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“Re-writing *Pollyanna*: Towards a Rethinking of Representations of Asperger's in Fiction”

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ABSTRACT

The first element of this work is a novel entitled *Anna*. The commentary that comprises the second element argues that aspects of the title character of Eleanor H. Porter's 1913 Children's Novel, *Pollyanna*, resemble fictional and medical depictions and descriptions of Asperger's syndrome.

I carry out a character analysis of Porter's *Pollyanna* using close reading, likening her depicted behaviour and implied patterns of speech and thought to traits associated with Asperger's in fiction and in medical commentary. Given that *Pollyanna* is a public domain text written before the naming or first medical descriptions of Asperger's, I discuss the implications of this, observing how, unlike many modern works featuring protagonists with Asperger's, *Pollyanna* changes her surrounding community, not just in terms of how it operates and relates to her specifically, but in terms of how it operates and relates to itself. I argue for a need for such representations of contemporary fictional protagonists with Asperger's, which I conclude to be more in keeping with the self-regard and aspirations of real people with Asperger's.

I then give an account of the writing of my own novel, *Anna*, in a subjective, essayistic style in the vein of several fiction authors' non-fiction commentaries on their own works, such as Milan Kundera's 'Dialogue on The Art of the Novel' – included in *The Art of the Novel* (2005, Faber & Faber, pp.23-46), and Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition', included in *The Oxford Book of American Essays* (Matthews (Ed.), 1914, pp.99-113).

The objective of this work is threefold: firstly, to show what must still be achieved in terms of future Aspie portrayals, that they may better reflect and represent the capabilities and experiences of Aspies today; secondly, to demonstrate how fiction not associated with specific medical labels can provide inspiration for new treatments of Aspie characters, with transferrable implications for all kinds of fictional representation; and thirdly to show how I put these findings into practice by transforming *Pollyanna* to create a complex representation of Asperger's which reflects these objectives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	p5
ANNA	p6
COMMENTARY	p145
Introduction	p184
A Brief Synopsis of <i>Pollyanna</i>	p184
What is Asperger Syndrome?	p185
Terminology	p187
Considerations When Characterising Pollyanna as Aspie-Like	p188
Aspie Fiction Case Studies	p192
Pollyanna: Characterisation With Respect to Asperger’s	p195
Semantic Language	p195
Pragmatic Language	p197
Theory of Mind	p199
Reduced Sense of Danger	p201
Not Always Understanding Her Own Emotions	p201
One-Track Mind	p202
Rigidity	p203
Age-Gap Friendships	p203
Lack of Pretend Play	p204
Apparent Departures in Pollyanna From Modern-Day Popular Expectations of Aspies	
p204	
A Love of People and a Strong Urge for Social Interaction	p204
Fierce Hugs and a Strong Tendency Towards Tactile Affection	p205
Outcomes of Various Traits Within <i>Pollyanna</i>	p205
Theory of Mind	p206
Semantic Language	p206

Transformation of Stories and Stories of Transformation	p206
Transformation of stories	p206
Stories of transformation	p207
Fictional Representations of Disability: Social Significance	p211
On the Writing of <i>Anna</i>	p212
Defining the Cardinal Functions of <i>Pollyanna</i>	p212
Why Transform <i>Pollyanna</i> ?	p214
An Updated Transformation	p215
Re-Considering Tone and Complexity	p215
Anna: A New Type of Fictional Aspie	p216
Avoiding ‘Compensation Cures’	p217
A Figurative Aspie	p223
Filmic Narrative	p226
Level of Detail	p227
Inconsistency of Anna’s Register of Vocabulary	p233
Treatment of Paraplegia Within <i>Anna</i>	p234
Patty’s Voice in <i>Anna</i>	p238
Lack of Chapter Breaks in <i>Anna</i>	p243
Drawing <i>Anna</i> to a Close	p244
Concluding Remarks	p246
References and Bibliography	p247

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ANNA

There was a huge summer storm as I was coming up on the bus – splattering rain, and flickers of lightning every thirty seconds or thereabouts. It was dark enough outside that I could see my reflection in the window, and the cars coming in the other direction all had their headlights on. I was happy that I was warm and dry, and not being soaked with rain or splashed with spray from lorries and cars.

I didn't really know where I was going – only that I was going North across the border to the Scottish Central Belt. I was happy that, unlike me, the bus driver knew exactly where we were going. At least, I hoped he did.

I'd travelled without Dad before, but never so far, to somewhere totally unknown to me, and never with people to whom Dad had not entrusted me. I tried to be happy that I was doing so well on my own, and that there hadn't been any hitches.

The man next to me had his head tipped back and was snoring gently. His hair was curly and brown. Dad had curly brown hair too – like a Jersey cow. Every time I saw this man out the corner of my eye I thought I was sitting next to Dad. Then I'd turn to look and see that it wasn't him. Then I'd remember that I could never sit next to Dad again. One of his elbows was sticking into my side, but it seemed selfish to wake him. Besides, waking him would mean I had to talk to him.

The first time I went somewhere without Dad was two years ago when I first tried secondary school, aged eleven. I went on the school bus. He bought me a phone specially, so that we could talk to each other throughout the day if I got scared. It wasn't a very fancy one – it looked a bit like one of those walkie-talkies policemen used to use – but it was good for texting. I never added any other contacts or texted anyone else. The pamphlet the school had sent when my place was confirmed said phones were banned, but Dad said that if I put it on silent, turned it off during class and handed it over if asked, he would 'face the music'. During that bus trip into school the driver had shouted at me because my bag was in the aisle. I'd wanted to curl up or run away, but instead I'd texted Dad. I'd said it was because my bag was in the aisle.

I still had that phone. Now I took it out and accessed the inbox:

Him: "Why did he shout at you?"

I came out of the inbox and accessed the outbox:

Me: "My bag was in the aisle."

Back to the inbox:

Him: "It could trip someone up. Why not be happy they don't want you to trip!

Xoxoxoxoxoxoxox".

A minute later he'd sent a second reply:

"If you're sitting beside someone, introduce yourself. They're probably just as nervous as you are. Xoxoxoxoxox"

We hadn't texted very often, so there weren't many messages. There would never be any more. I had barely looked at them since leaving the flat – I wanted them to feel fresh when I really needed them. Except now I felt like a pumpkin being turned into a lantern. I put the phone away, and swallowed down a sick feeling.

The bus lurched to one side. The driver really should have been going a bit slower. The curly haired man sitting beside me jumped awake.

"It's ok," I said, "We just aquaplaned a bit because it's raining."

"Ah, yes." He rested his head against the seat and closed his eyes again.

I held out my hand. "Hello," I said. "My name's Anna Whitear. It's very nice to meet you."

His eyes snapped open. He looked at my hand, then gave it a very short shake. "Ben Strachan. Nice to meet you, too." He turned away.

"I'm on the bus up to my mum's house."

His eyes flicked back towards my face, but they didn't meet mine. "I see." He hunched forward and picked at the right side of the thumb on his left hand with the thumb and index finger on his right. This conversation was not running along as smoothly as Dad's message had made me think it would.

The other passengers murmured in the background, along with the hum of the engine and the rain which now pattered, rather than pelted, against the windows. I pulled out my pen and writing pad.

"Want to play noughts and crosses?"

He turned to me and put his head on one side, eyes narrowed like Dad used to narrow them when he was trying to deduce whether I'd washed my face that morning. Then he gave a smile and his shoulders seemed to relax. "OK then."

We played fifteen games. I won eight, we drew in five, and Ben won in two. About an hour later we got held up in a mile-long traffic jam. The bus driver made a phone call, then announced to us that a lorry had jack-knifed, and that we were waiting for the rescue services. I decided to be happy it wasn't anything more serious.

"Nobody's going outside to smoke," I said.

Ben craned forward to look. "Too rainy."

"At least that means they're less likely to get cancer."

“Well that’s one way to look at it...”

“Dad smoked,” I told him. My chest hurt – it was the first time I had referred to Dad in the past tense following his death. “Never inside though, because of me. He had those self-roll type cigarettes. The kits all came with huge health warnings on them. Why do you think people still do it when everyone knows how bad it is?”

“It’s an addiction, isn’t it?”

“Yes. They’re hard to overcome. I know – I sucked my thumb for ten years.”

When the bus pulled into the station I collected my two suitcases and looked around for someone that could be Mum. I’d never seen any photos of her. Dad once told me we didn’t have any. I asked him why not, and he started looking for some in his desk, but instead found tickets he’d managed to get for us to see the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky.

We wouldn’t have been able to afford that sort of thing usually, but Mrs Taylor’s mother’s friend had come down with pneumonia, and had passed her ticket on to Mrs Taylor’s mother (who couldn’t go because she was going to be away in Italy at the time), who passed it on to Mrs Taylor, who would have gone but thought I would appreciate the music for what it was better than she could have done, because I was so much more knowledgeable – and she knew that Dad would want to go with me.

Dad had been so excited about the concert that I’d decided not to ask anything else about Mum, because it might have seemed ungrateful and obsessive – and I knew from my outreach worker that being obsessive could alienate people. That night when he had tucked me in, he’d told me that Mum was fine, and that we were fine, and that I had nothing to worry about. He also said something about not rocking any boats. I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, but I didn’t ask again, because he used the same tone of voice he used to end a conversation when I’d talked too long about the same thing to someone, without letting them have a turn.

I had another surreptitious look for photos when Dad was out at work and Miss Corrigan was babysitting – but I didn’t find any.

Dad taught me a fail-safe trick for being happy, no matter what. You just turn it into a game – like a riddle to crack. It was easier just after he had died – the whole thing had been so horrific that I was just happy he wasn’t suffering any more. It was also easier because I knew all of his worries about money and me and getting recognition for his paintings were now over, but me being still alive, I had a lot of new things to worry about.

So much had happened in the last two weeks that I still hadn't had time to assimilate all the ways my life would change from hereon in.

Dad's jaw was square-ish, and he had freckles like me, but not as many. It was impossible to tell whether Mum would have any freckles, because freckles are as much environmentally-determined as they are hereditary. However, she probably had a round face, because I did. I also have more red in my hair than Dad did – although my hair is still more brown than red – so Mum probably had red hair. That's not because she's a Scot though – not all Scots have red hair. Dad's family came from Glasgow before his great grandparents moved down to London. That's why he wanted to study at the Glasgow School of Art, which is where he met Mum.

There were no round-faced, red-haired women waiting in the stance. I sat down and watched as people passed, and tried to think of a happy thing about that. Someone tapped me on my shoulder.

“Is somebody here to meet you?” Ben asked.

“Well, Mum *should* be here...I was just going to wait until the crowds died down.”

“Have you got her number?”

“No. I've got her address, though.” I rummaged in my pocket and pulled out the post-it note Alison had given me. “Sixteen McCallish Court.”

He blinked, then stared at me intently. My face grew hot.

He sat down. “How old are you, Anna?”

“I turned thirteen on the 6th of August.”

“I see.” He rubbed his temples, then tapped his forehead rhythmically with two fingers. “Well, let's give it a few more minutes.” We played rock, paper scissors for about fifteen minutes, until the people had nearly all gone. Ben kept looking up and around, until finally he glanced at his watch and got to his feet.

“Right. You can't wait here alone. There's no telling what types might come skulking around.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some people...well...they're less than savoury.” He bit his lip. His shoulders looked very tense. “We need a plan,” he said, speaking very slowly. He continued, with lots of hesitation. “Tell you what – there's a taxi rank at the front of the station. Er...how much money do you have?”

“Five pounds emergency money.”

“That’s not enough.” He seemed to be speaking to himself – Dad often spoke to himself when he was cooking or cleaning. “Look, I’m not sure if this is the right thing to do, but...well...not much choice, really...” He reached into his pocket, took out his wallet and extracted a ten-pound note. “Here...” He handed it over.

“Oh, I couldn’t – that’s far too much!” That’s what Dad said when Mrs Corrigan gave me sixty pounds one Christmas. I think it’s what you’re supposed to say when someone who isn’t family gives you money.

“Don’t worry about it. Needs must. Your five, plus my ten. Fifteen should be more than enough to cover all possibilities. Have you ever taken a cab before?”

“Yes. Dad used to send me home in one with the flat key when he was working late.”

“R-really?” Ben frowned. “Well...I’ll help you get started, even so.”

We left through the double sliding doors at the front and came out onto a curved street lit by the glow of the bus station’s lights. We were first in line, but there were no cabs.

“Shouldn’t be long...hopefully...” He hugged himself and shivered. Every now and then he darted little glances at me, bit his lip and rocked back and forth on his heels. A strand of hair blew across my face, and a lone spatter of rain hit my cheek.

“I’ve found something else to be happy about,” I said.

“Fire away.”

I flinched, but tried to push the associations out of my mind. “Well, Mum may not have been here to meet me, but *you* were!”

“Er...yes. I suppose so...”

A cab rounded the corner and pulled up. On impulse I gave him a hug. He gasped and stiffened, but patted my shoulder when I let go.

“Fare thee well, Anna,” he said. “Perhaps our paths will cross again sometime.”

Sitting in the back of the cab I got my first good look at the town. The junctions, traffic islands and lights faded into and out of view, like drawings on an infinite, unravelling scroll. The houses were a mix of very old and very modern, and the streets, though urban, were quiet, less packed and more interspersed with wild greenery than those in London. The street lamps glowed orange against the blue of oncoming night. Mostly we were travelling too fast to pick out much detail, but twice I was able to take a peek when we stopped at a red light. There was a yew tree in the garden of 22 Stuart Lane, which cast a shadow across the lawn. I could see into some of the ground floor rooms. Through one window I saw a woman holding a baby. Another older child stood close by. There were lots of shops too. Most looked like general newsagents’, but one read ‘The Auld Toy Shop’. There was one with a

tourist information sign, and another with a selection of fruits and vegetables piled in the window.

We turned right, off the main road into a narrow alley which was not well lit, then left again into a sort of courtyard with groups of houses either side, each facing the car park. Most windows had their blinds down or their curtains closed, but yellow light shone out from behind these. Each house's lawn was small, and had a wooden fence with a gate in it along the front. Two had high hedges either side.

"There you go, Doll," the driver said, pulling in. "That'll be nine pounds sixty."

I handed him Ben's ten pound note, and took the change. Then I waited while he extracted my luggage.

The sky was almost black now. The silhouetted outline of a low hillside was just visible. The rain had stopped, and a soft breeze blew across my face. It smelled of grass, and something unidentifiable to do with the countryside. Apart from the distant sound of traffic and the shifting of leaves on the hedges, there was silence. This threw me – the part of London where we lived was never quiet. It felt as if a chunk of the world had gone missing. However, like eyes becoming accustomed to the dark, I found myself settling into it as I stood on the tarmac and got my bearings. Without the traffic to fill my mind, I imagined I could cock my head, see the constellations circling the pole star, and feel the Earth shifting beneath me, like standing on the back of a blue whale.

The gate of number sixteen was painted white, but had several chipped and rusted areas. I dragged my wheelie-suitcase behind me, and lifted the other in short bursts. It was difficult to know what to do once I was at the door. It seemed rude to simply walk in, but I wasn't sure whether I should knock, given that this was now my home and the person inside was my mum. It was beginning to get cold. Summoning up my courage I knocked three times. The silence seemed to extend as my anticipation mounted. Then there were gentle footsteps, and the sound of a lock turning. My mouth went dry, my hands went wet, and the door opened.

She was only about half an inch taller than me, and wore a pink fleece dressing-gown with purple, squashy slippers. And she *did* have a round face and straight, red hair! She also had big, brown eyes which were highlighted with mascara.

"Mum...?" I swallowed back a lump. Her eyes stretched very wide and she took half a step back. Her expression reminded me of the face Mrs Taylor had made when she walked into the Intensive Care Unit and saw my Dad lying on the hospital bed, the day after the fire in the flat. Her face had turned white too. Mum didn't look much older than me – certainly

not old enough to be my mother. She didn't look nearly as old as the mums of my school friends.

"Ah." She cleared her throat, her face settled back, she dropped her gaze, and nodded. Her cheeks were colouring. It was an 'Ah' that seemed to struggle to get out of her mouth, and ended with a hitch in her breath. She raised her eyes slowly, and looked me up and down.

"Anna. You *are* Anna, right?"

I nodded.

"Good. Well..." It was a whisper that trailed off, followed by a nod. Her whole frame suddenly looked very spindly and frail.

I wanted to hug her and tell her how I had been looking forward to meeting her, as well as how happy I was to be coming to live with her. On reflection, I also wanted to know what she had been doing all this time, why she hadn't come to the bus station, why she had never written or come to visit, why I'd never seen a picture of her, and why she and Dad decided to separate. However, I didn't seem to be able to move or speak. She lifted her chin, turned away and checked something which seemed to be stuck onto the other side of the door. The way she had gone from spindly to smooth-moving reminded me of how actors get into character before auditioning.

"You're supposed to come tomorrow. They *said* tomorrow! Oh God, this is..." She trailed off and passed a hand over her face. I copied her accent under my breath. Then she stood looking at me for a long time, her eyes darting over my face. "How did you get here?"

"In a taxi."

"Right. Come in then. Take your shoes off, please."

I heaved my suitcases into a bright, cosy little kitchen. There was a gas cooker in the corner, a wooden pulley for hanging clothes on, and a tall, humming fridge-freezer. A big freezer looked fun – you could make lollies in it. We had only a tiny freezer compartment in the London flat. The TV was on in the living room of Mum's house – which had a thick, cream carpet, and a sofa against the wall with the door in it. Venetian blinds were drawn over two large windows set in the wall facing the door.

"I was right about your hair," I said. My outreach worker told me that if I'm stuck for conversation with someone, or I don't know how to proceed within a situation, paying complements is a fairly safe bet. "It's really pretty. Some people say red's unlucky, but Dad said that was just a superstition. Will you let me style it? Please? I love styling hair." I reached out, but she cringed away and picked up my non-wheelie suitcase.

"Let's just get you sorted."

I followed her through a door on the other side of the kitchen, which opened into a hall dominated by a flight of green-carpeted stairs. This seemed a strange way to design a house – if it was raining hard people would have to trample across the kitchen, getting water and mud everywhere, before they could take off their boots and hang up their coats. I dragged the wheelie suitcase up behind her a step at a time – THUNK – THUNK – THUNK – pulling myself forwards with the help of the bannister. The walls of the hallway were papered in plain white, with raised floral patterns on them. It would be a good pattern for a blind person’s house – they could feel the pictures with their fingertips.

There was only one bedroom. A huge double bed covered with a white, lacy quilt had its headboard against the wall opposite the door. The window was set to the left, and the curtains were white. Although they were closed I could see pink ribbons on either side, which held them open during the day. Two wooden chests of drawers sat next to a full-length mirror, and there was a dresser for make-up near the door. Next to the double bed there was a bedside cabinet, and a desk with a laptop on it, with an office chair pulled up. Then there was a wardrobe, and a bookshelf which was stuffed and piled all round with books. It reminded me of the year Dad challenged me to read my height in fiction over the twelve days of Christmas. I’m fairly tall for my age but I managed it, just. I’m quite a fast reader because I read a great deal. On the floor, at the foot of the bed there was an air mattress, with a sleeping bag laid out on top of it. Mum gestured at this.

“You can have that. It’s not much, but then...this was all kind of sudden.” She perched on the edge of the bed, shoulders hunched, hair hanging lankly down past her shoulders, and watched as I kicked off my trainers, plonked myself down and drew up my legs.

“When Dad and Mr Langton were doing up my room I slept on one of these.”

“Oh.” Her mouth went very small, and her eyes flicked round the room.

I felt a sudden urge to cry, but Mum seemed so fragile already that I thought doing so might break her, so I held it in, forgetting in that moment that I, too, was very fragile. But unlike me, she didn’t have the fail-safe trick to be happy in any situation. I scrunched my hands up and pressed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, concentrating my mind on the fact that I was safe and warm and dry and home. It certainly was a great blessing to still have a home of some sort.

Her gaze wandered over me again. “Well...welcome home.” She made a strange, strangled noise, jumped up and ran from the room, slamming the door behind her and leaving my mind feeling like it had just been pushed over the edge of a cliff.

My room at Alison's had been more like a hotel room. For all that she was so good to me, she was a short-term foster carer, and children like me passed through her care like products on a factory line. Now I had somewhere to really make my own. I knew this should have been a happy thing. Maybe happiness didn't feel like how I thought it would feel. It seemed a small reward for such a lot of chasing by so many people in so many different times and places. But if Dad seemed to think it was worth chasing, then there must be something to it.

I recalled every aspect of the day – especially Mum – and listed on my fingers the many things to be happy about. Meeting Ben, the light on the lawn, the farmland... Dad had used the expression 'turning over a new leaf' in one of his texts, to help me feel better about starting secondary school. I pulled out my phone and stared at the message for a long time. Well this was definitely a new leaf. But in all honesty, I wasn't sure I liked it.

When I woke I had a moment of blankness, before the heaviness that had lodged in me every morning since Dad's death came rushing back in like water to a sand-hole. I let it settle, then tried to work out what was going on. The window at Alison's was at the head of the bed, whereas here it was at the foot, so at first I thought I was upside-down. Then I remembered. I struggled into a sitting position. Mum was still asleep, even though the clock on her bedside table said it was quarter past eight. Her red hair was spread across the pillow, like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. I wanted to touch it, but I didn't – Dad and my outreach worker once explained to me about personal space. Even though Mum was close family, I didn't know her.

The kitchen wasn't nearly as bright as the bedroom, but it was light, and the air was fresher and cooler. I got to work learning my way around. There were eggs in the fridge, and coffee and sugar in one of the cupboards. I found cutlery in a drawer near the bin, and a gas lighter which was also a bottle-opener. Pots and pans lived in a cupboard to the right of the sink. I twisted the knob for one of the cooker's rings to turn the gas on. There was a gentle *hsss*, and as I clicked the lighter next to the ring, it ignited with a quiet *wumph*. I cracked two eggs into the frying pan, and whilst they were cooking I found a pink tray patterned with green frogs. Just as I was filling a glass with orange juice there was a loud beeping from the hall. Remembering Dad's way of stopping the smoke alarm in London before he got fed up with it and threw it away, I quickly lifted the pan off the hob, picked up a dish towel, went through and waved it back and forth in front of it. The noise stopped. I listened hard, but I couldn't hear any sounds from upstairs.

The eggs weren't burned – it must have just been the hot oil. I turned the gas down, put a slice of bread in the toaster, stuck my fingers in my ears until it popped, and checked

the eggs again. The whites had gone opaque and jelly-like, and the yolks were round and globby. I scooped them out onto a plate, along with the toast, then put the orange juice on the tray. Very carefully I carried everything upstairs and put it down on Mum's dresser. The alarm clock now said it was twenty to nine. Since most people start work at nine o'clock I violated the personal space rule and shook her shoulder.

"Mmmurgh..." She opened one eye a slit and saw the clock. "Oh sugar!" She shot out a hand and banged the clock three times against the bedside table. I cringed at the sound. "Stupid...darn...thing..." Then she jumped up and pulled off her nightie, like she had forgotten I was there.

I had changed in front of Dad many times for swimming and getting into clothes and jammies, and he had changed in front of me, and had supervised my bath times until I turned eight, when I started showering instead. So although I was surprised that Mum would be so comfortable around me when I barely knew her, I must admit, I was a little curious to see what an adult woman looked like without her clothes on, simply because I had never seen one before and yet I would soon be one. I'd seen the blurry outline of Mrs Taylor in the shower before, and then seen her later in just a towel, but that was all.

Mum had a curvy, hourglass figure. Her skin was pale, as though it had rarely been exposed to sunshine, and around her neck she wore a thin metal chain with a tiny, square-shaped pendant on it. Across the lower half of her abdomen, just under her navel, there stretched a thin, horizontal line – almost like a smile. I wondered if I would grow to look like her. My body seemed very stick-like and flat-chested by comparison, but then, I think I'm something of a late developer, and anyway, I had no other female family members to consult or compare with.

She opened the first drawer in one of the chest of drawers and took out a pale blue, lacy bra. Sliding its straps over her shoulders she tried unsuccessfully to do up the catch. I went round and hooked it into place, but she didn't say thank you, or even pause. Instead she pulled on a long top, black tights and high-heeled boots, tied her hair back, picked up her handbag and went clattering down the stairs. I ran after her and watched as she struggled into a black felt coat. Then she slapped a twenty-pound note on the work surface. "That's not for you," she said, and rushed out.

I drew in a deep, slightly shaky breath, and let it out again. Mum's behaviour reminded me of my friend Jenny when she and I fell out. Except with Jenny I knew what I had done wrong. I extracted my phone from under my pillow and scrolled through the inbox. One message from Dad, dated 21st of July, simply read: "I love you!" From outside there came

the noise of a car engine starting up, then of wheels grinding, before the engine revved once more and faded.

The tray was still sitting on the dresser. I carried it into the garden and, after checking the grass was dry, sat cross-legged on the lawn. A chaffinch called, and a blackbird, and a thrush. There were no gardens in our part of London, so hearing birdsong was a rare treat. Now I would be able to hear it every day. A black and white cat with no collar sniffed around outside our gate.

“Puss-puss-puss!” I stretched out my hand. It turned towards me, rested on its back feet, then slid under the gate. It crept towards me on its belly, eyes wide, pupils fully dilated. Once it was almost within touching distance it stretched its neck out and sniffed my hand, but when I tried to tickle its cheek it ducked out of reach and ran away.

The streets were empty. The curtains in the bottom window of the house next door were drawn, but the car was in the drive. Even if the people who lived there were out on a walk or at work, you would expect them to pull the curtains back to let the sun in. Dad always said that made a difference to how a place ‘felt’. I watched as a van pulled up, and a man in a blue boiler suit heaved a huge, rectangular cardboard box from the back. When he rang the bell a woman answered. I was too far away to hear what either of them said. The woman took the parcel in her arms and kicked the door shut, leaving the man standing on the step. He shrugged, then got back into the van and drove away.

Once I had made my bed and brushed my teeth and hair, I decided to explore. Opposite McCallish Court there was a sloping patch of green, with a play park at the bottom surrounded by a bank of trees. I did what Dad and I had done at Richmond Park when we went for trips there early in the morning; I spread my arms out, tipped my head back and ran across the grass, shouting “WAHOOOOOO!” We would run in wide circles, sending birds scattering, and then chase each other until he caught me and pretended to be a monster, slinging me over his shoulder and growling, and we would laugh and laugh and laugh. Then we would explore and play football or just walk around, or I would go to look at things, and he would take out his sketch pad and draw me. We called this ritual ‘breaking in the morning’.

I tried to locate that feeling again now as I ran and shouted, but I just felt like a noisy siren, and couldn’t help imagining people looking at me like I was strange – they didn’t know. There were cans and bottles scattered across the grass, along with bits of newspaper and polystyrene take-away boxes – the kind that hamburgers and chips come in – as well as plastic cups and wooden stirrers. The six square feet surrounding me contained a cola can and a polystyrene box. I picked these up and moved on to another patch of the same size

directly in front of me, which had a broken glass bottle in it. To avoid getting cut I stood as far away from it as I could and picked it up with the tips of my fingers. There was no bin so I walked up the road, hoping to find one in somebody's garden.

At the top the road split into a T-junction. On the opposite side from me, and slightly to the left, there stood a gigantic house – also with all its curtains closed. In its driveway there were two green council bins. I hesitated, wondering if what I was about to do constituted trespassing. But then, I wasn't going to move or even touch anything other than the bins – which weren't his anyway – and the gate. Even so, I tiptoed in and lifted the lid as quietly as possible with my elbow. Unfortunately the glass bottle made a crash as it hit the bottom, and suddenly a dog was barking – a deep, low bark that sounded like an Alsatian. A man with wild black hair and grey whiskers, wearing a dark red dressing gown, opened the door.

“What do you think you're doing? I'll skin you alive!”

I ran for it. Of course, he would go to jail for murder if he skinned me alive, but that wouldn't make the experience any less painful.

When I stopped running I was on a street I didn't recognise. There was a second play park, but smaller than the one opposite McCallish Court. It was empty too. I sat on a swing and wondered where the other children were. Pushing myself back and forth with one foot I sang *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain When She Comes*. As I was in the middle of the second verse I heard mingled voices shouting. The front door of a house on the street opposite opened, and a man in a pinstriped suit strode out. He was followed by a woman dragging a small boy by the hand, with a girl toddler at her side, and a baby in a sling.

“You flipping blanket!” she shouted (I have substituted the last two words). “I just can't deal with this anymore!”

“Good! That makes two of us! Do what you want, Joanne, I'm off to make *money*.” The baby began to cry, the toddler began to march forwards towards the road, and the older boy tried to wrench his hand free. I stood up and jogged across the street as the man got into a black car. He slammed the door, and was revving the engine when the toddler reached the kerb.

“*Emily!*”

Joanne sprang forward, but I reached Emily first and swung her out of danger, just as the car sped off. She went rigid in my arms and let out a screech. A baby's cry is the same volume as an electric drill. The woman ripped her out my arms and pushed me back before running inside.

I stood on the pavement, stunned. If anything I was entitled to a humble ‘thank you’. I had actually risked getting run over to save her, after all. It would probably only have been a small knock for me, but she could have been killed. I clenched and un-clenched my fists a few times. Was everyone here so cross? I started to walk slowly away.

“Excuse me...?”

I hesitated, but it could have been any woman’s voice, talking to anyone.

“Hey! Excuse me?”

This time it was louder, and had an edge to it. I turned round, saw Joanne waving, and ran back to meet her. Her cheeks and the rims of her eyes were red. The boy leaned against the doorway.

“I’m...I’m sorry.” Joanne sniffed. “Sam’s supposed to stay until Molly gets here. Not that he ever *does* stay...”

“Who’s Molly?” I asked.

She passed a hand over her face. “What a mother I must seem! Can’t even keep my own house in order! And a right besom.” She paused. “Thank you...for what you did, just there.”

“What’s a besom?”

“A grumpy old birch.”

I haven’t substituted any words this time. I knew ‘birch’ was the wrong word. I think she did, too.

“That’s ok! I like babies. Especially Not-Squished ones.”

The boy walked up and tugged her arm. “Mum...”

“Actually, I was just wondering where all the other children were,” I said.

“Lots of families are still off on holiday,” she replied.

“*Mum...*”

“Didn’t you want to go on holiday too?”

“Uh-oh...” She patted the baby. “I smell trouble. *Again...*”

“Do you know how to get to McCallish Court?”

“MUM!”

“*What, Skylar?*”

“I’m *thirsty!*”

“Then get a carton of juice! I’ll be there in a minute!” She turned back to me.

“McCallish Court... That’s up near the big house, isn’t it?”

“You mean the place where the man lives who skins people alive?”

“Eh?”

“At the top of the junction. He set his dog on me. I ran away and ended up here.”

“Oh, *that* man! He won’t hurt you. All bark and no bite. Anyway, McCallish Court, you say?”

“Yes. I live at number sixteen.”

“Patty Harrington’s?” Her eyebrows jumped up.

“Um...” I dropped my gaze, realising I didn’t even know Mum’s name. Presumably Harrington was her maiden name and she had changed back to it after she and Dad had split up.

“What’s your name by the way?”

“Anna.”

“I see...” She gave her head a little shake. I couldn’t deduce what the expression on her face meant. “Right. McCallish Court. Hang on – I’ll show you.” She crossed the lawn to the gate and pointed up the road. “You see that pedestrian crossing? Well, you turn left when you get to it, then you basically keep following the hill up, and turn right at the top.”

“Thanks!” I said, “I’m very happy to have met you.”

I followed Joanne’s instructions and found my way back to Mum’s. The black and white cat was lying curled against the gate. Its hips and shoulders poked bonily out from under its skin. I put my hand down to stroke it, but it flattened its ears, gave a hiss, and swiped at me. I yanked my hand back, and saw three little lines of blood arcing across the back of my hand. It jumped up and ran. I was about to go inside when I heard something, and stood very still. Although Mum’s car wasn’t in the drive, there were footsteps coming from inside the house. I wanted to run, but as Mum’s daughter I felt I had a duty to protect her and all that was hers. I looked around for something heavy, wishing I had kept the broken bottle from the green. All I could see was a medium-sized branch in the gutter of number eighteen. There must have been a storm earlier in the week. I picked it up, went through the garden gate and flung the front door open, brandishing it.

The person inside didn’t look very burglar-ish. She looked as if she was in her twenties, with short, bouncy hair. It was red too, but unlike mine and Mum’s it was dyed a dark, artificial red. Her round, pale face looked strained, but she had smile lines around her eyes, and a dimple in the left corner of her mouth. She wore a sky-blue blouse, an ankle-length black skirt patterned with white polka dots, and shiny red doc martens. She was wiping down counter surfaces with disinfectant spray, but dropped the cloth when I barged in.

I lowered the branch and cleared my throat. “Hello,” I said.

She hesitated. “Hi...” She gave a tentative smile. Her eyes were milky-blue.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Molly.” Was this the Molly Joanne had mentioned?

“When will Mum be home?”

She put down the cloth and held out her hand. “So *you’re* Anna!” I took it, feeling hugely confused. She gave it a vigorous shake with both hers. “Patty’s told me all about you. It’s an honour!”

“She has...?” This seemed unlikely. Mum had hardly said anything when she saw me, much less spent time getting to know me. I couldn’t imagine her chattering away to someone about me. Still, at least I now knew Joanne had been right about Mum’s name.

“Yes. She phoned last night. She was all worked up.”

“Why?”

“Nerves, I think.”

This made no sense. “Why would she be nervous of me?”

“Well you *did* just rush in waving a branch...”

My face grew hot.

She gave a light laugh. “She couldn’t stop talking about you. What happened to your hand?” She was looking at the lines of blood the cat had left.

“Oh, there was a cat outside. I went to stroke it and it hissed and scratched me. Then it ran away.”

Molly flicked her eyes up. “Ah, *that* cat...!”

“Do you know him?”

“He’s a stray. At least, none of my clients know who he belongs to. Been trying to get a good meal into him for weeks. He keeps hanging around my place, but he swipes if I try and touch him.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I think he’s in pain. A lot of animals are aggressive when they’re in pain. Self-defence. If he’d only let me touch him I might be able to help.”

I thought about this. Then I realised my thinking was causing a silence that might feel awkward to her. “Are you married?”

Her face coloured. “Aren’t you Little Miss Forward!”

“Ah.” I clenched and unclenched my fists. “Mental Personal Space – that’s harder, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry – I’m not offended! And in answer to your question, no.” She wiped the table top vigorously.

“You could marry my friend Ben,” I suggested. “I met him on the bus yesterday.” She burst out laughing. “Well, let’s see!”

Mum didn’t come home before I went to bed. It was incredibly stuffy upstairs. I opened the window, lay down and dozed off, but was woken by something fluttering back and forth across the light at high speed. At first I thought it was a large moth, but as it flew past my face I realised it was in fact a pipistrelle bat.

“Silly bat,” I said. “You can’t live here! There aren’t any insects and there’s no water. Besides, you’d miss your friends.” I tried to wave it towards the window, but it was darting all over the place. Mum was on the phone in the kitchen. Perhaps Molly was telling her about our encounter. I tiptoed to the cleaning cupboard in the hall, where I found a plastic bucket near the back. Once in the bedroom I stood on the bed and tried to trap the bat. It kept getting away, and I found myself jumping around, clapping the bucket against the ceiling.

“*What* are you doing...?” Mum’s voice sounded from the doorway. Then she saw the bat, and flung her arms up around her face. “Get it out! GET IT OUT!”

“It’s only a little bat!”

She had gone all pale, trembly and glassy-eyed. I made a quick decision to temporarily disregard rules about personal space, took her by the arm and helped her stumble into the landing, before returning to the bedroom and shutting the door.

“Come on little bat,” I said in a soothing voice, though I was shaking all over. After about a minute it stopped its fluttering and clung to the curtain with its tiny thumbs. I was able to get the bucket over it, cover it with the curtain, and guide it out the window.

I found Mum leaning against the landing wall. She had a little more colour in her face, but was still shivering.

“Wash your hands.”

“Why?”

“*Just wash them!*”

I ran to the bathroom and did as she said. When I got back she was sitting on the bed, taking deep breaths.

“Bats aren’t scary,” I said. “They’re just little mice with wings. They can eat up to three thousand midges a night – except for fruit bats and vampire bats, but you don’t find either of those here. They navigate using echo-location because they’ve got very poor eyesight. And they’re wonderful mothers.”

Every muscle in her body seemed to go tense at this last sentence, and she seemed to struggle for breath. For a second something in her eyes looked like how the cat had looked just before it had scratched me. Then she stood up, and, hiding her face, ran from me for a second time.

The next day Mum wasn't in her bed when I woke up at 5am. I went downstairs and found her coat and bag gone, as well as the twenty pound note laid out on the work surface. I wasn't sure why she had gone so early, since as far as I knew – which wasn't very far – her work began at nine and she hadn't usually been leaving that early. Perhaps there had been a work emergency.

Mum returned home at half past five in the evening. I'd spent the day clearing more rubbish from the green – there really was a lot of it – and had found some lovely yellow flowers in the long grass and bushes that ran alongside the river. I put them up my sleeve and got back to the house just as Molly was about to leave.

“Are you friends with my mum?” I asked.

She smiled. “Our parents were friends. We went to the same school too, but she left when I was nine so we didn't overlap there. But yeah, we're still friends.”

“If she's friends with you, why do you charge her money to clean her house?”

She scratched the back of her neck and wrinkled her forehead. “I wish she'd let me do it for free, to be honest. I'm happy just to help – she could do with the company. But she insists. So I charge her a very discounted rate. And she gives me more and won't accept the change back.”

“Why not?”

“She says she wants to help!”

After Molly had gone I put the flowers in a purple vase I found in the same cupboard as the glasses, and put the vase in the middle of the table. The purple of the vase was a soft, pastel shade, and the bright yellow of the flowers, as well as the blue of the table cloth, looked pleasantly artistic. Then I went upstairs and wrote in my notebook. When I heard the key in the lock an hour later I jumped up quietly and padded downstairs to watch – unseen – Mum discover them. Then she would know that I was sorry about the whole bat thing.

When I poked my head around the kitchen door I saw her. She hung up her coat and started to go through to the living room, but then she turned and saw the flowers. She stopped and drew near, her head cocked to one side. She wasn't smiling – she was actually frowning, but not like she had done when she was cross with me. She took one out and rubbed the

stem between her finger and thumb, so that the flower twirled round one way, and then the other. Then she smoothed her hair back behind her right ear, and poked the stem of the flower through it, like a Kirby grip. The purple of the flower stood out against the red of her hair. Then she pulled it back out, put it in the vase, gave the vase a quick pat, and started towards the door behind which I was hiding. I ran away before she could discover me watching.

I spent the evening in my room. Mum didn't speak to me when she came in to get ready for bed. She bent her head as she squeezed past my camp bed. I wrote in my notebook and she read, and when she turned the light out I kept waking up to check if she was still there. At four in the morning, just to be sure, I got up early, showered, dried, dressed, made myself some hot chocolate, and waited in the kitchen. At six she clattered down the stairs looking flustered.

"Hi," I said as she hurried into the room. She let out a breath and put a hand on her chest.

We looked at each other for a few seconds, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. I've never run dry on stage before, and I've never frozen up playing the piano. But now I felt like a cornered animal. And then the moment passed, and as she made breakfast it was as if she was one of Alexander Fleming's bacteria and I was the penicillin mould – wherever she went her body seemed to lean away from me, and her face seemed to always be turned sideways to me, or else her eyes would look just past me over my shoulder.

We watched television together that evening. I say 'together' – we were in the same room, on the same sofa, except there was about a foot and a half of space separating us. Mum had her knees drawn up so that she was curled into a little ball. She was wearing her pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers, just as she had been when I'd first arrived. I had the oddest sensation, for a moment, that perhaps if I got up now, packed my things, thumped my suitcases back down the stairs and backed out the front door, the taxi would be waiting for me, and then I could get back on the bus and go all the way back down to London, and Dad would be waiting for me and we'd go back to the flat and this whole thing would be a strange kind of waking-dream. But my clothes were in the wash. The rubbish was gone from the green. The flat was a hundred miles away. And Dad was...I didn't know where he was now.

Mum's eyes never left the screen. Her face was impassive as she watched. When I was four, Dad used to read me stories. I don't remember a lot of them because at that age I was much more interested in watching his face as he read. His eyebrows would jump and raise and lower. His mouth would grow and shrink. His forehead would wrinkle and smooth.

Sometimes his nostrils would flare. I learned those facial expressions later, with the help of my outreach worker and some photographs of situations and people. I also taught myself how different facial expressions are connected to different feelings, and different feelings are reactions to different information being received. It's an ongoing process.

That night as I dozed I sensed her crouching beside me, and considered whether or not to open my eyes. In the end I decided I would, but my courage failed me. Not only did my courage fail me; when I was pretending to be asleep she stood closer to me than she ever had before. And then I felt a hand rest for a second on my shoulder, before it lifted again. I lay extra still, hoping that she might keep it there for just a little longer. But she didn't.

When Dad was alive it had never felt like hugs were an essential thing – not like food and water. Now, however, I felt like how I imagined it to feel to be withering away from famine. In the quiet moments I would look at the texts, and I would try and get back a sense of him, but it didn't work.

The phone was an old model – older than Mum's – and I didn't have a charger for it, nor did I know where to get one. The only reason it had survived at all was because I was holding it when I jumped out the window to safety, having used it to call 999. I tried to be happy about it having survived, and about still having the texts. It was like trying to be happy about getting a new doll when you thought you were getting a little brother or sister.

Did Mum even *want* to hug me? Perhaps. I hoped so, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe she just wasn't a hugging person. To try and help her feel more relaxed I resolved to make up another game, which I played during the following day to the best of my ability – the Avoid Provocation Game. One point for every morning I managed not to get in her way or make her shout. Each time I did annoy her or get in her way I subtracted a point from my total score. I didn't speak to her. I didn't cross her path. I didn't try and catch her eye. I didn't do any surprises. And I have no idea why, but it didn't make *me* feel more relaxed, at any rate. It *should* have made things happier and easier and more relaxed for both of us – I'd taken away all the things that made her shout after all – but it didn't.

The weather quickly turned colder and cloudier. Alison said you don't get a lot of dry days in Scotland, so on good days I took my breakfast outside. My favourite breakfast is ham with fried tomatoes, cheese, a slice of buttered toast, and some hot chocolate. It's lucky that most people have most of those things, and it's something I know how to put together myself. It was never long before there was a high-pitched 'meow', and the black and white cat came trotting over the grass towards me. I'd offer it a shred of ham, and it

would stretch out its neck and sniff, before taking it from my hand. Soon it let me pet it properly. One morning it jumped onto my knee.

That morning it must have rained during the night, because when I ran across the green my feet squelched, and cold, slimy water leaked through my trainers between my toes. The green sloped down towards a wooded river bank, and as I inched closer, picking up cans and an old nappy along the way, I saw something in one of the trees. I pushed through the tangle of shrubs that surrounded it and saw a human leg, clad in khaki trousers, with a foot on the end wearing a muddy black trainer, hanging. I approached with tiny steps, my heart palpitating.

“H-hello?”

“Who’s there? Identify yourself!” I let my breath out, and approached with more confidence. The reply was muffled by leaves and branches. It was a child’s voice, unbroken but in the *alto* range – and it sounded cross, but this time in a way that made me smile.

“What are you doing?”

“Being away.”

“Who are you?”

“Nobody.”

“That’s your name...?”

“No, *stupid*.”

“I was making a joke. So what *is* your name?”

“Jamie.”

“It’s nice to, er...meet you...” I took hold of his foot to shake it. He gave a yell and kicked out, making contact with my lip. There was a searing pain and a salty stickiness in my mouth. A drop of blood landed on my sleeve. The owner of the shoe on the foot on the leg dropped down and stood facing me. He was about ten years old, with large front teeth, thick, dark, scowling eyebrows, and big, brown eyes. He had a little knobbly nose and round cheeks. He was wearing baggy black tracksuit bottoms with a really stained, grass-green, too-big fleece. Its sleeves dropped past his hands, and it had a zip that went from the top of the collar down to about his breastbone. His hair was blackish-brown, too long, tousled, and was covered in little knotty balls.

He glared at me. “You made me lose the game!”

“Game...?”

He held up an old-fashioned gameboy, knocked my shoulder with his and started to walk away. Then he stopped and looked back, before turning round and retracing his steps, eyeing my lip.

“How’d you get that?”

“You kicked me.”

“Oh.” He cocked his head, and his eyes flicked between my mouth and the Game Boy. “You’re not crying.”

“It’s not that sore.” More blood dripped onto my trainer, briefly forming a red blob before the mud and water diluted it.

“You should go to the doctor. I had a cut that big once. I had to get stitches.”

“Does it hurt?”

He grinned massively. “Really much! When I had it done they used a big needle. They stuck it into me and pulled the thread through like an operation, except I was completely awake. And if they break one stitch the whole lot comes undone like knitting, and then they have to do it all again, except if they do it too many times over the same spot the skin all mashes up into a humungous big mulch!” He spread his arms.

“Ouch! I don’t think I’ll go then.”

“If you don’t you’ll bleed and bleed until you shrivel up!”

I had never heard that before, but decided not to risk it. “Where’s the nearest surgery?”

“Follow me.”

I leaned my bin bag up against the tree. Jamie led the way back up my street, past the wooden fences, the brown concrete houses and the little gardens with flowers and patios and white plastic chairs, up to the junction where the man who skinned people alive lived. We turned right, down a foot path at the side of the road, where there was a flower bed and a green, fluffy looking hedge, and then right again. All the while Jamie was playing on his Gameboy. Drops of blood splashed my shoes, the road, and my tracksuit. I dabbed my lip again with my sleeve, and winced as some of the fibers stuck.

“Shrivelling up yet?”

I held a finger up to check. It was pink and full. “Not yet. What’s the game you’re playing?”

“Snake.”

“What d’you have to do?”

“Make it eat the dots so’s it grows. Now shush.”

I tried to be quiet, but it’s so much harder when somebody tells you to. We passed down a street called North Street. The houses here were bigger, and were all joined together in a row. Then we came to a couple of shops, and a pub called ‘The Corrie’.

I leaned over to look at the Gameboy screen.

“You’re putting me off!” He stepped into the road. There was a “MEEEEEP!”, a scraping of tyres, and a high-pitched squeal of brakes. I grabbed his arm and yanked him back onto the pavement. He wrenched himself free.

“OW, get off me...what?!” He stared at the screen, then glared at me. “I was heading for top score!”

“You almost got hit by a car!”

“Stupid car.”

“You didn’t look both ways.”

“So? It should’ve slowed down when it saw *me*.”

He sat on a flat, low wall which ran alongside the pavement. I dabbed my lip again.

He pointed up the street. “Keep walking that way. It’s a big white building.”

“Can’t you come with me?”

“No. Now pee off.”

The streets were mostly empty here too. I was happy for them that they were all probably having a lovely time on holiday, like Joanne said. Still, I thought, it would be so nice to meet just one person – especially someone my own age – who didn’t keep going all scowly and cross at random times.

I carried on until I came to a white building with a sign above the sliding doors saying: ‘North Hill Group Practice Surgery.’ Inside were six chairs and a coffee table with magazines, and a central desk at which sat a woman who had slightly greying, wavy brown hair and a pointy nose, talking on the phone.

“No, no we don’t have any appointments for tomorrow, I’m afraid. Friday? Yes, we can fit you in for nine. Date of birth? Fantastic. We’ll see you then, Mr Fraser. Take care. Goodbye. Bye.” She put the receiver down. “What?”

“I’ve cut my lip.”

She raised her eyebrows. “So I see.”

“I just moved here, so I’m not registered, but I think it needs stitches.”

She took a sheet of paper from a stand, and handed it to me. “You fill that in, and I’ll see what I can do with slots.”

I filled in my gender and previous address. I had known the latter ever since I was five. Dad taught it to me after I got lost in Richmond Park. More blood splashed onto the form as I bent over. I wiped it with my sleeve and checked my fingers again to see if I was shrivelling up.

“I don’t know who my old doctor was,” I said. “Someone in London...”

“Well *that* narrows it down. Er, right, well... You’re going to need the name and address of a parent or guardian.”

“Oh, that’s easy – I found out Mum’s name yesterday from a neighbour. She’s called Patty Harrington. She lives at number sixteen McCallish Court.”

“Right, I’ll photocopy it and you can take the original back with you. Just make sure you bring it back filled in. Excuse me...” The phone was ringing again. “Hello? Uh-huh. No problem, would you like to reschedule? OK, well why don’t you get back to us when you know? Thanks for telling us. OK. Bye now.”

She turned to me: “Cancellation.”

“Ah, sorry to hear that.”

“Sorry? That means the doctor can see you now – and I believe that’s him!”

Someone had come out from a side room. It took me a second to recognise him, but when I did I had to check again to make sure I wasn’t seeing things.

“Doctor Strachan, we have a damsel in distress.”

Ben pointed at me. “I recognise you!”

I pointed back. “I recognise *you!*”

“Come on through! That cut looks nasty.”

I followed him, feeling happy because now I could introduce him to Molly. His office was quite small, with a computer, a bed with a curtain round it like a shower curtain, a desk and three chairs – one on his side and two on mine.

“Take a seat, Anna.” He sat down. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve cut my lip,” I said, although because of the swelling it sounded more like: “I cuh why liw”.

“How did that happen?”

“I got kicked.”

The smile disappeared. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Has anyone done anything to you which...which they shouldn’t have?” I looked down and sorted through everything that had happened since I’d arrived, whilst trying to work out what he meant. “You can tell me. It’s OK.”

“N-ooo... At least...I don’t think so. Well, the man who lives in the big house threatened to skin me alive when I put some rubbish in his wheelie bin, but he didn’t go through with it. Does that count?”

He laughed, breathing a long breath. “No – no it doesn’t count. I just had to make sure – professional obligation, you understand. And neighbourly concern, of course. Put

plainly, I have to make sure nobody at home is hurting you. Would you mind telling me who kicked you, and what happened?”

“It was an accident. There was a boy in a tree. I tried to shake his foot to say hello, because his hand was too high up to reach. He got a fright and kicked out, and it hit my lip.”

“Well, at least it was an accident. But it’s a significant cut. I’ll need to clean it before I do anything else. Let me just get my things together...” He fetched a cardboard tray and some antiseptic swabs, washed his hands and put on his gloves.

“So...you found your mother’s house?”

“Yes. It’s so clean. The living room has a thick carpet and a big squashy sofa. And I get to sleep on a fold-out chair-bed in her room!”

“Hmm.”

“My mother’s...interesting.”

“Is she?”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I wasn’t sure why. “Yes. She works a lot. She’s usually really tired when she gets back, so she shouts at me and doesn’t have much energy left to talk. And she’s terrified of bats.”

“Yes, I remember that.” He tore open a sterile swab.

“Do you know her?”

He nodded. “Hold still...” He dabbed my lip, and I winced. “Right! That’s the sore bit over. Now comes the main act.”

Jamie had been completely wrong in everything he’d said. Not only did I *not* shrivel up, but the stitches didn’t even hurt – apart from the disinfectant. The needle didn’t turn anything to mulch either. Ben made me lie down on the trolley, then sprayed my lip with cold spray, which seemed to numb it. The needle going in and the pulling tight of the thread just felt like two tugs. Once he had finished, I sat up.

“Now, you book another appointment in a week or so to come back and get those taken out. OK?”

“OK. And thanks. I’m happy we’ll get to chat again!” I reached the door, and remembered something: “Do you know Molly?”

“Molly who?”

“She’s a cleaner.”

“Oh, *that* Molly! Yes, I do.” He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling like paper. “She’s lovely.”

Back at the house I found Molly vacuuming the living room. I stuck my fingers in my ears.

“HELLO!” She waved, then gestured at me and pointed to her lip.

I made a gesture which I hoped conveyed that all was ok. “IS MUM HERE?!”

She pointed upstairs.

“WOULD YOU LIKE SOME HOT CHOCOLATE?” We had run out of milk the previous day, but instant drinking chocolate has milk already added.

She shook her head and gestured at an ironing board, which was set up along the wall with the window in. Sitting on the end was a cat-patterned cup, filled with plain hot water. She turned off the vacuum.

“Sorry...trying to get this done before the hour. I’m meeting up with a friend.: What happened to your lip?”

“Someone kicked it. He was in a tree near the river.”

“Ah, Jamie Bean?”

“Yes. But it was an accident.”

“I see.”

I paused. I had never had any coaching on how to ask the question that I now wanted to ask her, and so I didn’t know if it was OK to ask it, and I didn’t know anything about the right time or place to ask, or the right way to go about it.

“Molly?”

“Yes?”

“How...how can a person be happy?”

Her eyebrows went up and her mouth opened a bit. “Uh...” she said, as though she hadn’t meant to make a noise, and then she closed it, frowned, and put her head on one side. Then her shoulders drooped, and she ran a hand slowly down the handle of the vacuum cleaner, as if it were a cat. “If you find the answer to that, Anna,” she said at last, looking almost like Mum because her eyes were looking off somewhere and her smile had vanished, “Tell me. Tell all of us, in fact.”

I made a cup of hot chocolate for myself, then swithered for a long time. Since I couldn’t control what Mum did, but I *could* control what *I* did, I made a second mug, took off my shoes and went upstairs, taking care to avoid the creaky step at the top. The door to Mum’s room was ajar, and computer keys clacked inside. I poked my head round and saw her sitting at her desk, typing. I pushed the door open with my elbow.

“Hi.”

She jumped. “Don’t blooming do that!” There was a very long, very awkward silence before, slowly, she turned round. Then she stood up quickly and swept towards me, eyes glinting. “What happened to your...?”

I couldn’t work out what she meant until she stretched out her fingers towards my lip.

“Someone kicked me.”

Every part of her seemed to go tense. In fact, she seemed to grow in size too, though that must have been an optical illusion. “Who?” she snarled.

“A friend.”

“*Which* friend?”

“Jamie. I met him in a tree. It was an accident – he’s just little. He didn’t realise my mouth was in the way of his foot. Don’t worry – it’s not bad. It doesn’t hurt much now.”

She drew back and sat down, not taking her eyes off me. It felt good to be having a proper conversation with her again.

“Where did you go for the stitches?”

“North Hill surgery.”

She nodded. “Well, we’ll get you registered with my GP in Livingston. Not at North Hill.”

“Why not?”

She shivered. “I just don’t feel comfortable there, ok?”

“But I’ve already filled in half the registration form...”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll get you a new form.”

Her voice sounded strained. Her shoulders looked stiff. I put the hot chocolate down on the table. She tutted, and moved it onto a coaster which had printed on it a picture of an owl and its baby.

“This desk belonged to my mother. It’s worth about five hundred pounds.”

“Is it? I didn’t realise you were putting it up for sale.”

She closed her eyes. “I just mean I don’t want stains on it. Ok?”

“OK.” I sank down onto my camp bed and sipped my hot chocolate for a few minutes. She turned back towards her computer screen and keyboard as though she were about to type, but instead she just sat there. “Mum?”

“What?”

“What is it that you actually do?”

“Administrate. For a charity in Livingston.”

“What does ‘administrate’ mean?”

“It means I do the dirty work nobody else can be bothered to do.”

“Like what?”

“Book meetings and transport...organise events...type minutes...get flyers and other things printed...take personal calls...get food in...God knows what else. Truth be told, I'm getting blooming fed up of it. Was going to quit. Then I get a call saying *you're* coming north, so...”

“Why are you getting fed up? Don't you like the job?”

“Oh, it's not the job – it's all the stuff around the edges. The nit-picking and bickering. It's not even about doing a good job, it's just about getting one over on each other. I try and stay out of it – keep my head down, but...” She shrugged. “You can't, really. They hunt you down and drag you into it.”

“School was a bit like that. Well, now I can understand why the fridge is so empty and everything is off.” I put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hmm?” She took my hand gently, and moved it away.

“The milk was all curdled yesterday, there was only one slice of ham and we're running out of eggs. But if all you do all day is get food in for other people then I can understand why you wouldn't want to do that in your Golden Time as well. That's what Dad calls it. I mean – called it.”

“Anna,” Mum's voice sounded like the effort to speak was comparable to the effort of hauling a sack of potatoes up a ladder. “Look, I know you must be hurting. I know you loved your dad. But I don't want to hear about him, ok? Or his flat. In fact, I don't want to hear about anything touching upon your life together.”

“Why not?” It was as if she had punched me in the chest.

“He hurt me very much.”

“How...?”

She turned away, then started to type, then stopped again. “When you were a baby and he decided he wanted to leave, he sued me for custody of you.” She sipped her hot chocolate. “He won.”

“Why?”

Her face went very blank and her voice sounded a bit like one of those automated phone network voices that do your top-ups for you. “The case your dad's lawyer built,” she said – and I remember noticing how crisp and clean each word sounded, like it was a hedge that had been carefully pruned to exactly the right shape – “Was that because I had chosen to work full-time, and because I'd been showing symptoms of severe depression, and because I wasn't breastfeeding – all those things combined meant that you and I hadn't

developed a proper sense of attachment to each other, so if I got custody of you, you would be emotionally starved. He argued that you should be cared for by the parent who had the most chance of ensuring you thrived both physically and emotionally.”

“But I *do* feel attached to you!”

She was quiet for several seconds. Then she continued as if I hadn’t said anything: “Have you any idea what that feels like?”

I shook my head.

“I watched him gather up all your things and pack them into two big suitcases. After he had done that he stowed them away in the boot of his car. Then he took your car seat out of my car and secured it on the back seat. Some of the neighbours were watching – it was like the air was saturated with their judgements. He took you out the social worker’s arms and he strapped you into the car seat. Then he got into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and drove off.” She was shaking. “I stood in that driveway for an hour after he left. When I went back inside it was like I’d never had a baby. Until I found one jar of baby food still in the freezer. Imagine how that feels.”

It interested me how she spoke about the air being saturated with judgements – as if feelings were like radio signals one could tune into without words if only they had a working satellite dish. I’d never thought of feelings in that way. Perhaps my dish was faulty. My hot chocolate was far too sweet, and it coated my mouth gaggingly. Out of habit my hand started to inch towards the pillow for my phone, but I caught myself and thought better of it. After about ten minutes Mum got up, went over to her bag, took out a twenty-pound note and put it into my hand. “Here,” she said. “Stock us up.”

It hadn’t been a pleasant conversation at all. My mind tossed and turned as I walked down the road to the shop. Dad had been my every other thought for the last month, but in light of what Mum had said I now felt guilty for dwelling on his memory. It felt...tainted. Would I gain the same comfort from his text messages now? If I had been in his position I wouldn’t have found it as easy to abandon Mum as he had seemed to find it.

I didn’t feel like smiling. I didn’t feel like breaking in the morning. I didn’t feel like dancing or skipping. I didn’t feel like all my worries had disappeared. And yet...in biology I watched a documentary about the desert. At one point the presenter walked up to a clump of totally dead-looking plants and, by flicking his fingertips, sprinkled a few drops of water over them. You can’t usually see plants moving and changing but these ones did. The leaves all uncurled with a gentle crackling, and brightly coloured flowers sort of oozed up out of

them like blisters from a burn. That's how I felt after the conversation between Mum and me. But I didn't know why.

