between trees or wading into a pool. Although I knew she thought her latest work was much more skilful this still made you stop, run your finger ends lightly over the rumpled surfaces. You have to touch Bex's art.

The phone against my waist vibrated. Somebody rushed into the corridor from the entrance, talking loudly into her phone as she ran towards the hall. I must be one of the last to arrive. My eye fell on the trail of discarded paper scattered like the white line in the middle of the road all along the freshly-carpeted corridor. I followed the trail, moving to the side as more footsteps sounded, Mr Jolly this time, swerving and scooping litter in a gliding motion that scarcely slowed him. He was an old-style dancer, precision-smooth, banging through the clunky wooden double doors at the other end as if he were leaving the stage; or maybe entering it. I crumpled the sheet of paper in my hand, stared at it. What? TO SIXTH FORM TUTORS. I supposed mine would have to do, if I could find her.

The hall echoed with shouts, laughing, mobile phone-tones. The walls here had been newly painted, too – the usual off-white, shade of something, and the new carpet had been glued in place, the fishy aroma almost overpowering. In the old days, the hall was the gym too. Long tables had been set up against the right-hand wall. They must have been carried from the dining room, cleaned up a bit. Somebody had already left a



grey skidmark in the paintwork. There was a definite smell of disinfectant competing with the odour of carpet glue, and bodies, and shampoo, and coffee. Several of the duty staff clutched mugs of coffee.

My eyes twitched about, seeking Bex, not finding her. At the end of each table was a laminated label: **A – E, F – K** and so on. Mrs Patten had been busy. Envelopes had been lined up, but many had been shuffled aside, anyhow. Some schools pin up exam results so everyone can look at them. At least our school keeps them private. It is up to you to show and tell. I headed through the crowd in the direction of **U – Z**, vaguely thinking that my tutor might be there but it was hard to get past all the texting and crying and air-kissing. How could so few people, strictly speaking, take up so much space? People crashed into me regardless so I had to shove and push just to stand still. Nobody seemed to be in charge. Mr Jolly and his deputy must be letting all this happen. It was like a tidal race, a rip of currents.

Suddenly a pair of hands grabbed my shoulders and dragged me to one side. Spikey Todd was a stout, bearded guy with green eyes and the nose-tingling smell of white spirit on his hands. White bristles had begun sprouting in his eyebrows. He was Bex's best teacher, her friend, her mentor. He'd been watching out for her since we were twelve.

'She's over there!' He had to shout. 'In the corner under the fire notices. Something's wrong. Have you picked up your results yet?' I shook my head. 'Go and talk to Bex, will you? I'll find your results and bring them across. OK? Bex has done brilliantly so it's not that.'

I screwed my eyes up tight, staring around the pale walls till I glimpsed several people from Bex's art group leaning together like mannequins. No sign of Matt. But 'something wrong' would surely be him, even though if he had any sense he'd stay away, today of all days, results day, Mr Jolly on a high, thinking Publish.

'Are you supposed to do something with that?' bellowed Spikey Todd, butting his head towards mine. I reared back, stumbling, till he grabbed my wrist. 'You OK?' I stared. He was gesturing at the crumpled paper in my hand, stretched out in front of me as if it didn't belong. Neatly he whipped the memo from my fingers, scanning the words quickly. 'I'll deal with it, Joey, you get to Bex, will you?' His beard was flecked with

green paint, and so was his blue denim shirt, as if the sparkling anxiety of his bright green eyes had been overflowing.

He bothered me. I bounced through the crowd like Carlos Acosta till I found Bex. She had now slumped to the floor in a corner, hands limp on her knees, hair taut behind her ears in that scraped-bare expression I was beginning to get used to. I squashed beside her, cringing at the tacky surface of the new carpet. ‘Spikey Todd says you’ve done brilliantly.’ I could smell my trainers now, sweat and mud and something from a pavement.

‘Yeah,’ breathed out like a sigh.

‘I got this strange text.’

Her eyes flicked sideways and away again. They were the black holes I had pictured.

A voice above said, ‘You’re a tad late. Matt pinched her results and her phone. He’s got them somewhere.’

‘Thought he might have your phone,’ I said, wanting to touch the back of Bex’s hand.

‘Sophie got the results back.’ The speaker dropped to her knees, her blue gaze sympathetically resting on Bex. ‘He’s such a wanker.’

Sophie squatted on her heels alongside Bella, flicking her streaky blond plait into place. She shared my Critical Thinking classes. ‘He dropped them when he ran off, stupid fuck. Bella nearly got the phone.’

Bella tapped Bex’s knees which were hunched up under her chin. ‘Let it go, forget him. You were right to give him the shove.’

‘Bex thought you were meeting her here.’ Sophie spoke without looking at me, her voice expressionless. ‘We’d have met her, come in with her, if we’d known. If we’d known you weren’t going to be there for her.’

Bex said under her breath, ‘Joey took down the hate page, Soph.’

‘Yeah yeah, but what about today?’

Bex put her hands across her eyes. ‘Don’t. It’s Matt, nobody else. Me. I could’ve handled it better.’

I realised that I was shaking. ‘Didn’t any of the staff see, try to stop him?’

‘Too busy yadda-yaddering. Anyway, I got the results slip for her.’ Sophie had taken up position on the other side of Bex, her arm laid casually across Bex’s shoulders.

Suddenly the hall began to empty, like the tide rolling back across the sandbanks of Morecambe Bay. The carpet was like sand, yes, grainy and sticky and ready to suck you in.

The long tables stood at awkward angles, speckled with torn brown envelopes. A few people swirled around the remaining members of staff. Spikey Todd was one of them. Maybe he had my results envelope in his hand. I hoped he had delivered Mrs Patten’s message or she would grab me on my way out. She has a long, curved nose, beaky, sits like a hawk on a fencepost, seeing everything when you think she’s dozing. I watched as Spikey Todd gesticulated, tugged at his beard, clapped a lad on the shoulder, caught my eye, waved an envelope in my direction. The echo in the hall now had deeper tones. Fewer bodies, I guessed. I wrapped my skirt closely around my knees, staring at the regular rolling ridges in the carpet. Already it was grabbing at bits of white cotton, black threads from unravelling hems. Pity the cleaners, for once.

‘Get your results, Joey.’ Bex sounded half-asleep. ‘They won’t hand them out unless you sign for them.’ Her gaze was fixed somewhere. ‘I tried.’ She felt boneless beside me, a rag doll.

Bella said, ‘Bex did brilliantly in Art and Textiles.’ She spoke as if Bex were a pet.

‘How did he get your stuff? Where is he, anyway?’

Bex tipped her head against the wall. Her hair smelt stale. ‘I didn’t see him. I waited outside for a bit but – .’ One of those sighs that makes you wonder if she will ever breathe in again. ‘I was one of the first in, there was hardly anyone in the hall.’ She tipped her head back so sharply that it banged on the wall. ‘I went out to the atrium. He must have been on the lookout. He came up behind me, grabbed. I dropped my phone.’

‘I saw him. He was like stalking her.’ Sophie chewed the end of her plait, baring her teeth. ‘I hope his results are fucked. What does he think he’s doing?’

‘That’s dead easy. Matt doesn’t get dumped.’ Bella’s fluttering hands suggested Matt’s ballooning ego. She lived on a farm and was addicted to Cumberland wrestling. ‘He thinks he’s the man,’ said with an exaggerated accent that made me itch to find Matt, slap him.

‘You’re well rid. We just need to get your phone back.’

‘Sophie. I don’t want to think about it.’ Bex lifted a hand, dropped it heavily into her lap.

I leapt up, ignoring the remarks, and Carlos Acosta-ed across the hall past Spikey Todd and Mr Jolly. Nothing could stop me. I was through to the other side, into the atrium that linked the hall to the science labs and the arts block.

This huge glass building had been added last year, part of a big development scheme for the school. Mr Jolly had written to all the parents and some of them were buying bricks for the new music studios, yet to get beyond a set of plans. This summer’s scaffolding must be Phase 3. Ma said it was another of Mr Jolly’s marketing efforts, said she would buy a couple of bricks, it was hard going. He told us the atrium would become the marketplace of the school. Lots of people did go there at lunchtimes to chuck money into the fountain, though I don’t suppose that’s what he intended. But you could see the sky through the vaulted roof, and long glass windows opened on to the playing field. The Friends of the school had donated indoor plants – a couple of yuccas, figs trees, heart-leaf philodendrons to purify the air. They were unexpectedly thriving despite some kids’ efforts. The brown-tiled floor was wet, as if someone had been splashing.

Matt was posing on the coping stones that edged the fountain. He had tied back his hair, and two or three dreadlocks dangled across his face. Half a dozen mates nearby were laughing, shaking the water out of their sleeves - members of the school rugby squad, blag and bluster and testosterone. Once upon a time they were small, awkward, anxious new kids like the rest of us. They must have been. Nobody’s born with huge shoulders and bent noses.

If Mr Jolly had tackled him about his porn Facebook page, Matt didn't seem bothered. He was holding a mobile phone in each hand, staring intently from one screen to another. I burned for him to be forty, balding, getting fat and full of regret. Suddenly one of the others waved his phone. 'Nice one!' I ignored the vibration of the phone at my waist, half-hid behind a philodendron, waiting for the moment.

Matt began to juggle the phones, leaping into the middle of the group, whilst the others were engrossed by their messages, hooting, screeching. 'Skill, man!' 'Pussy!' 'Stupid cunt!'

I've learned to be fast. Running's taught me to skip and dodge where I thought I might lose my balance or skid on tumbling scree. I slid through the leaves, through the bobbing figures and under Matt's arm, snatching both phones from the air before anyone realised what had happened. I could have drowned in the silence.

'Bitch.'

It wasn't Matt who spoke.

'Maybe,' I said, bouncing on the balls of my feet, stepping lightly back. I was acutely aware of the doors nearby.

'Leave it, Matt,' said another voice as Matt's face reddened and swelled.

I did not take my eyes from his face. 'Watch it.' I tossed his phone on a curve to just below his left hand. He had to dive and roll, fumbling the catch so that the phone cracked against the edging stones of the fountain.

'Dyke.'

I shrugged. Matt yelled suddenly, 'Fuck yourself, nobody else will.'

'Lezzie Wilcox.'

'Give her a mouthful.'

I backed to the doors and slipped through, pressing Bex's little phone with its identifying purple cord against my throat. Back in the main hall, I gagged. Seconds later, somebody exploded through the doors and reached my elbow. 'Hold on.' Another wide-shouldered figure, narrow in the hip; probably the perfect Greek athlete. Oliver.

Wider-shouldered than last year. I had managed not to see him for almost a year. School's large enough for that. I suddenly remembered the feel of his skin, his warm breath in my neck. He had gentle hands. 'Joey, hi, wait.' His face was pink. I felt an answering heat. 'Tell Bex, will you? It's not right. Matt's out of order. We're not all up for it. It's not right. I don't know how to stop him.'

'What?' I tried to stare away but his expression made me shiver. 'What?'

'He's a bastard. Tell Bex we don't all think like him.'

'I don't – what?'

He gestured at the phone. 'I'm so sorry. I wish I knew how to have stopped him. If it gets really nasty, tell Bex I'll be a witness, will you? I'm up for that, anyway.' Then he blushed scarlet, backed away across the hall, finally twisting to head for the far doors and the exit, tight brown curls clustered at the nape of his neck. Despite the bouncy walk, the neat jeans, the crisp shirt, his head was bowed. The sudden thought came that perhaps his Facebook was the link Matt had used to make Bex Burn In Hell. His sister was Bella. They'd be friends on Facebook.

I looked at the face of Bex's phone and opened the new message. It was a new picture – a terrible, gross image that could only have been made by superimposing Bex's head on another photo. Because Bex would never in a million years have done anything like that, have got involved with anything like that. There were two men in the image, as well as the naked female figure. I saw the handcuffs, the swollen penises, the truncheon, the spread legs and then almost dropped the phone as Mr Todd called out, waving my results envelope. Bex stood nearby. The others had gone. In a flash I erased the picture. There had not been time to get rid of the other disgusting Sent messages that Matt had despatched when he stole the phone. But at least she would not see this one. I wondered how many other phones now carried this image and my throat closed up. I wanted to kick him in the balls. I'd find my winter boots, polish them, plan.

Bex fell silent as I reached her. *Thank you*, she mouthed, taking the phone before I could hide it. My skin prickled with heat. I should have dropped the phone in the fountain. God knows what was still on it. Mr Todd gave me the envelope, his eyes bright. 'Go on. Read them.' I turned away. He would know the results anyway but I needed to straighten my face. It was a struggle. I opened the printout. I'd done OK. Bex

returned to a conversation about the summer art exhibition but Mr Todd said he needed coffee. ‘See you at the Town Hall, both of you? Well done, Joey.’ He nodded, ambled away.

‘It’s half-past ten. Can we go out over the playing fields?’

‘If you like.’ I folded and refolded my results slip into a hard, tiny lump of paper that I could shove into my shoe. Bex shook her head with a tight half-smile, eyes that flicked right and left around the near-empty hall. She was so plainly checking to see that it was safe that I had to look over my shoulder. The small of my back was rigid.

She slid towards the main corridor and I followed, hoping that Matt was still in the atrium, swearing at his fractured phone, that somebody – Oliver, Bella, Sophie – would tell Mr Jolly about his latest act of cruelty. Telling Ma didn’t seem very useful. Whatever she had said to Mr Jolly two nights’ ago, nothing had changed Matt. Maybe he was the sort who was already fixed, cast concrete like motorway bridges, like that stupid old saying about the wind changing and your expression forever being stuck in whatever face you were pulling at the time. But I didn’t really believe that. I couldn’t. I had to know that everyone could change, even the most surprising people. It was the only way to make sense. Even Matt. I pictured his huge body squeezed and reshaped like putty, like wet clay. Caroline could remould him into a jug, or a sheepdog. Bex could sew him into a tapestry and nail him to a corridor wall. We’d have to catch him first.

We found our way through a classroom that was being repainted, its fire doors wide open. The workmen ignored us. A fine mist hovered on the field. Two dogs chased each other in a wild dance and a man wrestled with a kite, a small child and a push chair. From beneath its rain shield came the yowls of a trapped baby. The kite fluttered listlessly to the grass. We sheltered against the wall beside the new bike sheds, lined up like empty peapods in a row. Pa approves of anything that ticks the conservation box. I tried not to look at my watch. The man began to roll up the kite.

‘My father was hanging round on the main road when I got here.’

‘I didn’t see him.’

‘You didn’t come.’

There was nothing to say. After a moment, Bex said, ‘Sorry. Enough’s gone wrong in the past few days for the next million years.’ She bit her lip, teasing the veil of hair across her cheek and tugging at the wristband of her shirt-sleeve. ‘It’s like harassment,’ she said after a while. ‘I don’t have to see him just because he’s here. It’s not in the agreement.’ Her voice sounded thin in the open air. There were shouts from the far side of the field, where students from our year group were kicking a ball. It bounced over the wall into the road beyond.

‘Your father?’

‘Who did you think?’

‘Well, Matt?’

‘Matt’s a jerk, but he’s nothing.’

My mouth dropped. After a moment I said, ‘Can’t Jack help?’

‘No.’

‘He’s got to be helpful, hasn’t he? Being a policeman. And he’ll be your stepdad.’ I leaned into the wall. The gritty bricks pressed hard against my skull. ‘Can’t he help you sort things out?’ Mist-drops sat up on the surface of my shirt, gradually sinking into the fabric until it sagged against my skin.

Bex’s fingers were working under her sleeve as if she were trying to find a pulse. ‘I can’t ask him, not with the wedding.’

‘You said Jack would kill Matt.’

Her sleeve fluttered. ‘It’s different.’ I didn’t know what to tell her. How many messages were flying from phone to phone? Pornographic images move at the speed of light - cruelty exploding like Himalyan Balsam, seeding itself worldwide and pestilential. ‘Anyway, I’m not getting Jack involved in my crap. Mum would be miserable. She’ll do anything to avoid a fight.’

‘A fight.’

‘I don’t want Jack dragged into something from our past.’



I remembered Caroline balanced on top of a ladder with paintbrush in one hand and paint pot in the other, whitewashing their little terraced house - Bex and me leaning on the ladder to steady it but trying to kick one another's ankles - Caroline shouting at us to stop messing about. She had fought for years. Only Caroline had once been married to that man. Dominic Ainsley. Bex used to be Rebecca Ainsley. It was in another world. The image on the phone haunted me. 'What sort of policeman was Jack?' Surely Jack would get it, would want to do something.

Bex took the pulse of the other wrist. 'He was custody sergeant. That was his last job. He was in charge of anybody locked up in the station. If they were arrested.'

'He knows all about coping with thugs then.'

Bex looked across the field, not meeting my eyes. 'I'm not getting Jack involved.'

In a couple of hours I would have finished my driving test. Either I would have passed or I would not. 'I just wondered.'

'Show me your results.' I reached down to fish the wad of paper out of my shoe, surreptitiously glancing at the screen of my phone. The message icon flickered. I opened, erased. But the tinkling sound of Message Received was unmistakable. Bex sighed. 'I bet that was about your test.'

A spatter of rain flung against the wall. 'Just a reminder.'

'You are so well organised. No wonder your Ma thinks you'll end up Prime Minister.'

The shock of it made me shout with laughter, excessive. 'She's got that wrong.'

'Well, you could go into the police. Jack says it's all about being clever these days.'

'Clever how?' The man with the pushchair was trying to get the child to walk faster. A gust of wind threw rain more sharply into my eyes.

'Oh, like being custody sergeant. Jack's clever. Not like you. He says all the time his work was making the right judgement-call. Risk.'

‘What’s risky about locking up thugs and drunks?’ The child began to cry as the man dragged a waterproof cape over its head. However did Ma cope with Noah and me together? It must be like prison, being tied by the ankle to little children, dragging them or being dragged. The girl with the baby in the surgery yesterday was practically a child herself. There are risks everywhere. Risk was sitting behind Noah when he was driving. Risk was waiting for some proxy to send the image again, again, again, seed on the wind and almost indestructible. Caroline would go wild if she knew. I pictured Jack in his warm red pullover, his golden house, and the sheer nasty unkindness of Matt’s attack. He’d been in the house whilst Jack was converting it. He used to adore Bex. He said he did. Bex was unaware, still talking. The man was trying to wedge the kite in the storage area beneath the pushchair. Anguished yells from baby and child together, now.

‘Thugs can still be mad, or ill. Jack had to decide whether locking them up was necessary.’ Bex heaved herself away from the wall and stood staring at the peapods. Mist-drops sat upon her face like beads of sweat. ‘Something about the principle of necessity. You’d like principle.’

‘Yeah, sure, my principle would be lock up Matt before he does any more damage.’ The man with the kite had stuffed it under his arm.

Bex gave a strange, barking laugh. ‘Anybody under eighteen, they have to get an adult in. He wouldn’t lock up Matt without.’ Another gust of rain; we both straightened as if given a cue.

‘But you can’t tell by looking. Matt looks eighteen – twenty – how do you tell?’

‘Yeah.’ Bex started walking. ‘That’s the risk. Come on.’

‘You don’t think your dad’s still around, do you?’ Bex increased her stride. ‘Bex, why are we running?’ The pushchair lurched over the clumps of wet, newly-cut grass.

Suddenly Bex’s phone and mine beeped together. We halted, opened the messages.

**11.21am Sophie to Bex**

Scrub messages, don’t read

‘What does she mean? Have you got a message from Sophie too?’

‘Don’t look,’ I said. ‘Don’t look.’

‘What does she mean – why – oh.’ Bex swayed. I grabbed the phone by its purple cord and saw the terrible image again. Again, I deleted it.

‘You really have got to tell Jack.’ She shook her head, and retched into the grass, throwing up slimy remnants. ‘For God’s sake, he must be able to do something.’

‘I don’t care about. I will not care.’

‘Bex –.’ I caught at her elbow.

‘It’s nothing. It’s nothing.’ She dragged herself away, sweeping wet hair from her face.

‘Well, tell your real dad then.’ I don’t know what made me say it.

‘Dominic.’ Her tone turned the rain to ice. ‘His name is Dominic. Not dad. He has nothing to do with me. I have nothing to do with him.’ Then she said, in the same frozen voice, ‘Text me when you’ve passed your test.’ Her arms were tightly clasped across her chest.

‘You can’t keep this inside you.’

‘Watch me.’

## Zeph's Blog Thursday 17 August

I am cyborg. I drove like the machine and I were melded. I drove as if Matt were in the middle of my route, whichever way I turned. I flattened him thoroughly under the wheels. I three-point-turned him into a dinner-plate. Mr XL Drive-to-Success was impressed, he said. He watched me reversing round a corner at the end of the test.

Sophie forwarded texts from her friends, Bex's friends, saying they were never talking to Matt again, striking him off their list. I showed Bex, in the shop. I asked her to change her number, at least. You can, the companies will do it. They'll have seen the messages, they'll know it matters. Why don't phone companies ban people who text abuse? If Facebook catch you they can wipe out your account. Matt got away with it on Facebook because of the mask. You'd have to know it was one of Bex's masks on the body.

It feels like I'm living in a different universe from everyone else. I can't make anyone pay attention. I suppose I'm the same. We're all in parallel worlds, shouting. Girly-Shirley went on about being a model again, it was great PR for the shop, I can earn my way through university. I could almost think it was funny. She has no idea when she asks me to be her clothes horse that I'm a stalking horse, Trojan horse. She's putting me into her world and I could blow it up. And Bex's parallel universe has rules that I can't understand. Non-actions. She won't **do** anything to stop Matt. It's nothing to do with me, I keep telling myself. All afternoon in the shop I kept whispering, 'Let me fix him. I'll sort him out.' But she walked away, every time. Ma texted me about the results and then she rang. Mr Jolly had been on at her about my personal statement, getting it in early so the school could vet it.

Maybe Bex has changed places with her doppelgänger. Only instead of seeing God out of the corner of her eye, like it says in Wikipedia, she's seen the Devil.

## **Black Box file**

### Personal Statement Version 2

I love fell running. I feel so bonded with everything around me that the air in my lungs and the wind on the fells is the same air that has blown across oceans and mountains - air that takes atoms of me across oceans and mountains every time I exhale. I breathe me in and out. I train so that I will be able to run for longer, higher, deeper, steeper. I am going to fly off the edge of the world, out among the stars. Next to fell running, the most important thing in the world is to live as I am, not as other people expect me to be. I am not sure if I truly understand what they expect or want but I can feel it, all the time. 'People' are my parents and brother, friends. My parents have said for as long as I can remember that whatever I do will make them happy. They do not understand themselves. You won't know what to believe either, oh admissions tutor, who's been suckered into reading personal statements. Sure, my parents love me, only the way they love me seems to have a question attached. ME, I have to live as a man, experience the world as men do, have other people treat me as a man, react to others as a man, not as the female everybody sees. I don't want to change myself much, either. I am the person I remember. I remember hating that everybody treats me like a girl and I hate menstruation but I can't deny that it's part of me too.

If there is an academic study that allows me to investigate this, experimentally, I will consider it.

I am currently investigating the study of anthropology, but I am open to suggestions. Academic disciplines attract me. I learn quickly, am very curious about all sorts of things but nobody learns the truth just by study, hypothesis, analysis. You have to try things out. Your body, your feelings have a lot of information. I do believe that there is "Truth" to discover. This may be naïve. A white man once coloured his skin black so he could be treated as black, that was before civil rights in America. It was Bad.

378 words; useless for personal statement. Fun, though.

## **Zeph's Blog Thursday 17 August**

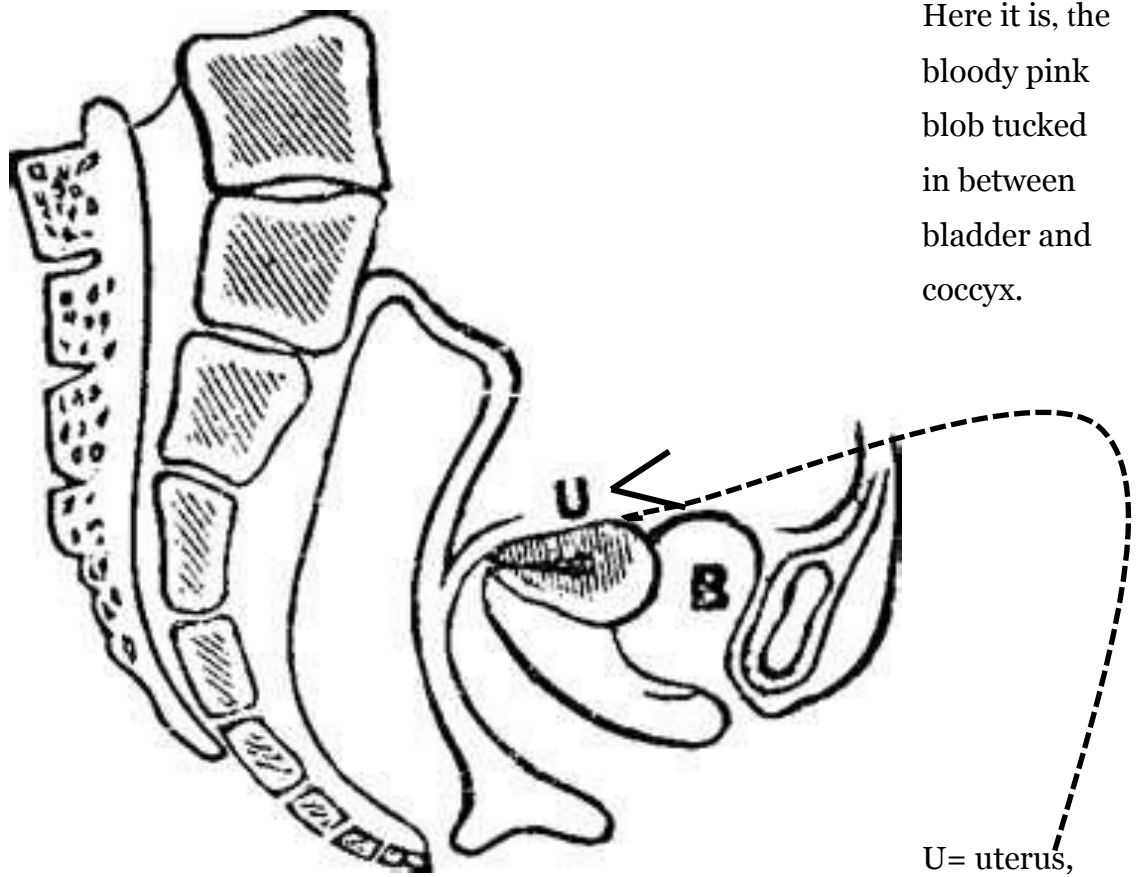
I've been watching the videos again, Noah and Simon at the Bowder Stone. Noah moves like a lobster, all claws and shoulders, and Simon's an elegant fish, flicking and arcing up the rock. I've been practising talking deep.

It's easier than I thought. You open up your diaphragm and let the air vibrate between larynx and diaphragm. People expect men to have deep voices. Sometimes on the radio I can't tell whether it's M or F.

I asked Ma, roundabout, how she copes in her school with bad stuff on text, online. She kind of eyed me and said girls are the worst. Some nice girls send repellent messages. She makes them read the messages to her, in her study. She says they don't realise half the time what they're posting, they just do because they get hooked. When they stand in her official headmistressy office and have to say out loud what they've written they completely hate it. Ma wanted to know why I was asking. Pa says she's bound to be worse than any bloke as an employer. She's so interested you don't escape.