The wind had picked up and had blown the clouds away. The sun shone low and glinted from the west, but it was still bright and warm. I sort of hoped, as I turned into the junction and onto the main road, that I would see Jamie playing on his Game Boy. But he wasn't there, so I went into the shop, picked up a wire basket and walked up and down. There were essentials like fruit, which sat in wooden boxes, bread which was up on the shelves, and juice and milk in the yellow-lit fridge area. I put a carton of fresh orange juice into the basket, and picked up a jar of red and a jar of white pasta sauce. I also got some tinned pineapples and peaches, as well as some new potatoes and sardines, some cheese, some lettuce, a smoked sausage and a pack of sliced ham. For snacks I picked up a bag of chocolate chip cookies and a multipack of crisps. All together it cost sixteen pounds and thirty-eight pence.

When I got back Mum was sitting on her desk chair, her head resting on her arms. I thought she was crying at first, but when I got closer I saw that her eyes were closed and her breath was gentle. I tiptoed round her, perched on the edge of the bed and put a hand on her shoulder, thinking of those times she had sat with me while I pretended to be asleep. It occurred to me that at this moment, the roles might just be reversed.

It was raining the next day. I woke up to it splattering on the window. The wind gusted the ventilation system, rattling something I couldn't see. When I looked outside the shrubs and bushes were swaying back and forth, and a plastic bag whirled in the road. The window itself had streaky droplets running diagonally down to the left, and the sky was a deep shade of purpley-grey. The house next door still had its curtains shut in one window, just as it had done all day the previous day, and the day before, and the day before that. I went downstairs in my nightie and found Mum in the kitchen, putting on her coat.

When she saw me she gave a quick nod. "TV guide's on the coffee table. Help yourself to snacks. Oh, and have you got that GP form? Might as well register you today. I'll just copy the info you put down."

I fetched the form and handed it to her. "I didn't know all the answers, but I filled it in as best I could."

She took it and skim-read it. "What's that?" She asked, pointing to something I had filled in. She started to giggle.

"What are you laughing at?"

Something hot rose up inside me. Dad had told me off very severely for laughing at the medical word ‘squamous’ when Mr Langton once used it in front of me. Mr Langton had been talking to Dad about Mrs Langton, back when Mrs Langton was still alive. Dad had said that it was extremely wrong and hurtful to laugh at somebody’s diagnosis, especially that one, and double-especially if you didn’t know what it is – no matter how funny it might sound – and that I should make every effort to control myself. But when I used to go to school the other children still asked me all the time if I pooped burgers, and if they could have some brown sauce for their chips when it came to my diagnosis. Then they’d roar with laughter, and my ears would go so red that they would burn me. But I quickly learned that I couldn’t just ask them to make an effort to control themselves. That only made them laugh more, and then my ears would go even more red and that would make them laugh too and call me things like ‘traffic lights’, which became my nickname. It got used more than my real name in the end. Eventually I forced myself just to laugh along whenever it happened, which Dad said would make us friends instead of enemies, so that is what I did.

“I know,” I said, keeping my voice as relaxed as I could, “I think it sounds like a fast food restaurant for donkeys!”

She waved a hand in front of her face, blew out slowly through pursed lips, and when she had stopped laughing she said, “Sorry.”

I blinked. I’d never heard her say sorry before. In fact, nobody had ever said sorry before for laughing at my Asperger’s.

She folded the form up and zipped it into the main compartment of her handbag.

“So...when were you diagnosed with this...Asperger’s?”

“When I was four,” I said, noting how intently she was staring at me. I didn’t know why this was gripping her so much more than any of our previous interactions, but it felt good to have her attention so completely.

“How...why? I mean, what is it? Fill me in!”

I hesitated before answering. How could I describe in a few minutes something that had taken nine years to live? Most people who’d found out about my diagnosis had already heard of it, and most of them already knew all they wanted to know, or else it wasn’t a good time. It was quarter to nine now. Mum was going to be late for work. Nevertheless, she’d sat down at the table and was looking at me. It felt odd to be looking back at her – actually looking into her eyes instead of watching her look somewhere else. I sat down too.

“Well...” I said, “It’s a thing that makes you a bit different in how you look at the world, and also how you learn and talk to other people. It’s named after Hans Asperger. I don’t know if it’s a hard or a soft G.”

She nodded. Of all the conversations that could have made us start talking to each other again, I'd never imagined that it would be one like this.

"Sometimes it makes you think very intensely about things," I continued. "And sometimes you don't always understand people, so you accidentally say things that upset them."

"Like what?"

This question surprised me. I'd thought I'd said plenty to upset her since arriving. Maybe I'd read her wrong. "Um, well... Once my friend Jenny drew a picture of me and she drew my head really big. And I thought it was a caricature so I laughed and said the head was far too big. But it wasn't meant to be a caricature. And she didn't speak to me for a week. My outreach worker told me what I did wrong – I didn't figure it out for myself."

"Maybe Jenny came down too hard on you anyway. It was just a misunderstanding." It came out of Mum's mouth as a whisper. She dropped her gaze. Her cheeks went a bit red. She looked like a boy in my class once looked after he'd accidentally made the teacher cry. "So, who is this outreach worker, then?"

"Oh...I had two I used to go and visit. They helped me learn some things about how most other people work, and how to know what they need and expect, and how to reach out to them. They said it was because I'll have to be around them my whole life, and most of them don't think like me, so I might as well learn some general things to help me get by. That's the other thing about Asperger's – people don't always understand you either, so sometimes you have to teach them, and to do that you have to know what they need in order to learn, because they don't always know themselves. But sometimes they're not interested anyway and won't listen. But that doesn't matter. It's good to give them the chance. And Da...I mean...I think it's fine to be a bit different anyway – no matter what people say – as long as you're honest and careful and kind."

"Ah. OK."

She fiddled with a thread on her sleeve. "There's a lot I've missed, isn't there?"

I didn't know what to say. I wondered how this was going to end.

There was a noise outside. We both jumped up. Mum opened the door, and we peered out. I shivered and hugged myself. The bottom of my nightie flapped around. I held it down. The delivery van was back in next door's driveway. Two men were staggering in with another box.

"Were those the ones who stared at you?"

"Hmm?" She turned to me briefly.

"You know...when Dad left."

Her lips went very white and taut. “No.”

“What do you suppose is in the box?”

She paused, shook her head, and then shrugged. “They don’t even have jobs!”

“Perhaps they work from home. Or...or maybe they have a rich relative!”

She gave me a sideways look. “Well then, how come Molly sees the daughter at the benefits office every week?”

I didn’t know what to say in reply to that.

It was far too wet to eat outside, so I stood by the window and watched for the black and white cat. Nobody deserves to be left outside in a freezing deluge – even if they did scratch you out of pain. Of course, I’d have to make sure it didn’t walk on the living room carpet. It didn’t turn up though – it must have found somewhere else to shelter.

I went through to the hall to see if Mum had any waterproof coats. There was a wooden panel bolted to the wall, with a lot of shiny gold metal pegs screwed into it. An oilcloth waterproof hat hung on one of these. I picked it off and put it on my head. On the floor immediately below sat a pair of green wellington boots. They looked brand new. Perhaps Mum had been given them by someone, but wasn’t in the habit of wearing wellingtons. Otherwise she would certainly have worn them on a day like this.

There were no spare coats on the pegs, and I wondered what to do. Then I remembered the cupboard under the stairs. When I’d got the bucket to get rid of the bat there’d been a bit of oilcloth poking out from the bottom. It could have been a sleeve. I found a camping torch hanging from a hook on the inside of the cupboard door. It kept flickering on and off, and the light it cast was dim, but it was good enough to shine around until I found the poking-out bit. I gave it a sharp tug. A heap of things fell forward, but since everything was so disorganised anyway I didn’t suppose Mum would notice. When the whole thing came free it was indeed an old, green oilskin coat! The lining was maroon and dark green checked on a white base, and it had a gold zip and poppers down the front for extra waterproof-ness. There was no hood, but that didn’t matter because I had the hat which went perfectly with it. When I put it on the sleeves came all the way to halfway down my fingertips, and the bottom reached my knees. Since Mum wasn’t much taller than me, and it was not the style of coat designed to reach to the knees, it must have been too big for her too.

Before I could wonder about this any more I heard another sound outside – a bumping noise, and then a rumble, as of wheels rolling across tarmac. I rushed down the path, banging the front door of the house shut behind me, hid behind the wooden fence and peeked into

next door's garden. The gap was so narrow I couldn't clearly make out details, but the woman – who wore a long, black coat – was wheeling a bin down the driveway whilst trying to shield her head from the rain. She left the bin outside the gate and retreated back inside, banging the door.

As soon as she had gone I crept round the fence, through the gate and up the concrete path, which had a knocker on it in the shape of a horse shoe. I knocked three times, and watched the rain run down the window pane. Quick, light footsteps approached, and the lock turned. The woman had a long, thin, pinched face with coarse skin, and downward sloping creases at both corners of her mouth. Her hair was dirty blonde, her cheekbones were high, and her eyebrows were low.

She looked me up and down. “What?”

“I'm Anna,” I said. “I live next door. It's nice to meet you.” I held out my hand. “Can I come in?”

“No,” she snapped. “We're busy.” She started to shut the door.

“It's soaking wet...”

It opened a tiny crack. “Not my problem.”

“What are all the parcels?”

There was a pause. “None of your business.”

“OK,” I said. Perhaps this was just a very private, un-personable neighbourhood. Maybe that explained some of the things about Mum, too. “It's just that if the curtains are shut all the time but you're dressed, I wondered if you were looking after someone who couldn't get up. And that must be really annoying for them.”

She gave a laugh, but it wasn't the kind you do when you're having fun. It was the nasty kind, like the kind my friends did at me when I used to go to school. “Ha! And what about the poor folks they drag down with 'em?”

“Maybe I could come in and cheer her up? I'm good at being cheery.”

“Don't waste your time, Honey Pops – nothing's gonna cheer *that* one up.” She jerked her thumb in the direction of the door. “Save those smiles for someone who appreciates them, because trust me – they won't make a blind bit of difference here.” And the door shut.

The rain was really coming down heavily now. It reminded me of the car wash Dad used to drive through every Wednesday, but the drops of water were fatter and wetter. The oilskin hat magnified the noise until it sounded like there was a waterfall in my head. The street was empty – or so I thought. I decided the best thing to do would be to simply go back to Mum's house and borrow one of her books. I squeezed back through the gate and splashed

down the road, through the puddles that were collecting because the street was sloped and the kerb at the lower side of the road was high.

It was only when I got back to the front door that I realised how stupid I had been, banging it shut behind me in haste, without setting the latch so that it wouldn't lock behind me. Now it wouldn't open. In stories people are able to magically open doors using hair clips. I wasn't sure it would work with this kind of lock, but it was my only hope. I took the oilskin hat off and removed my butterfly hairclip. Then I tried fitting it through the keyhole, both in the open position and the closed, but it was too wide, even when I tried forcing it through. It sprang sideways and I cut the side of my thumb a bit.

Even after such a short time with the hood down my hair and back were completely soaked. There was no point in putting the oilskin hat back on, and my clip would most likely tangle in my hair, so I hung the hat on the doorknob, put the clip in my pocket, and went down the road to see if I could shelter under a tree.

I crossed the grassy area, which was now even squelchier than before. The rain was pelting directly in my face now, and I was shuddering. The wind roared around my ears so that they ached and I felt dizzy. Someone tapped my shoulder. I gasped and jumped round.

“Are you deaf?” Jamie yelled.

“What? I can't hear you in this wind!”

“You're a freak!”

“What?”

“YOU'RE A FREAK!”

“Why?”

“Nobody goes out in rain like this!”

“*You're* out...”

“Yeah, only 'cause I saw you and had come out to call you a freak. Come on – this way...” He grabbed my arm and hauled me back across the green.

Jamie's house was a good deal smaller than Mum's. His parents were obviously not nearly as particular about muddy shoes or making sure the furniture stayed neat. The linoleum in the kitchen had brown stains on it, and there were cracks where the tiles met. The living room had a thin, faded carpet and a brown leather sofa with yellow foam poking through a hole. There were blinds on the windows instead of curtains.

“It must be lovely that your parents don't care if you don't take your shoes off,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah. Here – this is my room.” He pushed open a wooden side door, upon which “Jamie's Room” was carved in spiky capitals, using what looked like a kitchen knife.

His room was even smaller than the living room – just big enough for a bed, a chest of drawers, a laundry bag on a hook on the door, and a stack of shelves up the wall. The lowest shelf had a radio on it, and a very thick, heavy-looking mobile phone catalogue, as well as a tin money box. The second shelf held a pile of upturned drawing pins, his Gameboy and a head torch.

“You can wear some of my clothes.” He wrenched open a drawer and pulled out a fleece and some trousers.

“Thanks.” I pulled off my jumper and T-shirt.

“Wait a moment!” He threw his arms up over his eyes.

“What?”

“I’m a *boy!*”

“So? You’re just little. I changed in front of Dad all the time when I was little.”

“Family’s *different*. And I am *not* little. I’m nearly eleven.”

“Are you? OK then. But why is family different?”

“Because... because...” he faltered. “Look, I’ll turn my back.” And he stood in the corner, facing the wall.

Once I had changed I said, “You can turn round now.”

“Are you *dressed?*”

When I said yes he turned cautiously, scowling. “Siddown.” He gave me a push on the chest so that my knees buckled and I sat heavily on the bed. Then he sat cross-legged opposite me, and looked as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do now.

“Did you ever make a den?” I asked.

“What?”

“Well, if you pin the duvet to a shelf with some of your drawing pins and hang it over the edge of the bed, you’ll have a sort of tent, won’t you?”

He picked up his Game Boy. “Let’s see you do it, then.”

I got him to stand up, then pulled the duvet cover off the bed. It was blue, with an orange stain near the popped opening. I pinned two of its corners to the top shelf using six drawing pins – a red one, a yellow one, two blue ones and two green ones. Then I pulled the other end straight, so that it fell over the side of the bed. Now there was a wedge-shaped space where the pillows were.

“See? A den!” I sat back, admiring my work.

“Great – now I can’t see the flaming game.” As soon as I’d pulled the duvet off, Jamie had sat back down on the mattress and I’d worked around him.

“Here,” I took the torch and forced it over his head.

“Ow – flip off!” But he let me pull it over properly.

“Budge up...” I squashed in beside him. The den was very warm with the two of us inside. “How’s the game?”

“Not bad.”

“Can I try?”

“Wait your turn.”

I looked through the mobile phone catalogue. There were a lot of incredibly high-tech, fancy new ones. I turned to a random page and started reading information for the Polestar H7 – a silver phone with a screen that looked like a very small computer. “Download games, apps and more!” the description read.

“Look at this,” I said. “If you had this you’d have loads more games – not just snake.”

He jabbed a finger at the price: £399.99. “As if Carol’d be able to afford that.”

“Carol’s your mum?”

“No *fear*. She’s my foster mum.”

“Really? I had one of those! She was called Alison, but she only did short-term emergency fostering.”

“There’s four of us – Alasdair, Jeremy, Joe and me, but Joe’s almost sixteen now, so I expect she’ll kick him out soon. Imagine getting paid to keep children! Like when there’s a used car nobody wants, so they pay to get it taken away and stayed-away.” He threw the Game Boy down and clenched his jaw. “I put it on level one for you. Arrow keys move it. You’ve got to get the bits of food and the snake gets longer and longer. If you touch the side you die. If you touch any part of the snake you die.” I hoped he wasn’t being literal. Life here was proving to be decidedly violent.

The snake was a thick, grey line made of squares. It was quite short, and didn’t move smoothly. It travelled forward in jerks, about one every second, accompanied by a ‘Bip...bip...’ sound. The ‘food’ was a tiny grey square in the top right hand corner of the screen. At first it was easy, almost boring. However, as it grew longer it curled around the screen, and I had to think more carefully and plan ahead so that I didn’t trap the head end. I lasted as long as I possibly could, spiralling inwards, until a piece of food appeared in the top right-hand corner. I aimed for an emerging gap, but missed and hit the body. The screen went blank. There was a “Dee-deedee-DEE!” noise, and the words ‘TOP SCORE!’ appeared, with an animation of a snake waving.

“I got top score!” I said.

“Impossible,” he scoffed. “You were on the lowest level! Anyway – it was your first time.” He snatched it off me and inspected the screen. His eyebrows and the corners

of his mouth went right down. “Right,” he said, “I’m setting *that* straight.” And he settled back on the pillows and started a new game.

I don’t know exactly how many games we played, but it must have been a lot because we got three more top scores between us, and when the knock sounded on the front door it was dusky and had stopped raining.

“Should we answer it?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It’ll just be one of the others.”

“They wouldn’t knock, would they? They live here. *You* didn’t knock.” He didn’t answer. “I’ll get it if you like.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

I opened the door, and found myself facing a gigantic policeman.

“Are you Anna Whitear?”

“How do you know?”

“Carol only fosters boys. I’ve been sent out to look for you. Been round all the houses in between this one and your mother’s. What are you doing here?”

I began to sweat. I didn’t see what I’d done wrong, since Jamie had invited me in and nobody had forbidden me from going out, but I still didn’t want to be dragged off to prison. “I was just visiting.”

“Aye, well, your mum’s in a fair state, worrying over you.”

My stomach felt like it was collapsing in. I never thought she might actually get worried about me. Dad knew I was sensible, and we had agreed rules so even if I did get lost – which hardly happened at all after the Richmond Park incident – he knew I could get back safely. Maybe now she would pay to have me taken away and stayed-away, like Jamie.

“Can I get my clothes? They got wet in the rain.”

“All right.”

When I went through to Jamie’s room I found it empty. The window was open, and the white net veil that hung in front of it flapped in the breeze. It was as if he was a criminal, running from his own house. I recalled Molly’s words – you never know from the outside why someone reacts the way they do. I gathered my clothes up. Then the policeman walked me home.

Mum was pacing up and down on the lawn. When she saw me she came towards us with her chin raised.

“Thank you,” she said to the policeman. He nodded and left. Then she took my arm and led me inside surprisingly gently. When we got inside, however, she pressed me down

into a dining chair and stood over me. Now I almost wished she *would* shout at me. I would have deserved it. Instead her voice was level.

“Do you know how much trouble you’ve caused?”

I couldn’t reply, even though I knew I owed her a proper explanation.

“The police had to come out, Anna. The *police*.”

“I’m sorry.” My mouth wobbled and I tightened it.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “You know, they say that if a missing child doesn’t turn up within the first few hours, then something’s probably happened to them.”

I looked past her towards a painting of a farm which hung on the wall opposite the table. The cockerel looked as if it only had one leg, and it had its eye fixed on a nearby hen.

“I’m sorry,” she added.

“What for?” I was incredulous.

“For leaving you alone. It was wrong of me.” She sat down. Her nails were ragged and short.

I wanted to reach out and comfort her, but I didn’t dare.

She lifted her head again. “Go to your room.” Her voice sounded like a dog baring its teeth.

I sat in my room and thumbed through Dad’s texts. The phone had twenty-eight percent of its battery left.

“Chips tonight? Xoxoxox” read one from last November. Another read, “Conkers match. Five o’clock, Regent’s Park tomorrow. Prepare to get THRASHED! Xoxoxoxoxox”. A third read “Don’t worry about them. You’re head and shoulders ahead – I believe in you. Xoxoxoxoxox”.

I heard Mum on the stairs, and then the sound of the bathroom door, and a bath being run. It felt like someone was holding a glowing hot poker against my heart, except that pulling back and twisting couldn’t shake it free. I wanted to keep reading, and yet doing so was unbearable. Instead, I took out my notepad and wrote.

Three paragraphs in, Mum knocked softly on the door.

“I ran you a bath,” she said, and held out a large, fluffy purple towel. “Leave your clothes on the floor. I’ll wash them for you.”

Mum and I both settled down to sleep early. The excitement, the soaking and Mum’s scolding had worn us out.

I spent the evening in my sleeping bag, writing. Mum sat up in bed, reading a book.

“*Wuthering Heights*,” I read out, catching the title as she opened it.

“Mm-hmm,” she confirmed.

“Mum? How did you get that scar? The one on your belly?”

Asking the question felt like throwing a new born baby across a gorge. It was an all-or-nothing moment – like that moment when a cartoon character runs over a cliff and hovers for a second, running in mid-air, before either plummeting or grabbing on to something to pull themselves back up again.

She went very still, then slowly shut the book and laid it to one side. “When you were born.”

“What do you mean?”

She was silent for several seconds. “Ever heard of a Caesarean Section?”

“That’s where they cut the baby out, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Well, they had to do that with you.”

“Why?”

Her hands seemed to develop a slight tremor. “I was very ill. So were you.”

“OK.” I hoped she would elaborate, but instead she sat for about a minute, and then picked her book up again.

As I cuddled down into my pillows Mum turned off the light, slipped out of bed and went to the bathroom once again. There was the sound of the tap, followed by the toilet flushing. Then she tiptoed back into the room, opening the door only the tiniest crack to slip through. My eyelids were much too heavy to raise by now. Not entirely sure if I was awake or dreaming, I felt her crouch down once again at the head of my bed. Once again, a cold hand pushed a strand of hair behind my ear, and a finger traced the shape of my eyebrow. This time, however, she also spoke. Her voice was soft and low and lulling – and the words were in a language I couldn’t understand.

“Get up, Anna.”

Mum shook my shoulder, and started downstairs. I sat up, rubbed my eyes and looked across at the alarm clock. It was half past nine – far too late for her to still be in the house. Then I remembered it was a Saturday. I dressed and put my earrings in. My butterfly hairclip seemed to have gone missing since my having tried it out as a makeshift key. I searched through my laundry and in both suitcases, as well as in and around my bed. It wasn’t there. I went to the kitchen and found Mum sipping coffee whilst bustling round the kitchen, a blue folded sheet of A4 paper in her hand. Her hair was wet, and she had a towel round her shoulders. She was wearing a knitted white top with wool bobbles spaced regularly in vertical lines down the front, and black corduroy jeans.

“I like your jumper,” I said.

“Thanks.” She pointed at a second bowl. “Eat up. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

“Where are we going?”

“Edinburgh. I need to visit my solicitor.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Just stuff. There’s always *stuff*.” She stuffed the blue folded sheet into her bag. “Also need to get you a coat and hat.”

“I’ve got a coat and hat,” I protested.

“You mean the oilskin ones? I put them in the skip.”

The honey nut loops felt squishy against the roof of my mouth. I thought of my coat and hat lying amongst piles of rubbish, with the rain rotting the lining and gradually breaking them down into nothing. That’s when I remembered I’d put the clip in the pocket of the coat. Dad gave me that clip last Christmas. Everything to do with him was slowly crumbling away. Probably one day my memories of him would fade, too. I should have been happy that Mum wanted to get me nice new clothes and spend the day with me, but instead I wanted to scream and hit things – the hot poker feeling was back, despite not looking at the texts. . . Soon it would be too big for me to hold it inside of myself any longer.

Once I had finished, Mum dumped my bowl in the sink. “Teeth and hair. Quickly now.”

I took time alone in the bathroom to calm myself down by twisting the hand towel violently – as if I was wringing water from it. That was a technique my outreach worker taught me for when I needed an ‘outlet’ for anger. It seemed to help for this feeling too. Once I had wrung out all my upset I sat on the closed lid of the toilet seat, letting my breathing get back to normal and collecting my thoughts. The sky shone blue, framed by the skylight in the bathroom. Towards the end of summer the quality of light changes – it gets yellowish instead of white, and shines on things from a lower angle so that they have a sort of halo. Today there was a thin but dazzling glow around the edge of the metal window frame. I felt something inside me like chimney smoke, or leaves chasing each other on the pavement, or a flame in a dark room when the candle has almost burned out.

I opened the window, and thought I could smell the frost which would appear in later months, carried ahead on the wind. The radiator gurgled. There was a muffled flapping from within the sloping wooden ceiling, and I wondered if it was the bat settling down to sleep in some hidden cranny. I put my toothbrush back in its glass and ran down, out the front door, to where Mum was waiting in the car.

We drove past the house of the man who skins people alive, and straight ahead at two roundabouts. The houses thinned out, and so did the shops. I saw more farmland ahead.

“Do you like Queen?” I asked.

“No.”

“What about Thin Lizzy?”

“Ugh. No.”

“Starship?”

She snorted. That exhausted all the bands Dad and I used to listen to together. My interest and knowledge with regards to classical music, along with my piano playing, were things he approved of and had been proud of, but hadn't shared. Neither had my outreach worker. Neither had Mrs Taylor or Miss Corrigan. Neither had my teachers. Neither had any of my school friends. And thus far I had found no indication in Mum's house that she might share such an interest, either.

“So what music *do* you like?”

She shrugged. “Bjork. Florence and the Machine. Kate Bush.”

“I've heard of Kate Bush, but I don't know any of her music. Can I hear some?”

“We're almost there. Perhaps another time.”

The car jerked as she changed down a gear. To our right I saw a footbridge spanning two parallel railway tracks, with a platform and an outdoor shelter on either side. A portable cabin formed the station building, with a large car park in front which gleamed in the sunlight.

Once we had pulled into a free parking bay Mum pointed at a fat, blue metal contraption which stood at head height about fifty meters away.

“Machine's up there. Get us a ticket.”

Five minutes later Mum was sitting in the outside station shelter reading her book, while I wandered up and down the platform. At each end where it sloped down to the track there was a white-rimmed, triangular red sign which read: “DO NOT CROSS THE LINE”. The track curved to the left, and clumps of tall dock leaves and stinging nettles grew on either side. The train to Edinburgh was due in three minutes.

“What are you reading?” I asked, returning to Mum's side. It wasn't *Wuthering Heights* any more. She must be a fast reader too.

She held the book up. It was called *Her Eyes*, and was by Marion Carson.

I watched her reading for about a minute before she said, “You're giving me the heebie-jeebies”.

“What are they?”

“Can you not sit still for two seconds?”

I tried really hard, but even in the shelter the wind was picking up, and although it was dry it wasn't as warm as it had been the day before. I swung my legs back and forth, and my teeth clacked together with every gust. Finally I stood up and walked the length of the platform again, just to keep moving. This time, as I neared the edge to read a Samaritans poster, I saw two parallel horizontal lights rounding the bend.

Mum had hunched her shoulders and wrapped her arms around herself by the time I reached her again, so she must have been cold too. The train slowed to a stop. She pressed the button for the door and jumped up into the carriage – the floor of the doorway being level with our knees. Then she held out a hand. I grasped it and pulled myself up. Then I panicked for a moment – if she could get the heebie-jeebies just from sitting next to me she must definitely have them after touching me.

“This way.” She pushed past me into a carriage which was far less crowded than any of the trains Dad and I had taken in or around London. There were actually seats free, and you could move in the vestibules and up the aisles of the carriages. Nobody crowded the doors.

“Let's get an aeroplane seat,” I suggested.

Mum sniffed. “Why would I want to sit in a tiny, pokey little seat when there are proper tables?” I frowned. Did she really not know how un-tiny and un-pokey this train was?

“Well...we could always pretend we're on a transatlantic flight!”

“Pretend away...” She sat at a table. I stood in the aisle and deliberated, but somehow it didn't seem as appealing to play aeroplanes without someone else to play with, and I didn't want to annoy Mum any more. Otherwise it would cost me another point, and I'd been doing well so far today. I sat down opposite her.

The train began to move, and the station disappeared behind us. A long bank of witch elms went past the window. After them came a huge field with blue oil drums, white jump-poles and red wings lying on their sides. In a smaller field adjacent, two horses were grazing. One was large and dark red – like Mum's hair – with rickety, thin legs. The other looked too small for anyone to ride except perhaps a pre-schooler, and was muddy-white and very fat.

“Who do you think rides that one?” I asked, pointing to the small, fat one.

She looked up. “Probably just a companion pony.”

“Did you ever ride?”

“Used to, when I was at primary school.”

“Is that the same as junior school?”

“Yeah. Sorry, keep forgetting it’s all different for you.”

“It’s ok,” I reassured her. “Could *I* ever have riding lessons?”

She giggled. “Find a horse and I’ll take you. Course, you’d fall flat on your bum...”

“Why?”

“You’re from London!”

Just as we were rounding a right-hand bend a woman’s voice shouted “All tickets, please!”.

“Two return. One child.” Mum handed her two ten pound notes without looking. The officer printed the tickets out using the portable machine which hung round her neck, and handed over change from each of her pockets.

“Is there a snacks trolley?” I asked.

The ticket officer craned her neck to look up the carriage. “Should be along in about fifteen minutes.”

Once she had gone, Mum put her book spine-up on the table, making me cringe. “Just so’s you know, I’m not spending money on week-old, overpriced junk off a trolley, provided by a governmentally rejected, bureaucratic, shoddy system with no competition to act as quality control.”

More houses began to appear amongst the fields, until we were travelling through sparse townland. A small woman with a shapely nose and thin eyebrows, long eyelashes, light brown skin and nearly-black, wavy hair that came down to her shoulders, sat at the table on the opposite side of the aisle. She wore a dark grey raincoat, a red skirt which complimented her lipstick, black tights and boots, and sat back in her seat, one leg crossed lightly over the other. She was reading something off a notebook computer, one hand hovering above the touchpad. She didn’t look up when the snacks trolley clanked in the next carriage, but at one point she took a smartphone out her coat pocket and glanced at the screen, before putting it back, tilting her chin, and resuming her reading. I watched her for another minute or so until she caught my eye. Before I could look away she gave me a half smile. I smiled back shyly, and a second later the snacks trolley stopped in the aisle between us.

The train plunged into a tunnel following Haymarket station.

“I know this bit!” I exclaimed, “I’ve been here before!”

“Well, what do you know.” It took me a moment to figure out that this was a rhetorical reply.

“Can we have a go on the Ferris wheel and ice rink?”

“The ice rink’s only up in winter.”

“Oh.”

I pressed my nose to the window. When I was eleven I came up with Dad and stayed overnight to see the castle and dungeons, for History. He tried to scare me by telling me a story about a creature living in the wall of the Haymarket tunnel. His eyes always widened when he was trying to convince me of something untrue – especially when it was something he had made up himself – but just for fun I got down under the table anyway and sat on his feet until we came out the other side. I didn’t think Mum would approve of my doing that now.

“We are now approaching – Edinburgh Waverley – where this train will terminate. Please ensure you have all your belongings, and personal items with you, when leaving the train.”

The platform was extremely crowded because it was the tail end of the Fringe Festival. Pigeons flapped across the rafters, and there was an echoing mixture of voices – French, German, a bit of Russian, Polish and Chinese too, in amongst the English. Blue Scotrail trains like the one we had arrived on waited in parallel lines at their platforms, looking like runners at the start of a race. Crowds crossed both ways over a green footbridge far ahead and above. Beyond the ticket barriers there was a complex of shops – including a WHSmith and a Boots, with another indoor area across from them. The roof was made of glass, and was criss-crossed with white beams held up by thin, green-based pillars.

“You’ll need the ‘out’ half of your ticket,” Mum said.

Long queues of people stretched up the platform to get to the three open ticket barriers, whilst two officials in high-visibility jackets stood either side. When it was my turn I slotted my ticket into the machine. It was pulled from my hand as though someone inside had snatched it from me, and the gate opened.

“Up here,” Mum pointed to the right, where the road sloped up and out into the sunshine.

We came out onto a bridge with tour buses parked nose-to-tail. Crowds of people crossed as if they were tidal waves. I could see and hear a piper in full tartan, standing on the corner. Behind him there was a market that was so full the stalls were barely visible. My vision blurred and I felt giddy, but Mum grabbed my arm before I fell, and steered me to the right, walking just in front of me. Her path left a short, temporary channel with nothing in it, like the wake of a boat. I stumbled along in it. After about a minute the world came back into focus, and my balance returned to normal.

We waited at a pedestrian crossing for the green man. It was hard to see because there was a tall man standing in front of me. He wore an orange T-shirt and light blue jeans, and his hair underneath his cap was dreadlocked. Mum craned her head to see round him. To the left of me was Scot's Monument, and behind me and to the right there was a red and white frame structure, as big as a house, and shaped like a football. There were children inside it, attached to bungee ropes that hung down from the top. Every time they bounced they flew about fifteen feet into the air.

The people behind me squashed up against my back, and my feet felt light. I focused on planting each one firmly into the empty spaces as they emerged, and we reached the kerb without any mishaps.

"In here..." She pulled me into a shop through some sliding doors.

It was cooler inside than out. It was also a lot quieter. I didn't feel like I was being pressed anymore. The crowds seemed to have been left behind at the doorway, and the palpitations had gone too.

"Well," said Mum, with a big sigh, "That's that!" And for a second, she looked as if she might smile.

Beside Mum there was a white mannequin with no arms or legs, impaled on a stand, wearing a purple and blue floral-patterned top and red shorts. Ahead of us an escalator led up to the next floor. There was a desk in front of us, upon which two stands were stacked with different shades of lipstick. I had my ears pierced for my twelfth birthday, and Dad gave me my butterfly hairclip last Christmas, but apart from that I've never felt drawn to accessories or cosmetics. However, as I gazed at all the colours of lipstick, as well as the bottles of nail varnish and the eye pencils, I felt a flutter of curiosity.

Mum approached the desk, which was manned by a woman with copper highlights and lots of eyeliner.

"How do I get to the children's wear?"

"Two floors up."

I followed Mum to the escalators, stepped on, rested my chin on my hand and my hand on the bannister, and enjoyed the feeling of travelling forwards without having to move.

The mannequins on this floor wore khaki trousers. One had a dark green fleece that reminded me of Jamie's.

"I like this floor," I said.

"It's men's wear," said Mum.

"But the patterns and styles are great. Can I have a look around?"

"No. Come on."

I was about to reply when an assistant approached us. “Can I help you?”

We both spoke at the same time. Mum said, “Just passing through,” and I said, “Where are the fitting rooms?”

He laughed, and pointed through the racks. “Male fitting rooms on the left, female on the right.”

“It can’t just be for men if they have female fitting rooms.” I had to work hard not to sound too smug.

Mum eyed me, lips twitching. “Five minutes, then.”

I wove in and out the shelves. One rack had extremely soft, baggy khaki trousers hanging from it. They were summer ones and so were discounted, but Mum had said we were there to look for hats and coats, so I doubted she would let me have a pair. There were also dark green and navy denim shorts, and light brown zip-up fleeces, string vests and patterned T-shirts. Right at the back I found waterproof coats and hats. One mannequin wore a navy blue hat that looked waterproof and would not be too big for me. When I took it off, all illusion of character vanished: the outfit in its entirety had been the thing creating it.

The hat felt reasonably waterproof on the outside, and I perched it on my head. Then I ran back to Mum, who was waiting at the escalator.

“How do I look?”

She eyed my head. “Like a flower pot man.”

“Can I have it?” I found the price tag. “It’s only 99p.”

“I’m not surprised. How badly do you want it?”

“Badly. *Very* badly. It’s lovely and funny and it fits me perfectly.”

Her lips twitched again. “*If...*” she said, slowly, “*If* I let you have it, will you promise to come up to the children’s wear with no more dilly-dallying?”

“I promise.”

“It’s a deal then.”

“Thank you!” I hugged her. She stood stiffly and didn’t reciprocate, but she didn’t push me away either.

After she had paid we went up the next escalator – me still wearing the hat – and came off the stairs onto a floor full of tiny mannequins wearing brightly coloured matching sets. Mum kept turning to look at me, then biting her lip and looking away again. One little mannequin wore a white pleated skirt and a blue shirt. There was a big photograph on the wall, of a little black boy and a little white girl, both about five years old. They had their arms around each other, and were laughing at the camera. The girl wore a brown, knee-

length coat with a floral-patterned dress underneath, and had a yellow flower clip in her hair. The boy wore a white school shirt and smart, black trousers and shoes. They were standing in a frosted field with an oak tree silhouetted in the far background. It seemed the wrong kind of getup for such an outing.

There were other shoppers in this area along with us. One woman was pushing a toddler along in a green, three-wheeler pushchair, as she examined a range of child-sized sunglasses. The far left corner formed a shoe shop area, where an assistant and a woman in blue were squatting side by side. A girl of about seven years old, wearing a red velvety dress, was walking up and down in shiny, red buckle-up shoes.

“Over here.” I followed Mum past three rails filled with leggings, until we reached a sort of alcove with racks of coats.

“Stand there and don’t move.”

I wasn’t sure whether she was being literal or not, so I stood as still as I possibly could while she walked up and down looking at the coats.

“Ah,” she said aloud, and picked a long, black corduroy coat with floral lining, off the shelf. It didn’t look very waterproof, even if it was warm – and there was no hood. All my previous coats had been waterproof with hoods.

Meanwhile the girl had sat back down, and the assistant and the mother were each pulling shoes off her feet. They seemed to be stuck on, because both grown-ups were having to wrench and jerk. All the while the girl hooted with laughter.

“Aaand this one,” Mum pulled a horrible brown leather coat with black fur round the rim off a rack. She was more relaxed than I had ever seen her, apart from when she was asleep of course. She was also holding a stiff, dark red one, and a black corduroy one.

“That’ll do,” she said. “Hold your arms out to the sides.” I did, and she pulled the black corduroy coat sleeves up over my hands. My tracksuit sleeves bunched up round my elbows, but I couldn’t pull them back down since I was standing with my arms out. The mother and assistant were now pushing black, shiny lace-up boots onto the girl’s feet. The assistant asked her something, and she nodded. Then she got up and started walking up and down again.

“No,” said Mum. She pulled at one sleeve, then the another, until the coat came off.

“Can I move?” I badly wanted to sort out my sleeves now that she had finished.

“Hold on, I’m busy.” I held my position, even though my arms were now beginning to ache. Mum pulled the brown leather coat on.

“Oh, no, no, no!” she exclaimed, to my intense relief.

“Good. I hated that one.”

She laughed, and my aching arms didn't matter anymore. She zipped me into the stiff, dark red coat. This one had a fabric belt around the waist, but it didn't have any pockets, which again I thought was a bit silly for a coat. You'd have to carry a bag wherever you went, just for your keys and money, and you might leave it behind. The belt also made it very tight around the waist, which would be hard for playing football in, climbing trees and running.

"Well that one suits you at least. You'll grow into its cut with time."

I considered telling her that I would never wear it, but she had been good enough to buy me the hat, even though she hadn't wanted to, so I thought it was fair to let her get me something of her choice in return. At least I could in theory be happy that it was waterproof – unlike the corduroy one – and that it had a hood, and that it wasn't the horrible brown one. She pulled it off me and started to walk away. I hesitated, in case she was just going to look for more coats, but then she turned and nodded back at me to follow.

"Are we going to the solicitor's now?" I asked, as we rode down the escalators.

"Not yet. After lunch."

"Please can we get a German sausage?"

"A German sausage?"

"Yeah!"

"What makes you think they'll have *German* sausages in particular?"

"They had them at the market when...when I was here before."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

We both gazed across at the market place. It was swarming with people. "I don't think I could deal with the crowds," she concluded.

Right beside the station there was another complex of shops situated under a pyramid which read 'Princes Mall'. In it were more clothes shops, a Body Shop, a stairway leading up to a 'Costa' coffee shop, and a railing overlooking a crowd of tables and chairs bordered by several different fast food shops. I leaned out over the railing. It was crowded here too, but at least I could see floor-space.

"Go and choose yourself something," said Mum, as we stepped off the escalator into the food court. "I'll be back soon." And before I could ask how long 'soon' was, or where we would meet up, she was washed away in the people.

I walked a short distance and turned around on the spot. There was a KFC behind me. I stood in one of its two queues and hoped it was the right one.

A person in a cap and apron came over.

“If you just move up one to the right,” he said, pointing. Then he retreated back behind the counter and opened up a third till. “And what would you like?”

“Can I have some chips, please?” I asked.

“Medium, large or extra-large?”

I would have expected there to be a ‘small’.

“How large is medium?”

He measured with his hand, about ten centimetres off the table.

“And extra-large?”

He did the same gesture, this time about ten centimetres higher. So ‘large’ meant ‘medium’, then, and ‘medium’ meant ‘small’.

“Can I have large?”

“Sure. Anything with that?”

I looked at the menu photos. One showed a milkshake with a chocolate swirl on the top, which looked too big to drink, but perhaps Mum could help me finish it. “Can I have a chocolate milkshake?”

“Medium, large or extra-large?” This time he gestured without me asking.

Given that I already had a medium-sized portion of chips, a small one would suffice.

“Medium, please.”

“Anything else?”

“No thanks, that’s all.”

“Sitting in or taking away?”

I supposed I would be taking away if I was meeting up with Mum again in the main food court. “Taking away.”

“That’ll be two-ninety-nine.” I gave him my five-pound note, and he handed me back two one pound coins and a one penny piece. “Won’t be a tick...” He went to his colleague in the back of the preparation area to pass my order on. I wasn’t sure where I should wait without the risk of making people think I was still in the queue. The man hadn’t said anything about how they got the right orders to the right customers, so I stood where I was. After all, there were no other employees to take orders, so the crowd wasn’t being held up any more than if I moved aside or went away.

“That’s one large chips and one medium chocolate milkshake.”

“That’s me!” I called out. He winked and put the order down on the counter.

Whilst I had been ordering the food court had become much busier. I held the chip bag between my teeth and the milkshake in the crook of my arm, unwrapped the straw and

stuck it into the lid. Then I held one thing in each hand and scanned the crowds, looking for Mum. The milk was more like ice cream, so it took a lot of sucking to get any of it up through the straw. I left it for a bit and ate some chips. After five minutes I decided to go back to the bottom of the stairs. I tried to steer round people, but knocked into a broad, hurrying man with a moustache, in a red T-shirt. The milkshake fell on the floor.

“Sorry!” he called over his shoulder.

I bent down but was overwhelmed by the mass of legs walking around me, like water flowing round a boulder in a river. A brown leather shoe kicked the container out my reach. I began to feel dizzy again and stood up slowly, hoping nobody would trip over me or the fallen milkshake, and walked towards the stairs. Once there I leaned against the safety rail, calmed myself down, and ate my chips.

Because I was sure that if I just stayed in one place Mum would find me in the end, I didn't worry about looking for her any more. Instead I concentrated on my lunch, before scrumpling up the empty bag and putting it in my pocket. My hands felt greasy and sweaty, so I wiped them down on my trousers. At one table I saw the mother and little girl from the shop. The little girl was swinging her feet, which were now in navy blue Velcro trainers. Those seemed much more practical than the red buckle-shoes or the black, shiny boots.

The man who had knocked over my milkshake sat two tables away, reading a copy of the *Metro*. Then there was a woman with a teenage boy in an electric wheelchair. Intermittently she broke off bits of burger and put them into his mouth. He was jerkily manipulating what looked like a gearstick on a laptop where the keyboard would usually be. The laptop was mounted on a stand which looked a bit like a robot's arm.

“Hey!” It was Mum. She was eating a wrap.

I gave her my change.

“I waited where you'd go to get out.”

“Good. Let's go.”

We made our way back through Princes Mall together, onto the road, straight across the street and up a sloping road with lots of traffic islands. I saw a copper monument to our right, with a fountain surrounded by a shallow pool and grass. A pathway ran through the middle to some more shops, and a green building on the far side.

“Left here,” said Mum. We turned onto a small street, and then right again onto a bigger one with a long, fenced-off garden filled with purple and yellow pansies. On either side of the street were old tenement buildings.

“Cross over.” After checking the traffic we ran across, and approached one of the tenements with a sign above the door that read ‘McCauliff & Co’. There was an intercom system with twelve labelled buttons. Mum pressed a button and waited.

After about three seconds there was a crackling sound, then a female voice said, “Hello?”

“Patricia Harrington to see Peter Reid.”

The door unlocked, and we were in a concrete corridor with stone steps spiralling up to the left. I followed Mum up and through a door on the right, into a reception area with potted trees either side of the entrance, and a shiny wooden desk in the centre of the room. There were soft, low chairs upholstered in red fabric, and coffee tables with magazines. In the background I could hear a nocturne by Chopin. It reminded me of life back in London.

“You wait here.” Mum waved a hand in the direction of the chairs. “And please, *please* be sensible.” She went up to the desk, and I heard her say her name again, but didn’t hear what the person at reception said in response. She looked round briefly and bit her lip. Then she jiggled one leg and shifted her weight.

“Miss Harrington?” A short, chubby man had emerged from an office on the right.

“That’s me,” said Mum.

“Come in.” She followed him through a side door.

I sat down and gathered my thoughts. The music playing now had the atonal quality of Debussy. I could just see the top of the receptionist’s head, bent over behind the desk and covered with curly white hair. On a small trolley immediately in front of the desk sat a tea and coffee machine, like the one in the hotel Dad and I stayed in during our trip. Beside it was a stack of disposable paper cups and three wicker baskets; one with miniature pots of milk, one with sticks of white and brown sugar, and one with teabags and sachets of instant coffee. I went over to it. It had a schematic of a coffee cup with three wisps of steam coming off it.

“Excuse me,” I said to the woman behind the desk.

She straightened up. She wore thick, crimson-rimmed glasses. “Yes?”

“How does this thing work?”

“You just hold the cup under the nozzle.”

“The nozzle in the alcove?”

“Yes.”

I did as she said. The machine gave a splutter, and a tiny trickle of water spurted out. Then it stopped.

“Not to worry,” she said. “I’ll get a refill.” She got up and went out through a door on the left, staggering back a minute later with a large, plastic container full of water, with a tap at the bottom for decanting.

“Do you want some help?” I put my hands under the bottom of the container. We lugged it across the room.

“Dump it here...” We plonked it down heavily. The desk shook.

“Are we going to turn the tap on and make a waterfall down into the machine?”

She laughed. “Hmm...that could make quite a mess!”

“Then what *are* we going to do?”

“Not sure. Alan’s usually here to manage this sort of thing, but he’s off today.”

“We could always pour the water in using paper cups,” I suggested.

“Good lateral thinking.” She pushed two buttons either side of the top of the machine. The top half came off, revealing a reservoir which glistened wetly.

The tap of the water container only admitted a tiny trickle, and it took nearly a minute to fill one paper cup. When I tipped the water into the machine it made a rumbling sound and a vibrating sensation, which lessened and turned into a splashing once the bottom had been covered.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Anna,” she replied.

“Snap!” I grinned.

“There you go, then,” said Anna-The-Receptionist, “Good to meet a fellow Anna!” We paused in our water-pouring to shake hands.

“What kind of solicitors are you?” In Social Education I had learned that most lawyers and solicitors specialise in one area, such as commercial, family, employment or criminal things.

“We cover family matters.”

“So that means you deal with things like divorce and custody?”

“Smart girl.”

We carried on pouring in silence until the tank was almost full. Dad wasn’t here anymore, so why would Mum need a custody solicitor?

“Anna!”

Both of us looked round. Mum and the man had come back into the foyer. Mum looked as if someone had stuck a pin into her and let all the air out. I wanted to hug her, but I knew from looking at her that doing so would almost certainly result in a points-fine, or at the very least, would not be welcome.

“Sorry,” said Mum, addressing Anna-The-Receptionist. I waved to Anna and followed Mum out through the main door.

“Had to, didn’t you?” she said, as soon as we were out on the spiral staircase.

“Had to what?”

“Meddle.”

“I was only helping her refill the water container!”

The coat was stiff, scratchy and hard to walk in because it restricted movement around my torso and upper hips. Mum kept giving me glances as I made my way carefully down the remaining stairs.

“How’s the coat?” she asked at last.

I could tell that in terms of the answer I gave, I would be caught between a shouting fine and a lie. My courage failed me. “It’s fine,” I said, “What were you and that man doing?”

“Going over some forms.”

“Is it something to do with me coming to live with you?”

She looked at me for a long time, then turned away and was silent for a few seconds.

“Yes.”

My cheeks tingled and my throat tightened. “Am I going to be sent away?” We had reached the bottom of the staircase.

Mum looked at me hard, and then, turning abruptly away, she squeezed my shoulder.

“Not if I can help it,” she said.

In Dad’s flat my window was always open a crack during summer. This made the curtains ripple in the breeze. I would lie in bed at night and pretend I was watching the aurora. You could hear cats singing to each other in the street. I don’t know whether the council pulled down what was left of our flat. Perhaps the lower floors could stay – it was only ours and the one above that sustained really serious damage. Everyone escaped from the one above. If they did pull it down the street would look like the only comb that never hurt my scalp. One of its teeth was chipped in the middle, breaking the perfect row.

At seven O’clock on Sunday morning I dressed, went downstairs and raised the blinds on the kitchen window. A magazine called *For Real* lay spine-up on the table. I pulled it towards me and turned it round. The page was completely taken up by a huge picture of an extremely shiny, muscly man wearing nothing but a pair of Y-fronts with ‘Tiger’ written across the waistband.

“Paws off.” Mum looked me up and down. “Should’ve got you some smarter clothes in town.”

“Oh, these are fine!”

“Not for church they’re not. After breakfast we’ll see if we can get you sorted.”

As soon as I had swallowed my last mouthful we went upstairs. Once in the bedroom Mum narrowed her eyes and put her hands on my shoulders, as if I were a balloon that might float away.

“Not much difference in it. You can wear one of mine.”

She opened both doors of the wardrobe. A row of coat hangers dangled from the rail, each with a full outfit on it.

“How about this?” She held up a blue denim jacket and skirt.

“I’ve never worn denim before,” I said, “Except once, and that was jeans. They made me sweaty and itchy, and the flies unzipped whenever I breathed.”

Mum’s mouth twitched. “Well if you really can’t cope or you keep busting out of them we’ll try something else. Take the strappy black sandals too, bottom right. Oh, and you’ll need...” She opened the top left drawer of one of the chests of drawers, and tossed some balled-up, black tights over to me. “See you downstairs.”

The denim jacket was slightly too big, and the buttons were slightly too tight. The armpits bunched when my hands were down at my sides, and when I bent to do up the shoes I had to hold my breath. Once dressed I wobbled downstairs, gripping the bannister with both hands.

It was very windy when we stepped outside. I wore my new coat and hat, and although Mum gave the hat a long stare when I put it on, she didn’t try to make me leave it behind.

“Are we taking the car?”

“Nope. It’s only just up the road.” Her hair was blowing everywhere. She attempted to fix it, but that only made it worse.

“May I...?” I reached round by way of indicating my intentions. “I’m good at doing hair.”

“OK, then. Thanks.”

Her hair was extremely thick and glossy, and flowed through my hands like water. I stood behind her and gathered it into a ponytail.

“Ow! Careful!”

“Have you got a hair clip?”

“Hang on...” She fumbled in her bag, then put something into my hand. It was the butterfly hairclip. “I found it in the pocket of the old coat. Forgot to say.” She held my gaze. I bit my lip, bent my head and fumbled with her hair.

“All done!” I stepped back to take a look. Mum seemed taller, and her eyes and cheekbones were highlighted. “If only you had a mirror!”

“There’s no time...”

“Oh, but you *have* to see! Just turn and look in the reflection of the window.”

She turned, and started. “Dear God, what have you done to me?” She reached a hand up. “I look...I look...” We regarded our reflections, standing side by side. She had a freckle on the side of her nose in exactly the same place as I did. She nodded, and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Not bad. Well, come on then.”

We turned right at the junction leading out the car park. The curtains were closed in all the houses on the left. Even the curtains on the downstairs floors. All the people I have ever known open their downstairs curtains once they get up. Except for the people next door. And the man who tried to skin me alive. Hardly anyone here must go to church.

At the main road we turned left, past the house of the man who skins people alive. His garden was hidden from view by a red brick wall, over which grew a tangle of ivy. The top branches of a tree were visible over the wall, with an overgrown bush in the foreground. Mum slowed her pace to look as well. Suddenly the door opened, and the man strode out into the street. This time he was dressed in a smart suit, and when he saw us he started a hobbly run across the drive.

“Hey! HEY!”

“Quick!” Mum grabbed my hand.

It was almost impossible to run in high heels and a skirt. My balance was precarious and I didn’t have the range of leg motion that I would have done in a tracksuit. I kept nearly falling, but Mum held me up, and we hurried down a side-street to the left. In the distance I saw the play park near Joanne’s house.

“In here.” She pulled me down another alley – this one cobbled – and pressed herself flat against the wall. I copied her.

“What are we doing?”

“Waiting...Shhh...”

“For what?” She held up a finger. “Why aren’t the church bells ringing?”

“There aren’t any. Hush...”

“Why not?”

“It wasn’t originally a church. Now shut up, he’s coming!”

I heard footsteps approaching, and wheezy, rapid breathing. The man passed by close to us down the main street, but he didn't stop or look in our direction.

After another minute Mum let her breath out. "OK. I think the coast's clear." We tiptoed out, checked again that he was a good distance away, and passed a pub called 'Farmer's Rest'. "You stay away from him, Anna."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't believe the amount of skeletons in his closet."

The Skeleton Man. It all made a horrible kind of sense now. The skeletons must be the people he skinned alive – the ones who wandered into his garden. Perhaps the dog chased them down for him. I had been lucky to get away with my life.

The church had a thatched roof. It looked like the replica of the Globe Theatre in London. There were half-barrels of red and blue petunias either side of the door, and a row of wooden steps up to the entrance. The wheelchair ramp must have been round the back.

"Don't worry," I said, "We're not the last ones." I pointed up the road to a woman pushing a double buggy with one hand, and holding the hand of a small boy in another. She waved.

"Does she know you?" Mum asked. She kept darting glances at the church door, and as they approached she edged up a step.

I looked again, and recognised Joanne and her children. The angry pinstriped man wasn't with them. "Sort of," I said.

"Guess what?" said Skylar, as the family reached us.

"What?"

"Dad got us a trampoline! How cool is that?!"

Joanne tried to take Skylar's hand again, but he jumped away and stuck his tongue out.

Mum shifted her weight from one leg to the other. She was leaning well back from the buggy, never taking her eyes off it. Her face looked pale and she seemed shivery, as she had done with the bat. Joanne smiled at her.

"I've a lot to thank Anna for, you know. She pulled Emily off the road. My husband...well..." she waved a hand, but didn't say anything else.

"I'm happy I was there to help," I said.

"Told me she loved children," Joanne continued, "She's welcome to come over and play any time."

"Well...thanks. Let's see," said Mum. She was now at the top of the steps, and seemed to be trying and failing to turn her back on us.

Joanne squatted down in front of the double buggy and undid the straps.

“Skylar, hold onto Emily for me...”

At that moment the baby woke up and began to cry. Mum clapped her hands over her ears, shrank back and crouched against the church wall, eyes closed. I ran up the steps and knelt in front of her.

“Mum! Mum, are you all right?” I turned and looked behind me. “They’ve gone – it’s just us.”

Very slowly she uncovered her ears. Her face relaxed, and she breathed in deeply. “Sorry,” she said.

Our flat block in London was right next to a street with a church on it. Every Sunday at nine o’clock the bells would start ringing. They would go on until ten o’clock, when the service began. It was the only thing that ever seemed to annoy Dad. I once asked him if we might go to one of the services. His face went red, and he growled something that ended with: “...Up to you when you’re older.” I concluded that they probably served alcohol, and that minors like me were therefore inadmissible. After all, that was why Dad always got Mrs Taylor to babysit me whenever he went to the pub with Miss Corrigan. Then again I was still a minor now, and so were Joanne’s children, yet the grown-ups were taking us along with them.

The hall immediately inside the building had a worn, brown carpet. There was a row of coat pegs next to the door. I hung my coat on one, glad to get rid of it. A royal blue curtain hung down from the right-hand wall. The door that led into the main room was propped open with a brick. Mum kept looking around with wide eyes. Every now and then she would crane back to look out the door. I could see Joanne and her children a little way ahead, separated from us by a group of people standing in a queue. A man of about sixty was holding a pile of dark blue, cotton-bound books. He had thick, grey hair, and wore a black suit.

“The Adamson clan!” he said to them. He approached Joanne and started talking to her, but I couldn’t hear what he said. Emily reached out from Skylar’s arms and took one of his ears very gently.

“Ow, my ear! You’ve got my ear!” He pretended to struggle and yell while she squealed with delight. Finally he broke free, and they passed on into the main hall. “I haven’t seen *you* before,” he said to me, when we got to him. He offered me a book, which I accepted.

“I’ve never been to church before,” I told him.

“Well I hope you’ll be a regular now.”

From time to time I’d seen glimpses of churches on television, before Dad invariably changed the channel. This one had a high ceiling, and a platform in the centre like a stage. The chairs were arranged in rows, and at the far end of the room a flight of steps led up to an area that looked a bit like a box seat.

“Near the back, on the edge,” Mum muttered.

As we took our seats, I leaned my mouth to her ear. “Is this going to be something like a show?”

She raised an eyebrow. “No, not exactly.”

“Sorry. It’s just, I don’t know much about religion. D – I mean – I was never raised with it. And it was never discussed. I’ve read some books which had vicars as minor characters, though.”

“Oh gosh...” She passed a hand over her face, then held up an index finger. “Right. First, some terminology. A church service is sort of like a pre-arranged programme centred mainly around the Bible, with the minister in the twin roles of commentator and continuity announcer. The congregation – that’s us – sing and pray with him, and listen to what he has to say. Sometimes we take communion, but we’re not having that today. Prayers are where the minister says some words to God, and if you want to make them your words too you whisper ‘Amen’ afterwards. A sermon is a sort of lecture given by the minister, designed to help people see what God means and wants. Halfway through the service we have offerings, which is where people have a chance to donate money, though they don’t have to. Hymns are songs praising God. The children’s address is a little, short, simple talk for the children of the congregation. They usually go off to Sunday school during offerings, before the main sermon.”

“What’s Sunday School?”

“It’s a way of learning about God which is easier and more fun for children than a big, long sermon.”

“And when we pray, you said we speak to God?”

“Yes.”

“Does he speak back?”

She considered. “Well, I know he speaks to *me*...”

Interesting. It hadn’t occurred to me that she might believe in God. I didn’t know any other believers. At least, not ones who openly professed or spoke about their beliefs. She’d never mentioned it before, and again, there had been no indication of it that I could

see within her house. Perhaps I would try mentioning classical music to her after all, in case I had been wrong about that too.

“Does he speak to you face to face, like we’re speaking now?”

“Something like that. Others might not say the same thing. Sometimes he speaks through people.”

“You mean he interrupts them?”

Mum laughed. Bonus points. “Well...that’s not exactly what I meant. More like he sends his spirit to communicate the Word directly into some individuals’ minds, so that they can share it for him. He makes them his ambassadors.”

She turned over the pages of her hymn book. Every time she did so, she licked her index finger. If everyone who used that book did the same thing, they must end up eating billions of germs.

“What is the Word? Is it like a password?”

“More like His essence.”

“Oh, right. A perfume!” This time I was making a joke.

Mum laughed again – this was surely my lucky day! Then she breathed in deeply, and straightened her back, looking ahead. “See that board?” She pointed at a wooden board that looked like a bookshelf, except that it had cards on it with numbers, like the letters on Countdown. “Those correspond with the numbers of the hymns we’re going to sing.”

As she finished speaking, music started playing on what sounded like an organ, but which was actually someone playing a keyboard on a stand in the corner. I strained to see who the keyboard player was over the tops of the people in front, then gaped, then glanced at Mum.

The Skeleton Man didn’t look at all angry now. Instead his face was relaxed and solemn. His shoulders sagged, even though the music was cheerful. His eyes were half closed, and as he played he rocked back and forth. His fingers stroked the keys as if they were animals. The melody was quiet, in triple-metre, with an andante tempo, in G major. I was reminded of the music of Bach, but it was more like one of his harmonies than a melody.

The minister walked onto the stage. It wasn’t the same man who had greeted us at the door and given us our books. This one was younger, with long, ginger, dreadlocked hair, jeans and a checked shirt. He spoke into a microphone clipped to his clothes.

“Hello everyone.” He looked round with a huge smile.

“Hello!” some people called back.

“Right. Indentations. I mean...intimations...”

“He makes that joke practically every week,” Mum whispered.

“The latest issue of *Alive!* will be on the desk outside. Tea and coffee will be served after the service. And now I want to say hello to any newcomers – I have been reliably informed that there is at least one with us today.” I grinned, but he didn’t look over at me. “And so to business with our theme.” He leaned forward, and panned his gaze across the audience.

“We humans seem intent on devising easy, immediate solutions. Instant this, instant that. We simply can’t delay gratification!”

I thought of Mum, and of the black and white cat, and of what I wanted for them both. Both were hurting – I was quite sure of that now. Both of them also avoided getting too close to me. Perhaps that would change. It hadn’t yet, but perhaps it would. Perhaps it was just going to take a bit of time.

“Not only that, but we want everything to happen on *our* terms. Well, what if we had to live on somebody *else’s* terms? That is in fact what we have to do all the time, every day, whether we realise it or not. We have to abide by laws set by others and enforced by others, lest we lose our liberty at the hands of others. We have to work for others to make money off others, to buy things off others which we need to live. We have to turn to others when our bodies get ill. In short, none of us are independent. Now, does acceptance of that guarantee our wellbeing? Of course not. There are no guarantees, but we like the *illusion* of them. Is it any wonder then that today, faith in God, and the ability to engage with him personally, seem to be declining? So often they seem like things we can voluntarily dispense with and suffer no immediate consequences. There are better ways than God to sustain and gratify ourselves, it seems – ways we can see and hear and touch and talk to. But here’s the rub: God’s larger plan for us does not change just because we are changing, or because the world we live in is changing and the things we want and that make us feel safe are changing. Today’s sermon, when the time comes, will explore what it means to trust God and His plan today.”

“Hymn book,” said Mum, as the Skeleton Man started playing again. I tried to turn the pages in time, but they were thin, like tracing paper, and I couldn’t get them to separate. They kept falling back every time I tried to flick them over quickly. She reached across, took my book off me and handed me hers. She pointed at hymn number two-hundred and seventy-three, just as everyone stood up to sing.

“I don’t know the melody to this,” I whispered.

“Neither do I,” she answered. “Just follow along as best you can.”

The chord progressions were very predictable, which helped me keep mostly to the tune, coming in as soon as I could on each note. Sometimes I had to stop and re-start when

I fell behind, and sometimes I anticipated a note wrongly, which made it hard to concentrate on the words. The four verses felt like they lasted about ten minutes, even though I checked my watch at the end and the total length had only been two and a half minutes.

“Now then,” said the minister, directing his words mainly to two children in the front row. “Who here likes sweeties?”

“I do!” they chorused. I heard Skylar’s voice say “I do!” as well, but he said it later than the others.

“You do, do you?” He chuckled. “I like sweeties too. I also like biscuits, but who here likes *cake*?”

The children all shouted “I DO!”, and so did I. Mum turned to me, and I couldn’t tell if she was angry or amused. The minister glanced in my direction, and I felt my ears go red.

“Oh, that’s all of you! I thought so. Well, I like cake too. Especially chocolate cake. Sometimes my wife, Helen, and I make our own. Have any of you ever made your own cake?”

I raised my hand in affirmation. Dad and I used to make my birthday cake together every year – chocolate sponge, with butter-icing in between the layers and crackly, hard icing on top. The minister went up into the box seat and bent down out of sight. I heard a plastic bag rustling, before he returned to the front with a utensil which had a long, wooden handle embedded in a rectangular piece of rubber at one end. He held it up.

“Who knows what this is?”

I put my hand up again. “It’s a mixer.”

“What’s your name?”

I stood up. “Anna.” The Skeleton Man was suddenly looking right at me. I turned my head side-on to his gaze.

“Well, Anna,” said the minister, “Would you like to explain what it’s for?”

“You use it to scoop the cake mixture out the bowl.”

“Top marks for you!” He turned back to the other two children near the front. “Can somebody now tell me please, what you do when you’ve scooped all the mixture out the bowl and into the cake tins?”

The other children all shouted in unison, “Lick the bowl!”

The minister laughed, along with several of the audience. “Tell me...does the dough you lick get put in the oven?”

The small children said, “Nooooo.”

“Does it become a nice, spongy cake?”

“Nooooo.”

“That’s right. It does not. It’s the mixture that was created with just as much care, and which started out just the same, but didn’t become what it was always intended to become.” He paused, and lowered his voice to a serious tone. “God likes to make ‘cake’ too. But instead of using dough, what do you think he uses?”

Nobody volunteered an answer.

“He uses people. People are like cake mix that hasn’t yet been baked. And the world is like the mixing bowl. So right now, the mixture that will become the cake, and the mixture that will stick to the bowl, are all mixed in together. But God already knows who will cling to the world and get left behind. When we feel tempted we should always ask ourselves, “Is this part of God’s recipe? Or am I clinging too tightly to what *I* think and want?”

There was silence.

“Let us pray.”

I looked towards Mum. She had put her hands together and closed her eyes, so I did the same.

“Lord, help us to keep thinking of your plans for us as we go through our lives...”

I opened one eye and looked around to see how everyone was getting on. The man behind me had his head bowed, and was muttering something I couldn’t hear. One woman two rows behind and three seats to the right was kneeling, with her head resting on her clasped hands.

“Help us not to get scared when we don’t feel in control, and to be patient when we don’t get what we want straight away. We are ready to trust you, and to follow your recipe, even if we don’t always know what all the ingredients do. And now we offer up our silent prayers.”

There was silence, except for a few whispers. Mum was whispering. Once again, she was speaking in that language I didn’t know.

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Everyone else said “Amen” too.

I opened my eyes. “Is that the end of the service?”

“No,” she whispered, “Now we have offerings, and the children go to Sunday School.”

As the children passed us on their way up the aisle towards the back door, Skylar whispered “Come on!”

I looked to Mum. She paused, then nodded. I squeezed out and followed him and the two other children up the aisle. A heavily pregnant woman, with bouncy dark hair, and wearing a red cagoule, was standing in the hall.

“Chop-chop!”

Once in the hall she pulled back the royal blue curtain and opened a door behind it. A row of wooden steps curved up and round to the right. We followed her up them like ducklings. At the top there was another door, which led into a room that looked like a disused classroom. It had brown plastic chairs arranged in stacks around its edges. Wooden desks lined the walls. At the far end there was a bookshelf, which was filled with children’s books. The walls were covered in posters.

The woman took off her cagoule and hung it on a peg on the door. “Right,” she said, “Everyone grab a seat! You! Excuse me?” She gestured to me. “Can you get a chair for Kirsty?” She pointed to one of the other children – a chubby little girl of about three, wearing red flip-flops and a navy-blue dress.

“And one for yourself too, of course.”

I took two chairs – one over each arm – from a stack next to the bookshelf. Skylar and the other child had already positioned theirs beside each other.

“Right,” she said, when everyone was seated. “First I want to welcome our new member.” She looked at me. Anna, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Welcome, Anna. I’m Helen. Everyone say ‘hello Anna’.”

“Hello Anna!”

I waved and said “Hello!” back. Helen went over to the bookshelf and took out a book. I couldn’t see the title, but for a second I saw the picture on the front cover – a huge barn stuffed full of hay, with big black birds circling above.

“This is a story Jesus told.”

I put my hand up. “Who’s Jesus?”

Helen addressed the other children: “Well, there’s a question. Who is Jesus? Can anyone tell Anna?”

Everyone answered together: “God’s Son.”

“And what did he do?”

“Um...um...um he *taught* things...”

“That’s right, Kirsty. And how did he teach them?”

“Stories!”

“Yes. This is a story He told.” She opened the book.

“Once there was a farmer. He spent his whole life growing lots of lovely grain and hay.”

She turned the book round so that we could see the illustration of the farmer.

“Everything he grew, he stored. Lots of people asked him: “When will you eat what you’ve grown?” and “Will you sell your crops?” Lots of poor, hungry people begged him for some food.”

The next picture showed a woman and child, both in rags, with very dirty faces. They were on their knees with their hands clasped together, looking up at the farmer. He stood over them wagging his finger, eyes closed, head held up, mouth open in mid-speech.

“The man’s answer was always the same: “Someday I shall need it all. Just now there is none to spare.” And then, one day, the man died.”

Helen paused. “What do you think happened to the crops?”

I put my hand up. “Did the poor people get them?”

“Nope.”

“Perhaps he was the only one who knew where the key was....”

“Perhaps. Let me finish reading:

“He never got to eat or sell his crops! Eventually the barns went to ruin and the mice and birds ate all the food up.””

She closed the book.

“That makes me sad,” I said.

She nodded. “It makes me sad too. Now that was a story Jesus told, to teach us something. What do you think he was trying to tell us?” Nobody moved. Kirsty had drawn her feet up and was hugging her knees. “Have a guess.” Nobody answered. “I’ll give you a clue. Think about something you love. A possession.”

I thought about all my memories of Dad’s flat, but chose not to share them because of time and place. That was another concept Dad and my outreach worker had taught me. Still, apart from Mum my memories of Dad were my most special thing. And yet...and yet...

In a moment of insight, I understood how the story connected to the minister’s words. I put my hand up.

“Go on...”

“It’s like the mixing bowl, isn’t it?”

Helen frowned. “I don’t quite follow...”

“Well, he tried to cling to his crops instead of following God’s plan, didn’t he?”

Now she nodded, smiling.

I continued, with gathering confidence: “When he died those things were no use to him anymore, because dead people don’t need food, and because he was so anxious about keeping them safe and storing them up forever he made it so they were no use to anyone else either. So he didn’t do anything good for anyone.”

“Excellent!” Helen clapped her hands. “Jesus wanted us to follow God’s plan, to trust that He is in control, and to not let our own fears hold us back, so that we can do His work and help people to understand His love.”

“So...what *should* the man have done then?”

She looked at me with narrowed eyes, then smiled with one corner of her mouth. “That’s a very good question, Anna.” She turned to the other children. “What do we think? What should the man have done?”

Skylar sat upright. “I’d burn the barn down!”

“Ah, but that would destroy the crops! Kirsty? Any ideas?” Kirsty sucked her thumb and smiled, but said nothing.

The other child put her hand up. “Yes, Mary?”

“I’d...I’d...get a axe and chop it till there was a hole!”

“Yeah!” Kirsty squirmed in her seat. “I’d get...I’d get a even *bigger* axe and go like...like...like...!” She jumped up and mimed, almost losing her balance as she swung her hands around.

“And then what? You’ve got the food, but what if the *rain* comes in and makes it soggy? What if the little *mice* come and nibble on it? What if the *birds* fly down and peck it all away because there’s no door?”

“We could use it all up at once,” I suggested. “We could invite all the poor people the farmer said no to before, and cook them a big meal.”

“Yeah! Invite *all* the poor people in the whole, whole wide *world*!” Kirsty spread her arms and beamed around at all of us.

“And,” I added, “At least then the man would be remembered for what he did *right*, rather than what he did *wrong*, which is a much better memory.”

Helen looked at her watch, and stood up. “Well then,” she said. “That was a good chat, wasn’t it? Not quite what I had planned, but perhaps it was better. God is in control, after all! I think what we’ve learned today is that He wants us to be kind, and to use what He provides us with to help people who need it. Right – I have activity sheets for you. Each one has a treasure box on it. I want you to draw some of your own treasures inside it.”

“Mum?” I said, after the service had finished and we were walking back home.

“Hmm?”

“You know how the minister said we needed to be patient to walk God’s path?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I don’t see how that can work when the farmer was supposed to share his food straight away instead of waiting.”

“Hmm.” She put her head on one side.

“What language were you talking in during the prayer?”

She made eye contact with me, and a little smile played across her face. “Oh – that’s a language I use to pray in. Lots of people have a special prayer language.”

“Do you think *I* could get one?”

She smiled again. I was beginning to lose track of bonus points. She also hadn’t shouted at me in several days. “Maybe you’d better ask God about that.” Then she pinched the bridge of her nose. Perhaps she had a headache. Dad did that when he had a headache.

“Mum?”

“Yes?”

I took a deep breath. I had a funny feeling she wouldn’t like the question I was about to ask, though I couldn’t say why I felt that. The satellite dish could tell me about feelings in the air, but it didn’t seem to be much use when it came to working out how other people would react. “If you hate the man so much, why do you keep going to the church where he plays?”

She bit her lip, then smiled, but it looked odd. “They say you should keep your friends close and your enemies closer...” she murmured, but then immediately shook her head. “No. I’m not going to let my life be dictated by him. Besides,” she cleared her throat, “Someone’s got to keep track of the old Grouch.”

I tried and failed to figure out what this answer meant. It hadn’t been the harsh snap I had been expecting. “Mum?”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry about what happened outside the church.”

“That’s ok. It wasn’t your fault. I’m just not great around babies.”

“I understand,” I said, and I actually did. I slipped my arm through hers as she bent her head. She didn’t pull away.

When we reached the house I saw Jamie dribbling a football in the drive. Ignoring Mum entirely, he addressed me:

“Come on. We’re having a game in the park.”

“Who is?”

“You and me. I’ve been here for ages, so you owe me.”

His eyebrows looked even thicker than usual, and his mouth turned down at the corners, but his eyes also had shadowy circles around them, and there were red lines staining his cheeks. I didn’t ask about these things – I didn’t want to put him in an embarrassing situation, especially in front of Mum. “Can I, Mum?”

She clicked her tongue, and bounced on the balls of her feet. “Well...all right. But keep out of trouble, ok? And be back at one for lunch.”

Because the green was on a slope, every time one of us kicked the ball it would either curve round and roll back down, or travel through the air at high speed. The wind was also blowing downhill. Jamie insisted my goal be on the downward slope, making it much easier for him to score and defend, but I was always in goals with Dad and so had plenty of experience and practice. I was also taller and could run faster. We played three games, two of which Jamie won, but I didn’t mind. The wind was warm, and I could smell bonfire smoke. When someone let a Labrador off its lead we decided to stop because Jamie said the football belonged to Jeremy and if it got punctured Jeremy would kick his head in.

“You any good at tree climbing?”

“I’ve never tried,” I answered, “There weren’t any near my old flat.”

“C’mon, then.” He ran down the slope towards the trees by the river. I followed, and by the time we reached the cluster of oaks I had a stitch.

He approached the tree in which I had first encountered him.

“This is the easiest one.” He gave it a kick. “Right. Here’s how you do it.”

He jumped and grabbed a thick branch which stuck out. Holding onto it with both hands he walked up the trunk, hooked an ankle over, then wriggled round so he was lying across the branch, and sat up.

“There. Do that.”

Jumping up was easy, and helped my stitch by stretching my stomach muscles. Walking up the trunk was harder though – my toes kept slipping, and I don’t have much strength in my abdomen. My feet fell back down the first time I tried to hook my ankle over, and I had to drop back. My hands were also stinging from the friction of the bark. I rubbed them down my thighs, then put my palms on the grass. The coolness was soothing. Meanwhile Jamie sat on the branch as if it were a horse, and watched me.

“Come on then!”

This time when I hooked my ankle over he grabbed it, which gave me a chance to get a better grip. I could hear the blood pulsing in my head as my heart sped up. “I can’t do it!”

“Shut up and concentrate!”

“Let go, I’m going to fall!”

“No you’re not.” With his other hand he grabbed my arm, and wobbled. His breath hitched, but he regained his balance. I slid my hand forward, hooked my elbow round the trunk, then pulled until I was sitting up.

“There. See?” He stuck out his chest and folded his arms, before taking hold of the tree trunk again. “This is where I go to be away.”

I tipped my head back and looked up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves. I learned in art that there were over a hundred different shades of green. Now it seemed like the leaves were scattering them all around. When I levelled my gaze again, Jamie was using a tiny knife to whittle away at the branch.

“Where did you get that?”

“I keep it in my sock. It’s my sgian-dubh.”

“Your what?”

“Scottish people keep them in their socks.” He brandished it: “On guard!” As he continued to whittle his jaw flexed, and he swallowed four times in quick succession.

“You look sad.” I poked him in the tummy.

“Ow – get off!”

“Mum was at the solicitor’s yesterday,” I continued. “She has to sign formal papers. Anna the receptionist thought it might be to do with custody. That means who takes care of me.”

“Tell me about it...”

“I just did.”

“Idiot. I meant some people came round to visit. They asked me lots of questions about school. They say I might have to go into a children’s home because of my Truancy Problem.”

“You mean because you run away?”

He nodded.

“But a home full of children – how lovely! You can be happy about that, can’t you? In fact, that’s probably why the park’s so empty all the time. I bet there’s a soft play centre there, and a swimming pool and everything...”

“There’s not.” His voice sounded flat. “I was in one before. It’s either that or another foster home somewhere else.”

“Well...why don’t you just not run away from school?”

He stared at me. “You don’t know what it’s like. I’m not going back.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

“OK.” I paused. “I went to school until I was eleven. I tried senior school, but it didn’t work out.”

“Did they put you in a children’s home?”

I shook my head. “Dad taught me.”

“Well bully for you.” He leaned over and spat onto the grass below. Suddenly his head jerked up. “Wait – I know!” He lowered his voice. “We could live here! Just you and me!”

“You mean run away?”

“Yeah! We could eat berries and birds’ eggs and drink out the stream!”

“That sounds good. But I read *Lord of the Flies* and it all went wrong for them.”

“That’s because they were stupid. We’ll get it *right*.”

I checked my watch. “Actually, I’d better go home to Mum – it’s nearly one.”

“But you’re Away now. All that stuff doesn’t matter anymore! And you never know – you might never be Away again.”

“She’d worry if I didn’t come home.”

“So what?”

“Well, I don’t want her to be worried.”

“They don’t care. Not *really*.”

“That’s not true!” I glared at him, willing myself not to believe it. But even if it was so, Dad had taught me that honesty is an ethical obligation, and ethical obligations don’t depend on other people behaving well. “I don’t feel comfortable breaking my word.”

“Well, that’s that then.” Something fluttered in the leaves above us. We both looked up. “There’s a bird’s nest in there. Eggs for tea. Yummy.”

“How do I get down?”

He stared straight ahead and tried to whistle a tune, but his lips were pursed incorrectly.

I lay across the branch and swung myself upside down, before letting my legs dangle and dropping to the floor. As I hit the ground I had an incredible thought. “Jamie!”

No answer.

“Jamie, it’s important!”

“What?”

“Come down and I’ll tell you!” There was a pause, then a rustle of leaves, then a *thunk* as he hit the grass.

“Follow me!” Together we ran up the slope towards the house.

The kitchen smelled of potatoes. A pan of baked beans was steaming on the hob. The TV was on in the living room.

“Take your shoes off...” I put my head round the living room door. Mum was watching *The Weakest Link*.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hi.”

“Can Jamie stay for lunch?”

“There’s only two potatoes.”

“That’s all right. He can have toast.”

“Well if he’s sure...”

She got up from the sofa and we followed her through to the kitchen.

“You get plates. They’re in that kitchen unit.” It was then that I remembered we had run out of bread.

Jamie sipped a glass of juice, watching the two of us as we ate. Mum sat hunched forward. I considered telling her that sitting like that would lead to back pain and internal problems later in life, but decided against it.

“Do you like Jamie?”

She stiffened. She and Jamie looked at each other, and averted their eyes. “I...I...well, I’ve nothing against him, particularly... Don’t know him enough to say, really.”

“He says Carol doesn’t want him anymore. Can he live here?”

Jamie choked on a mouthful of juice. I hit him on the back and it sprayed across the table.

Mum put her fork down. “You have *got* to be joking...”

“He can have my bed. I could sleep in the loft.” I thought back to the bat – would I mind sharing a room with it? More to the point, would *it* mind sharing a room with *me*? We’d both just have to lump it, I supposed.

“Anna, I work full time at a stupid wage just to keep *you*. Anyway you’re my daughter. I don’t just snatch random children off the street!”

“I’ve got to go...” Jamie jumped up.

“No – wait!” Feeling a growing panic inside I reached out and tried to pull him back, but he shook me off, sprang across the room, wrenched open the door and ran out. I started after him.

“Don’t you *dare!*!”

I turned to face Mum, who was trembling. All my bonus points gone in one go.

“Get back here. Sit down. Finish your meal.”

My cheeks tingled. I wondered whether Jamie would ever talk to me again – and what Dad would do and say. The hot poker feeling surged up inside me like water behind a dam, until suddenly it burst.

“WHY CAN’T YOU TAKE HIM IN LIKE YOU TOOK ME IN?” I yelled.

Mum’s mouth dropped open and her eyebrows rose.

“How come *he’s* so different to you? You didn’t know me either!”

“I’m your mother! Anna, I *made* you, I lo...that is, of course I’m going to take you in...I...” She broke off, and clasped a hand to her mouth before staring at me, looking all spindly again. But I was too angry and disappointed to give this sudden transition much thought. It was as if all the times she had answered me shortly or snapped at me or pushed me away had joined forces in my head now, pushing me over an edge that no technique any outreach worker had taught me could forestall any more. On top of that, all the care Dad had given me – and out of that, the full force of all I had lost with him – met with my sense of what Mum was failing to give me – and all the hope I had had for how things would be. It was like two opposing winds meeting each other and forming a tornado strong enough to destroy everything in its path.

“You *don’t* care about me! Jamie was *right!*” I hurled the words with all the bitterness and disappointment I could muster. Then I ran out the kitchen and upstairs to the bedroom, where I picked up a pillow and smashed it several times hard against the wall.

I stayed in the bedroom for the rest of the day. As I calmed down my anger was replaced by tears, which I wept whilst looking out the window. Some were for Jamie, but most were for Dad – for how his jumpers smelt and his hugs felt, for our walks, for playing backgammon together, and for the flat. As memories crashed against each other like rocks in Saturn’s rings, I felt as if I was being pummelled on the inside. After a long time I sat limply on the edge of the double bed. The side of the bed nearest the window was perfectly made. The one nearest the bedside table was crumpled, and the duvet had not been pulled back. I pulled it straight, and Mum’s book – *Her Eyes* – dropped onto the floor. I picked it up and turned it over:

“In this harrowing but charming memoir, Marion Carson describes life with her autistic foster child, Jenny. Wry, honest, often funny and sometimes heart-wrenching, Her Eyes tells of an initially strained relationship which – bit by bit – transformed into a lifelong love.”

My mind stilled as I turned to the first page. It described a scene where Marion is talking to her friends, with twelve-year-old Jenny curled up quietly in her lap playing with some lego. As I was reading about how long it took to get to this point, pale fingers gently reached over the top of the page and eased the book out my hand.

“Best get an early night,” Mum said softly, “It’s been a tiring day.”

It was warm and bright the next morning, but I felt like I’d swallowed a bucket of ice water. If I hadn’t shared my idea with Mum I would have misled Jamie in calling him down from the tree, and he might have stopped being friends with me for that reason; but if I hadn’t then I wouldn’t feel such a mess today. I wondered if we had ever been friends in the first place, and whether there were any reasons left for him to want to be friends now.

“Anna?”

I jumped. The voice was not Mum’s. I sat up quickly and saw Molly standing in the doorway. “Your mum’s away to work,” she said. “Someone cancelled on me this morning, so I’m a free agent. What would you like to do?”

I shrugged. Over the lip of the window there came a blinding point of sunlight. It felt warm on my cheek.

“We could go for a walk, or you could come and see my flat, or – ”

“What do people like to eat when they’re stuck indoors?”

“Come again?”

“The next door neighbour,” I said. “The one stuck in bed.”

“Mrs No, you mean?”

“I didn’t know her name. But the woman who looks after her – ”

“That’s her daughter, Susan – ”

“Well, she says that if anyone tries to cheer her up or bring her things, Mrs No just wants something else, or tells them to leave her alone. So I thought maybe we could do something different – something to help her feel better, so she’ll be happy and Susan won’t be irritated.”

I got up and started to take off my pyjama top. Then I remembered how Jamie had reacted when I undressed at his house, and began once more to go over things I could have done differently.

“Do you mind if I change?”

“Go ahead. All girls together! So what did you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, pulling on a sock. “Is there a particular food that’s good for ill people?”

“Off the top of my head I’d say...some kind of broth. That’s the traditional cure-all, anyway.”

“Could we get a recipe book?”

“Well, we could always look in the library in the next town. You finish getting ready and come downstairs. No need to get breakfast – I’ve made us a picnic.”

I couldn’t be bothered putting my earrings in today, or clipping my hair back, or brushing my teeth, or washing my face, so once I had finished dressing and gone to the bathroom I joined Molly.

“I don’t have a coat,” I said. “Well actually I have two, but one’s in the dump, and the other’s all scratchy and hard to walk in.”

“Not to worry. I have the car. We’ll just run in very quickly, then run out again. Come on!”

Molly’s car was pulled into the kerb on the road at the end of the courtyard. It was a small, maroon Renault Clio. The bumper was dented on the right-hand side, as though it had been driven into a tree or lamppost.

“Hop in!”

I got into the navigator’s seat and moved some crumpled road maps onto the floor. The car smelled musty, like the inside of the cupboard under the stairs, and a blue pompom dangled on a tassel above the dashboard. It swung back and forth as Molly started the engine. I thought it was ironic that a cleaner’s car should be so messy and smell so musty.

“So,” she said, “How’s...everything?”

I gathered my thoughts. “I *thought* it was all going well. I was on my own, and then I met Jamie and I liked him, but – ”

“Carol’s Jamie?”

“Yeah. But then I made a mistake, and now I’m scared I’ll never see him again.”

“Why?”

“I asked Mum if he could live with us. She said no. Then he ran away.”

Molly laughed. “I wouldn’t worry if I were you. It’ll blow over with time.”

“But what if it *doesn't*?”

“It will. You meant well. If he’s a good friend he’ll see that. And if *you’re* a good friend he’ll miss you.”

“I’m not sure if I *am* good friend...” I muttered.

“You tried to help someone you cared a lot about when he was upset. That sounds like a pretty good friend to me.” She reached over and squeezed my right knee. “Anyway, until he sees sense you’ve got me.” I felt something which I had to work very hard to control, but this time I didn’t know what it was.

The grassy field, the play-park, the river and the banking were on our right as we drove away from the Skeleton Man’s house. A bizarre mental image came into my head of him standing in a green-lit, flag-stoned room which looked a bit like a witch’s cavern, next to a table, with flaming torches in the corners of the ceiling, holding a gigantic carving knife and skinning someone alive, whilst listening to gothic choral music on an old-fashioned stereo system. It seemed like something Edgar Allen Poe might write. The ridiculousness of it made me laugh. Still, I didn’t want to get too close.

We passed an empty bus stop and came to a junction where we turned left, back round almost in a circle. There were silver birch saplings evenly spaced along either side of this road, and their branches extended above us. Their leaves shivered as we passed underneath. The road gave way to roadworks up ahead. A man wearing a blue boiler suit, high visibility vest and green wellingtons stepped out into our path, holding a ‘STOP’ sign. He had a round face, very pink cheeks, and a red button nose. Although he was wearing a hard hat I could see a thick, black, mop-like fringe underneath, which he kept pushing out his eyes.

“Open your window,” Molly said. I wound it down. She leaned across. “Oi! Kenny!”

Kenny smiled and stooped down to window-height. “Hi-aye! It’s yourself. How’s tricks?”

“Same old. You still OK for tomorrow?”

“I am indeed.” He nodded at me. “Who’s this then?”

“This is Anna, Patty’s daughter.”

“So you’re she,” he said to me. “It’s an honour.” He shook my hand, and my whole body bounced up and down. “Nice to meet you.” He stepped back. “Well, best not keep the traffic waiting.” He turned his sign round so that it was green with the word “GO” written in white capitals.

“He seems nice,” I said.

Molly smiled broadly, and her neck coloured. “Glad you think so!”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Um...”

“Would *you* like to be his girlfriend?”

Now she went unambiguously scarlet: “I...”

“Oh, that reminds me. I met Ben again. He works at the doctor’s surgery.”

“Oh...*that* Ben!”

“Yes. You could come along with me when I get my stitches out. He says you’re lovely, so he obviously likes you.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“Don’t be shy! You just have to say hello.”

“Seriously, no!” She broke into sudden laughter. I laughed because she was laughing. “Thanks for the offer, though!”

The sun had gone behind a cloud, but the rest of the sky was blue. For some reason I felt as if I was four and was just setting off on a weeklong summer holiday to the Cornish seaside, but I hadn’t the faintest idea why. The wind had picked up, and was ruffling a dark green yew tree and a shrub with pink flowers on, both of which formed part of a public garden area bordered by a wooden fence.

“Kenny put that fence up,” Molly said, nodding at it and drawing her spine up straight.

“Perhaps he could sort out the garden for the Skeleton Man,” I suggested, “It’s all tangled inside, but you can’t see much because of the wall.”

“The *what*-man?”

“The man with all the skeletons in his closet. Lives in that huge house up the road.”

“Oh, him.”

“What’s he like?”

“Stubborn, high minded and judgemental. Don’t you go anywhere near him, Anna.”

We turned left onto the main road. “Doesn’t anybody read here?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“Well, if there’s no library...”

“Oh, they *read*. It’s the council. Won’t put the money aside for a library. And nobody’s lobbying them.”

“Lobbying?”

“Yeah. Badgering. Pestering them ‘til they’ve done their job.”

“I’m good at badgering people,” I said.

She glanced at me sideways, and one corner of her mouth twitched.

We ended up on a narrow two-lane road with a stone wall on the right-hand side and an electricity power plant with pylons all clustered together. These looked like huge versions of children’s climbing frames, except for not being dome-shaped. To the left a hill sloped upwards, upon which a herd of brown and white cows grazed. Molly pulled the car up next to a wooden gate.

“Breakfast,” she said. She peered up through the windscreen into the sky. “Should be ok. Follow me.”

We got out, and she pulled a rucksack off the back seat. “One of the neighbours was asking about you yesterday. Said she’d seen you out her window, sitting outside in the garden. Here – I did us sandwiches.”

“Thank you!”

We climbed over a gate. Molly was wearing a skirt and therefore had to go slowly, putting one leg over so that she was half-straddling it. Then she lifted the other leg over too and jumped down onto the other side. I climbed up so I was sitting astride the top, then pushed my bottom forward and pinged down in an arc onto the ground.

“ThreetwooneGO!” Molly shouted – a joyful shout. And suddenly we were laughing again and racing each other to the top.

It wasn’t a long hill, but it was steep, so by the time we stopped we were both gasping for breath. Above me the electricity lines stretched, and the moon was out behind them against the blue sky. It made me think of a poem by Seamus Heaney, in which some children climb to the top of a hill to look down on ‘the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires’. About a quarter of a mile down the hill behind me there was a gigantic pylon, upon which I could just see the ‘DANGER OF DEATH’ sign. That warning always seemed comically tautological to me – surely what defines danger is its connection to death. The grass was dry, so I sat down and waited for Molly. I realised I hadn’t thought of Jamie for over an hour, and then that in thinking that, I had thought of him. But, like the fields below, the worry seemed to have shrunk for now.

Molly looked out over the view too. “Wow”, was all she said.

We ate our sandwiches in companionable silence.

“Do you like Queen?” Molly asked.

“Dad and I used to sing ‘We Are the Champions’,” I replied.

“Ah. Well if it would make you sad...”

“Oh no, I’d like to hear them again!”

“You would? Well, it just so happens I have an album in the glove compartment of the car. You can put it on when we get back down if you like.”

Once we were back in the car I prised the glove compartment open. It was very stiff and opened grittily. Inside I found a pile of cassette tapes. Some seemed to be home compilations, and there was a Bob Marley one, as well as Ian MacDonald, and the Spice Girls.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said. “Don’t think anyone’s cleaned in there since the nineties. The tapes were in it when I got it. Kind of surprised they played, to be honest. Or that the player worked, for that matter.”

I found the Queen cassette, which had a loop of tape coming out the top, and wound it back in with my finger like I once saw Dad do. Then I blew on the slot to get rid of any dust, before sticking it in the player. For a second nothing happened, then ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ came on.

“Fast forward if you like.”

“It’s ok, I like this one too,” I said.

We were coming into town again now, past more houses and a ‘thirty’ speed limit. The road had widened. ‘We are the Champions’ came on next. It made me feel sad, and yet for some reason I didn’t want it to ever end.

“Everyone can sing,” I said, because I had studied singing in Music. “You just need to produce your voice properly – open up the back of your throat and breathe deeply, all the way down to your diaphragm.” I took a breath, opened up the back of my throat and sang the first chorus. “Now you try.”

But she shook her head. “I’ve got no sense of rhythm and I can’t hold a tune.”

“Just try. I won’t mind if it comes out rubbish.”

“Here we are!” She pulled in past two red brick buildings. I ejected the cassette and put it back in the glove compartment, in its case.

The library made me think of Dorothy’s house in Kansas, with its brown walls and its veranda. It had large windows, steps up to the door, and a concrete wheelchair ramp zigzagging up beside them. There was a wooden bench in the space in front of the building, with a border collie tied to it by a leather lead. It looked up and wagged its tail as we passed.

Inside there was a long, curving reception desk made of smooth wood, with four silver computer monitors spaced evenly around it. Two members of staff were on duty: a middle-aged woman with a pink cashmere top and sparkly hair slides; and an oldish man with fine, grey hair and glasses.

“Shall we split up, look around and then reconvene?” I suggested. I wanted to see if they had a telephone directory with Carol’s number in it, but decided against sharing this.

“Yeah, might as well,” Molly agreed. “If I don’t see you shall we meet outside the door in half an hour?”

“Ok.”

I wandered through the biography and non-fiction sections, and even a section with outdated sales brochures. One of them had a smartphone on the cover. Jamie would have liked that. I clenched and unclenched my hands, and tried to stay focused. Now I was standing next to a gateway formed by two smaller bookshelves, beyond which was what looked like another smaller bookshelf shaped like a train. Near it was a red and yellow play tent with round, fluffy cushions inside, and a toddler-sized table with an old man – much older than the one behind the front desk – kneeling beside it. He had a book in front of him, and was pushing one wrinkly hand over the pages to turn them, like a child who hasn’t yet learnt how to use their fingers properly. I peered over his shoulder at the book, and saw a picture of Little Red Riding Hood. He was whispering to himself: “And I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll BLOW your house down.”

I coughed. “Hello.”

He stared at me. His eyes struggled to focus on mine, and his pupils were cloudy.

“I’m Anna.”

He didn’t answer.

“You’ve got the wrong wolf,” I said. “The *Three Little Pigs* wolf was the one that huffed and puffed. Yours is the ‘All the better to see you with’ wolf. Want me to find you *The Three Little Pigs*? I can –”

“ – I have a doggie” he interrupted.

“Is that your border collie outside?”

He cringed and hesitated before answering. “I left him there?”

“Well, there’s a dog tied to the bench outside...”

“Yes. Yes – that’ll be Hops.” He nodded to himself, turned his head in the direction of the reception desk and clicked his tongue. “Ridiculous. I’ve been waiting for over an hour. Ruddy doctors!”

“But this is a library...”

He looked even more confused and waved a hand at a father and pre-schooler who were eyeing the area we were in from a distance. “But then...who are all these people?”

“They’re people who like books.”

“Ah. Well, I’d best be away.” He stood up, and his knees crackled as he straightened them. I watched him take tiny steps all the way through the biography and non-fiction sections, and out through the main door, which slid shut behind him.

A spiral metal staircase led up to the first floor. I ascended it and found lots more higher, older metal bookshelves. Interspersed between them were coffee tables and purple armchairs. Molly was sitting in one, with a large book in front of her.

“What’s that?”

She held it up. The cover showed a photograph of a stainless-steel saucepan on a gas hob, with clouds of steam coming out a vent hole in the lid. The title read *Cooking and Curing: Sixteen Nourishing and Healing Recipes*.

“Any good ones?”

“Lots,” she confirmed. “They’ve got one for lamb broth. We could easily make that. What do you think?”

“Sounds good.”

Once we had checked the book out at the reception we left. I went through the library’s exit gate with my fingers in my ears, in case the alarm went off. It didn’t. As soon as we were outside I looked towards the bench, and saw the dog still curled up beside it.

“He forgot,” I said. Leaving Molly at the base of the steps, I went up to it. It licked my hand. It had soft fur that felt like plush, and rolled over when I rubbed its tummy. I felt around its collar until I found the metal name disk, then pulled it round so I could read the inscription: “32 Fentonpark Avenue. My name is Hops.”

“What are you doing?” Molly called, “It might bite!”

“There’s an address!” I replied over my shoulder. “We could take him back!”

“Back where?”

“There was a man in the children’s section. He was really old and wobbly. He thought we were in a doctor’s surgery. He said his dog was tied up outside. We could take him back!”

“Or we could just call the SSPCA...”

“We could drop him at the door and run,” I suggested, “His owner wouldn’t be able to catch us – he was over a hundred years old.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “Well... All right then. Put him in the back and we’ll have a look at the map.”

I opened the navigator’s door and folded the front seat down. Then I put my arms around Hops’s tummy and slotted him, wriggling, headfirst into the back. He pushed his head forwards in between Molly and me, and stayed like that as we drove. His breath was

hot on my ear, and smelled sweet and tangy, like tangerines. I'd never met a dog with breath that smelled like tangerines before.

We turned right, up a junction bordered by a clump of red and yellow marigolds, onto an uphill street with a multi-storey community building, a church on our left and a row of detached, white bungalow cottages.

"Keep an eye out," Molly said. Some houses didn't have numbers, but I kept count mentally. "Thirty-two." I pointed, then reached back and stroked Hops on the head. "Nearly home."

We parked outside the church. I lifted Hops out and held him by the collar. The house was made of white stone and had two main windows with yellow frames. The paint was peeling off, leaving patches of grey. The front door was ajar. I could hear Schubert, but couldn't place where it was coming from. Molly knocked and we waited. Hops strained forward.

"Hello?" Molly called.

The pressure from the collar was hurting the inside of my fingers, so I let go. Hops disappeared into the house.

I looked to Molly, she nodded, and we followed. A horrible smell – like old roadkill – filled the hall.

"Should we run?"

She didn't move.

She was looking ahead with her chin tilted up, eyes watering.

"What if he's dead?" I shivered.

She shook her head. "He wouldn't go off that fast. It's probably just something in the fridge. Come on."

We followed the smell down the hallway, through a door on the left. As soon as we entered the kitchen it became so bad that Molly went to the sink and dry-retched. I held my nose and opened the window. There was a cord hanging down above a rusty, white electric cooker, which Molly pulled. A fan to the right of the window started up.

"What on earth is making that ungodly stink?" she gasped.

The cupboards were open, the bin was lying on its side and there was rubbish all over the floor. In one corner lay something I didn't recognise at first, but when I got closer I saw that it was the remains of a whole, raw chicken. The carcass had been picked two thirds bare, and the rest of it was swollen and mottled.

"That fits the bill." Molly's voice was muffled – she had pulled her top over her nose and mouth. "See if you can find the man."

I left the kitchen and walked up the hall. The music got louder. There was an open door on the right, which led through to a living room. The floor was wooden, and an electric fire blazed in front of two armchairs. Hops was curled up in one, and the man sat in the other. His head was on one side, and in his left hand he was holding a miniature radio up to his ear. His right hand was on the armrest and his fingers were waving up and down in time to the music.

“You left Hops behind at the library,” I said.

He looked up.

“We brought him back for you.”

“Who?”

“Hops.” I pointed at Hops.

“That’s *Daisy*.”

“No it isn’t. His name’s on the collar.”

He closed his eyes and resumed his finger-waving. For some reason I felt sad, but he didn’t seem to be unhappy so I decided instead to be happy about the beautiful music. I would have liked access to a piano at that point. A few seconds later he opened his eyes again. “I went fishing the other day.”

I smiled. “That’s good.”

“Do you know what this music is?”

“It’s the Trout Quintet.”

“Correct. Listen to how calm it is.” The strings undulated in volume and rhythm, like drifting waves. The tempo increased when the piano came in, as if a current were picking up on a river.

“Fishing isn’t calm,” he continued. “My pike put up a huge fight!”

“Really?”

“I’ll have to take the boat out again before summer’s through.”

As the music played his eyes half-closed, so that I could only see the whites, and his chin dropped so that it rested on his chest. My mind began to lapse back onto the problem of Jamie. He might be at the tree now. It was a nice day, and he had wanted to go and live there. Or he might have been moved by now, possibly to a different town. I thought about Skylar and Emily and the baby, and how Emily and the baby were cute but they were too young to have proper conversations, and as for Skylar, well, he didn’t know what it was like. Jamie had been in foster care too. A different type, and longer than me, but it had still been nice to have a friend with that in common. I appreciated that more than I’d realised.

With Dad, whenever I became anxious about things out-with my control, he would always repeat the same mantra, which I had in a text from him, though I had left my phone at the house:

“You don’t know what will happen in the future. It could just as easily be good.”

Usually he had been right, like when I did my grade six piano, and when I auditioned for the part of Beatrice. Now, however, the mantra seemed irrelevant. This time I had done something real to someone else, which had turned things bad and might even have lost them to me. It would be all my fault if I never saw Jamie again. Had I not acted the way I had done, we would still be in touch. To distract myself I looked around the room. On the wall beside the double windows, opposite the door leading in, there was a framed collage of photographs. One showed two children – a girl of about four with two blonde plaits and wearing a blue dress, and a baby boy of about one, wearing denim dungarees and red shoes. The girl was halfway up the ladder of a baby-slide, and was looking directly at the camera, laughing. The boy was getting up off the end of the slide having just gone down. Another showed the man, younger, with a fat woman who had her arm around his waist. On the other side was a much younger man with thick, shoulder-length blonde hair, exactly the same shade as the hair of the little girl in the first photograph. A third photograph showed Hops as a puppy, lying in some long grass, with daisies and buttercups around him.

My eye was caught by a movement through the window. I peeked out. The blonde-haired man from the photograph was coming up the path. He looked older, and his hair was shorter, but it was definitely him. At that moment he glanced up and our eyes met. His eyebrows pulled down, and a red spot appeared on each of his cheeks. The photograph didn’t show how bony his face really was. He broke into a run.

I dashed through to the kitchen as quickly and quietly as I could. Molly had disposed of the chicken carcass and was wiping down surfaces with a dishcloth. When she saw me she hastily threw the cloth back into the sink.

“Sorry, cleaning’s kind of a habit.” She went pink.

“There’s a man outside. He’ll come in at any moment!”

“Oh, shoot, *bollards!*” She darted glances around the room as the man’s footsteps sounded in the hall.

“Just WHAT is going on here?” He strode into the kitchen, stopped when he saw us, then swept a hand round. “Who the heck are you two?”

“We’re really sorry,” said Molly. “The gentleman who lives here left his dog at the library. We just dropped him off.”

He surveyed the clean counters and his breathing seemed to calm, so it came as a horrible shock when he yelled. “Who told you to clean the place? You had no right to break in here like the pair of do-gooders you are!”

I bit back tears, shivering.

“Now listen here,” his voice dropped, and he shook a finger at us. “We don’t need any ‘help’. So get out, and don’t you ever bother us again or I’ll have you both arrested.”

“Well...some gratitude *that was*,” Molly spat, once we had returned to the library car park to recover. When we hadn’t immediately pulled away from the kerbside outside number 32 the man had come after us, rolling up his sleeves. She took a deep breath. She was shaking too.

“Oh well,” I countered, “We’ve got the book now. That’s something to be happy about.”

She made a small noise in reply. A muscle in her jaw flexed and relaxed rhythmically.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded.

“What’s going to happen to the dog?”

“I’m tempted to make a note of the address and call the SSPCA.” She took a notepad and pen out of a pocket in her door, and scribbled the house number and street down.

“Why is it that the more you try and be kind, the more people shout?”

“Because they don’t like *charity*.”

“Charity? Do you mean like the place where Mum works?”

“No, I mean like people who come in with intentions of ‘bettering’ others in order to make themselves feel good, or so as to look good in the eyes of people they want to impress.”

“But we weren’t doing either of those things. We were just cleaning the kitchen.”

“I know.”

“Is charity a bad thing, then?”

She sighed. “No, not bad. Just sometimes it can be a sore spot for people. It was my fault – I should have known better.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I said we should take Hops back.” I put a hand on her knee. “So then, how do I tell if I’m doing charity or kindness?”

“It isn’t always easy,” she admitted. “I suppose you have to give people space. That and recognise where your responsibility stops.” She changed gear. “Whatever happens, Anna, don’t you give up your kindness. OK?”

“OK,” I said, and I looked out the window at the marigolds on the junction corner.

Once again I got very little sleep fretting about Jamie, and woke up with a head cold. To my surprise Mum took the day off work. She spent most of the morning upstairs on her computer, but we ate lunch together watching *Bargain!* I lay on the living room sofa with my notebook and pen, dozing. My mind was fuzzy, and most of my energy was gone. Mum spoke to a doctor over the phone in the afternoon, but it wasn't Ben – I asked. Every now and then she asked if there was anything I needed. Every time I longed to say that I just wanted to be held, but I thought that probably wasn't the kind of thing she meant, so I didn't.

I felt somewhat better the following morning, got a bit of writing done and read some of Mum's Bible which she lent me. Like the hymn book, its pages were thin. It was bound in brown leather, with *The Holy Bible* engraved on the front in silver letters. I read all of Genesis and most of Exodus. At bed-time I pretended to be asleep. I heard Mum go to the bathroom and brush her teeth before returning to the bedroom, where I felt her brush the foot of my sleeping bag. She must have stayed there for about five minutes, because during that time there were no footfalls, and the only sounds I could hear were the ventilation system, my sleeping bag shifting as I breathed, and two men shouting outside. Then there was the creak of bed-springs, before the light was turned off.

Once Mum's breathing deepened I sat up, my head clear now, my body full of adrenaline. I had made a decision about Jamie. Since the thing that had upset our friendship had come from me the reconciliation was my responsibility too. Perhaps he was spending the night in his tree like he'd said. Perhaps he was there right now. Even if he wasn't I might find a clue as to where he had gone – he had been wearing football boots with studs at the time, and the ground was wet. It would be quiet and deserted, and if he wasn't there I could just check for clues, then come back before Mum woke up.

I quietly wriggled out of my sleeping bag. It didn't seem like a good idea to dress in the bedroom – the more disturbance, the thinner a person's sleep becomes. I gathered my clothes into a bundle and tiptoed through to the bathroom. Even if she did wake up now she would probably just think I was using the toilet. The thought of putting on used socks and knickers was a bit icky, so I just put my tracksuit top and bottoms on, and left my feet bare because my trainers were still in the bedroom. Then I tiptoed downstairs, avoiding all the creaky bits. I found a new one on the third lowest step. The sound made me flinch, but it stayed quiet when I lifted my foot off it very slowly.

Once in the kitchen I turned the door handle gently, pulling inwards, then pushing outwards. It was locked. I looked in the drawers, then under the mat and on top of the fridge, but found no key. The windows in the living room were closed. It was dark, but the drawn

blinds were thin, and orange street light shone through them. The empty furniture and long shadows gave me a strange feeling, somewhere between haunted and melancholy. There were two large window panes set side by side in the wall, which looked out across the lawn. They were split down the middle, with one shared wooden edge. At the bottom of each was a catch. I pulled one up, then pushed the frame out as far as it would go. A gust of wind blew, and the curtains billowed silently into the living room.

The gap was no wider than about thirty centimetres. Putting my head on one side and sucking in my tummy I squeezed my body through horizontally, until I was lying astride the window frame. Then I groped around with my foot until my toes touched the grass. It felt soft and cold and wet with dew. After wriggling around and bruising my hips a bit I slithered out to stand on the lawn. The street looked very different at night. Everything dark looked more prominent, and I noticed things I hadn't before, such as the two metal skips at the end of the street, the dark spaces around the sides of the garages, and the puddle at the junction onto the main road. Now its ripples broke the reflection of the lamplight into fragments, which glittered when I looked at them out the corner of my eye. In the daytime it had just been a small pool which I had jumped over or stepped around without thinking.

A few drops of rain blew into my face. My arm came out in goose-pimples, partly because of the damp and wind, and partly because I was keeping a watch out for burglars. At one point I thought I was going to faint when something rustled in the hedge until, with a quiet 'miaow', the black and white cat emerged. I stroked it, and whispered my apologies that I had been unable to meet it and share my breakfast ham. It rubbed against my hand as if to forgive me, then trotted off towards an open wheelie-bin.

The green was silent and peaceful, with few street lamps on the road running alongside it. I could hear the quiet, collective swish of wind in the trees down by the river. Clouds scudded across the sky. A waxing gibbous moon kept showing itself momentarily before being obscured again. A tawny owl hooted, a twig skittered across the road, and a bat fluttered overhead in a wide circle. I wondered if it was my bat. Probably not but perhaps they were acquainted. This thought made me smile. I listened hard, imagining I could hear high-pitched chirruping, but bats' echolocation usually occurs at supersonic frequency, so it was more likely that I was hearing wing-beats. Running over the green felt different to how it did in the day. The shadows made it look as if I was moving much faster, and maybe I was – I had more adrenaline in me than I would have done had it been day. Without the weight of my shoes my body felt very light. When I reached Jamie's tree I leaned against it and let my breathing get back to normal. Then I glanced up at the first branch.

"Jamie?" I called in a loud whisper.

There was no answer, but that might have been because he was asleep. I poised, leapt and grabbed with both hands. It hurt to walk up the trunk without shoes on – all the deep ridges cut into the soles of my feet. At least the grain lay the same way as my feet, although that made it harder to keep a grip. Despite grazing my skin in the process, slotting my ankle over the branch was easier than it had been the first time. I wriggled round and sat astride the branch, then looked up into the leaves. Jamie was not there. With that realisation all the worry I had hoped to get rid of by seeing him again came back. I took four deep breaths and clenched and unclenched my hands.

I was about to jump down and start for home when there was a snap – like a twig underfoot – from somewhere below. I went completely still and rigid, and waited. Another snap, then multiple crackling footsteps over dead wood and grass, coming nearer. A figure came into sight from the direction of the river – a figure I knew, that Molly disliked and that Mum – well, I wasn't sure what Mum felt, really. A figure much taller and broader than Jamie, with dark hair, and clad in a red dressing gown. The Skeleton Man walked slowly and carefully. When he reached the bottom of my tree he leaned against the trunk. I saw the flame of a lighter like Dad's, and the orange glow the end of a cigarette makes when someone takes a puff. Wisps of smoke rose up towards me. The smell triggered faint gusts of memories. Memories of being held in arms whilst wrapped in a soft, warm blanket; being irresistibly sleepy; of the accompanying smell of beer; and of the sounds of voices and a fiddle.

My breath hitched, and I put a hand over my mouth and nose to muffle the sound. In doing so, I wobbled and grasped a nearby hanging branch. The shaking leaves sounded like a rain stick. The Skeleton Man looked up. I didn't see his face, because it was as if something had burst inside me. I scrambled to stand up, forgetting any previous senses of danger and vertigo, and began to climb faster than I ever imagined I could. I must have only climbed about a metre higher (although it felt like more) when I grabbed what I thought was a strong branch. It snapped, and I flung my arms out, trying to balance myself or else find an alternative handhold. I found nothing. I fell, struck the main branch and carried on down, presumably knocking my head on the ground below because I don't remember the actual impact.

It was warm. I was lying on a soft surface. Through my eyelids I could see that something was moving back and forth across the light. I opened my eyes and saw the dark red upholstery of a sofa. A face came into focus, peering down at me. I tried to leap up and run, but the Skeleton Man put a hand on my upper chest and gently pushed me back down.

“Shh, Anna. Lie back.” His voice was scratchy and whispery.

“You know my name...?”

“Are you in pain?”

I frowned, trying to work out if any particular part of me hurt. “Only my back. And my feet. And my head. And my hands. Where am I?”

“I carried you in. I know that was a risk, but I don’t own a mobile telephone. It would have been just as bad leaving you where you were. Now then, can you wiggle your toes on your right foot?” Although it stretched the skin on the soles of my feet and made them sting, I was able to do so. “And your left?” I did. He nodded, looking at my feet with half-closed eyes.

“Are you going to skin me alive?”

He looked right into my eyes with his narrowed, pale-blue ones. His pupils were very small. I felt as if I was a mauled mouse that had been adopted by a cat. “Hmmm... No. I think not. Not tonight anyway. What did you...?” He pointed at his lip. I realised he was asking about my stitches.

“Oh...a friend kicked me.”

“As friends do.”

“I’m not sure if he *is* my friend any more though. He...we...I made a mistake. I asked him to come and live with me. Then he ran away. I haven’t seen him since.”

“I see. So he kicks you in the lip and you stay his friend. You make one mistake and you’re *persona non grata*. Yep, sounds like pretty typical human behaviour to me.”

“What does ‘*persona non grata*’ mean?”

“It’s Latin. Literally translates as: ‘person not welcome’.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t want to be *persona non grata*. And I don’t know where he is. I thought he might be...”

“In the tree?”

I nodded. “It’s his secret hideout.” My eyes filled up and overflowed. My nose started to run. I sniffed.

“You went to look for him?”

“Yes.”

He reached down his dressing-gown sleeve and brought out a blue cloth handkerchief, which he handed to me.

“He used to live with Carol – that’s his foster mum – but now he says he might have to live in a children’s home. Or in a different foster-home. It’s because of his truancy

problem – he keeps running away from school, but he won't say why. His name's Jamie. Do you know him?"

"People!" There was a hard emphasis on the 'p' so that a bit of saliva flew out his mouth. Then he curled his upper lip, like a wolf, and shook his head vigorously. It was then that I saw the Alsatian sleeping by the open fire. I backed away.

"Hot chocolate?" Soft, scratchy voice again.

"OK..."

He stood up and went through another door to the right. I sat back down and drew my knees up, keeping my eyes on the dog. There was the sound of a gas ring being lit, and of a pot of some kind being pulled out a cupboard. The room was spacious, gently lit by standard lamps in the corners, with a large fireplace, a book shelf, a sheepskin rug and several wooden cabinets, some of them the height of a person. I wondered where all the skeletons were stored. Dad told me ghosts were nothing to be afraid of – they didn't exist and even if they did, they were dead and couldn't hurt anyone. Skeletons were just the same – piles of bones. I put my hand up and cupped the outline of my jaw. The wide grin of my skull was both familiar and unfamiliar. I shuddered, but it helped make the thought of the skeletons – wherever they were hidden – not quite so eerie. I stood up and took a few steps forward. My feet held my weight and I didn't have a limp. The Alsatian opened its eyes, lifted an ear and growled.

"Quiet, Jen," the Skeleton Man called through. I blinked. I hadn't imagined the dog to be female. "All bark and no bite," he added.

"That's what Joanne said about you."

"Well, there you go then. A perfect team." There was the sound of liquid being poured, and a teaspoon clinked three times against the edge of a mug. "I don't like people pestering me. Especially children." I tried to tidy my tracksuit, hold myself erect and make sure there was nothing childish about me. "Since you don't seem to be seriously hurt, put another log on the fire."

Two wicker baskets sat on the floor either side of the fireplace. One had small sticks in it, and the other was filled with big logs. Jen heaved herself up and walked away as I approached, giving a half-hearted snap at my hand when I reached out to touch her back. I picked a log off the top of the pile, held it in both hands and darted forwards to drop it on the fire. The Skeleton Man came through with two mugs – one with blue stripes, like pyjamas, and one which looked hand-painted. He gave the hand-painted one to me. I put it on the arm of the sofa.

“Oi! Mug. Coaster. Side-table.” He indicated a small, square, wooden table covered with a Chinese silk drape, with a lamp and a plain blue cork mat on it.

The painting on the mug was faded, and showed a barn owl with a star above it. Someone had painted them with black outlines, then filled them in with colours which had run a bit and dried in drips. Bits of the ceramic were chipped.

“Did you make this?”

He shook his head. “My daughter. Years ago.”

“She’s a good artist...”

“Was.”

“Is she dead?”

“Oh, no. No, we just don’t speak now.”

“Not ever?”

“Well...one or two words in about fourteen years.”

“That’s awful.”

“Her choice.”

I sipped my hot chocolate. It left a light, creamy foam on my upper lip.

“So – this Jamie,” he continued, after a few seconds, “You say he lives at Carol’s?”

I nodded.

“Have you tried ringing there?”

“I don’t know the number.”

“She’s his foster mother, you say?”

I nodded again.

“Maybe we can find out.” He stood up. “Bring your drink.”

We went through to a hall with a floor and staircase carpeted over with wicker matting. He climbed the stairs like a toddler, stepping up with his right foot, then bringing his left onto the same step as the first, before stepping up with his right foot again. His left hand gripped the banister. The bones under his skin looked like a spider as they flexed. Once at the top of the stairs he led the way through to what looked like a study. There was a flat-screened, black and silver PC – a newer model like the ones in the library – and a rotating desk-chair on casters. The rest of the room was covered in chest-high piles of books, with sheaves of blue, crumpled A4 paper between the pages. A light brown, upright piano with yellowed keys stood in the corner with its lid open, the stool pulled out. Some music sat on the stand, falling sideways: ‘Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring’. Thinking through the notes as I scanned the first lines, I recognised the melody from church.

I sat down and played three nocturnes by Chopin. Those were the last pieces I had learnt before the fire broke out in the flat. Music – transient combinations of twelve tones at varying octaves, rising up for a moment and then falling away again until next time, like flowering plants, or the sun and the seasons. It can't be contained, but neither can it be fully destroyed – even when composers crumble to dust and manuscripts burn to ashes, the tunes still exist in peoples' memories and fingertips.

When I finished I turned around. The Skeleton Man was watching me. His eyes were all shiny.

“You have a hand for Chopin.”

I said, “His music makes me feel calm when I'm stressed.”

“Are you stressed now?”

“Not now that I've played some Chopin. I've never played a nocturne in the middle of the night before.”

“Something everyone should do before they die.” He half-smiled. “Come on. You can kneel here. Let's check for this Carol.”