Surfing, I found the clips from the fashion show. I guess we signed some sort of consent form but I didn't realise it meant seeing me onscreen. I didn't notice the clothes they put me in but it's me in that big room, wooden panels, me in narrow trousers, shirts with high collars like from another century, waistcoats, a cloak thing. I really don't remember the shorts or the big boots laced to the knee. I never saw myself walk before, not from behind. You don't see yourself from behind, walking. My hips don't sway from side to side like the other models.

Why won't Bex tell Jack? If anyone understands about locking up thugs, he must, from what she says. She's not listening to herself.



Here it is, the bloody pink blob tucked in between bladder and coccyx.

such a little organ, such a huge effect.

Thank you gutenburg.org.

If Matt was a woman he'd be just as gross. It's not his dick that makes him vile, it's his mind. Wonder if Jack was/is any good as a mind-reader.

## **Black Box file**

*guidance on safer protection and handling of people in police custody*

Risk assessment means assessing the risk and potential risk that each detainee presents to themselves, staff, other detainees, and to others coming into the custody suite.

Every detainee is an individual. Changing events and circumstances for the detainee, and within the custody suite, may affect the detainee's mood or behaviour and the risk that they pose to themselves and others.

The assessment must be ongoing and be reviewed throughout the period of detention. The risk that a detainee may pose to themselves and others may alter when a detainee is charged, refused bail or released on bail and, therefore, the custody officer must review the risk assessment at these stages and prior to release or transfer. A record must be kept in the custody record of each time that a risk assessment is carried out.

Risk assessments should be as objective as possible and assumptions should never be made when assessing risk. Police custody is stressful for most detainees and for some it is particularly traumatic. Simply being placed in a police cell may immediately raise the category of risk for a detainee.

*Jack must have been mind-reader*

*wouldn't trust myself if I was Jack*

*emotional minefield - what  
does Jack remember?*

*mindfield*



## **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> August**

Bex did not come to the shop all day. She rang in, Shirley said, bad headache, something. Bex never has headaches. I knew she wouldn't be able to bear it. I hoped she had told Caroline. The sun shone all day long and after the drizzle of yesterday, the racks of clothing seemed to radiate heat, thickening the air. All day long was fatigue and muddle. On the way home I felt almost sick for the cool of my room, the window open to let in the evening, birdsong, Marmalade on my knee. He hadn't come in all night and I needed his sharp claws.

Voices were clanging in the kitchen. I stood in the hall, suddenly filled with dread.

*Noah:* Did somebody move my wet-suit?

*Ruth:* Moll, I think I'll be ready to serve in about five minutes. Don't disappear, Noah, will you? Oh thanks, Simon. The plates are in the bottom oven. I'll want the small ones for the starter.

*Pa:* Hey sweetheart, there you are. Am I laying a place for Bex tonight?

*Me:* No.

*Pa:* Is she poorly again? She's looking a bit peaky. So are you. You girls need a holiday.

*Ma:* Is it me or is it getting exponentially hotter in here? Andrew, when you've finished with the table could you open the window? Would you mind? I must be getting hormonal.

*Noah:* Sy, did you see my wet-suit? I swear it's walked.

*Pa:* Nothing wrong with your hormones.

*Ruth:* I'll dish out here, I think. How hot are the big plates, Simon? I wonder if we need glasses for water, too.

*Ma:* Noah, please. The doorframe won't take your pull-ups indefinitely. Is your hand steady enough for carving? It's no good scowling. I didn't move your wet-suit.

*Simon:* Something smells wonderful.

*Pa:* Prosciutto and asparagus for starters? Leg of Rough Fell lamb. Knife sharpener? Mollie?

*Simon:* I've read about Rough Fell Lamb. And isn't there another local breed, sheep that graze on saltmarshes?

*Noah:* Mutton dressed as lamb.

*Ma:* Knife sharpener third drawer along.

*Pa:* Your wet-suit's in the garage.

*Ma:* Caroline rang this morning, by the way. She's asked Ruth to help out at the reception, too. Someone's let her down. That's nice, isn't it? Not being let down I don't mean. We'll practically all be there. We can see the house at last.

*Noah:* What's it doing in the garage?

*Simon:* Maybe I could cook for you one evening.

*Ma:* Thank you, that's a very kind offer, but aren't you busy most nights? Noah said it was difficult getting you both off shift together for tonight.

*Pa:* Is Bex's family having a celebration supper too?

*Me:* No.

*Ruth:* I'll enjoy helping for their reception, seeing Caroline relaxed. Those little girls seem to think Jack's the king. Would you sit down now, please? The prosciutto is perfect, crispy.

*Pa:* So it went ok at school today?

*Ma:* Only two or three going through clearing. One girl completely changed her mind. Peter Jolly's extremely pleased with himself. I guess he's done well by Joey.

*Noah:* Who's a clever girl then.

*Ruth:* When does your university application form have to be ready?

*Ma:* We try to get them off next month. Hit the admissions tutors as soon as we can, before they get jaded. That lamb smells delectable, you've done it again, Ruth. And again.

*Simon:* Is it appropriate to ask about your results, Joey?

*Ruth:* Watch out, the plates are red hot.

*Ma:* Politics, History, English, Psychology, Critical Thinking. Five A\*s.

*Simon:* You must be delighted, Joey.

*Noah:* Wordy subjects, did you notice?

*Simon:* What is the exam in Critical Thinking?

*Pa:* Where did you buy the lamb?

*Noah:* Maths without numbers. Passes as logic.

*Simon:* It's amazing, Joey, I didn't realise you were so – I didn't know about – I'm digging myself a hole, aren't I? I thought you were the outdoor type – running, dry stone wall sort of thing.

*Pa:* She takes after her father.

*Noah:* Oh God, another competition.

*Ma:* I caught sight of Bex with Caroline in town this afternoon when I was driving through. I thought she looked wonderful, like having a flower painted on her hair.

*Noah:* What? What's she had done? What happened to my portion, Ruth?

*Ma:* You must have sucked instead of chewing. You know where Bex had the streaks of red and white? She's had a sort of flower tinted right across where the streaks used to be. Shades of deep pink - almost purple. Like a Chinese screen, almost. I could fancy it myself. I wonder if every hair grows at the same rate.

*Pa:* I thought you said she was ill, Joey.

*Ruth:* Talking of walls, are we having another go tomorrow?

*Ma:* Have you decided what to wear to the wedding? That reminds me, did you see that that woman about more fashion photos?

*Noah:* We found a video of you, Jay-Babe. The hotel's got the fashion show on its website. Jay-Babe could make all our fortunes if she could be bothered.

*Me:* I'm entering the mountain marathon.

*Pa:* You can't, lovey.

*Noah:* You have to enter as a pair.

*Simon:* What is the mountain marathon, please?

*Ma:* Noah, can you carve? Let's get this party back on track. Joey, I know you don't like a fuss but we are so very proud of you. I did think you'd be brilliant. And your driving test too.

*Noah:* Fuck.

*Pa:* Noah.

*Ruth:* Use the hand-towel, it's just behind you. Is it deep?

*Simon:* Actually, maybe I could carve?

*Ma:* Your mother would be proud of you.

*Simon:* Do you like it carved from the middle or the end?

*Ma:* Noah. Plasters in the second drawer along.

*Ruth:* Where did you learn to carve like that?

*Simon:* My father taught me. He's a chef, actually.

*Ruth:* In London? Your own place? I must look you up when I'm back.

*Simon:* It's in the family. My grandfather started it.

*Pa:* Where did you learn to climb, Sy?

*Simon:* At school. I went to boarding school. We had a climbing wall. But we didn't often climb on real cliffs – health and safety sort of thing. That's why I joined the climbing club in Leeds.

*Ma:* You're doing a great job there. You can come again.

*Simon:* Is your application for university ready, Joey?

*Me:* No.

*Pa:* We don't want her to go too far away, do we, Moll? But we're just sentimental.

*Ma:* She's full of ideas, aren't you, darling? She went off to several open days last year. And there are hordes of websites. She doesn't need advice from me. It's really hard to stay out of it, Simon, when it's half my life, getting pupils on the right route.

*Ruth:* Hard work circumnavigating parents, I should think.

*Ma:* Anyway, she can drive now. That's enough meat, I would think.

*Ruth:* How do you get them on the right route?

*Ma:* You might just as well come out with it straight and tell me to shut up. I'm terrible.

*Pa:* Toast to Joey.

*Ma:* Wait a bit, Andrew, let's dish out the rest before it gets stone cold. Could you pass round the veg whilst you're on your feet? Noah, are you joining us or are do I stitch you up?

*Simon:* We could run up Coniston early tomorrow, if you want. You could come, Joey.

*Pa:* Shit.

*Ma:* Oh Andrew – that was a really lovely Rioja.

*Noah:* Seriously, Pa, white wine works. Let me -

*Ma:* Don't you dare. That's Ruth's Sancerre. This meal feels doomed.

*Pa:* There's too much testosterone in this room. I'll change.

*Ruth:* I've heard about the white wine trick.

*Ma:* I wonder if my elderflower champagne would count.

*Simon:* Would you think of London for university, Joey? I wanted to get away from the south. I guess people in the north might want to get away from here.

*Me:* No.

*Ma:* Money's changed all that. It all costs so much now.

*Noah:* So what're you going to do, Jay-Babe?

*Ma:* It's probably my fault, I keep making suggestions. It's the job. It deludes me into thinking my opinions matter. Mind you, it's all my school parents think about, where their kids are going to university. It's infectious. I didn't want to catch it myself.

*Simon:* Did I carve enough, do you think?

*Noah:* I know what it is, you don't know what you think, you're fanning about, wondering about a gap year, not going to uni at all, putting it off.

*Me:* No.

*Noah:* It's the people who haven't a clue what to do with themselves do gap years. And if you don't get it by eighteen, when are you ever. Waste of time.

*Ruth:* You carve like a professional.

*Noah:* Are we going to eat this meal or just look at it?

*Ma:* We all talk too much.

*Ruth:* I wonder what too much is. Life's too short not to. Talk, I mean. Say what you mean, too. It's your life, not their idea of it.

*Pa:* What have I missed? What are you saying?

*Ma:* Whatever Joey decides to do when she leaves school we'll support her, won't we?

*Pa:* You're very tense, lovey.

*Ruth:* I'll put the veg back in the oven for a bit.

*Pa:* What's going on? I go to change and you've started a row behind my back?

*Noah:* Dish up, Sy. Shame Bex isn't here. There's a girl knows just what she wants.

*Ruth:* You seem very sure.

*Simon:* She told us about her exhibition the other night. When we walked her home. She seems very focussed.

*Ma:* She has a remarkable talent.

*Me:* I got the wrong gender when I was born.

*Noah:* Oh for God's sake.

*Ruth:* Noah. Please.

*Pa:* I don't understand.

*Me:* I'm not hungry. I'm going for a run.

*Simon:* Wait, Joey. Please wait.

**10.43pm Ruth to Joey**

Where are you? Ruth xx

**11.56pm Noah to Joey**

What was all that about.

Sulk then.

Where r u?

Ma's in right state.

Sy says 3<sup>rd</sup> sex in Thailand?

r u gay? is that it? no big deal



**Black Box file**

*The Getting of Wisdom - Gutenberg*

"Oh, what ARE you going to do, Laura?" cried Pin, in anxiety.

"I'm going to have a good run," said Laura; and tightened her hair-ribbon.

"Oh, but you can't run in the street! You're too big. People'll see you."

"Think I care?—If you'd been years only doing what you were allowed to, I guess you'd want to do something you weren't allowed to, too.— Good-bye!"

She was off, had darted away into the leaden heat of the December morning, like an arrow from its bow, her head bent, her arms close to her sides, fleet-footed as a spaniel; Pin was faced by the swift and rhythmic upturning of her heels. There were not many people abroad at this early hour, but the few there were, stood still and looked in amazement after the half-grown girl in white, whose thick black plait of hair sawed up and down as she ran; and a man with mop and bucket, who was washing statues, stopped his work and whistled, and winked at Pin as she passed.

Cross and confused Pin trudged after her sister, Laura's hat and gloves in one hand, the leather bag in the other.

*wisdom = running or running away?*

## Black Box File



my exploding brain or picture of wisdom? Normal neural pathways - a tangle in this pic

You aren't wise if you think you are, you're BLIND

*When nobody's telling you who you are, you start to find out.*

*Looking in a mirror's no use. Maybe you have to see your doppelgänger*

**look up blind goddess**

# Rock

## Zeph's Blog Saturday 19 August

Nobody tried to talk to me last night, nobody knocked on my door. I didn't mean it to happen like that. Can't find Marmalade either.

The person who wrote The Getting of Wisdom is called Henry Handel Richardson but really it's Ethel Florence Lindsey Richardson. One day I'm going to write a book about all the people playing hide and seek.

I skipped breakfast, shower, everything this morning, went straight to the shop. At lunchtime I bought a toothbrush and toothpaste, washed in the shop's toilet. Bex came back to work, mouth zipped. Her new hair flower is another work of art. This afternoon the woman turned up, Julia, talking at Shirley. She wants to buy 'something special' for Bex, for the wedding. I got out, stockroom, Bex came, said it was a gambit, a game. We was almost like old times, hugger-mugger. Then Shirley said she understood Bex's dad being twitchy, now there was going to be a stepdad. Another man around all the time, Shirley said, you can understand a father getting anxious. Bex seized up again. We had to go back into the shop, and Woman Julia was posing like we were interested, kept picking things off racks, trying to drape them on Bex. I said, 'Bex has got a dress already.' She would have stabbed me. Shirley tried to smooth things over. 'Bex might want something for the autumn, new stock.' Not from Girly-Shirl

All the time I was thinking, who cares, leave us all alone. But just now Ma knocked and said would I like to borrow the car tomorrow. She looked kind of crumpled. I wanted her to hug me. They've gone out to the pictures. Everyone's running away. But I will take the car. Amazing.

## Joseph Heller Catch 22

### Black Box file

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr.

But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."

- if you do what guys do, look like a guy, why wouldn't everyone assume you were M?

- is what I do the same as being me?

- CHANGE what I DO = change ME?

Yinyang?

I am who I am. - facticity = me?

blind goddesses - Maat, Isis, Themis, Justitia - justice and fairness - can't see self = wise and fair?

- if you see your doppelganger see what you shouldn't? staring in mirror = bad for you? bad?

## Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August

Ma has packed a proper picnic and I might even eat some of it. Her face is shiny this morning. I haven't seen Pa since Friday night. Ma and I haven't talked about anything except food, the washing, Marmalade being off on a bender.

Ma gets the car out of the garage for me and hands me the keys. Then she pats my shoulder and goes back in the house. I've only driven Pa's old car, never hers, her pride and joy.

I sit in the driver's seat and have to change the mirrors. Ma and I are about the same height but we obviously don't like the same angle of view. I sit farther back from the steering wheel than Ma. It is the oddest sensation to take her place in this bright red car she loves so much. The seat fits her rather than me.

As I take the corners of the A591, heading for Keswick and Borrowdale, suddenly I realise that Ma must have insured me to drive her car. It probably cost a bomb. I have to pull over into a lay-by. She must have done it yesterday, while I was at work.

I get out of the car to look at the rising fells. It's nine o'clock, just after, and the road is still quiet. Sunlight on the shoulders of the Kentmere fells, and maybe Wansfell, maybe Fairfield – I'm not certain – warms my shoulders too. Everything is achingly familiar though I can't label everything I see. There are smaller tops I don't have names for. They're on the ordnance survey maps. As I run them, they'll be mine, too. You see things differently from the driving seat.

I look west, towards Windermere. Sometimes I think this is the most beautiful view in the world. The Way There. *There*. I imagine myself an archer, arms straining as I pull back the string from the bow, my body poised against the growing tension, gripping the arrow lightly, then releasing it into a soaring, rising arc to the heart of *there*. The sky is that pale blue you get when no cloud will form. The elements are balanced: earth, air, fire, water. Today I will drive to the Bowder Stone and get the balance right. I'll climb up the proper way, know how to grip.

I've told Ma I'm running in Borrowdale. I promise to keep my mobile in my pocket and switched on. I don't tell her the signal is patchy/non-existent. I say that I

mean to be home by five. Noah's inflatable crash mat is in the boot and I expect to spend half an hour blowing it up because the pump has vanished into one of Noah's black holes.

This morning, early, before Ma, even, a knock at the door -Simon. Not that I had slept, anyway. I downloaded and read *The Getting of Wisdom*, looking for clues about Bex. Simon had some of his clothes tucked under his arm, and a frowning, shy expression as he held them out. Try them, he said, walk about the town in men's clothes. See how you feel. Everything was clean. I can't process it but his yellow tee shirt has found its way into my rucksack. If I wear it, somehow I might capture his agility on rock. I've pinched the bag of chalk, too. Only the shoes are mine. The beat of my heart is skittish whenever I picture climbing and my hands stick to the steering wheel but I'm going to do it.

This car is sweet on corners. My body wants to lean as I steer. Me + car I am Cyborg. All of a sudden I get what the bikers love, the closeness to the road, the machine's power, the tilt, the swooning speed, o god. I could be a biker.

O god my back goes rigid and the car swerves. I slow down. My heartbeat slows down. I'd like to get safely into Borrowdale. So that's what Jack does when he thinks about what's risky. He'd have to work out whether I'd be the sort of driver to crash into walls for the joy of cornering on two wheels. Not likely at the moment. Still, the rush of adrenalin has brightened my concentration. Maybe I'd do better with a microchip in my brain. I could volunteer for an experiment as soon as I'm eighteen. November.

The road from Windermere to Ambleside to Rydal curves like a snake through undergrowth, under the summer-green branches. The road has muscle and sinew, adjusts to the landscape, flows. Is water muscular? It's strong. I think about 'spineless'. The snake has no spine but the python can crush a pig to death if it wants to. We're always being told how good it is to have 'backbone'. Brave, that's meant to be; a proper human being. The climbers I looked at on YouTube seemed incredibly bendy to me. Snakes, lizards, fish, we all come from the sea.

I pull down the sun visor to look at my reflection, unclamp the jaw. Driving is meant to be liberating, not to make me sweat. I'd like to switch on the radio, but right now my left hand won't leave the steering wheel unless to grab the gear lever or

handbrake. It has a life of its own. If I'd brought my MP3, I might have sung along. *My mama told me when I was young/We are all born superstars/She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on/in the glass of her boudoir...* Not my Ma.

I decide to stop at Thirlmere, by the viewpoint over the reservoir. I'll drink some orange juice, give myself a break. Camper vans stack up at the viewpoint, people eating sausage rolls. Hot day, great for tourists. I gaze at the far side of the lake, dark and heavy with conifers, a green that seems to soak up light instead of giving it back. Beside me someone takes a photo. 'It's wonderful,' she says. 'I can't believe we're here.' I realise with a shock that she's talking to me. I'm visible. Here I am, Public. 'We're from Wolverhampton,' she says as if I were about to be interested. 'What about you? Have you come far?'

Limply I say, 'I live down the road, actually. I live here.' Her face crinkles with a look of genuine envy.

'We'd love to buy somewhere here,' she says, turning to the man who approaches. 'We'd love to live here wouldn't we, Jeff?'

He hefts his binoculars to his eyes, smiles distantly, isn't getting involved. I say goodbye and get back into the car. I feel better. I'm so lucky that Ma and Pa both wanted to live here. For what I have received I am truly thankful amen. It's a long time since I was anywhere for grace to be said but amen feels great today. We learned it in RE. It means So Be It. We say it together.

I stop in Keswick, impelled by a need I don't get to repeat what we did, Noah, Simon and I. I buy a tuna roll, even. That I can park the car between others – look over my shoulder, assess the width, reverse neatly, brake – makes me Cyborg. Machinery kills, but I won't, I am Cyborg with my posthuman brain.

Matt is big bug or Himalayan Balsam. I might have to reconsider.

This time I am driver. I have to focus on the road instead of gawping at the lake and its magical depths of reflected fells. Borrowdale: most beautiful of all. Maybe. I glimpse early canoes and kayaks, somebody standing knee-deep, white-backed, a new arrival. He'll probably go home white, too, though today is perfect. In a flash I realise that I'm free to stop the car wherever I wish. I park at places I have previously scorned

– the falls at Lodore, the bridge at Grange – get out, stride around the car, lean against it like an owner, drive on. I wave at the trees, royalty. Not blind god/goddess.

It's well past eleven by the time I switch off the engine in the Bowder Stone car park. I don't care. I feel giddy. If somebody x-rayed me now, they'd find my arteries and veins running with fire and sparkle, like rich minerals through quartz. I have said out loud to Ma and Pa, are you sure you labelled me correctly? Has it occurred to you that you might have got it wrong, that day when you stared at me in Ma's arms in the hospital, my face still screwed tight and smeary? That you might have gone on kidding yourselves, all these years? That what you want is another version of you? Whatever you say. *There's nothing wrong with loving who you are/she said, cos he made you perfect, babe.* The words spin through the air – yin and yang and shadow and light - seeding the sky, drifting, and the air is full of sap, headstrong with bracken in full growth. I'm going to explode, lungs, guts, brain. Facticity is me, I am who I am. I could shout at Bowderstone Crag and King's How, rearing up behind their cladding of trees to the skyline above, waiting maybe to toss another boulder into the valley.

A walker crunches through the car park, gives me a very odd look. I have been leaning on the bonnet for a full ten minutes, with the car door wide open, keys in the ignition. Anyone could have stolen car, contents, whatever they wished. What would I do if Ma's car were stolen? I snatch my mobile from the car seat where it's been lying in full view. What did I actually say on Friday evening?

When I reach the Bowder Stone I am dismayed to find two other people already there, experts, it's plain. One of them is teasing excessive chalk from handholds. He has brought a brush for the purpose. It seems bizarrely housewifely to dust a rock before climbing.

I decide to begin with what the girl has already completed – the girl who is about to start climbing at an impossible angle. She limbers up by going hand over hand up the underside of the wooden staircase. I will do that except that I want to use my feet too. I want to work out how to swing my legs above my shoulders, defying gravity as the others seem to.

Despite recent rainfall, the wood is dry, flaky. I launch myself, clinging like a slug to the underside of a bucket. I am unprepared for the sheer downward weight of my legs, dangling and flailing. Shit. A voice says calmly, 'This your first time?' and cool



hands lift my legs by the ankle so that I can jam my feet into the steps. I feel a total clown. 'Go on,' he urges, 'you're doing fine, you've got the right idea.' He wouldn't help a fella but I can't resent it. Somehow I scabble up half a dozen steps until I lose my grip and fall off to sprawl on the ground. On YouTube, they seem to land on their feet. They probably cut all the falling over.

'Your grip's good,' says the man, extending a hand. He has a pleasing, ordinary face. I say dumbly that I've been practising with a spring-loaded grip to strengthen my fingers. The girl calls him, impatient, and he backs away with an apologetic spreading gesture. 'It's upper body strength you need for overhangs,' he calls. 'Maybe a few more press-ups?'

I watch them for a while. The girl has launched herself again, and needs his help to reach the first foothold, which seems to be well above her head. It's incredible that she's so happy to be almost upside down. There's a cleft in the rock that runs parallel to the diamond edge of the boulder, leading to the top, and she's trying to use it for her ascent. The rock bulges like a swollen cheek. Suddenly she swings free, holding only by the tiniest of finger-holds, and throws herself up at the rock. And behold, one foot is now locked into place above the bulge. Now she twists her hips insanely, bringing the other leg into position, ready for its move too.

In seconds, she has swarmed above the rocky cheek and is almost running to the top of the Stone. She isn't she isn't ant or bee, yet she runs across the rock like someone who lives on it then bounds down the wooden steps, spitting on her hands, wiping them on her shorts. The man turns to me. 'Do you want some help? We can help - can't we, Jane?'

I say I came alone so I wouldn't make a fool of myself. 'Fair enough,' he comments, and the girl says, 'But Fred can give you a leg up if you want. We've got to go in a minute.'

I want to refuse. My thighs tremble. I've strapped on the chalk bag and dip in my hands. But he steps forward. 'Not too much,' he warns. 'You slip if you have too much. You have to be able to sense the rock, feel every fissure, all the little cracks, so's you can get a good grip.' Jane steps forward with the brush, dusts off the excess. She's built a bit like me, I realise - flat-chested, narrow-hipped, with long, muscled thighs. 'We've got to get back to Brum.' She wrinkles her nose as she smiles. 'It's been a fab

weekend. I'd stay till late but Fred's got the early shift, three o'clock.' She has a lean, brown face, rather like his and their voices have a similar twang. I think of Dr Hallgrave and wonder if she's truly paired as these seem to be. Is this Yin and Yang?

They ease me into place beneath an overhang, in the boulder's shadow. It isn't the same position as hers. The white blobs extend sideways, and I recognise them. It's where to begin, I can see. You go sideways like a crab, not up. If you fall, you won't break. It's only a couple of feet above ground level, in the dark niche between the upward jut of rock and the soil beneath.

I lay hand on the rock and lean into it. It smells warm, old, surprisingly of vegetation. Rock digs into the palms of my hands like someone waiting to be noticed. Like Marmalade when he is determined to get my attention, bony-headed. Rock is the earth's skeleton. I reach sideways, my fingers almost stroking the rock to find the finger-holds that others before me have used. This is the novice trail. 'Keep close to the rock,' says the man. 'Don't let your body weight become a drag. Find your balance before you start. Anticipate where you'll be, how your body will feel.' *Picture it, talk about it, name it, do it, become what you dream.* This is what it means. 'OK?'

His question is the starting gun. I grab on, swing one leg high to the right, wedge the foot into a gap. Gravity wants to suck me down but my back arches, hips must not pivot out of control. The hardest part is working out what to do with the dangling leg. I thought I was supple but I'm scissor-stiff by comparison with this pair. He doesn't mean balance the same way I do. He means finding a way of breathing evenly in and out even when my diaphragm is screaming. Now I've to move my centre of gravity to the side, and I feel the whole weight of myself through my fingers, wrists, forearms, shoulders. The jammed foot has to extract itself, be ready.

'Isn't it easier to go up?' I squeeze out the words; fall off. He's placed their crash mat so the bounce is OK.

'You'll get better,' says the girl. 'Keep at it. You have to practise. You'll be fine.'

I watch them pack their bags. Once they've gone, I decide to try the staircase again. This time I'm going to swing my legs above my head, same as she did. On my own. Same as she did. I will have to inflate the crash mat, in case.

After half of hour of struggle I run up the Stone the easy way, not the wooden staircase but the rocky steps smoothed out by toddlers and grandmas. The hills are watching. I lose patience with bouldering. The very act of leaping up the rock is such a release that I think I have to run the route again where I fell asleep – complete the round instead of retracing my steps. I'll wade across the Derwent, I know where to go, through the woods, up the quarry path. I'll jog up High Spy, I know it so well, then over Maiden Moor to the end of the ridge, to Catbells, down towards Hause End and then back along the track above the Derwent, back to the crossing point. The track is easy, easy running. I'll probably have to dodge past a playgroup coming down from Catbells. I won't even bother to move the car. Then I truly can say to Ma that I've been running.

I can't avoid this great slab of rock. I wish I could feel that it threatens me but it doesn't. It's just here, spattered with chalk and human sweat, with lichens marking its surface and rampant, insistent vegetation sprouting where you least expect. Rock is OK with me. I am building a wall from baby rocks.

I dawdle back to the bottom of the steps and glower at the overhang. There's something about this rock, about laying my hands on it, that's won't go away. It stares me in the face, every weathered crevice. Thousands and millions of years have gone into its making and it won't back off.