I squeezed in and rested my elbows on the desk while he booted up the computer. It took a while, but not nearly as long as the one we had in the flat, which had a cube-shaped screen. As we waited I reflected on what Mum and Molly had told me. He didn't seem remotely scary or dangerous. Fierce, perhaps, but some people are, and it doesn't always mean they're bad inside. If anything he seemed subdued. If he had been dangerous he could have done something to me when I was knocked out, but instead he made sure I hadn't been hurt and gave me hot chocolate. I thought back to his saying 'people' and wondered if he had been – Dad used the word once and afterwards I looked it up in *The Oxford English Dictionary* – 'maligned'. Maybe that was why he owned an Alsatian, hated people and kept his curtains closed all day.

“Now then, some keywords...” He hesitated, his fingers hovering above the keys. He typed in 'Carol', and 'foster', and 'West Lothian'.

“Why are you searching for Carol?” I asked. “Jamie said he might not be living with her anymore.”

“On the other hand he might be. Best start with what we know.”

He clicked 'search'. The first page came up, with the keywords highlighted in the preview lines:

“Carol singers face a curfew after sleepy residents complain...”

“How to foster good oxygen and harness positive quantum wellbeing...”

“Carol Evans grew up in foster care in Winchester...”

“West Lothian fostering agency...”

“Click on that – click on that!”

“Yes, all right, I know!” he shoved my hand away and clicked. A flower-bordered yellow page came up, with a black and white photograph of four older women. Along the top of the page were different headings: ‘Who are we?’ ‘Want to foster?’ ‘Fostering in Scotland and West Lothian’ and ‘The Fostering Process’.

“Is that them?”

“Let’s find out...” He clicked on ‘Who Are We?’:

“We are a group of dedicated foster parents. Our job is to provide temporary, home-like environments to children who, for many possible reasons, cannot be cared for by their parents or relatives. We have all been through specialised training and undergone thorough background checks. We are passionate about children and their welfare. To learn more about each of us, please click on our photographs.”

I peered at Carol’s photograph. It was an outdoors, head-and-shoulders, greyscale shot. She had a weathered face but was smiling. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a raincoat. The Skeleton Man clicked on her name, and a telephone number came up. I jumped up and twirled, banging my left knee against the corner of the desk. Pain shot through it but it didn’t matter.

“Best not ring it at...” He glanced at his watch... “Half three in the morning. Infuriating, the conventions of normal people. Still, there you have it.” He got up. “You’d better get back home. How are your feet?”

“Fine now.” The stinging had almost completely gone, and though the base of my back felt tender, the tenderness was in a more definite area and was therefore easier to avoid provoking.

“How’s your head?”

“It’s ok.”

“That’s good.” He nodded. “You fell from the tree a while ago. If you were in any danger it would be showing by now. You’d be slurring your words and getting sleepy. Certainly not spinning and conversing. I’ll phone your mother.”

“You know her number?”

“Yes.” He held the door.

“It’s OK though,” I said. “I left the window open to get back in.”

“In that case I’ll just walk with you. Make sure you get in safely.”

The night seemed darker as we stepped out onto the concrete drive, partly because the clouds had thickened and covered the whole sky, and partly because of the comparative

brightness inside the Skeleton Man's house. We walked in silence, side by side. After several minutes he spoke:

"So. What did you think of the house?"

"It's different to...to what I imagined."

"Good-different, bad-different or neutral-different?"

I considered. "Good-different, I think. Except for the skeletons, of course."

He stopped. "The what?"

"The skeletons. In your closet. Or was Mum wrong about that?"

He lifted his chin, opened his mouth and gave a grating laugh. "Ahhhh...! I see," he murmured, "*Those* skeletons. Yes, they're all the rage..."

"You mean other people have them too? Like a fashion?"

"Oh yes. You'd be hard-pushed to find anyone here who doesn't have at least one."

I stared. Nobody told me the Scots hoarded skeletons. But then, nobody told me they kept knives in their socks either. I desperately wanted to know more, but as we drew level with sixteen McCallish Court I saw, to my horror, that the lights were on and the curtains were open.

"Quick," he muttered. We ran through the gate. He knocked hard on the door. When Mum answered it was obvious that she'd been crying. When she saw us her cheeks grew pale.

"Safe and sound," said the Skeleton Man.

Mum glared at him. He gazed back, eyes all shiny again.

"Goodbye Anna – for now." His shoulders seemed to sag. Then he turned and receded into the night.

My laundry was hanging on the kitchen pulley.

"Are you OK?" I asked Mum.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Does it *look* like I'm OK?" Then she shook her head. "From now on you're sleeping in *my* bed. That way I'll know if you try and go wandering off again."

Her parenting methods were so unusual. Dad's punishments had always been fair, but were never very nice. Once when I threw his shoes out the window because he wouldn't buy me a book that I wanted, he confiscated my entire Agatha Christie collection. Another time, when I'd stolen all the baking chocolate after we'd had a supermarket delivery, he fined me five pounds of pocket money and made me spend the rest of the afternoon doing his tax returns. He'd said that it was never too early to learn.

Here it was different: when I misbehaved by going over to Jamie's, Mum ran me a bath, as though I was ill and being tenderly cared for. And now she was letting me sleep in the big bed – like a tiny baby who needs to feel safe and not-alone – because I had run away in the middle of the night and talked to someone she hated. It was really confusing. Despite the confusion, though, I couldn't stop grinning as we went upstairs and I changed back into my nightie.

Just before Mum switched off the light I rolled onto my tummy, rested my chin on my knuckles, and turned to face her.

"I'm glad you don't shout at me so much any more," I told her.

"Don't push it," she answered.

"Why are you so scared of the Skeleton Man?"

"I'm not *scared* of him. It's...complicated. A lot of things happened a long time ago, and now we don't talk."

"Not ever?"

"Well, one or two words in about fourteen years. Now go to sleep. And don't sleepwalk."

And she leaned over and kissed me on the forehead.

When I was little Dad sometimes took me to see Nanna and Granddad, who lived in Cornwall. I remember climbing through the cat flap and out into the garden aged two. The house was near a footpath above the sea. The waves crashed below and the seagulls, black against the sky, looped and shrieked. The grass came up to my armpits, and was full of little blue flowers. When I peered down over the cliff I could see foamy-white water splashing and swirling around the rocks. The wind blew my hair into my eyes and mouth, and made me stagger. I sat with my legs sticking over the edge, and pretended I was flying home to my nest. Suddenly I heard someone shout my name. I turned and saw Granddad running across the grass. When he reached me he put his hands under my armpits, and for a second I thought I really *was* flying as I swung through the air. Then I was over his shoulder, and all I could see were flowers.

Now whenever I hear the word 'Granddad', that's what I think of – blue flowers, long grass, sea salt and waves.

The sky through the curtains turned lighter and lighter blue, and a thrush began to sing. Mum had faced away from me all night. She'd been breathing deeply so I'd assumed she was

asleep, but when she turned around at seven O'clock she was fully awake. "Did you sleep ok?" she asked, when she saw that I was awake.

"Yes thank you. Why didn't you tell me before that he was your dad?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Just because."

"OK. Why don't you and he speak?"

"Many reasons. It's very complicated." She threw back the duvet, got out the bed and stretched. Then she dressed, opened the curtains and went downstairs. I lay still for a bit longer, then washed, put on a clean tracksuit and went down too.

The front door was open. It was a balmy, sunny day, with a slight haze. Mum put ham on two slices of toast, filled a glass with orange juice and put everything on a tray, exactly like when I made breakfast for her on my first morning.

"Molly says you like to eat outside."

"Yes. I learned about the calls of most garden birds when I was eight. And Molly and I had a picnic on a hill a few days ago – it was lovely."

"Hmm."

I sat on the grass, but Mum took a chair out. She chewed, looking straight ahead with her face, but somewhere down and off to the right with her eyes.

"I phoned work," she said. "I'm going in a bit late today."

"Why?"

"Need to get those stitches removed." She nodded at my mouth.

"I thought your doctor was in Livingston. I could just come to work with you."

"Kind of stupid to register you in Livingston when you're going to be here most of the time. Besides, like I said – I can't be ruled by fear. Anyway, they run a drop-in clinic today. It'll be ok. Just..." She cleared her throat: "Just don't make me come in with you."

"You don't have to come along with me if you don't want to. I can manage."

"No, I'll come." She paused and looked away. Then she smiled. "Right. Teeth, and then we'll walk to the clinic."

"So," she said, as we made our way up the road, "You met him."

"You mean my...your...the Skeleton Man?"

"*Skeleton Man?*"

"Yes."

She laughed quietly, and repeated the term. "It suits him. Anyway – what did you think of him?"

“I drank from your cup.”

An expression I couldn't decipher flickered across her face.

“The one with the owl,” I added, for clarification.

She smiled. “Oh, *that*. He *kept* it?”

“Yes.”

We walked on. “There are things I regret...” she said. “I could have handled them differently. I was...I was very raw at the time.”

I waited.

“Look, Anna,” she continued, after about a minute, “You're a teenager. Before you came here did you get, like, pocket money?”

“Yes. One pound fifty a week.” I fought back a feeling of disappointment that she had not elaborated on what had happened between her and the Skeleton Man.

“What did you spend it on?”

“Books, mostly. From the second-hand bookshop. I saved up. I got others from the library too.”

Her mouth worked, but not in the angry way I had seen before. I thought of her bookshelf – all the books filling it and piled on top. “What do you like to read?”

“Well, I went through an Agatha Christie stage when I was ten. And Seamus Heaney. I quite liked some Auden. And I started reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but Dad stopped me. And photograph books. I had one about bats – sorry...” She shuddered. “One Christmas I read my height in fiction.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And I love to read aloud. I used to read to...well...to a lot of people. Except that now I don't have any of them. The books, I mean. But also the people.”

She nodded, brow furrowed.

“Anyway,” I went on quickly, “I'm happy I *had* them. I write a lot too. Alison gave me a notebook and pen. It's nearly full now.”

“What sort of things do you write about?”

“Just things I do. And things that make me happy.”

“What makes you happy?”

I stuttered – my mind went blank. It was the kindest thing she'd said to me since I'd arrived, and I was caught completely off guard.

She laughed again. “Well like I said, I don't have much to spare, but I could probably manage three pounds a week. How does that sound? At least then you can save for more

books. And if you want to read C.S. Lewis go ahead. Fiction, theology, it's all fine with me."

"Oh, thank you!" I slipped my arm through hers. "I'm going to build my own collection here."

When we got to the clinic Mum sat on the wall and told me to go on in. I hadn't realised she was being quite *that* literal when she asked me not to make her go in with me.

"Oh, don't forget this..." She handed me the doctor's form. It was very crumpled and stained, and still had blood from my lip smeared across part of it, but she had filled in the sections I hadn't known.

Once inside, I realised that what with all that had gone on, I hadn't thought about Jamie all morning – Mum's sudden change in behaviour and the rare chance to chat casually with her had overshadowed it. Now though it all came surging back, as though a dam had burst in my mind. I couldn't ring him now – we were out the house and Mum was outside. I clenched and unclenched my fists a few times. A sign was propped up on the reception desk. It read: "Drop in, 9:30-11:00am." It was a different receptionist this time – another woman with long, blonde hair, and nails painted with purple and silver swirls.

"This is for you," I said, handing her the form.

She hesitated, then took it between her finger and thumb and dropped it somewhere under the counter, lip curled.

"Also, I need to get my stiches taken out." I pointed at my lip. "Can I see Doctor Strachan? I saw him last time."

"You'll see whoever is ready for you first. Now take a seat."

The waiting room was occupied by a woman in a black suit looking at a pink smartphone, an old man with wispy white hair, brown trousers and an oilskin coat like my old one, a black woman in jeans and a summery blouse, and a girl with lilac hair who couldn't have been much older than me. She was sitting in a chair in the far right-hand corner, leaning against the wall and crying quietly. The one spare seat was between her and the old man.

I sat down. "Hello. What's the matter?" Getting no reply I repeated the question.

She lifted her head. "Nothing." Then she sank back down against the wall.

On the coffee table in front of the chairs there was a National Geographic magazine, and a round wooden plate full of indentations, each with a green marble on it, forming the shape of a cross. The central indentation was empty. I picked the plate up.

"Been trying to solve that thing for years," said a voice to my right. The old man pointed at it.

“What is it?”

“Solitaire.” He reached over, jumped one marble over another into the central indentation, and removed the one that had been jumped over, placing it in a groove around the rim of the plate.

“You do that until there are no more marbles left beside each other. Should be able to get it down to just one in the middle, but I’ve never managed it. The wife knows how.”

I got all the way down to four in a square, before the man was called away by Doctor Warren. Then I played three more games, but on each occasion I ran out of pairs of marbles. Two, three or four were always left isolated. A third of the way through my fourth game the girl with the lilac hair pointed wordlessly to a marble on the arm of the cross nearest me.

“Jump over this one?” She nodded. I did, and she pointed to another one. We went on like this until there were just two left – one in the centre and one beside it.

“Why were you crying?” I asked again.

She opened her mouth.

“Anna!” Ben Strachan was standing in the corridor from which the doctors’ offices led off.

“Good luck,” I said. The girl smiled, shifted in her seat and leaned her head back against the wall.

“How’s things?” Ben asked, as I sat down at his desk.

“OK, thanks. I also met my...my Mum’s dad.”

“You met John?”

“That’s his name?”

“Yes. Though now most people I’ve talked to just call him The Man. What’s he like these days? One hears so many rumours...”

“I played Chopin on his piano. It was the middle of the night. He’s still got the mug Mum painted when she was little. I drank hot chocolate from it.”

He searched in a drawer and pulled out a packet of surgical scissors.

“I told Molly you thought she was lovely,” I added.

He dropped the scissors. “You...*what*...I hope you didn’t...just...!” He spluttered something else I couldn’t understand.

“I thought you two could meet and get to know each other. Didn’t you want someone to marry you? Or was I wrong about that?”

“N-no, you weren’t wrong...” He looked a bit pale.

“I asked her to come with me to the surgery. She said no.”

He laughed for several seconds. “Did she?”

“Yes.”

“Mum came with me instead. She took a few hours off this morning.”

“She did?” His voice dropped. He put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “Is she here now? I didn’t see her in the waiting room...”

“She’s outside. She wouldn’t come in.”

He stood up again, all expression leaving his face. “Ah.”

“Also, I think Jamie’s not my friend anymore. I asked him to come and live with me and Mum got all cross. Then he ran away.” I clenched again as he put a hand on my shoulder, then worked the scissors up and under the loop of my stitch.

He snipped. “Ow!”

“Done!” He picked at the loose threads, then wet a cotton ball and dabbed. A tiny smear of blood came away, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as the bleeding had been when the stitch was put in. “Well, that’s you discharged. Give your mum my regards...if she’ll take them, that is. I would say hope to catch up soon, but...” He sighed.

“But that would mean I’d have to hurt myself again or else get ill?”

He cocked his head. “Y-yes. Well. Anyway, best of luck with...with everything.”

“Thanks.”

I found Mum sitting on the low stone wall bordering the clinic’s lawn.

“All done!” I called.

She gathered up her bag. “Good. Let’s go. I said I’d be in by eleven.”

As we departed I saw a shadowy figure draw back from one of the surgery’s windows.

Molly’s car was parked in the road outside McCallish Court. Molly herself was leaning against it, eating a banana. She waved when she saw us approaching.

“I’ve brought you your charge!” Mum called, waving back.

Molly chuckled.

As we reached the car, Mum took a twenty pound note out her purse and tried to give it to Molly, but she wouldn’t take it.

“I’ll be back around six, ok?”

“Fairy-nuff.”

Molly and I watched Mum go. Just as she was opening the door of her car she straightened and turned round again. “Text if you need anything,” she said to me.

After we had waved her car out of sight and settled ourselves into Molly’s car, Molly seemed to go all quiet and strange. Then she sucked in a breath:

“You know, you really *can't* go sneaking out at night.”

I didn't answer. We drove back up the road.

“It isn't fair on your mum, it scared the life out of me and it wasted police time. Did you know she called the police? *Again?*”

“No.” My stomach hurt. “Where are we going?”

“Hmm. I've half a mind to forego all the fun plans I'd devised.”

“I *said* I was sorry!” Tears threatened. I seemed to have made everyone unhappy since coming here.

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose you did. Oh well. Do you still want to make the broth?”

“Of course!”

“Thought so. Then we'll go to the shop first and pick up a few things. After that we'll go to mine.”

“All right.”

“And we'll talk more about this later.”

It wasn't until we were back in the car, having picked up two packets of lamb chops, a clove of garlic, two onions, some carrots, some celery and a bunch of fresh basil and rosemary, that either of us spoke again. I spent most of the time in the shop trailing round after Molly, clenching and unclenching my hands.

“I thought we could invite your mum round,” she said, as we set off again.

“Oh, good. She can try some of the broth.”

“That's what I had in mind.” She suddenly giggled: “She can be our guinea pig!”

“What do you mean?”

“To check it's worked. Before we risk it on Mrs No...”

That made me laugh too. “I don't think she'd like to know that!”

We drove past the Skeleton Man's house, turning left into the road with the church, then right at the T-junction at the end of it, and came out onto a street lined with modern, concrete-walled flats. One had an elm tree growing near enough for the branches to almost touch a jutting out complex of three windows two floors up. Molly pulled into the kerb, behind a green Peugeot.

“Here.” She pointed. We went down a gravel path which cut through the middle of a small lawn, and up some steps to a communal door with a Yale lock and a series of push-buttons, each of which had numbers engraved on plaques beside them. She unlocked the door, and I followed her up four short flights of linoleum-covered steps.

“One of these days...” she panted, as we reached the top, “I'm going...to move...to a place...with a lift!”

The door to her flat was tall, painted shiny black, and had a plaque with 'McLean' engraved on it. She used another large, silver key to unlock the lower lock, then opened the door using the Yale key again. The first thing I saw when I entered the hallway was a huge, black coat hanging on a peg beside the door.

"That's Kenny's." She gestured in its direction. "He came round for lunch yesterday. I suppose I should take it back sometime." She picked at a sleeve. Then she gave it a quick pat and continued on through a door to the right.

The kitchen had a wooden floor, a wooden table and chairs, wooden counters and cupboards, and wooden shelves. It reminded me of an old farmhouse Dad and I once visited in Charlwood.

On Molly's table were two muddy potatoes, and a handful of cherry tomatoes.

"He left those, too," she said. "I mentioned making broth and he brought them round. They're home-grown. Aren't they great?" She rolled up her sleeves, went over to the sink and turned on the tap. "Wish I could grow my own food, but I've not got room for anything bigger than those." She nodded towards the windows, each of which had a herb box on its ledge – thyme, parsley and sage. "How are you with a knife?"

We sat opposite each other at the table. The onions were extremely strong. I cut a good amount off the tops and bottoms, like Dad showed me, and soon found myself sniffing repeatedly, my eyes tearing up and overflowing.

"You ok?"

"Yes," I answered, blinking. "I'm a bit stressed, though."

At once she put down her knife. She pulled a chair up and sat down beside me. "Want to talk about it?"

I told her all about Jamie.

"Oh, Anna..." She put a hand on my forearm, then fetched me a tissue. "You know, my mum always tells me the same thing whenever I get stressed out about anything."

"What does she tell you?"

"Never make a sticking point out of anything that isn't glue."

I thought about this. It sounded like something Dad might say.

"It means you shouldn't worry about something unless you're sure you've good reason to do so. OK, so Jamie ran off. Sure, he *might* have decided not to be friends with you. Then again, he might not have. All I'm trying to say is, you don't know that you have anything to worry about here, so why act like it's a foregone conclusion? You've certainly not got anything to cry about..."

"I wasn't crying."

She scrunched her eyebrows. “But you...” She indicated the tears on my face.

“Oh – that’s just the onions!”

“Tell you what...” She refilled the sink and tipped the peeled, diced potatoes into it, “You finish those onions, if you’re up to it, and we’ll ring Carol.”

I managed not to cut my hands, then washed them and fetched the cordless phone from a small table in the hallway. I took it into Molly’s living room, sat on the sofa and dialled the number. If Jamie were out, Carol, or perhaps Joe or Jeremy or Alasdair might answer the phone. That would be strange because I’d never met or talked to any of them, so to me they felt like characters in a book. At the same time part of me was intrigued at the idea of a story turning into real life.

The phone rang three times before someone picked it up.

“Hello?” said a woman’s voice. It sounded a bit like Mrs Langton, whom we used to see smoking in the next door garden. She would always stub out her cigarettes in the bird bath, which eventually became so full the butt ends started dropping onto the grass below. The main difference was that this voice had a thick Scottish accent. Thicker than Molly’s, and slightly thicker than Mum’s.

I swallowed: “Hi, my name’s Anna. Is Jamie there?”

“Hiya, Anna. He’s no’ in the now. He’s in school.”

“What about his Truancy Problem...?”

“Aye, well, we’re working on it. Shouldn’t *you* be in school?”

“I’m home educated. At least, I was when I was with Dad. I’m sure Mum’ll sort out a teacher here soon. So Jamie’s not going to a children’s home?” I concentrated on staying relaxed as I said this last bit.

“We’ll see. Anyway, I’ll get him to gi ye a quick ring when he gets in.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem, hen. Bye, now. Bye!”

It was just before one o’clock. I had been so sure that phoning Carol would immediately make everything all right. Half past three seemed like an impossibly long time to wait – and he might not go straight home.

Molly was frying some of the lamb with a few vegetables when I returned to the kitchen. I slumped in a chair and scuffed my right foot back and forth over the floor. My trainers had lights along their outer sides which were supposed to flash when I stamped, but they were second-hand and the batteries had already run out by the time I got them.

“Oi! Don’t get skid marks on my floor!” I stopped and rested my chin on my arms instead. “No joy?”

“He’s out.”

“Well, we’d better get this broth on to cook down. It’ll take a good few hours. Once it’s simmering we’ll have lunch.” She fiddled with a dial on what looked like a ceramic pot with an electric cable and plug coming out. “Gotta love a slow cooker!”

I didn’t have much of an appetite, but it would have been bad manners not to eat what she had made for me. If I hadn’t upset her earlier then I didn’t want to do so now.

“I texted your mum. Didn’t tell her the bit about being a guinea pig, but she *does* want to come round, so we’ll have to do things properly. Making bread’s good when you’re angry or stressed. All that mixing. And soda bread goes well with soup. What d’you say?”

I shrugged.

“Oh come on! That’s got to be something to be happy about!”

After lunch we skimmed chunks of fat off the top of the broth using two slotted spoons. Molly put them in a small, blue bowl, and set them to one side.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Dunno. I might put it out for the birds when it cools down. They need lots of fat right now to put on weight for the winter. Or I could just give it to Jesus.”

“What...?”

“Talk of the devil. There he is now!”

I was about to ask what on Earth she was talking about when there was a muffled meow. I turned to see the black and white cat sitting on the outside middle window sill. It must have climbed up the tree and jumped across. It looked cleaner and less bony in daylight.

“So he’s yours!” I exclaimed.

She opened the window. “Well, he’s not really mine. Like I said, he’s sort of common. But I feed him, so he keeps coming back. Kenny wants to call him Rorschach because of his black splodges, but I’ve settled on Jesus, and that’s that.”

“Why?”

“Because Jesus supposedly travelled from house to house. Kenny says I’m daft – that one day he’ll show up when I’ve got posh guests and I’ll scare them all silly shouting ‘Jesus! Get down!’ Do you believe in God?” As she was talking she had fetched a can of cat food from one of the cupboards. She was in the process of opening it, but turned round to look at me as she asked this.

I put my head on one side. “I...I don’t know. I *think* I *might*...”

She turned away again, scooped the cat food into the same bowl as the fat from the lamb, and placed it on the floor. “Well perhaps you should pray to him about Jamie, then.”

Jesus jumped off the work counter, hunched into a ball, curled his tail around himself and began to eat, growling “*Nyam-nyam-nyam-nyam.*”

In church they knelt on the floor on special pads. Not all of them, but perhaps the ones that did were more likely to get the answer they wanted. There weren’t any pads like the ones in church in the kitchen, so I went back through to the living room, took a cushion off the sofa and knelt on that instead. Then I clasped my hands, bent my head and closed my eyes.

“Please make Jamie and me friends again. Amen.”

I felt like I ought to wave a wand and say ‘Abracadabra’ to finish it off, but I didn’t have a wand, and if Abracadabra could make everything OK then Mum wouldn’t cry at night, and Mrs No would be well, and Dad...and Dad...and Dad...

There was another meow. Jesus peeked round the door and trotted towards me. I stroked the top of his head with the back of my hand. He stepped into my lap and curled up. There we sat, listening to Molly walking around the kitchen, then up and down the hall. Later she went to the bathroom, then finally she was quiet for about half an hour in the one remaining room which must have been her bedroom.

A loud buzz on the intercom made me start. Jesus leaped up and darted through the door.

“That’ll be your mum!” Molly clattered up the hallway.

The broth smelled strong now, and was mingled with the biscuit-y smell of fresh soda bread. My stomach rumbled. I opened a drawer under the sink and found some cutlery, just as Mum and Molly came in.

“You got things in hand here, Anna?” Molly asked.

I nodded, counting forks, and the two of them went through to the living room. Once they had gone I laid the table, looked through the cupboards and found glasses and napkins. I folded the napkins into standing-up fan-shapes, like the ones in the restaurant Dad and I sometimes went to at the start of the month. Then, because I couldn’t resist it, I crossed to the slow cooker and lifted the lid. The broth was brown, with soft chunks of vegetables shifting around in it. The steam wet my face. The smell made me want to get a straw and suck it all up, straight from the pan.

As I approached the living room to call Mum and Molly I overheard Mum’s voice:

“I’m scared...I’m just so scared...”

I poked my head round the door. They were sitting on the sofa. Mum had been crying again. Molly's hand was outstretched, touching Mum's outer left forearm like she had done when she'd thought I was crying.

"Why are you scared?"

Both looked up. Mum shoved a folded blue piece of A4 paper into her cardigan pocket. Molly withdrew her hand and stood up.

"Nothing you need to worry about, Anna."

"Smells good," said Mum. She took a two-pound coin and a one pound coin out of her purse, and thrust them at me. "Here. First week of pocket money, as promised."

I ladled the broth into three bowls, then cut the soda bread. The first slice went sort of wonky, until I learned not to press down at the same time as slicing back and forth. I cut two pieces for each person, then put the butter dish – which was on top of the microwave – in the middle of the table. Mum spread some butter on her bread and dipped one end into the broth. She took a bite and chewed.

"How is it?"

She didn't answer straight away. Then she swallowed: "It's good. I'd say eight."

"Out of ten?"

"Yes."

"Hooray!" Molly and I high-fived.

I ate all my bread before starting on my broth. Then I sipped it from the spoon, rolling each mouthful around before swallowing it. It had a sweetness from the carrots, a tang from the tomatoes and onions, a saltiness from the lamb, and a buttery background. The only thing I'd ever seen Mum scared of was a bat. Perhaps another one had got into the bedroom. If so, that was no problem – I had removed the first one, after all.

"You look very pensive," Molly said.

"Oh...I was just thinking."

"Penny for them?"

"I'm sorry?"

"It's an expression. It just means, care to share your thoughts?"

I drew breath. The phone rang.

"That'll be Jamie!" I yelled. In my haste I knocked my chair backwards as I jumped up. Carol must simply have taken down the number I had called from to call me back. I dashed into the hall, picked up the receiver and pressed the green button.

"Hello?"

“Hi.” Jamie’s voice sounded higher on the phone than it did in real life, and more staccato.

We were both quiet for a few seconds. Then I cleared my throat. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

All the stress I’d been feeling faded like a receding tide. If he didn’t even know why I was sorry he couldn’t possibly have been avoiding me because of Sunday. I hadn’t realised my lungs were that big. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Ah.”

Each silence seemed to go on for ages, but it didn’t matter – I knew he was there on the other end of the phone, and that everything was fine. It felt like we were together again.

“It’s nice to hear you,” I said.

“You been smoking something?”

I didn’t know how to answer this question – it didn’t sound like any of the figurative expressions I knew, and yet no child I’d ever met had smoked. Except two of my friends at school, outside the gates, at the end of the day. Perhaps it was rhetorical.

“Look,” he continued, “We’ll meet up soon. OK? For football or...or something.”

“OK then.”

“Yeah.” Another silence. “All right, bye.”

“Bye.”

Though my throat was painfully twisted up, my mind was filled with light. There was a pause, then a click, then the continuous buzz which sounds when the person on the other end has rung off.

When we got home I checked the bedroom for bats. If one had somehow got in the window it might be tangled up in the curtains, like a moth. I shook them, but found nothing. Then I opened the wardrobe and rattled the coat hangers. Lastly I flapped the bedclothes and my sleeping bag around. As I was doing so, Mum came in. I straightened the duvet hastily.

“There aren’t any bats,” I said.

Mum put her head on one side as she gave me a long look, then started forward. I had a mad thought for a second that she was going to give me a hug, but she stopped and shuffled her feet. Then she smiled and shook her head slightly. “That’s good then.”

I slept late, and was woken the next morning by Molly. She was wearing a blue sash over her shirt, with a schematic of a house with a smiley face on it.

“Come on, Sleepy Head!” she said, “It’s Mrs No Day!”

We ate boiled eggs and soldiers in the garden. Jesus came and joined us, so I fetched him some ham. Molly stroked him, and he rolled over onto his back, tail twitching.

“Why are you wearing that?” I pointed at her sash.

“Well, when I clean for your mum, for example, I’m doing it privately. But I also do work for the council as part of their Home Help scheme. It’s for those dealing with Complex Issues.

“What sorts of Complex Issues?”

“It varies. Some people have mobility problems. Some are carers. Between them Mrs No and Susan tick both those boxes.”

She tickled Jesus’s tummy. He flattened his ears, hissed and swiped at her, eyes dark.

“OW!” She sucked the back of her hand, which was bleeding. He darted under the gate and away. “Fine, so it’s one of *those* days.”

“What days?”

“Not-Molly’s-Cat Days, that’s what.”

We washed up, then made our way next door. The curtains were closed in the room on the ground floor, but all the others were open.

“Is that Mrs No’s room?” I asked.

Molly nodded. It seemed odd that a person who couldn’t leave the house would voluntarily shut out the sunshine and view too. She rang the bell. My hands grew clammy, like when I was standing on Mum’s doorstep for the first time. I heard brisk footsteps, then a lock being turned. The door opened.

“We don’t want... Oh it’s you.” Susan pointed at me. “And *you!*” She turned to Molly. “She’s with you?”

“She’s in my care. And she has something for Mrs No.”

Susan glared at me. “Oh, a do-gooder, now, are we?”

I hadn’t thought of the broth in that way, but now Susan mentioned it I realised it could be construed as Charity. I wasn’t sure how to answer. If I said ‘yes’ then I’d be admitting the charge of do-goodery. And yet literally-speaking I *do* like to do good, so ‘no’ was a lie.

“It’s just one neighbour saying hi to another,” I settled upon.

“It was my idea, really,” Molly added. “I apologise if we caused offence. We were acting with the best of intentions.”

Susan sniffed. “You always did have a habit of putting your foot in it, Molly McLean.”

“It *wasn't* your idea...” I whispered, as we stepped inside and wiped our feet on the mat.

“I know,” she mouthed, and put a finger to her lips.

The doorway led into a very narrow corridor, which opened out into a hallway with a staircase to one side, and two doors leading off. One of them had a yellow sign on it with the words “CAUTION! Miserable birch inside” (the word ‘birch’ is a substitute). Tiptoeing through the hall to the kitchen, I noticed this was another house devoid of photographs.

“She takes a couple of hours to get started in the mornings,” explained Molly, after we had shut the kitchen door behind us and all let our breath out. “You can go in and see her when she wakes up. If you dare.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it...” Susan pulled on her coat. “Right. I’m going to the supermarket. There’s plenty for you two to be getting on with – washing, ironing, floor needs mopped and hoovered too. And this time, try not to leave the sink in such a tip. See you later.” She turned her back on us and closed the door.

We didn’t talk for some time, except for a few fragments of sentences such as: “Ironing board’s in there”, and: “Where are the clothes pegs?” The muscle in Molly’s jaw was flexing again, like when we delivered Hops back to the old man.

“Are you all right?”

She shook herself. “Yeah, I’m fine. She just...they both...I try and let it slide off, but...” She waved a hand at the door.

“What’s actually wrong with Mrs No?”

“Arthritis. In her hip.”

“But that’s great! Mrs Taylor’s mum had arthritis in her hip, and she got surgery. They replaced it with a steel one.”

“It’s not as simple as that with Mrs No – here, hold this...” I took two corners of a double duvet cover and folded them in half, as Molly did the same with her two corners. “She had a lump *here*...” She laid a hand over her left breast, “...Six years ago. They operated on it, but she had a reaction to the anaesthetic. They managed to pull her back but it was a close call. After that she vowed she would never have surgery again. In fact, she said she would never go to hospital again. Anyway, her hip started playing up a couple of years later. She didn’t want to tell anyone as she was only forty-four. She went to see Ben Strachan. Or rather, Susan bundled her into the car and drove her down to North Hill. He said she’d need surgery, and that was it – she wouldn’t listen to a word more. Now if anyone mentions the ‘S’ word around her she won’t have anything more to do with them. Trouble is, that was six years ago and since then it’s just got worse and worse. These days she’s in

so much pain she can hardly walk and has a lot of trouble sleeping. The tiredness brings on migraines. That's why the curtains are always closed, and why we all have to be so quiet."

"I had migraines when I was practicing for my grade six piano," I said, "They're horrible."

"Yeah, they are," agreed Molly. "That's the trouble with this job. Some of the folks treat you like dirt, but there's always a blooming good *reason* !" She banged the ironing board legs together so that it snapped flat. The noise rang out, and we both cringed. There was a thump from the other room, then the sound of a voice:

"Who's that? Susan! SUSAN!"

"Oh, crumbs..." We looked at each other. "Well *I* don't want to confront her! I probably just woke her up! She'll skin me alive!"

"Is that an expression?"

"Yes. *You* go!"

"*I* don't want to go! She doesn't even *know* me!"

"*You* wanted to make the broth – at least *you* have a peace-offering!"

I opened my mouth to retort, but found I had nothing to say.

"It's in the fridge door. In a jam-jar."

"SUSAAAAN!"

"Quickly, quickly!"

I hurried to the fridge, extracted the jar and tiptoed to the bedroom door. Then I turned the handle and pushed it open just wide enough to squeeze through.

"Shut the door! You're letting in daggers of light!" said a strident voice from the dark.

The room was about the same size as Mum's bedroom. Beside the door was an upright piano, with laundry and dirty plates piled on it. Against the opposite wall, under the window, was a sofa. If the curtains hadn't been shut you could have sat on it with a book and the light would have fallen perfectly across the page. But it was far too dark for reading.

"Well? What have you got to say for yourself?" The voice had lost some of its edge, and sounded like Mum's at the end of a working day.

"Sorry we woke you, Mrs No." I approached the far side of the room where she sat in a riser-recliner chair, wrapped in a fleece blanket, with a trolley-table next to her that had an empty bowl on it. Her hair was shoulder-length and mostly black, but with a few bright silver streaks which made it look like a horse's tail. It was too dark to see the colour of her eyes, but her cheeks were parcel-paper-crinkly, and her cheekbones were pronounced, like Susan's. Her hands lay curled on her lap.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” she demanded, nodding at the jar.

I pulled the trolley-table towards me, then manhandled it so that it formed a bridge over her legs. Then I put the jar on it for her to see. She picked it up and squinted at it.

“What is this muck?”

“It’s broth. Lamb broth.”

“Ah, so I’m some kind of helpless Victorian invalid now, am I? Well at least it isn’t grapes. Do you know how many grapes I ate in the four years after...” her breath hitched, “Over the first four years?”

“No. How many?”

“I’ll give you a clue. 2004 was a leap year.”

“Are you asking me to calculate the number?”

“You’ve got brains, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but I can’t do that in my head!”

“Didn’t you ever learn how to multiply big numbers?”

“Of course I did. I could do the sum on paper, but it’s far too dark to write in here.”

“Is it, now?” She leaned forwards, moaning as she did so, and pushed her table to one side. Then she stood up, gripping the back of her chair with both hands, before edging round the room holding onto the walls. She had a bad limp, and leaned heavily on her left leg. Every time she stood on her right foot she huffed out a breath with a squeak at the end. After about a minute she reached the windowsill and opened the curtains a crack. A shaft of light fell across the room, illuminating an old yogurt pot with the spoon still in it, as well as a cobweb in the corner to the left of the piano.

“There. Is that better? There’s paper and a pen on the desk.” I crossed the room and fetched a biro and an envelope. Then I cleared the rubbish off the piano stool, sat down, crossed one leg over the other and started to write. It took a bit of scribbling to get the biro working. Meanwhile, Mrs No traversed back round again and lowered herself into her chair.

“Right, it’s not hard. What’s three hundred and sixty-five times two?”

“Seven hundred and twenty.”

“And three hundred and sixty-five times ten?”

“Three thousand six hundred and fifty.”

“Good. Now add the two together and multiply the total by four. Have you done that yet?”

“No.”

“Well after that you just add another twelve to account for the extra day.”

“So nothing plus nothing is nothing, and five plus two is seven, and...”

“Oh, for shame. Look, it’s the product of twelve and three hundred and sixty-five, multiplied by four, plus another twelve to account for the extra day in 2004. Since I’m already halfway through my life and can’t afford to waste any more of it, I’ll tell you. Eighteen thousand, seven hundred and seventy-two grapes. Or about six hundred and twenty-two bunches.” She peered at me. “Speaking of maths, shouldn’t you be in school right now?”

“I don’t go to school,” I replied. “I used to. Then Dad took me out and taught me at home.”

“Hmm. It shows.”

“Now I’m back with Mum, though. She spends all day at work.”

“Who is your mother, then?”

“Patty next door.”

One of her eyebrows arched, and her eyes gleamed in the half-light from the window. “Indeed? Well, she won’t have time for that kind of thing, will she? She’s far too busy burying herself in her work.”

“Oh, that’s not her fault. I know she wants to be there, but she works full time at a stupid wage just to keep me.”

“I’m sure she does. That woman has no soul. She wouldn’t know love if it flung its arms around her and told her she could never fall out of its light.”

“Oh, she loves me – I know it! She must do. She’s been so good to me.”

“How?”

“She does my washing and buys my food. That’s two things...”

“A prison guard throws food in to her prisoner every day. Is that prison guard acting out of love?”

“Well...no. Duty, I suppose. But she bought me a new coat and hat too...”

“The prisoner’s lawyer brings him a brand-new suit to wear to the trial. Is that love or an attempt to grow a career?”

“She also gives me pocket money. That is, she does *now*...”

“Give a dog a bone and it’ll be quiet for hours. Do you think Susan looks after me because she loves me? Ha!”

“I...” I didn’t want to presume anything bad about Susan, but at the same time she had said nothing but bad things about Mrs No during all the times we had talked.

“Oh, she probably loved me once. I was a loveable thing a long time ago. Not anymore. But the point is, as long as people can win your unwavering allegiance and good

faith by fulfilling basic duties, you'll always be neglected and exploited. Do you know how much your grandfather suffered because of what your mother did?"

"No. What did she do?"

"She cut him out of her life, is what. Told him she wanted nothing more to do with him. All because he was concerned about her marriage."

My chest gave a jolt. "Why was he concerned?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer – another crack in Dad's memory – but I had to ask. *Breathe...* I told myself. *Breathe...*

"Well, because it was so sudden. One day she was off to the Glasgow School of Art. Next day she was married. No wedding ceremony – just in at the church door, down to the registrar's and that was it."

Well, that wasn't as difficult to hear as I had imagined it would be. "I think he worried she'd been pressured into it." She glanced towards the door. "He'd have you in a heartbeat, you know."

"Who?"

"Your grandfather. In his care. Surprised you aren't in it already..."

"Why?"

"Out of him or your mother who's got more money, time and experience?"

"But...but I belong to Mum..."

"You belong to *you*, Anna. Don't ever forget that."

We sat in silence for about a minute, me clenching and unclenching my hands. "How many cakes have you eaten?" I asked at last.

"Eh?"

"When I first talked to Susan she said you always wanted cake when you were given bread, and soup when you were given cake."

"Did she?"

"Yes."

"Cheeky madam!"

"Molly helped me choose the recipe book and make the muck...I mean...the broth."

"Oh, *Molly*. She's got two left feet and a soft-boiled alarm clock." While I was trying to picture this, the sound of a vacuum cleaner drifted through from the direction of the kitchen. "There you go! I rest my case!" She pressed her index fingers to her temples. "Well, then. I suppose I'd better sample a bit of this. Heat me up some, would you?"

"Can I use the microwave? I breezed through the kitchen door. Molly had stopped vacuuming now, and was winding up the cable.

“I suppose so, why?”

“Mrs No wants me to heat her up some m...broth.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“*Really?!?*”

“Yes!”

“Now?!”

“Yes. And she opened the curtains a tiny bit.”

Molly leapt in the air and punched upwards with her fist. “*Result!!*”

“Well, she hasn’t tried it yet.”

“Even *so!*” She pointed me to a cupboard in which bowls were stacked. With a dishcloth wrapped around my hands I prised open the lid of the jar, then poured some broth into one of them.

“Pour yourself one too,” she added, looking at her watch. “It’s nearly lunchtime and you deserve it.”

“But then there’ll be none left for you or Susan.”

“Who cares? It’s Mrs No that matters!”

I brought the two bowls of broth through on a tray, with some bread on the side, which Mrs No, pushed away. “Now, let’s see what damage this does...” She sipped some from the spoon. “Not half bad.”

I started on mine too. “I used to like eating syrup sponge cake dipped in tomato soup when I was seven,” I told her.

“How original.”

“Then my friend Beth said it was gross, so I stopped doing it. But you could always try it.”

She peered at me. “Now there’s an idea... There’s a very interesting idea.”

“I could go and get you some sponge cake now, if you have any. I know it’s not tomato soup, but...”

“I don’t mean that! I mean being gross. That seems like an excellent idea. Shake things up a bit.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Can you burp on cue?”

“No. Can you?”

“Haven’t done it since I was eight, but...” She swallowed, then gave a long, deep belch which sounded like a motorbike going by. “Now you try.”

I sucked in my stomach, and managed a tiny burp that sounded like a pop.

“No, no, no – that won’t do at all!” She shook her head. “You have to really *gulp*, then sit up straight, huff in without breathing, and let fly when you feel it coming up your throat. It’s like loading a gun and shooting, except without all the mess.”

I gulped several times. “It just keeps escaping out my nose ...”

“Try swallowing a bit of muck at the same time.”

I gulped enough air – along with several spoonfuls of broth – to make my stomach feel full, then huffed out. This time it sounded like a motorbike that has tried and failed to start.

“WHAT is going on in there?” Molly’s voice was muffled, as though her lips were pressed to the edge of the door.

“None of your business!” Mrs No called back.

“Well, it’s time for us to go! Come on, Anna!”

“So soon? But we were just getting started!” Mrs No grabbed my wrist and leaned forward, wincing again. “Will you come back?”

“Of course,” I told her, feeling surprised but elated. “And I promise to practice my burping.”

“And think about your grandfather, too. There’s a loving home for you there,” she whispered.

I drew back without answering, and opened the door. As I did, the sign fell off.

“Oh, sorry – I knocked this down.” I picked it up and dropped it into her lap.

“I can’t believe it...I can’t believe it...she let you in! You’re a *witch!*” Molly bounced along next to me, down the drive and through the gate. “Mind you, what was all that burping? I mean, I know garlic repeats on some people but...!”

“She was teaching me how to burp on cue.” I demonstrated. This time it sounded like a motorbike engine that has started successfully, sputtered and then cut out.

“Charming...”

“You try – it’s fun.”

“No, you’re all right.”

“Where are we going now?”

“Back to yours. We’ll eat our lunch there, then take Kenny back his coat. “

Molly had made sandwiches, so we sat outside on the lawn to eat them. My sandwiches were mixed salad with cucumber and cream cheese, on brown bread. She had also packed us each a can of lemonade, a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, a tangerine and a chocolate-covered wafer.

I nibbled my sandwich. “Molly?”

“Hmmm?”

“Why did my mum cut the Skeleton Man out of her life?”

“Who told you that?” The muscle in her jaw flexed again.

“Mrs No. She said he suffered a lot because of it. But she didn’t say why she did it.”

Molly put a cherry tomato into her mouth, chewed it thoroughly, swallowed and moistened her lips. “The thing you have to understand about your mother – and I wish others would too,” she said, “is that she’s very, very harsh on herself. I mean look at her – she isolated herself for twelve and a half years!”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people, when they make mistakes or react to something in ways they later regret – they’re able to get to a point where they can see it as that and face up to it. Might take them a while but they get there. And then they’re able to make amends and let it go.”

“Are you talking about her marriage to Dad?”

She stiffened. “What do you know about that?”

“Nothing. Only, Mrs No said it was very sudden.”

“Well, how would I know? It was in Glasgow.” Molly’s voice was tight.

I hoped I hadn’t made her cross again. When I was in London my outreach worker once talked to me about the need for discretion and finesse in delicate situations, after I phoned up our neighbour, Mr Langton, to ask him what Mrs Langton had died of. That was the day after she had died, and I can see now why that was probably a bit inconsiderate. Now I seemed to be inadvertently hitting all the delicate spots in both Molly and Mum.

“The important thing is, your mum can’t just forgive herself like that, plus she hasn’t had anyone to bounce things off, so they either radiate out of her or get bottled up. When she makes mistakes or when bad things happen involving her, she puts *all* the blame on herself. Whether it’s deserved or not. Even when there’s no-one to blame.”

“Is that why she cried so much when I went over to Carol’s? And when I got back the night before last?”

She dipped her head sideways. “Well, partly. She blamed herself for letting you get into potential danger.”

“But I was fine.”

“Yes, but she didn’t *know* that, did she?” I was relieved to hear the tightness go out of her voice, as she smiled gently. “All she knew was that you’d gone walk-about, on your own, in a strange neighbourhood. In the middle of the night in the latter case!”

I thought about this as I drank some lemonade and opened my packet of crisps. “What did the Skeleton Man do to make her cut him off?”

She bit her lip and narrowed her eyes, looking at nothing in particular. “Well, I don’t know the *whole* story. There was some kind of scandal years back when she was a teenager, involving a rogue relationship. She was still in secondary school at the time. The neighbourhood was...*is*...religious. VERY religious. Blooming religion. Well, somehow it all got a bit too involved – at least, I think that’s what happened. Do you know what a miscarriage is?”

“It’s when you’re pregnant but you lose the baby in the early stages.”

“That’s right. Well, I *think* it was something like that.”

“Oh. That’s sad. I can understand why she would have been upset.”

“Well...it wasn’t so much that, I don’t think. More the stigma around being pregnant out of wedlock whilst still in school. You can imagine how the religious nuts reacted to that.”

Not having much experience of how religion would come into it I couldn’t really imagine, but I didn’t say so.

“Like hounds to a fox. I was only nine, so I only have the rumours that went round at the time. My mum was caretaker at the school – says she tried to be friendly to your mum in passing, until she switched schools and ran off to the Glasgow School of Art aged eighteen. Came back two years later, married and pregnant, and sometime after that your granddad and she stopped talking. And he stopped helping out with money.”

I was deep in thought as we finished our lunch, cleared the rubbish away and drove down the road towards North Hill clinic. My temples pulsed. I shut my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. We turned left up a small hill with identical, new, semi-detached bungalows either side. Each one had a small, square lawn in front of it, like the one in front of Hops’s owner’s house.

“Kenny’s house is round the next corner,” said Molly, slowing the car down to walking speed. I shook myself out of my thoughts. “Anna, what I told you...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t go spreading it around, will you? And don’t go worrying yourself. People’ll try and drag you in and fix your colours to their masts, but you have to decide for yourself. You’re not a pawn.”

Kenny’s house was bigger than the ones on the hill, and had two floors. It looked out across the main road onto the countryside, so if it hadn’t been for the street lamps it would have felt

as if it was out of town. A low stone wall surrounded a medium-sized lawn, with a wooden picnic table in the middle of it. The lawn was covered in pots of all different sizes. Some were made of plastic and some of ceramic, even a mixing bowl. Each one had a plant in it. There were two that looked like broom – one with white flowers and one with yellow. Then there were three irises, a red-leafed shrub, a green-leafed shrub, some flowers that looked like giant daisies, some pampas grass, some purple, blue and yellow lupins, some forget-me-nots and several heathers. In one corner there stood a stone bird bath, and a nut feeder for the birds hung from one of the downstairs windows.

“Wow...” said Molly, raising her eyebrows and widening her eyes. She parked the car and we got out. She opened the boot and extracted the coat, along with a large, round, papered package.

“Hi-aye!” Kenny weaved his way between the plant pots towards us. He wasn’t wearing his hard hat or high visibility jacket this time. Instead he wore black tracksuit bottoms like mine (but without the line of pink down the sides), and a yellow T-shirt which read “I’m allergic to cats...” Below the writing there was a black silhouette of a cat lying on its back.

“Coat!” Molly threw it over the wall at him. It landed on his head, and he stepped backwards into a tray of petunias. His arms shot out to the sides and his hands drew circles in the air. She doubled up laughing. Once he had regained his balance he pulled the coat off his head and slung it over his arm. “Cake!” She threw the parcel in his general direction. He dived, plucked it out the air as if it were a rugby ball, and tucked it under his left arm.

“Come and have a cuppa,” He turned and walked up the path. The back of his T-shirt read: “...But I eat them anyway.”

“So what did you do this morning – rob a garden centre?” Molly cut the cake as Kenny made a pot of tea.

“Har har. They’re flattening the garden at number 45. The Macks got moved out.”

“*What?*” Molly’s mouth and eyes stretched wide again. “But...they can’t do that!”

“Aye, they can. And they have. They’ve sent them across town. A flat, apparently. More size-appropriate, that’s the story. It’s a young family they’ve put in that house now, and they’ve no time for all the work.”

“So you rescued the residents?”

“No other takers.”

Kenny carried the sliced cake outside on a plate. I fetched three small plates – one for each of us. Molly followed, carrying a tray with a pint bottle of milk, three mugs, a sugar bowl and a tea pot with a red tartan cosy on it.

“I got as many as I could. They’re in holding here till I find homes for them.”

“I just can’t *believe* they’d do something like that. After he broke his rib and all!”

“Well, you know. They were looking for an excuse. That was the cincher, I reckon. It was going to happen sooner or later.” He took a huge bite. “That. Is. Heaven,” he declared thickly, spraying crumbs onto the table. I picked up my slice and nibbled the narrow end. It was sweet and crumbly, with a lemon tang and an almond background taste. There was a thin line of soft icing in the middle.

Molly took out her phone and tapped on it, then put it back in her pocket. “Did the badger come back?” she asked.

“Yep, three nights in a row now. I put out scraps but I’ve nae idea what the beggars eat. It was just a couple a bits o stale bread, some pepper cores, bit of old fruit, some leftover rice...”

“We could go to the library and find out,” I suggested.

He swallowed and turned to me. “We could.”

Molly sipped her tea, then looked out across the road. “You can sometimes see aeroplanes coming in to land from here. Edinburgh airport’s not that far away.” She pointed to the hedge along the opposite verge. “Mind the time we went berry-picking? I still have one pot of jam left.”

After tea we helped ‘whip the plants into shape’, lining them up in rows along the bottom of the wall and dead-heading them. Once there was space we had a game of tag. It started with Molly picking up a watering can and trying to water Kenny, and ended with her tripping over her skirt and dragging him down by the arm. I tagged them both, and we all took a few moments to laugh. I wished Jamie had been there – he would have enjoyed it, though he might have pretended not to, since grown-ups were involved.

We talked on the lawn for a few more minutes, and Molly fell asleep. Kenny and I left her, quietly gathered up the cups and plates and took them inside.

“Ah, sweet Molly McLean...” He craned to look out the window. Then he turned back towards the sink. “Do you think she likes me, Anna?”

I considered. “Well, she patted your coat when you left it at hers. And she made you a cake. But Mum makes me food and gives me clothes, and Mrs No says that’s like a prison guard throwing food to a prisoner, or a lawyer furthering their career.”

“Sounds like a right barrel a laughs, this Mrs No.”

“She lives next door to us.”

“I don’t know the woman.”

“She’s got arthritis in her hip. You can’t blame her.”

“I had back pain for years ‘til they fixed it. Disnae mean you have to pull others down with you.”

“She said if people could win my unwavering allegiance and good will just by fulfilling basic duties, I’d always be vulnerable to neglect and exploitation. What do you think?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Well I know *I* don’t think that. And I know Molly doesn’t either. And who’s happier – us or her?”

“You, I suppose...”

“There you go then.” He put the last cup away and went to lean on the windowsill, looking out at Molly. She was beginning to wake up. We watched her sit up slowly and rub her face. Then she looked at her watch, out towards her car, and back at the house.

“Aye,” he concluded, as she got to her feet and began walking up the path towards the front door, “If it’s real, and it’s the right kind, and you’ve got the right way of showing it, you cannae love a person too much.”

“Anna, wake up – Anna...” Mum was shaking my shoulder. It was early the next morning.

“What? What?” I rubbed my eyes and sat up.

“Put on your church clothes.” She threw them onto my side of the bed. Then she started to dress herself.

“But it’s not Sunday...”

“Well, *duh!*”

I tried to imagine why else I might have to dress smartly. “Are we going somewhere special?”

She chivvied me off the bed, before straightening the pillows and duvet. She was talking very fast. “You know there’s been some major cock-ups with the social services, right?”

“What cock-ups?”

She counted on her fingers: “You were posted off a day early. Should have been a social worker travelling with you. Should have had regular visits from the Livingston branch ever since you arrived.”

“But we’re fine.” I tried to keep my voice calm, but the things Dad’s lawyer had said about Mum when she lost custody of me as a baby now weighed heavily on my mind. Perhaps the only reason I was still with Mum now, and not with someone judged better suited to ensuring that I would thrive physically and emotionally, was because of those cock-ups. So far they had meant that nobody had been able to check up, develop concerns and take me away.

“I know!” Her voice rose to an almost falsetto pitch. She closed her eyes and breathed a couple of breaths through her nose. When she next spoke her voice was at a more normal pitch. “Anyway, someone’s coming out today. They’ll be here at nine. So two rules. One, whatever anyone’s told you about me, forget it. And two, they’ll probably try and wheedle information out of you with casual conversation and stuff. You’ve got to say the right things.”

“Why?”

“Because otherwise they might try and take you away.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because they’re social workers! That’s what they do!”

I shivered and glanced out the window across the lawn. Dad had always advocated a Total Honesty Rule. He’d warned me that there would be a few exceptions – mainly things like not telling someone they looked lovely *despite their warts*, or evading a question by offering a different but related positive answer if the direct answer was negative. Now, given what various people had said, I wondered if he had been being entirely sincere in his professing to advocate those things. Now I couldn’t ask. Nevertheless I mentally added social workers as another exception to the Total Honesty Rule. I bit down a tiny bit of hot poker feeling – I had been planning to get up the courage to ask Mum outright about the things Molly and Mrs No had said.

“So what should I say?”

“Just...tell them everything’s fine and that you’re very happy. OK?”

“OK.”

After breakfast I had a shower and brushed my teeth. Mum insisted on checking they were clean afterwards, which she had never done before. She dressed in a black skirt and tights, along with a knitted cream top which had to be kept wrapped in plastic when it was on its peg in the wardrobe. I clipped my hair up and put in my earrings, one of which had rolled off the bedside table and under the dresser. Mum spent fifteen minutes plucking her eyebrows, then doing her make-up. Then we made the bed, hoovered the floor, dusted the surfaces, folded the laundry, mopped the kitchen and wiped the surfaces – even though Molly

normally did all those things. Sometimes Mum crossed to the window of whichever room we were in and peered out, like a dog waiting for its owner to come home. She tensed at the sound of every car. At ten to nine she made a pot of tea.

“Molly’s so much better at this kind of thing than I am...”

“You mean at cleaning and tidying?”

“No, this.” She waved a hand at the teapot and pulled a tin of biscuits from one of the cupboards. There was a gentle knock on the door. “Oh God. Now remember, everything’s fine, and you’re very happy.”

The social worker was female, with a soft, low voice. I didn’t hear their exchange at the door, but after a few seconds Mum moved aside, and she stepped in. She was about fifty, with curly grey hair, and wore a black windcheater which Mum took from her and hung up in the hall. Underneath it she was dressed in a pink polo-neck and grey suit trousers, with brown woolly socks and black lace-up shoes.

“Tea?” Mum offered.

“Please! I’m parched. Been driving since seven. Got caught in the rush-hour.”

“Milk? Sugar?”

“No sugar thanks. And pardon my manners. I’m Gayle Henderson. Good to meet you, Mrs Harrington.” She held out her hand. Mum shook it by the fingertips. “And Anna.” I shook her hand too. It was a firm handshake, but not vigorous.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I said. Mum counted out three sugar lumps and dropped them into her own tea. Her hands were shaking.

Gayle’s voice dropped in pitch and volume as she made eye contact with me. “I’m sorry for your loss, Anna.”

I clenched my hands and jaw. I was sure Gayle hadn’t meant to show a lack of discretion and finesse, but she had hit a delicate spot for me. The image I had been fighting to keep away ever since I arrived came into my mind; a hospital bed, with a prostrate figure so bandaged he looked like he’d been mummified. And Mrs Taylor’s hand on my shoulder as they turned the life support machine off...

“Anna, don’t draw blood, darling,” said Mum’s voice, and I felt her prise my fingers open.

“I apologise,” Gayle said, quietly.

“It’s ok,” I forced out, “I’ve got Mum. That’s something to be happy about.”

“Indeed,” Gayle took a sip of tea. “And it seems like a lovely house. That’s another thing to be happy about.”

“I’ve made lots of friends – Molly and Kenny and Ben and Jamie and Skylar...”

“Friends from school?”

Mum stopped stirring. “We’re still in the process of sorting that out,” she said, sounding a bit snappy. “I spoke to the local yesterday and they’ve agreed to take her once the formalities are in place.”

I felt like I’d been hit in the face by a Boeing 747.

“Good, good.”

Now my mind was stuck on memories of the electric school bell which rang at 150 decibels every fifty-five minutes, and clocks which were all a few minutes different from each other, and teachers who made so much more sense than pupils but who weren’t allowed to be your friends, and corridors which went round in circles, branching off to classrooms which all looked the same, and people ramming me in P.E. while the teacher pretended not to notice, and older pupils queue-jumping in the canteen so I never got any lunch...

Gayle put down her cup. “I wonder if one of you might show me to the bathroom?”

I started to get up, but Mum put a hand on my shoulder. “You wash up, Anna. Then you can go and play if you like.”

The two of them disappeared upstairs. I heard low voices which were drowned out when I turned on the hot tap. As I scrubbed I glanced out the window and saw Jesus padding across the lawn. I joined him outside. A few minutes later Gayle came and squatted beside us. She stroked Jesus’s back. His tail lifted up and shivered as her fingers reached the base.