### **Zeph's Blog Sunday 20 August**

I tore such a chunk out of my knee that Ma took me to Casualty. Only 2 hours waiting. And I did something to the gastrocnemius that I might live to regret. Driving home from Borrowdale was agony. Every time I pressed the accelerator, calf muscles screamed. There's blood on the upholstery.

I ruined Sunday night. The things Ma has not said:

- 1. Tell the truth.*
- 2. Take somebody with you in case you get hurt.*
- 3. I trusted you.*
- 4. I lent you my car.*
- 5. I expect you to be more sensible than Noah.*

I replay the commentary if it was directed at Noah:

- 1. You're a terrible communicator*
- 2. You're always doing something daft to yourself*

3. *For goodness sake, take more care next time*
4. *At least you didn't run the car off the road*
5. *Will you try setting a better example?*

Pa knocked on the door to say he felt I'd taken advantage and it wasn't like me.

He didn't look like Pa, his face all smoothed out.

I wanted to punch him in the mouth. I don't like the feeling of being angry.

Maybe I do. Girls don't shout and scream unless they're off their faces.

## **Zeph's Blog Sunday 20 August**

It's rubbish that you can't add to a blog without opening it up, going through the business, unpublish, edit, publish again, tick all the privacy settings. It's easier to start another post.

Pa's been back, sitting on the end of my bed. He said, 'I am sorry. I haven't looked at you properly for years. Maybe I kept on seeing you as if you were still a little girl.'

We both got emotional. I wonder if he and Noah hug each other like this, privately.

Marmalade's not in. Hunting nights, just what he loves.

**1.06am** I saved this as a draft. Pa and I might have hugged each other but I can't get rid of the sense that he was putting it on, he didn't really mean it. I bet Ruth has been talking to both of them. She probably still is, right now.

Give me cats not people. Cats knead your thighs with their paws. I cut Marmalade's front claws for sheer preservation but still he purrs like crazy. He calls it grooming and pats my face to tell me I'm doing OK. As I write this, I realise I don't know exactly when I last saw him. Where the hell is he? I try telling myself about the time of year, his time, summer time, dawn, when his strange song yowls up the stairs. He's bringing home booty. He streaks straight under my bed to crunch, unless he's so full of rabbit or mouse that he makes for my pillow and sprinkles it with thorn, grass seeds, moulted hair. Ma's given me fresh bedding but I don't need it, everything's seedless.

I can't sleep. I'd really like it if Marmalade would lie with all his weight across my neck.

**Surfing Monday 21<sup>st</sup> August 9.33am**

[www.sexi-rexi.net](http://www.sexi-rexi.net)

**Physical chaos results when you allow irrelevant desires to dominate your thoughts. No-one is more important than you. No living creature's interests can be satisfied if first of all you do not ensure the fulfilment of your true nature.**

**But true nature will only be found through rigorous self-discipline of mind and feeling as well as of body. If emotions begin to define your actions, reassert control through exercise.**

**Punish your body – explore the farthest limits of pain – and grow beyond. Pain becomes pleasure once it is mastered. Master your body and control your life.**

## **Tuesday 22nd August**

Monday was a sleeping day. Ma went on at me to stay home so she could have me under her eye and for some reason I let it happen, like a kid with a temperature who couldn't go out to play. A wad of bandage sat on my knee and from time to time I replaced the cold compress around my calf, to reduce the swelling. I could have worked in the shop but it was such a relief to stay away. I did not have to see Bex's expression. I could watch out for Marmalade.

Three of us added to the wall – Ruth, Ma and me - and we finished the second layer of stones. They worked on either side of me but not like on guard duty. I hadn't seen Pa since last night. He was away in Ennerdale on the new project, so Ma said, and Noah and Simon were on long shifts. Ma must have said something to Noah because he only screwed up his face at me, and Simon smiled as usual and said he was looking forward to another session of wall-building.

Every now and then Ma would touch my shoulders as she stepped behind me, or she'd take one of my hands to look at broken finger nails, gently clucking. Once, she tipped my head by the chin and stared into my face for a long, unblinking minute, oddly reminding me of Marmalade. Ruth kept on picking up stones, trying to make them fit. Ma talked about soil, stones, birds, herbs, washing on the line, picnic lunch, fish soup for supper.

Ruth sat late in the garden as the sun went down behind the fells, her notebook on her lap. Ma came out from clearing away, and I went too, sitting between them on the rough bench. We listened to sheep bleating, a twilight tractor, a distant quad bike, a dog, and the birds, of course, the house-martins soaring and twittering and swooping till the curves of their flight were like arcs of song. Swifts, too. Ma said Marmalade would be in his killing fields. I should not worry. He'd come in eventually, and probably sick up all over the house. I lay in bed for hours before sleeping, swallowing and turning over, rubbing my eyes to get rid of the tears. They had been so kind, Ma and Ruth. They had spent all day on the wall with me, building it up. I heard Pa's car on the drive, the slamming of the front door, a low murmur. He did not come to say goodnight.

Next day, I strapped up my leg to keep the dressing in place under the skirt and went back to the shop. The first shock was that Bex was not there. Next, it was even more gross having to put my hands on all the floppy clothes again. I kept thinking of

snakes sloughing their skins. Pa had brought home a casing last week. It was still on a windowsill in the hall. Even the new autumn range of female stuff dangling on the racks was disgusting. I tried not to think about Marmalade. What would Pa think if I parked my uterus on the hall shelf?

The sky was overcast and the shop filled up with bored tourists. Just after ten o'clock Bex materialised. Shirley seemed to know where she had been but I did not ask. I did not want to have to ask. Bex looked like a different person. She had carefully painted not only her eyes but her lips and cheeks. She looked more than ever like a Chinese portrait, behind glass. For the first time I was almost glad when Shirley waved me over to say Daphne was on the phone again about a photo shoot for the shop. So I said yes. Curiously, it wasn't so bad to be a clothes horse. At least I knew I was dressing up. Shirley said she'd fix the meeting - tomorrow, maybe.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. We did Macbeth at school when we were younger. He didn't understand his own feelings, he got more and more violent. The story of his growing rage was totally engrossing. Of course, Lady Macbeth was played by a boy. A boy with an unbroken voice went storming round the stage in long skirts and everybody believed he was a woman as long as he was onstage. It's odd how you get to believe something even when you know it's not real. It's a different kind of real. There was Lady Macduff too. I used to wonder who acted the children's parts. Were they just younger, smaller boys, learning the craft?

The shop got so busy that Shirley sent me for lunch separately from Bex. Automatically, I headed for the library. Our teacher told us Shakespeare wrote parts for girls who dress as boys to get what they want - layer upon layer of staging, image-making. Shakespeare must have had an instinct, an intuition. I needed to read his boy/girl lines. But there weren't any of his plays on the shelves. If I had a smartphone I could have downloaded them. I wondered if I could surf boy-actors playing girl roles but all the computers were taken. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Shakespeare must have known about the waste of time.

There was one easy-chair free, next to the coffee-machine in the Teen section and I sat down heavily, feeling the drag of the skirt against the stitches. Shakespeare imagined a boy actor who's freed from the skirts of the play's character and puts on the real boy's clothing only it's part of the deception. The boys must have got used to it.



Perhaps they loved being on stage so they did whatever the playwright wanted. And the audience was used to it. It was what they expected. They looked at a boy and saw a girl – or they saw a girl pretending to be a boy and it was a boy all along but they played the game it was a girl, really. Astonishing.

The Teen section was full of books about vampires, boy spies, fantasy worlds, broken homes, how to pull at school.

I day-dreamed going into school as a boy and nobody looking twice. It was OK onstage so why not in school? I could feel the ridges of Simon's boxers under the droopy black skirt. I had told myself they would be more comfortable than lycras over my wounded knee and that was true. But they made me feel bold, too. Daphne might swear if she knew, or laugh. She was the one who said I had the androgynous look. I saw myself walking along a corridor and the girls sizing me up as a guy, not as competition. I pictured the fashion show videos of me on the catwalk, striding along in narrow black trousers. How different it must be to have cock and balls slung before you, gently wobbling. Girls' breasts wobble but not mine. Men walk with their legs slightly apart. I opened my eyes and watched an old guy riffling through books. His belly hung over a tight canvas belt and his thighs seemed ludicrously skinny.

Halfway through the afternoon Bex's face suddenly appeared around the end of a rack. 'You've forgotten.' She disappeared again. What? There was no time to brood. Shirley got in a state about something and I had to go back to the database to check a couple of entries, so it was not till closing time that Bex, on vacuum duty, swept in my direction as if she'd like to see me vanish up the hose. Black eyeliner emphasised the fullness of her eyes. 'You promised. The exhibition.' The dress slithered off the hanger to the floor and I scrabbled at it, ham-fisted. 'I knew you'd forgotten.' Bex dropped the vacuum head, leaving the machine still whining, grasped my wrist. 'I'm relying on you to come.' I tried to step back but her fingers were stronger than I expected. 'I need you to come.'

'It's OK, I want to see my life-mask.' I gestured toward the hanger, the hook caught in another's dress's straps.

She relaxed. 'There's more than that.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I really do want to come.'

I fetched my rucksack, texted Ma and joined Bex outside the shop. At least she wanted me to be with her. We walked slowly towards the Town Hall, and after a bit she flashed me a smile. Something unclenched. Her rose perfume sweetened the air.

Caroline was already in position by the entrance, with the little girls swinging from her arms. Susie danced to make her trainers flash and Tess swung on her mother's hand, letting go for the fun of it, and then reattaching herself. It must be very hard on the wrists, trying to keep the children clear of the kerb, passers-by, and impatient crowds at the traffic lights. Cars, lorries, queuing buses, belched out clouds of exhaust fumes.

Caroline looked wonderful. Her dark, straight hair had been newly trimmed, a heavy curve into the nape of her neck and she wore her favourite jacket of velvety fabric – the one she called her burnt sienna. The rich orangey-brown enhanced the glow of her skin and the neat bones of her face. She reminded me of someone. Tess? Bex, yes. But someone else? Her face relaxed as soon as she saw Bex and I realised she had been anxious. *She's getting married in a couple of days.*

There was a shout from across the road, and Jack hopped between the stationary traffic to join us, picking up Tess as if she were a toddler. Her face went pink. She gave him a gentle kiss on the top of his ear and patted his rough red jacket before he set her down on the pavement. Then Bex said, 'Ruth's on her way, she texted,' and I was instantly on guard. We went inside and I tried to concentrate. It was a huge event for Bex. She said she was relying on me. The inner witchy voice muttered, *Why does she want Ruth too?*

Earlier in the year, someone from the arts centre had visited our school, had seen one of Bex's works on display in the entrance hall and asked to see more. This had turned into an invitation to show her work in the town's summer exhibition, an artist among artists. He liked her forest, too. Bex kept saying, 'But I'm a textiles person, I'm not an artist,' and then Caroline would say it was in the blood.

The piece that had drawn the guy's attention was a textile mask. I'd been the model, putting my head into the frame so Bex could adjust and pin and mark. She was the one to say it was my life mask. It wasn't a life that I knew. Over the willowy frame she had laid a face with feathers that morphed into wool and fur that seemed to spread out like the whorls on fingerprints into waves. The mask flowed down from the head

across my shoulders and chest. It became a bit heavy, in the end, hot from the weight of fabrics and feathers and threads.

Bex made three more masks, all just as other-worldly, like creatures from fairy-tale. I guess they were beautiful. For one she chose textures and colours you find in the mountains. It made you think of how a mountain would be if it were alive. In the old days Blencathra was called Saddleback. People must have saddled up then as a matter of course. Bex saw the mountain differently and asked Caroline to drive her into the northern fells so that she could research on the spot. I went too. Bex took photos, collected samples of everything that grew, made sketches and recordings. Caroline sketched in charcoal and Susie and Tess ran round picking up small stones of many colours, chirping to one another like nestlings. I was in charge of the stone collection. Bex had said she was developing an idea about how the shoulders of a mountain support its summit. Then she'd made Blencathra Stingray.

She made gauntlets, too, long fingered, with every knuckle a miniature world – like spreading out your fingers and holding planets and stars. She built a breastplate, with ribs on the outside looking like precious metals, only she got the effects by lots of gold and silver thread. And she put the heart there, behind the ribs, bronze and oddly dark. Something got drafted for the exhibition programme, saying her work 'transformed the human body, fusing it with the physical and metaphorical material of the universe.'

The town hall's a bit small, really, lot of dark wood and pale walls. Corridors, closed doors. There was to be a reception for the artists and the woman at the door said TV cameras were probably coming too. Bex didn't say much when we went in but her eyes were everywhere. I turned away, digging my fingernails into the palms of my hands till it hurt.

Susie ran straight to the refreshments. She had her eye on the crisps. Bex said she was going to the loo and disappeared. In a flash I knew that I was never going to a LADIES again. I'd rather go in the wheelchair loo.

Caroline asked me to fetch orange juice for the girls when Jack went to collect wine and it was a relief to wander in the wake of his rusty-red jacket. His hair looked as if he had made some sort of effort at brushing it. I passed a number of large canvasses that were splashy bright colours: somebody's ideas of landscape, though I couldn't be

sure. Jack said he liked the water-colours and stared closely at a vast, shadowy painting of the view along Wastwater towards Great Gable. '*Cloud, mountain and water exist in the same spectrum of colour and substance.*' He read aloud from the programme. This view was once voted the Best in England, apparently, but the artist made it look sinister, with ominous shapes lurking in the sky. The clouds swirled down from the summit like fingers reaching and squeezing. The colours were shades of grey, a dead green, a murky brown. Somebody didn't see the fells the way I did.

'I like that,' said Jack, squinting at the price in the catalogue.

I said, 'What's the red dot for?'

'Hah. Damn. It's sold.'

'It's awfully expensive,' I said, peering past his shoulder at the catalogue.

Caroline suddenly appeared with Tess still attached. 'I think I'd like you to come.' Her voice sounded unusually flat. Jack looked over the top of her head and made a clicking sound in his throat. I twisted to see what was up.

Bex was standing beneath her display, back half-turned from her father. The glossy Julia stood beside him, wearing white trousers, heavy-looking white sweater. A large black leather bag was slung over her shoulder. Her clothes were exotic, different from anything Caroline ever wore. Julia looked from top to toe as if she hadn't designed anything herself, she'd paid somebody else a great deal of money instead. Some people pay a fortune for makeovers. The black bag curved over her ribs like a wet crab-shell.

Jack and Caroline were already walking slowly across the hall, steering their way between viewers who pinched the stems of plastic wine glasses, talking holidays. I followed, eerily aware that I would feel reassured when Ruth turned up. Tess held her mother's hand in a tight squeeze that Caroline tried gently to loosen. Tess did not let go.

'You ought to have a price on it,' her father was saying to the back of Bex's head. She was standing in front of her exhibits, facing away from them. 'I want to buy it.' Today he wore a black roll-necked sweater, same sort of heavy knit as Julia's, and narrow grey jeans, designer label no doubt. Shiny black pointed shoes, fashion statements. I couldn't imagine the world in which he had been married to Caroline. Jack

was Borrowdale volcanic to this man's heat-moulded resin. I ought to think of him as Dominic. It made him somehow smaller to give him his name.

Bex had tucked her hair into a black comb behind her right ear. The delicate flower-pattern rippled over her left cheek as she lowered her head. Slowly she pulled from her bag a long, thin, stretchy pink scarf, which she wound around her neck, over her chin, across her mouth. Her eyes flashed at me, at Caroline. Susie hopped from foot to foot, the wink of her trainers like traffic warning cones.

After a moment, Caroline said, 'Jack, you remember Dominic. I didn't know you were in town, Dominic.'

The man stepped to Bex, unblinkingly put one arm round her shoulders and proffered his right hand to Jack. 'My business focus has largely been abroad, but I've shifted my interests back home, now. Good to see you, Jack. We'll be family, I guess. Time I got to know my daughters again.' He smiled down at Bex whose face was shut behind pink gauze. He continued to address Caroline and Jack as if they were his audience. 'Obviously, as soon as you let me know you were getting married again, Caro, I had to take stock of my position.' He smiled broadly, his even teeth whiter in contrast with his tan, his beard-beneath-the-skin.

I couldn't square in my head the way he looked with the way he sounded. His accent was unnervingly like Jack's. I took a couple of small sideways steps, instinctively wanting to block him from the life mask. My fists itched. The mask had me in it somewhere. Jack accepted the handshake though you could see he really didn't want to touch him, but Man Dominic's long fingers held firm. 'I hope you're going to be nice to my little girls, Jack. I've bought a place just out of town on the road to Windermere so I'll be able to keep in touch, much more.'

Caroline cleared her throat, tugging at a strand of hair. 'I'm sure we can work something out.' Her voice was hoarse. A small hand crept into mine: Tess. I hadn't noticed her leaving Caroline's side.

Julia said in her stiff, snip-snap way, 'I'm here now. The girls can decide for themselves. They're old enough.' She took a position on the far side of Bex, pushing her hand through the rigid crook of Bex's elbow, pulling Bex into the shot.

Susie grabbed Jack's wrist, tucking her hand into his as she planted herself in front of Man Dominic. Even her profile looked fierce. 'You're not my father.' Her clear, thin voice cut through other people's talk and heads turned. 'Jack is my father. And Bex and Tess.' Suddenly I glimpsed the tough teenager she could become.

The man stooped, opening his eyes wide. The green and black flecks in the pale eyes glittered. 'Well, you have your father's spirit. I think we'll get along just fine, now I'm home. We can see each other lots.' He flashed a smile in the direction of Caroline and Jack. I felt, rather than heard, the rough intake of breath from Jack.

Susie's lip quivered and she leaned into Jack. Her eyelids fluttered. She still had delicate baby skin; and her father's profile.

His arm looped itself around Bex as he turned to Julia. 'We'll have to talk to Nigel about access arrangements, I can see. You remember Nigel, Caro. He's handled my stuff for years. Now, this piece of yours, Rebecca. I want it on the wall of my new office. I'd really like to show my business colleagues what a talented daughter I have.'

The pink scarf still smothered Bex's mouth. Jack said gently, as usual, 'I'm afraid it isn't for sale, Dominic – at least, not for a while. I think Bex needs it for school, for her portfolio.' He raised his free hand towards her. 'Have I got that right, Bex?' Susie flung herself away from Jack and into Bex, knocking her free. Bex's eyes were as helpless as a bird's. Last month, Marmalade brought a bird into the house and let it go. The bird flew into the bathroom and perched on the shower rail, trembling, shedding feathers. I hated that my cat was a hunter. *Please come home.*

I jumped at the new voice. 'Hello, everyone. Bex.' It was Spikey Todd, bouncing on the soles of his feet, ready to take off, a yellowed vest straining through the buttons of his shirt and his beard wagging with his smile. Caroline opened her mouth to say something but he was barging ahead. 'Bex, Figgie's here to see your work. The Scottish artist, Figgie, the one with the studio in Scotland? You remember?' Bex unwound the scarf, produced a faint smile. 'Come and talk. Is that OK, Mrs Woods?' Susie unclasped Bex's waist but stood close, like a sentry. She was almost as tall as Bex. 'Hi Joey, come to see your mask? Looks wonderful, doesn't it?' Bex put out her hands for her sisters, nodded to me sideways and followed Mr Todd. Caroline stared blankly at Dominic whilst Julia swivelled, turning her back. Incredible that my friend's

mum had ever been married to this man. She'd had sex with him at least three times. Three girls.

Jack and I caught one another's eye and my heart juddered. Jack's face wore an expression I had never seen before.

'I don't understand,' said Julia, cupping her hand under her dark hair. 'Why does he say it's your mask?' I watched Jack's face immobilise. 'Why does he say it's your mask?'

'I was the model.'

'Well then,' said Man Dominic in his Cumbrian drawl, 'wouldn't you be proud to know it was on display with other art works? I've a small collection, a few special objects.' I tried to match him stare for stare. He had the air of someone who always smoothly gets what he desires. Against my will my heart fluttered. I couldn't escape the musky, warm smell of him, the sense of developed shoulder muscles and strong hands. His eyes were dark and deep; Bex's eyes. He shrugged, shifted, and the mask glowered over his shoulder. Its cavernous eyes glittered.

I gritted my teeth. 'Bex doesn't do her stuff so only private people see it.' It came out louder than I'd meant. 'Anyway, she needs her mask. For the grade. Like Jack says.'

He gave a sort of small nod, half-closing his eyes. Jack moved closer to my shoulder, his rough woollen jacket a shield at my back. I held my breath, but Julia said, 'Get me a drink, darling. Not the white, it'll be warm.' The man pressed his lips to her pale cheek, his mouth fixed in its half-smile, before pushing away through the crowd towards the makeshift bar.

Julia adjusted her body in our direction, looking down her chin like the models at the fashion show. She was used to people looking at her. I wondered if the man's lips on her cheek felt dry or spidery. She managed to speak without moving her lips at all, or so it seemed. 'He's back and he won't be contradicted. He has rights. He wants his daughters. We'll see he gets them. Nigel will. He's used to do dealing with flummery. As for you, with a swift blink at me, 'I don't think you're a good influence. Something's not right about you.' Jack shifted from one foot to another. I was almost leaning against him. Her large blue eyes surveyed me as if she were measuring or

calculating - Daphne's expression but much less friendly - then she slid backwards into the crowd as if closing the curtains on her performance.

'I see why Bex thinks the world of you.' Jack's hand cupped my elbow and I tried not to shake. After a moment the waves of his body heat braced me. 'That man,' he muttered, deep in his throat. My spine tingled. 'The woman's just décor.' He was talking to himself as much as to me. I willed the tremors to stop. There was nothing to be afraid of. 'Ignore them. *Flummery*.'

'Joey's a very good friend,' said Ruth's voice and I flinched again, sweating now. 'Hi Jack. I saw the unhappy couple. Bad luck. They must have read the bit in the *Gazette* about Bex.' What bit? Bex in the local paper?

I was almost going to ask but Spikey Todd marched back with the others and a new woman, who tilted her head towards Bex, straining to hear above the babble of voices. Bex's hands were twisting the flimsy pink scarf into knots. Her eyes were bright, excited. Tess swung on Susie's arm, careering into Jack as Caroline introduced Figgie and they shrieked as Jack captured them. Caroline's face was pink. When Bex went from one piece to another, explaining her techniques, her feelings, what she saw, Caroline threw in comments too. Bex brushed her cheeks with the ends of the scarf, removing some of the blusher. She seemed not to notice. Perhaps she didn't care.

Figgie's deep, soft voice carried through the babble. 'But this is inspiring, Bex. You have such a feel for it. You were right to get me here, Spikey.' I saw bystanders smiling at one another, somebody pointing out Bex. 'And I had forgotten that your mother's an artist in her own right.' Caroline nudged Bex, whose eyes sparkled. I turned away to look again at the masks.

The masks were fixed to the wall on a sort of brown cloth, scratchy to the touch. They looked like totems. Gauntlets and the breastplate were pinned up too. I went from one to another, seeing them afresh, remembering where we were, Bex and I, when she was getting the ideas together. We had wandered along the twisting trails of the woods above the town, we had sprawled by the tarn on Blencathra, staring up at cautious walkers silhouetted against the sky on the high, narrow ridge of Sharp Edge, that led to the summit, and Caroline saying she'd gone up it once, never again, she wasn't going to add to the casualties. On my runs I had gathered fir cones, fronds of dead bracken, frost-marked stones, curious-shaped twigs, anything I thought might be interesting. I had no



idea, really, but it was like magic, what she did with the bits and pieces, making them seem as if they always were a part of whatever it was.

One step further, and my stomach suddenly churned. There was a new mask. New to me. I felt stupid, staring at it. It stared back. Bex had given it huge round eyes with sets of lids that seemed to open from every angle – like the cat’s third eyelid only this creature had any number. It made me think of insects and beetles and creatures with too many scuttling legs rustling under leaves. She was talking behind my back now, perhaps to me, I couldn’t bear to look round. ‘I made the feelers from fine wire, and I found this stuff, it’s wool round a core of stainless steel so it holds the shape.’ Figgie’s voice responded. She seemed to know what it was.

Behind the woollen feelers were other, sticky-looking strands – tentacles - formed from thin green rubbery strips that gleamed gelatinously. My toes wriggled in my shoes. It was like those dreams where you are swimming through deep water and something clutches at your feet, the dream where you suddenly wake up with your knees snatched into your chest.

Figgie’s voice said, ‘But this is haunting, don’t you think? Fabulous textures, not intricate for the sake of it. What was your inspiration for this, Bex?’ I turned away from the mask, unable to look at it any longer.

Bex actually smiled. ‘It was something I read.’ She shook her hair forward and the artist exclaimed at the pink flower sprayed into her hair.

I felt as if I was looking at the scene through the wrong end of the binoculars.

Ruth said, ‘I could write the back story for this mask,’ reaching up to touch the quivering tentacles, and Bex said, ‘Kafka beat you to it.’ They got talking about *Metamorphosis* and Ruth said she could supply a reading list of horror stories to make Bex’s imagination work overtime. I wished I had not finished Kafka’s story. Gregor Samsa’s father threw apples at him and one stuck in his back, where it rotted away. In the end, his family pushed him into a little room where they threw all their rubbish. Gregor starved to death without anybody paying attention or caring about him as long as he was out of sight. They only saw how thin he had become when he was dead. I snatched glances at Bex, whose face was full of movement as she listened to Figgie and

Spikey Todd, telling one another what Bex should do next. Bex must have been making this mask right now, in the last few days.

We all went for a pizza, with Figgie telling stories in the Scottish accent that I couldn't always follow. Bex's face was almost as pink as Caroline's. This evening they looked too alike. She sat opposite me, between Caroline and Jack, with Figgie and Mr Todd at opposite ends of the table. The stretchy pink scarf was now around her wrist, a slinky bracelet, and her hands moved just like Caroline's, fingers pressing, twisting, shaping, under the long, floppy sleeves of her thin white shirt. The restaurant was full of families, at least two with birthday parties, and there was a lot of singing. Jack caught my eye across the table, winked. I must have completely misread him earlier. He mouthed, 'Thank you,' raising his glass. I wondered if he would thank me if the next time we met I wore Simon's gear. He might not know anything was different, of course. Practically all my stuff was unisex. Tonight I was in drag, of course, the uniform I had not been able to change. Shakespearean.

Tess's eyes were slits of fatigue. She had eaten the dough balls, a sliver of pizza, and chocolate ice cream, sitting so tightly against her mother that Caroline had to eat one-handed. Susie, beside me, leaned into my shoulder like Marmalade when he wants to sit on my knee and I haven't yet made space. Marmalade asleep on my lap is a drug. It was Pa's idea, giving them the same name. My Marmalade is a queen. Question: when a cat is speyed or a neutered is the behaviour less gender-intense, or the same?

Suddenly I wasn't hungry and the pizza swelled in my mouth. Ruth quietly slid the glass of water across to my left hand, catching my eye, flicking her gaze at Bex as if trying to tell me something. But the waiter brought another bottle of wine and fresh glasses.

Caroline said, 'To Bex. I am so proud of you, my love. I am so proud of everybody here. I could not be happier than I am tonight. Well, apart from Saturday, of course.' Jack laughed, reached across, stroked the back of her hand with his rough forefinger. 'To Bex.'

Bex lifted the glass. I realised I'd been poured some white wine too. Then Jack said, 'To Joey.' Figgie asked about Saturday and there were several more toasts. A pang of misery tightened my gut.

Ruth tucked her arm into mine as we walked home but I could not warm up. She asked again about the doctor. I was afraid to ask why she was at the exhibition. I said instead, 'Why do they keep turning up? He must know Bex can't stand him. Why does he try to spoil things?'

'Maybe he loves her.'

'You don't think that.'

'I'm just trying out the idea, Joey.' We had reached the track leading up to home. Behind the house, long feelers of cloud strung themselves across a faint moon. Shadows were filling the garden and darkening the shrubs. Ruth pointed at the folding poppies in the hedge.

*I'm on the right track baby, I was born to be brave.*

I didn't think so. My sense of dread deepened.

## Zeph's Blog Tuesday 22 August

I've worked out that Marmalade has been missing since Thursday night or Friday morning. That's 5 or 6 days.

Ma says it's OK, Marmalade's poaching, the weather's fine, stop agitating, it's the time of his life. Pa won't look at me straight.

Marmalade's living his secret life. Except he doesn't hide it. He's just doing what he does. Unless he's trapped somewhere, locked in a deserted cattle shed. OR he's been caught by a combine harvester.

I have to think about what Dr Hallgrave suggested but my mind is fuzzy with emotion about a cat. And Bex. And Ruth. And the man I should think of as Dominic but it makes me think of mastering, of dominating, because that's what he does, I can feel it.

I have to get a grip.

Online is overflowing with information. Wikipedia has a heading, disambiguation. It's supposed to sort things out, separate things that look the same but aren't.



Is this me aged 7?



or this?

## **Zeph's Blog Wednesday 23 August**

I woke up with everything clear.

No Marmalade, but my body knew this all night long.

We used to get our cats from the cat refuge in London. They must have had our phone number pinned up in their office. Pa used to bury the corpses on the common because there was no room in our yard for a cemetery. Marmalade had several reincarnations what with the roads and the urban foxes and soon after we moved here, Marmalade was killed on the road. Noah couldn't speak for rage. Cars aren't supposed to drive faster in the country than in London but they do.

And then my Marmalade appeared in the long grass along the track only two days later, before we found the local animal refuge. He was just a kitten when he sat in my neck. He knows all the farmers. The farmer across the valley understands him. He will be across the valley in the old barns, stalking with the sheep. He has to be.

Today I have to tell Bex. This is facticity.

Publish, publish and no editing

### **Wednesday August 23<sup>rd</sup>**

The work skirt made a pool of shadow on the floor beside my bed. I stared at the blank white wall, tapping out rhythms against the end of the bed with my big toes. *Don't hide yourself in regret Just love yourself and you're set.* I needed to forget the night, forget the dreams, get up, get moving. I felt deeply tired.

The floor boards were cool for my bare feet, and my shirt flapped in the breeze from the open window. All night long I had rolled about under the surface of sleep, straining to hear Marmalade's yowl. I kept seeing him couched in the hedge, his amber eyes staring back at me. Within the dreams was another, the same one, over and over. I was tracking a faint figure across fields, past trees that twisted to follow my movements. The lines and curves in the bark stretched watchfully behind my back, waiting.

I leaned out of the window, taking in the half-finished wall below, the track, next door's garden where they had begun to dig a pond. It was going to be hot again today; you could smell it on the air, you could hear it – already there were clouds of buzzing insects in the clematis around the porch. Bees dived in and out of the beds of sage and thyme that Ma had planted last year, and the sunflowers were tracking the sun like gorgeous solar panels. I should be climbing through the hedge at the top of the back garden and lapping the field, flushing Marmalade out of his hiding place. I should be heading west to Wasdale to run over Yewbarrow and Scoat Fell. Ma would lend me her car again, maybe.

I pulled back into the room and rubbed my face, removing a tiny spider that had drifted on to my cheek. Today I would make the space and the occasion to tell Bex. Fact.

Somebody scratched at the door. My family bangs on doors.

'I am so sorry,' said Simon, frowning at the sight of me in a towel, I guess.

'It's OK.'

He scrubbed his thin brown hands across the top of his head. The black hair sprang back and forth like wires.

'Really, it's OK. What?'

‘I wondered how you were getting on.’ His expression was hard to read but he looked, as always, gently interested. For the past two nights I had washed out his boxers by hand (Machine Wash 40° C) and dried them on the window ledge. Last night the bizarre image of him wearing my pants under his jeans jostled into my head and made me smile until another thought dislodged it. Simon had talked of men in Thailand who, dressed immaculately as women, wait at table or serve in department stores. Customers do not look twice. There must be men all over the world wearing women’s clothing, hidden or obvious. Deciding which garment was for men or for women was a lottery, a game. Only it was more than a game. My skin crawled at the thought of dragging myself again into the shop’s black skirt, with its embroidered hem and tiny black beads. I must have shuddered. ‘I do apologise,’ Simon said again, with a polite gesture. ‘It’s too early in the morning. But you will be off to work shortly. I’m on late tonight. I didn’t want to – I heard you moving - .’

The spice of his body odour was utterly different from the sweaty rawness of Noah or Pa in the early morning. Perhaps the small attic room where he slept, next to Ruth’s room, smelt of cinnamon, of lemons. His slight, wiry figure was oddly comforting. ‘I wear your boxers.’

‘OK. Is it?’

‘Do you know about doppelgängers?’

‘I’m sorry?’

Ma’s voice sounded downstairs. ‘Cup of tea, Joey?’

‘I’ll be down in a minute.’

‘Do I know what a doppelgänger is?’

‘I keep feeling there’s another version of me, like a doppelgänger.’

‘Isn’t it bad luck to see your doppelgänger?’

‘Maybe. Maybe it is.’ I pulled the towel tight.

‘I expect most people feel there are other versions of themselves.’ He shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. ‘Like I’m a UK citizen, I was born here, same as you. But everything’s Thai at home. I just get used to it.’ I digested the idea. ‘Look, it’s

obviously a bad time. But you're OK.' He made a strange sort of bow with his hands pressed palm to palm against his chest, and ran silently downstairs.

In the shower I scrubbed furiously. People change their body shapes all the time, especially women. My reflection glowered from behind the steamy surface of the mirror. Back in my room, I picked up the tiny photo of a child self that was probably me. I supposed it could be Noah. When I had scanned it, saved it black and white and then reversed the image it was curious to see how neutral it became. How easy it was to manipulate. I directed my glare at the small mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all? This mirror displayed a hollowed-out face on which the black eyebrows and full upper lip drew attention. Maybe everyone has a second self, a ghost self, a second life never lived to the full; or life spent in secret, or online. Or you could pass your life under strange lights -infra-red or ultra-violet - seeing everything differently; x-rays and CAT scans, ultra-sound, magnetic resonance imaging.

You could not trust any online image to be truthful.

Dr Hallgrave didn't say what sort of scans I could have.

I knotted the towel under my arms, flipped the lid of the laptop, stroked the keys, looked up CAT. Computerised axial tomography. I looked up axial and tomography. The x-ray machine is a ring and you lie in the middle of it. The scan is called a tomogram and you get a virtual 3-D image of whatever's inside you; clever. The MRI scanner sends out radio waves to all the protons inside your body and they ping back where they are; it's like pixels, millions of them. And you get this kind of computerised photograph of your inner self. They can do this to your brain, too.

I sent to print, closed the lid, fretting at its surface as I thought about the structure of my brain changing under the influence of testosterone. It might take out all my confusion. I'd know what to do every day. I wondered if the scans came out black and white or grayscale or coloured.

Today I would talk to Bex. I tried to picture us together in a quiet moment, perhaps at lunchtime. She might agree to come to Maude's Meadow again; but even Bex the shop girl had changed. She used to be quite interested in what people were buying, would make helpful suggestions. Usually she was right. In the last few days she seemed to stand far away.



A whack at the door. ‘Tea outside,’ called Ma. ‘I thought I’d better bring it up, it was getting cold. It’s late, my – Joey. It’s quarter past eight.’ Only last week she would have knocked and opened the door, waiting for me to invite her inside. She hesitated before calling me her love, her darling, her sweetheart. I hated the faltering undertones in her voice.

‘You self-regarding git,’ I said to the self in the mirror, and towelled my hair dry. At least I could make my bed with no cat-shaped patch of mud in the middle of my plain white duvet. Marmalade had to be cushioned on long grass under a hawthorn hedge, his stomach full of mouse and rabbit, his ears twitching in the excitement of dream-hunting. The farmer had let the land go back to meadow this year, and summer wild flowers dappled it like a painting. Pa was keeping a list on the whiteboard by the utility room door: rosebay willow herb, blue scabious, red campion, pink Herb Robert, Ragged Robin, great blowsy red field poppies that I love, huge white plates of yarrow and cow parsley. Marmalade would be out there somewhere.

I went back to the window to gaze at the brilliant meadow, and the sick dread winded me. I craved Pa’s detachment, his curiosity about every living creature, even when it was dead. Maybe that was his brain structure. M/F? I climbed into the F clothing. The skirt was looser than ever. I found an old leather belt, fastened it round my hips to keep the skirt from slipping and went slowly down the stairs.

In the kitchen I poured the cold tea quietly away and opened the back door. Then I noticed Ruth, sitting at the kitchen table, head bowed over a notebook. She looked up, not seeing me at first. Then her eyes met mine and she closed the book.

‘I’m telling Bex today.’ I steadied myself against the door jamb.

Ruth’s face held no glimmer of a smile. ‘Take care, for both of you.’

‘You told me I ought to.’ I wanted to lean my head on her shoulder but she was still behind the table, one finger tracing the golden-brown arc of an eyebrow.

‘I only mean, don’t – Bex is under a lot of pressure, don’t you think? With her father reappearing, the wedding.’

‘You mean I’ll balls it up.’ This brought her round the table and hurrying towards me but I stepped backwards into the garden. ‘You don’t have to tell me what to say, Ruth. I’m sure you’ve more important things on your mind.’

I ran around the house to the gate at the front and out to the track so that I did not have to listen to whatever she was calling after me. I can drive, climb, run. I don’t need breakfast. Could a CAT scan put together the pixels of my mood?

I went down the hill like a cat, light on my pads over paving stones, past the gardens that were more densely scented, more sugary than the fields: pink and yellow roses, blue hydrangeas, tall red flowers I didn’t know the name of, and flowers like trumpets, and pots brimming over with tiny bouncing rainbow-shades. I picked up pace past shiny front doors, and paths humped with mosses, and clipped green hedges and woven brown fencing that gave off the tang of creosote. The wild woman’s song lifted my resolve.

*Give yourself prudence  
and love your friends  
Subway kid, rejoice your truth*

Other people must feel underground too.

Padding like a cat seemed to protect my torn calf muscle. Maybe I could run home at the end of the day. Running uphill is great practice. At the bottom of the hill I stopped to inspect the wall. They don’t build dry stone walls next to a street. Tiny plants grew in the mortar. It was staggering that they could hang on in such places. Earlier in the year every crevice had been smothered in miniscule pink flowers but now there were little egg-shaped fruits, so small the Borrowers would have made a meal of them. I had asked Pa what they were called but I couldn’t remember the name. He said he was surprised it was growing there. Sometimes you could look all over the place for a plant and not see it.

Bex sent a text. I punched the air. Stuff Ruth. By the time I got to the usual place my skipping had flattened to a slouch. The tables were slightly damp but somebody had tipped the water off the chairs. Bex wore yesterday’s filmy pink scarf around her neck and her hair was still wet from the shower. The purple flower lay in separate strands across her cheek. I remembered the way she laid out strands of embroidery wool and silk when she was making the life mask.

'I ordered already.' She flicked a glance across the top of the mug as she took a careful sip. 'I ate too much last night.' Today her face looked bare of make-up.

'So. Figgie.'

'Yeah. She says I can stay in her studio if I want, learn a bit. Before I go to art school.' She wound the ends of the scarf around each hand and tugged. 'It's an option. Mum and Jack think it's too good to miss and I should do it straight after sixth form.'

The sudden idea of Bex going away gave my coffee a bitter taste.

'My new mask, spooky, yeah?' Bex gave a tight laugh. 'My best, Figgie says. It kind of invented itself. I just supplied the hands.' I had nothing to say. 'Sorting out the tendrils, the eyelids, took forever. Couldn't get the silver and gold cloth to lie down, curves, like over the eyeball.' Her fingers recreated the gestures. 'Mum helped, sort of. My apprentice, she said.'

Her words were oddly disconnected. Maybe it was the way her head seemed severed from her body by the scarf, and the deathly white pallor of her face, with huge dark holes where the eyes should be. 'Drink up. Another great day at the store.' Maybe she was wearing makeup after all; some sort of whitener. Sometimes she played around like a kid with face paints. We learned in history that in the old days there was lead in the white paint women used to make themselves fashionably pale. It killed them.

Shirley had already jammed the doors open and turned on a fan. The hangers clattered as garments rose and fell on eddies of air. Two serious customers turned up by mid-morning. One guy bought a floppy blue dress for his girl-friend's birthday. I said she could exchange it if he kept the receipt but he was anxious about letting her know how much he had spent. A middle-aged woman bought the outfit from the new collection that Shirley was favouring: 'Shades of Autumn, Harvest Gold and Berry Red'. But whereas Shirley's hair was the colour of Morecambe Bay mud, this woman's hair flamed in short curls all over her head, and she had narrow, bright blue eyes. She was almost six feet tall, reckoned by how she stood in the doorway, and magnificent. 'She's going to a Do, the Lord Lieutenant of the Shire'll be there.' Shirley's whisper was too loud.

After the woman had gone Shirley went along one of the racks, rehangng every garment, restlessly shaking out and inspecting it against the light. We were instructed by

a nod of the head to follow suit. When we had finished, Shirley took up position in the shop entrance for so long I was afraid one of us would be sent into the high street with a placard. Next she tried to explain her business development plan. She was so excited that the long-legged woman would be at the same function as the Lord Lieutenant, had bought an outfit. Well-off women, like his wife, would see the new outfit and ask where she'd got it.

I said, 'She might be the Lord Lieutenant for all you know.'

Shirley tugged at her ponytail, curling it over her fingers. 'You're both being very peculiar this morning. Don't tell me you're waiting for the holidays to end so you can get back to school.' She gave me a long, disbelieving stare and idly plaited the ends of hair. There were still only the three of us in the shop. Her face rearranged itself purposefully. 'Daphne's been on the phone. You can go round if you like. It's dead as anything in here. Go on. If you want to.'

I scowled. Bex wandered behind the counter to rearrange bracelets on a stand.

'I've negotiated a fee for you, Joey.' Shirley's teeth looked whiter than usual. Last week she had been reading a magazine article about signs of ageing. Yellowing teeth are right up at the top there with bags under the eyes. 'Go on, half an hour. We can spare you.'

Daphne's studio was tucked at the far end of one of the Yards, not my sort at all. Café for middle-aged live music, expensive kitchen shop, boarded-up windows that you can't see from the high street – and Daphne's. Here I was, anyway, doing what I was told, curious.

The studio waiting room was lined with life-sized photographs of men in dress suits or so-called farming gear or designer sweaters – just like Man Dominic, in fact - and children in frills and women looking almost identical to one another. I was the only living person there. It was like sitting at the doctor's but with cardboard cutouts. The women were mostly skinny, like me, but with glossy cheekbones and big lips and jewels, lots of, and cleavage. Lots of that, too.

Dominic Ainsley. Maybe I should think of him as a cardboard cut-out too. It was easier than thinking of him as a replicator who kept materialising on the pavements, in the town hall, outside school.

I counted twenty photos. The room felt crowded. I sat in one of two deep green leather chairs and it was hard not to be impressed. The floor was tiled with small wooden blocks, freshly polished; white bowls of lavender were carefully placed on a couple of small tables, highly polished too. Hidden wealth. I know there are wealthy people in Cumbria. Some shops are too expensive and there's a show room full of Porsches. I wanted to picture instead a room full of scans. They could be beautiful. The ones I'd seen online were spectacular.

Daphne's voice on the phone from an inner office was like a code – rising and falling tones that made no sense and yet I ought to have been able to work them out. Today Bex had no book with her. She was not reading *Two Worlds and Their Ways* at work. The thought was shamefully cheering. Soon I was in Daphne's gleaming little office, beside a solid black desk, black leather chair, black filing cabinets, long mirrors. Somebody was making money. She offered to sign me up, to be my agent. I wanted to laugh out loud. I stared out of the window at the disused building on the other side of the Yard, with its blanked windows and peeling blue paint. I could strut my stuff as girl and boy alike, be paid for it. Maybe with testosterone I could even produce designer stubble to order. She described my face as 'usefully androgynous', a 'pallet for the artist to paint on'. Hah. I might meet half a dozen others all exactly like me. *Who's like you?* Ruth said that.

Anyway, I agreed to let Daphne shoot photos – well, it wasn't her, it was the man with electronic gear who had been outside school the other day. I didn't let on. He said he worked on commission for national magazines. He was ordinary. I suppose ordinary is OK. Probably ordinary is just what you want. You want to be like everybody else so nobody tries to change you. You can get on with becoming yourself if nobody pays attention.

Shirley had gone for lunch by the time I got back to the shop. Bex sat on a high stool behind the counter, looking at nothing. She glanced up as I approached, her face slightly more alive. The pupils of her eyes had adjusted so that she was less like an animal yanked into daylight from the bottom of its burrow. 'Three more paying customers since you left. Business booming. Three kids from school buying cheap.' She even sounded like herself.

I leaned on the counter beside her and we played at stringing bracelets as if we'd never grown older than eleven. Ten minutes passed; twenty. Outside, the air grew hotter still and long blocks of light trembled across the racks of clothes, transforming them into slivers of rainbow.

It was too good to last. Julia came, snicker-snack between the racks, aiming at Bex. She knew I'd be there. She had something to say that needed an audience. She got straight to it.

'Your father is taking Tessa out. He thought you might like to come too.'

Bracelets rattled on the surface of the counter. 'He can't do that.'

Julia behaved as though nothing had been said. 'We shall be meeting for tea. He wants time alone with each of them.' Julia flicked carelessly at a bracelet. She wore deep pink nail varnish which drew attention to the perfect scimitar curve at the end of each finger. 'He has taken Tessa to Sizergh Castle grounds. This is his phone number if you decide to join us.' She looked at me sideways. Black mascara scrupulously applied, every lash given its due weight. She should have been negotiating with Daphne as a model, not me.

Bex's voice was tight. 'What about Susie?' She bit her lip so hard I thought the skin would break. Julia folded her arms. The white silk shirt was sleeveless and unflattering, I decided; no muscle tone in her upper arms.

'As I said, your father chooses to see them individually.' She raised a straight black eyebrow, visibly lifted the edge of her upper lip. The pale fingers with their carnation nails grew agitated. 'Take the phone number.' She placed a white card on the counter. 'Your father's business card. His mobile,' pointing it out with a single tap. Her glance slewed towards me for a moment as if she knew I had not passed it on. 'Get used to it. Whoever your mother hitches herself to, you will be your father's daughter forever. Dominic and I have been together for five years, and you'd better get used to that too.' She made a curious gesture with both hands as if about to shape a giant snowball, picked up the white card, took the pen that customers use who have to sign instead of chip-and-pin, and scrawled large numerals on the back. 'My number. You can come with me when I drive out to meet them at tea-time. If you choose.'

The way she said ‘tch’ sent a fine spray across the counter that I had to wipe off once she had left. Bex disappeared into the direction of the office. Once, a host of small birds mobbed Marmalade and he scooted for cover. ‘Tch tch tch.’

More customers drifted in, bringing with them the scorched smells of diesel fumes, blistering cobbles, their own fiery skins. Two buses panted in front of the shopping centre, opening and closing doors with wheezes of pneumatic air. I leapt. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

‘I have to find Tess. I rang Mum. Can we meet later?’

‘Sure. Where? When?’

‘Walk. Meet you?’

‘What do I say to Shirley?’

‘I’ll make sure Julia spends money here.’ I worried away at the meaning of this, afterwards.

Bex sent me a text as I was fighting the coils of the vacuum hose, whilst the last shopper of the day dithered over buying a turquoise silk scarf from the bargain rack. Shirley smiled fiercely, hand on door, ready to shoot the bolts, turn the key, set the burglar alarm. Several pigeons danced up and down on the cobbles, as if on hot coals.

I rang Ma to say I would be late. ‘I’m going out for a bit with Bex.’

‘Is she OK? Ruth said she thought something was up.’

I chewed the inside of my cheek. ‘What time’s supper?’

‘Don’t worry, it’ll wait. Don’t get lost, will you?’ She tried to laugh.

‘It’s only Scout Scar.’

‘Well. I guess you’re a big girl now.’ We both listened to her embarrassment until I laughed.

Bex was waiting by the wall at the bottom of Beast Banks. At my approach she leapt across the road in front of a laden cyclist, making her swerve. The cyclist

recovered, balanced, tightened the strap of her red helmet, checked her panniers and freewheeled down the hill without a glance in our direction. She must be used to it.

I wanted to ask about Tess, tea, happy families but Bex set a brisk pace up the hill. I overtook, and the late afternoon ramble turned into a sprint until we reached the bypass. Bex had to stop and lean, gazing down at the cars and lorries heading for the motorway or Windermere. Her face was flushed and much more relaxed. ‘God you’re fit! I suppose you could keep on indefinitely.’

‘I hope so.’

We wandered towards the stile, where, as usual, several cars were parked along the verge. The sky was intensely blue. A heavy woman hovered over the gap in the wall, the stitching of her green linen trousers pulled taut by the swell of her bum. ‘Up you come!’ and the black dog leapt with a clatter to the top of the wall beside her. She made a fuss, gathering his rope lead into loops around her wrist. ‘Always a bit of a tussle here,’ she said, smiling broadly at the sky as she jumped into the long grass on the verge. ‘He needs to lose weight, the vet says. I tell him I’ll have to rename him RolyPoly instead of Roland.’ She batted her eyelids and shouted. ‘The dog, not the vet, obviously!’ Bex and I did not catch one another’s eye. ‘But I can’t, he’d be so embarrassed. The dog, not the vet, I mean.’ She nuzzled into the dog’s large head, tugging him off the wall.

Bex watched as they crammed themselves into the smart red sports car at the back of the row. ‘Do cats get embarrassed?’

I had not told her that Marmalade was missing and just shook my head. There was nobody else in sight as we slid over the stile and sauntered across the short, dense turf towards the racecourse and the common land. Sheep looked expectantly in our direction, then got back to serious nibbling. Twice I bumped into Bex. I seemed unable to walk in a straight line.

On the Access land, the path zig-zagged between small trees, springing bushes, heaps of shattered limestone and patches of bracken near the summit of the Scar. Hawthorn berries were turning red and already there were blackberries ripe enough to pick. Black and orange Painted Ladies and Red Admirals quivered in the afternoon sun and I sighted the pale yellow and brown wings of Meadow Browns spiralling through



the branches of a rowan. Brilliant yellow gorse jostled against purple heather. I swept a few flowers of gorse into the palm of my hand and thrust my hand towards Bex. 'Pa says gorse smells of coconut but not to me. I can't find a word to describe it. Somewhere between honey and pee? What do you think?'

With a quick movement, Bex batted my hand upwards, scattering the gorse over my shoulders and suddenly we were careering up the path like kids playing tag. Bex swerved into a narrower trail and I threw myself past her, shrieking as the black skirt billowed out and snagged on a blackthorn. I wrenched at it, barely hesitating as the skirt tore free so that a ragged flap of cotton swung at my ankle. Bex gave me a hearty shove in the small of the back and again we were off, hurling ourselves up the narrow path that ran under a rising ridge of ground. My gastrocnemius muscle twanged and I felt the plaster stitches on my knee giving way.

Behind me, Bex darted away from the path, and plunged up the bank through tussocks of spiny blue grass towards a small tree shaped like an umbrella. By the time I caught up she had collapsed on to the bony turf beneath its branches. 'It's a parasol,' she exclaimed, plucking at a low-growing twig. 'What sort of tree's this?'

I patted the coarse trunk and pressed my nose into the bark. 'Juniper, it's juniper, see?' I clipped a couple of hard black berries from further up the branch. 'Ma puts these into stew.'

'I could take some home for Mum and Jack,' thrusting her arm deeper into the tight-woven mass, regardless of how claw-like branches scored streaks of green and brown along her tight sleeve. She balanced juniper berries one by one on a flat fragment of pale limestone near her feet, before unfastening the rainbow-buttoned bag and throwing the berries inside. 'Nine, ten. That's enough. Come on.' Again, she scabbled clear of the tree on hands and feet, and stood with hands on hips staring around. 'What's that?' Ahead of us at the top of the rise was what appeared to be a wall. We made our way between bracken and anthills to the foot of a stony rampart and - *déjà vu* - it was the old ruin of the night I got lost.

We worked our way from end to end, idly speculating. It was uncannily like being with my best friend, Rebecca Woods.

There was no obvious entrance, no connection between three collapsed rooms. It didn't look like a sheepfold or shelter, though sheep graze on the racecourse. Welsh Black cattle were recent comers on the far side of the Scar, according to Pa, so this would never have been for them. No obvious path led to the ruin. The only inhabitants in this area were ground-nesting birds, voles, shrews. But the ruin still looked like a would-be house. There were even shards of glass among the stones. Here was the ledge that I had called an altar. In daylight it was more of a shelf or seat. There was no sign of fireplace or chimney.

Bex balanced on one of the walls, shading her face and staring out across the valley towards the far hills and the town below. 'It's beautiful. It's so peaceful. No wonder you come up here.' Her eyes were bright and excited.

'You could have brought a book.'

She sat down, resting her feet on the rampart and plaiting her fingers. 'I've given up reading for the moment.'

It was my turn to stand on the wall, one-legged. 'How was tea at Sizergh?'

The plaiting stopped for a second. 'Not doing it again, not if I can stop him.'

A stone slithered underfoot and I slipped with it, tearing the skirt still further. 'What about Tess?'

'I'll talk to Mum. It mustn't happen again.'

'And Julia?'

'Cow. Skinny bitch. Cunt.' Bex looked at me sideways through her purple-flowering hair and laughed softly. I waited. 'You're luckier than you know.' A small brown and white bird flew quietly down to a boulder below us, chirruping, cocking its head on one side, and preening a wing. Stonechat, maybe? 'Tess and Susie, they're so, I dunno, little. They're so little, still.'

'But Jack.'

'Yeah, Jack's a good guy. He is.'

The bird chirruped again, hopped off its rock and up the slope towards us. I held my breath. A dog barked in the distance and at once the bird swooped effortlessly away across the Allotment, disappearing against the shrubs and grasses and outcrops of rock. I fiddled with the long strip of frayed black cotton that had once been part of my skirt. ‘Suppose I’ll have to pay.’

‘Never. You’re the golden girl.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘She thinks you’ll make money for her. You will, won’t you? That woman, Daphne, she’s offering you a contract, you said.’

‘But I might rather be a golden boy. A boy.’ I was breathless.

Bex turned slowly towards me, lifting the hair clear of her face with a look of intense concentration. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Apparently I have a wonderful androgynous look.’ My heart doubled its beat.

‘Yeah. You’ve been working on it for years.’

‘Is it that obvious?’ Inadvertently I had gripped her wrist. She raised her arm but did not break away.

‘What?’ The purple flower in her hair rippled as a warm wind bent the grasses, whitening the heavy seed-pods. The hairs stood up on the back of my arms.

‘I – maybe – I got the wrong gender.’

She dropped my arm. ‘The wrong gender.’ I tried to look at her straight, but she was taking her pulse again. ‘Have you been talking to Ruth?’

I had to swallow. ‘I always talk to Ruth.’

‘You’re still coming to the wedding, are you?’

‘What?’ Somebody else was writing the script. ‘Yes.’