“You know your mother and your grandfather both love you very much, don’t you?”

My throat tightened. I stroked Jesus harder.

“And you know that I care about you too and want to help in any way I can.”

Jesus wound his way round Gayle’s legs, leaving white hairs on her trousers.

“We’re just doing our job, you know – checking you’re in the right place.”

I nodded.

“Is there anything you’d like to tell me, Anna?”

I rewound all the way back to when I had first arrived – the shouting, the feeling that Mum hated me, the isolation, the disorientation, the not speaking, the hug-drought... But in the end she was still my mother. “No,” I said at last. “No – I’m fine. Everything’s fine. I’m very happy.”

I squatted on the path with Jesus for some time after Gayle had gone. Then Mum crouched beside us both.

“I’m not going to school,” I said, not looking up.

“You’ve got no choice.” My lungs felt as small as table tennis balls. “Believe me, Anna, I know school can be...well...unbearable. Especially if you’re a bit different. And

I'm sorry I have to put you through it, but did you seriously think you could just carry on reading and playing football and wandering round the neighbourhood?"

"I *can't* go back to school." I clenched my teeth. I began to tremble.

"If you don't they'll take you away!"

I jumped up and ran out the garden, ignoring Mum as she shouted after me.

I ran all the way to the Skeleton Man's house and through his gate. Jen barked from inside, but I wasn't scared of either of them anymore. The curtains were closed, as always, but I banged on the door.

"What on Earth is that racket?" grumbled a muffled voice. The lock turned and the door opened. I didn't look at his face so I don't know if he was as cross as he sounded. I flung my arms around his waist and buried my face in his dressing gown. "What the-?" He flinched. Then he relaxed. "Ah. Anna." He put his arms around me lightly, as if I were a treasure chest that had been thrust at him in the middle of a supermarket aisle.

"I don't want to go....I don't want to go..." I sobbed.

"For heaven's sake, woman!" He prised me off, frogmarched me into the living room and sat me down on the sofa before going through to the kitchen, where I heard his voice but not the words. After about a minute I managed to stop crying enough to breathe properly and reflect. It felt strange to be called a woman. A mixture of thrill and fear. Soon he returned, drew up a chair and sat opposite me. "Now talk sense, slowly and calmly."

I wiped my face on my sleeve. He handed me a red checked handkerchief. I told him all about Gayle's visit, and about Mum's insistence that I attend school.

"So it's school that's bothering you."

"Yes."

"Ah." He sat quietly, fingers pressed together under his chin. "If you didn't have to go to school, yet still got an education, would that suffice?"

"I don't know," I scrunched the handkerchief in my hand. "Gayle says it's a big transition and Mum says if I don't go they'll take me away, and not to believe Gayle. But it makes no difference because Mum has to work so she can't teach me at home anyway."

"But we can surmise then that this Gayle did not explicitly tell your mother that you would be taken away if you did not attend a school in the area?"

"Yes..." For some reason I had the urge to ask the Skeleton Man about what Mrs No and Molly had said. "Do you think Mum loves me?"

His head jerked. "What?"

I repeated the question.

An unreadable expression came onto his face. It reminded me of Jamie when he told me he might have to go to the children's home. "Sometimes people are afraid of love," he said.

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons. Some people feel like they're not good enough. Some feel scared of what they might have to give in return. Some are scared of being ridiculed. Some are afraid of getting their hearts broken. Of course, it can go the opposite way too. Some people try too hard to hold on to what they love. I learned that the hard way."

"What happened between you two?"

His eyes took on their shiny quality again. "She had a boyfriend in school. Not usually a problem, but he was a good bit older – three years, and that's a lot when you're thirteen."

"That's how old I am!"

"Yes. I didn't know about this boyfriend for about a year. Well, I knew of his family – his father ran the best butchery in West Lothian. I just didn't know about him and Patty. It was all far too big for them. She was just a little girl. I tried to stop them seeing each other. She rebelled, of course, so I let it go a bit. I hoped they'd both move on, but they didn't."

"She had a miscarriage," I interjected.

His eyebrows went right up. "Who told you that?"

"Molly." I hunched, feeling my ears going red. "At least, she says that's the rumour that went round."

He nodded, slowly. "Y-yees. Yes, she did, although I wouldn't have told you that if you hadn't already known. You're going to rip that..."

I stopped twisting the handkerchief.

"Well as you can imagine, that was a huge shock to me. I had no idea their relationship was so...intimate."

"Was the baby a boy or a girl?" I had trouble getting the words out. After thirteen years as an only child the idea of a brother or sister was almost inconceivable.

"Too early to tell. Anyway, she learned her lesson – so I thought. She also point blank refused to go back to school."

"Molly said that she changed schools."

"That's right. The social services threatened to get involved. I thought..." He swallowed. "I thought they were going to take her away."

"Just like me!"

So that explained Mum's fear of the social services. And her saying she knew school could be unbearable. I felt a sudden rush of relief, mixed with profound compassion.

"Well, not quite like you. Luckily I found a different school which she agreed to attend, so the situation was de-fused. But she was never quite the same again after that." He shook himself. "She thought I was more ashamed of her than I was."

"Weren't you ashamed of the stigma?"

He eyed me strangely. "No. It hurt me, but only because she's my daughter." With that, he stood up abruptly. "Now then. When you and I first crossed paths you were dumping rubbish into my bin. Correct?"

"Yes." The conversation was clearly over for now.

"In that case, I have just the job for you."

I followed him out the living room and into the room where he had made the cocoa the night I fell out the tree. My mind felt like how your eyes feel when you've watched a long firework display, and suddenly the darkness closes back in – the after-visions were still popping and fizzing in my brain. I now no longer knew who was owed my allegiance, and I doubted if any of Dad's texts or any amount of chat with Molly could help me with that.

The room I found myself in was a kitchen – a long, narrow one, too small for a table or chairs. A strip of fluorescent lighting ran the length of the ceiling, and I could see the shadowy outlines of several insects which had become trapped inside. A wooden pulley like the one in Mum's house hung down. Along the length of the wall in front of us ran a work surface, and the wall nearest me was lined with wooden shelves and hooks, which had cooking ingredients and equipment stacked on them and hanging off them. The floor was made of cracked linoleum. In comparison to such a lavish living room it seemed strangely cluttered and derelict.

"This way." He indicated for me to follow him into a porch in which there was a deep freeze, a doormat, a frosted, glass-panelled door, and a couple of brown, ceramic dog bowls – one empty and one half-filled with water. The Skeleton Man opened the frosted glass door, and I got my first look at the garden.

It would have been a beautiful space, but the grass had grown waist-high and was dry, dead and tangled. Raspberry bushes had grown over the high brick wall outlining the perimeter, and had encroached onto the lawn. There was already a thick layer of ivy climbing up the brickwork. In the far left corner a rose bush poked through the tangle, but it was shaded by the cherry tree I had seen from the road when walking to church with Mum. In the middle of the lawn sat the frame of a deck chair, its canvas broken and flapping. A white plastic chair with one leg broken off rested on its back along the right hand edge of the

wall. I stepped off the porch and felt uneven flagstones under my feet, invisible among the weeds. The Skeleton Man stood in the middle of the overgrown lawn, surveying the surroundings as if he wasn't quite sure where to begin. He waved a hand, made to speak, and then stopped. Then he tried again.

"After your mother left I sort of let my organisation slip." His head drooped. Then his chin snapped up. "Still, I've got to do it some time, and perhaps another person being there would be helpful. And I'd rather have family than any old stranger. If you love clearing rubbish so much let's see you clear that lot." He gestured to a collection of milk bottles, plastic wrapping, polystyrene cups, dented cans and old newspapers that had been thrown over the wall. "I'm something of a celebrity among the *charming* children of this town."

While I picked my way around the edges of the garden, the Skeleton Man began to trim back the long grass. The sound was loud, but not unpleasant. It reminded me of Thames boat rides and vanilla ice cream, Mr Langton's sprinkler and picnics at Regent's Park. For a second I felt autumn again on the wind, like a herald running to deliver a message prior to an attack. Except autumn isn't a battlefield. Autumn is warm air hitting your face as you come in from outside, and pale yellow windows against darkening blue skies, and street lamps, and amber leaves tumbling across the pavement. If Mum got her way, by the time all that came in I would be in school.

Having gone one third of the way round the garden, my bin bag was full. My arms and face were scratched from picking paper out the raspberry bushes. "SHALL I JUST PUT THIS IN THE BIN IN THE DRIVE?" I had to yell it twice before the Skeleton Man heard me over the strimmer. He gave me a thumbs up with his right hand. I tramped through the living room and into the hall, before opening the front door and dumping the bag in the bin. Then I straightened up, letting the lid drop back down, and gazed out across the road. There, slouching along towards North Hill on the far pavement, was Jamie.

"Jamie! JAMIE!" He glanced up, and his jaw dropped. He craned his neck, then darted across the road to meet me. I couldn't quite hug him over the low wall, but I managed to grab both his forearms.

He wriggled away and jabbed a finger at the front door. "You're in...what...He'll KILL you!"

"No he won't. Come on – I'll prove it." I grabbed his sleeve and opened the gate. Jen started barking as he tiptoed through.

"Quiet, Jen!" I called. The barking stopped.

"Woah..." Jamie's mouth hung open. "You just..."

“Oh, she’s no worse than him.” I felt rather smug at having earned Jamie’s admiration.

At that moment the door opened and the Skeleton Man came striding towards us, eyebrows down, seeming to increase in size as he approached.

“Who’s this then?” He glared down at Jamie as though he was a hawk and Jamie was a rabbit. Jamie shrank back.

“This is my best friend,” I told him.

“Ah. One of the bottle-throwers, no doubt.”

“No-o...” Jamie’s face went pink.

“You’d better not be. Well, if you’re a friend of Anna’s you can’t be all bad. Do you know how to work secateurs?”

“What are they?”

“Hedge clippers. Ever used them?”

“Carol showed me once.”

“Then come round the back. There are some old flower beds somewhere under all the tangle.”

I finished clearing the rubbish and Jamie clipped back the bushes along the short far wall towards the cherry tree. Just as I was filling my second bin liner he gave a cry, and held something up. The Skeleton Man put down the strimmer, I put down my bin liner and we went to see what he had found. It looked a bit like a wind chime, but was not designed to make a noise. Rather, it was a series of small, cracked, circular mirrors, suspended from what looked like tangled fishing gut attached to an X made out of wooden dowelling. One end had a hook on it.

“I’d forgotten about those.” The Skeleton Man stepped into Jamie’s personal space and took the mobile from his hand, holding it up. Jamie didn’t move away, but squinted up at it flashing in the light.

“Was it Mum’s?” I asked.

“Yes. A stocking filler when she was ten, meant to decorate her bedroom. She thought it would look nice hanging from the cherry tree. It must have come down in a storm or something.”

“Can we try it out inside?” Jamie asked. “If we hang it near a window it might catch the light.”

“Yes, let’s. Come on.”

We had hot chocolate, and I let Jamie have Mum’s owl mug to drink from. He turned it round and shrugged: “It’s just a mug. Big deal.”

“You two come with me.” We followed the Skeleton Man up the stairs and through a door into a part of the house I hadn’t seen the previous time I’d been there. The corridor was wide, bare, also wicker-matted, and a window at the far end illuminated dust particles swirling in a beam of sunlight. “Wait here.” He disappeared into a room off to the right. A few seconds later he beckoned to us to follow.

It was a small, single bedroom with pale blue walls. The curtains were white, and patterned with dark blue stars. A small chest of drawers stood on one side of the window, and a desk and chair stood on the other. A white sheepskin rug lay alongside the bed, which was covered by a dark blue cellular blanket. It was lined with cuddly toys – worn and discoloured. There was a beaver with a toy Sonic beside it, then a knitted blue elephant with pink felt ears, then a lamb with a body covered in what looked like real sheep’s wool, then a monkey in a nappy, with a hole in its face for a mouth, and a half-peeled banana stitched to one hand. Jamie picked the monkey up and stuffed the end of the banana into its mouth, before putting it back in its place. The wall on the right had shelves all up it, like the kitchen. These were filled with fiction and poetry books. I saw Roger McGough, Allan Ahlberg, Jo Shapcott, the Harry Potter series, several Famous Five titles and a book by Salman Rushdie. There were posters on the walls – Fleetwood Mac, and one about the solar system.

“Were these Mum’s things?” I asked.

The Skeleton Man nodded. “I got them out when she fell pregnant again, after marrying your...” He gestured in my direction. “This was going to be the...the grandchildren’s room.” His voice was husky. He gripped both my shoulders, not quite so hard that they hurt, but so that his fingers dug into my collar bones. “You know you’re always welcome here, don’t you?”

I opened my mouth to thank him, but he swept on:

“Might you consider living here? I’ve been noticing the quiet ever since you played the piano.”

My face grew hot. Jamie was suddenly fully occupied tying the mobile to the top of the window frame. “But...I live down the road. With Mum. I can’t leave her – not now.”

He closed his eyes, bit his lower lip and nodded once. “I thought you would say that. I understand. But I will say that if you *did* live here you’d never have to go to school. I’d teach you. We could design the curriculum ourselves. It could be very piano and music based.”

I stared at him, trying to work out what I should say next.

“There!” Jamie cut in, saving me. The mobile was successfully strung up, and points of light played on the walls like hundreds of eyes winking at us. For about thirty seconds none of us said anything. Jamie tilted his head and swayed along with them.

The Skeleton Man addressed him: “Speaking of school, hasn’t term started?”

“Er, well...” He shuffled his feet, eyes averted.

“Ah. So it’s like that, then.”

Now Jamie was looking at the floor. His face was going redder and redder.

“Well, I’m disgusted. Does Carol know you’re here? I’ve got her telephone number. I can call her now...”

“No! Wait!” Jamie slowly bent down and rolled up his right trouser leg to reveal a gigantic green and blue bruise stretching over his knee and up to his lower thigh. Then he rolled up his top, and there, in the middle of his chest, was another huge bruise with a small scab off to one side.

The Skeleton Man caught his breath. “What...who...which person did this to you?” he snarled.

Jamie shrugged. “Some kids. At school.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“St Eleanor’s.” He shifted his feet again. “You can’t say anything. They’d kill me.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.” He looked at his watch. “Come with me, both of you.”

We walked back up the road, past the junction to Mum’s house, past the Premier shop and the sweet-shop, towards the centre of town. Before we got as far as North Hill clinic we turned right, up a long road which led back down towards the river and the green. Normally I don’t mind silence but that time I wished someone would talk. The Skeleton Man’s eyebrows were all frowny. Jamie was biting his nails, eyes wide.

“It’s at the end of this street...” He pointed ahead. “We’ve got about ten minutes until the bell goes...”

Through the houses in front of us I saw a low, flat complex of rectangular buildings, surrounded by tarmac paths and green grass on either side. We followed the road down to a high fence made of dark green posts embedded at intervals of about six feet, spanned by green, diamond-shaped metal grids. On our side the road curved into a small roundabout, with a blue sign above it that read ‘drop-off and pick-up point only’. From inside the grounds came laughter and a few squeals. All the children wore yellow tops, and on the ones playing closer to the gate I could see a circle printed in the top right corner of each, with the fullness of a picture in the centre.

“Now then,” said the Skeleton Man, “Which ones are the problem?”

Jamie squinted at the figures, then pointed at two boys and one girl leaning against a picnic bench. One boy was tall and thin, with shaggy blonde hair. The other was tiny, with ginger hair. The girl was tall and chunky, with black hair down to her shoulders. She was eating something, but I couldn't tell what it was.

“Good. Now go in there, and if they bother you, just you tell them Grandpa John has got your back. See what they do.”

“Good luck,” I said.

Jamie sucked in a breath, then let it out through puckered lips before taking a small plastic disc out of his pocket and pressing it against a box on the school gate. It beeped, and a light turned green. He slipped through. The Skeleton Man saluted him, and I waved.

“That's what they call me – they shout it over the wall,” he muttered.

We watched Jamie walk up the playground, until the gang of bullies thronged around him. They seemed to engage in some kind of exchange, before Jamie pointed back towards us. They all turned to look. The Skeleton Man stood ramrod straight, glaring ahead, before saluting him. The gang appeared to pull back and talk to each other. Then they walked away.

I had lunch at the Skeleton Man's house, and gardened for the afternoon. With the Skeleton Man strimming and mowing, and me clearing, we soon got a good chunk of the lawn looking seatable.

The Skeleton Man dragged an un-broken deckchair over. “Strange boy,” he remarked.

“He's my friend,” I replied.

“Good.”

When I got back home I slipped into the bedroom and sat on the bed while Mum typed. Soon she stopped, and came over to sit beside me.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I answered.

“So. Did you have a good time at...over *there*?”

I gathered my courage. “He asked me if I wanted to go and live with him.”

“Ah.” Her hands scrunched into fists. “Yes, I thought he would before long.”

“Is that why you didn't want me to know him?”

She didn't answer.

“He said he could teach me at home.”

“Of course he did. When you came here the first thing he did was challenge me for custody.”

So that was what the visits to the solicitor’s had been about. “Did he get it?”

“Not yet. But I’ve not exactly been the model mum.” We both bent our heads. I had no idea what she was thinking, but I was thinking about all the motherly things she had done, especially the little things: sitting with me when she thought I was asleep, praying over me in her special language, pocket money, reading *Her Eyes*, the coat and hat – even though she didn’t like the hat – the crying when she thought I was in danger, looking after me when I had a cold, coaching me for the social worker and pushing me to attend school, lest I be taken away. All despite such painful memories and such fear, and despite being so harsh on herself. My chest seared, but I felt strangely at peace with the searing this time.

“You’re my mum,” I said, and I touched her hand. She pulled back.

“And what a mother! What a track record!”

“What do you mean?” She gripped the edge of the bed with both hands. I persisted: “Do you mean the rogue relationship, the miscarriages and the Skeleton Man cutting you off?”

She drew a sharp breath in. “So *that’s* what you’ve been talking about, is it?”

I didn’t answer – I didn’t think she would appreciate knowing that I had gleaned my information from several sources.

“That ‘*rogue relationship*’”, she spat, “Was the last time I was really properly happy. And that was seventeen years ago – we got together in the summer of 1996.”

“He said it was too much when you were so young.”

“Then he cares more about social conventions than he does about me being happy.”

This made me think. Dad once said that during the process of getting me my Asperger’s diagnosis he kept questioning himself as to whether he was doing it to help me, or just to make me ‘normal’. It was something he claimed never to have fully resolved within himself.

“If we were too adult in our relationship then it’s because we loved each other with an adult love.” She went pink. “I told my father I was having sleepovers at my friends’ houses. Then we would meet up and just *be* together. I’m not proud of the lies I told. Once we went up the hill and slept out and watched the stars. We had to leave before the sun rose so we didn’t get discovered or miss school. We were all dewy. Another time we took a train to St Andrews and went night swimming on the beach.”

She gestured in the direction of the banking across the green. “Tracked the river to its source... Most teenagers think of romance as a flirty night at a bar or club and then a

drunken one night stand. If you string a load of them together like sausages it's upgraded to a 'relationship'. The trouble is, that kind of dynamic has virtually nothing in common with the dynamics of things like a lasting marriage, or having a settled home, or raising a strong family, or growing old together with peace, so where does it all lead? We weren't like that. We *knew* each other. At first we talked and talked, but later we talked very little – we didn't have to. I felt safe with him. I knew he loved me. He's the only person who ever made me feel that way.”

“Was that before the miscarriage?”

She looked at me like a songbird looks at a vulture. “That...that happened in...in 1997.” She closed her eyes for a few seconds, and then continued. “It was an accident. Tried to keep it a secret – I was sixteen, nearly seventeen, and about to start some serious exam revision. But I wasn't going to abort – no question about that. A life's a life. Even so...I lost it.”

Her mouth wobbled. Molly had been wrong then – the loss of the baby *had* mattered to Mum, at least as much as the stigma.

“It may have been early but it was still a person, and it deserved to be given a gender and a name, so I called her Kayleigh. And then somehow – I don't know what happened – *everyone* at school found out about it, and about him and me. Anna, you have no idea what it's like to have the air thick with un-whispered rumours and judgements – the world you have to confront every day peppered with accusing stares. I'm not strong,. I can't just stay true to myself and blaze my own trail through that kind of battering. Not like you...” She gave me a weak smile. “I broke it off. Couldn't cope. He was devastated of course. Kept begging and pleading with me. In the end I blanked him. Refused to go to school. Refused to answer his messages and calls. Even refused to go out the house for a while in case I met him on the street. He was the one person who would have stood by me. My dad was *no* use. He was all 'you reap what you sow'. That was the *last* thing I needed. But essentially I clamped a pillow over the nose and mouth of our relationship and pressed down until it stopped struggling. Finished up at a different school and then ran away to the Glasgow School of Art aged seventeen in the autumn of 1998. That's where I met your dad.”

My mouth went dry. This was the first time she had mentioned Dad of her own accord. I prepared myself to hear uncomfortable truths. She had been so brave sharing such hard things. The least I could do was listen, even if it felt like being kicked repeatedly in the head – which it did.

“The Skeleton Man doesn't think that,” I told her quietly, squeezing her hand.

She rocked back and forth slowly a couple of times. The bedsprings creaked. “Well what does he think?”

“He says it hurt, but then you’re his daughter.”

“Did he tell you the whole thing?”

“Well...he told me about the miscarriage and the relationship. Is there more?”

“Yes. But maybe that’s enough. You’re only thirteen.”

“I want to know. I *need* to know.” There was an edge in my voice which I didn’t expect, but I had been holding in so much, in the hope that somehow I’d discover the truth behind why Mum was the way she was. To face being denied it now, yet to know that there *was* a reason – that it wasn’t just all in my imagination – was an unbearable prospect. “Tell me.”

She picked at the locket around her neck. “I didn’t just lose one baby.”

“I...I’m sorry?” For a moment I regretted telling her to tell me – perhaps it *was* too much for me to take – too much to expect her to share. Still, it was too late now. I knew from my own experiences that once you let your pain out you have to let it come out to the fullest extent, and in whatever way it demands.

“The second one was your dad’s. That one miscarried too. I called the second miscarriage Archie. He wasn’t any further along than Kayleigh, but he...he...he made me think there might be something wrong with me. You know – to lose one baby seems like a misfortune, to lose two...” She laughed a hollow laugh. “I hid the whole thing from Thomas. Maybe that was a mistake – he thought I’d just randomly gone from shiny happy me to this dour old woman overnight. Maybe he thought it was a reflection of changing feelings on my part. But I really loved him then. I *really* did.”

“Why did you two split up?” I dared to ask.

“Oh, it was one thing after another,” she said. “We got married in a whirl – said our vows in a random church after its Sunday service, then slapped our names on a register in front of one witness pulled in off the street. Not exactly my dream wedding, but I figured it was the vows and signatures that counted more than the frills. Although, not exactly ideal vows either – Thomas wrote them.”

“What were they?”

“To promise to look out for each other and to be a friend to the other, as long as time, integrity and compatibility of character allow. Doesn’t really bind you in any way at all. Anyway, the whole affair *really* upset my dad. So right from the get-go there was this horrible atmosphere of tension hanging over us. I couldn’t relax into the marriage as I would

have done otherwise. I dropped out of my course in the Christmas term of 1998, when I found out I was pregnant again – with twins. That’s when we moved back here.”

“Into this house?”

“Yes.” She scrunched her fists, like I do when I’m trying to keep calm. “That one was *sort* of planned. I mean, I thought being a family would make everything better. I just...I stopped being quite so careful.”

I took her hand.

“Thomas was pretty well off at that stage so it wasn’t the tight squeeze it could have been. But I went into early labour. They strung things out for two weeks with bed rest and drugs, and got me to the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, with all the intensive care baby equipment. But I was only twenty one weeks along when they were born. Two little boys – Hamish and Craig.”

“Two big brothers,” I murmured, and felt an overwhelming swell of sadness. I would have loved brothers.

“Hamish hung on for a day and a night,” Mum continued. “He was the bigger twin, but he was also weaker. In the morning they told me he would go sometime that day, so we took him out of the incubator, removed all the tubes, gave him a bath, put him in some nice clothes and he went within the hour. Really peacefully, in my arms. It was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. Especially because Craig looked so much like him.”

“What did they look like?” I closed my eyes to better picture.

“They didn’t have proper skin – just this raw, red, shiny layer. But it was so soft and warm. They were the most perfect creatures in the world. They had the tiniest fingers and toes, and a layer of downy fuzz all over. Like new born kittens. It was the most surreal experience of my life, seeing those two babies, who looked so other-worldly, moving around and trying to kick and cry, just like any baby would. But Craig developed heart failure and passed at five days. My dad was absolutely destroyed. As far as he was concerned they were his first grandchildren. But then he went all preachy on me again – practically made it into a sermon about the virtues of prudence and the penalties of rashness. And that was it. I told him I no longer wished to be associated with him in any way.”

So that was what had caused the rift. I made a face. I knew the Skeleton Man loved me – he had asked me to live with him. And the fact he had retained Mum’s possessions and cup convinced me that he loved her too, even if he had shown a huge lack of discretion and finesse. But I also knew, having lost the dearest person in my life less than a month ago, that the person from whom I would really have liked to receive support and comfort was my closest surviving family member. Maybe Mum felt the same, deep down inside.

“Didn’t expect him to honour my request,” she continued, interrupting my thoughts. “I didn’t really mean it. Thought I meant it at the time, but now I know I didn’t. He was just trying to make sense of it all, I suppose, and he’s always been kind of critical in doing that. Doesn’t mean he didn’t feel it too.”

“The grandchildren’s room is still all set up as it was at the time,” I said.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then nodded into her chest.

“Well, then I fell pregnant again in November 1999. Much too soon. We’d been sure we’d try again at some point, but we meant to hold off and just try and let things settle after the twins. That didn’t exactly work out. And that’s the worst thing – after losing four you *want* to be happy – you want to with all your heart – but it doesn’t feel...safe. You almost feel like you don’t have permission. Like being happy will cause something bad to happen.”

I thought about the Happy Game, and Dad, and the fire. The Happy Game seemed rather flimsy and trite now. My memories were breaking beyond repair.

“Not being able to celebrate damaged our marriage even more – Thomas wanted to just live in the moment and trust in whatever would happen. Because of my history I was referred immediately to a high risk pregnancy clinic. He thought we had it made now that we were getting help. But I couldn’t take that same leap of faith. He wasn’t the one whose body was tasked with carrying the baby and not killing it off or jettisoning it too early. I think he resented me dragging him down like that, so we spent less and less time together. And he started picking on me. Everything I did was unwise. Everything I ate was unhealthy. The types of toiletries I used were ‘toxic’. Even my knicker elastic was too tight. Heck, he even picked on things I was helpless to control – like how many hours of sleep I got! I tried. And I still...” Her voice became sort of growly, “...I *still* lost that baby, too. Just when we were sure we were safe – just two weeks before she was due, she went and died on us. I had to be induced. They put a white ribbon on the door of our room so everybody would know not to congratulate us. Imagine that! But it doesn’t make it any easier – there’s still the happiness of everyone else bending all around you, and you’re outside it all. And everyone talks in hushed voices and acts all unnatural around you.”

“Did she look like Hamish and Craig?” I asked.

She nodded. I turned my satellite dish to face her fully, and felt the sadness and tiredness pulse down through my eyes to register in a part of me deep inside my chest. It was one thing receiving such signals, but what to do with them? No amount of outreach, and no wise words from any parent, helped me know at that moment.

“Like them, but chubbier, with more hair. And bluer. The likeness only made it harder. We called her Paige.” She rubbed her face, which was now dry and white..

“Thomas blamed himself, but he couldn’t cope with that level of accountability so I ended up shouldering *his* blame as well as my own. Communications dried up between us and we didn’t speak for weeks after burying her. I didn’t have many friends – when we got married he told me I didn’t need them now I had him, and I believed him. I thought he was all I needed, and he maintained that he was. And enforced it. Never with physical violence – more like emotional pressure. I would have loved for my father to step up then. He didn’t. Did he tell you that bit?”

I shook my head.

“Thought not. It’s just been one massive elephant in the room ever since.”

I couldn’t have spoken if I’d wanted to now. My body felt cold all over, though my palms were wet.

“We *did* leave it for a year after that. But he badly wanted a baby. Kept threatening to leave if I didn’t agree. Eventually I gave in, and we got pregnant with you. And when I was seven months along I got something called HELLP syndrome – it’s a condition that happens sometimes when you’re pregnant. Organs start to fail and stuff. Anyway, like I said, you were delivered by Caesarean because we were both so ill. And that’s the scar you asked about.” I nodded, remembering it. Proof of a connection nobody could supplant or take away, whatever else may have happened.

“And then I had several big bleeds. Spent weeks in ICU. My milk dried up. So I didn’t give you a good birth, I didn’t give you a good start, I couldn’t even take care of you... And look at me now! I can’t even give you a proper *bedroom!*”

She said this last bit with a hiccup. By now I could barely breathe. Could the dish be turned off?

“I’m happy sleeping in bed with you,” I managed, after a few tries.

“Not only that, I work all day so I’m not even *there*... That’s one of the reasons why *he* got you back then. That and the fact I wasn’t breastfeeding. But I had to do *something*. So I worked fourteen hour shifts at the distillery six days a week. Minimum wage, but I did save some money. That’s all gone now. Besides, I’d got it into my head that I somehow brought my children bad luck, and that if I hung around you too much you might get cot death or something. I’d seen everything else, after all. I know it sounds stupid... Of course, *he* had charm on his side too. And social smarts. And contacts. And an outside reputation. And a famous smile. And tears on cue. They *would* believe him.”

I bit my tongue – the urge to defend Dad threatened to ruin everything.

“Oh, things weren’t easy for him either...” She laughed – that laugh of hers which makes me cringe. “But honestly, I made a mistake taking up with him. I should have stayed with...” She bit her lip so hard it bled. “Oh, you might as well go and live with your granddad! You’d be better off.”

“I said no.”

I tried hard to pick up a signal from her, but couldn’t tell what she was thinking or feeling now. But then, knowing that sort of thing can often be difficult – especially since people can think and feel two directly conflicting things simultaneously. A Schrodinger’s Cat of emotions. And people often hide or deny their true feelings. “I said no,” I repeated. Then I thought of Molly. “You shouldn’t be so harsh on yourself.”

She gazed over the bed and out the window. “You’re mad,” she muttered, through clenched teeth. “Bonkers. Off your head. A dipnut.”

“I’d rather be a dipnut than live with anyone else.”

She tried several times to say something, but it seemed to get stuck in her throat each time. “When you came back,” she managed at last, “I tried to make myself hate you.”

I felt a sharp pain in my chest at that. “Why?”

Her eyes seemed very large in their sockets, but they weren’t bulging.

“I...I think I was scared.”

“What were you scared of?”

She lifted her chin, but her hands clasped and grasped at the bedspread. “What if they’d taken you away again?” The hurt seemed to sputter in her as she said this, like a kettle on a rolling boil. “What then?”

It was raining. The droplets pattered against the outside of the window. Once again, I didn’t have an answer. My mind was a jumble of sympathy and compassion and confusion, like a painting palate where all the colours have been swirled together. All my memories of the Dad I had thought I’d known - the character I’d loved - now seemed like crayon pictures drawn on the wall of a paper house. The thought of his texts nauseated me.

“*Do* you hate me?” I didn’t mean to ask aloud, but the question came out of its own accord. I didn’t want to know the answer. Had I wanted to know, I could have asked at any point since arriving.

She looked as if I had given her an electric shock. Then she slumped and began to cry, as if the tears had been building up for weeks behind a locked door, which had finally given way.

“So many times...” I heard her say indistinctly, before she managed to stop and breathe. “*So* many times I would look at you sleeping and just...just want to hold you.”

Those words – like water to cracked, dry earth. “You can,” I told her gently. “I’m here. And I’m alive. And nobody is ever, *ever* going to take me away again.”

She came towards me. Then she shook her head. “I...I don’t think I remember how...”

“I’ll show you,” I said. And I put my arms around her, and held her as a father might have held his daughter after she had gone to school and her friends had beaten her up again.

That night my dreams were filled with satellite dishes, walls of eyes, the Skeleton Man’s garden being uprooted, and babies squirming on an open hilltop. I wanted to ask God to stop time and give me a moment to work out what to do with all Mum had told me, and how to make everything all right. That’s what family is supposed to do. But time didn’t stop. The sun moved through the sky, the earth flew through space. Early in the morning, after Mum had left but before Molly got there, I snuck out and smashed my phone against the wall of the house. Then I gathered the pieces up and dumped them in one of the skips. False, false, false. All of those messages, all those memories, all that love, all that supposed wisdom, *false*. If the old oilskin coat and hat had been Dad’s, then I understood now why Mum had taken them to the dump.

Molly and I barely spoke that morning. We cleaned the house, had an early lunch and called on Joanne. Skylar came running out to greet us, and persuaded me to bounce with him and Emily on their new trampoline. I managed to pretend to be engaged and enthusiastic. After a few minutes the repeated downward pressure of the bouncing made me need the toilet.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I shouted, jumped down and ran inside. As I was on my way back out Joanne diverted me through the living room and into the kitchen. She closed the door and motioned me to take a seat.

“Simon, the minister, was in touch with me. His wife, Helen, runs the Sunday school. I gather you’ve already met.”

“Yes, I remember her,” I said, “She was very pregnant.”

“Mmm. Seven months. Anyway, she thought you might like to read a passage out in church. Not this Sunday, but the following one.”

“I...well....” I really didn’t think I could cope with any more things filling up my mind.

“You don’t have to make a decision right now,” she added. “There’s no pressure. If you don’t want to do it I’ll do it. The theme is thankfulness. Helen remembered how you

found happiness in the farmer story. She suggested you to Simon as a potential reader, and he mentioned it to me in passing. Anyway, the passage is Psalm 100. Do you have a Bible?"

"Mum lent me hers," I said. The farmer story and that attitude of blinkered happiness seemed impossibly long ago now, like it existed on the other side of a deep chasm.

"Well, have a think and give me a ring later on."

I didn't tell Mum anything about the reading because I wanted it to be a surprise. That evening we went for a walk – just her and me. We went past St. Eleanor's and up a single track road with sheep poo scattered on it, and thick whin bushes on either side dotted with yellow flowers. It wasn't especially sunny, and the sky was covered by a layer of cloud, but it was mild and bright. A cow mooed in a field. The noise of the town slowly fell away to wind and birdsong, and the faraway sound of a tractor. To our left there was a bank of trees. A field sloping down to our right was filled with glossy, half-ripe corn that looked like fur on a giant animal. It reminded me of Winter Hill, just outside London.

Mum cleared her throat. "I want to apologise."

"What for?"

"I was wrong to stop you from talking about him."

"It's ok. I didn't know about...everything." Something was rushing up a beach inside of me. It felt painful, but once again, it was an OK kind of pain. "I'll go to school on Monday."

Her eyebrows went up. "Are you *sure*?"

"Yes. It's like you said – I might not like it, but I *am* strong. I *can* be true to myself, and I *can* blaze my own trail. And if anyone tells me I'm annoying or tries to beat me up, I'll just tell them Grandpa John has got my back!"

As we turned in through the garden gate I heard running feet, and saw Molly charging across the car park.

"What's she doing here?" Mum asked. "She's not due here today!"

She didn't greet us with a smile and a 'hello', either. She simply leaned against the gate, her mouth open and her eyes glassy, trying to catch her breath.

"Kenny proposed to me."

"What?"

"*Kenny* proposed to me! He *proposed* to me! He proposed to *me*!"

So Molly *wasn't* going to end up marrying Ben Strachan! Unless she'd said no to Kenny's proposal, of course, and that didn't seem likely. Molly started to laugh. It reminded me of myself having a panic attack. I hoped she wouldn't end up breaking things and yelling.

That's what I used to do before my outreach worker taught me to punch pillows and write in my notebook instead.

"OK, hang on..." Mum took her by the arm and steered her to the kitchen. Once in, she made her sit at the table. "You've made me so many cups of tea," she said. "I'm afraid I might have been quite a burden to you."

"Don't be silly!" Molly seemed to be growing calmer now.

"So what happened?" Mum asked.

"Well it was quite funny, really..." Molly's cheeks went pink and she fluttered her eyelashes with a small laugh. "I'd spent the morning out at Mum's, and Kenny texted and asked if I'd pop in on my way back. Said he'd made a cake in return for the one I gave him before. Remember, Anna?" I nodded. "He *never* makes cake! Anyway he wanted to give it to me properly, so I got there and he met me at the door. He had the curtains closed – said he wanted it to be a surprise. Then he made me close my eyes too – even blindfolded me in case I cheated! I heard him go inside, and when he came back out again he told me I could look. So I pulled off the blindfold..."

"And?" The kettle had boiled, but none of us got up to make the tea.

"And it was this Victoria sandwich cake, with jam in the middle, white icing on the top, and a marzipan bride and groom that looked like us, surrounded by green question marks."

"And what did you say?"

"I got him to spell it out for me. Sort of took the romance out of it a bit..."

Mum snorted. "But then what?"

"Then I fainted. You know me – I *never* faint!"

Mum burst out laughing.

"Fainted dead away! Came to lying on the grass. So you know how it goes, I started to get up. And I was terrified he'd think he'd scared me off, or that he'd made a terrible mistake and go back on it. So I was gearing up for this high speed, oh-so-romantic improv speech, and before I could say anything...I fainted again!"

"You're *joking!*"

"I'm not! Anyway, I came to – *again* – and this time he was lying on the grass beside me."

"Had he fainted too?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't *think* so... So we just lay there for a bit and looked at the clouds. He saw a barn owl. I saw a mountain. Then I turned to him and..."

"Do we want to know this bit?" Mum darted a quick look in my direction.

“Oh yes! I turned to him and told him he had a *long* way to go as a fiancé. I mean, come on! Any *real* gentleman should at least be able to catch a swooning maiden! Not just let her drop like her strings have been cut!”

“So *then* what?”

“Then I asked where the cake was.”

“Well *naturally*,” said Mum, “Can’t be mixing up our priorities.”

“Indeed not. He’d put it on the picnic table. So I got up really, REALLY slowly, and asked if I could have a slice. And we divvied it up between us.”

“Don’t tell me you ate it all, you greedy pig!”

“Certainly not! I let him cut it and ate the slice he offered me. Almost broke my teeth on the ring. Then I spat it out and made him do the thing properly, on one knee and everything. Then it all got soppy, ‘cause I started crying and he started crying...” Now her eyes filled up. I hoped she wouldn’t cry again – I’d had about as many tears as I could take. Mum offered her a tissue. She waved it away and sniffed loudly.

“And then what?” I asked.

“Well then I went in for the snog, didn’t I?”

Mum squealed.

“And then I fainted again.”

Over the weekend Jamie, the Skeleton Man and I worked in the Skeleton Man’s garden, transferring the plants into flower beds as we cleared them. The repetitive digging and clearing, and the hoisting of things across the lawn, acted like a mental anaesthetic. In the absence of sadness a sort of peace crept back in.

I was too nervous to speak much on Monday morning. When I came out the shower at quarter past eight I found some new clothes laid out on the floor by my side of the bed. There was a blue linen shirt, a black skirt, some black tights, some shiny lace-up shoes, and a black cardigan. Mum brushed and clipped back my hair as I buttoned the cardigan. I buttoned it as slowly as I could.

“I ordered the clothes when I went to meet the learning support staff on Thursday,” she said. This did not reassure me. At my old school one of the learning support workers had informed the new music teacher about my Asperger’s and my passion for music. On Monday the teacher opened the lesson by approaching me and saying: “I hear you’re quite the music expert. Lots of autistics are, you know. Now, you’re not to go on and on or jump in with all the answers. Other people matter too.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked.

“I told them you had recently lost your father, that you had just moved here, that you didn’t like loud noises, that you needed clear boundaries, and that you were very friendly and thoughtful. They said they have a couple of other children with Asperger’s, so they have some specific supports in place already. Such as a sensory room.”

“What’s a sensory room?” My old school had two part-time learning support workers and one learning support room, which was a repurposed cleaning cupboard.

“It’s a room where you can go to relax if you feel too stressed to work or listen. I blooming wish they had one at work.”

Intrigued, I tried and failed to imagine what that would be like. I hoped it wouldn’t be like a psychiatrist’s office.

Once dressed I went down to the kitchen, where Mum put some pancakes on my plate.

“Keep a move on – I want us driving away by twenty to nine.”

“Are you taking the morning off again?”

She nodded, pouring milk into her coffee. “I’ve had to ask your granddad to bring you back today. Don’t know what’ll happen in the long run.”

“Couldn’t Molly help?”

She shook her head. “From now on I expect she’ll be spending most of her time helping Kenny with the house he’s building for her.”

I dropped my pancake. “She’s *moving*?”

“Yes – out of town. Nearer her parents. They’ll still be within reach – just further away.”

“Will she still clean for us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will she look after me while you’re away?”

“I don’t know.” She clenched her teeth and turned away.

It occurred to me that perhaps this had been another reason why Mum was keen to get me into school. And it was all because of Kenny. Why did he have to build a house? And why did it have to be so far away? And what right did he have to take Molly away from so many people for whom she had been such a huge, crucial part of their lives? Perhaps Molly would go off him once she knew him better. He was only a person, after all. And there was always a chance the house would prove structurally unsound or something and they wouldn’t be allowed to live in it.

I breathed in, imagining I was an extractor fan, then let it out slowly, imagining all the annoyance leaving with it. “At least she won’t be leaving until they get married and the house is done,” I concluded.

Mum had also bought me a schoolbag and lunch box. The bag was a large, black rucksack, with a snap fastener, and straps around the waist.

“I remember what it was like in school,” she said. “You think you’ll swap your books around day to day like a good girl, but then all the work piles up and you get tired in the evenings. And either they all end up in your bag together and it weighs a stone, or you forget half of them. The first was what kept happening to me. So I got you a really good bag to save your back. It’ll last for years.” The lunchbox was a plain, clear Tupperware tub, which Mum had already packed for me.

I sat in the navigator’s seat. The morning was cold, but the sky was clear and the sun shone over the farmland, glinting off Mum’s wing mirror. We turned down the road towards the roundabout leading to the station. Mum pressed a button on the dashboard. Some music came on. It had a breathy, sweeping quality, a looping base and a syncopated rhythm. The singer was female, with a Nordic-sounding accent.

“Who is this?” I asked.

“Bjork. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all.”

We turned left at the roundabout, onto a road that seemed to define the outskirts of the town. The song was an urging for the listener to come to the singer so they could take care of them. When a line came up about jumping out a building that was on fire a deluge of horrid images came into my mind. Smoke – not like bonfire smoke, but like piping hot, blackened, lung-scalding soup. And this soup was also an eye-watering haze through which the only things I could see were the orange, flickering rim of the bedroom door, and a white searchlight backlighting swirling air currents, guiding me towards the window, and a twenty-five foot drop onto a canvas held taught by firemen, police and some neighbours who had seen the fire and rushed to help. And then a mental picture of the pieces of the phone, lying smashed in the skip. Hot poker.

“What are you doing today?”

Perhaps so many people filled silences by saying things – anything at all – to stop unwanted thoughts and memories from rising up unchecked.

“Seeing my solicitor again.”

“Why do you need to see him again?”

“Don’t know. He summoned me.”

“If anyone tries to take me away, I’ll run away and come back here.”

Mum didn’t say anything. She kept her eyes on the road ahead, but her face broke into a beautiful smile.

The local senior school was situated on the other side of the town from St. Eleanor’s junior school, but we still got there in under fifteen minutes – the main road circumvented most of the morning traffic. There were no children playing outside, but then the clock in Mum’s car said it was twenty past nine.

“We’re late,” I remarked. Not a good start, but at least we made it.

“It’s ok,” she answered, “They asked me to bring you in a bit late so you wouldn’t be caught up in the rush to class. And so’s you’d arrive between bells.”

We got out the car, and immediately I noticed the sense of peace. We were some way from the main road, and a tractor whirred again in the distance. In the foreground I heard chirping – chaffinches nesting in some crevice within one of the school’s buildings. The school was made up of two long, repurposed flagstone barns, each two storeys high, with sloping triangular ceilings – one with its end facing the car park, and one side-on to it. Six portable cabins surrounded a tarmac playground, with eight picnic benches made of a red type of wood. The whole school seemed to be bordered by a low stone wall.

“I remember these.” Mum ran over to sit at one of the benches.

“Were you happy here?” I asked.

“Yes, very. For the first four years, at least.” She cocked her head. “I thought it would be harder coming back. But it feels...nice.” We were silent for a few minutes.

“This isn’t a bit like my old school,” I told her. “Mine was much, much bigger. And it was all one concrete building which went up four storeys. It looked like an anthill when you viewed it from above. And there weren’t any stone walls around it – there were huge metal fences.”

“It sounds like a prison,” she murmured.

An oak tree encroached on the playground between two cabins. A gust of wind rustled its branches and a group of swallows startled from it, backlit by the bright, mottled clouds.

“Come on then.” She pointed in the direction of a cabin to our left, in one window of which grew two sunflower plants. On its door was nailed a sign with an arrow labelled ‘Learning support’ pointing to the right, and another labelled ‘Reception’ pointing to the left.

The reception area was more of a hall, with some wooden chairs in a row, each with faux-leather stuffed backs and seats. In one wall there was a glass partition, and through it

I could see an office, but there was nobody in it. It looked like the learning support room here would be another repurposed cleaning cupboard. The glass partition didn't reassure me either – the learning support room at my old school had a glass partition looking out onto one of the corridors, so that when people went to the canteen or to their next class, they would stop and peer in.

On our side of the reception there was a silver bell, like the kind in hotel lobbies. Just as Mum went over to it, a man came through the front door. He was tall, looked about forty, and had black, slightly greasy hair and a beaky nose.

“Patty and Anna?” He shook Mum's hand, then held out a hand to me. In surprise I took it and shook it. I wondered how he could possibly keep track of every individual child, much less every individual visitor.

“I'm Gavin Shaw, the guidance teacher. Let me show you to the learning support room and Rachel will take you from there.”

He indicated a small door in the wall opposite the main entrance. We followed him through, into a room which looked almost like a living room.

Mum whistled. “Well...THIS has changed!”

There was a large, squashy blue sofa against one of the walls, and what looked like a synthetic tent against another, big enough to sit on a chair inside, but not quite big enough to stand up in.

Mr Shaw pointed at the tent: “That's the sensory room.” There was a long wooden table in the middle of the room with office chairs pulled up to it, and four PCs at one end. At one of these sat a boy in a winter hat with ear flaps. His neck was stretched forward, his eyes were fixed on the screen and he was clicking repeatedly with the mouse.

“Hi Jess.”

Jess looked up, nodded his head and raised a hand.

“What are you playing?”

He reached down and held up a case, which had ‘Fun French’ written on it, with the colours of the French Flag.

“Good, good!”

At that moment there was a zipping noise, and a hand pushed the flap of the tent back. Out stepped the girl from the GP waiting room – the one with the lilac hair. Now she wore thick, round purple glasses too.

“Oh, hi!” she said. In contrast to how quiet she'd been when we were playing solitaire she now spoke with a loud, abrupt voice, accompanied by a big smile.

“Do you know each other?” Mr Shaw asked.

“Yeah. We played solitaire,” explained the girl. “I didn’t tell you my name. It’s Cal.”

“I’m Anna,” I replied. Cal thrust out her hand and we shook.

“This is the learning support room.” Cal waved a hand around the room as if it were a stage. “This’ll be your ‘safe base’. You’ll work here until they know you’re up to speed with what our classmates are doing.”

“Thank you for that, Cal,” Mr Shaw said, “Saved me the breath!”

“We can work together!” I said.

“Yeah!”

“Now,” he continued loudly, as Cal opened her mouth again, “Through here we have the staff office.” He stuck his head through a door on the right. “Rachel! I’m gonna leave Anna with you, ok?”

“Right you are,” said a female voice, and out came a smiling young woman with curly black hair, full cheeks, high heels and an ankle length skirt.

“See you later, Anna.” Mr Shaw waved and stepped out the door.

“Will you be ok?” asked Mum.

“I think so,” I said, and suddenly felt like clinging to her coat. I resisted the urge, and she laid a hand on my shoulder. Then she hugged me, turned and left, closing the door.

The rest of my morning was spent sitting at the central table, flicking through second year maths, geography, home economics and history textbooks, identifying which topics I had already covered. As it turned out I was about a year ahead in most respects, and Rachel had to give me the SQA standard grade textbooks, of which I had only covered about a quarter. Cal kept peering over from her computer screen and pointing at bits, saying things like: “Oh we did that. That was cool,” or “That bit’s hard.” About every ten minutes Rachel would call through from the staff area, “Cal – less talk, more focus, please!” whereupon Cal would go quiet and concentrate for a few more minutes.

During break time Cal and I both went into the sensory tent. Its interior was lined with huge cushions and a couple of gigantic fleece blankets. It had a mobile hanging from the ceiling, with stars made of mirror material which reflected coloured fairy lights strung up along the tent’s seams, casting what looked like shards of light off the walls. It reminded me of Mum’s mobile. At the far end there was a book shelf.

“This is amazing!” I lay down, wrapped myself up in the blanket and rubbed it against my face. I felt like a butterfly in its cocoon, or a dormouse curled up in its lair for the winter.

Cal lay on her back, raised her leg and jangled the stars with her toes. The shards of light leapt back and forth across our faces and hands, like excited fairies. “See? It’s just like a disco!” She laughed.

“It’s better than a disco!” I said.

It was P.E. in the afternoon. I would have spent it in the learning support room too if I had a choice, but Rachel sat me down.

“You know, Cal goes to P.E.”

I couldn’t see what that had to do with anything.

“Go this time at least. It’s a new block. They’re doing circuit training today. You can change here – I’ll come with you. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

I *was* surprised. Before we began, the teacher – Miss Marney – sat everyone down at the front of the games hall.

“Now,” she said, “What you’re going to do is go round the room in groups of five. You will have three two-minute stints at each station. At the first station you are stepping up and down from the bench, as many times as you can in two minutes. The second one you’re doing press-ups – again, as many as you can. The third you’re bouncing on the trampolines – as high as you can. And the last...” She jogged over to some hula hoops in a circle on the ground, with a pile of hand-sized bean bags in the middle, “You’re standing on one leg in a hula hoop, throwing bean bags to each other in a clockwise manner.” Several of the children laughed, and so did I. “You’re counting throws you can do in two minutes without losing your balance or dropping the bean bag. If you lose your balance or drop a beanbag you start counting from one all over again. You’ll go round in groups of five.” She paused and walked up and down in front of us. The room was completely silent. “This is a competition. Competition is key to sport because it connects us in what we do and in what we aspire towards. The person who wins each round will receive points, which we’ll tally up at the end. However...” She looked each of us in the eye with a twinkle in her own, but a firm-set mouth, “I expect no cheating and no gloating. The reason you are competing is to prove to *yourselves* what you can do when you really put your minds to it, and so that you can share the experience. You are not doing this to show everyone else how much better than them you are.”

She didn’t raise her voice or sound like an army officer, but instead spoke with a strength, softness and clarity of tone. I found myself looking forward to the lesson.

“Told you you’d like it!” Rachel said, as I returned to the learning support room at lunchtime, having come second place, received a chewit, and chatted to Miss Marney about football as people filed out at the end. She had complimented me on my technical and

strategic knowledge, and invited me onto the school team – which met from half past three to five O'clock on Thursdays.

“Miss Marney is *such* a good teacher. And so nice!” I flung my bag onto the sofa and unlaced my shoes in preparation for the sensory tent.

“Ah, she’s a good soul isn’t she?”

I was dismissed five minutes before the end of the school day, and was halfway across the playground before the bell went. Out in the car park I saw a red Volvo parked on the kerb, and as I approached it the window on the passenger’s side slid down.

“Hurry or we’ll never get away!” said the Skeleton Man.

I threw my bag in the back, and plopped into the navigator’s seat.

Before I was even strapped in he had revved the engine, pulled out and the school was receding into the distance behind us.

“Your mum asked me to pick you up,” he said. “I think you should know that that’s the first decent conversation I’ve had with her in years.”

“Did it feel like your mind was filled with light?” I recalled the feeling I’d had after reconciling with Jamie, and tried to imagine it ten times bigger.

“You could say that, I suppose.” His eyes scrunched at the corners, but they were smile scrunches. “She’s much different, you know.”

“She is?”

“She is. It must be you, you magic girl. Anyway. How was school?”

“It went really, really well!” I said, my voice growing louder like Cal’s as I began to tell him all about my day.

When we got back to his house Jamie was pacing up and down the pavement.

“Hi Jamie!” I called, getting out.

“Oh, hi.” He ran over to the Skeleton Man and took hold of each of his hands. I blinked, my mouth falling open. Obviously he had been a more regular visitor than I had realised. Not only that, but a tactile Jamie registered with me like the moon transforming from a sphere into a cube. “Can we put the shrubs in today?” he asked.

“Have you gone to school?” The Skeleton Man loomed over him, but Jamie didn’t shrink back – not even a tiny bit.

“Yep.”

“ALL day?”

“Yeh.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Yes!”

“In that case, certainly we can.”

Jen bounded around us as we worked. Occasionally she squeezed in beside me and dug with her paws. I turned over the soil in the remaining beds using a garden fork, picking out stones and weeds and tossing them into a pile behind me. Meanwhile the Skeleton Man and Jamie unwrapped and planted each shrub. There was a small tea bush, which the Skeleton Man said should yield tea leaves in about two years’ time. There were two elderberry shrubs and two juniper bushes. Perhaps Molly could come over sometime and make juniper jelly and elderflower cordial. But not Kenny. Then there was a rosehip bush. I remembered hearing something on the radio about rosehips being good for arthritis. It might help Mrs No. I’d have to look in the traditional medicines cookbook again to see what to do with them. Hopefully Molly would be able to help, if she wasn’t too busy working on the house with Kenny. Finally there was a tall climbing rose.

“That’ll have to go up the wall,” said the Skeleton Man. We surveyed it lying out on the grass.

“I’ll go up,” Jamie said.

“Good man. I’ll fetch a ladder.”

“I’m a good climber. I’ll just go up the tree and crawl along.”

“Don’t be idiotic. You’ll fall and break a leg.”

“He won’t,” I said, “He’s used to climbing trees. He climbed the tree I fell from.”

“I can’t risk it. I’m fetching a ladder.” He stomped off. As soon as the hall door was closed Jamie ran to the tree.

“Don’t!” I cried, “He’ll skin you alive!”

“Pfft. He’s just another grown-up, moaning and groaning. I’m not scared of him. I’ll show him!”

As he was speaking, he planted a foot halfway up the cherry tree where two thick branches forked out from one another, and, grasping a branch in each hand, levered himself up. The sound of banging and swearing came from outside the front end of the house. In four scrambled leaps Jamie was up about eight feet. He grabbed an overhanging branch and swung himself feet first onto the wall. I watched in fascinated dread as he balanced his way along, until he was at a spot immediately above where the rose bush was laid out.

“You’ll be in such big trouble,” I remarked.

“Just dig a hole and plant it! Quick!” I did as I was told. As I stood the rose against the wall, thorns scratched my wrists and stuck to my jumper. Jamie squatted down, took the top of the plant between his right finger and thumb, and I started to tie the branches to the frame.

“Oi! What did I tell you?” The Skeleton Man’s voice set Jen barking, and Jamie startled and wobbled. He recovered quickly though.

“It’s ok! Look, we’ve done it!” He waved from his position atop the wall.

“You could have cracked your head open! Come down at once!” The Skeleton Man wrestled the ladder out the door, leaned it against the wall and glared up at him. He stuck his tongue out.

“Can’t I tie the high ones? You can tie the low ones!”

“You’re a scoundrel, that’s what you are.” We waited for him to give a yes or no answer, but he didn’t. Instead he stooped, picked up a tie, straightened up and secured one of the rose’s branches. I dropped my fork and joined him, and for the next ten minutes we worked on securing its branches in place. Then we stepped back and looked at our work.

“Pretty good,” said the Skeleton Man. I agreed. “Look,” he carried on, “a bud.” He reached out a spindly finger and stroked its closed petals.

“GRANDPA JOHN! CATCH ME!”

Both our heads snapped up. Jamie had a huge, wide grin on his face. The Skeleton Man barely had time to step back and hold out his arms before Jamie launched himself off the wall. He landed heavily on the Skeleton Man, who stepped backwards, making contact with my pile of weeds and stones. He fell, and his shin-bone cracked over the fork I had laid down when tying the rose.

For a second they both just lay there. Then the Skeleton Man let out a roar, but it wasn’t like his other angry noises or Mum’s shouting, and it didn’t carry any words of admonishment. It was more like a lion’s roar when it’s been shot. Jamie sprang up, eyes huge, face pale, saying “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry...” I dropped down beside the Skeleton Man’s head and took it in my lap. For about a minute he did nothing except groan and scrunch his face into expressions that registered on my dish like whenever Mrs Langton’s angina took hold. I put my fingers in my ears, even though he was only making squeaks and huffing out breaths between clenched teeth. Finally he reached up with both hands and pulled my wrists away from my ears. I sang a loud monotone to drown out all noise around me, then saw his face had settled down, his mouth was moving and his eyes were fixed on me. I stopped the note.

“Call the GP,” he gasped.

“Shouldn’t I just call 999?”

“No. It’s probably just a bad sprain. Call the GP. Number’s by the phone in the main hall.” He lifted his head, cried out, dropped it back, then shouted for Jamie. Jamie

looked poised to run. “Get a blanket. No, wait, get my coat. From the hook inside the back door.”

Jamie and I ran inside together. I found the phone on what looked like a footstool to the right of the front door. As I searched for the number I heard Jamie fumbling at the back door, before he ran back outside again, presumably with the coat.

I found a wad of scrap paper underneath the phone, each piece scrawled over with handwriting. My hands were shaking so much I had trouble peeling the papers apart, but eventually I found a tiny slip labelled ‘GP’. I dialled the number, and tried to keep my breathing calm while the phone rang at the other end.

“Hello, North Hill Clinic, Alice speaking. How can I help?”

“Hello,” I took care to speak slowly and to enunciate, as I had learned in drama. “I’m calling to report a broken leg belonging to a Mr John Harrington.” I told her the address.

“John Harrington, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“Right. Hold on a mo...” There was a click, and Vivaldi’s ‘Spring’ came on. I tapped my fingers, growing calmer within its familiarity, so it came as a shock when the music cut off and Alice’s voice said, “I’ve called an ambulance and I’ve dispatched Doctor Strachan. He’s on call a few doors away, so he should only be a few minutes.” Even though I was trying not to imagine the Skeleton Man quietly expiring on the lawn I smiled for a second – it seemed that on this occasion, calling the GP was the same as calling the ambulance.

After thanking her, saying goodbye and hanging up, I ran back outside and paced around on the lawn, working off the adrenaline that almost felt as if it was pouring out of me.

“Go and stand in the drive and show them the way,” the Skeleton Man told me.

Ben Strachan got there first. I waved him in. He stopped for a moment on the threshold of the hall, then followed me through the living room and kitchen (glancing at the owl mug, which was on the draining rack), and into the back garden.

“It was her fault,” Jamie said, pointing at me. “She left the rake and pile of stones on the ground.”

“*You* were the one who jumped off the wall!”

“Well, let’s not lay blame,” the Skeleton Man cut in. Jamie looked from him, to Ben, then took the Skeleton Man’s hand. The Skeleton Man shut his eyes.

“Quite right,” agreed Ben. “That won’t help us at all. Let’s just assess the situation. Now,” he squatted by the Skeleton Man’s head. “Can you hear me, John?”

“Mmm. Hello.” He didn’t open his eyes.

“The ambulance is on its way. .”

I took the Skeleton Man’s other hand.

“Please don’t die,” I said.

He snorted. “Don’t be stupid! I’ve just sprained something.”

“We’ll see what the X-ray says,” said Ben. “I have some painkillers with me. Anna, can you ring your mother and tell her what’s happened? She might want to come round.”

His face was hard to read. Then he turned back to the Skeleton Man.

“I don’t know her number,” I said. He recited a mobile number, and made me repeat it back three times correctly. “Worth a try at least. She’s slow to change”. Chanting it to myself and feeling more and more confused, I returned to the hall and dialled.

“Hello?” said Mum’s voice.

“Mum,” I said.

“Anna! Is everything ok?”

“School was fine. I hope your meeting with the solicitor went well. The Skeleton Man’s broken his leg.”

There was a long pause. “Well. God.” She cleared her throat.

“Ben’s with him now. The ambulance is coming.”

“Ben...?”

“Ben Strachan. Jamie and I were planting a rose and Jamie jumped off the wall. The Skeleton Man tried to catch him and broke his leg over a garden fork. At least, Ben thinks it’s broken. The Skeleton Man thinks it’s just sprained, but when I sprained my ankle running in my old school’s sports day I didn’t make the faces he’s making. I th –”

“ – But Ben’s with him, you say?”

“Yes. He was on call nearby.”

Another long pause. “Well, I’m sure you don’t need me there as well. Doctor Strachan’ll have it all under control.”

“He thought you deserved to know.”

“Thanks. OK, well, if you can hitch a lift with the ambulance I’ll meet you in A&E. OK?”

“OK.”

As I hung up I couldn’t help thinking that since Mum had wanted the Skeleton Man to be with her when she was in distress, she should be with him now, when he was in distress. I heard an engine. I went to the drive and saw the ambulance pulling up. Two paramedics

got out – a man and a woman. The man asked if this was the house of John Harrington. I said yes, and showed them into the garden.

“Right, lass,” the male paramedic said to me, “You’d best come up here and hold your granda’s hand this side. And – what’s your name?” He directed this second question to Jamie. Jamie told him his name. “You’re doing a smashing job, Jamie – keep up the good work. Are you her brother?” he jerked his head in my direction.

“Me? Nope. She’s just my friend.”

The female paramedic conferred with Ben Strachan, then squatted next to me: “Mr Harrington? We’re going to take you to get a wee X-ray up at the hospital in Livingston.”

“Why is it always a ‘wee’ this, and a ‘wee’ that?” he grumbled. “Why not a huge one? Unleash the gamma rays! Go on – fry me! You never know – I might come out with an extra head and a pair of wings.”

I laughed, and so did the female paramedic. “Well you’re lucid enough – I’ll grant you that! Now, I’m going to place a cannula and give you a shot of something for the pain. Then we’re going to get you onto the stretcher.”

I watched as the needle slid under his skin, and felt my spine tingle. Ben put a hand on my shoulder. “Perhaps I’d better try ringing Patty myself, so you can go home.”

I shook my head. “She’s going to meet us at the hospital.”

“She is?” His eyes widened.

“Yes. It’s ok, I’m happy to ride in the ambulance.”

Jamie patted the Skeleton Man’s shoulder. “Grandpa John, please tell me when you’re ready to do the garden again.”

“There’s not much more to do,” replied the Skeleton Man, patting his hand. “But I’ll give Carol a ring when I’m out. Shouldn’t be too long.” He squeezed his eyes shut and smiled. It looked like he was wrenching his mouth into the correct shape. “Good job we got that patio all cleared and levelled in time for the crutches!”

Every time we went over a bump the Skeleton Man scrunched his face up tight like a cabbage, but the drip – which I overheard was an opiate solution – seemed to make him sleepier over time. He was dozing as we pulled in at the back door of A & E, but when they wheeled him off to the X-ray he opened his eyes, looked at me, reached up and brushed my cheek with the back of his hand.

I was led into the waiting room where Mum was already sitting. When she saw me she stood up, and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“Well done, Anna.”

I hadn't realised how tired I was before, but now it all seemed to crash in onto me at once. I slumped into a chair. At that moment Ben came running in. He stopped when he saw Mum, and his whole body went tense. Mum's mouth was open in an almond-shape. Then her lips pursed, and her eyes averted.

"Hi, Patty..." Ben said.

"Hello, Ben." Her voice was constricted, and sounded like it did just before she shouted. I braced myself. He approached, taking hesitant steps, and sat on the other side of me. He clasped his hands, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and looked straight ahead. Mum sat ramrod, hands in her lap, looking straight ahead as well, but every now and then she shot a sideways glance at him.

"Anna – there's a little shop just down that corridor." Mum pointed, then handed me three pounds. "I haven't given you this week's pocket money. You might be here a long time. Get yourself something to eat. Or do. Or both."

I hesitated, confused by the tension my dish was picking up, coupled with the casual-sounding suggestion, then slowly made my way towards where Mum had indicated. A man was lying on a trolley in the corridor, blood dripping down into his badly swollen right eye from under a bandaged hairline. As I passed, he craned his head up and met my eyes. I edged away and ran the rest of the way through.

The shop had a stationary section with novelty notebooks in it. I bought a blue one patterned with silver moons and gold stars, along with a cheap biro. I still had fifty pence left over, so I bought a bag of butterscotch sweets to share between the three of us.

Now the man in the corridor was shouting at a passing nurse. I edged past quickly, and got back to the waiting area to find Ben crouched on the floor, partially shielding Mum from view. One of his elbows was resting on a chair, and the other lay across his knee. Mum was still sitting as she had been when I left, hands in her lap, shoulders and head pointing away from him. As I approached, she held up a hand.

"Just give me time, Ben."

"How much time? It's been sixteen years."

My mind fast forwarded through all I'd been told. I felt as if I was a jigsaw puzzle being torn apart and put back together again – this time in the correct formation. Then they saw me. Ben stood up.

"I think you'll both be all right now," he said. They nodded at each other – unsmiling. Then he walked out the room.

"So the rogue relationship was with Ben Strachan?" I asked, once it was just us.

She sighed. "Yes. Yes, it was."

I started to say “That makes me so happy”, because in a way it did. Ben and I got on well, which would be important for when he and Mum got married. And he still loved her after all these years and all that had happened, so I was convinced he would be a good and faithful husband. Mum definitely deserved a good, faithful husband. And if she made him happy too so much the better. At the same time, my dish did not detect happiness from Mum, and for me to be happy when she was not felt wrong. “Are you going to get married?” I asked instead.

“Anna, how can I *possibly* know that after a ten minute conversation following sixteen years of silence?” She snapped this question at me, but I found I didn’t mind her snapping any longer. I knew it was just because she felt raw.

“Sorry,” I said. “So what were you and he talking about, then?”

She pushed some hair behind her ear, a strange look upon her face. “Oh, nothing much.”

On Sunday we walked to church arm in arm. Mum tried to make conversation, but my answers were minimal, even curt; I had too much on my mind, what with my upcoming reading.

The minister opened the service by telling a story about Jesus curing ten lepers, who then go away dancing and happy, but only one returns to say thank you. After singing a hymn about thanking God for giving us Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he told the children in the front row another story, about a man who dies and gets a tour round heaven. He sees God’s order room, where hundreds of angels are streaming in with requests. Then he sees God’s packaging plant, where hundreds of angels are wrapping up gifts and sending them to the mail room. Next he sees God’s shipping room, where hundreds of angels are posting off gifts to people. Finally he sees God’s parcel acknowledgement room, where one angel is dozing with a cup of coffee. He said it’s easy to pray to God when we want something, but we often forget to thank him when we find ourselves blessed, and that when difficult times come along we often forget that we are *still* blessed. We said a prayer thanking God for all the blessings in our lives. Then we sang another hymn, this time about praising God in different places and in different ways.

My reading was immediately after the offering. The other children all went off to Sunday school as the wicker bowl was being passed round. I watched them leave, feeling sad that I couldn’t go too this time, but there was also a tiny stirring deep within me – like the first breeze of a hurricane. Like when the Skeleton Man called me a woman: a mixture of thrill and fear.

“We now take our reading from Psalm 100, which is going to be read to us by Anna Whitear.”

“Well *that’s* news!” said Mum, loudly. The she looked startled. “Oops,” she whispered, very softly.

I squeezed past her to the end of the pew. As I stepped onto the stage the room went quiet. A few people began whispering. The Bible was propped up on something that looked like a music stand. The minister reached over my shoulder and adjusted the microphone. Then he stepped back. I leaned forward. Breaking the silence felt like making the first footprint on a patch of new snow.

“H-hello. I’m Anna.” It sounded odd hearing my voice booming back to me from the opposite side of the room.

“Hello, Anna!” called out a few people.

There was a bit of laughter.

“Um, I’ve never done this before.” I tried not to let my jaw chatter. “I’m happy to be reading at a service about happiness.”

More slight laughter.

“When I lived in London my dad and I had a game about being happy. In August there was a house fire. I didn’t get hurt – I jumped out the window and escaped. But my father died the next day from smoke and burns.”

There were some intakes of breath, and more whispers. For some reason I was able to state the facts easily when saying them onstage, to an audience. Perhaps it was because I was just ploughing through, saying it not exactly as me but as a performer-me. Or perhaps it made it easier to detach, knowing what I now knew about Dad.

“I nearly stopped playing the Happy Game for a while after that, but then I thought, well, happiness really doesn’t count for much if it only depends on good things happening to us, does it? So I decided to carry on playing it.” I hesitated and clenched my fists. “It wasn’t easy when I first started playing it. In fact, it was never exactly *easy*...and these last couple of months have been the hardest it’s ever been. But now I’ve settled in and made friends, I’m happier than ever to be living here, in Mum’s house, with her.”

Mum pressed a hand to her mouth. The Skeleton Man bent his head.

“Anyway, this is the psalm:

‘Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!

Serve the Lord with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!’”

*“Know that the Lord, He is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”*

*“Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations’.”*

I finished with a “Thank you.”

A few people clapped, and there was some chatter which sounded like bees in a hive. I walked back up the aisle and slotted myself into the pew beside Mum, as the minister remarked that I had my career cut out. Mum put her arm around me and kept it there for the rest of the service, until the last hymn. I felt so happy I didn’t hear much of anything else, and ended up parroting social scripts rehearsed with my outreach worker when people came up to compliment me afterwards.

Mum was very quiet the next morning. As we ate, her head was turned sideways towards the kitchen sink. She was tense, but it was a different kind of tension from the kind I had seen before. Nevertheless, I decided to keep quiet and let her have her personal space.

When I came out from school she was waiting in the car park. Her eyes sparkled. A folded blue piece of A4 paper poked out from her coat pocket.

“How was your day?” I asked.

“Great”. Her voice sounded strained, but again, it wasn’t the same kind of strain I had encountered before. She said nothing on the way home, but her mouth worked, as though there was some kind of animal inside her that was struggling to get out. As she opened the garden gate I noticed she was quivering. Finally she spoke:

“I went to the solicitor’s today. Got some interesting news.”

I tried to commit to memory every little detail about her appearance, her habits, the district and her home in two seconds flat, so that if I was taken away I would be able to keep my promise and find her again. “What did he say?”

“Apparently my dad got in touch with them. The social services have cleared it too, so it’s official. The custody challenge is null and void. Do you know what that means?”

“No. What?”

“You’re staying here! With me! Forever and ever! WELCOME HOME!”

And suddenly it was as if the *real* Mum – the Mum I had been so sure existed underneath the defences, and which people had seemingly debated the existence of for years – erupted out of her, like a fully-fledged eagle exploding out of an egg. Her face split into the biggest smile I have ever seen, as she flung her arms wide. For half a second the shock and hugeness of it rendered me utterly immobile. Then I recovered, and ran into them. She gathered me up, I buried my face in her shoulder, and even though there was only half an inch between us in height, my feet left the ground.

EPILOGUE

Patty here. Anna asked me to write this bit of her story. I did suggest that maybe she could just stop there – it seemed a natural, happy ending, but she insisted on having this next bit. She said it was an important part of her finding happiness because it involved London, her brothers and sisters, Ben and me, and her father. She said that without what follows there would be a massive gap. However, from this point onward s there are bits of the story she can’t tell herself, because she doesn’t have direct experience, but I do. In the end we compromised and settled for a very long epilogue, written together, even though epilogues don’t usually contain game changers.

Please excuse me a bit if my sections are a bit bland and tedious – for all that I love to read, for all that I tried to write growing up, and for all that I would have loved to possess it, I never did discover a storytelling gene within myself. Anyway, here goes:

September morphed into October, and October into November. If the doctor’s predictions following Anna’s birth are to be believed I will never know what it’s like to biologically parent toddlers, pre-schoolers or schoolchildren, but I did have a teen – and a lot of catching up to do. Within the space of a few months I had gone from TV documentaries and packet meals to washing school clothes, falteringly expanding my cooking repertoire, attending a parents’ evening mid-term, and a piano recital on the last day before the October holidays, overseeing the removal of the double bed and the arrival of two single beds, contracting a split of the single bedroom into two smaller rooms, attending a college course on Asperger’s, ferrying books to and from the library, and trying to help with homework I hadn’t the first clue how to approach (with the exceptions of English, art and French).

Another prospect that blindsided me: CHRISTMAS. I’d sort of got out the habit of Christmas, but for lighting a candle and saying a prayer at midnight. Now I would have to

consider presents, stockings and snacks for Santa. Did she even believe in Santa? Maybe all that stuff was only for younger children and I'd be committing a Crime Most Foul.

Then there were finances. I'd have to talk to someone about writing my will, and about opening up or otherwise gaining access to some kind of Anna-specific long-term savings plan. That meant more solicitor's visits and visits to the bank. My head hurt at the prospect of navigating yet more such conversations – maybe they never ended – a fact of life – but at least they were worth it, and at least they weren't poised on a knife-edge now. And things weren't as bad as they could have been that way – though I continued to pay for the house and Anna's upkeep myself, it was a reassurance to know that Dad could contribute (indeed, insisted upon doing so) towards her future.

Towards the end of October we acquired a puppy. Involuntarily – he was only meant to stay the weekend, but he proved so well behaved and personable that said weekend stretched into a week, and then two, as my resolve quickly broke down in the face of the sheer pleasure Anna drew from him. He looked exactly like the Andrex puppy, and the vet put him at about eight weeks of age. When Anna trained him she would work him almost to the point of collapse some days, before leaving it for nearly an entire week, depending upon how much time and energy school and music commitments took up. Verbal cues also seemed to change on a daily basis. Thankfully Dad stepped in and took him during the day, and that seemed to produce results. We called him Todd, because he was found in an abandoned fox's den on one of our walks up Fiddler's Brae.

But those learning curves were nothing – nothing – compared to how it felt to effectively share Anna's emotions – her anxieties and insecurities concerning friendships and tests, her ongoing attempts to play her blessed game, and her disappointments when her more elaborate and ambitious plans didn't work out the way she had hoped. Not only that; I was having to cope with my own reactions to the twists and turns of her life. I've never found it easy to confront emotions, and suddenly I was confronting them on two fronts.

And then the ever-present, tyrannical spectre – I had to keep up with work. Dad helped out by picking up Anna and hosting her (frequently along with her friend, Jamie Bean) at his house in the two hours or more – depending on my workload – between her finishing school and my coming home or otherwise being available to parent. Even so, I had been informed by Layla, my boss, that I was treading a fine line due to my erratic schedule, and as such I frequently worked late night after night.

It was dark when I turned into the alleyway leading to McCallish court. All the petty office bickering had worn me down, and rainbows rippled around the edges of my vision.

Not another migraine, please God, not now! Just let it be a tension headache – I have a life to hold together and I can't afford to slip back!

As I was about to turn in I saw a thin, black shape spread out along the kerb. I pulled over, jumped out the car and, against all my instincts, approached to get a better look. As the shape became less and less mistakable in its form, I tried desperately to explain it away as a plank fallen from a passing truck, or a dumped bin liner, but when the butterfly hairclip glittered I couldn't pretend any more.

It felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over me. I tingled all over but otherwise couldn't feel my body at all, except for my heart, which was beating out a heavy metal rhythm, shaking my whole chest cavity and all the blood in my body. Squelching the Great Howl that threatened in favour of systematic reasoning, I snatched around in my mind for fragments of first aid acquired in the obligatory training course undertaken in Livingston, for work purposes. She couldn't be moved because of her spinal cord, and yet you're supposed to tilt the chin to clear the airways. Which of those was the right option now? I put a hand to her nose and mouth, and felt the gentle swell of breath. A little warmth returned to my extremities, and I found myself marginally more able to breathe. Her pulse was strong – good. Her face was like a crescent moon – all but a sliver was pressed into the grass, and her longish eyelashes fluttered when I touched her closed eyelids. A dried-up trickle of blood flowed from somewhere unseen lower down on her face.

By the time the ambulance arrived the shimmer around the edges of my vision was back – but this time it was white, and was not helped by the headlights. At some point Ben Strachan arrived. I don't remember calling him, but I suppose I must have done. He kept repeating "I'm so sorry this has happened," and was as white as plaster. Aren't doctors supposed to be cool with this kind of thing? But he was only human too, and he knew both of us. He had two blankets with him. He put one over Anna, and, to my shock – I had forgotten about myself in the course of everything – wrapped the other around my shoulders.

Then it was just a case of waiting for the ambulance to get here, checking Anna's vitals regularly, and walking to work off the sense of helplessness. I suppose at that point I should have been trying to work out what had happened, in order to help the paramedics when they got there, and to prevent a repeat when she got home, but all I could think of was that if Anna died I would too – she had been my last chance. Better to be dead than to cause endless death and damage to all my loved ones. It wasn't like I could shut myself away again – how could I ever force myself back into that underground cave, now that I'd felt the wind and the sun on my face, and seen the stars and planets stretching across the heavens one last time?

Perhaps her being on the roadside was just a coincidence. The pavement was lightly frosted, and there was a football resting on the grass a few feet away. The one thought that did go through my mind at the time, concerning what may have happened, was that if Jamie Bean had been playing with her, seen it take place and run away, God help him. I hadn't the energy to spare for good faith at that point, or to remind myself that he was just a child, and children get scared of getting into trouble when things go wrong.

Finally they got her onto the backboard, and I saw her face. Her mouth was slightly open, and her eyes were half-mast. Her right nostril was bleeding – that had been the source of the blood. Well, a nosebleed wasn't so bad. There was a bruise on her forehead, and a long cut across the bridge of her nose. Other than that, and mud streaks on her tracksuit, and the fact that she wasn't conscious, she appeared unscathed.

The trip to hospital lasted ten minutes. Through the straps and pads and blankets her right hand rested palm-down across her chest, the IV drip poking out a mass of tape affixed to the back of it. One of the paramedics was pressing a cold compress to her forehead.

"Please tell me she's going to be ok," I begged.

"We're doing all we can, Mrs Whitear," one of them replied. I cringed. I am not, and shall never again be known as, 'Mrs' anybody. Not even if I re-marry.

"Can I... Can I hold her hand?"

"Yes, you may."

I stroked it and turned it over. Her fingers curled inwards, like a wilted flower. Her skin tone was a little darker than mine. Her nails needed to be clipped. She had a long life-line, though of course that really didn't mean anything.

They got her through A & E in a matter of minutes and sent her for a series of X-rays. A male nurse sat me down at a coffee table and, with the solemnity of a funeral director, said:

"Mrs Whitear, we're working hard to help Anna right now. We're checking for broken bones and whether there's any swelling in her brain. We also want to see if there's damage to her spine. Can I ask what happened?"

I shook my head. I couldn't speak.

"You can cry if you like."

I didn't 'like'. I did want, but couldn't seem to do.

"It's normal."

Great. Another way in which I'm Not Normal. I bent my head until my face was in shadow. That seemed to satisfy him. Todd was still at Dad's house. Ben said he'd tell Dad

about Anna for me. The groceries were still in my car. My car was still in the road. None of that mattered right now. The road hadn't been roped off for investigation.

Once they'd set her up in ICU they led me to her room. She was surrounded by machines. Old frenemies – they couldn't save Hamish and Craig, but they tried their best. They did save me, but they isolated me from my child. And now they were keeping that child alive, but they couldn't save her father who – God knows – hurt me immeasurably, and yet had somehow still managed to turn out into the world, one of the kindest, gentlest, toughest and most forgiving souls I had ever encountered.

As I was bending over her, pushing her hair back and singing so that only she could hear, a hand rested on my shoulder. I leapt away, simultaneously wheeling round. It was Ben.

"I'll get you a chair."

I didn't answer, but he got it anyway. He also brought me a paper cup full of tea, with lots of sugar in. It seemed to calm the shivering. As I sipped it he stood close by. But he didn't touch me again.

Presently there was a knock on the door, and a woman in a white coat introduced herself as Doctor Jenner.

"Patty Harrington?" She held out her hand, like a pistol. "We've discussed Anna's X-rays. Would you like to take a seat?"

I sat down, not because I liked to, but because I knew she would tell me nothing until I did.

"Well," she began, "The good news is that Anna doesn't appear to have any broken bones. There is some mild swelling under the bruise on her head, which we've got under control, and her brain itself looks fine, so we're not too concerned at present."

I nodded.

"As such, we'd expect her to wake up fairly soon. If not, we'll have to run some more tests."

"What kind of tests?" I managed to ask. Tests to find out if she's in a coma? Perish the thought – after all that had happened she didn't deserve for her Happy Game to be tested to that extent for months, maybe even years. And what about me? It would be like being in a kind of living death – a purgatory – a place which until then I had been so sure didn't exist.

"Well, I'd be speculating if I tried to anticipate that right now. We'd only be able to tell you that after we'd assessed the situation. However, let's hope for now that it doesn't go in that direction. What we know at the moment is that one of the vertebra in her lower back has been knocked out of place, and it's putting pressure on her spinal cord, cutting off

its blood supply from about hip level down. Now, it's impossible to say what the long-term effects of that could be, because I gather you don't know how long she was lying out."

OK, so any damage was my fault for not finding her quickly enough.

"We need to bring her spine into correct alignment as soon as possible." Doctor Jenner's voice was measured and meticulous, but there was an edge of urgency which stirred a deep dread within me. She had said it was impossible to tell what the long-term effects would be – not that it was impossible to tell whether there would be long-term effects.

"Are you saying she needs surgery?" Ben interjected.

"Well, that's one option, but it's not really ideal in this case since the cord itself doesn't seem to be torn or severed – just constricted. We might do further damage, poking around in that area. And the vertebra isn't actually broken – it's just shifted. We've given her some medicine to stop the swelling. What we want to do now is give her a muscle relaxant so that she doesn't spasm, put her in traction, get her on bed rest and see how much function she can recover, before working out how to go forward from there."

"How long will that take?" Ben wanted to know.

She shook her head. "It's hard to say. It could be some time though – we're talking weeks or maybe even months. Of course, she'll go on to physiotherapy and strength training as part of the process. She's young, and that works in her favour. If you're OK with that plan we'll keep her under sedation until she's all set up, and then we'll see if we can bring her round."

Having signed the consent forms (I could barely get my signature out), and having been told I had some waiting to do, I went out to the hospital garden on my own, into the cool of the night. Around the back of the hospital there was a tiny chapel and a cemetery, which I had visited many times. Now I wandered through the rows of graves once again. There were a couple of standing stones, but most were marked by simple plaques, including all the ones along the far short end. It was in front of one of these that I now crouched:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

HAMISH THOMAS WHITEAR

22ND – 23RD MAY 1998

AND HIS BROTHER, CRAIG JONATHAN WHITEAR

22ND – 27TH MAY 1998

AND HIS SISTER, PAIGE HOPE WHITEAR

26TH JULY 1999

THEY WILL SOAR HIGH ON WINGS LIKE EAGLES

The last line was a Bible quote. It was a modern translation, deliberately devoid of any quotation marks or citations to throw Thomas off the scent. Thomas hated it when people made any mention of anything to do with religion. His parents had holed him up indoors all day every Sunday of his childhood that he could remember, except for forcing him to attend a Sunday school in the morning, where the teachers had beaten him for not saying his prayers. Had he clocked where the quote had come from he'd never have agreed to its inclusion. Then again, I had not had an easy time at the hands of religious institutions either. And yet...none of that seemed to have affected my feelings towards God. But it was more than that. I felt entitled to have at least one aspect of my wishes reflected in the memorial to my children – even if it meant not being entirely transparent. In the end he'd dismissed it as 'flowery', but for once had humoured me.

What was left of the wild bouquet from July had wilted entirely into a few straggly, brown, drooping threads. On a smooth, round piece of sandstone propped at the foot of the headstone I had added: "Kayleigh Katharine Strachan, 1996, & Archie Fergus Whitear, 1997". The white scratches were barely visible now. I attempted to retouch them with my fingernail. The locket I wear contains two photographs – one of the twins and one of Paige.

Ben squatted beside me. He was holding flowers – winter violets probably bought from the hospital's shop. That man has a knack for tracking me down. I suppose that should probably have sounded alarm bells, but, well, all I can say is that it didn't, and still doesn't. He took a Swiss army knife out his pocket, exposed the blade and – after waiting for a nod from me – scratched Kayleigh's and Archie's names deeper into the stone. Then he put it away and placed the flowers in the graveside pot, before cuddling me close and kissing the top of my head. This time, I didn't pull away.

Anna here. The first thing that went through my mind when I woke up was that my sleeping bag had grown very tight indeed around my upper chest. I was wearing a thin, loose shirt and lying on crisp sheets. Then a sharp pain shot up my back and a different, foggier pain swept through my head. Bright lights shone overhead, hurting my eyes. I screwed them up. Then I saw Mum's silhouette. I tried to lift my hand, but she took it in hers and guided it back down. I could feel my tummy under my palm, but I couldn't feel the weight of my hand on top of my tummy. My eyelids felt heavy, and the sound of low whispering was soothing. The lights faded. I tried to drift back to that warm, dark, muffled place where my mind seemed to have been hibernating.

"Anna, can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes again. The lights had been dimmed, and I could see Mum more clearly now. Ben Strachan was holding her hand. Someone in a white coat was standing on the other side of the bed from them.

“I can hear you.” My voice was high, crackly and barely more than a whisper. The words were slurred.

“Anna? I’m Doctor Jenner. Do you feel any pain?”

I shook my head, which made my back sear again.

“Don’t try to move. You’re at the hospital. You’ve had a wee accident and you’ve hurt your back. We’ve put you in traction to keep you still. Do you remember what happened?”

I played back my memories of the day like a video. At school I had researched L.S. Lowry, learned how to describe an isosceles triangle in algebraic terms, drawn the learning support room using a graphics design program, titrated some iodine into some orange juice to measure its vitamin C content, measured the wind speed, and made a vanilla layer cake. Afterwards I was dropped at the Skeleton Man’s house by the contract taxi, and took a football onto the green on my own to practice some new tactics. After that it was as if I came up against a set of white screens, and try as I might, I couldn’t get over, under or around them.

“No.” I started to cry, which disconcerted me – I didn’t even feel sad.

“Don’t cry, darling.” Doctor Jenner patted me on the shoulder. Mum dabbed my eyes with a tissue. “I’d just like to try a few tests, if you’d be all right with that.”

“OK.”

“Now, this is Lily.” Another woman came into view. She wore a pale pink nurse’s overalls, and had black hair which was clipped up, the way I like to wear mine.

“Hi!” She waved. I waved back, and saw a drip bandaged on the back of my hand.

“Now, she’s just going to brush the sole of one of your feet with a toothbrush. It may be a bit tickly.”

I waited and concentrated. I seemed to wait a very long time.

“Right, can you feel me brushing your foot?”

“No.”

“OK. I’m going to brush your knees now.” I waited a few seconds. “Can you feel that?” I couldn’t. I couldn’t feel her brushing my thighs or my lower tummy either. It was as if half my body had disappeared – like a hill fading away into mist.

“It’s all right, Anna.” Doctor Jenner drew away. “Now, Lily’s going to check your reflexes. You don’t have to do anything, but if you feel any pain or discomfort just tell us and we’ll stop. In fact, just tell us if you feel anything at all.”

“OK.” I waited, but felt nothing. After that they held my calves, pressed the soles of my feet and asked me to point my toes against them, as if I was trying to stand on tiptoes. Then they bent my legs up and asked me to try and push them straight. It was as if they were asking me to wiggle my ears – something I have never been able to do. But at least I can feel things on my ears. I couldn’t feel them in my legs or tummy.

“Are my legs asleep?”

“Something like that, yes.”

I thought of the Skeleton Man. “Are they broken?”

“No, they’re not broken. You knocked a bone out of place, and it trapped your nerves – a bit like when you sit curled up on your leg for a long time and it goes numb.”

“So will I feel better in a few minutes then?”

“Well, we’ve got the bone back into place and freed the nerve, so we’ll just have to let it heal and wait and see. It may take a while – it was trapped for a long time. Meanwhile, try and rest. And try not to worry.”

After just a few hours I began to get stiff and sore. I would have loved to be able to roll onto my side and curl up, but the straps and blocks didn’t allow for it. Besides, my legs would have been left behind. I had two bags – one taped to a hole in my tummy, and one hanging on the side of my bed. These took the place of my going to the toilet. A computer controlled where the pressure fell on my back, so that I wouldn’t get bed sores.

My nights were filled with frequent wakings from dreams of being offered up as a human sacrifice. Not being tired physically I was stuck with impossible-to-fulfil urges to jump up and down, climb things, twirl and run around. They niggled at me like a persistent itch.

The Skeleton Man visited. He taught me how to play chess. I beat him, two games to one. I also transferred some fake tattoos onto his plaster cast – a unicorn and a comet. He bought me a new mobile phone, but I couldn’t use it because of the life support equipment. Mrs No and Susan visited too. They brought some beef muck – the making of which was presided over by Molly, apparently – and we practiced our burping, with the aim of creating a secret language. Also, Cal came to visit.

One day Professor Morrison, the neurologist, removed the traction device for a few minutes and re-tested my reflexes, sense of touch and ability to move. He wrote something down, and left the room without a word. Mum’s face looked like it had done when the

policeman delivered me back home after I'd made the den at Jamie's. Meanwhile, Ben went around with his eyebrows drawn together and his mouth set in a horizontal line.

Over the following weeks I spent more and more time free of the traction device, and had two more scans. I also started a type of therapy called hydrotherapy. This is where you get into a pool of water – but it's warmer than a swimming pool – and you're there to work, not play. There aren't generally other swimmers there, although sometimes I would see one of the other nurses taking a severely disabled young girl in to swim. I overheard the nurse calling the girl Celia. Celia was a teenager, but she was quite a lot smaller than me. She couldn't control any of her limbs, or her head, and I don't think she could speak. At least, nothing I could understand. She wore a neck float which looked like a travel pillow, but which fastened at the front with velcro.

Eileen – the hydrotherapist – helped me to do certain strengthening exercises. She was from Illinois, and she loved horse riding. When I asked her whether she might teach me how to ride she said, "Sure! I know a riding centre near Uphall – they've got a rehabilitative programme that I help run."

One of the things Eileen did was put me in a monofin. This is a type of diving flipper which looks like a mermaid's tail. I couldn't move it, I but enjoyed swishing around in it nonetheless. At the end of each session we took five minutes just to play. Eileen had a very good aim – much better than mine – when it came to water fights.

In early December the care team held a meeting in my room. Doctor Jenner, Eileen, Paul and the neurologist gathered around my bed, along with Mum and Ben. It felt like a sleepover. I wished I had a midnight feast to share with them, but all I had was some toffee Ben bought me from the shop downstairs. Doctor Jenner cleared her throat.

"Well, Anna, we've discussed your progress, and you've done very well. The bones in your spine are properly aligned, and the inflammation has gone. Your joints are supple, and your upper body strength is excellent." She smiled at me. I smiled back. Then her face settled back into a neutral expression. "The question remains as to how much damage the nerves to your lower half have sustained. You don't seem to be recovering any sensation or movement, and to be honest with you, that's rather concerning." She paused and moistened her lips. "I'm thinking we need to change our goal from recovering full prior function to recovering independence."

Mum went white. "Are you saying she'll never walk again?"

"Obviously we can't absolutely rule it out, and medicine is advancing all the time, but with what we've got right now, it's not looking likely." She swallowed hard. "I'm so very sorry. I wish I had better news."

In many TV shows competitors get a montage of their best moments when they are eliminated. As I struggled to digest what I'd been told with regards to my walking, my brain did something similar with respect to my legs – only it happened in slow motion, and repeatedly – over the course of the next week. I both saw and felt myself, aged five, running across the Cornwall sand towards my granddad, doing long-jump and high-jump, tap-dancing aged eight, kicking a football around, stumbling through knee-high mud on a forest walk during a torrential downpour, scrambling through the branches of Jamie's tree, swimming the length of the local pool with my arms clasped behind my back, using the sustaining pedal on the piano, walking a beam, climbing Snowdon, bounding up the stairs of the flat... I also had a vision of all the things I had hoped to do in Scotland – huge footprints in the snow, learning to skate, dragging a sledge up to the top of Fiddler's Brae, crossing the river with Todd, using boulders as stepping stones. If only I hadn't gone to the green...

"I've referred you to a child counsellor. It's big news to take in, and it's absolutely understandable that you'll need help to adjust." I heard the voice as if I were underwater.

During this time I almost entirely stopped eating and drinking. The counsellor came and talked to me about how life was still worth living, and gave me a book to read called *Rollin' and Rockin'*, which was written by a man who lost the use of his legs as the result of a skiing accident. It was only after she had gone that it occurred to me that perhaps she thought I was trying to starve myself. In actual fact I would have loved to have been able to eat and drink properly. My stomach felt as if it was turning itself inside out from hunger, and my throat felt dry. Mum brought cheese, ham and tomato toasties into the hospital, and made me hot chocolate, but I just didn't seem to be able to swallow more than a few bites, or a few tiny sips of anything. I felt like the whale in the *Just So* story, with the raft stuck in his throat, preventing him from eating anything except for very small fish. The dietician put me on special high nutrient chocolate puddings to keep my weight up, and Mum, Ben, the Skeleton Man and the doctors spent a lot of time whispering in the corridor.

One morning they all gathered together in my room a second time. I braced myself in case they had more difficult news for me.

Doctor Jenner opened the meeting. She just went straight to the point:

"There is a trial in London, beginning in the New Year, which involves using cells from the area of the brain which controls smell, to repair spinal cord injuries like yours. How would you feel about applying for a place on that?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but she cut me off:

“Now, there are no promises of your being given a place on it, or of it being effective – much less enabling you to walk again. But if you are, and if it is, it may at least give you back some movement and sensation in your legs. How much, we can’t say. It’s early days yet, and preliminary cases are still being followed up. So far it’s been different for every patient.”

I cleared my throat, and chose my words carefully. “So...so I could apply to be in this study...and possibly walk again?”

“Don’t count on it. There are a number of risk factors. Even if all goes to plan, regaining any function at all would take a great deal of time, patience and effort on your part. You’d still require wheelchair and mobility training. Even in the best possible scenario you probably wouldn’t get all the function back that you had before. But yes, given all those things, there is a chance you could walk again in some capacity. There is also a snag. Participants are required to remain in London for the first phase of the study, for rehabilitative and monitoring purposes.”

London. London, with its market places and boroughs, museums and cathedrals, graffiti and tour boats, traffic haze and interminable red lights, oyster cards and buses, Turnham Green and Richmond Park, Torriano Meeting House, Globe Theatre, British Library, Regent’s Pond, Winter Hill and Kew Gardens. London with Mr Langton, Miss Corrigan and Mrs Taylor, my outreach worker, Alison, my friends from junior school... City of my heart...but not mine. It had been mine because it had been Dad’s. This realisation made me feel like an astronaut who is just out of reach of their spacecraft – right in front of it, looking in at the lighted windows, but totally powerless to open the door.

And yet...an astronaut doesn’t look around them and see the farmland, the new school and the church right where they are at this point in time, or a host of new friends and family found in outer space. Even if they dreamed of space for years, everything they are committed to is inside that space ship, and ultimately on Earth.

Mum and I looked at each other. “Of course if it was right, we would go wherever necessary,” she said.

“You might as well put in an application.” Doctor Jenner told us both as she handed Mum the forms. “Even if you’re offered a place you don’t have to take it. There’s a waiting list as long as my arm.”

On Christmas Eve the ward laid out pillowcases at the end of each bed. I woke in the morning to find mine filled with presents wrapped in snowflake-patterned blue paper. Over the course of the morning I opened them. They contained some chocolate coins, a tiny navy blue teddy with the Milky Way galaxy printed on its stomach, a Marx Brothers DVD,

a country snow-scene, some purple slipper socks, and a ridiculous-looking hat which Professor Morrison tried on. It had lots of stuffed tentacles of different colours sticking up in all directions, and made him look like Medusa.

In the afternoon I managed half a potato, a few scraps of turkey, a Brussel sprout and some chocolate pudding, before being wheeled out into the lightly snow-covered garden, where the Skeleton Man let Todd snuffle around my feet, tail wagging almost too fast to see clearly. Todd's tail, I mean. Not the Skeleton Man's.

On Boxing Day I ate some more chocolate pudding, then lay in bed looking out the window. I could see the orange windsock and the helipad where people were brought in and medical crews dispatched. At some point there was a knock on the door.

“Anna?” It was Sophia – the nurse on duty. “You have a visitor.”

Simon the minister poked his head round the door. “Hello Anna!” He sat on the chair beside me.

“What's in there?” I pointed at the blue leather satchel he was unslinging from his shoulder.

“Oh, bits and bobs. How's tricks?”

I shrugged.

“Enjoy Christmas dinner?”

I felt myself tense up – so many people had tried to get me to eat, and I wasn't prepared to repeat the truth again; that I really, honestly wanted to, but just couldn't. I shook my head.

“Ach. That's how it goes sometimes, isn't it?”

We played a few games of noughts and crosses, talking very little. I won most of them. “I gather you're considering participating in a stem cell trial,” he said at last.

“Yes.” I twisted my fingers. “It's in London.”

“Ah.” He nodded, looking at me hard. “That must stir up a lot of memories for you.”

I set my jaw. “My home is here. I can't see London as my home now. Not when everything my father did was false.”

He frowned. “Why do you say that?”

I told him all about the things Dad had done to Mum.

He stroked the beard he didn't have. “Anna, are you forbidding yourself from remembering him as the kind, gentle daddy you knew?”

I started to cry. It quickly turned into a howl – a long-overdue howl which counsellors have since told me was a delayed reaction to being bereft, not once, but many times over: of my dad; of my home; of my previous life; and finally, fatally, of my happy, uncomplicated memories of all of these things.

“Oh, Anna...” He offered me a tissue from a packet in his pocket – and his own eyes looked full. “He inspired you to be who you are in so many ways, didn’t he? Especially with playing your Game. Only now you feel it’s all fake – is that right?”

I nodded, feeling unbearably foolish.

“Shall I tell you what I see?”

I waited.

“I see an articulate, open-minded, compassionate, very generous-hearted and attentive young girl who always tries to see the best in people. Am I right?”

“Sometimes.” My ears went red.

“Well then. The way I see it, when a person sees the best in someone, and takes those perceptions and uses them to inspire them to grow in those qualities themselves, then even if what they saw turns out to be not quite as faultless as they imagined, they still create something real. Do you see what I’m saying?”

I shook my head, “Not really.”

“You saw good qualities in your dad, and you took them and ran with them in full sincerity, and made them your own. And they really, truly *are* your own. And that’s because of him. A worthy legacy, don’t you think?”

I thought about this. Dad *had* raised me. Almost single-handedly, until I was ten and he met Mrs Taylor, and even then, he’d still done all the hard stuff. I thought back to the smashed phone – how heavily I had leaned on those messages when I first arrived in the town – and how often I had revisited my memories to help me navigate this new neighbourhood. All courtesy of Dad, for better or for worse. I met Simon’s eyes, smiling, and saw that he was smiling back.

“With regards to your Happy Game ,” he went on, “You’re still playing that, aren’t you?”

“Um...”

“You’d better be. Because I spent all last night going through this bad boy...” He took a copy of the Bible out his satchel. “There are, as far as I can tell, eight hundred verses and passages calling people to be happy. That averages out at twelve times per book.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Sixty-six books, written over a period of fourteen to eighteen hundred years, by at least forty authors, invoking eighteen countries that exist today, spread across three continents. On top of that there are multiple translations in two thousand four hundred languages, and it remains the best-selling book of all time. Even without arguing for or against its spiritual truth, on that basis alone it seems the Happy Game has a pretty good following.”

This made me laugh.

“I’m not always the most optimistic of people,” Simon admitted.

I started to tell him that he was, but he waved my words aside:

“No, really. I find myself lamenting over things a lot in my sermons, by way of conveying points. So I’m taking that in hand. I’m still making the same points, because they’re important and not everything is easy to tackle, but I’m working on their framing. I’ve started reading a happy passage every week to keep things a bit more upbeat. I have you to thank for that.”

I gave him an impulsive hug. He went bright red – red enough to make me laugh.

“Just one more thing,” he added, “I came here today as unofficial mail man...”

He undid the buckle of his satchel, and instead of handing me envelopes one by one, he upended the whole thing onto the bed. I stared, unable to process what I was seeing. It was as if a snowdrift had swept in and covered me. I surveyed the pile of envelopes, then looked up at Simon, my throat and eyes burning. In that moment, the messages I wanted to send back to my friends didn’t have words.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said. “Don’t feel you have to write loads of replies – they didn’t do this to create a ton of work for you.” He nodded and slipped out the door.

Once I was alone I picked up an envelope. Slowly and neatly, I opened it – carefully crafting the memory. The card inside depicted about twenty cats swarming over the top of a walled garden. One of them – a black and white one – was saying to the others: “OK, troops, let’s get to work on Crazy Plant-Man’s garden!” The inside was crammed with writing:

Dear Anna,

Hope you like the card – it seemed like your kind of humour. We’ll try and get over to see you before too long. We moved into the new house last week. Jesus came too. He’s loving his new home. He’s already climbed all the trees, and is getting to grips with field mice. Not the prettiest things to discover half dead under your pillow, but so it goes... Plus he’s on his third collar. At least we know they break under pressure, so he won’t get strangled.

Kenny made some changes to the design of the East gable. We're adding a downstairs bedroom, and bathroom with a lowered sink, lowering the light switches, and levelling and widening the doorways. We're also putting a ramp out front, and a chair-height doorbell. All his idea – we're in the process of updating the planning permissions now. Perhaps when you come home you won't need these things, but they're bound to benefit somebody. We expect you to come and stay often – and your mum, of course. You're also invited to the wedding, either in person or by video-link.

Give our regards to your grandfather.

Anyway, gotta sign off now. Much love and well wishes. Keep playing your Game!

Molly & Kenny xxx”

Kenny. He had welcomed me into his home, given me tea and cake, given me plants for the Skeleton Man – even though Molly disliked the Skeleton Man at the time – and trusted me with his feelings and questions about Molly. And he wasn't even taking her away – they were adapting their house so they could welcome me in whatever happened! A stray thought cut across my mental stream of guilt, like a passing breeze. The clear-cut conviction of it took me by surprise – almost like another person's thoughts plopping into my brain. Kenny didn't hold anything against me. And in terms of what little he knew about how I felt, he didn't take it personally. Furthermore, he wouldn't want me to beat myself up over anything to do with him. I blinked, then smiled. I opened the next envelope:

“Dear Anna,

It's not the same around here without you, but the two of us are getting on much better these days. I've been going for daily walks, and my health has improved some. I've also been going to cognitive behavioural therapy. If I ultimately have the surgery – and I feel it's in sight at last – I like to think we might end up on the same ward.

With best wishes,

“Mrs No” (aka. Heather Snow!) x”

“Mrs No.” “Mrs Snow.” Molly must have talked to her. I whispered the two names several times, and laughed aloud.

The next four envelopes contained hand-drawn pictures from Skylar, Emily, Kirsty and Mary. Joanne had written a longer letter:

Dear Anna,

Joanne here. Hope you're doing well. We all miss you! Following your reading the church seems to have become a much brighter, warmer place. Some people aren't entirely enamoured with that, but such is the way of things, I suppose.

I thought you might be interested to know that Sam and I are renewing our wedding vows. We sat down and had a long talk. We know we have a lot of patching up to do, but we realised there's no 'right' time to do such a thing – if we really want this, we'd better just go for it. Anyway, I thought that news would make good ammunition for your Game.

Big love from the Adamson clan!

Joanne *et al.* xox

Next there were five letters from other members of the church, and ten short notes from casual acquaintances at school. Miss Marney had sent me a card, which simply read: "Come back soon! There's a wheelchair basketball team in Livingston if you're interested. x" There was one from Rachel too, and a letter from Cal, written on what looked like a page torn from an exercise book:

Dear Anna, I hope your doing well and that youll be back soon. The sensory tents just big enough for a wheelchair! Do you have instant messenger or videolink? I'm listing the things you and me can do when your back. Jess says hi.

Anyway got to go, I'm making a dining room chair, talk to you soon!

Love Cal xox

One of the remaining envelopes was cream-coloured, and heavier in texture than the others. My name was written on the front in a small, slanting hand which added loops to lower-case 'L's and 'Y's. The ink lay on the paper more thickly and uniformly than it does with a biro, making less of an indentation on the paper. The lines were narrower on the vertical strokes of letters, and wider on the horizontal ones.

Dear Anna,

You wouldn't think I had much left to tell you, given how often I visit. Todd has learned how to dig on command, so I've set him to work digging a vegetable patch. By this time next year we'll have home grown turnips, peas, broad beans and potatoes in the freezer. Jamie has been helping, of course. My cast got adjusted again last week.

There is something I've been wanting to tell you for a while, but have held off on to be sure, and until a suitable moment arrived. An incident occurred in December involving Jamie, some other schoolchildren, a knife hidden in a sock, and an attempted attack on me in the dead of night – Chopin-time, to you and me. As it turned out, Jamie had gone along with the intention of defending me. Luckily, the police turned up before any serious damage was done to people, pets or property.

Following the incident, Carol felt she could no longer care for Jamie, and gave him up to the children's home. However, I have had a long think about this, and if the relevant authorities are willing, I shall be taking him in to live with me as my foster-son, as soon as I have finished undergoing the necessary training and disclosure checks. It shouldn't be too long.

Of course, this does not in any way mean that I am attempting to replace you. Nothing and nobody could ever do that. I just remembered you telling me how worried you were about him, and I realised that both he and I need a friend. Consider my telling you a late Christmas present.

With love always,

'The Skeleton Man'

So Jamie would soon be safe from the Children's Home. Well, safe for a while at least. Perhaps the Skeleton Man would adopt him later. Then neither of them would ever be lonely again. And the grandchildren's room was so much nicer than his room at Carol's. I hoped there wasn't a parent like Mum somewhere, missing him and fighting to get him back. Not just because that might mean him going away, but because I wouldn't wish that on any parent, knowing Mum and all she'd gone through. A funny thought came to me: if the Skeleton Man was now Jamie's foster father, that made him Mum's foster-brother, and therefore my foster-uncle! By coincidence the next envelope contained a note from Jamie himself:

Dear Anna,

Grandpa John has been working with me on spelling and grammar. Can you tell? I hope you're happy and that the food is ok. Grandpa John says the food was terrible when he was in hospital.

See you soon,

Jamie.

P.S. Here is a paw print from Todd. I dropped the letter and he trod on it.

I experienced a jolt when I opened the last envelope and saw a folded piece of blue A4 paper. Perhaps this wasn't for me at all but for Mum, and got muddled in with the rest by mistake. Perhaps there had been a mistake with the custody challenge being dropped, or the social services had revoked their decision... Well if that was the case then Mum and I would deal with it together. I opened it.

Dear Anna,

Knock 'em all flat!

With best wishes from everyone at McCauliff & Co'.

In a different colour, at the bottom of the card:

‘(Especially Anna. P.S. Drinks dispenser’s behaving much better these days!)’

Patty here. I stood on the front doorstep. The morning was nippy, but the sun was out. It had a halo of ice crystals around its circumference. I knocked, resisting the urge to creep away. I had never taken the time to stop and talk to either of them – and yet they had always said a friendly ‘hello’ to me in passing. The lock clicked on the other side of the door – point of no return.

Helen was holding a tiny baby. I’d forgotten. Brilliant – palpitations before I’ve even stepped over the threshold. And I hadn’t even brought a gift. Some wise woman I would have made.

“Patty! She smiled at me. “Meet Lizzy.”

Lizzy snatched her fist back from Helen’s hand with a disgruntled squeak. I couldn’t blame her – she must have sensed my reluctance.

“Pardon her manners!” Helen laughed. “And mine – come on in. Simon’s in a kirk session meeting, but if I can help...”

In the hallway I passed a pram, a carry-seat and some baby socks drying on a radiator in the hallway. The living room was (mostly) baby-things-free. At Helen’s urging I perched myself on the arm of a light brown armchair, and stared at a blank plasma TV screen while she made some tea. Tea – comforter of the lost, calmer of krakens, restorer of the withered, blessing of the benevolent. Once she had handed me my cup, she sat down and crooned to Lizzy. I watched her for a few minutes. She didn’t incite me to make small-talk.

“I can’t do parenting,” I blurted out at last.

She looked up and raised her eyebrows. “Are you saying that because of Anna’s accident?”

I stared at the rift between my two knees. “Not just that,” I mumbled. The cup was warm between my hands. They would have been clammy without a source of heat – and not because the room was cold. I fought the urge to glare at Helen for what I pre-empted she would say. Something about God working in mysterious ways and using even bad things for His good purpose. Maybe something about sending blessings and messengers in disguise. Well, she could leave all that at the door. I was fed up with being a bad thing and a mysterious way for so many people, for so long, and Anna was no messenger of God. Nobody deserves that onus. As for her accident being a blessing in disguise – well any such blessings could go to hell as far as I was concerned.

“Can I ask you a question?” To my surprise Helen sounded vulnerable. “I wouldn’t ask this of a nonbeliever...”

“Go on then...”

She seemed lost for a moment. “Well, I haven’t been a parent for very long. And I don’t know what it’s like to go through half of what you’ve gone through. But my question would be, where do you believe guilt belongs?”

A gust of wind whistled outside, and a branch began to knock against the window. “On the cross, I suppose. But that’s the easy answer...”

“I know what you mean. But, well, easy for whom?”

This registered like a slap.

“I could dig around for something about God clearing obstacles rather than laying them but, well, fat lot of good that lecture does when I give it to myself! Doesn’t make me resent the obstacles any less. Maybe I’m just hard-nosed.” She chuckled wanly. “Plus you only have to look at a newspaper to wonder if that isn’t too simplistic an outlook.”

Lizzy started to cry. Helen undid her top and put her to the breast. In that instant I had an almost overwhelming urge to kill something. I reeled, and seemed to look back at myself with a newfound fear.

“I’m so sorry for all you’ve gone through.” Helen’s gaze was intense and luminous.

“It’s ok.” The words came out my mouth automatically, and before I’d had time to think.

She looked down again. “I must say I don’t feel well equipped to offer anything helpful, if that’s what you came here for... I wouldn’t presume to know, or to understand. But I suppose what I can say is that when I start worrying about things I can’t undo, I just try to remember those feelings died on the cross, and I tell myself that there they must stay.” Her eyebrows seemed to fight with the rest of her face. “I mean, what’s the point in resurrecting those?”

I sat back, wondering what things Helen’s past might contain that would give rise to feelings that needed to be killed again and again. It occurred to me that when you walk down the street and see people pass in the opposite direction, it’s like they’re ships. You don’t know what cargoes they might be carrying below deck. For years I had felt like whenever people looked at me they could see right through me like I was a ground-floor flat without curtains – see the custody battle, the losses, the separation, the snuffed connections. Obviously the small community didn’t help – everyone knowing everyone, just about. On top of that, I always assumed everyone else had such simple, successful, happy,

uncomplicated lives where I had failed. But perhaps not. And perhaps most people really don't think so much about that kind of thing in the moment as they walk past each other.

I no longer felt like I wanted to kill something. In that still, quiet, in-between time – measured only by the continued knocking on the window – a huge, cold, jagged weight seemed to drop away through a trapdoor in my soul.

Open Letter from Anna Whitear, Featured in Alive!

First of all, thanks to Joanne and the other editors for publishing this, even though it isn't very religious. I was really touched by all the letters you sent, so it seemed right that I should write something to you in return. I loved the surprise party – thank you for not having any party poppers or rubber balloons or anything like that, for being gentle, and for coming into view one person at a time. How fortunate that there wasn't enough room for everyone in the visitor's lounge! Holding it outside meant I got to see Todd and hear the birds, and also to see my brothers' and sisters' gravestone. Seeing it made them truly real – I have brothers and sisters! I believe I'll meet them somehow, at some point. It was also fortunate that there wasn't any rain or sleet.

Skylar – thank you so much for laying the wreath for Dad – it meant more than I can ever express. And Simon, thank you for marrying Mum and Ben – they caught you off-guard asking you to do that, didn't they!

It's been a month now since we settled into our Sunshine Flat. There was a winter storm as we were coming down in the van, but I didn't mind that, because I knew where we were going, and why we were going – and I was excited, even though I knew it was going to be hard. Mum and Ben were with me, and I knew you were all with me in spirit, too.

The flat is FANTASTIC! We're staying with two other girls. One of the girls is called Katy. She's twelve. She hurt her spine playing on a swing which broke. She's still recovering from surgery, and has the most beautiful collection of hand-made nightgowns which have been passed down through her family. The other girl is Clara. She's been paralysed on one side for most of her life. She's in a lot of pain which nobody can really explain, but she's taking a few steps. We have a chore rota which the wardens have set up – it's supposed to make it feel less like hospital and more like home. This week I'm washing up, Clara or her mum are taking out the bins, and Katy or her dad are vacuuming. The next week it all changes round so we don't get bored. They have a really fun sit-on vacuum cleaner. All the sinks, shelves, light switches and work surfaces are lowered so we can reach everything easily from our wheelchairs.

In the living room there's one of those wide-screen TVs, as well as a really good electric piano which I can play any time I like. It's better than the keyboard in the church, though not as good as a real piano. I'm learning a few mazurkas. If people are sleeping or wanting peace and quiet I just plug in the headphones. Ben found me a sustaining pedal which I can operate using my tongue, so I've been getting used to that. It's not as big a change as you'd think. I'm thankful that the vertebra I knocked out of place was low enough down that I still have full use of my hands and fingers.

I miss home. I miss going to church, going to see Mrs No with Molly, gardening with Jamie and the Skeleton Man, and just venturing down the street and seeing people I know. Mum misses it too. She's getting counselling to help her re-learn how to make friends and cope with her own problems. She has step by step guides for talking to people in different situations, in order to make and keep connections. It's not unlike the social stories I used to have when I was little. It isn't that she doesn't know how to do these things – it's just that it's been such a long time she's got a little bit rusty. She's also getting help for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is when certain everyday things make you really stressed because your subconscious mind associates them with bad experiences in the past. The type of help she's getting for that is called 'dialectical behaviour therapy', which is a new one from America. It involves talking back and forth, learning to name your feelings, telling yourself it's OK to feel them, and then using problem solving strategies to work out what to do with them, instead of letting them rule you.

Sometimes I get scared you might all forget about us while we're away, and that everything might have changed by the time we get back – but I know those are silly fears. Even if things *did* change it would still be home, and you would still all be you.

Anyway, I'm running out of space so I'd better stop. There's so much I'd like to say! I still haven't told you about the clown-doctors who came round last Friday, or the Bubble Lady who created a giant bubble around Mum or the couple with the therapy dog, or the two creative writing students who got Katy to write her first story. She has the wildest imagination of anyone I've ever met – it gets her into trouble when she does things without thinking. Meanwhile, Clara is producing a pamphlet of poetry – mostly about goats.

As for me, they're saying I should consider turning my bits of notebook-writing into a proper memoir. I don't know about that – I don't know who would read it – but I'll certainly give it some thought.

My life is full, I feel all your prayers, and I'm happy.

I am happy.

I am so happy.

COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

A Brief Synopsis of *Pollyanna*

Pollyanna tells the story of Pollyanna Whitear – an eleven-year-old girl who is sent to live with her rich, prim, cold and distant aunt, Miss Polly Harrington, in the village of Beldingsville, Vermont. Pollyanna has an unfailing capacity for gladness, as the result of a ‘Just Being Glad’ game taught to her by her late father, which involves finding something to be glad about in every situation.

Initially the village – and in particular her Aunt Polly – find Pollyanna baffling and infuriating. However, as time goes by, her attitude wins her the friendship of even the most misanthropic of characters.

Key supporting characters include orphan Jimmy Bean – later adopted by the estranged and irritable Mr John Pendleton – the eternally dissatisfied invalid Mrs Snow, and the heartsick Doctor Chilton, who – initially unbeknownst to Pollyanna and Nancy – had been in love with Aunt Polly for the last fifteen years. When Pollyanna has an accident and becomes a paraplegic, with little prospect of visiting people again, she becomes depressed. This so distresses all her friends that they flock to the Harrington household to deliver messages of gladness to Pollyanna through Aunt Polly. Later, a much-buoyed Pollyanna writes a letter to her friends from her bed at a rehabilitation centre, where she is learning how to walk again, and where the now-mellowed and affectionate Aunt Polly has married Doctor Chilton at Pollyanna’s bedside.

The concept behind the Glad Game has captured imaginations for decades. It continues to give rise to modern-day fictions such as Tali Roland’s *The Pollyanna Plan* (2014, Seattle: Lake Union Publishing), and the term *Pollyanna* has entered into the Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. eds. 2009, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford), where it is defined as “...[A]n excessively cheerful and optimistic person”.

Pollyanna’s influence extends into the field of psychological research, with the ‘Pollyanna Hypothesis’ stating that “[T]here is a universal human tendency to use evaluatively positive words...more frequently and diversely than evaluatively negative words...in communicating.” (Boucher & Osgood, 1969). Likewise, ‘The Pollyanna Principle’ was used to denote a phenomenon whereby people “...[P]rocess pleasant information more accurately and efficiently than less pleasant information” (Maitlin & Gawron, 1979).

In general, the word ‘Pollyanna’ connotes unrealistic or blind optimism. This is most likely due to a certain friction in modern culture, between ideas of ‘niceness’ and ideas

of being intellectually empowered. Virginia Woolf describes her struggle with the clash of the onus to be the idyllically gentle, courteous, charitable and bidable woman, and the desire to be an honest and pertinent literary critic, in her essay, 'Professions for Women', in which she talks about having to kill "[T]he angel in the house" (Woolf, 2009, p.141).