‘OK then.’ She tipped back her head to stare up at the sky and I followed her gaze. High above, two hawks wheeled on a thermal, dark wings effortlessly spread against the thin blue sky. They turned in majestic, masterful curves, shaping their

territory. ‘The sun is behind me. Nothing has changed since I began. My eye has permitted no change.’

‘What?’

‘That poem we did, about the hawk? Ted Hughes. I love that poem.’

My throat tightened. ‘Mrs Tully. *It took the whole of Creation to produce my foot, my each feather.* Yes.’ I had forgotten what I knew. The teacher, Mrs Tully, didn’t stay long in our school. She was young and excitable and her lessons kept on going well past the bell. We had all thought she was bizarre, exotic, from another world.

‘I could live here. Do you think anyone ever lived here? I could die here.’ Bex picked up a flint-shaped shard, spun it into the sea of stones, and leaned back on her elbows, absorbed by the circling hawks. I shifted, caught sight of a plant that seemed to float in stone, slid down to the floor of the ruin. It was the same little flower that clung to the town wall. ‘What?’ asked Bex.

‘Nothing. It’s perfect. It grows on nothing at all. I can’t remember the name.’ The little flowers leapt to view everywhere. I hadn’t seen them, but they were under my feet and hands and probably I was sitting on them. ‘Rue-leaved saxifrage.’ It was a small triumph and I bent close, fingering the firm red succulent leaves. ‘I saw lots of it this morning on a wall in town. I didn’t look for it here so I didn’t see it. But here it is.’ The white flowers swung at my touch. I wanted to plant flowers like these in my wall, when it was finished. If ever it was finished.

Bex spoke over my head. ‘I won’t be in the shop tomorrow.’ Slowly I stood up, adjusting to the stab of pain in my calf, the tight feeling in my chest. ‘Mum needs a bit of help. Keep an eye on the girls. That sort of thing.’ That sort of thing.

She gestured for me to go first, not meeting my eyes. I followed the line of the wall, listening for the clatter of her step behind me on broken limestone or the swish of her skirt against heather. The air was so still that I heard someone say, ‘Not tonight,’ from a car parked below. I wanted to smash my fists into a wall.



## **Please look out for Marmalade**



**Classic**

**grey tabby, weighs c. 3.5 kilos**

**Usually wears red collar + bell but may have discarded these. Friendly and talkative. Favourite places: fields at top of hill, garden walls, watching out for people/other cats. Microchipped, regularly wormed, no fleas. Went hunting Thursday August 17<sup>th</sup>; has not been home since. Please ring, text-**

# Zeph 07992113100

## Zeph's Blog Wednesday 23 August

Every lamp-post, fence, tree has a poster on it. I've shouted in the field, run up and down the hill, pushed open every door that isn't actually locked, yelled at sheds and garages.

I ran round the town, stuffed posters through letterboxes, especially the vets'. I'd have stayed longer but I didn't want to meet the jobs coming out of the pubs or anyone else for that matter.

One black cat followed me all the way back up the hill, howling.

I don't want to go to bed except it might be a magic token to get Marmalade back. If I sleep the hours will pass and he might turn up as usual, sitting on my face. How I would love to be woken by wet cat sitting on my face.

[www.lostyourcat.org](http://www.lostyourcat.org)

[www.homeforlostcats.co.uk](http://www.homeforlostcats.co.uk)

[www.findyourfeline.net](http://www.findyourfeline.net)

lots more no use at all.

## **Zeph's Blog Thursday 24 August**

Pa came to the shop at lunchtime and insisted on taking me out for lunch. Shirley cracked a joke about us girls and our fathers. She told Pa I was doing more modelling for Daphne. It would be great for my uni time, wouldn't it? I'd be able to supplement my income, maybe not have to borrow so much. Maybe I'd turn into a super-model.

Pa contemplated her like another specimen and I held my breath. His tan's like old shoes cracking up.

Town was half-empty, everybody sane on the fells, so Pa escorted me to a sofa in some coffee corner so that we could sit squashily, having to stretch for a table. He was terribly polite. I had water and a bowl of soup, since he insisted. Pea and ham. Too many bits. Pa had a cheese sandwich that he made even more crumbs of than I do. It was painful to see him making bread pellets. He said, this idea I'd got, he wanted to understand it but he was having a bit of a struggle. Ruth had talked to him. Noah's friend was freaking him out about the third sex. I wanted to say, third sex isn't it, Pa.

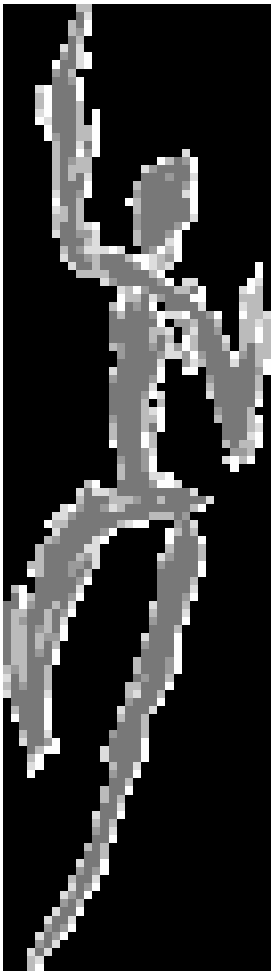
I thought he might work out the gender/sex difference but he couldn't fit it with me. Me. He wanted me to explain how I know what men feel like. Like he was setting me an exam for gender. Like he knows how all the men in the world feel. I tried to say we aren't exactly definite when we're born, we find out and we sort of invent ourselves too. Pa said I had no idea about the natural world and he's spent his life observing and I must have misinterpreted. So I said, 'Pa, it's still me. I'm still me. I'm just working out the details, that's all, I've got the same brain and feelings.' And he got up in a hurry, bread pellets all over the sofa. He said, 'You can't call it detail, what you're saying.' I could give him the weblink about morphs of gender but I don't think he'd take it in.

Simon and I built a bit more wall before he went to the pub for his evening shift. We didn't talk at all. Pa came out, muttered something and drove off.

Ma and Ruth were cooking something in advance of the wedding reception and were absorbed. I think Ma may have had a row with Pa.



No Marmalade and the black cat keeps turning up in the garden. I don't want to think. I just want Marmalade back. Now I know what sick at heart means.



This isn't a dancer tonight, it's somebody in a panic, chasing after Marmalade or trying to get over a fence, running away, escaping, leaping through glass.

I think about printing off the definition of facticity for Pa. I could leave it on the kitchen table, random litter.

## **Zeph's Blog Friday 25 August**

Can't describe how I feel. Pa left a note on the kitchen table. I'm obviously taken up with more important things so he's asked Harry to come and sort out the new wall. To make sure it gets finished in time for autumn planting.

I showed the note to Ma. Her face went completely flat.

I am not going to think about it. Today Caroline and Jack get married and I am going to spend time with Bex.

He's so full of his Ennerdale wilderness.

My leg hurts.

## Friday 25<sup>th</sup> August

I found the carrier bag of clothes that Bex had given me to look at for the wedding and shook it out on the bed. The array of clothes was startling – as if Bex had worked out what I might have chosen myself, if I had known how: narrow black trousers with a fine grey stripe, a jacket with sleeve buttons like a man's and a stiff white shirt. I don't know how she found these in Shirley's stock but at the moment of inserting my foot into the trouser leg I knew I'd worn these before, or their twin, at the fashion show. Bex had folded them carefully, interleaved with plastic wrapping from the shop store-room. She might have guessed I'd ignore the bag till the last minute.

In the depths of the mirror a hologram tilt – now you see me, now you don't - doppelgänger, male/female in the blink of an eye. I'm running along a high, knifelike ridge with plunging depths on either side. People fall off Sharp Edge, Striding Edge, kill themselves, every year. There are much easier ways to the top of Blencathra or Helvellyn yet still people queue to get up the hard way. The shirt collar tried to meet under my chin but I didn't want the tightness of the top button. The jacket lapels lay flat and satisfactorily across my chest.

Ruth whistled and Simon said, setting down a buttery knife, 'Hold on. I've something for that.'

From the kitchen sink, Ma looked over her shoulder. 'Now what's that about?' she said in wondering tones. 'We'll see you at Caroline's. Did you know there'd been a problem, did you know?'

'What sort of problem?'

'One of the girls, maybe? I didn't like to ask. I hope it's OK at the County Offices.'

Simon reappeared with a thin yellow scarf. 'Don't look so anxious, Joey, I think this will do the trick.' He tucked the scarf round my neck and over the stiff collar of the shirt. 'Now then, you see? You're ready.' Carefully his eyes surveyed the jacket, the trousers, my hair, the scarf, as if I were about to walk out on to the stage of a huge auditorium, with bright lights everywhere. 'I wonder. I hope you don't mind.' With a courteous gesture he pointed at my feet. 'I don't think you can wear those, can you? What do you think, Mollie?'

Ma spun round, laughed, sighed. ‘She won’t collaborate, Simon. She’s thrown out practically everything that isn’t trainers or running shoes or heavy winter boots. I can’t make her...’ She turned back to the coffee grinder, spooning the beans with a rattle into the metal cup. The nutty scent of fresh ground coffee lifted on a breeze from the open door. ‘It’s a lovely day. You could always stop in town and get some new trainers. Could you? I’ll buy them. If you like.’ She was doing her best to sound uninvolved.

Simon tucked his fine white shirt into belted cotton trousers. ‘If you please, just wait till I’ve eaten my toast. I’d like to be your clothing consultant. I’d enjoy it.’

Noah thumped into the kitchen, pulling on a crumpled but sweet-smelling sweatshirt, fresh from the washing line. ‘What do you mean, clothing consultant? Fi’s coming back tonight. She texted me, changing planes in the middle of the night, nightmare. You don’t look bad considering. Somebody ill in the family, I think. I’m going to Manchester to meet her.’

‘What about your shift?’ said Ma, turning round with hands that dripped soapsuds.

‘Simon can sort it out, can’t you? I’ll have to go back to Fi’s, see what’s happening.’ His face looked strangely piebald from the clean shave.

‘Noah, don’t be so cavalier.’

‘I’ll ask if I can move into the pub, there’s a spare room.’

‘Simon, please stay – we’d like you to stay. I expect Noah will turn up here with Fi in another day or so. We’d really like you to stay, wouldn’t we Joey?’

‘Would you say at the pub it’s a family crisis, mate. They don’t need the details.’ Noah had gone within ten minutes, his rucksack crammed.

I checked my email for news about Marmalade. Nothing. If I had a smartphone I could get my emails even in the County Offices. That’s where the Register Office is, Ma had told me. It isn’t the sort of thing you usually need to know.

Time went in a series of overlapping loops – wedding at midday in the Register Office/ shoe shop/walk back to Caroline and Jack’s after the photos/gallery/kitchen/garden. I was trembling still at midnight.

**GUESTS FORBIDDEN TO ENTER** in Ma’s neat capitals was posted on Caroline and Jack’s kitchen door but I decided to be family. When I’d come to visit we hadn’t eaten in the kitchen and I had barely glimpsed it during Bex’s guided tour.

Ma eyed me with a frown. ‘If you’re coming in you have to work.’ She was wearing her oldest jeans and a pale green shirt of fine cotton, which must be her concession to the party. Ruth’s trousers were in better condition, but her feet still wore the favourite yellow-striped trainers. ‘Take off that jacket and scarf.’ Ma retied the black and white striped butcher’s apron. ‘Did you get photographed for Shirley?’

I scowled back. In a while, I might tell her about Dominic Ainsley. The words ran round and round my head - domination, dominance, dominion.

I squirmed, though I knew I couldn’t actually run out of the house altogether. ‘Nice shoes,’ said Ruth, sliding past the laden table to sling her arm around my neck. ‘You look fab. So – what’s the word?’

‘Skinny,’ said Ma, with half a grimace.

‘Ignore your mother. You look comfortable. Photogenic. Svelte might be the word. We’d better get the photos sorted. Maybe we just have to buy you the jacket and trousers and never mind the photos, what do you think, Moll?’

Ma was carefully balancing olives and pancetta on fingers of toast. ‘Nearly done here. It’s her choice. Sorry. My pronouns are having a gender crisis.’

I hung the jacket over the back of a chair as instructed and surveyed the kitchen. It was a large, airy room, with sealed cork tiles on the floor and the familiar amber and terracotta tiles forming a dado around the walls. Two long windows gave sight of the garden. At right angles to the sink was a great black range, set into an alcove, with terracotta tiles to frame it and an old-fashioned drying rack hanging from

the ceiling. Bex said Jack had made the kitchen table himself from a slab of yew that he had polished and varnished so that small girls' paints would not damage the surface. The upright chairs had been gathered from junk shops round the town, and Caroline had upholstered the seats herself. She'd gone for all the colours of the rainbow. The cupboards were, I remembered, painted white but as virtually every door was open the room was at risk, wherever I looked, of foodstuff or crockery or glasses exploding from their places.

'So those are the shoes you bought with Simon,' said Ma, handing me a cloth and indicating glasses for me to polish. 'They'll all be in here eventually. Jack's got a chum serving champagne on arrival. We have to create a sort of servery. What's the time, Ruth? He's got good taste, Simon. We'll need at least two serving points. How many guests did Caroline say?'

In the shoe shop, Simon had stared closely at the ranks of boys' and women's shoes, and then shepherded me towards the shelves. 'Do you see? These are identical, just stacked with different labels on different shelves. Shoes for women that are almost the same as shoes for kids. Boys. You need shoes that fit. I think you won't get into boys' sizes, will you? And anyway, you don't want to look like a child on an outing.'

He had picked out two pairs of narrow black shoes with pointed toes, shiny leather soles, tiny square heels. One pair was patent leather and the other a matt black with stitched whorls like fingerprints across the toes. I would never have noticed them. I took a look at his feet: highly polished light brown shoes.

For someone so correct, so polite, he was very determined. A slice of the running-away fund vanished in buying my fingerprinted shoes but Ma would insist on paying anyway. She was always ludicrously excited at the notion of buying clothes for me. These she would never have predicted. I wondered if she would buy me a man's suit. Before today, I could never have imagined myself in any kind of tailored garment.

Simon had said goodbye in the County Offices car park amidst clouds of exhaust fumes, with a shake of the hand – again, that dry, warm skin and the faintly cinnamon smell of his coarse, shining black hair. 'Haircut next time,' he added. 'It doesn't need much to give it a slightly more masculine feel.' I did not know how to thank him. He walked away with a fast, gliding stride, confident and easy about inserting me into his

familiar world. Noah was in that world too. Was Fi? They were all there together, in Leeds. I could get out of a train in Leeds and be somebody else. Then I remembered that Marmalade was missing.

‘You’re doing fine with those,’ said Ruth, taking the cloth. ‘Can’t we get Joey to do something more creative and less menial?’ She placed a cool hand at the back of my neck and frowned, shaking her head slightly. Under her breath she muttered, ‘Have faith.’

Ma poured wine into a glass and swallowed it at a gulp. ‘I needed that.’

‘Did anybody ring, before you left?’ My voice sounded stupidly pleading.

Ma looked up sharply, set down the glass and ran to grasp my shoulders. ‘I’m sorry, my darling, but no.’ Her square face was flushed and I saw as if for the first time the fine lines around her mouth and eyes. ‘We may have to brace ourselves. He’s never stayed away so long before.’

Sometimes she could be psychic. I was haunted by the image of Marmalade lying up somewhere with a broken back, licking the dew off grass to stay alive. Ma kissed my cheek. She smelt of limes as well as wine, for she had been slicing. ‘Don’t torment yourself,’ she said, breathing warmly into my ear. ‘Keep busy. You’ve done everything you possibly could.’ Then she choked on a laugh. ‘Of course, this Marmalade’s a female. We’ve managed to obliterate her gender, haven’t we?’ Across the room, Ruth was watching, her shoulders tense.

I began to ferry glasses into the galleried sitting room. Everybody was making for the garden, and the rare, full gaze of the sun. The French windows stood open and the sweet smells of roses and lavender and something honeyed strayed into the room. Marmalade. I’d never bothered to find out if queens behave differently from toms, especially if they’re neutered. Does neutering save cats from longings? Not in Marmalade’s case, for sure.

The front door banged and more people streamed through the mellow wooden tunnel of the hall towards the garden. Jack’s police friends cracked jokes as they came, inspecting door frames and the way the floor had been laid, shedding uniform jackets like nuts bursting out of shells. Then Caroline’s artists came leisurely up the garden path, stopping to pick lavender or comment on the stained glass, a rainbow of soft

scarves and coats scattered in riotous contrast to the solemn blue-black fabric heaped around the coat-rack. I suppressed the instinct I had acquired, working for Shirley, to pick them up, to find the hooks. Stereotypes everywhere, why did everybody look predictable? I looked down the hall at the rectangle of brilliant light, seeing the energetic, quirky figures in the garden as in a series of stills from a film. I could edit – cut, splice, upload. Somebody would be videoing the reception. Touching the void.

There had been a great deal of excitable videoing outside the Register Office earlier, when I had been hanging around in the car park. I had felt exposed and stupid, being early, on my own. It was all because of buying shoes. Still, they were OK. I'd been working out a different pattern for the laces when a fleet of long black cars with darkened windows eased into the car park. Men in official-looking peaked hats climbed out of the drivers' seats and flung open doors as if it mattered. The wedding guests were obviously relatives, larking about. I had begun to feel alarmed. Most of the women wore flimsy dresses that they could have bought from Shirley. They didn't seem like friends of Caroline's or Jack's. I would be wildly out of place. Of course, they could be cousins or aunts or sisters. Caroline must have cousins.

They tottered to the steps with the forced arch of the back that goes with high-heeled shoes, all grooming one another, preening, squawking with excitement. Peck, peck, peck – this strand of hair, that ear-ring, a slippery strap, a slipping skirt, a neckline to be hitched up; down. Then the men followed, all grey and black suits with flashes of red and pink by way of waistcoat; cravats; buttonholes. It was like watching a cartoon, nothing truthful or real. It had made me feel with instant clarity, *I'm in the wrong place*. Then I thought, *I can go home and look for Marmalade*. A breeze had flurried across the surface of the car park, sending up whirls of dust and dead confetti. I had gripped the flaky iron railing in a sweating palm.

Then a smartly-dressed woman appeared at the top of the entrance steps, and instantly they all seemed to know what to do, picking their way up the steps, grabbing at their skirts or giving a tug to waistcoats.

And just as I had made up my mind to sneak home, a crowd of men and women appeared on foot, some of them in police uniform. They must be Jack's colleagues, stepping round the corner from the central police station. I had been watching a



different wedding party. It was like when the cramp grabs your calves if you don't warm-down after a run, and then the pain lets go and your muscles tremble with relief.

A man in a striped suit slid out of a car I hadn't noticed, neatly balancing a box full of blue and white flowers in one mighty hand. He had greeted the others with ringing confidence, handing out one flower apiece for the people in uniform. Drawing level with me, he said, 'Hello young'un, are you an usher?' I shook my head. 'But you're going to Jack's wedding?' He gave me a flower anyway; a buttonhole. The pin pricked my finger. I dandled it like a fool, having nowhere to put it. Bex pinned it on for me, later.

The flower was probably shedding petals all over the kitchen floor, right now, where the jacket clutched the back of a chair. Caroline's voice called me to attention.

'Hi Joey. I'm so glad you're here.' She was on her way from the garden to the kitchen. 'I only caught a glimpse of you at the Register Office. You look very smart – different, somehow. Have you done something different to your hair? You look very fit. It's very sweet of you to help.'

After Simon's comment about a haircut, I had thrust my fingers up and through my hair to form a crest. 'That's OK,' I said, balancing the tray of glasses. 'I'd better get on. Ma's got a timetable.' I saw myself in the long mirror, a thin figure in black trousers and white shirt, bearing a tray of empty glasses. The figure in the mirror shifted weight from one foot to the other and Joey stared back. Joey>Zeph. Josephine Wilcox on the school register, on my birth certificate. Earlier I had stuffed old pants into the crotch of the boxers to see the profile of trousers with a fake cock and balls. I took them out again, unnerved, uncertain.

I gave myself up to the flow of activity. The man in the pin-striped suit stood at the door into the garden and announced in his loudest voice that food was served. Ma took charge, issuing instructions, sending Ruth and me plunging to and fro with bowls and bottles, squeezing between guests to pour wine or juice, or to 'save me the hassle' of collecting a plate with 'just a couple of those little grilled lamb chops' and 'some more of that delicious salmon trout'.

I recognised faces after a while, and not just from the Register Office. Two of Caroline's artist friends looked at me twice, trying to work out if they knew me. They

had come occasionally to her tiny terraced house to practise new techniques; and a couple with a studio in Wasdale sometimes made the long trek into Kendal for a concert. Bex and I had half-listened to conversations or been called to admire a new onscreen design. A middle-aged man with a vast beard stopped me for a top-up of red wine. 'I seem to know you,' he said, indicating with his finger how far up the glass I should pour. 'But you're not Matt, are you. I met Matt.'

My heart performed an acrobatic loop. I excused myself and pushed back to the kitchen. Jack was talking to Ruth. 'If you come on Monday afternoon that would be terrific.' He had stripped off the rich brown jacket he'd been wearing and hung it alongside mine on the back of a kitchen chair. The shoulders were huge in comparison with mine. I saw myself dwarfed, ridiculous, in a standard masculine jacket. 'Pray for the weather to hold. We aren't going far. I couldn't get a flight at such short notice so we're going over the border and up to Glen Coe. Hi Joey. You're doing great work here.' He linked his arm through mine, the warmth and sweat of his body like a great fiery engine. I reached out to stroke the fabric of his jacket. It was rough as bark.

When they had arrived at the Register Office, Jack and Caroline, in the stupendous car they had been lent for the occasion, their faces had been shining. A huge white ribbon bow perched on the bonnet like a seagull giving its blessing. Bex and the little girls sat opposite, their smiles broad with nervousness. Caroline stepped out to applause and cheers for a blazing orange outfit and Jack clambered out afterwards in the nut-brown jacket. His police friends wolf-whistled at him. The little girls were wearing brilliant, full-skirted dresses with orange and blue flowers splashed around the hemlines. And Bex wore the close-fitting, wonderful bluebell dress I'd seen before. They looked like summer. Even Jack's friend, the driver, boasted an orange waistcoat. He closed the doors with a tremendous flourish, and stuck his thumbs into the waistcoat so that everyone could admire it.

I lifted the sleeve of Jack's coat to sniff the fabric. It smelt new; he hadn't yet given it the odour of wood polish, sawdust and oil that usually wafted from him.

Bex had looked amazing. The purple and white flower-pattern in her hair gleamed as if spray-painted; and from the right temple her hair was swept back by the ivory comb. She had stopped to say hello before the formal procession up the steps and into the Register Office. 'It's real,' she had said, lightly touching the comb with a

fingertip. 'It's real old ivory. Jack gave it me. It's my bridesmaid present.' Her skin looked polished white, like a statue, and for once, the eye-shadow was a muted grey. But her eyes looked through me. Tess held her hand, her small mouth firmly shut, as usual. Her glances shot everywhere.

'Are you a bit nervous, Tess, being bridesmaid?' I had dropped down on one knee. She put out a finger to touch the yellow silk scarf.

'That's nice,' she said in her fluting, precise little voice. 'It's the same yellow as my flowers, look,' thrusting out her bridesmaid bunch. I admired the match before getting to my feet.

Bex looked me up and down. 'So, the clothes.'

I wanted to touch her cheek. 'Thanks.'

She'd glanced at my feet and raised her eyebrows. 'Have you done a smash-and-grab?' Her face wore an expression of genuine astonishment. 'They're cool, Joey. I'd never have thought.'

'Simon.'

She had nodded. 'See you at the house, later. I'm glad you're here.' That's when she had seen the buttonhole wilting in my hand, took it from me, neatly pinned it to the black lapel, given me a straight, distant look. 'I'm glad you're here. You look different. I thought you would.' For a second she focussed, saw me; and then I vanished. She led Tess up the steps.

Jack squeezed my arm again. 'Did you enjoy it?' Ma was giving him a glass of something fizzy.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yeah.' The Register Office was a large hall. I had expected something like our school office but of course it was wood-panelled and a bit like a stately home. In fact, most of what happened I had not expected. Music, for instance – Jack and Caroline had chosen a recording of brass band music for their entry, and all the friends had cheered and applauded. It was a police band from somewhere. A woman friend of Jack's read a poem starting with the line, *Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face*, and my eyes had filled up. I was tired from not sleeping, of course.

‘The brass band was good,’ I said. ‘And you guys looked great.’

As Caroline and Jack had begun to exchange their promises, a shadow had cast itself along my bench. From the corner of my eye I had glimpsed a dark grey suit that flickered like silk: Bex’s father. I had stopped breathing, willing him to move on, but he decided to settle by me. His strong musky scent had filled the space, and his tanned hand rested on the bench back of the bench before us, golden thumb ring tapping on wood. He was restless. From the corner of my eye I had seen designer stubble more pronounced today; part of the picture, then. A shimmer beyond him had been Julia, on the edge of her seat like an exotic bird in stripes of black, grey and white shot through with purple. I suppose they were free to walk in. Nobody had told the people on reception to get out their AK40s and fire.

Man Dominic had insisted on talking in a low monotone. ‘My girls are looking utterly gorgeous, I see. I hope to catch them after for a photo. Julia has the camera.’ I guessed he would not carry anything, nor spoil the line of his suit by an object that was not slender as a credit card. ‘We wish them well, of course, Caro and Jack. Don’t we, darling?’ Julia wore a tiny feather clipped against her dark hair. ‘And I’m negotiating with Bex for that mask – that glorious death mask. I think it’s a death mask really, don’t you?’

I had stared steadily ahead. They were breathing my air and I had sidled along the bench away from them, feeling sick about Marmalade, about them. It was all mixed up.

I broke from Jack. ‘Better get on,’ I muttered, picking up some forks and spoons at random.

‘Caroline says that the girls’ father turned up at the Register Office,’ said Jack abruptly, rubbing his eyes. ‘With his woman. I didn’t see them.’

‘No,’ I said, dropping cutlery into a sink full of soapy water. ‘They didn’t stay long.’

They had hovered outside when the photos were taken, as the steps filled up with friends, jostling excitedly. One guest wore a green and red checked shirt like a lumberjack’s and hugged everybody he could grab. He didn’t seem bothered about whether he knew people or not. Jack and Caroline had shaken hands with all their

guests as they left the Register Office, but Dominic and Julia Ainsley had strolled out early, stationing themselves by the railings. When Jack had invited me for a photo with the family, Caroline had caught sight of Julia. Her face had stiffened, fleetingly, before she smiled politely and nodded in their direction.

Bex had muttered something to Jack and disappeared inside the Register Office, and then the photographer had run forward with more suggestions, and lots of people got out their cameras. I had moved away from the flashing lights. I attached myself to the railings until it was time to go.

Ma was stacking dishes in the dishwasher. 'I'm sure it was beautiful. Are you getting more photos taken? I haven't seen Susie or Tess in their dresses yet.'

I had seen Tess slide her hand out of her mother's and hop down the County Offices steps towards her father. I had seen him bend to whisper something in her ear, and her smile, a small, secret smile. I had seen Julia take the purple feather from her head and snap it into place in Tess's hair.

'They're round somewhere,' said Jack, running his thumb across the rim of the glass to produce a piercing note. 'I'll send them in to you. Or Joey could, you wouldn't mind?' I would go in a moment, once my chores were finished.

'You look as if you've been sucking lemons' said Ma, giving me a push. 'Go and find those girls.'