This strikes me as a disservice to Porter's story, and not a true reflection of the story's essence, because it over-simplifies the story's use of Pollyanna's Game, with respect to the treatment of very poignant themes such as homelessness, chronic illness, loneliness and hypocrisy. I feel there is often a failure to take into account the various contexts and different ways in which it is played, as well as its outcomes, and the difficulties that are depicted as arising for Pollyanna in her attempts to play it on a nonstop basis. *Pollyanna* is a story of grappling and of severe testing of such an attitude; in fact it could even be argued that it is a story which demonstrates how the complexities of society and circumstance challenge such a simplistic attitude, leading in turn to equally complex consequences arising from any serious attempt to live by it.

Such themes are arguably even more relevant today, and thus the story as a whole deserves continued consideration. I hope that one effect of this research, and of my novel, will be to introduce the story to modern-day readers, especially within the context of Asperger's syndrome, but through that, within the context of difference in many forms. For those already familiar with the story, my hope is that as the result of my novel and commentary, these readers will look anew at the story in its entirety, and see in it fresh nuances, from different angles.

What is Asperger Syndrome?

The diagnostic criteria for Asperger's, as well as clinical conceptualisations on the part of professionals, have changed over time. In fact, this is something that complicates any discussion or contextualisation of such conditions in a context of fictional works, Hans Asperger – after whom the condition is named, first used the term 'autistic psychopathy' in his 1944 paper, "Autistic Psychopathy in Children", (Asperger, 1944).

In 1981 researcher Lorna Wing published her paper, *Asperger Syndrome: A Clinical Account* (Wing, 1981), which did much to popularise the term 'Asperger Syndrome' (Frith, 1991, p119).

The increase in diagnoses of Asperger's attained even greater momentum with the inclusion of the term 'Asperger's Disorder' in the 4th edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or 'DSM-IV'), published in 1994.

The diagnostic term did not feature in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (or 'DSM-V'), as its traits were absorbed into the criteria for the more generalised diagnostic label, 'Autistic Spectrum Disorder' (or 'ASD'). In later sections of this commentary I shall make reference to 'Aspie' and 'autistic' ways of being in acknowledgement that they are now considered to be part of the same continuum. ASD was further broken down into several levels, based on how profoundly the traits affected those with the condition, with 'Level 1 ASD' corresponding to what used to be known as 'Asperger Syndrome' (Kutscher, 2014).

Despite the discontinuation of its clinical use, the term 'Asperger's' is still relevant due to its history of application over the past twenty years. In the earlier days of its use it was not clear how Asperger's related to autism – whether they were different degrees of the same condition, or whether Asperger's was a different but related condition (Frith, 1991, p1). Moreover, for a long time the term 'Asperger's' connoted greater verbosity in early childhood (Kutscher, 2014), as well as better prospects for future integration into society, and average intelligence (Frith, 1991, p4).

This early distinction is strongly reflected in many works of fiction centred around characters portrayed as having an Asperger diagnosis. Fictional Asperger characters are generally portrayed as highly verbose and intelligent, and although they are usually signposted by expositional means within the narrative or the dialogue of supporting characters as being unusual in certain ways when appraised according to the standards of others around them, they are seen to undertake significant feats of social interaction. This is not as uniformly the case with characters intentionally associated with the label of 'autism'. Since fiction treats the two labels so separately, I see it as more beneficial for the purposes of this discussion to focus on works of fiction portraying characters described as having Asperger's specifically, though my discussion of non-fiction sources will include some pertaining to autism as well, depending on their relevance.

Although the diagnostic label carries more transient secondary connotations as I have already mentioned, broadly speaking, Asperger's syndrome is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition which causes difficulties in social interaction, communication and imagination (Frith, 1991, p3). The diagnosis of Asperger's is typically associated with a lack of key early childhood behavioural patterns displayed by most children when growing up. Asperger children often ground themselves in strict routines, foregoing engagement in typical childhood imaginative play and demonstrating reduced interactions with their peers. They may display very literal, one-track thinking in terms of language, problem-solving and personal interests, may engage in one-sided conversations,

may have trouble inferring others' viewpoints as well as non-verbal aspects and implications of communication, and may inadvertently cause discomfort due to very un-dressed and forthright styles of communication and social expression.

All of these traits are character aspects which fiction authors have drawn upon in the creations of their Asperger protagonists.

Terminology

Much early medical literature pathologises Asperger traits, advocating rehabilitation of such individuals to a more 'normal' presentation for their own success and independence. Researcher Uta Frith asserts that "There is no getting around the fact that autism is a handicap," (Frith, 1991, p31), and though she acknowledges that "...[I]t is possible for the Asperger person to learn social routines so well that he or she may strike others as merely eccentric" (p20), she concludes that, "Only a few Asperger syndrome individuals adapt so successfully as to pass even fleetingly for normal," (p23), and that most will always remain 'odd' (p4), 'strange' (p5), 'supremely egocentric' (p5), and 'misfits' (p7).

Likewise, Hans Asperger refers to certain behaviours of Aspies as 'negativistic, naughty and aggressive', 'aloof' and 'spiteful', characterising his children as actually enjoying perpetrating trouble. Of one of his case studies, Asperger remarked, "...[O]ne could not help feeling that he was not listening at all, only making mischief" (Asperger, 1944).

Having a diagnosis of Asperger's myself, I consider my traits to be an intrinsic part of who I am, and would not wish to isolate, pathologise and excise my Asperger traits any more than I would want to isolate, pathologise and excise any other part of myself. I am one of many people with Asperger's who feel the same way. In the collection *Loud Hands, Autistic People: Speaking* (Bascom, 2012, The Autistic Press, Washington DC), editor Julia Bascom comments in her introduction that an overarching communication runs through the diversity of writings by the many autistic essayists whose works are featured: "[I]t starts with the basic, foundational idea that *there is nothing wrong with us. We are fine*" (Bascom, 2012, p8). This ethos is replicated in Loftis's academic discourse, *Imagining Autism* (2015, Indiana University Press, Indiana).

The terminology I have chosen to use henceforth in this discussion seeks to remove implied negative value judgements and medicalisation of aspects of the condition.

Instead of 'disorder' I shall continue to use the word 'condition'. Instead of using the term 'Asperger syndrome' I shall henceforth refer to the diagnosis as 'Asperger's'.

Instead of talking about ‘patients’ or ‘sufferers’ I shall employ the term ‘Aspies’ – a term embraced by many with Asperger’s.

Autistic self-advocate Jim Sinclair is widely credited with having coined a term for those without Asperger’s or autism, which does not imply a value judgement on either party – ‘neurotypical’ (Walker, 2014). Although useful in empowering more even-handed discussions, I consider the term problematic in that it is not coupled with a definition of ‘typical’ neurology, and also because not all people without Asperger’s are in fact ‘typical’, neurologically. Accordingly, I shall stick with the terms ‘Aspie’ and ‘non-Aspie’ for the remainder of this discussion.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHARACTERISING POLLYANNA AS ASPIE-LIKE

It is not my intention to attempt to ‘diagnose’ Pollyanna with Asperger’s in a way analogous to that used by real-life psychologists. Loftis carries out such evaluations on a selection of fictional characters within *Imagining Autism*, however, I feel this is problematic for a number of reasons. First, Pollyanna is a fictional character, and exists only as a series of narrated behaviours and dialogic exchanges within a written work. As David Lodge says of fictional characters in his essay, “Consciousness and the Novel” (in Lodge, D. *Consciousness and the Novel*, 2002, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, vintage digital edition): “There is no empirical reality against which we can check the truth of [the author’s] account of [the character’s] consciousness” (p37). When evaluating people for Asperger’s in real life, assessing outward behaviour *in situ* is a key aspect of the diagnostic process. Elements of Pollyanna’s characterisation may, of course, have been modelled on the character of a real person or people, but to present knowledge, Pollyanna herself remains a work of fiction

No personal commentary by Porter on her creation of the character of Pollyanna has come to light at this time, so whilst it is possible to argue that the character of Pollyanna displays characteristics commonly associated with autism, I feel it is impossible to comment on the author’s intentions in creating the title character, or on her regard of people who would now be thought of as autistic, or the characteristics now associated with autism and Asperger’s, based on her crafting and treatment of the character Pollyanna. However, the thematic treatment of difference as a positive thing within the book, coupled with the story being set in Vermont, may have been something of a counter to widely-held, Vermont-based conceptualisations of difference at the time – conceptualisations which would later lead to the activation of the state’s eugenics programme (Kaelber, 2012). Pollyanna’s difference is initially off-putting to the inhabitants of Beldingsville, yet it ultimately proves to be a good thing for the community, thereby conveying a message that difference should be given a

chance to flourish in its natural state, and should not just be reflexively stamped out or corrected to a more socially normative state, on a basis of first impressions.

Hans Asperger's 1944 paper also took pains to stress the value of difference with regards to his subjects' special interests, and their creative applications of language. Asperger's legacy has been double-edged for contemporary Aspies, due to his negative treatment of elements of his Aspie subjects' ways of being within his discourse.

Knowledge of such contexts may make these diagnoses and stories seem time-locked, but Vermont-like attitudes towards autistic difference (I include Asperger's within the term 'autistic' here, solely in the context of this observation) are still very much alive, and still very powerful, in large organisations and sections of the general public in the western world. Diagnosed Aspie and autism researcher Wendy Lawson describes how celebrity Jenny McCarthy has promoted the term 'boo boos' for her son's autistic behaviours (Lawson, 2008, p97) – implying that they represent something wrong like a bruise or a cut. Lawson goes on to note:

“Neither valued for their neurological difference, nor heard regarding their perspectives on the social implications of their disability, autistic people have been subject to treatment that seeks to normalise them or, as history has shown, institutionalise and segregate them. Given IQ tests and other measures constructed for the typical majority and not originally intended for them...autistic people come to be considered 'wrong', 'abnormal', 'sick', 'victims' and 'hopeless', and are therefore continually set up for failure.”

In this same chapter, Lawson also cites charities with names such as Generation Rescue, Cure Autism Now, Fighting Autism.org and Safe Minds as inherently contributing to this aura of fear-inducing defect (Lawson, 2008, p98). One of the most chilling accounts of organisational 'correction' of autistic behaviour is autistic researcher Shain Neumeier's summary of practices developed by, and carried on throughout the history of, the Judge Rotenberg Centre (Neumeier, 2014), which describes the routine use of strong electroshock conditioning within the institution, ostensibly to train autistics into 'normal' behaviour.

Clearly, though Pollyanna is not a real character, differences like hers, and the story's message and the need of it, have their roots in the real world. Nevertheless, the earliest descriptions of Asperger's traits in medical literature were not until 1944. Hall notes the controversial nature of retrospectively 'diagnosing' historical characters with conditions that were only described after the time in which these stories were written (Hall, 2016 p110). Anachronistically diagnosing a fictional character involves two pretences and one supposition: a pretence that the character has a real and objective existence off and beyond the page; a pretence that such a label could apply to the culture of the time; and a supposition

that the story world, were it really to exist, would mirror a culture in which the diagnostic label in question would have any meaning (if everyone in a culture has Aspie traits, then there is no contrasting normative backdrop against which difference can give meaning to the diagnosis).

On top of all this, many real life Aspies do not meet all the diagnostic criteria, and the criteria they do meet often differ from one another. This is especially the case in female Aspies, who often display either different traits from their male counterparts, or else are able to mask their traits to a greater extent (Attwood, 2014). Once again, these people exist off the page, as, in many cases, do the justifications for applying the label. Therefore, should Pollyanna not tick all the boxes, such a puritan approach would seriously undermine my argument for her as being Aspie-like.

Finally, attempting to faux-formally ‘diagnose’ Pollyanna would make it harder to draw upon modern-day Aspie fictions in my discussion. Fictional depictions of Aspies often differ from, build upon, or extend the implications of the strict diagnostic criteria. For example, in Nancy Ogaz’s *Buster and the Amazing Daisy* (2002, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia), Daisy, the Aspie protagonist, attributes her need for things to “[B]alance out and match right” (p51) to her Asperger’s, although there is no requirement in any Asperger’s diagnostic criteria for a person to have a compulsive need for things to match and balance out.

Fictional works also make use of a range of different types of sources (including personal experience), from a range of different times, during which descriptions and conceptualisations of the condition have changed due to the culturally fluid nature of the label. Therefore, an Aspie character is unlikely to be created based solely on, and fulfil all of, any one set of descriptions or diagnostic criteria. Again, Hall notes a ‘tendency to conflate very different conditions into a single category...in early discussions of autism’ (Hall 2016, p109). This is a practice that I believe still influences Aspie fiction today, since it is a process many authors of Aspie fiction will likewise undertake – or at the very least they will come into contact with the effects of other people having undertaken it, in the course of carrying out research into the condition that will underpin the creation and treatment of their fictional characters.

Therefore, since I am a creative writer and also a reader with my own subjective experiences of Asperger’s that are in part founded on my own past experiences with Aspie fiction – and these will in part influence my impression of *Pollyanna* as Aspie-like – I feel it useful to incorporate a process of close reading, and a consultation of a selection of what I believe to be the most relevant Aspie fiction ‘case studies’ at this time, into my discussion,

as well as consulting medical literature, to highlight the parallels between Pollyanna's characteristics, key Aspie traits and traits in fictional Aspies. Such an approach is more likely to reflect the type of mosaic portrait of Asperger's arrived at, and portrayed by, the fiction author. As Susan Suleman notes, subjective, creative interpretations alone can be a source of inspiration for new works of fiction. In her essay, 'War Memories: On Autobiographical Reading' within her volume, *Risking Who One Is*, she notes that the urge to read in accordance with aspects of one's life, and the urge to write one's life, are connected, saying: "The idea I want to pursue here is that the autobiographical imperative applies not only to writing about one's life, but to reading about it; to reading *for* it; reading, perhaps, in *order* to write about it" (Suleiman, 1994, p204). It is this type of reading that she terms 'autobiographical reading'.

In the case of the fiction author a similar reading process may take place, but not necessarily an autobiographical one, in that it may not just be aspects of the author's own life that shape the creation of their characters and their readings of other fictional characters. I suggest the term 'biofictional construction' to denote the authorial process of creating a fictional character's inner life – of which biofictional reading on the part of the author will form an aspect.

A third type of autobiographical 'reading' may occur in everyday life. Both Hans Asperger (in Frith, 1991, p35) and Uta Frith (Frith, 1991, p4) note that once one is familiar with the traits of Asperger's, Aspies are highly recognisable. This, coupled with the increasing public infatuation with Asperger's through mediums such as film, television, radio and literary fiction, means that people are recognising Aspie traits as they understand them, in others, to an increasing degree, including in literary classics such as Sherlock Holmes, as well as posthumously and hypothetically in factual historical figures such as Sir Isaac Newton.

In some cases, this type of 'Aspie-spotting' serves as a normalising process for those still struggling emotionally with the medical application of the label to a loved one, along with all its lifelong implications. Again, using autism as an example of this, YouTube vloggers Cheryl and Mike Riley – who have a young autistic son named Jack – share their own anecdote of opportunistic 'autism-spotting' in their video podcast series, *The A-Word, Autism* (2011). In their first podcast covering Jack's diagnosis, Mike relates a story of taking Jack for a haircut, and seeing a fifteen-year-old boy monologuing about the film *Toy Story 3*, before abruptly excusing himself and leaving. He states:

"I go, 'A-word [the couple's term for 'autism']?', and she [his wife] goes, 'Oh yeah!'" Talking about how this autism-spotting has affected them, he says:

“Maybe it just helps to think everybody has it a little bit” (The A-Word, Autism, 2001, 7:09-7:51).

In a similar way, inspiration for my own novel, *Anna*, came from reading Pollyanna’s depicted behaviours and certain parts of her dialogue and thinking, “That’s just like an Aspie character – as is that, and that!” From there I began to speculate on whether Pollyanna’s having Asperger’s would alter the story or the character significantly. I came to the conclusion that, when one takes all the different things the label has meant over the years and creates a mosaic picture of Asperger’s based on its portrayal in modern-day popular fiction and medical literature, the label and its implications sufficiently fit the pattern of her behaviours, did not alter the story arc, and, in fact, made it easier to imagine what the character might plausibly do in hypothetical situations not depicted within the story. In other words, Pollyanna gave me the impression of an autistic presence within the story.

ASPIE FICTION CASE STUDIES

The fictional texts that I have drawn upon are texts which are targeted at teens and children of late primary school age, mostly written in the late nineties and the early twenty-first century. A lot of Aspie fiction is written for this age-group. This is understandable in terms of when a diagnosis of Asperger’s is likely to occur, given the structure and demands of school. Attending school successfully requires a level of social intuition which may render more apparent any neurodevelopmental differences, prompting assessments and diagnoses. This is even more the case for secondary school – if Aspies are able to integrate into primary school, the added social pressures, undertones and responsibilities of secondary school may prove too much.

More recently there has been a wave of adult and late teenage works within the crime genre that feature Aspie protagonists, such as *Rubbernecker*, by Belinda Bauer (2013, Bantam Press, London), *Asperger Sunset*, by Carol Hornung (2013, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, South Carolina), *Trueman Bradly, Aspie Detective*, by Alexei Maxim Russell (2011, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia), and *The Stages: A Novel*, by Thom Satterlee (2012, Bookspan, US). Since *Pollyanna* is a children’s book in the family genre, I thought it inappropriate to use these works to underpin my impression of a resemblance. They are texts with entirely different emphases and basic styles, written for different target audiences, and any differences in them would reflect these considerations as much as the authors’ different treatments of Asperger’s. Treating them as similar to children’s fictions featuring Aspie protagonists, simply because they, too, feature

Aspie protagonists, would be like treating a cube and a sphere as similar simply because they are both 3D.

Three of the books included in my case studies – Kathy Hoopman’s *Lisa and the Lacemaker* (2002, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia), Katherine Erskine’s *Mockingbird* (2012, Usborne Publishing Ltd, London) and Nancy Ogas’s *Buster and the Amazing Daisy* (2002, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia) – feature female Aspie protagonists as the main characters. They are depicted as being approximately within the same age group as the character Pollyanna, and are portrayed in more varied ways than their male Aspie counterparts, in terms of their difficulties and interests.

I felt it was important to consult these works, not just because they depict characters of the same age and gender as Pollyanna, but because Pollyanna’s difficulties and manners of interaction are not always as reminiscent of male child Aspie characters, as they are of female child Aspie characters. Like most of the male characters she is portrayed as being extremely literal in her semantic interpretations, yet she does not have a preoccupation with numbers, which many of the male protagonists have. Nor is she portrayed as having the degree of sensory problems frequently depicted in male characters, but which are typically more understated in the portrayal of female ones. I felt that adding in these books would present a more rounded impression of fictional Asperger’s, and would open up discussion of Aspie traits not commonly discussed or portrayed in the context of Aspie fiction. This has implications both for future disability studies-related literary discourses, for future discourses about what constitutes an autistic presence within a text, and for future discourses on the crafting of fictional Aspie characters.

Finally, some of the books are ones I chose for personal reasons. I was diagnosed with Asperger’s in 2002, and at that time I read the three books which comprise Kathy Hoopman’s ‘Asperger Adventure’ series. This sparked an investigation into other Aspie fictions, which at the time all contributed to my general understanding of the condition and its traits. Although my perceptions have evolved since then, aspects of those initial impressions were re-evoked upon reading *Pollyanna*.

Where possible, I have taken my choice of Aspie fiction from a diverse range of authors and publishers, as I want my work to primarily reflect a range of individual impressions of the condition, as opposed to any one author’s or publisher’s overriding interpretations or ethos.

In the vast majority of my Aspie fiction case studies, Aspie protagonists are explicitly cited as having Asperger’s within the stories themselves, either within the narrative or the

dialogue. I wanted there to be no question in any of the works that the protagonist with Aspie traits comprised an *intentional* portrayal of an Aspie, and not just someone who seems like they might have been, or could be if read autobiographically.

In more than one case, blurbs of books have stated that protagonists have Asperger's or autism, or fall somewhere on the continuum (perhaps the most well-known example being Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003, Jonathan Cape, London), along with Sumia Sukkar's *The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War* (2014, Eyewear Publishing), Catherine Simpson's *Truestory* (2015, Sandstone Press, Scotland) and Lawrence Dahner's *Vaz* (2013, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, South Carolina). In other cases, the story simply has a reputation for its protagonist's Asperger-like qualities. This is the case for Jonathan Saffran-Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston), in part due to the film adaptation's insertion of the detail that the main character, Oskar, was tested for the condition, with inconclusive results (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012, 29:56-30:05).

In these works the condition is never mentioned within the actual text itself, and so even if the characters constitute autistic presences when read by today's readers, it is usually impossible to know the author's intentions in this respect. If they did not intend for the characters to constitute autistic presences – and if they did not base their characters on real people who would now be considered autistic – then such impressions of autistic presences on the part of modern readers are simply coincidences resulting from convergences in these characters, of individual traits now associated with autism.

Researcher Loftis argues that such characters are autistic even if their authors do not realise it, but I find this to be a problematic stance as it raises the question of whether certain groups of people should be granted authority over how certain character traits are treated in fiction (as opposed to certain specific diagnostic labels). This has implications for the future of fiction in terms of creative freedom and the reputations of fiction authors. I think it would be dangerous to fiction, and to fiction authors, to arrive at a point where it was possible to denounce a fiction author as, for example, misogynistic, based solely on their portrayal of a character whose gender is not specified within the text but who is commonly read as female; and I see a similar danger when it comes to literary criticism of authors for their treatments of characters who are now commonly read as autistic – but who were not intentionally written with that in mind.

I therefore feel that the only use to be had in discussing such characters as though they were autistic is in the discussion of the author's treatment of the individual composite

traits that make up these characters; as well as the delineation and illustration of character traits now commonly – albeit often stereotypically – associated with a diagnosis of autism.

For the purposes of my own discussion I consider such speculative connections to autism and Asperger's to be too tenuous and contentious to be useful. I see no objective grounding in partly basing a personal reading of a fictional character on yet more personal readings of other fictional characters. To me this seems too much like making up an entirely new and entirely personal definition of autism and Asperger's specifically with regards to fiction and my reading of it, and that is not my intention in discussing Pollyanna and my own work. I do, however, see objective usefulness in placing the character of Pollyanna alongside existing discussions concerning the nature of Asperger's as understood and interpreted through the medium of intentional fictional portrayals.

POLLYANNA: CHARACTERISATION WITH RESPECT TO ASPERGER'S

As mentioned previously, a few researchers such as Murray and Loftis have discussed autism and Asperger's traits in fictional characters not otherwise specified as autistic or as having Asperger's, using close reading to underpin their observations, but none have clearly defined or objectively laid out the criteria by which they are carrying out their personal evaluations as readers. This constitutes a gap in the discussion: given the fluid nature of these diagnostic labels, readers' personal definitions of them – and thus their criteria for arriving at autistic readings of fictional characters – may differ; yet as Loftis stresses, autistic readings of fictional characters not otherwise specified as autistic continue to influence public regard and understanding when it comes to real autistic people and Aspies. Accordingly, in order to make it clear which character traits in Pollyanna I have associated with Asperger's, I have delineated my own criteria for assessment, along with my grounds for considering each point to be an Aspie trait.

Semantic language

According to Kutscher (2014), “Semantic language refers to the ability to use and understand words, phrases and sentences; including abstract concepts and idioms”. He elaborates that:

By definition, people with ASD have problems in the non-verbal/non-spoken areas of communication... [A] typical child who is told by a peer, ‘nice job!’ after striking out with the bases loaded in the ninth inning of the baseball game still can figure out that he is being insulted despite the literal meaning of the words. Such is the power of non-verbal communication.

Aspie non-fiction author Luke Jackson reconfirms in his book, *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome* (2002, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia) that "...[P]eople with AS take language very literally, so what may seem logical to them may not be to someone else" (Jackson, 2002, p125).

Pollyanna is depicted as being extremely literal when it comes to semantic interpretation. As such, she is seen to frequently misunderstand supporting characters' figurative speech. We learn very early on, when she and the domestic servant, Nancy, are in the carriage on the way to Aunt Polly's house, that Pollyanna's late father told her she "must be glad" (Porter, 1913, p6). As such, Pollyanna plays the 'Just Being Glad' game absolutely literally and absolutely incessantly.

Later on, when Nancy tells her that the surly, rich and (according to her) miserly Mr John Pendleton has a 'skeleton in his closet', Pollyanna is horrified, exclaiming, "How can he keep such a dreadful thing? I should think he'd throw it away!" (Porter, 1913, p25), and later accosts Mr Pendleton over his refusal to consider adopting orphan Jamie Bean, telling him, "Maybe you think a nice live little boy wouldn't be better than that old dead skeleton you keep somewhere, but I think it would!" (Porter, 1913, p60)

As well as taking expressions she doesn't understand literally, Pollyanna builds upon expressions she understands in a literal way, in order to make her replies to them. At one point Nancy tells her, "I guess you flew right up through the roof," to which Pollyanna replies that she did, "...[M]ost only I flew down instead of up. I came down the tree" (Porter, 2013, p11). Such creative interpretation and application of language is a characteristic acknowledged throughout Aspie fiction, memoir and early professional literature.

In Brenda Boyd's *Asperger Syndrome, The Swan and the Burglar* (2007, AuthorHouse, Milton Keynes), Ryan notes that whilst people with Asperger's syndrome may misinterpret expressions that they take to be literal, "People with Asperger Syndrome can [also] be very funny, because they take things literally just for a joke" (Boyd, 2007, p146).

Hans Asperger, too, notes that many of his children will craft their own, original words and expressions to give voice to their perceptions, noting one child who, when asked to express a thought verbally, stated that he couldn't do it "...[O]rally, only headily" (Asperger, 1944), and another who stated, "I don't like the blinding sun, nor the dark, but best I like the mottled shadow" (Asperger, 1944).

Aspie Kenneth Hall also notes in his memoir, *Asperger Syndrome, the Universe and Everything* (2000, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia) that he is "...[V]ery interested in words..." and relates a time at which he overheard his mother saying

that something was a "...[T]urn-up for the books", to which he responded: "And a potato too if they really want it!" (Hall, 2000, p13).

There are several instances in the book of Pollyanna misunderstanding the rhetorical nature of certain remarks. Upon learning that she climbed out of her bedroom window and down the tree outside it, Nancy exclaims that she would like "...[T]er know what yer aunt would say ter that!" to which Pollyanna replies that she will "...[G]o and tell her so you can find out" (Porter, 1913, p11). This response not only misses the fact that such a remark does not require a reply; it also misses the subtext completely, namely that her aunt would not be at all happy to hear about such antics, so it is just as well that she didn't know.

A second, long-acknowledged example of semantic language impairment associated with Asperger's concerns prosody of speech. Gillberg & Gilberg's 1989 diagnostic criteria for Asperger syndrome cites the 'odd prosody' of the Aspie themselves (Gillberg, 1991), whilst the 2013 DSM-V criteria for ASD identifies the inability to pick up on non-verbal cues "...[S]uch as comprehending subtext or hidden messages" (Kutscher, 2014) as a trait.

This second conceptualisation seems to apply more in the case of Pollyanna, who is portrayed as being apt to miss sarcasm and implication. When Mr Pendleton breaks his leg in the woods by his house and Pollyanna tells him he can be glad he only broke one leg, he replies, "Of course! So fortunate...looking at it from that standpoint I suppose I might be glad I wasn't a centipede and didn't break fifty!" (Porter, 1913, p42) Rather than understanding that Mr Pendleton is attempting to highlight how ridiculous her degree of optimism sounds to him, Pollyanna delights that this reason to be glad is "[T]he best yet!" (Porter, 1913, p42), prompting more angry sarcasm to the effect that he supposes he can be glad of all the doctors and nurses and other strangers coming into his house, which she again misses, instead agreeing with him that it is good indeed that he has them to take care of him.

Pragmatic Language

Kutscher (2014) places the ability of knowing what details are important to relay to people and to include in different kinds of communication, under the umbrella category of 'pragmatic language'. He defines this as:

[T]he practical ability to use language in a social setting, such as knowing what is appropriate to say, and where and when to say it, and the give-and-take nature of conversation. Effective pragmatics requires a working theory of mind: the ability to figure out what the other person does or does not already know – or might or might not be interested in hearing about.

Additionally, he cites one example of pragmatic language as being, “The ability to narrate a story with an appropriate amount of detail” (Kutscher, 2014).

Pollyanna talks in long monologues, providing copious extra detail to relatively simple questions, even when Mr Pendleton is lying injured in the woods and needs simple, efficient answers and fast assistance without unnecessary details (Porter, 1913, p36). When he asks her what she knows and whether she has any sense, she replies:

Why, Mr Pendleton, I – I don’t know so very much, and I can’t do a great many things, but most of the Ladies’ Aiders, except Mrs Rawson, said I had real good sense. I heard ‘em say so one day – they didn’t know I heard though.

This is a disproportionately long answer to a question presupposing a short answer leading in to a request for help. It also demonstrates the way in which Pollyanna is seen to insert additional details that are not relevant to the situation at hand, or to the reason for the question’s having been asked, and which would be unwelcome in a situation such as Mr Pendleton’s.

One-sided conversation is another characteristic associated with Asperger’s. According to Kutscher (2014), one secondary characteristic of Asperger’s is that of frequently appearing rude, due to not understanding conversation rules “...[S]uch as waiting your turn”. Aspie Luke Jackson also notes this in his discussion of ways in which Aspies may inadvertently offend or upset people, for example, by being too outspoken or “...[I]nterrupting all the time”. He recommends roleplay in which the parent or caregiver provides “...[E]xaggerated signs of when it is OK to talk and when it is time to listen” (Jackson, 2002, p174).

There are several instances of Pollyanna’s attempts to cheer people up inadvertently causing offence, and of Pollyanna not anticipating this or recognising it when it happens. She fails to anticipate that her suggestion that Mrs Snow can be glad because others aren’t stuck in bed like her might cause upset, and then misses the angry tone of her response, commenting on how lovely the game will be for Mrs Snow to play, since it will be so hard for her (Porter, 1913, p27).

She also appears to struggle with the notion that others might not express their feelings in the same way as she does. She expresses great sympathy for her Aunt Polly after Aunt Polly says she certainly never banged doors, on the grounds that: “...[I]f you’d felt like banging doors you’d have banged ‘em, of course, and if you didn’t, that must have meant that you weren’t ever glad over anything – or you would have banged ‘em” (Porter, 1913, p29). She can’t imagine how anyone could feel glad and *not* express it in her particular way.

She is also portrayed as frequently reporting to people, verbatim, the unfavourable things others have said about them. When she first pays a visit to the invalid, Mrs Snow, she takes her calf's foot jelly. Mrs Snow states that she had been hoping it would be lamb broth. Pollyanna justifies her amazement at this by stating that: "Nancy said it was chicken you wanted when we brought jelly, and lamb broth when we brought chicken" (Porter, 1913, p21) – a remark for which she earns admonishment due to its impertinence.

Luke Jackson cites his own Asperger-related difficulties with "...[T]hings that some people consider to be rude," here citing "...[B]eing too outspoken" as an example, as well as admitting: "These are...very hard lessons and certainly not ones that I have got right yet!" (Jackson, 2002, p174).

Theory of Mind

According to Kutscher (2014):

Theory of Mind refers to the relatively unique ability of humans to understand: that I have a mind; that you have a mind; and most importantly, that our minds may or may not know or be feeling the same things.

In 1985 Uta Frith and Professor Simon Baron Cohen confirmed that young children on the autistic spectrum (including those with Asperger's) overwhelmingly have difficulty inferring these things in other people, both in relation to their peers who are not on the spectrum, and to negative controls with severe intellectual disabilities but without social impairments. They used a test called the 'Sally-Ann' test, which Uta Frith (1991, p17) summarises thus:

Sally has a basket. Anne has a box. Sally puts a marble into her basket. Sally goes out for a walk. While Sally is out of the room, Anne (naughty Anne!) takes the marble from the basket and puts it into her own box. Now it is time for Sally to come back. Sally wants to play with her marble. Where will Sally think her marble is? Where will she look?

She explains that autistic children generally answered that Sally would look in the box, thereby indicating that "[A]utistic children did not understand the concept of belief. They expected Sally to *know* that the marble had been transferred even though she was absent at the time."

The first clue that Pollyanna possesses very little theory of mind comes in her manner of conversation. Her chatter generally consists of rhetorical observations about other characters and their situations, interspersed with numerous details about her own life and what she thinks and supposes. Both Frith (1991) and Asperger (1944) note the self-reliance

of Aspies in formulating their perceptions of the world. Frith refers to their ‘egocentric dependence’ (Frith, 1991, p22) while Asperger (1944) notes that:

[I]n autism there is a particular difficulty in mechanical learning, indeed there is an inability to learn from adults in conventional ways. Instead, the autistic individual needs to create everything out of his own thought and experience.

In a similarly egocentric way, Pollyanna makes suppositions about how things must be for other characters, based on her own portrayed knowledge and reactions – rather than actually asking them or even seeming curious. Upon seeing Aunt Polly’s house for the first time, she exclaims over its loveliness, adding “How awfully glad you must be you’re so rich!” (Porter, 1913, p8). On another occasion, Pollyanna is telling Aunt Polly about how one of the ladies’ aider’s husbands – Mr White – is expected to give a lot of money to the church for a new carpet, as his nerves can’t stand the noise when people “clatter down bare aisles”. She projects her own attitude onto Mr White, stating: “I should think he’d be glad that if he did have the nerves, he’d got the money, too; shouldn’t you?” (Porter, 2013, p16)

This quote reveals another portrayed habit: when Pollyanna asks a character what they think or feel, she often frames her curiosity as a closed question presupposing agreement with her own perspective. When Mrs Snow reveals that she got no sleep the night before, Pollyanna responds with: “You lose such a lot of time just sleeping! Don’t you think so?” (Porter, 1913, p22) As such, Pollyanna is never seen as gaining deep insight into any of the other characters’ points of view.

Theory of mind is also related to empathy. Kutscher (2014) explains that a lack of theory of mind leads to difficulties in empathising:

With limited ability to ‘get inside your mind’, it will be difficult for the child to demonstrate empathy for what you are feeling. After all, empathy is virtually defined as “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. A child with theory of mind problems may assume that since he is happy, then you must be happy, or the child may not understand that someone else is deceptive when he is always brutally honest.

Throughout the story, Pollyanna is depicted as having a generalised lack of insight into the perspectives of the characters she encounters. That she struggles to infer what other characters do and do not know is shown in the way she talks to characters in her new home about people in her old home, without any sort of introductory explanation or contextualisation. When talking to Mrs Snow about how the miseries of enduring unwelcome noise can be alleviated somewhat by moving around, Pollyanna launches into

an explanation about Mrs White – one of her ‘Ladies’ Aiders’ – and her “...[S]ister’s ears – being deaf so” (Porter, 1913, p28). Mrs Snow has to ask what on earth Pollyanna means before Pollyanna realises that she has to elaborate. She says she had forgotten that Mrs Snow did not know Mrs White or her sister, and therefore could not have inferred the relevance of their invocation.

A similar forgetting occurs when Pollyanna begins to tell Aunt Polly about Mr Pendleton’s broken leg, and her aunt doesn’t know what she is talking about. Pollyanna then realises this, stating: “I forgot. I reckon you didn’t know. You see, it happened while you were gone” (Porter, 1913, p40). This reminds me of the autistic child and the Sally-Anne test, in which the autistic child doesn’t realise that because Sally was away when the marble was placed in the box, she cannot know that the marble has been moved.

Likewise, early on in *Pollyanna*, when Pollyanna looks out of her bedroom window and sees a large rock on the horizon, she climbs out the window and down a tree to go to it, and is subsequently late for dinner. When Nancy tells Pollyanna that her aunt is cross because she didn’t come down to dinner when the bell was rung, Pollyanna protests that she couldn’t because she was out on the rock (Porter, 1913, p11).

Reduced Sense of Danger

Pollyanna’s climbing out the window and down the tree, and wandering off alone to get to the rock without telling anyone, as well as her later climbing onto the roof to sleep out in the open due to the stuffiness of the house (Porter, 1913, p19), create the impression of a character with a reduced level of safety awareness – a trait common to many on the autistic spectrum (AWAARE, 2017).

Not Always Understanding Her Own Emotions.

According to Attwood: “Research studies, clinical experience and autobiographies have confirmed that children with Asperger’s syndrome have considerable difficulty with the understanding and expression of emotions” (Attwood, 2014).

There appears to be a blurry line between Pollyanna’s really feeling something and her simply willing herself to believe that that she feels it. With great effort, following her discovery of how shockingly bare her bedroom is, she convinces herself to be glad that there is no mirror, since it means, therefore, that she cannot see her freckles (Porter, 1913, p9). Once again, following her accident, she treats all her plans for what she will do in the future as if they were things to be glad about in the present (Porter, 1913, p71) .

Pollyanna's own emotions are depicted as being very compartmentalised, and as occurring in extremes. When her aunt forbids her to talk of her father, this causes her eyes to fill with tears, and for her to falter, but she stops herself from crying, holds her chin up 'bravely', and comforts herself by convincing herself that she is "[G]lad [Aunt Polly] doesn't want me to talk about father...it'll be easier, maybe – if I don't talk about him. Probably, anyhow, that is why she told me not to talk about him" (Porter, 1913, p8). By the end of the next paragraph she is exclaiming "rapturously" over the beauty of the house.

One-Track Mind

A one-track mind is recognised by Attwood as being commonly associated with Aspies, noting that "There can...be difficulties switching tracks when a strategy or solution is not successful (flexibility in thinking)..." (Attwood, 2014). Pollyanna seems to be loyal, grateful and affectionate towards her aunt, to the point of twisting evidence to fit her suppositions of kindness, generosity and good intentions, as has already been seen.

The grounding of this love and affection in a basic expectation that family members automatically feel these things for, and behave in these ways towards, each other, is shown in the contrast between how Pollyanna greets Nancy when she thinks Nancy is her aunt, and how she behaves towards her once she finds out she's not; despite Nancy's being more 'auntly' to her than her real aunt. Upon first seeing Nancy and thinking she is Aunt Polly, Pollyanna rushes at Nancy with an impassioned, delighted embrace (Porter, 1913, p5). When Nancy finally gets a chance to correct her as to her identity, Pollyanna is openly dismayed, and is worried that there might not be a real Aunt Polly, until Nancy reassures her there is (Porter, 1913, p6). It isn't Nancy's personality, therefore, that gives rise to such excitement and affection in Pollyanna, especially since the brunt of Pollyanna's initial reaction came before she and Nancy had talked at all. Rather, it is the fact that Pollyanna thinks she is meeting her one remaining blood relative.

Pollyanna also repeatedly reaches out in friendship to Mr Pendleton, steadfastly believing his superficial prickliness to be hiding a good soul, despite all of his attempts to rebuff her (Porter, 1913, pages 8 and 24), and despite Nancy's denunciations of his character (Porter, 1913, page 24). She also believes, until her case is rejected at their meeting, that the Ladies' Aid are good enough and kind enough to immediately step in and help Jimmy Bean when the orphanage in which he resides is threatened with closure. (Porter, 1913, p33).

Rigidity

Another characteristic of Asperger's is a resistance to change. As Kutscher (2014) justifies it: "Change means that previously hard-learned strategies will not help in this situation. These kids are barely hanging on. One new wrinkle can throw them over the edge."

Pollyanna appears to depend upon her Glad Game to determine her actions, and uses it for emotional security during times of great change – no matter how creatively she must twist the evidence before her to find a happy perspective on the situations she finds herself in. For me this characteristic of Pollyanna, and such outcomes of her Game, also resonate with Attwood's allusion to Aspies' difficulties with changing strategies when the one being used proves itself suboptimal for the situation or task. Pollyanna is depicted as having an emotional breakdown when she first arrives at Aunt Polly's house, and cannot think of anything to be glad about with respect to being placed in a tiny, bare attic room. However, as soon as she feels glad about things like the view from her bedroom window and the lack of a mirror to reflect her unsightly freckles, Pollyanna's upset immediately reverts to exuberance, as she is able to settle back into the comfort and security of her Glad Game (Porter, 1913, p9).

Age-Gap Friendships

Apart from Jimmy Bean, and a much later reference to beginning school, Pollyanna is not seen or referred to as interacting with any other children, but instead with adults. More notably, she doesn't appear to mind this. We are told that: "There were no children in the immediate neighbourhood of the Harrington homestead for Pollyanna to play with...This, however, did not seem to disturb Pollyanna in the least" (Porter, 1913, p20). Later, Pollyanna confirms that she does not mind, saying: "Oh, no, I don't mind at all...I'm happy just to walk around and see the streets and the houses and the people" (Porter, 1913, p20).

Unlike other instances in which Pollyanna claims to be glad about something, but the narrative (and in some cases, later events) imply or demonstrate otherwise, there are no implications that Pollyanna is putting on a brave face and making the best of things when she makes this claim. When asked by Mr Pendleton whether there aren't any people of her own age to talk to, she explains that there aren't any in the area, but reassures him, telling him: "I like old folks just as well, maybe better sometimes – being used to the Ladies' Aid, so" (Porter, 1913, p24).

In terms of Asperger's syndrome, Attwood (2014) states that "[C]hildren with Asperger's syndrome may prefer to interact and play with adults more than with peers." This characteristic of Pollyanna can also, therefore be seen as Aspie-like by some standards.

Lack of Pretend Play

That Pollyanna enjoys just walking around and looking at things could also be interpreted as an indication towards another characteristic associated with Asperger's: lack of a tendency towards typical childhood shared pretend play activities. This lack is cited by Kutscher (2014), and Frith (1991) as a common feature of children on the autism spectrum. Even when Pollyanna makes friends with Jimmy Bean and goes to school, there are no indications that she engages in pretend play. At one point she states that she wanted a doll, but this is the only reference to toys or to play with respect to her.

Attwood (2014) concedes that children with Asperger's may sometimes engage in solitary, 'eccentric' pretend play. We can but creatively speculate on the games Pollyanna might plausibly have played.

APPARENT DEPARTURES IN POLLYANNA FROM MODERN DAY POPULAR EXPECTATIONS OF ASPIES

Given how well-known Pollyanna is, and given all her similarities to contemporary descriptions of Asperger's and Aspies, as well as the widespread awareness and many different conceptualisations of Asperger's and its main traits, it is surprising to me that this resemblance has not been spotted and given more attention. I believe there are popular stereotypes and misconceptions about Asperger's, and the implications of traits for the Aspie and their personal inclinations, which have deflected attention away from Pollyanna's Aspie traits. I will discuss some of these below.

A Love of People and a Strong Urge for Social Interaction

Pollyanna is highly social and eager to make connections, stating "I just love people" Porter, 1913, p20). One conception of Aspies is that they have no desire or motivation to interact socially. There is contention over this view between neurodevelopmental professionals. The assertion is replicated by Kutscher (2014), who states that "Without a theory of mind, there is little point in communicating...After all, with whom would you be communicating?" However, Attwood maintains that: "The child with Asperger's syndrome may long for social inclusion, social success, and a friend...yet have a comparatively low degree of social success due to their difficulties, and misinterpretations of these on the part of others." (Attwood, 2014).

Uta Frith also noted that, “As they grow older they often become quite interested in other people and thus belie the stereotype of the aloof and withdrawn autistic child” (Frith, 1991, p4). This objection, then, can be discarded.

Fierce Hugs and a Strong Tendency Towards Tactile Affection

When Pollyanna first meets Nancy and Aunt Polly, she flings herself at them and clings to them in a passionate embrace. She also persists with hugs with Aunt Polly, plays with Mrs Snow’s hair, and holds Mr Pendleton’s head. Dislike of touching and of being touched was conspicuous in Mark Haddon’s portrayal of Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, though it is not discussed much in factual accounts by Aspies. Neither is it a requirement for diagnosis, and in fact, the opposite may be true. According to Attwood (2014):

In general, a child with Asperger’s syndrome may enjoy a very brief and low intensity expression of affection, but become confused or overwhelmed when greater levels of expression are experienced or expected. However, the reverse can occur for some children with Asperger’s syndrome, where they need almost excessive amounts of affection, sometimes for reassurance but also for a sensory experience, and often express affection that is too intense or immature.

This latter description certainly fits with Pollyanna, with her voracious hugs. The two main objections to Pollyanna being characterised as Aspie-like can therefore be discounted.

OUTCOMES OF VARIOUS TRAITS WITHIN POLLYANNA

The outcome of Pollyanna’s difference departs from the structure of most Aspie fictions, in which difference is portrayed as being diluted in a learned way by the Aspie themselves, with them being better accepted and tolerated on an individual-specific level by those around them over time. On the other hand, Pollyanna’s differences remain undiluted throughout the story – indeed, they catalyse real change in the characters around her, not only with respect to their interactions with her, but with respect to the basic pattern of their interactions in general. In fact, Aunt Polly’s prohibition of Pollyanna’s talking about her father (Porter, 1913, p8) and of her using the word ‘glad’ (Porter, 1913, p32), are later recanted, and although Mr Pendleton attempts to rebuff her friendly greetings, his attempts to alter her approach are also unsuccessful. It is Aunt Polly and Mr Pendleton who learn and modify their interactions and perceptions, not Pollyanna.

Below I present analyses of how specifically Aspie-like character traits of Pollyanna function within the story to influence supporting characters.

Theory of Mind

As previously discussed, it is hard for Pollyanna to see things from others' perspectives. She doesn't appear to like what little insight she gains anyway, reacting with revulsion, for example, to Aunt Polly's explanations of duty (Porter, 1913, p17). In order to interact with Pollyanna – and she doesn't generally give them any choice in the matter – other people are therefore forced to step into *her* mind-set. Upon finding that they like her way of thinking better, they adopt it as their own, and thus Pollyanna's characterisation is afforded lasting, broad influence upon the supporting characters in her fictional community – an influence that survives her withdrawal from it, as we see when she is removed due to her accident.

Semantic Language

Pollyanna's literalisms catch people by surprise, which makes it harder for them to terminate their interactions with her before they have begun, and before they have been introduced to her outlook. This allows her to build connections with people who would otherwise have seen her coming in plenty of time, pre-empted what was to follow, and taken steps to ensure their paths did not intersect with hers.

TRANSFORMATION OF STORIES AND STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

Transformation of Stories

I will now discuss the practice of drawing inspiration from pre-existing works, since my novel is connected to a pre-existing text in much the same way that a musical theme may have variations.

Discussions of theme-and-variation relationships within fiction are scattered. Discourses, terminology and theories are still solidifying and emerging, and have only just begun to be incorporated into academic discussions within the field of adaptation theory. More recent discourses draw a distinction between traditional notions of adaptation, and a practice referred to by some researchers and commentators as *transformation*.

Extending the metaphor of theme and variation, Gerard Genette, in his collection of essays, *Palimpsests* (1997, University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska), refers to 'theme' texts as 'Hypotexts' (p5). These hypotexts tend to be literary classics in the public domain, the details of which are either subverted, or are updated to modern-day settings. An example of the latter would be the BBC's television series, *Sherlock* (2010). Incidental details are altered where it is necessary to make them more reflective of the trends of the modern world, e.g. sending text messages instead of telegrams.

Sometimes altered details may also create cryptic jokes for fans of the original. In the Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (Conan-Doyle, 1887), the word ‘Rache’ – written in blood at the scene of a crime – is misconstrued by Lestrade as an incomplete writing of the name ‘Rachel’, when it is actually a German word meaning ‘revenge’ (Doyle, 1887, p24). Conversely, in the first BBC *Sherlock* episode, ‘A Study in Pink’, the word ‘Rache’ – scratched into the floorboards by a murder victim – *is* in fact an incomplete writing of the word ‘Rachel’ – a point upon which the rest of the story hinges (Sherlock, 2010:24:30-24:44).

Academic discourses on transformation vary in their terminology. In the introduction to their compilation of essays, *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works* (2010, Macfarland & Company Inc, North Carolina and London) researchers Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams define a literary transformation as “[T]he combining of...texts into a new work,” (Frus & Williams, 2010, p3), likening the process the text undergoes to an act of ‘shape shifting’. This notion of *shape-shifting*, as opposed to maximal shape conservation across cultures, mediums or languages, is what separates transformation from more traditional, translation-deriving connotations of adaptation.

The idea of transformation is especially pertinent to my treatment of *Pollyanna*. In writing *Anna* I have not attempted to preserve or transfer the story from Porter’s context to mine with all its details unaltered. In fact, my intent was always to alter it in key ways, whilst conserving the ‘core’ aspects of the characters and plot. I will talk more about this later on.

Stories of Transformation

‘Transformation’ is also a word that can relate – in an entirely different way – to character development within a story. In *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843), the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, changes from a miser to a philanthropist in the space of one night, following a series of ghostly visions pertaining to the past, and to the consequences of his his present actions if he does not change. The transformation speaks to the social issues of poverty and charity, illustrating the struggles of a life of extreme underprivilege in the Victorian era, and the ways in which the privileged have the power and responsibility to improve the lives of those less fortunate than them.

Likewise, the film *Groundhog Day* (1993) sees weatherman Phil Connors transform as the result of becoming stuck in a time-loop, repeating the same day over and over again. During this time he gradually transforms from a self-centred misanthrope to a generous-hearted romantic. The nature of this transformation allows the film to portray the different

outcomes of different attitudes and outlooks in Phil's life, almost like a series of controlled experiments in a laboratory.

Many Aspie fictions, despite their having been written at different times by independent authors and published independently of each other by different publishers, depict similar transformative arcs, and function as vehicles for the exploration of similar themes. In many of the Aspie fiction case studies examined here, character transformations take place within the Aspie protagonist themselves. They move away from rigid, arguably exaggerated initial manifestations of Aspie-ascribed traits, into ways of being that are implied to be more normative for the place and majority of supporting characters within the story, thereby allowing for more inclusion and integration of the Aspie.

In Francisco X Stork's teenage novel, *Marcelo in the Real World* (2011, Scholastic Children's Books, London) – the Aspie protagonist, Marcelo, learns that he is able to discern dishonesty and manipulation when they are present, stand up for his morals and cope with difficult decisions in a job that doesn't come naturally to him. He also learns what it is that he would like to do in the 'real world'. In Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* (2012, Usborne Publishing Ltd, London), Caitlyn learns social finesse and how to work as part of a team. In Brenda Boyd's *Asperger Syndrome, the Swan and the Burglar* (2005 AuthorHouse, Milton Keynes), Ryan learns how naïve trust in people can be a dangerous thing, and his diagnosis of Asperger's helps him to understand that he is not a problem child; he just has difficulties. In Jude Welton's *Adam's Alternative Sports Day* (2005, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia), Adam learns how to compete and to lose with grace and, again, how to work as part of team, considering others' feelings and intentions, as well as understanding that a situation may be different or more complex in its nature from how it initially appears.

Part of this is simply that fiction – especially children's fiction since the Victorian era – boasts a rich tradition of didacticism. Echoes of this still remain, with knowledge-based educational and socially discursive themes and undertones still being prevalent and praised in children's fiction today.

However, in Aspie fictions, an overwhelming proportion of the educational and socially discursive value in the issues explored in some way links back to traits ascribed, or implied to be connected, to the protagonist's Asperger's – such as Marcello's and Ryan's social naivety, and Caitlyn's lack of finesse and rigidity in her not drawing in colours (Erskine, 2010, p140) or participating in group work at school (Erskine, 2010, p39). Such recurring patterns of focus show that Aspie fictions are not just following in the general tradition of life lessons conveyed through fiction – their educational and discursive agendas are specifically Aspie trait-directed and rehabilitative in nature. The effect, therefore,

however inadvertently, remains that they continue to uphold a paradigm of Aspie trait rehabilitation and preservation of normative societal infrastructures already established.

Alternatively, or sometimes additionally, supporting characters undergo character transformations, but these transformations seem to take place *specifically in relation to how they interact with Aspie characters*. In Kathy Hoopman's *Blue Bottle Mystery*, child Aspie protagonist, Ben's, father, learns to better accommodate Ben's difficulties with change, following his diagnosis of Asperger's. In Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, fifteen-year-old Aspie, Christopher's, parents learn how to communicate and interact with him more effectively, thereby at least partially remedying a gigantic family rift. In Nancy Ogaz's *Buster and the Amazing Daisy*, Marissa learns respect for schoolchild Aspie protagonist, Daisy, through Daisy's training of Buster the rabbit. This emphasis may reflect an expectation, sense of responsibility or desire on the part of these works' authors, for these works to take on an educational function in the real world, not just for Aspies themselves but for those around them such as parents, friends and school teachers.

However, there is little indication within any of these texts that the community around these characters has been permanently changed in its own right, as a result of the Aspie character's influence in their natural, un-rehabilitated state. It is primarily the Aspie characters' difficulties, and the accommodations of these, that bring about any transformations. The Aspie characters themselves remain misfits in their own right. In other words, Asperger's is portrayed as something to ideally be softened in the Aspie, and accommodated or at least tolerated by the non-Aspie characters – and that is where the influences of these characters within their story world stop, becoming irrelevant to the supporting characters in the absence of the Aspie character.

In addition to this, several Aspie fictions' plot arcs centre around Aspies 'proving' their worth by using their specialised gifts to somehow benefit the non-Aspie supporting characters – and it is in this way that non-Aspies come to see their worth, and the merit of accommodating their differences. Trueman Bradley's unorthodox approach to detection, and his Asperger's diagnosis, are only truly accepted and accommodated once he has solved the case around which the novel centres. In *Colin Fischer* by Ashley Miller and Zack Stentz, the almost clinically flat-demeanoured titular character gains friends and acceptance within his school only once he manages to prove, by using detached logic, who has fired a loaded gun at his school. Daisy finds acceptance in association with her training of Buster in preparation for a pet talent show.

The ways in which the Aspie protagonist gains support in their endeavours varies. Trueman Bradley gains many of his friends because his social naivety – and thus

vulnerability – lead kind-hearted people to reach out to him in order to help him, thereby becoming his friends. Colin Fischer gains acceptance because his dispassionate recognition of the biggest school bully as being innocent cuts through the social quagmires of secondary school and therefore comes across as refreshingly accepting. ‘Refreshing’ is a message that runs through many of the Aspie fiction case studies; the message that the Aspie outlook brings people a refreshing new angle on life, and that this, too, is valuable. It is regrettable that the plot arcs of these works must still combine these messages of ‘refreshing’ with messages of ‘useful’ and ‘conformant’ in order to achieve this.

Pollyanna does not uphold this paradigm. We see, not a rehabilitative transformation of the central character to be more normative, not a conditional celebration of the refreshing nature of the main character, provided she can prove herself able and useful within the existing social and/or vocational paradigm; and not a type of transformation of supporting characters only with respect to making allowances for, and tolerating, the misfit. Instead, we see a much more pervasive transformation of the social infrastructures of a small community in and of itself, without the story having to depend on Pollyanna’s normative practical usefulness or functional ability. Yes, her problem solving abilities are tested – for example, in helping Mr Pendleton when he breaks his leg – but the transformation of the community primarily happens because of how she already is; not primarily because of what she does or becomes.

Pollyanna remains a fairly static character throughout the story, not undergoing much character development. In fact, when she falls into a depression following her accident, she does not learn a valuable life lesson to the effect that the Just Being Glad Game can take her only so far in life as it becomes more complicated with growing up. Instead, the villagers around her actually take pains to restore her to her definitive disposition, showing how they have come to value her as she naturally is, and her perspective on life as it naturally is. By the end of the story she is still highly literal, glad and effusive to the point of being a social oddity, extremely energetic, and frequently apt to miss the non-verbal cues of supporting characters, such as tone of voice and facial expression. She still displays excessive enthusiasm and, at times, a comically blunt directness and honesty in her appraisal of people. This kind of development and outcome is not like anything I have seen in my Aspie fiction case studies. It would seem that stories of Aspie trait restoration, rather than rehabilitation – and stories whereby Aspie traits carry social value in their unchanged state – are extremely rare in modern-day Aspie children’s fiction in which the authors *know* they are writing about a medicalised diagnostic label.

FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY: SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Even within a self-contained story, details of the story world remain in dialogue with aspects of the non-fictional world. Again, this is what enables autobiographical readings of works of fiction. Susan M. Coolidge's children's novel, *What Katy Did* (1872, Roberts Brothers, Boston) is a good example of this. The title protagonist is a twelve-year-old girl with unruly, immature, obnoxious and impulsive tendencies. As the result of falling off a swing upon which she disobediently plays, Katy ends up temporarily paralysed from the waist down, and consequently bedridden. In the time between this accident and her learning to walk again three years later, Katy grows into a mature, well-mannered woman, proficient at housekeeping, sweet-tempered and patient. In other words, she learns to embrace Woolf's angel in the house, and this is framed as a desirable outcome.

Disabilities and disabled characters also have well-established histories of being used – again contentiously – as plot vehicles for bettering non-disabled characters, whether these non-disabled characters are supporting characters (as they are in much Aspie fiction) or the main protagonists, as they are in France Hodgson-Burnette's *The Secret Garden* (1910, Heinemann, London), or in Joanna Spyri's *Heidi* (first complete English edition, 1884, Cupples, Upham & Company, Boston). They achieve this by serving as vehicles for supporting normative societal ideas of the time and place in terms of plot and character development. Disability representation researchers David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have coined the term 'narrative prosthesis' to describe this function of disabled characters in fiction. (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

Katy's paraplegia is the result of disobedience leading to an accident that injures her, and abates when this character shortcoming, and others, have been addressed. This temporary measure of corrective disability is not always the case though. Katy's cousin, Helen, has a case of lifelong paraplegia, which serves as a backdrop against which her outstanding qualities of unrelenting, unconditional self-sacrifice, patience, cheerfulness and forbearance may be accentuated.

All of this matters because works of fiction occupy platforms of direct influence over real life perceptions, and indirect influence over approaches to social interactions. As Brenna (2010) notes: "By offering mirrors and windows to readers, stories build understandings of self and other critical to...renderings of identity and community."

To this end, stories involving characters with specific disabilities may be used as illustrative educational aids. In early learning, disabled children are provided with characters with whom they are expected to be able to identify, and through whom they are intended to explore aspects of their own experiences and identities not shared by their peers (Brenna,

2013; Iquinta & Hipsky, 2006). Such works also provide detailed fictional case studies which can be used to develop constructive strategies in vocational training, e.g. teacher training (Beecher & Darragh, 2010).

Finally, these works may be consulted for the purposes of biofictional construction on the part of literary authors. Their value as opposed to using only medical commentary is that they show the possible outcomes and manifestations of specific collections of traits, as well as describing the traits themselves. It is a little like learning what icing is by seeing a picture of an iced cake, rather than simply seeing recipe for icing.

For all these reasons it is important to continually examine and discuss what impressions works of fiction are creating of the things and people they represent. To this end, a large number of studies have been conducted on representations of disabilities within fiction (e.g. Ayala, 1999; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Lois, 2001; Haigh 2012).