I went back into the butter-yellow hall, and slid my hand across the silky smooth surface of the curving cupboard, visualising Susie and Tess scampering past and stroking the cupboard as they ran. It ought to be that sort of home, where kids played games and clambered over furniture. Noah and I used to play a rapturous game of trying to get round the edges of the sitting room without our feet touching the floor. Pa was amazingly good at it but he didn't often play. Ma would tell him off. One night we had been woken by shrieks of laughter and had crept downstairs to find Ma playing the round-the-room game too, doing even better than Pa.

Perhaps the little girls had gone upstairs to change. Slowly I mounted the staircase and on impulse wandered into the gallery where Caroline's materials stood neatly in a corner. It was hot at this level.

I peered down on to the bobbing heads below and saw at once that Susie was twirling in front of a stocky policeman, holding out her skirts, pirouetting, pointing the new shoes – first position, third position. I wondered if she would regret asking to have her hair cut short. At the Register Office, when the wedding car had come to a standstill in the middle of the car park, she had leapt out, face pink with excitement, dragging impatiently at her full-skirted dress and staring at the waiting crowd. As soon as she caught sight of me, her mouth had opened wide and she launched herself with the shout, ‘Joey here!’ She had swung on my arm, pushing her bouquet to my nose. ‘Don’t they smell lush? Smell my wrist. I’ve got perfume. I’ve got nail varnish, look.’ Her fingernails had gleamed. Somebody had lovingly painted them with a pale pink gloss. White and yellow petals escaped from the tight little bunch of flowers in her hot clasp.

She was showing the policeman her newly-varnished nails even now, raising her hand imperiously. Tess was nowhere in sight and neither was Bex. I turned to look out through the round window at the fells across the valley, where sunlight created deep shadows between rounded hills. Jack built this house with space for dreaming. Up here, the air was thick with the smells of fresh bread, mayonnaise, mint, strawberries, cold meats, smoked fish, meringue, whipped cream. Fragments of conversation and laughter wreathed upwards, and someone began to strum on a guitar. A soft tenor voice sang.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.  
Blackbird fly....*

Still no sign of Bex. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t in the garden, but I knew she was not. From the gallery window there was an excellent view. Most people had come inside to collect their food and then drifted out to sit cross-legged on the grass. The guitarist had set herself up by a sundial at the far end and someone wearing blue-black trousers had produced a flute. They were tuning up.

There would be an even better view from Bex’s room. I guessed she would be there, peaceful in her tower, and with reluctance went up the stairs rather than Rapunzel’s ladder of handholds. It wouldn’t be right to use them unless she invited me. It seemed too personal. How ludicrous. In the old days of course I would have gone up

by the holds, banged on the navy blue door, shouted the best friend's catcalls. She was my best friend.

I stood at the door with a sick feeling in my stomach that perhaps I was no longer hers. Here at the top of the house sounds echoed and were magnified. I could hear no movements from the other side of the door. Maybe at home in my room, behind a closed door, Marmalade had crept home and was even now deeply asleep on my pillow. I closed my eyes and pictured it. Wish it, see it, make it. Only the mantra didn't always work. I ached from not having his tough, furry body wedged into my back in the middle of the night and his persistent claws in my nostrils before dawn. There were hours to crawl through till I would know the worst. It would be the worst.

I knocked gently on the wooden panel with a knuckle, feeling more and more uneasy. Why couldn't I hear Bex? I would talk to Bex about Marmalade and she would understand. I tapped again, two knuckles' worth.

The room was empty. Her bluebell dress lay on the floor. She must have changed into ordinary clothes and that's why I didn't see her. The new mask, its huge eyes veiled by many eyelids and gleaming, sinister feelers, was propped against the pillow. My knees trembled as I ran down the stairs, my new leather shoes clip-clopping on the wood. I ran into Ruth, and forgot all that I had just seen.

'I was looking for you.' She took my hand. 'Can you come into the kitchen?' Several stray hairs lay in damp strands across one cheek.

'More dishes?' I tried to sound light-hearted but my voice cracked.

Pa leaned against the black range. He looked yellow around the eyes and Ma had linked her arm through his. As soon as I walked in, he straightened up. He avoided looking into my face. I saw his expression change as his glance fell on my shoes and I knew he'd suddenly glimpsed how I wanted to be. He scowled, tensed and I was almost ready for the fight. But Ma's elbow dug into his ribs and he looked up with a different kind of frown. Something in my chest squeezed tight. 'I came to say we had a call from someone, about a cat that might be Marmalade.' I thought I would fall over. 'You'd better come and check it out with me. I brought the car.'

'What did they say?'

‘They found a cat in the ditch by their house,’ he said flatly.

‘Is – is he alive?’

‘He was when they rang.’

We drove away from the party at six o’clock. I know that was the right time. Pa was listening to the car radio, and it was news time. At least he had come for me.



## Friday 25<sup>th</sup> August

**7.12pm Joey to Ma**

Not M'lade no microchip

**7.12pm Ma to Joey**

Going home soon – why don't you go back to party? Ma

**7.15pm Joey to Ma**

Looking for M

**7.15pm Ma to Joey**

Would do you good. Ma

**7.22pm Joey to Ma**

Talk to pa, ps

Don't let Harry do the wall, ps.

**8.14pm Joey to Bex**

Bex, where r u?

Went looking for M'lade. couldn't find u anywhere at party. Bex?? J

**9.17pm Joey to Ruth**

pa hates me

**9.18pm Ruth to Joey**

He loves you. Give him time x

**9.19pm Joey to Ruth**

he loves his little girl i'm not her

**9.20pm Ruth to Joey**

where r u anyway? garden at home perfect evening. x

Andrew's here getting mellow xx

**Voicemail 9.42pm**

Bex, why don't you answer? I've been looking for Marmalade, we went to the vet, we got a report, but it wasn't him. I came back to the party but you weren't there. I've got to talk to you. Please. I'm by the Birdcage in town. It's heaving tonight, everybody's out partying.

# Wilderness

**Saturday August 26<sup>th</sup>**

Voice mail 0.03am

Hi Ma, why aren't you picking up? I wish you would. It's about Bex, Bex went off somewhere. I know Caroline rang you at home, I went back to the party twice but she's still not there. Anyway, I got an idea so I'm going to the Scar. She might be there. I heard Jack say he was going round town with some of his mates, in case she'd gone clubbing but she wouldn't. I tried to tell him but he wasn't listening, Well, that's it. I've got my headtorch, I'll be back soon. Bye. I got my compass too

## **Saturday August 26<sup>th</sup> 0.30am**

It's dark. It's the middle of the night, of course it's dark, starless. The moon appears, scowls, drags the huge swathe of grey cloud across herself and disappears, woman in a sulk. The cloud is fretful yellow at the fringes till the dark rushes back.

I can't work out if it's better or worse with the headtorch. At my last eye check the woman kept asking if the black circle was clearer on red or green and I really couldn't be arsed. I suppose it matters. Seeing shades of difference matters now. At least I've stopped shaking. This is my ground.

There's such a pain around my heart. Pa told me I was freaking him out. The young tabby from the ditch is just hanging on. We took her to the vet and she hasn't a microchip so nobody knows where she belongs. One of her legs is broken. Pa said we'd pay anyway, till the owner comes. The stray black cat sat under our half-wall and howled.

Getting across the racecourse is easier without the headtorch. My eyes adjust and I see the worn trail across the grass as far as the hedge and the gate to the Allotment. That's when I switch on again. The torch shows a tangle of thorns and scrub and within seconds I've lost all sense of direction. When I turn my head it's like a sabre, cutting the summer night into slivers of greenery that won't stay whole. In the total dark, after a few seconds, there's a spectrum of shade and I sense the solidity of things.

The path vaguely shows itself.

This is a fool's errand. I've heard the saying. Now I understand it. I'm here on a hunch. I couldn't bear another minute of watching Caroline's face crumple and smooth out and tense until a sob tore out of her throat like something breaking, a terrible damage that can't be reached. I couldn't bear Jack's begging face, wanting to take the strain but she won't let him, she can't. I can't bear how they sit close but the air between them is jagged. The girls are asleep, thank God. They won't know anything about it. Only Tess might. Tess had the secret smile. Susie thought it was a wonderful day, I'm sure of it. I tried to be useful all day so I wouldn't have to think. I stare down at the pallid white of my trainers and think of Ruth's yellow-striped trainers, yellow shoes. A yellow brick road. I'm not going over the rainbow.

I am useless here unless I can find her but I know she's here somewhere. I think she's gone to the ruins. I keep seeing her face the other day when we sat up here and watched the sun setting.

And I don't want to think about why she would be here.

I should never have told her. I should have kept it to myself till I went away.

I don't know how she would find the way in the dark. Only she's been gone for hours and hours so perhaps it wouldn't have been a stumble through the dark like this. Perhaps she came straight here to watch the sun painting shadows across the hills. It's funny that you can't have shadow without light. I would never have thought of the sun as the bringer of darkness.

I keep sensing something out of the corner of my eye, but there's no point in swivelling round to catch it off balance. It, whatever it is, knows exactly how to keep out of sight.

At least I can get my bearings. I know more or less where to go, even if I can't see how to get there. The needle of the compass flutters in the light of the headtorch, swirls round like a drunk, finds true north. I close my eyes, switch off the headtorch. Slowly the shades reassemble themselves into suggestions of scrub, a huddle of bushes, maybe a tree or two, the faint glimmer of a path. Limestone pallor. My footsteps are cautious. There's no point in trying to be fast. I have to find her, can't be chancy about the route.

And I am so LOUD. Limestone clitter scuttles underfoot like stone ants on the run. My ankles remember the twists and turns and how to miss them, this time. Accidental memories flare - Bex laying a gauzy purple dress against her face, or standing with arms outstretched at the edge of her room, or flinging a book into the air as she runs away from Matt. I remember her today at the wedding, in the bluebell dress, with a face overwritten by too many expressions for me to understand.

I stumble forwards, wary of netted brambles or manacled thorns. Atishoo atishoo we all fall down. I slip, clutch at thistles, bang my head slam into a stone. Lights flash before my eyes and the pictures tear me up. What time is it? The lamp slips off my head like it's got a will of its own. This is stupid. This is ridiculous, actually.

Get a grip.

I squat on the path, tentatively pat the ground all around me, methodically, so as not to push the headtorch further away. And I picture someone up here with a night-time video, animal-watching, falling about with silent laughter at what they've caught in their view-finder. Maybe badgers and foxes feel as stupid as this. The ground is warmer than I'd expected. I could lie here and wait for the dawn. Maybe if I stopped breathing I could catch the sounds of Bex.

Suddenly the moon sashays into sight - huge, yellow, lopsided, with tatters of cloud like torn cloth drifting across a wild face and I get the meaning of *lunatic*.

*Lunatic.*

I whisper it under my breath. Get up, get moving, there's light enough. I wind the strap of the headtorch round my wrist and break into an idiotic teetering run. The narrow trousers clutch at my thighs, drag at the stitches across my knee so that I cry out with the unexpected jabbing pain, grind my teeth in frustration as my toe stubs itself; boulders-in-waiting, perfectly obstructive.

Shrubs are more disturbing in this strange light, black and silver as the breeze shifts, and in my hasty push forwards they stick out their roots, grab at my sleeves. I wriggle to extract myself, infuriated by the delay. So what, if the wedding shirt tears too? My legs are leaden. In nightmares, the faster you run the more slowly the ground unrolls. The air stiffens, I bend double, clutch the knife in my side.

Great gobs of sweat run into my eyes and I dash them away with the back of my hand. There are too many bushes, too close and the entire Allotment cramps itself up, its walls a closing fist. Beyond the walls is the wide open Scar, where shadows thin out and the paths run straight. The knife twitches under my ribs but I'm not attending. It's Bex I must attend to. Breathe in, breathe out.

I snap on the lamp to check the compass, which is no help at all since my bearings have gone. If you don't know where you've come from and you can't see the lie of the land, you can't work out where to go. Half past midnight. No one has seen Bex for six hours – not unless she's with someone now. The very word '*someone*' is unnerving. I note that my fingers tremble.

This is the void. You are thrown into the dark and there's nothing but you. And inside you there's nothing but the dark.

Leaves rustle. A bird twitters, a piercing, sweet sound that sends a thrill through my nervous system. If a bird can sit in a bush and get along with its own business, so can I.

The moon disappears. I stand in a cleared space, listening to the pitter-pat of my heart and the nervous rasp of breath in my nostrils. All I have to do is wait till daylight; and daylight will come. If Bex is here I will bring her home. Today I will have brought her home. Future perfect. Name it, do it. I sit on a stone, imagine the spatter of lichen on its surface, the bird on its branch. I wonder if its nest is close by. The quiet of the night begins to seep through my defences: silence, soil, stone. I lift my head, listening, hearing something different.

There it is again – the rattle of stones, a surge of wind that might be a sigh. I won't move, won't lose the sound by so much as the twitch of the hand. So I'm ready when the moon yanks her cloud aside. I'm at the bottom of the rampart of stones, where Bex and I sat on Tuesday. I have known how to find it again, after all. I take a moment to thank the instincts I do not control, and then I clamber hand over hand to the top as fast as I can.

At first it's hard to be sure what's there, for the pits overflow with shadow, but my hackles have risen regardless and my heart thuds tremendously against my ribs. I can't swallow, I can't breathe, her hand is lying limp at the edge of the shadow, she's drowning in shadow and dark, ragged lines criss-crossing her wrist. A new and unmistakable metallic odour sharpens the air. I reach to her hand. It's deadly cold and sticky. The sticky darkness has spread over stones.

Slowly I ease myself over the edge of the rampart to where she lies across the inner ledge.

My mind clams up with mish-mash images – Take a First Aid Course on the Careers noticeboard, Give Blood on the cloakroom walls, Carry a Donor Card in the loos, tourniquet with tights, strangling with scarves – until the hand in mine twitches slightly and at once I grip the fingers, snapped back to intense concentration.

There's blood everywhere but I am trying not to panic. She's so cold. I have to know she's alive, that it wasn't my tremor. I bend to her face, hoping for the fan of breath but the breeze is playing games and I can't be sure. I lean into her breast, face pressed to the sodden fabric of her shirt, where blood has also found its way. How not to hear my own heartbeat? Blood on my cheek – I brush it off – it's in my mouth, raw meat, Bex, gross, o god.

I wrestle off my shirt and use the rent in a sleeve to tear strips of fabric for bandages. Everything now is black. Round and round her wrists, tight, not too tight, don't know about her circulation. Is it better to strip off my trousers as a blanket for her, or to use my own body to warm hers? I waste precious time, fumbling, and almost drop my phone. There's no signal but they say that 999 works wherever you are.

I slide my arms beneath her body, straining to control my juddering muscles so that I can move her gently, gently to the ground. My vision blurs with the effort. She's little and light but not a child. A fingernail breaks as I scoop stones out of the way. The ground is rock hard, naturally. Bone of my bone. Now that she lies curved like a comma, I make myself her double, tight against her spine. I become her outer self and breathe slow and hot into her spine, sending a surge of warmth from me to her. The heat fans back to my face, too, but her hands are still so very cold. The faintest scent of rose arises from her skin and I bury my nose in her neck, inhaling, exhaling.

Ringling 999 is not straightforward. I jab at the phone, can't explain where we are, and keep repeating that mountain rescue will know. She's kind, the operator, a bit thick, keeps asking for details I have already given.

Time yawns. I am so cold. I want to think it isn't my fault but here she lies, where I brought her. She came *here* where I told her I was not a golden girl but perhaps a golden boy. She must have thought I was disgusting but she kept it inside. Everything is so dark. I can't see the stars. I can't let go. I have to keep pushing out long hot breaths into her body. But I am so cold, only my face is warm from the endless breathing into her skin and I feel sick and blackness yawns and my head spins, lights.

A wet nose in my face, a bark, dense looming figures.

They say she's alive. The paramedics wrap her in foil, set up a drip, lift her to the stretcher with tenderness that makes my eyes water. The dogs snuffle. Loud patting

and mutters. 'Good girl Sheba, good girl Betty.' Somebody wraps me in foil too and I'm half-carried by a huge man in a fleece to the road where the ambulance is waiting. There's a car behind it and I'm astounded to see Ma and Pa leaning against the bonnet. Their faces are green by flashlight.

'How did you know?' I say, my lips muffled against Ma's hair where she has me in so tight a hold I can hardly breathe.

Another voice says, 'Oh Joey, oh Joey,' and I feel Jack's hand between my shoulders.

Ma says, 'Caroline's in the ambulance. Ruth's gone to babysit the little girls. I can't tell you what it's been like.' My ear is wet. She's crying into my ear.

We follow the ambulance to the hospital. I have no sense of time. Pa drives, Ma sits in the back seat alongside me. She won't let go. I'm ravenous and then I feel sick and hot and cold, shivering with feelings I can't name. Ma says, 'She's very shocked, I guess they'll know what to do for the best.'

I want to ask about Bex but my mouth won't work. Why did she quote the hawk poem when we went the Allotment on Wednesday? The hawk's a killer. In the poem, the hawk says *I am going to keep everything like this*. Nothing stays the same unless it's dead. Even the rocks change.

You really do get hot, sweet tea. I hate sugar in tea but it's wonderful. We wait for a while in the reception area on stiff, fierce chairs, and then for a long, long time in a cubicle where I can lie down under a thin blanket and Ma and Pa take it in turns to sit with me or go to the drinks machine. Pa has insisted on giving me his sweater that smells of cow. I could be lying in a field. I try to explain what I did, how I knew where to go. Ma's face has a white, scrubbed look, like a little girl's. Pa rasps his hand over his face, flicks the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, *What Car*, *Cumbria Life*, tosses them on the floor, picks them up again, flicks through. At one point Ma collects them up and takes them back to the waiting area but ten minutes later Pa has retrieved them. He starts to read the Small Ads aloud. It makes me laugh. Suddenly he drops them, grabs my hands and his face is scarlet. 'I got it all wrong.' Ma puts her arms around him and we shudder together as if the earth has shivered too.



A man in a white coat with a swinging stethoscope and tired eyes say he'll be along shortly. Ma asks why he can't stay now but she's talking to his back. Was that his ghost, then?

Pa wipes his eyes, takes my hands again. 'I'll find out about Bex.' It's almost too painful to smile. There's a grim set to Pa's smile that I have hardly ever seen. He releases me, strokes my forehead, and pushes himself up from the chair with a stiff, mechanical movement. 'I'll find out.' He disappears through the gap in the curtains.

Ma says, 'I don't suppose you could sleep. You could close your eyes, though. This is a horrid light.'

'What's the time?' My voice comes out cracked and squeaky.

Ma slips her hand across my eyes and instinctively I shut them. 'Nearly five o'clock. Soon be breakfast.' I wonder if Ruth gets story lines from real life or if she just makes things up. I wonder if Bex told her the secret story that I don't know. I wouldn't blame her.

**Saturday August 26<sup>th</sup>**

**2.12pm Noah to Joey**

God, kid. Noah ( )

**2.12pm Joey to Noah**

Feel like shit ☹

**2.13pm Noah to Joey**

Home frm hospital 2day?

**2.13pm Joey to Noah**

Waiting for dr

**2.14pm Noah to Joey**

Pa's Isot it ☹

**2.14pm Joey to Noah**

Yep

**4.14pm Joey to Ma**

Fetch me home now pls?

**4.14pm Ma to Joey**

We're all coming Ma xxx

**4.14pm Joey to Ma**

Who

**4.14pm Ma to Joey**

Ruth, Noah, Pa, me xx

**4.15pm Joey to Ma**

Noah?

**4.15pm Ma to Joey**

Try stopping him. xx

**Sunday August 27<sup>th</sup>**

‘I was the friend who let her fall. I cut the rope. I wish I hadn’t seen that film.’

Ruth grasped my fingers tightly. ‘Explain to me how you cut the rope.’

‘She kept telling me she needed me to help. She didn’t say so, words out loud, but I wasn’t paying attention.’

Ruth had dragged me out into the garden, to the wall. She was choosing the pieces for the stone jigsaw. I stared, half-seeing the curve of her backbone, a ridged but flexible hoop bent over the heap of stones on the moist brown earth. Her pale blue shirt lifted in the light wind that blew up the road and on, up the fellside, carrying a spray of rain. ‘Come on, Joey, it’s your design, tell me if I’m selecting the best stones. We need to get this finished, plants in.’

I wiped my face with the striped jersey. I was wearing familiar clothes: neutral, anonymous. Figure in landscape, faded rugby shirt and black jeans, short dark hair and straight black eyebrows. Everything felt dreamlike, distant. Then Ruth put a rock into my hand. ‘Come on, Joey. Time to build. Let’s get a yard done by lunch.’ She grasped my hand again, pressing my fingers over the stone until the sharp edges cut into the palm of my hand. It felt good, the solid weight and rough texture, smelling of wet earth and fine green moss. I wedged another stone into place. *Ruth says it’s not my fault.* The loop of the last two weeks was replaying like an uncontrollable video.

Ma had woken me first thing with tea and toast in bed. She said she couldn’t help it. If she thought I’d eat boiled egg and soldiers she’d have appeared with those. I was a hundred years old when I woke up. My knees creaked. Very old people get treated like babies.

I had slept with the curtains open, and the early light threw a pink dye into the air of my room. By the time I had finally struggled into clothes the sunshine had been wiped clean out of the sky by the wet grey sponge of cloud. All morning long, an invisible hand gave a desultory squeeze to the cloud. No sooner had we dried out than another squeeze left us sodden again.

Ruth crushed a forefinger trying to make two stones fit. I said, ‘Ease them. I’ll look for a different one.’ She arched her back, smiled, rubbing the aching muscles. I said, ‘What if -?’

‘You can’t be responsible for her life.’ I thought of all the time we’d spent together, Bex and I - all the texts and messages, the summer days in the field behind our house, the evenings when she read and I studied maps of Cumberland and Westmorland, looked up old fell races, did squats-sit-ups-press-ups in my bedroom or hers. I tried recapturing the sense of how it felt inside the framework of the life mask, its weight and slipperiness, the smells of willow and wool and crinkling paper, a hot smell

of something metallic when she soldered, the burn on her finger, the yelp. But it was fading. You can't make sensations come again. I remembered sitting flat on a slab in the yard of their old little house, playing spit-cherry-stones. That was easier to recreate – stone, moss, damp earth – they were all about me now.

Ruth said – as if her last remark had only been made seconds ago rather than half an hour – 'You're not the only influence in her life, are you? What about Matt?' I delved into the pile of stones, threw several aside in search of the right match. There was blood on my hand, another torn fingernail.

After a while, Simon came to the open door, leaned out, disappeared. Five minutes later he strode out in neat jeans and a clean denim shirt, swinging a couple of water bottles in each hand. Noah wandered out later still, wearing ragged brown shorts and a climbing top that used to be green. His face was scrubby with black stubble. If Fi were here, she would tell him off, rub her hand across his stubble and mutter into his chin. He would grin and pull her against him. The muscles of his tanned forearm would swell as they tightened around her body. I could remember that well enough.

Noah took long strides down the garden in my direction, arms half-raised as if to hug me, stumbled, dug into his pockets with a puzzled scowl. The weight on my chest lifted for a moment and I punched him lightly in the arm. 'You're up early.'

'Can't see my sibling struggle.'

'What about Fi?'

Simon half-turned from the wall to watch, opened his mouth, thought better of whatever he might have said. Noah shrugged, spread his hands, pointed at the wall. 'Instructions?'

We lifted and checked, placed stones in position, repositioned, stood back to wipe the damp from our faces. Time was marked in inches.

Ma called us for lunch. She had made vegetable soup and almost visibly stopped herself from sitting beside me. Instead, she sat across the table, watching through her lashes as I lifted the spoon. Her mouth opened as I opened mine. Eventually, I said, 'Ma, would you like to regurgitate it for me?' Even Pa smiled. He still had the shocked look of somebody whose clothes stand away from the skin, whose features are trying to recall how they fit. He saw my glance and stretched his arm along the table in my direction, brushing aside Ruth's plate and barely giving her time to whisk her bowl of soup out of the way.

'We nearly lost you,' he said, mouth twitching. 'I nearly lost you.'

‘No, no. I was always going to be OK.’ He gripped my hand so hard that my knuckles cracked. *It’s Bex who was nearly lost.* I was glad of the pain.

‘I nearly lost you,’ he repeated. Around the table everyone fell silent. Finches twittered in the bushes by an open window and water from a saucepan lid over the soup hissed upon the stove.

When the phone rang, I jumped.

It was Caroline, telling Ma that Bex had just been discharged. She wanted to see me. My stomach tightened and I didn’t want the soup any more.

‘Surely it’s too soon for her to be discharged,’ Ruth said, frowning, pushing her bowl away too. ‘I thought she had a transfusion or something. They can’t just kick her out.’

Ma said slowly, ‘I rather think from what Caroline said that Bex discharged herself.’

‘Can you do that? Surely you can’t do that, not after something like trying –’. Noah stuffed a hunk of bread into his mouth, looked as if this had been a mistake, and groped for his glass of water. He had an odd, closed look.

Ma said, ‘I rather think you can discharge yourself, if you’re of age. And of age could mean anything from about ten years old. If the doctors think you understand what you’re doing.’ She was still wearing the green shirt. She can’t have thought twice when getting dressed today.

Ruth refilled the water jug. ‘I guess they don’t want beds clogged up, do they? And there’s always the risk of getting an infection.’ Her matter-of-fact tone seemed to bring down the temperature. She leaned across the table to place the jug in the centre. Drops of water flecked the wooden surface, little globes of winking light.

Ma looked at my face and folded her arms tight across her chest. ‘I’m not so sure I want you going to see Bex today but I suppose I can’t stop you. I don’t see how it will be good for you, not today.’ Ruth put a hand on her arm and Ma’s shoulders hunched as if she had swallowed a wasp.

I stood in the garden assessing the wall. It could be finished in a couple of hours if everybody helped. I saw the floor of the ruined house, and the shards of glass in the clutter where rue-leaved saxifrage grew.

As I walked along the track to the road, a wet, black creature leapt between my legs from the grassy verge, mewling faintly. I hardened my heart and walked on. No

creature was safe with me. Trying not to picture Marmalade dead in a ditch was so hard that I stooped to pick up a flint from the track and ground it into my palm.

It had turned into a typical Sunday afternoon, with the cloud settled on the fells for the rest of the day and every tree and shrub water-sodden. *We could grow gills.* Creatures evolve to fit the habitat. We could all become amphibians together, like two-legged dolphins. My eyes stung from the salt of unwanted tears. I ached to know what had happened so that I could bury him – no, so that I could lay him to rest. Burial meant concealment in the dark earth, a covering over and forgetting. Ma and Pa were used to the reincarnation of Marmalade in the next stray, but this Marmalade had been mine from the moment we moved into the new house; the year we moved from London. Someone had dropped him in the verge, barely able to lap his milk. How do you forget?

Suddenly a car drew up behind me. Noah. ‘I’ll drive you. Come on.’

‘I need to walk.’

Wearily he propped his elbow across the open car window. ‘I can take you, easy.’

‘I need to think.’ His face closed up again and he reversed along the track. I walked on, baffled by a kind of muddled softness in my brother, but soon the only pictures in my mind were of Marmalade. I kept seeing him at full stretch along a windowsill, or bounding across the field towards me, or curled tightly on top of someone’s newspaper. To find myself at Bex’s gate was shocking. How did I get here? I pinched my arm. There was a cat-shaped space in the crook of my knee for Marmalade by night. You don’t choose who or what you love. Maybe in cyborg life you grow out of your emotions or man + machine leaves out everything that hurts. The mist intensified the scent of lavender garden. I struggled to get feelings into place.

Jack opened the door. He looked as bad as Pa; haggard and too small for his rusty-red sweater. He pulled me across the threshold. ‘I’m sorry to grab you like this but Caroline’s frantic, we’re both frantic. She won’t tell us. She turns her face away. She asks for Susie and Tess but we don’t want them frightened. She’s still sedated. They had to give her blood.’ Words tumbled out as if all the normal controls had been trampled. ‘Susie keeps bursting into tears and Tess hasn’t spoken a word since Friday night. Friday night. It’s three o’clock, my God, she still won’t talk to any of us.’

The kitchen was stark. Nobody seemed to have used the great black range and the table was bare apart from a bread board and hacked pieces of bread. A half-empty bottle of milk stood beside the sink and two or three mugs with protruding spoons sat on

the draining board. Someone had dropped an entire packet of butter on the floor in the corner.

‘Do you want some orange or tea? Water? I’ll tell Caroline. Don’t go, will you?’ His eyes were huge, the pupils utterly dilated, like a man’s who has been underground for days.

Left to myself, I shivered, wishing I had brought a fleece. It was warmer outside, walking in cloudland.

Caroline’s face was as bleak as Jack’s but more steady. She managed a smile. ‘Thanks, Joey. Thanks so much. She isn’t talking to us. Sit down a minute.’

We perched on the bright chairs, I on one upholstered in yellow and Caroline on indigo. Jack leaned against the range, fretting at his finger-ends.

‘I can’t ask you to talk to her and then tell us what she says, I realise that. If she tells you what, why -.’ Caroline stopped dead, closed her eyes. Her face was white and her black hair looked lank. ‘If she talks to you, I’d just be glad if you could ask her permission to tell us if it’s something we’ve done that we didn’t realise.’ Then she covered her face with her hands. The new wedding ring was a soft, wide silvery band: white gold, they had said.

I said that I would try. ‘But I don’t think it’s you.’ The doubt in my voice made her look up. She was not crying. ‘It might be me.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You? Of course not. She thinks everything of you. She thinks...’ She ran her hands hard over her face, fingers clenched as if to tear off the skin and then covered her eyes once more.

Jack slowly walked forward and placed his hands over hers. It was a curious picture of double blind-folding, colour-coding, his old red sweater curved around the shabby brown fleece she wore for screen-printing. ‘She’s in her room.’ He nodded in the direction of the stairs.

They couldn’t imagine that I was the one who had let her down. OK, I didn’t cut the rope, not deliberately, like the climber in the film. But that was only because the invisible cable in me was paid out to Marmalade. It was all wrong, of course. Nobody’s supposed to love their cat more than another human being. It wasn’t exactly that I loved him more but I knew how to love him. I loved him for his wildness, for winding himself around my legs, for taking over my bed, my face, the hollow in my body. He was fearless. Being friends with Bex was a great deal more complicated. I went online instead.

I hadn't talked to anyone online for days.

Slowly I stepped up the magnificent wooden staircase, stroking the banister, the warm, mellow oak sliding through the palm of my hand like polished rope. I might never come here again. I looked through an open door at the gallery, where clearing up had not been completed. There were still several empty glasses and plates on the floor. At Susie's room I paused, pressed my ear to the closed door, knocked. No answer. The further up the stairs I went, the faster my heart banged against my ribs. It felt like the end of a very long run.

A small voice fluted ahead. I pushed open the door of Bex's room to find Tess and Susie sitting on the end of the bed. Bex was lying flat on her back in the middle of the floor. She wore only her bra and pants. Her wrists were lightly bandaged and the white scars slicing up the inside of both arms were terribly clear. There were scars at the top of her thighs, too. Some of them were red, as if recent.

Susie leapt off the bed and ran towards me. I bent to embrace her quivery body, shielding her head in the palm of one hand. The cap of hair was soft and slightly damp. Bex gazed at me with a motionless face. Only her eyes were alive, peering through peep-holes.

'I think Bex wants to talk to me,' I said, freeing myself from the tight hug. 'But maybe she wants you both to stay too. I don't know.'

Susie's voice was higher than ever. 'She's got these marks all over. She cuts herself. She gets a knife.'

Bex sat up, clasping her arms around her knees. 'Would you mind? Could you pass me a shirt or something?' She was talking to me. She was talking to me. I plucked one of her usual long-sleeved shirts from the bottom of the wardrobe where it had either fallen or been cast, and wordlessly handed it over. There were goose-pimples on her legs. A short blue skirt, no more than a frill, and a pair of black footless leggings were folded neatly on the chair by the window. I held them out. She took them as if I were serving in the shop. Tess's mouth was firmly shut but her eyes were wide and with a shock I recognised the huge, empty pupils I had seen in Jack's face, Caroline's. Pa's.

Bex sat cross-legged on the floor and gestured that we were to sit too, forming a circle. 'Storytime,' I said, idiotically. The others slipped into place as if this were regular.

It was unnerving to watch Bex. No muscle of her face moved, except her mouth. 'I'll begin. Yes. The cuts. They are old, you know that.' She pulled up a sleeve, her



mouth tightening as the fabric snagged in the bandages. ‘Mostly old.’ Again she patted at her wrist as if taking a pulse, stroking the scars. ‘I started out with compasses from my protractor set. The year you came, Joey. I had wanted to do it before.’ I began to shiver again. ‘I used to dream about it. I used to dream about getting a knife and slicing into my mouth. I used to dream about getting a knife from our kitchen and slicing across my lips.’ She chopped down over her mouth with the side of her hand. Tess’s face did not change, but Susie clasped her mouth with both hands.

‘Why? Why?’ My question burst out. ‘It wasn’t me was it? Was it my fault?’

‘Oh.’ Her small, dead white face looked at me as if I were in a shop window. ‘It never occurred to me before, but maybe. I didn’t have any friends before you moved here, Joey. I used to get picked on. Teachers always used to tell me to stand up for myself but I couldn’t.’ She talked in a flat, soft voice, turning her head like a puppet, a robot, so that Susie, Tess, would come into focus. I felt flat as a picture on a wall. ‘Our teacher, that year you came, she told me bullies could smell me being afraid and I needed not to be so they wouldn’t smell the fear. But I didn’t know how. I was always afraid, even after - .’ She fell silent and seemed to be holding her breath. I counted. *Twenty-nine, thirty seconds.* ‘Even after Mum ran away with us, I couldn’t stop being afraid. She went back once and I remembered. She ran away with me when I was little, I remember that. I remember being in a little room. She had a friend we stayed with. But he came for her. He’s good at that. He made us go back. Everything started again.’

Susie and Tess looked like dolls propped up around a rug for a pretend tea-party. Susie’s eyes open and shut mechanically, like a doll’s. Her mouth opened and the small voice said, ‘Who’s *he*? Who ran away?’

Bex’s eyes swivelled in her direction. ‘Mum ran away with me.’

‘But who’s *he*?’ Despite her toy-like movements, Susie’s eyes were determined.

So I said, ‘Your real dad.’

Tess stuffed both fists into her mouth but Susie’s head snapped up. ‘He’s not our real father. Jack’s our real father.’ The tears on her cheeks were real enough and her hands clenched and unclenched around her bent knees but the voice was that of the teenager to come.

Bex slowly turned her eyes in my direction. ‘Yeah. The man. Dominic.’ She was looking at the ghost again, the shadow in the room.

I needed to help us out, Susie, Tess, me. ‘So what started again?’

‘He used to slap Mum about. He told her she made him. I heard him. After Susie was born it was worse. I saw it.’

Susie’s head reared back. ‘Do I remember that, Bex? Do I?’ She choked on the question, child again. I wanted to reach across, to hold her hand, but Bex was talking to the ghost.

‘So we got away again only this time Mum had fixed things better. We moved to our little house, the one we used to live in. That man went abroad. You came to our school. Tess was born and she never knew him. Never had to know he was our father.’

The little white-washed house: I could picture every room, Bex’s tiny room with the sloping window in the roof that you opened with a rope, and the big room downstairs for Susie and Tess with stick-on transfers all around the walls, and Caroline’s room next door, her table at the window, the computer alongside, and designs tacked loosely to the walls. Everything was white, to bring in the light, Caroline always said.

I asked the question cautiously. ‘You cut yourself because he hit your mum? I can’t work out about Susie and Tess.’ My mind went whirling round possibilities.

‘It was sort of like an offering to the gods,’ said Bex unexpectedly. ‘You’d come, you were my friend, he’d gone and I wanted to make sure he would never come back.’ There was a faint tinge of colour in her face and she looked at me properly again, pleadingly.

‘OK. OK. But why this? Why now?’

Bex’s eyes darkened. The chill in the room was almost solid. ‘Maybe you two should go downstairs and see your mum,’ I said uncertainly, looking from Susie to Tess. ‘We’ll be down in a minute. What do you think?’

Susie got to her feet, held out her hand to Tess. ‘Come on.’ She straightened her shoulders, took charge of Tess’s hand and stepped around us towards the door. ‘Come down in a minute won’t you? I don’t like it. Tess and me, we don’t like it, do we?’ Tess shook her head. The door clicked softly shut; Jack’s gentle hinges.

Bex suddenly blurted, ‘Check out of the window. See if he’s there. You’ve got to check.’

Mystified, I peered down. ‘Where am I looking?’ Bex’s window looked down upon the garden at the back of the house. ‘Who could get into your garden? You don’t mean Jack, do you?’ The appalling words had slipped out before I could swallow them.

‘You’ll have to look at the front.’ She wasn’t listening. The ghost was in the room and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

Then she told me.

## **Zeph's Blog Sunday 27 August**

Noah brought me a can of beer. He didn't hang around, just put it on the desk beside the laptop. He didn't try to look at the screen, even.

Work tomorrow seems another world. Someone will have to tell Shirley.

The worst was Jack. He looked wild. I should have come away when Bex was telling them but she wouldn't let me go. She had to practically die before she would tell.

She said, when she was telling Caroline and Jack, that it had been like living in a box.

Caroline sat with her arm round Jack whilst Bex talked and for a while I couldn't work out why, but it was to make him sit still. It's to do with why he left the police. She didn't say anything and he wasn't going to but he was kind of doubled over as if someone had knifed him in the belly.

Jack threw up in their cloakroom. I heard him when I was leaving.

Something's going on with Jack and I'm trying to understand because there's enough going on that I never paid attention to. And he's Bex's dad now. Father.

I found this website - [www.ukpolicetalk.org](http://www.ukpolicetalk.org) . It's a bit like [iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk). Policemen go online to try and work out all sorts of things, mostly what to do if something happens that they can't control, or to share experiences. Like what to do if they are off duty and there's a crime happening in front of them; and whether anyone will believe them if they do or don't do something. Whatever they do it may be wrong. I get that. I identify with that.

I never thought about a policeman being in agony like Jack. He began a rant about regulations being worse than prison but Caroline stopped him.

I looked up police regulations for custody sergeants and they are impossible. There's something in this website about stresses on the police, people like custody sergeants. They have to be almost superhuman steady, making decisions. There's so much to remember, so many variations

While in police custody, detainees are treated in a way that is dignified and takes account of their human rights and diverse individual needs. Custody staff are respectful in their day-to-day working and are aware of and

responsive to any particular risks and vulnerabilities relating to:

- those who have consumed alcohol;
- those who have consumed or packed drugs;
- those with mental ill health or learning disabilities/difficulties;
- women;
- black and minority ethnic detainees;
- children and young people;
- those with disabilities;
- foreign nationals;
- immigration detainees;
- those with specific religious requirements;
- older detainees;
- sexuality;
- transsexual and transgendered detainees;
- other factors.

Doesn't all this mean treat everyone decently? why are women singled out, not men? what's the difference between a mental ill health disability and 'disabilities'? I don't get it.

On [www.ukpolicetalk.org](http://www.ukpolicetalk.org) it says if a policeman has a really bad experience he may be off his head with worry and nerves so anything he says shouldn't be relied on. If he's asked to make a statement he won't want to refuse in case they think he's hiding something. At the same time, he'll be afraid that anything he says will be used against him, whatever. And all the time he's going mad with worry that he could have made a better judgement. That's what it says on the website.

It's Catch 22 again. If you make a statement it can be used against you and if you don't make a statement it can be used against you.

Jack said some men can't keep their dicks to themselves. He said it with such a look on his face. He said some men ought to be castrated at birth. He pushed Caroline away and ran at the wall. He slammed his fist into it so hard that the plaster was dented and she had to shove his hand under cold running water and fetch ice. Caroline wanted him to get checked out at casualty.

Bex talked like a dummy as though everything had happened to somebody else. Caroline did not move until Jack hit the wall. Then she jerked as if he was going

to hit her next. Jack didn't raise his voice above a whisper. Caroline said she would take Bex to the police station in the morning. Bex said, 'I'll go when I'm ready' and it sounded like a slap in the face. She can't have meant it to sound like that.

I try not to think about what the father did to Bex. She described it all. I don't want to remember but the words won't go away. I want to look it up but if I do I might get on a porn site by accident.

I don't drink beer but it was a family sort of thing for Noah to bring me some, I guess.

He probably raped Caroline, for Tess to be conceived. Dominic the Man. I think that's part of what Bex meant to say. Because Caroline wouldn't have said yes.

He fucked his daughter, over and over. Total control.

The house that Jack built. Jack built space for dreaming, he built for them as well as him.

There's a policeman who blogs, who actually puts his thoughts out to everyone - complaints and parodies and everything, so maybe I could -

I thought it was Matt's fault, I thought it was me. It was all of us, maybe even Caroline.

I thought it was me worrying about Marmalade, loving him most. It wasn't. I was looking at me in the mirror all the time.

**10.20pm Bex to Joey**

Log on

**10.20pm Joey to Bex**

What?

**10.21pm Bex to Joey**

2 long for txt

**10.21pm Joey to Bex**

Phone?

### **Chat Bex to Joey Sunday 10.23pm**

*Bex* Can't say it out loud

*Joey* Are you OK?

*Bex* He was after Tess, that's why she went for tea.

*Bex* He kept saying he wanted to get to know me again.

*Bex* He said he was going to get to know Tess better. You don't get away from him.

*Bex* Are you still there?

*Joey* You thought he'd do the same to her as he did to you.

*Bex* He gets into your head.

*Joey* You have to tell your mum and Jack.

*Bex* Hospital in the morning. Some consultant or other.

*Joey* Makes you want to kill him. I saw at the wedding, him and Tess, outside, her.

*Joey* Do you think that woman knows?

## Networking 10.46pm

[iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk](http://iwannagetoutofhere.co.uk)

**Narrative: Zenith 10.45pm**

*Does anyone know about being no-sex?*

**Comment: Moderator Sue 11.22pm**

What's worrying you, Zenith?

**Narrative: Zenith 11.22pm**

*Sex seems to drive people off their heads.*

**Comment: Cybersnake 11.34pm**

Makes you human, though. Old people give it up don't they?

**Comment: Moderator Sue 11.34pm**

Most people would say that sex in a loving relationship brings fantastic happiness. It's no good being driven by sex, though. Sex is part of the engine, not the driver.

**Narrative: Zenith 11.34pm**

*What about paedophiles?*

**Comment: Barbarian 11.41pm**

What are you getting into?

**Comment: Moderator Sue 11.41pm**

Everything can be twisted. Too much food makes you fat, too much alcohol rots your liver; fighting for justice is a good thing, fighting for the hell of it leads to murder. It's like cancer cells, probably. Cells in themselves are OK; cancer cells are just the same cells doing the wrong thing

**Comment: Barbarian 11.42pm**

What?

**Narrative: Zenith 11.46pm**

*Can you kill the love in the paedophile and not kill the paedophile too?*

**Comment: Cybersnake 11.48pm**

They make their choices, free will and all that

**Narrative: Zenith 11.51pm**

*Do you think people are born paedophiles? Or does something horrible happen and they grow up twisted? Do they choose to be paedos or does something else do it to them, make it happen?*

## Monday 28<sup>th</sup> August

'I didn't expect to see you today.' Shirley's eyes were newly framed by lines of golden glitter along her cheekbones. She looked exotic for a Monday morning on the high street. About twenty motor bikes had just rumbled past. Normally they never came



into town. It was like being in the middle of a herd of cattle – no, a herd of bison - bulky, black, massive, slow motion. The riders were bonded to their machines, hidden by total body-cover. A couple of engines still growled in low, vibrating surges. *I'd rather be in a herd of bison than here. More straightforward.*

Ma stood on the pavement with the bulging briefcase at her feet. 'Is this your mother?' Shirley tiptoed down the steps. 'You have a look of your mother, Joey. I heard about her great work in the middle of Friday night. You must be very proud of her, Mrs Wilcox.'

Ma said, 'It was a tough night.'

A rider revved his engine, let it settle, and Shirley pursed her lips. 'They shouldn't be in the town centre like this, I'll be ringing the council to move them on.' She stared past Ma's shoulder. I stood between them, trying not to shift from foot to foot.

Ma's eyes never left Shirley's face. 'I came along to talk about Bex, actually. She's making good progress. Her mother would have come but everyone's still in a state of shock as you can imagine.' Shirley tried to scoop Ma into the shop but Ma performed a neat sideways step. 'I have to get along, I'm afraid. I came to speak on Mrs Woods' behalf.' I watched Shirley's face harden. 'She hopes – we all hope - that Bex will be returning to work soon.' She fixed Shirley with that headmistress look.

'Yes, but.' Shirley smoothed an invisible hair from the corner of her mouth. 'I don't want to be responsible for – .' Her voice trailed away. The sun was fingering the cloud layer. Glancing up, I saw pale blue sky breaking through like dye. 'It's all over the town.' Shirley's eyes narrowed.

Ma said smoothly, 'Rebecca is not ill.'

Shirley could bite. 'She's only a Saturday girl, a holiday girl.' Then she added, 'I've got my business to look after.' She looked at me, at Ma. 'Well all right then, but I don't want clients nervous. She might try, do it, something.' The motor bikes fell silent at last, leaning on their stands whilst the riders disappeared into the burger café. Shirley took advantage of the lull. 'They really should not be allowed up here. It fills the street with exhaust. My shop will be full of fumes, I'd better close the door. Are you in, Joey?'

Ma spoke even as I was opening my mouth. 'Joey needs a day off, if you don't mind. A bit of time to get over the shock. Is that acceptable?' and she took me by the elbow, walking me away. Shirley called out that she would expect me tomorrow, and the shop door slammed with an incongruous tinkle.

'Don't be cross,' said Ma quickly, hastening me past the library. 'I know you need the money but really. Anyway, what I said's true. You've got a stretched look.'

Ma had parked defiantly, illegally, on the double yellow lines by the post office. She felt ready to fight the traffic warden, she said, fumbling in the pocket of the briefcase for the car keys. I watched the familiar scramble for keys with a darkening sense that anything could change. Ma caught my expression. 'It's not so very long since people who attempted suicide were sent to prison,' she said. I stared. 'It's true.' Ma tugged open the door. 'The legal position was that your body did not belong to you and it was a crime to try to kill it.'

'Whose body is it then?'

'Don't fight me, darling. It wasn't my law.' We got into the car. 'It was a religious thing. Your body belonged to God so suicide was murder.'

'Where are we going?' I could not get rid of the memory of wrapping my body around Bex, trying to trap warmth.

'I thought we might try to link up with Caroline at the hospital. She sounded so tense on the phone this morning.'

'I thought you were going into school.'

'Later. In a bit.'

Ma was concentrating on changing lanes in the one-way system. I watched her hands on the wheel, seeing familiar fingers. Mine were the same. I didn't ask to be born, I didn't choose it. She and Pa had sex, gruesome. They chose. All my genes came from her and Pa. The bubbling, fierce feelings in my head, were they from my genes too?

We were brought to a halt by traffic lights. Alongside, the river roared through the town, brown and teeming and running back on itself in rough, dark eddies. Rain on

the fells had filled the beck and gills, swelling now to the full-bodied current that would tear headlong towards the coast. I opened the window, glad of sounds that more than matched the hum of stationery traffic. ‘Ma, you know what you said.’

‘Which pearl of wisdom had you in mind?’

‘About suicides. Who owns your body.’

‘What’s bothering you?’

We swept over the river and glided smoothly between the almshouses and the rich green turf of the river bank. I pictured the river’s rampage through the flattening countryside until it carved its way deep into the sands of Morecambe Bay, and merged with the sea and the wide, enormous sky.

‘Who owns you?’

‘Me? You? Anyone? What do you mean?’ But I had stopped listening. I was a twig on a branch, on a tree, a huge world-tree like in mythology, roots in a system as huge and intertwined as the underground mycelium of fungi.

And I was me. I was me, I owned me, not like my coat or my shoes, but what nobody else could lay hands on - my spirit, my secret and unsayable awareness. I marked out my own boundaries, I could choose to say or not say. I chose the route that led to the top of the Bradleyfield Allotment. That was me. I went on my own, I went after Bex. Twig, branch, tree, root, seed floating in the wind, all of it me. My heart raced.

‘You’re talking to yourself, Joey.’

Tess and Susie were dancing up and down under the canopy of the Out-patients department. ‘Mummy’s gone in with Bex,’ said Susie, her face still pale. ‘Jack was going to take us out for an ice cream but he’s gone over there,’ and she turned to point across the slip road towards the hospital car park that we had just left.

‘Oh,’ said Ma, ‘well we didn’t see him. But I expect he’ll be back soon.’ She looked at their small faces. ‘Shall we go and find a seat? I’m not sure how long they’ll be, their appointment.’

We walked past the computer terminals inviting you to Check Yourself In Online into the waiting area, where padded chairs, unnaturally high, were set in formation around low tables. A cardboard box, half-trodden down, displayed wooden jigsaws, an abacus, three or four board books and some blunted crayons. They must get all sorts here. Like us. Ma persuaded the girls to sit down, and looked about. There was no sign of Caroline or Bex. 'I think I know where they'll be,' she said, suddenly looking as determined as Noah. 'I'll nip along and tell them we've got the girls. Must text Ruth too, tell her where we are. I was going to meet her for coffee at the Arts Centre before going to school. Might be later than I thought. I wonder what's happened to Jack. You stay, won't you?' Shr headed off along the wide corridor.

I dragged the cardboard box to their feet, looking for suitable books, when Susie said, 'Look, it's Matt.'

'He can't!' I shot up, overturning the box. Matt stood in the foyer, clutching a large bunch of flowers in one hand and his mother's arm in the other. His mother went to the reception desk, teetering on wedge-heeled sandals. 'What's he doing here? She's not here. How dare he!' I saw the look of confusion on Susie's face and bit the side of my cheek. Something about him looked undressed, newborn. He had shaved his head and the scalp was limestone-white. I felt a pang of pity that I didn't want.

'I don't understand.' Susie stood up, as if ready to run over to Matt.

I grasped the hem of her short skirt. 'They'll tell him she's not here, she's been sent home.'

'Well she is here,' said Tess in a whisper. 'And he's here too. Our real daddy.' My phone skidded under the stiff moulded chair, and I grovelled after it. Her small hand gripped my shoulder. 'I don't want to go with him now. Not if Bex cut herself. I don't want to cut myself.'

I wriggled free, took one of her hands, Susie's too as I kept my voice low. 'You live with your mummy and with Jack, now. You don't have to go with anyone else ever again.'

'He said I could go if I asked but I don't want to.' Her lip trembled.

‘When you said he was here, what do you mean?’ I saw with relief that Matt and his mother were turning away, making for the exit.

‘He was behind us.’ Susie’s eyes narrowed as she gave me a sideways, knowing look. ‘I saw him. Bex dropped her book and I picked it up and I saw him.’ She took a deep breath. ‘He was standing on the other side of the road, where the cars are. I didn’t tell Mummy.’ Her mouth tightened and again she looked older than her nine years. ‘I told Jack.’

‘What did Jack do?’

‘He went across the road,’ still giving me the sideways look. I felt clammy as I cast around for inspiration. An elderly woman cautiously hobbled in front of the glassed-in reception desk, where one man sorted slips of paper into piles and another focussed on a computer screen. I joined the small queue, desperate to catch someone’s eye. They were busy. The elderly woman waited patiently, folding her gnarled hands over the top of her walking stick.

‘Excuse me –,’ but he merely lifted a hand to silence me whilst he completed the task. The old woman shuffled and I had to step back, give her the place that was hers. Urgently I rehearsed the lines. *I just have to go outside for a moment. The little girls there – their mother’s inside with their sister. My mother’s here somewhere too. Could you keep an eye on them?* Too long, they’d never listen. My heartbeat gave a double-thump.

‘You all right love?’ The old woman gave me an anxious glance.

‘Susie, you’re in charge!’ She nodded, straightening her shoulders, and I ran.

The forecourt was almost empty. I hurled past a girl reversing carefully into a disabled slot, past two ambulances waiting with open doors and attendants, a couple of women crossing the slip road from the car park, approaching the main entrance. Matt stood open-mouth. His mother tried to pull him away. I leapt across the hospital road, up the grassy bank below the car park and bounded on to the tarmac where I came to a stop, confused by the ordinariness of the scene and the hectic drumming of my heart.

At first there was nothing to see but neat rows of cars and two men at the ticket machine. In the middle was a raised sort of sentry box for an attendant but it was empty.

I started to run again, automatically following the arrows on the road as if I were driving. And then I heard shouts, caught sight of struggling figures under the trees. A man was shouting into his phone, waving his free arm, stumbling back from flailing figures that fell, swung, ducked, doubled over.

My feet skidded and slipped on the damp grass and there they were, Dominic, Jack, Jack, Dominic, Jack, wrestling, falling, Dominic kicking with full force into Jack's ribs, Jack grunting and rolling aside and leaping at Dominic's face, fingers plunging towards his eyes and I screamed out, 'Jack! Don't! Jack, stop!' and he faltered for a second, seeing me. At once his head was seized in a ferocious lock and I passionately wanted him free to ram great blows into Dominic's midriff, crotch, nose. I danced from foot to foot, barely clear of them, balling my fists, breathing so hard that involuntary choking sounds were mine. Jack's mouth was distorted, gaping wide with the huge effort to pull away. Tears streamed down his face. The spectator shouted, 'I've called the police, I have!' and over my shoulder I saw the men from the ticket machine running towards us. A terrible flexibility sprang in my heels and knees and I was ready, ready – but suddenly a flat, rectangular, silver-glittering object appeared in Dominic's hand and he was swinging it into Jack's face with grunts of 'Don't mess with me, don't fuck with me, you fucker!' Dark blood spurted and Jack screamed and the deep fury of days and years overwhelmed me in a huge upwelling of rage that felt exact and right. I yelled and shouted, swore in a delirium that hurled me into the flurry of thrashing legs, arms, fists. I was on fire to smite the bastard from the face of the earth - grabbed at his raised hand with both of mine - bit into its fleshy edge with all my might – gristle and crunch - falling metal object – card case maybe? – bit again, catching the edge of my tongue – metallic taste in my mouth – screams and curses - still I hung on, scrabbling to keep my footing, to avoid the knee, the deliberate, kicking boots, stomach clenched to keep my neck braced, shoulders firm - cracking blow - flashing lights - searing pain in my ribs, in my groin - blackness and roaring and.

Someone was hammering nails into my skull. Someone had clamped my neck and shoulders to a bed. Someone was trampling up and down my body. There was a confusion of swirling rainbows and murky, swarming spots.

After a while I knew that someone was softly stroking my hand. My eyelids had been gummed down but I was determined to prise them apart. Ruth's voice said, 'Hi Joey. You do have a knack of creating plot-lines,' which brought an unexpected grunt

of laughter and stabbing pain in my side. Ma's voice hiccupped, and my eyelids winched themselves fully open.

They were sitting together on one side of the bed which saved me the agony of turning my head. Ruth's nose was pink.

'Jack?' I still had a voice that worked.

'He's OK.' Ma leaned forward. It was her hand cradling mine. 'They've patched him up but he's being sent on to Lancaster. His eye's a bit of a mess. If you hadn't got involved.' My eyelids fell down again. Her voice continued, 'Shall we get the doctor back? Ruth?'

I heard a rustle, the swish of a curtain. The air moved over my face with a comforting sigh.

Ma said, 'It could have been so very much worse. He went for you instead. Dominic knocked you out and didn't stop kicking you till Jack grabbed him. That's what the others said. Apparently it took three men to get Jack off him.'

I stared at the theatre of lights behind my eyelids. 'Jack,' I started, cleared my throat, tried again. 'Jack's eye. That man had a metal thing in his hand. He meant to get Jack's eye. Dominic.' I made myself say it. Make him human, not the devil.

'Yes darling. Try not to think about it.'

'Ma,' I said, feeling the weak, salty tears springing out regardless, 'I wanted to kill him.' Tentatively I moved my lower jaw up and down. It felt as if my bite would never be the same again. My free hand moved to the piercing pain in the corner of the jaw.

'Mm,' said Ma. 'I shouldn't worry about it. Let's think about you, let's take care a bit of you, shall we? Leave it alone, love. You probably damaged a tendon or two but it'll be OK. The doctor says we should take you to the dentist. Maybe you'll need one of those bite things to sleep with for a few weeks. Let your jaw relax.'

'Yes, but Jack's eye.' I kept seeing the gouge, the droop of the eyelid, the swollen globule burgeoning like foul fruit. I would always want to kill him. It was a black certainty.

‘You shouldn’t worry about anybody except you right now,’ said Ma, reaching over to lay her cool hand on my forehead. Her breath smelt stale. She had been crying.

I tried in vain to sit up.

‘It’s a brace on your neck. It won’t stay but they’re making sure you don’t thrash about. Your head struck the tarmac pretty hard, we think. No, leave it alone. Try to be quiet. Here.’ A straw was pushed between my lips and automatically I sucked. Cold, clear water rushed into my mouth and down my chin. Ma mopped up with a soft cloth.

The curtains swung back and the doctor came in. Ruth was behind. Her nose was still pink. The doctor was young, a woman with long hair swept into a loose knot on top of her head. She picked up my spare wrist. ‘OK. Pulse OK. X-rays next but I think you’ll be fine to go home tomorrow.’ She looked at Ma. ‘We’ll just observe her overnight. In case the concussion has consequences. But you seem a very resilient person, Joey. Fit.’

Ruth said in a low voice to Ma, ‘There’s someone from the police outside. They want a statement, I think.’

The doctor frowned down at me. ‘That’s up to you right now, Joey. I’d quite like you to have some normal sleep.’

I wanted to sit up but the room performed a sickening twist. ‘Tess – what happened?’

Ma held tight to my hand. ‘It’s OK. Everyone is safe. It’s all been a bit of a mess, doctor.’

The doctor sat down carefully on the edge of the bed. ‘The local press have been around. It sounds like a bit of a drama. You’ve been in the wars twice now, I gather from the notes. I expect you want to get her home, Mrs Wilcox.’ I saw their eyes meet. They nodded at one another.

Ruth said, ‘Bex’s father has been arrested, Joey, if that’s any consolation. I think it’s all coming out now.’

‘What about Jack?’ The air felt chill.



Ma said, 'You know, we'll have to wait. People saw it all. One man says Dominic hit first but it was very confusing.'

I muttered, 'I would have killed him.' A small surge of remembered rage ran through my body. 'Evil bastard.'

The doctor slowly stood up, watching me with a strange look on her face. 'He certainly laid into you, young woman. You're going to have some spectacular bruises. I'll leave you to it for a while, Mrs Wilcox. We'll probably discharge her tomorrow and send a note to your GP. I'll come in later, Joey. See about some pain relief.' She nodded. The silence thickened as the curtains closed. I had to let myself go. The stabbing needles in my groin were gradually morphing into an intense and throbbing ache that rose and fell like a great tide, dragging at banks of sand. It was easier to close my eyes, to float up and down.

Ma was whispering, 'She can't be so bad. They'd have taken her to Lancaster or somewhere, like Jack.'

Dimly I heard Ruth's response. 'You heard her say it, she's a fighter. He. Who've you got here, Moll?' and Ma murmured, 'No idea but it scarcely matters, does it? Our kid.'

'They won't charge Joey too, will they?'

'God, I hope not. God, Ruth, what an appalling thought.'

'I wouldn't think so. The story's pretty clear, isn't it?' I felt another, cooler hand on my cheek. 'Amazing. It's a good thing I'm staying around for a while longer.'

Much later, somebody else came in and sat on the edge of the bed. My hand was taken into a firm grip. 'You'll be wanting your Superperson Logo next,' said Bex's voice. Then Noah said something.

**Tuesday August 29<sup>th</sup>**

**5.42pm Simon to Joey**

You were hero, I gather S

**5.42pm Joey to Simon**

Noah says your mum's sick

**5.42pm Simon to Joey**

Relapse. OK now. S

**5.43pm Joey to Simon**

How's London?

**5.43pm Simon to Joey**

OK. Sorry to leave u such short notice

**5.45pm Joey to Simon**

Can we chat?

**5.45pm Simon to Joey**

Get Noah to bring u to Leeds next term.

**5.46pm Joey to Simon**

You're going back to uni?

**5.48pm Simon to Joey**

Noah's v proud of u.

## Black Box File

from Bex

The god Jupiter was taking it easy, drinking, cracking jokes with his wife. 'You women have more fun making love than us men.' She said he was talking rubbish so they decided to ask Tiresias what he thought.

Tiresias had made love both as a man and a woman, because of what had happened to him. He had been out walking in the forest when he stumbled on two snakes, mating. He swiped at them with his stick and was miraculously transformed into a woman.

Seven years later, she was out in the same forest and again saw two snakes mating. She was curious and said to the snakes, 'Well, well! Last time I whacked you, you were so mad you changed my sex. I'll give it another go!' So she hit out at them with the same stick (some things don't change, it seems). In a flash, Tiresias became a man once more.

When Jupiter demanded that Tiresias should decide between him and Juno Tiresias was very twitchy. He was bound to annoy one of them. But he was stuck with the truth. He had to agree with Jupiter. Juno was so furious that she struck him blind. Jupiter could not change the curse that another god had made, but he could help out. He gave Tiresias the skill to foresee the future.

Maybe Bex thinks I want magic knowledge

someone online says you can't just put gender off and on every day like a jacket. Why not? does it always have to be what other people think??

Maybe I do

## Black Box File

### Shadow

The shadow is an unconscious complex defined as the repressed, suppressed or disowned qualities of the conscious self.... a person's shadow may have both constructive and destructive aspects. In its more destructive aspects, the shadow can represent those things which people do not accept about themselves. For instance, the shadow of someone who identifies as being kind may be harsh or unkind. Conversely, the shadow of a person who is brutal may be gentle. In its more constructive aspects, a person's shadow may represent hidden positive qualities.

Dominic with hidden gold side???

I think not

He's somebody's son,  
somebody's grandson

Bex has his genes

I wanted to save Bex, Kill her  
father - what does that make me?

Ruth's shadow? she must have one

Vicemail 6.16pm

Ah, hello, this is a message for Joey Wilcox. You left a poster at our practice about your missing cat. I think we have your cat – well anyway, it's the correct microchip. Could you give me a call as soon as possible please? Ah, we're open all the time. Your call will get put through if you don't pick up this message till late. Bye. Um, my name is Jeff Donaldson. Ask for me.

## **Thursday August 31<sup>st</sup>**

It's a beautiful afternoon. The little girls are playing by the nearly-built wall, with Noah in charge of some elaborate process involving dragons, a makeshift tent, facepaints and buckets. The tent is an old groundsheet slung from the almost-finished wall, and weighted on both wall and ground by stones as yet to be built into the wall. Caroline and Ruth bend over the garden table looking at catalogues, whilst Bex and I recline like seagoing loungers on the expanding chairs that Ma set up before going to work for the afternoon. We are the invalid corner.

My neck and shoulders are rigid with a dull ache that nothing seems to ease except a hot-water bottle at night and pills. I resent the pill haze. Ma has made the appointment with a doctor for tomorrow. I told her to ask for Dr Hallgrave. She looked but didn't ask.

I dug the grave yesterday morning. I wouldn't let anybody else do it. I wept. It was rage, guilt, helplessness, ache. Ma and Ruth came out afterwards to say the funeral rites and we chose a stone to mark the spot. I'm going to plant meadow flowers on his grave, flowers that grow in the field where he spent so much time. It's funny how peaceful I was at the vet's. When I saw the flattened body I knew it wasn't him any more. Roadkill. The vet says it usually is. Ruth says he was my familiar. I said I'm not a witch but she laughed and said maybe I am.

Last night I put out a plate of sardines for the black stray. He's lying under the rose bay willow herb that Ma lets flourish as a hedge. It's in full bloom, humming with invisible life. The thrushes and finches are squabbling at the feeder and we have to watch out for thieving seagulls who choose to forget they should be at sea. I'm in no mood to tell anyone where they should be.

Bex sleeps. She's sedated all the time, reads a bit, doesn't say much. Her face is a blank, like she's turned into one of her masks, till she opens her eyes. The first time it made me go cold as stone, the way her eyes peered about, like a cat in a cage.

Sleep seems to help. It's almost like lying in Maude's Meadow, with people doing their stuff all round us; except that now people are watching us. There's something strange going on with Noah. He's here all the time. He isn't with Fi. He walked away from Fi. He keeps appearing next to Bex and she lets him. He never touches her, though. He seems to know he mustn't.

I feel stifled by the unspoken anxiety in the air, thick as flying wheat dust. The harvesters have been out all night, and the great golden bales lie up-ended in the fields. I wish Simon were here. Noah would be his bluff and blag self instead of this peculiarly kind person who brings me beer, offers water to Bex. I look up at thin cloud stretched across the sky and wonder if Jack is near a window, and what he can see with his good eye. His wounded eye will probably be OK. He may be prosecuted, maybe not - assault. He might have grounds to get him off but he should have known better, they will say. There might be a way out because of his depression. I can't get used to the idea of Jack and depression. Ma says it's a difficult thing, people don't always look depressed.

I heard it all yesterday afternoon in the garden, when they thought I was asleep.

'I can't reach him. He's taking the blame for stuff he shouldn't.'

'It's that lad who died in custody, is it?' Ma's voice, sympathetic, neutral.

'What was that exactly?' I was glad of Ruth's question. Bex had begun to tell me but drifted.

'When Jack was custody sergeant. There was a joy-rider, the umpteenth time, and the arresting officer wanted him kept in a cell while they sorted out the charge. He'd been cautioned loads. The lad wasn't sick or drunk. He was over eighteen so Jack didn't call anyone. If they're under eighteen you have to give them the option of someone in the cell with them the whole time. And if they're drunk you might take a look every half hour, even. But this lad was in a furious temper about being arrested again, being locked up. Jack didn't think he was the sort to harm himself. But nobody knew he had a bad heart and could just drop dead. When the officer went to check the lad was dead. Jack got the blame.'

'Were you together when this happened, Caroline?'

'I wish I had been.' There was a long silence. I heard the little girls murmuring and hoped they were too deep in their game to overhear. 'If I'd been with him I like to think he wouldn't have got so depressed. He was suspended, of course, and by the time he was cleared and could go back he was blaming himself. He never went back. Three years. And now he thinks he should have noticed what was up with Bex.' Her voice sounded so tight the words hardly got out.

‘Is it the same for you, Moll? Are you responsible for everything even when it isn’t your fault?’ Ruth tried steering the conversation in another direction. I understood.

‘You bet.’ Ma sounded unexpectedly grim. ‘You have to arm yourself. Invisible armour, so you don’t frighten the kids, of course.’ Then she laughed. ‘It goes with the job. It’s all right.’

‘Yes,’ Ruth said. ‘I’ve worked out the armour plating.’

But she wasn’t able to distract Caroline for long. ‘It was just after he’d been signed off the second time. I thought being with us had made all the difference. I really thought we were happy.’ She drew a breath and Ma tried to speak but Caroline’s words spilled out with a tight misery that I don’t want to remember. ‘He says all the time now that he’s a bad risk, he doesn’t see what’s under his nose, he didn’t see what was happening with Bex. But it’s me, I’m the one, it’s my fault.’ She struck her breast with both fists until Ma grabbed hold, and Ruth slid out of her chair to sit with the little girls. Trouble is, Caroline might have seen it. I don’t know what to think.

Today, Ruth has been roped in to the game again, and Noah is the pirate, apparently. There’s something about an evil pirate and a good one, and two princesses. Why are there always princesses? It’s a relief to see Tess with dirt streaked down her face. In fact, Ruth is smearing the dirt. I hear her explaining what camouflage means. Noah says the evil pirate has an invisibility cloak but that he, Captain Noah, has the spell for seeing all things as they truly are. Susie asks if it’s a spell to drink and Ruth says it’s a powder to sprinkle into a drink and she will fetch the drinks.

Caroline follows her into the house and we are left, Captain Noah and the camouflaged princesses, sleeping Bex and me, waiting for the magic spell. I stretch out along the chair, grasping its metal frame above my head. I envy their skill at creating an adventure in the corner of our garden. The wall across the slope is part of their island now. Maybe, once we’ve filled the hollow behind it with topsoil and planted the vegetables or herbs or whatever it is that Pa wants, the wall will be transformed into a castle, a fort, a cliff. At least he’s left finishing the wall to me, he’s told Harry not to bother. That’s something. It’s quite a big deal for Pa.

Marmalade would have prowled along the ramparts. A lorry killed him. A lorry driver killed him. The vet said it had to be a lorry because of the size of the tyres that



flattened him so completely. I could have made Marmalade stay in all night – most cats killed on roads die at night – but he would have hated it. He yearned to go outside and I chose his yearning. Like the guy that chose to steal cars. I guess he didn't choose to drop dead with a wonky heart but are we all responsible for how everybody else dies? Choosing is not straightforward and people who go on about the right to choose don't tell you how hard it is because sometimes things choose you. Something is choosing me, something that's shadow and light.

Will I ever forget the sensation of biting down into a living hand. I wish it were a dream but it isn't. My ribs are in agony. The bruises are dark, and there's a sponginess under the skin that bothers me. But I guess it will heal.

Ma said uncontrolled aggression is never to be condoned and I couldn't argue. My head aches. She wasn't telling me off, though. So how do we sort that out?

'You've dropped your notebook.' I shade my eyes, looking up into Ruth's face which is dark against the sky. Slowly she bends, retrieves book and pen, glances at the page. 'Remarkable.' Quietly she reads the heading. 'Manifesto for a post-gender world.' I take the book, lay it on my lap. I am going to publish this somewhere, find the right website. 'Fresh lemonade?' she says.

'Ice? Fresh lemons?'

She moves round so that I can see her quiet, pointed face. Who is she, really? What's she doing here?

'Magic powder for the spell coming shortly, I believe.' Two tall glasses froth with chocolate milkshake and Captain Noah appears with a small bottle, tightly corked. He gives a conspiratorial wink and I realise that Bex is awake and smiling up at him.

'Heigh-ho, me hearties!' he says, making-believe to scatter the spell over the surface of all seven glasses. 'Seven's a magical, mystical number, my princesses.' Susie runs to swing on his arm, her smeared face full of glee. 'Ma just phoned,' he adds, changing register. 'She'll be back any time.'

Caroline pulls a stool to the garden table and flips the pages of the plant catalogue.

Bex struggles to sit up, glass in hand. 'Noah's one of the good guys,' she mutters.

My stomach contracts painfully. Lives fall apart but children play at pirates and gardens get planted. There are more hours to survive before night and sleep.

Dominic is on police bail. I wish I could think of another name for him that suggests what he is now. Funny how *indomitable* isn't the opposite. Bex will give evidence. I suppose Julia will be in court. They must be together in their new house, out on the road to Windermere. They might be sitting there now, in a garden, listening to the traffic on the A591 that leads to Borrowdale and the Bowder Stone and High Spy and Catbells.

Ruth says she can script-write from here for a few months, apparently – though I am not sure where 'here' is. She might be staying at Caroline and Jack's for a while. So she says. I don't know how to feel about it. Ruth is part of my life, my memory, she's in our family photos. I can't picture her in Bex's new house. Don't want to. I close my eyes.

When I stir it's because of Ma's voice, calling from the kitchen. The others have gone inside, even Bex, and my body is heavy with sleep and painkillers. Words drift like thistledown, orange frits. I am who I am. *The right track, baby*. Funny how the song deserted me but now it's back. *Blackbird, fly*. The sun has dropped behind the trees and the house martins swoop in ecstatic pursuit of insects, calling with piercing sweetness. Slowly I get out of the padded lounger and take small steps down the garden to the hedge. A couple of yards away, I halt. Two yellow eyes stare at me through fringes of green.

I say, 'Are you coming out, then?' and I bend down, making clicking noises with my tongue. The ears prick up. Out he comes, slowly, slowly, on his belly, inching forward. I put out my hand. He's very thin and his coat needs serious grooming. We touch, my finger, his nose, which is cold and wet. I wonder whether he's male or female and my heart contracts for my grey tabby in the dark earth, but here's another stray. I sit down unsteadily on the grass, wincing as my bottom touches down. It's a good thing, this time, that I have no balls. No visible balls at any rate. I would have been in far more pain from Dominic's elegant boot. The black cat sits up, curls his tail around his body

and licks his chest vigorously. He is deciding whether or not to choose this as his residence.

A little voice says, 'Will you have the cat, Joey?' Tess materialises next to me, her eyes alert.

'If he'll come. He has to choose me.'

She leans against my shoulder. 'How do you know it's a boy?'

After supper, I sit cautiously on the kitchen sofa with my feet on the sill. I have been chatting to Simon online and now I know that I am a chrysalis. I don't think Pa or Noah will call my new self a butterfly, though. Noah is on the late shift. He sent me a hug ( ). His hug is virtual, texted. It might take half our lives for me to get the real hug but it could happen tomorrow, too. Captain Noah is a new character in my life. In Bex's life, it seems.

Ma's head appears above the back of the old brown sofa. 'Are you OK?' I pat the seat beside me. 'Just a tick.' She reappears with two mugs of tea, followed by Ruth.

I ask what has happened to the wine tonight and she gives me a headmistress look to go with the headmistress shirt she hasn't changed out of: green, again, with a small stand-up collar. 'Tell me your thoughts, Joey.' I look beyond at Ruth, who has perched on the arm of the sofa. The sun is shedding colour as it sinks, the high cloud teasing out shades of pink, purple, red, orange, vermilion, in an ever-refining gradation of substance. Parallel lines meet at infinity. The house is quiet. Pa won't be home for another hour, maybe more. He is still uneasy, I know.

My instinctive sense that I was assigned the wrong gender is as it is. I don't feel that I am male either. Being made to be either/or feels like a trap, a box. I choose the words carefully. 'I want to live as a man. I want to be myself as a man. For a while.'

They speak together.

Ma: 'For a while?'

Ruth: 'Does that mean hormones?'

Ma's face has gone blank like someone pulling the sheet tight on the bed.

‘I’m not changing sex.’ I try to answer both at once. ‘I’m not messing with my brain.’ Ma says she might like a whisky after all. Ruth takes her place on the sofa and looks at me intently, tucking her white hair behind her ears. She smooths down the blue shirt, clicking her tongue at dirt-marks, grass stains.

‘This gender thing?’

‘We don’t know what we could be.’

Ma slides behind me so that the three of us are jammed closely together. ‘Tell me simply what will happen.’

‘If the police arrest you they have to ask what gender you are and you choose. It says whatever you look like, it’s your choice. I choose other.’

‘Other,’ she repeats, still blank. ‘What does other look like?’

Ruth says, ‘I’m sorry. I’m very sorry. In the UK there isn’t ‘other’ yet. You have to put a gender on your passport, on your driving licence.’ She makes speech marks in the air, slopping tea from her mug.

‘Ruth, what are you talking about?’ Ma’s frustrated voice vibrates against my skull. At the moment, she touches me as much as she thinks I can bear.

Ruth says, dabbing at the arm of the sofa with the tail of her shirt, ‘I’m not sure but I guess Joey thinks she has characteristics of both sexes and she doesn’t want to be tied to one gender or another yet. Is that it?’

I say, ‘I’m not a hermaphrodite, I don’t have a dick.’

Ma pulls back. ‘You looked exactly like a little girl when you were born.’

‘But it doesn’t feel right.’

Patently Ruth asks, ‘What *does* feel right?’ She looks at me over the rim of her mug; the little red mug that we carried up Orrest Head a million years ago when she told me how characters in her scripts all have secret lives. The thought holds me. Whatever I do in public I’ll always have a secret life.

‘I have to live as a guy for a while. I want other people to see me as a guy, treat me as a guy. I’ve tried it out online and that’s not enough. It has to be face to face.’

Ma's head snaps away but Ruth fixes me. 'For a while. What exactly does that mean?'

'Like I said before. I want to go back to school next month on the boys' register.'

'Testosterone, surgery, all that?'

'No, no, it doesn't feel as final as that. That would change my brain.'

'You don't mean you'd be a girl again, sometime later?' I begin to visualise all the years ahead as a great forest that I will have to hack through, cutting my way. With a machete? I have never seen a machete for real, let alone handled one. 'If you do,' Ruth persists, looking as if she wished she had not thought of it, 'it's going to be a rare person who wants to have a deep personal relationship with you. Sex. Think about it.'

Ma suddenly puts her hand on my shoulder. 'Sorry, let me get this straight. You want to go into school and tell Peter Jolly that instead of being registered as a girl you want to be boy.'

'No, I want to be other but they don't have a column in the register. So I'll have to be boy.' Then I add, as a wild vision of incontinence pads pops up in my brain, 'School loos will be a bit of a problem.' For a second Ma's expression is of absolute consternation. 'I'll show you online,' I say, as my skin prickles with anxiety. 'I'll get my laptop –,' but she holds me down.

'My darling, listen. This is just not possible, it won't be possible. I mean, we'll support you of course.' She catches Ruth's eye and I can see her consternation enlarge. 'I mean, I'll come to see Peter Jolly with you. Oh God, worse and worse.' She lifts her hair up tight from her scalp.

I push myself off the sofa and stare up at the garden, the hedge, the dim outline of the fell upholding the sunset. 'There's a whole world of people like me, Ma, even if they're not round here. Websites full of people who become friends online.'

'Is one of your online friends worth a minute of Bex's time? Would you swop her for a laptop and an internet connection?' Ma sounds unexpectedly sharp.

‘It’s not my problem. It’s not going to be my problem. If people only want to be with me if they think I’m *either male or female*, I don’t want them.’ I feel suddenly inspired. ‘Did you only love me when you thought you knew I was a girl?’ Ma stares up at me, her expression unreadably confused. ‘What difference will it make to you anyway, Ma? It won’t change your life, will it?’

Ma’s voice says ‘Well, it might. School, for instance. My school, not yours.’

‘What do you mean?’ Ruth’s turn to sound sharp.

‘Oh, you don’t know the independent sector, my friend,’ says Ma, slowly getting to her feet and brushing past Ruth towards the kitchen table. ‘I’m putting the kettle on again to stop me drinking another whisky.’ She halts at the table, even so, pulling the bottle towards her, angling it to see how much remains. ‘You can’t imagine the social explosion there will be once the school governors get their heads round the fact that one of my children is changing gender or has a gender issue.’

Ruth said, ‘Really? You really think that’s likely?’

‘I’ve been thinking about it for days, ever since Joey told us,’ says Ma. ‘Last year I had a row with the governors about one of our pupils. She’s the product of incest, we found out. For God’s sake. They were terribly sympathetic but “a child like that in a school like ours” - oh, you can’t begin to imagine the things that were said at my last governors’ meeting. For God’s sake.’ She sounds unutterably weary. ‘The rest of the country’s not like London, Ruth. We love it here but - anyway, some things are commercially sensitive, that’s what they will say. They’ll say that prospective parents will ask questions about me, what sort of parent I’ve been.’ She fills the kettle and sets it on the hob. Her life at school seems suddenly a dark struggle with forces I do not recognise. ‘And God knows what parents will say about us on Facebook. Me. I could have my own special Burn In Hell page. Don’t look like that, darling, I can cope.’ She wanders back to stand beside me at the window, bringing the whisky with her. ‘Darling’s a great name, isn’t it? Gender-free and saying what it means.’

I want to say that she doesn’t call Noah darling, but she does say it to Pa quite often, so maybe it’s fine. Ruth sits at the table and traces with her little finger the lines of one of Noah’s penknife engravings. He was fined a month’s pocket money for it. ‘I guess almost any school will be just as twitchy,’ she says. ‘Fantastic plot line, Moll.’

‘You don’t mean you might lose your job, Ma?’

She snorts, laughs, takes a slug from the bottle. ‘Not likely. When we say equal opportunities that’s exactly what we mean. I’m not going to be bounced into something just because what’s happening is hard to handle. I won’t be bullied.’

The back door bangs open. ‘I’m always having to switch on the lights,’ Pa bursts out breathlessly. ‘Joey!’ I jump. ‘This cat needs feeding, worming, neutering whatever. I haven’t investigated its sex yet but let’s get on with it.’ The new Marmalade is squirming under his arm. I pull his small hot body into my neck, feel his ribs, his palpitating heart, and find the place behind his ears that will make him purr.

Pa stands legs astride, surveying us. He still wears that wary look. ‘What’s going on in here?’ he demands. ‘I can almost read the air, it’s so significant.’ He smells strongly of cattle.

‘You’re later than I expected,’ says Ma, trying to detach him from his old waxed jacket.

‘Traffic on the A66, getting back from Ennerdale.’ He shakes his arms free of the sleeves. ‘You have to come soon. It’s beyond what we hoped for. When you think, a few years back we’d have been in there putting up walls, changing the course of the Liza, chopping down trees, culling deer. Sorry about the smell,’ for Ma is wrinkling her nose at his sweater. ‘I got a bit close up with the Galloways.’ The room feels crowded. He might as well have brought the cattle. ‘It’s a dream - at last it’s happening - a bit of cooperation with nature.’ He kisses Ma’s left ear, turns to me and I see the kiss in his mind. ‘Hey, it’s too balmy out there to sit in. Come on.’

We follow him into the garden and sniff at the air which freshens as it brushes the fells. The house-martins loop the loop or cling to tiny stone ledges on the side of the house. Swallows take up position on the telephone wires. Neighbours have lit a bonfire and the tempting snap and crackle of burning wood punctuates our silence.

‘Our wall’s looking good,’ says Pa. ‘Got a bit of a list, but that’s character. As long as it doesn’t fall over.’

I say, ‘We’ll have to build it again if it does, better. We’ll know how to do it better.’

Ma says, 'Maybe one of us could go on a course.'

I think about Jack, with his padded eye. I picture Caroline in her lavender garden, and Bex in her tower, and I wonder what Caroline says to herself. For all those years Bex was never safe at home. The monster could talk himself back in. Maybe we've all got monsters on the doorstep, just waiting for the chance to come inside. Maybe the monster's already inside. The void isn't empty at all, it's full of nightmares and you have to meet them.

'You're sighing again,' says Ma.

'I was thinking about Jack. Caroline.'

Ruth says, 'What you're going to do, Joey, it's OK. Brave.'

And I say, with a flash of intuition, 'Maybe.'



**Black Box File**

# **My brain is an exploding star...**



*Edit? Publish?*

*Delete?*