Whether this representative responsibility falls primarily to the creative author; whether it instead falls primarily to the professionals and organisations from which these authors draw their impressions and inspiration; or whether the reader primarily carries a responsibility to remember that they are reading a subjective work of fiction with an artistic vision, and that it may not therefore necessarily represent a condition entirely as it occurs in real life, or be a straightforward reflection of the author's own regard of the condition and real people who have it, is not the subject of this discourse, though this question does merit careful consideration and discussion. As a creative writer I for one do, however, wish to at least be risk-conscious when it comes to potentially sensitive representations, and to at least investigate and acknowledge the opinions, experiences and needs of those less empowered voices being represented.

ON THE WRITING OF ANNA

Defining the Cardinal Functions of *Pollyanna*

In his "Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narratives" (1975, *New Literary History* 6(2): 237-272), Roland Barthes denotes two types of 'function' within a story: 'cardinal' functions, and catalyses (Barthes, 1975, p248). The former, he explains, directly influence the direction of the plot (e.g. whether your character's ticket wins the lottery or not). The latter can be completely changed without altering the outcome of the cardinal functions around which they centre (e.g. whether your character is drinking tea or coffee as they watch the lottery prize draw). I found this a very useful distinction when deciding which aspects of Porter's story to conserve within *Anna*, and which to alter.

In concurrence with a common scholarly distinction acknowledged in Genette's discussion of pastiches (Genette, 1997, p23), I do not think a pastiche must conserve any cardinal functions of any of its hypotexts, nor be a satire, mockery or caricature, as much as imitate the most prominent elements of style and, sometimes, common plot arcs employed by their author. However, for a hypertext to claim to be a transformation of a story requires that story to still be recognisably connected to the one told by the hypotext. Thus some cardinal functions, as well as aspects of their chronology and relationships to one another, must be conserved.

I decided which narrative and character details of *Pollyanna* I would treat as cardinal functions, by using a principle similar to that of textual criticism. By examining patterns of concurrence and variation within four adaptations of *Pollyanna* (Porter's book; a film adaptation released by United Artists in 1920; a film adaptation released by Walt Disney Productions in 1950, and the Carlton TV 2003 made-for-television film adaptation starring Georgina Terry), I took elements of the story that were conserved in all four versions (*Pollyanna's* arrival into the community as an orphan following her father's death, her cold and distant aunt, her Glad Game, and her paraplegia being the most cardinal examples of these) and carried them over into my own work. I went through a similar process with the supporting characters in the story (namely Mrs Snow, Mr Pendleton, Nancy, Jimmy Bean, and Doctor Chilton), deciding which of their relations to *Pollyanna* and to each other I would treat as cardinal functions.

Having decided upon cardinal functions, I then turned to the catalyses. Few catalyses were preserved exactly as they occur in the original. The setting is not Vermont but the Scottish Central Belt. Characters' names have been changed – Jimmy Bean is now Jamie Bean, *Pollyanna* is now Anna, Nancy is now Molly, and her prim Aunt Polly is now her cold and distant mother, Patty.

Barthes's model of narrative units of significance also accounts for the fact that the changing of certain details – or 'indices' (Barthes, 1975, p247) – can alter the subtler aspects of what is implied within a story, and thus a story's general character and even primary readership, without altering either cardinal functions or catalyses. Making Anna thirteen instead of eleven did not change the narrative arc, but it added a young adult, coming-of-age element to Anna's integrative process within her community, since my character, unlike Porter's, sits on the cusp of puberty, and of perceiving the world as an adult rather than as a child. In making this decision I also hoped to explore the complex outcomes and implications of the Glad Game from both a child's and an adult's perspective.

Changing the relation between the cold and distant relative from aunt to mother also increased the intensity of the sub-plot concerning the bonding of the two characters. The alteration of this detail increased the general intensity of the story, contributing to its target readership being raised in age from child to young adult or adult.

Why Transform *Pollyanna*?

I wanted to create a medium in which I could bring together elements of Aspie fiction and a selective exploration of aspects of *Pollyanna*, showing how a re-imagining of Pollyanna as an Aspie need not require much transformation of her most defining character traits, or of the general plot arc.

There were several reasons for updating the story to the modern era. Although at this stage the increasing popularity of Aspie fictions, and the increase in such works themselves, had not entered my mind, I had observed the rash of modernisations of classic works of fiction, particularly in the television industry, such as BBC's *Sherlock*, as well as the TV miniseries *Alice* (2009) – a transformation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the miniseries *Tin Man* (2003) – a transformation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Disney's *Frozen* (2013) – a transformation of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen*, Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013) – a transformation of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014) – a transformation of *Sleeping Beauty*.

All of these works conspicuously avoid appearing to endorse anything to do with the angel in the house, unlike the likes of *Pollyanna*, *The Secret Garden* and *What Katy Did*. As such, I could not envision *Pollyanna* receiving similar interest soon, though I learned after I had begun that there had in fact been a made-for-television transformation of the story entitled *Polly* and released in 1989, which updated the story to the 1950s, and used it to explore the legacy of segregation in Alabama (*Polly*, 1989).

On a purely practical level, the specific invocation of Asperger's within the story required me to set my story later than the 1990s – when Asperger's syndrome had begun to be more widely used as an official diagnosis. More specifically, to best utilise my personal strengths and minimise my personal weaknesses as both a researcher and a creative writer, I wanted to set my novel in an era, and in a place, that I both knew personally, and in whose culture I had grown up.

An Updated Transformation

Modernised transformations of classics each create a link between two cultural eras – the era of the hypotext’s writing, and the era of the writing of the transformed version. This allows for a type of veiled commentary on cultural differences between the two eras, such as dress, potentially giving rise to cardinal divergences between the hypotext and the hypertext, such as, on a practical level, whether the female character drowns because of her gigantic, waterlogged petticoat and skirt; and on a thematic level, such as whether, having not drowned, the female character can now sort out her own problems instead of relying on the male characters to do so.

In addition to rendering the modernised derivative version more socially relevant and plausible with respect to the time and culture portrayed in the transformed version, changed details afford an opportunity for cryptic jokes appreciable only by fans of the original. This opportunity is afforded when details of the original are altered in a way that keeps them recognisably reminiscent of their counterparts in the hypotext, yet also affords new ways to reveal dynamics between the transformed characters, and to explore contemporary issues through conversations specific to the updated version of the details. Does John Watson approve of smartphones? What if he does not and Sherlock does? Will this create a rift in their flat-sharing? Does one of them refuse to back down? Such downstream creative effects of transformations would not be possible if certain details were not changed.

Re-Considering Tone and Complexity: Adding Brown to the Rainbow

Pollyanna is a story endorsing the merits of a sunny disposition, and centring around a situation of family and domesticity. Given the angel in the house, these things afford the story a rustic feel, but equally a sense of timelessness – finding community of some kind, and seeking happiness to some degree, are almost universal human experiences.

Despite its being a children’s book, the premise of *Pollyanna* has attracted a great deal of serious attention from adults – a good argument for the writing of a more complex book adopting a viewpoint somewhere in between that of child and an adult, and addressing issues that are more adult and complex than those permitted by the scope of most children’s fiction.

Following two World Wars, multiple eugenics programmes, greater political and commercial cynicism, and the spike of awareness of terrorism in the early twenty-first century thanks to events such as the attacks on the World Trade Centre, and the London tube bombings, the simplistic type of optimism depicted in *Pollyanna* does not necessarily transfer to modern times in its 1913 incarnation, since it is associated with naivety rather

than with mindful dialogue with real issues in the world. To some degree, this awareness permeated my consciousness with respect to all decisions made in the writing of *Anna*. I will now discuss some of those decisions in more detail, with reference to academic works of discourse by novelists, on the nature of the novel, and on the fictionalisation of autism.

Anna: a new type of fictional Aspie

Anna came into my head fully formed, in terms of physical characteristics and ways of interacting with the world. Her demeanour and patterns of speech are not so much reminiscent of Eleanor H. Porter's original character, as of Georgina Terry's quieter, warmer, personable and soft-but-clear-spoken portrayal in the 2003 film version. This version conserves most of the cardinal functions of the original, but rather than being set in Vermont, it is set in England in 1913. Likewise in this version, Aunt Polly is distant and cold, yet she is also soft-spoken and expressive, in a less hysterical way than she is portrayed in the original book.

I felt this tone allowed for more pockets of stillness and emotion, and therefore was better suited to inform an adaptation of the story aimed at a slightly more mature audience. It also allowed for more teased-out moments of connection between the two characters during their interactions, thereby revealing the transformation of Aunt Polly more powerfully – an important consideration when changing the relation between the two characters from aunt and niece to mother and daughter.

Additionally the 2003 film adaptation's pacing allowed time for reflection, for which the original book did not allow, as the book becomes extremely fast-paced whenever the hyperactive Pollyanna slams doors, erupts with joy or dances and chatters (which she does on practically every page in the first half, once she enters the narrative). A more complex, more complicated and more theme-driven rendition of the story – such as would be required to plausibly transfer the book's optimism and its mechanisms from 1913 to the early twenty-first century – would benefit from such pacing, and in addition would bring out the grief that Pollyanna is going through more effectively.

This quiet reflectiveness is another reason I decided to make Anna a bit older than eleven – in terms of a modernised adaptation it allows for a different level of reflection, her having been through things like the primary to secondary school transition, and the beginning of puberty, observing her peers now that they're older, as well as observing the adult world into which she is about to enter, and some of its less attractive qualities. It also allowed for a more detailed transformation of the story, based on what she focuses on and observes.

In creating the character of Anna I attempted to find a balance between positioning her characteristics enough within the traditions of other fictional Aspies as to fit within that canon, and not creating a character which depended upon the same unhelpful stereotypes and literary techniques as many other Aspie fictions do. Loftis explores at length some of the most common tropes associated with autism, dubbing them ‘detective’, ‘savant’, ‘victim’, ‘gothic’, ‘child narrator’ and ‘label’. ‘Gothic’ refers to the eternally mysterious autistic – silent and shut off from the world. ‘Victim’ refers to the innocent, ignorant soul suffering at the hands of their handicap and of society. ‘Detective’ refers to the cold investigator who forgoes emotion in favour of clinical logic. ‘Savant’ somewhat overlaps with ‘victim’, denoting a poor soul at the mercy of their disease but in possession of some kind of astounding and niche gift that astonishes the non-autistic people around them and makes them noteworthy outside of, or else juxtaposed with, victimhood. ‘Child narrator’ is self-explanatory. Finally, ‘label’ denotes the type of autistic who constitutes a mystery to which people attempt to affix labels in order to demystify and categorise them, as part of a major component of the plot. The desire to avoid these modes of representation in their simple, stereotypical forms, influenced many of the creative decisions that went into constructing the character and voice of Anna – decisions which I will talk more about now.

Avoiding ‘Compensation Cures’

Loftis notes the roles of Aspies and autistics in fiction as ‘overcomers’ (Loftis, 2015, p72) of society’s judgement and of their apparent handicaps. She also notes the portrayal of savant skills and of other Aspie-associated gifts as ‘compensation cures’ (Loftis, 2015, p73) – referring to the fictional Aspie or autistic as being severely handicapped, but also as possessing a remarkable ability to somehow make up for their disabilities in another way that excels normal human achievement and ability.

This raised the question, for me, of how best to portray Anna’s strengths and gifts alongside her Aspie characteristics, in a way that avoided reducing them to compensation cures. This is a question every conscientious writer of Aspie fiction will have to address in the creation of both their character, and of their work as a whole. To help me in this, I attempted to pinpoint what aspects of a work’s structure and portrayal are responsible for the final impression of Aspie strengths and gifts as functioning within a story as ‘compensation cures’.

Part of the reason for the ‘compensation cure’ impression lies in questions concerning the character’s discovery or acquisition of the gift in question. In Lee Hall’s radio play, *Spoonface Steinberg* (2000, Methuen Drama, Sheffield), Spoonface, an intelligent young

primary-schooler with autism and terminal cancer, cannot read, and also struggles with games and with expressing herself. One day, she narrates, her father is calculating numbers and happens to say two numbers, of which Spoonface correctly calculates and names the product. Her parents become both very excited and emotional, and rush her to the doctor who proclaims that if she is able to calculate numbers then she can also calculate dates – at which point Spoonface discovers that she can indeed instantly and effortlessly name the day of the week on which any calendar date falls. She professes that she doesn't know how she can do so many numbers or dates, and that she just finds it obvious, like identifying colours. She also adds that this is all because she is autistic. This passage explicitly associates the almost miraculous gifts of this severely handicapped child with her autism, thereby framing them as a compensation cure. Had the passage instead depicted, as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* does, the careful acquisition of knowledge through hard work in a chosen subject of interest, Spoonface's gift would not have read so much like a compensation cure.

The characteristic of Anna that I deemed most at risk of coming across as a compensation cure was her remarkable ear, and her ability to play the piano. When she first visits the Skeleton Man she plays three nocturnes by Chopin, by memory. She also notes that music in the lobby of her mother's solicitor's firm had the 'atonal quality of Debussy'. She correctly identifies and then critiques Schubert's *Trout Quintet*, and attributes a harmony heard in church to Bach, giving a musical analysis of its structure to ground her supposition. Given that she is thirteen this kind of musical knowledge and ability is far in advance of her years. Since music is regarded as a common Aspie special interest it became even more important to render her relationship with it in detail, to stop it simply coming across as a mysterious quirk of autism, and instead enable it to come across as a fully integrated and organic part of her characterisation. To do this I made sure Anna told the reader that she had passed grade six on the piano – thereby implying that she worked up the grades. She tells the Skeleton Man that she used to hear tunes on the radio before purchasing and learning the music by memory. She also tells the reader that her father admired and encouraged her interest in classical music and in her mastery of the piano, although he didn't share her knowledge or talent in that area. These things between them imply that although her talents, memory and engagement are still very unusual and precocious for her age, they aren't just remarkable, ready-made quirks of savantism: she worked hard to get to that level, because she was passionately interested in the field. This is a familiar route of skills acquisition to most people, thereby avoiding making Anna's talents seem mysterious or miraculous as a function of her Asperger's.

Writing the story in first person from Anna's perspective afforded more opportunities to narrate this aspect of her characterisation than would have been open to me had I told the story from almost any other viewpoint, except, perhaps, for third person narrative, from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. Writing from Anna's point of view allowed for both internal and external discourse communicating the origins of her skills and talents.

The decision to narrate how Anna became so adept at music had potential implications for the reading of other aspects of the character. She is frequently revealed to have caches of specific knowledge, identifying flowers, calls of birds and discussing genetic heritability as well as making references to literature. Because the reader can see how she acquired her skills on the piano, it is possible for them to infer that she acquired these caches of specific knowledge in these fields through similar engagement in other areas of interest. This was how I represented the Aspie characteristic of special interests – some lasting across the years, and some lasting for a short time before being replaced by something new – and the long-term consequences of these.

Another component of whether a portrayed gift or strength in a disabled fictional character will likely come across as a compensation cure lies in how other characters in the story relate to the character in the context of the gift, in comparison to how they relate to the character outwith this context. Dick King-Smith's children's novel, *The Crowstarver* (1998, Doubleday, UK) tells the story of John Joseph 'Spider' Sparrow – a foundling left in a lambing pen at Outoverdown Farm in England, in between the two World Wars. Spider is raised by the shepherd, Tom, and his wife, Kathy, and it quickly becomes apparent that he is cognitively disabled, with physical clumsiness, limited comprehension and even more limited speech. In private, Spider is referred to by the major – 'Mister' – as 'half witted' (King-Smith, 1998, p43). Kathy and Tom themselves eventually admit to each other that Spider is 'not normal' and agree that they will likely never know what is 'wrong' with him (King-Smith, 1998, p31). The outspoken foreman, Billy Butt, even likens Spider to a deformed lamb that, by rights, should be allowed to die (King-Smith, 1998, p36). Spider is bullied by the local children, at one point being hunted by them like a fox. He is rejected from the local school by the headmaster, who admits to Kathy that "[Y]our boy has got problems that I don't think we can deal with" (King-Smith, 1998, p50). At various other points he is referred to as 'handicapped and backward', and by the narrator in a kind of free indirect style, as 'odd' (King-Smith, 1998, p23). He is given the menial job of crowstarving as that is all he is deemed fit for. He causes the poultryman to beg for him to be sent somewhere else 'for the Lord's sake' (King-Smith, 1998, p93) after smashing a tray of eggs, and having demonstrated himself to be unsafe with a pitchfork when mucking out stables.

However, Spider also has a compensation cure: a remarkable ability to communicate and connect with animals. One scene depicts him as climbing into an enclosure with wild horses so dangerous that any other person's life would be in danger; however, he quiets them instinctively and straight away, earning the admiration of the horseman, Billy Butt, thenceforth. He is able to imitate the calls not just of animals, but of specific animals such as the family sheepdog, and to make intricate and lifelike wood carvings of them, which he gives to the other farm workers such as Major Yorke – or 'Mister'. Mister's wife admits that despite Spider's deficiencies, there is 'something rather taking' about him (King-Smith, 1998, p44), and Mister later marvels at the realism of Spider's carving. Given the negative ways in which the characters related to him before they discovered his gifts and strengths, we the readers can readily believe that had he not possessed these, he would have had a much harder, if not impossible time, growing up in such a community. It is the community that is depicted as seeing his strengths as essential compensation for his deficiencies, 'curing' his place in their regard, in effect.

It was important to me that I portrayed Anna as intrinsically valuable within the story, without the necessity of a compensatory personal gift to justify the acceptance of her within her community. To this end, I took care to ensure that supporting characters related to her in ways that didn't simply depend on her practical skills and talents. For example, she meets and befriends the Skeleton Man in a manner that is completely independent of her control, of her Happy Game, or of her piano playing abilities – she falls out of a tree and is carried inside by him. By the time she plays the piano for him they have already connected emotionally. Likewise, Patty does not come to love her because of her skills or talents, but by confronting her own past.

It could be argued that Anna's Happy Game, and the disposition it affords her, act as compensation cures for her invasiveness and the less appropriate aspects of her conduct. However, I would contend that these are not special skills as much as unusual habits – and they are not strengths or gifts as much as personal qualities. I do not feel that there is any cultural insensitivity involved in depicting the positive regard and integration of a person within their community as being dependent on their admirable habits and qualities, rather than on what they can or can't do. The difficulty would lie more in representations that, by implication, inadvertently endorse a negative regard and/or failure of integration of a person because of their disabilities, or the positive integration of a disabled character primarily on the back of the presence of some compensatory factor. Furthermore, towards the end of the book references to both Anna's Happy Game, and to her musical abilities, become less prominent.

A third thing that could contribute to the impression of a fictional Aspie character's portrayed strengths and gifts as compensation cures is how the characteristic is described within the narrative itself – in other words, how the implied viewpoint of the narrator treats the strengths, gifts and disabilities of the character. If an autistic person is described as having eyes that wander vacantly and indiscriminately from cat, to person, to table, this establishes a default negative position towards the character in their basic autistic state of being. It implies that autism necessarily renders them incapable of intelligent thought or agency, and as such a pitifully deficient specimen of a person, good only as a narrative prosthesis, if even that. If the same character, who is able to paint beautiful pictures, is described as having their art flow from them like water pooling in a desert, this metaphorically implies at least two things. First, it implies that their artistic aptitude – their accomplishment and practical usefulness by normative standards – is the only pleasant, pretty or redemptive aspect of their character. Secondly, the image of water pooling in a desert implies that there is no conceivable natural or likely means by which a person so cognitively disabled could demonstrate any such normative aptitude, thus enhancing stereotypes about cognitive disability and its effects. This technique depends upon the polarisation, and the mutual dependency, of the two halves of the imagery – the wasteland of the desert (that is, the cognitively disabled person without their gift taken into consideration), and the water (that is, the gift). The implication is that there can be nothing watery about a desert, and nothing sand-like about water. It both utilises (if it is already there in the readers mind) and represents sentiments from past discourse concerning cognitive disability, to the effect that cognitive disability and any sort of normative aptitude are polar opposites. It also implies that some kinds of strengths or gifts are necessary to survive in the world in such a condition, thereby undermining the cognitively disabled person's natural state of being. Finally, water pooling in a desert gives the impression of something 'other' invading a certain type of landscape, instead of two things that can intrinsically co-exist interacting.

This third way of inadvertently creating an impression of a 'compensation cure' was not such a consideration for me when writing *Anna*, since I made the decision to tell the story in first person narrative from her perspective. Therefore a third-person narrative perspective could not superimpose its subjectivity onto the story as easily or as overtly. However, there were aspects in which I had to take such things into consideration. For example, we learn that there are a couple of other Aspies at Anna's school. When Anna goes to the school for the first time there are two students in the learning support room, both able bodied and therefore, by implication, receiving support for cognitive disabilities – possibly Asperger's.

Anna describes Cal's voice as 'abrupt' and 'loud' and describes her as 'thrusting' out her hand for Anna to shake. These indelicate, slightly negatively-weighted descriptions could be argued to fit within a literary tradition of indelicate, negatively-weighted word choices to describe the actions and voices of characters with learning disabilities. I did not wish to contribute to such a tradition; however, I am interested, as an author, in how to represent cultural conditioning in all its forms, without overt signification of the more problematic forms. Such descriptions of cognitively disabled or even simply cognitively diverse people are still relatively common in modern-day, real-life discourse, and in keeping with a realist element to the writing style and subject matter of *Anna*, I wanted to represent the effects of this – namely that Anna has unwittingly absorbed such terms of reference, and is unthinkingly using them without considering the impact they might have on the subject of description.

My reasoning in choosing to include such terms within Anna's narrative, when I would not use them were I writing non-fiction or writing in third-person narrative, was that in third-person narrative one generally only gets to know one's narrator through a type of subjectivity betrayed by their choices of description in relation to different characters. On top of this, if one does not find out who this narrator is – especially if the narration frequently employs a style of generalised commentary within or by way of relative terms of description, and the novel is written with an intention to replicate real life in terms of its subject matter and believability surrounding it – a reader may absorb the narrative's word choice in their descriptions as a type of intrusion of authorial personal regard. If the narrative voice seems like an omniscient narrator, its viewpoint may be even more persuasive in terms of cultural impact on reader's standpoints, and possibly on their subsequent regard of the real things the novel intends to represent. Similarly, I would not use these terms were I writing non-fiction, because they are not how *I* would want to relate to the subject.

However, in *Anna* the reader knows that the narrator is a thirteen-year-old girl who is still attempting to deduce the right ways to relate to the world and to the people in it, and who, by this stage, the reader knows has good intentions and a literal eye for details. This, I felt, meant that if Anna used insensitive language it would be reflective of her story world more than of my own insensitivity as an author. I did have to be careful not to entertain accidental authorial intrusions of language in terms of wording when writing these descriptions, though, and I will talk more about that later.

It might be argued that Anna's circumstances constitute a type of misfortune analogous in its treatment within the story to how disability has traditionally been treated in relation to many fictional characters. Anna could be said to be a 'victim' figure because she

has just lost both her home and her father, and is contending with a mother who continually rebuffs her. However, these are not different ways for a person to be in the world relative to normative ways – these are things that happen *to* a person, and they can happen to anyone, disabled or not. There is also a big difference between narrating and pitying a person's circumstances, and narrating and pitying a person's disability. Moreover, these pitiable things do not stem from, and are not attributed to, Anna's disability, by way of vilifying it within the text. In these ways I sought to provide safeguards within the narrative, in terms of not portraying savantism or compensation cures in conjunction with Asperger's.

When creating Anna's voice I was faced with several questions. How much should I draw on the narrative voice of *Pollyanna*? How much should I build Anna's voice on the legacy of the voices of Aspie characters as portrayed in other Aspie fictions? How much should I draw upon those aspects of my own experiences and imagination, which are not consciously associated with any specific texts of inspiration?

A Figurative Aspie

Aspie voices vary within Aspie fictions, but there are a few characteristics which are replicated in several of my case studies. One of these is brutal, unfiltered honesty. According to Aspie fiction, Aspies don't speak tactfully or mince their words. Christopher Boone describes one character as having hair in his nostrils, as though two mice were stuck up there (Haddon, 2003, p17). This trait is replicated in the character of Adam in *Adam's Alternative Sports Day* – in which he hurts and humiliates even his best friend, Josie, after he loses a maths challenge to her (Welton, 2005, p55) – and in *Blue Bottle Mystery*, when Ben's father asks Ben, in front of his teacher, whether his teacher is a good teacher. Ben replies, 'She's OK when she doesn't shout at me,' and when kicked under the table, he loudly asks why his father kicked him, much to his father's embarrassed anger (Hoopman, 2001, p73). Likewise, when another child attempts to make friends with Daisy in *Buster and the Amazing Daisy*, and Daisy wishes to be left alone, she simply asks the child if he can go away now, please (Ogaz, 2002, p38).

It seems to me that such moments have a twofold purpose. In cases like those which I have described, such a characteristic is sometimes intended to be so inappropriate that it is actually funny. In the cases of Daisy and Adam, this characteristic is an educational device, used to illustrate the difficulties these characters face, and why they struggle socially.

With *Anna* I decided to replicate a degree of frank, rather than brutal, honesty and straightforwardness in her character. Anna has enough cognitive finesse (that is, she can consciously rather than intuitively deduce what a person may be needing) to know not to

draw attention to Jamie's tear-streaked face in front of her own mother, in case it embarrasses him. She is also able to demonstrate great sensitivity in the way she comforts her mother following her revelation to her about her past, through drawing upon what her father would have done for her.

Conversely – and in an exact translation of the character of Pollyanna as seen in Porter's book – when Anna has no reason to believe that something might be a delicate matter, she is utterly indelicate. She very frankly asks her mother if Jamie can live with them, humiliating him by exposing him to her mother's shocked and adamantly resistant response. She also tells her mother that in light of learning why her mother hates work, she can now understand why there is no proper food in the fridge and the milk is off, thereby prompting her mother to send her to the shops for groceries.

I use Anna's naivety, coupled with her frankness, as a humour device at certain points, such as Anna's saying that nobody told her the Scots hoarded skeletons or kept knives in their socks, and her comment to her mother that she didn't realise the desk was up for sale, following her mother telling her that it is worth about five hundred pounds. However, I took the conscious decision not to use Anna's naivety or frankness as humour devices *at her expense* in terms of portraying her Aspie-like literal-mindedness as a ridiculous characteristic, or as a characteristic that is inappropriate or undesirable: Aspies have too often been the subjects of such jokes about their perspectives.

Literal-mindedness is another characteristic seen in just about every fictional Aspie in my Aspie fiction case studies. In its most basic form, it takes the shape of characters stumbling over common idioms. In *Blue Bottle Mystery*, when Ben's father says he didn't "...[P]ut two and two together" about the woman he had worked for being Ben's teacher, Ben informs him that two and two equals four, and that "...[E]verybody knows that" (Hoopman, 2001, p73). To me, this is taking the characterisation of Aspies as literal minded too far – Aspies may struggle over certain types of figurative language or hidden intent, but they have been exposed to certain idioms enough to infer their meaning from context if not from anything else, and to know that something figurative is being implied when a person they know to be intelligent says something that, literally speaking, is far below their intelligence level or doesn't seem to make sense. In other words, they may not understand the meaning of the idiom, but as long as they are aware that figurative speech exists, they can infer that an obscure-seeming remark or response may be figurative, and ask what the person employing it means.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time takes the implications of a literal mindset into more nuanced territory. Christopher Boone understands that people use

metaphors and similes, and knows what they are and what they are supposed to do, but he considers them to be the same as lies, because "...[A] pig is not like a day" (Haddon, 2003, p15). As such, he does not use them, and instead uses very flat, literal language. This also didn't feel like the right approach to me – it felt robotic and not true to my own lived experience of understanding language, or of hearing my Aspie friends speaking; and it didn't sound remotely like the autistics in Bascom, 2012. Consider this passage by Amanda Baggs, about her experience of nature (Baggs, 2012, p234):

[W]hen I'd had enough of the world of people, I'd turn off the Internet and go outside. My cat, Fey, often followed me out...I'd fill my pockets with rocks. Or sit on the ground and stack rocks all over my body. And the rocks would tell me about my own solidity. They'd tell me about being part of the mountains. And avalanches and mudslides. And volcanoes. And all the other things rocks know about. A small piece of granite in my hand would tell me about the smell of sun on a granite mountainside.

This passage gives rocks 'voices', 'emotions' and 'characters' through Baggs's fluid use of vivid, creative, illustrative and deeply moving personification.

I took such writing as permission to use emotionally engaged, flowing, figurative language in Anna's narrative wherever it seemed natural, and to not automatically forego it on principle since she is an Aspie. At one point she describes an emotion as rushing through her, like a wave rushing up the beach. During her trip to Edinburgh with her mother, she describes the legs of a crowd of people as swirling around her like water flowing round a boulder in a river. It was important to me to depict Anna's fresh, flexible, unique use of figurative language, in keeping with Asperger's observation of the creative, unique turns of phrase his subjects coined to describe their personal experiences and perceptions.

Attention to detail is another trait commonly ascribed to fictional Aspies. In *Buster and the Amazing Daisy*, a rival group of animal trainers attempt to sabotage Daisy's pet show act with Buster the rabbit, by kidnapping Buster. Daisy is able to remember several key details about the van, such as its markings, its number plate and its specific make (Ogaz, 2002, p87). Christopher Boone also has an eye for detail, remembering signs from the London Underground word for word (Haddon, 2003, p145), and noting the behaviours of those around him, such as his father tearing a strip of skin from his thumb when attempting to propose a means of regaining Christopher's trust following Christopher's fear-based rejection of him (Haddon, 2003, p219). In *Asperger Syndrome, the Swan and the Burglar*, Ryan's eye for detail manifests itself in the detailed notes he makes, such as the addresses of all the houses on his street (Boyd, 2007, p7). I replicated this characteristic in Anna, but rather than framing it as a unique talent – as it is with Daisy – or as an astonishing but

ostensibly pointless memory feat – as it is with Ryan – or as a quirky, stress-related behaviour – as it is with Christopher – I have let it go un-signified amongst other aspects of her narrative style.

The gentleness, brightness and still spaces in Anna’s voice are aspects that I do not feel come from pre-existing Aspie fiction especially, or indeed from the original *Pollyanna*, but which are based on the gentleness, brightness and stillness with which Georgina Terry delivers her lines in the 2003 film adaptation of *Pollyanna*. This adaptation was, as I have already stated, my primary inspiration in terms of informing the nature of my transformation of the story. I found the excessive exuberance and relentlessness of Pollyanna’s voice in the original book to be grating and uncomfortable, rather than uplifting and enticing, and to come across as neurotic and stressful rather than as cheering. The voice of Pollyanna in the 1950s Disney adaptation did not draw me in satisfactorily, since she was mostly reacting to other people rather than acting in her own right. Georgina Terry’s Pollyanna, I felt, established the balance perfectly where I wanted Anna’s characterisation to lie.

Filmic Narrative

Aspie fiction began to appear in the late 1990s as the diagnosis became more well-known. In this sense all Aspie fiction is post-modern fiction, and in fact the condition is arguably well suited to several post-modern stylistic trends. This also possibly explains in part the seemingly unwavering contemporary public fascination with Asperger’s and autism, and/or their associated traits, in fiction and fictional characters – the condition would appear to present a naturally fitting set of character traits for producing striking fiction.

One post-modern trend reminiscent of autistic experience is that of filmic, visual descriptions. This aspect of post-modern fiction is discussed by author-researchers such as Lodge, Foster and Christopher Isherwood, who says, of his novel-writing process: “I am a camera, with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (in Foster, 2002, p83).

Whilst Loftis contends the notion of the autistic as ‘passive’, a claim to filmic perception and memories of events is made by several autistics in their own memoirs. Autism advocate and cattle farm equipment designer, Temple Grandin, notes, of herself:

I create new images all the time by taking many little parts of images I have in the video library in my imagination and piecing them together. I have video memories of every item I’ve ever worked with... (Grandin, T. *Thinking in Pictures*, 2006, e-book edition 2009, Bloomsbury Publishing, UK, p5)

In a strikingly similar way, autistic autobiographer Donna Williams also describes her experience of the world as filmic:

As I have slept my mind has occasionally been aware of the replay of long strings of conversation and actions, feelings and sensations, perceptions of relative size and duration, or things and events exactly as it happened. (Williams, T. *Autism – an Inside-Out Approach*, 1996, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, p138)

These two autistic authors both report memories that work like a series of pictures or videos, and that are remembered in minute, close-up detail long after the events. This gave me a privilege when writing *Anna*: it allowed me to realistically ground and justify the minute detail with which she recalls events and dialogue, rather than relying on the reader's suspension of disbelief – a privilege most fiction authors do not have when writing in the first-person from the point of view of a non-autistic/non-Aspie character.

I could see the danger of this creative decision – it risked re-inforcing stereotypes of the autistic/Aspie as machine, computer or robot, as already mentioned. This stereotype, in turn, risks perpetuating the idea that autistics and Aspies lack emotions – an idea which Loftis asserts is erroneous (Loftis, 2015, p10). However, I justified my decision on the grounds that these two autistic authors themselves selected this aspect of their information-processing and recall abilities to associate with autism. I took this to be permission – along with the fact that I am also an Aspie who processes impressions and memories in this way – to re-create the characteristic for my own fictional Aspie. However, I do not actually say or signify within the work that this aspect of Anna's narrative is due to her Asperger's. Finally, I safeguarded against reinforcing this stereotype by taking great care to make it clear from Anna's own commentary during key parts of the narrative, that she does feel emotions, and that she feels them strongly. This was in my mind as a writer, particularly in the passage in which Anna's mother reveals her past relationship and the losses of multiple babies.

Level of Detail

Throughout my novel, Anna describes her experiences in great detail, evoking impressions, sensations and specificity. Early on, when she is eating her breakfast in the garden, she recalls a chaffinch calling, and a blackbird and a thrush. Later, she describes using drawing pins to make a den in her friend Jamie's bedroom, even giving the numbers of each colour of pin used. Obviously a photographic memory can remember events in more detail than a highly selective, general memory. This aspect of Asperger's fit conveniently into a pre-existing tradition of rich and extensive detail within the literary novel. Lodge describes the extraordinary level of detail inherent in Nicholson Baker's tribute to Proustian autobiographical fiction. In this tribute, says Lodge, Baker pads out the events of the story with copious detail and deviations concerning all that the main character encounters on his

lunch break (Lodge, 2002, p92). This kind of prose cheekily pays homage to the realist rendering of, as E.M. Foster puts it, ‘details simply amassing themselves like life’ (Foster, 1905, p34).

The subject of detail selection becomes pertinent to Aspie fiction in another way, and points towards another thing that I wished to avoid in the writing of *Anna* – disproportionate signification of Asperger-associated details of plot and character in Aspie fictions, by means of expositional narration and the purposeful contriving of situations designed to make Aspie difficulties blatantly obvious. Kathy Hoopman’s *Blue Bottle Mystery* opens with the Aspie character, Ben, being castigated for sucking his pen in class. In the next couple of pages we are told that he always flapped when he felt nervous, thereby revealing his repetitive, self-soothing movement (or ‘stim’) of choice. This is followed by him struggling to infer the idiomatic meaning of being ‘smart’ with a teacher, thereby revealing his difficulty with understanding figurative language. We learn that he is far above his class in maths and science – special interests that, along with computers, are ascribed to male Aspies in several Aspie fictions. Ben bluntly corrects the teacher to the effect that his pen is in fact not a pen but a texta, showing that he is pedantic, and furthermore does not intuitively understand that there are appropriate and inappropriate things to say to a teacher, and appropriate and inappropriate ways and times to say them. Finally he suffers a complete and dramatic meltdown in front of the class after the teacher loses her temper with him.

The first chapter of *Blue Bottle Mystery* reads as though it is intentionally constructed to allow the reader to be able to check off as many Asperger characteristics as possible within Ben – and to unequivocally identify him as the Aspie within the story. Not only that, but we learn next to nothing about Ben himself in this chapter, except for his Asperger traits. It is as if these are the most important things to establish about him as a character. In other words, Ben’s Asperger’s sits on the surface of the narrative, rather than being intergrated into it. As an Aspie I found this offensive on a humanistic level, as it encourages the reader to build their initial characterisation and regard of Ben almost solely on their understanding of generic Asperger’s – it is presented as a convergence of textbook-perfectly manifesting pathologised traits instead of as a unique and integral but not overwhelming aspect of his whole character. It also encourages quick and disproportionate judgements about how much of a person’s character and interactions with their surroundings are a product of their Asperger’s. It is also, I think, misleading from an educational standpoint, because Asperger’s does not usually present in such a clearcut way, in such a custom-designed situation, in real life.

Like *Blue Bottle Mystery*, Brenda Boyd’s *Asperger Syndrome, the Swan and the Burglar* begins with a similar classroom scene and a similar Aspie protagonist – Ryan.

Again, the reader is expositionally introduced to his literal interpretations of figurative speech, his problems with listening, his lack of social judgement, his love of making lists, his inappropriate manner towards the teacher and his particular kind of self-soothing repetitive movement, all within the space of a short first chapter. Unlike Kathy Hoopman, however, Brenda Boyd has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome herself. Whilst I respect that she herself evidently does not mind such a portrayal of an Aspie character, I still have the same personal concerns about the possible impacts of such portrayals. They still jarr with me as a literary fiction writer, and I would still seek to avoid them accordingly where possible.

Of course, part of the reason for this overt kind of narration and the quick portrait of Ben's and Ryan's Aspie traits is in part simply because *Blue Bottle Mystery* and *Asperger Syndrome, the Swan and the Burglar* are stories for pre-teens, and thus must be told in quite a short space of time in comparison to an adult book. A lot must therefore be shortcut in order to afford optimum space to aspects of the books that are of particular thematic interest. In a book intended for educational purposes with respect to Asperger's, it is inevitable that Aspie traits should be given greater priority within the narrative and characterisation. Given that *Anna* was aimed at a significantly older readership – adolescents and young adults – I could afford to make the book longer, and to integrate her traits more within the general portrayal of Anna's character and story, thus avoiding overtly expositional narration of her Asperger characteristics, and the creation of contrived situations through which to show their impact on her life.

Aside from allowing Anna's Asperger-related characteristics the space to develop and be revealed at their own pace and in an integrated manner throughout the novel, another related consideration with which I was faced, was how much self-awareness to give Anna, and as such, how much she should explain herself to the reader. For those parts of herself that Anna either could not or would not overtly explain or discuss, I had to find ways to signify important information to the reader through her (since she is, for the most part, the sole narrator and the only set of eyes through which the reader can view her or the story world), but at times above her own awareness – as researcher and novelist James Wood puts it, to simultaneously write 'from within' her but also to write 'over' her (Wood, J. *How Fiction Works*, 2008; 2009 e-book edition, Vintage, London: p25).

Interestingly, post-modernism provided an answer to this as well, in that it favours a paring down of narrative explanation surrounding dialogue and events, as noted by David Lodge, James Wood and E.M. Foster. Lodge notes that the connecting feature between post-modern authors such as Waugh and Powell is that they "reverse the modernist privilege of

depth over surface. There is a return in their novels to objective reporting of the external world, and a focus on what people say and do rather than what they think and feel” (Lodge, 2002, p71). He also notes the power of short, clipped phatic utterances in speech – utterances such as ‘I see’ to deliver subtext depending on the context in which they occur. This technique allows for communication, not just through what is said, but also through what is *not* said. This, comments Wood, allows the “...[L]anguage and omissions [to] tease us, provoke us to wade in their deep shallows...” (Wood, 2008, p83-84). To contextualise this he cites the work of Muriel Spark, with her ‘never explain, never apologise’ style (Wood, 2008, p88), and her conveyance of character mainly through their sayings.

This type of approach to fiction particularly influenced my creative decisions in terms of dialogue surrounding Anna’s mother, because she is so closed off. In one key scene Anna and the Skeleton Man are discussing a cup that Anna’s mother made when she was a child. Without revealing her identity, the Skeleton Man tells Anna that he and his daughter have spoken only ‘once or twice in about fourteen years’. Anna replies, ‘that’s awful’ to which he simply replies, ‘her choice’. The juxtaposition of this seeming dismissal with the revelation that he has kept the cup all these years is intended to reveal some of the affection and anguish masked by the brevity of this exchange. This also constitutes an example of the narrative speaking through but over Anna.

In this way, too, I chose to convey Anna’s situation-specific, ongoing puzzlement over which aspects of peoples’ communications to take literally, rhetorically or figuratively, as well as her sometimes inappropriate choice of conversational questions (she fills what she perceives to be an ‘awkward silence’ between herself and Molly during their first meeting by asking Molly if she is married), as well as her deliberations over how best to conduct herself in reaction to the various things people do and say around her.

Lodge notes that “[W]hen first person narration contains none of the emotions and values that we expect to find there, a peculiarly disturbing effect of alienation can be produced” (Lodge, 2002, p92). I felt this kind of alienation could be useful both thematically in terms of illustrating Anna’s alienation from her new community and, in particular, in terms of her alienation from her mother – not just because of her Asperger’s and the difficulty it affords her in reading new situations, but because of the closed-off nature of the community she is in, and how young she is to be coping with such a change in her life circumstances, with no help in adjusting at all, and intrinsic difficulty in identifying and articulating her own emotions anyway.

I originally also wanted to adapt this pared-down aesthetic with respect to her internal thoughts and feelings too; however, I chose in the end to narrate these as they occurred at

key points. My reasons for changing my mind on this involved my not wanting to risk creating the impression of a ‘gothic’ autistic, as Loftis puts it, through utterly alienating the reader from her, or a ‘victim’ autistic, through appearing to alienate her from her own feelings. A similar sense of alienation has been stereotypically associated with autistics and Aspies, and techniques to replicate it have been consequently employed in Aspie fictions. Indeed, Loftis asserts that this is one of the most common ways of representing autism in fiction (Loftis, 2015, p16). Hans Asperger, indeed, initially referred to the condition he described as ‘autistic psychopathy’ in his 1944 paper – a term implying not only alienation of non-Aspies from Aspie feelings, but actual absence of emotion in the Aspie.

This regard of Aspies and autistics has, unfortunately, persisted throughout the decades, with Lodge himself in fact stating that autistic people, lacking theory of mind, ‘don’t seem interested in communicating’ and that they ‘don’t understand fiction’ (Lodge, 2002, p48). Loftis refutes this assertion, stating that:

The psychiatric community has frequently described people on the spectrum as disliking fictional literature (As a professor of literature I like literature very much – and I know many other people on the spectrum who also enjoy fictional literature.)

Aspies Luke Jackson and Kenneth Hall also both express their love of reading throughout their works, with Jackson recounting a story about his suddenly acquiring the ability to read fluently, literally overnight, having previously been completely unable to read (Jackson, 2001, p116).

Loftis also dismisses the twin notions that Aspies and autistics cannot form emotional attachments due to their lack of theory of mind (Loftis, 2015, p10), and that they cannot ‘...[U]nderstand [their] own condition[s] or tell stories about their experience[s]’ (Loftis, 2015, p10). She discusses the novel *Flowers for Algernon* – and the problems with learning-disabled character, Charlie’s, portrayed lack of understanding of the bullying and abuse he encounters – as an example of how fictional characters with autistic-like characteristics are often portrayed as lacking subjectivity and agency. She objects to the notion that ‘[I]ntellectually disabled people are so socially unaware that they don’t feel the pain of mockery and rejection. Charlie does not realize when he is being bullied and believes that his abusers are his friends’ (p72).

I did not want to feed these misconceptions about Aspies in the creation and portrayal of Anna, and therefore took the fairly straightforward decision to make her, as a character, aware of her condition (at least up to a point – she is only thirteen), as well as a lover of fiction and a writer apt at telling of her experiences. References to fiction permeate her narrative, with her referencing *Lord of the Flies* on one occasion, and Agatha Christie on

others, as well as noting her own above-average reading speed and implying the volume and breadth of her reading in her having managed to read her height in fiction over the twelve days of Christmas. Anna's love of fiction, and the writing of her own story, also led to a significant creative decision on my part concerning the inconsistency of the register of her vocabulary, which I will talk about more later on.

With regards to the risk of creating a 'victim autistic', I did take the somewhat contentious decision to create an impression within my narrative that Anna is quite naïve as to who her friends are and who they are not – or at least, to how people should behave towards her if they are friends. She displays fierce loyalty and compassion towards her mother – preparing herself to defend the house on her behalf on her second day at home – despite her mother rebuffing her attempts at connecting with her in both verbal and tactile forms, avoiding her, and forbidding her from talking about anything to do with her father. Indeed, later on, her mother even admits to having tried to make herself hate Anna, and Anna wonders whether she dislikes her, and what she has done wrong, on a frequent basis throughout the story. She also refers to her friends having beaten her up in school on one occasion. On other occasions she refers to one of her friends as having called her choice of foods 'gross', and another as having cold-shouldered her after a fall-out.

My intention in this case was not so much to create Anna as a naïve character – she is aware that she is being treated unfairly, at one point getting angry at her mother for her attitude towards Jamie – as that she deeply believes that some things are owed, and should be given, unconditionally. I attempted to convey this through her dialogue with Jamie, in which he suggests that she should come and live with him in his tree. She notes that even if her mother didn't care about her, her father has taught her that '[H]onesty is an ethical obligation, and ethical obligations don't depend on other people behaving well.' Likewise, when she initially thinks that Molly is a burglar, she narrates that she wanted to run, but that '[A]s Mum's daughter I felt I had a duty to protect her and all that was hers.'

It may appear from the first example especially, that I have created Anna as a character naively and literally taking her father's words to extremes because of her Asperger's. However, Anna has just lost her father and is trying to hold on to as much of him and his influence as possible, primarily as a means of coping with her grief; not primarily as a function of her Asperger's. This becomes evident after her mother has narrated her experiences with her father to Anna, and Anna, instead of leaning on her father's memory, attempts to destroy it by smashing the mobile phone with his texts on, and notes that her Happy Game now seems 'flimsy and trite'.

Inconsistency of Anna's Register of Vocabulary

One aspect of Asperger's which was noted by researchers of the early nineties was the 'odd prosody' of Asperger's. This has also been noted by Kutscher in 2014, and attributed to impairments in pragmatic language. The authors of these pieces of research are not specific about the exact nature of Aspie-specific oddities in prosody. However, in Nancy Ogaz's Aspie fiction, *Buster and the Amazing Daisy* the Aspie character, Daisy, attributes her use of large words to her Asperger's. Hans Asperger himself also notes the creative use of language in his Aspie subjects, as discussed previously – including the use of adult-sounding words, 'clever' sounding language and unusual word choice.

This tendency of Aspies to use language unusually, in terms of their own age-group or just generally-speaking, was something that I wanted to capitalise on in *Anna*. I say 'capitalise' because it afforded the opportunity to switch between the comparative simplicity of a thirteen-year-old's language in terms of her perception, and the lyricism and expressive potential of an adult or an author. For example, Anna's narration of running across the street in the night to search for Jamie is very lyrical, whereas her narration of deliberating on whether to place rubbish in the Skeleton Man's bin on her second day at her mother's house uses comparatively simple language and terms of description, except for her wonderings concerning whether the placing of rubbish in someone else's bin 'constituted trespassing'. This hybridisation of language allows the reader a deeper, richer and more intimate portrait of both Anna's world and, indirectly, her emotions; but also her level of social maturity and vulnerability in moving through her community – the latter perhaps affording a greater capacity for feelings of compassion and protectiveness in the reader towards her.

After writing *Anna* I believe as a creative prose writer that if a pared-down description of deep emotions in a first person narrative creates a peculiar effect of alienation, then in first person at least, fleetingly very adult language coupled with a child's perspective and reactions to the world, can create a peculiarly affecting impression of rawness and emotional vulnerability. Jonathan Safran Foer makes use of this in the first-person narrative of his nine-year-old protagonist, Oskar Schell, in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It is interesting to recall again, here, that this character has been 'diagnosed' as being somewhere on the autistic spectrum by many readers, as well as by the screenwriters of the book's film adaptation. Perhaps, therefore, an association between adult prosody in a fictional child, and fictional Asperger's syndrome, has already been made.

All this being said, readers of this element of *Anna* may not come to such sympathy and protectiveness by this route initially. When a character uses language that seems, as James Wood puts it, over-literary for their station and/or characterisation within the story,

readers may instead conclude that the author's own style of literary narrative is intruding into the story world and the character's voice, spoiling the illusion of a self-contained world of which the reader has temporarily become, vicariously, a part, through the main character or characters' viewpoint(s). Wood regards this slippage of style as a common authorial error, easy to make when writing. He asks, of narrative and dialogue, "Do the words these characters use seem the words they might use, or do they sound more like the author's?" (Wood, 2008, p22). He notes that this kind of stylistic intrusion has the effect of alienating the reader from the character and the world, especially when the character's and author's styles are grossly different (Wood, 2008, p28). Perhaps this odd prosody is, then, another reason why Aspies have so commonly been misunderstood as aloof, and why this apparent aloofness has so often been replicated, extended and otherwise presumed and utilised in Aspie fiction.

Thus I could see that the decision to replicate this oddness – or at least unevenness – of prosody in Anna's narrative style may be jarring to the non-Aspie reader. However, to omit this aspect would have been to censor an accurate and significant reflection of Aspie experience. Its significance in the presentation of the condition is evidenced by its conserved status across commentary from psychology experts across a range of time periods, works from Aspie fiction authors such as Nancy Ogaz, and Aspie memoir writers themselves such as Luke Jackson. For this reason I chose to include this patchiness of register as part of Anna's narrative voice and style, and to provide an implied grounding for it that was relatable to the experiences of non-Aspie readers, in the form of her love of fiction. I also decided not to overtly explain or signpost such times within the text – there has to come a time when common knowledge can become subtext within fiction; and this aspect of Asperger's is becoming more commonly understood thanks to Aspie writing. Yes, she may borrow stylistically at times when writing her story, thus resulting in an unevenness of word choice and register at times, but although I have not overtly explained or signposted it, I *have* included within the story world an explicitly invoked resource from which the reader might infer this borrowing on her part is taking place: works of fiction read by her. In other words, the reader does not need to come out of the story world to explain to themselves the borrowed-sounding elements of Anna's narrative style. Thus the illusion of a self-contained story-world is conserved.

Treatment of Paraplegia within *Anna*

I have discussed at length my treatment of Asperger's within *Anna*, but this is only one of the disabilities that feature in the work. In fact, Porter's book features characters with various

disabilities throughout, and disability and illness are recurring themes. Mr Pendleton sustains a broken leg. Mrs Snow is a chronic ‘invalid’. Most prominently, Pollyanna sustains an injury to her spine that leaves her a temporary paraplegic and eventually sees her travelling to a rehabilitation centre to learn to walk again. Interestingly, when examining the four adaptations from which I drew inspiration, these three instances of disability are conserved across all tellings, rendering them all, by my criteria of selection and categorisation for adaptation purposes, cardinal functions. Accordingly, I made the decision to transfer all of them into *Anna*.

Whilst these four aspects of the story are conserved across adaptations, they are not all given the same treatment in each adaptation. In the 1950s film adaptation by Disney, Pollyanna injures her spine when she falls from the roof of her house as she tries to recover a doll. In the 2003 film adaptation, Pollyanna is injured by a motorcar driven by the motorcar-obsessed suitor of Nancy the maid. One thing all the adaptations conserve, however, is the thematic and plot significance of Pollyanna’s accident. Its consequences provide the biggest test yet of her Glad Game, not just as played by her, but as played by all those with whom she has come into contact and to whom she has taught it, and who subsequently attempt to buoy her by telling her, through Aunt Polly, the results of their having played it. It also provides a reason for her sudden withdrawal from community life, thereby enabling the extent of her integration within the community, and her effects on it, and its subsequent unification in support of her, to become apparent; much like only finding out that daylight comes from the sun once the sun sets and it consequently gets dark.

One of my biggest challenges in terms of how to adapt this cardinal function of *Pollyanna* was how to give her accident and its consequences a new significance and framing in light of new attitudes to disability and to the integration of disabled people into mainstream society, as spearheaded by proponents of the social model of disability. This model of disability proposes that some well-meaning ways of representing disability are harmful, disempowering, and othering to disabled people. The reasons why are discussed by various social model campaigners – many of whom are disabled self-advocates. Harmful modes of representation discussed include those of ‘supercrip’, ‘overcomer’, the ‘narrative prosthesis’ (already defined and discussed somewhat in this work), and one which I shall term the ‘perspective resetter’ – that is, disabled people as functioning to remind non-disabled people to be grateful for those things they have that the disabled person does not have.

As part of disabled activist Stella Young’s TED (Technology, Education and Design) talk (2014), Young shared her objection to the idea of disabled people acting as sources of inspiration for non-disabled people:

We've been sold the lie that disability is a bad thing...and to live with disability makes you exceptional. It's not a bad thing, and it doesn't make you exceptional.

She also uses the term 'inspiration porn' to refer to the hankering of non-disabled people after inspiring stories featuring disabled people, and notes that these stories often imply that disabled people are inspirational 'for getting out of bed and remembering our own name in the morning' – a trend which, she argues, disrespectfully lowers expectations of disabled people to such an extent that their genuine achievements on a normative level are actually devalued.

It is also possible to go too far in the opposite direction and expect impossibly high standards of achievement from disabled people to make up for, or transcend, their disability, in order to view them as equal to able-bodied/minded people. The 'supercrip' narrative takes a disabled person and frames them as a superhero, overcoming seemingly impossible odds and performing extraordinary feats, ultimately putting non-disabled people to shame in what they achieve as a result. This framing of disability, too, is problematic. Researcher Silva (2012) discusses it in relation to coverage of the 2012 paralympics:

Supercrip narratives may have a negative impact on the physical and social development of disabled individuals by reinforcing what could be termed 'achievement syndrome' – the impaired are successful *in spite* of their disability.

If, as Young asserts in her TED talk, being disabled is not a bad thing, then living with it is also not a bad thing, and the question arises as to why disability should therefore be overcome or transcended, and why it should be framed as something, *in spite* of which, a person can still achieve, or *because* of which, a person's achievements become more critical to the perception of them as meaningful contributors to society. I am not going to attempt to argue for an answer to these questions here; however, these considerations provide an unavoidable cultural backdrop against which new fictions about physical disability must henceforth be written.

In Porter's *Pollyanna*, the title character, upon encountering Mrs Snow, states that Mrs Snow can be glad that other people aren't like her, stuck in bed, thereby implying that she thinks Mrs Snow's invalid status is a thing to be thankful not to have. When Pollyanna herself has her spinal chord injury, she – believing her legs are broken rather than that her spine is injured – consoles herself by thinking of all the things that she will do once she can walk again; and when she finds out she will likely not walk again, she consoles herself with the fact that at least she *had* working legs for eleven years of her life.

These forms of consolation appear to characterise her as someone who believes that being able to walk is a preferable state of affairs to being in a wheelchair. In fact, the realisation that her injury is probably permanent almost breaks Pollyanna's spirit, preventing her from being able to play her Glad Game, much to the shock, sympathy and sadness of the community – compounded with their sadness that she cannot walk any more. This occurrence is actually portrayed as being a worse thing to happen to Pollyanna than the loss of her beloved father, since the loss of her father happens before the start of the story, but her paralysis forms the climax of it.

Clearly, the framing and significance of disability within the plot of Porter's book do not resonate with contemporary discourse falling within the social model of disability and, more significantly, with many disabled people themselves. Once again, I had no wish to perpetuate these modes of representing disability; however, I do believe that there is a significant psychological difference between *being* disabled and *becoming* disabled; the latter involving a period of emotional transition between ways of being in the world – the forfeiting of (and in forfeiting, a period of grieving for) one way, and the subsequent eventual embracing of the other. It is this arc of transition that I attempted to represent Anna as going through following her accident, and it was for this reason that I depicted her as losing her appetite, including a passage in which she lists the dreams she has lost in losing her ability to walk.

This process of emotional adjustment can be seen in the fact that it tends to be disabled people who once had functions that they do not have now – such as paraplegic Claire Lomas, and quadriplegics Joni Eareckson and Christopher Reeve – who entertain or at some point entertained dreams of regaining those functions. To me, this is an understandable function of a stage in the psychological transition between one form of living and another. Viewed in this way the desire to regain function is not necessarily reflective of a regard of disability as bad; rather, it is reflective of the emotional difficulty involved in passing through the transition and adjusting to a new way of being. It is this process that I attempted to represent in *Anna*.

It may be argued that my decision to depict Anna as departing for London to take part in a medical trial aiming to give her back some function of her legs supports a 'cure' agenda with respect to her disability. This raises a question particularly relevant to medicine today, namely, where do the boundaries lie between disability, injury and illness? Clearly there is some overlap – many hereditary diseases such as Cystic Fibrosis are disabilities that progressively injure the body, causing the patient to become increasingly ill. Likewise, the

condition Cerebral Palsy is a disability resulting from injury to the brain. This distinction between illness and disability is one that most disabled people are aware of themselves.

The situation is even more complicated with regards to spinal cord and brain injuries – if such injuries may one day not be permanent but instead be fixable through medicine, restoring function that had been lost as a result of them, should they still be regarded as disabilities and be subject to the social model of disability, or should they be treated as injuries, with a view to curing them? Whilst I again do not wish to suggest and argue for definitive or even personal answers to these questions in the body of this discourse, I maintain that these questions hold significance for creative writers seeking to responsibly represent disability, illness and injury in their works, and also that the social model, for all its self-assertiveness, does not promise straightforward answers to these questions.

My own solution was to attempt a compromise in the representation of Anna's paraplegia arc, by incorporating aspects both of the medical and the social models of disability. She mourns the loss of her ability to walk, but the function of the accident within *Anna* is not, now, to provide the ultimate test of her Happy Game, nor is it to wring extra pathos from the reader in reaction to her paraplegic state. Rather, I needed something to take Anna out of her community, and out of the Central Belt, to show how well integrated within her new life she had become in the course of the book. This was also why I depicted her as receiving an influx of cheering letters, and why the occurrence needed to appear towards the end of the book. In depicting her leaving the Central Belt for London, having found her mother and bonded with her, I closed the circle of Anna's travels and of her loss, which began with her leaving London for the Central belt all alone, having lost her father and the bond they had. I depict her as being enrolled in a medical trial to see if they could give her back some function in her legs, but I also narrated, through Molly's letter to Anna, that Molly and Kenny are adapting their house to ensure that no matter how she gets around following her return, she will still be able to come and stay with them; thus showing a society willing to adapt itself to ensure that her state of being does not become disabling to her. Crucially I felt it important not to hint either way at whether Anna is moving towards adapting to life in a wheelchair, or whether she expects to walk again. I chose to remain silent on this so that the happiness she finds at the end of the novel does not depend on the prospect of her becoming able-bodied again, but rather on her new sense of belonging, which is a feature of her successful integration within her new life.

Patty's Voice in *Anna*

Anna is a novel written overwhelmingly in a single narrative voice, and from a single narrative perspective – an approach increasingly popular in post-modern fiction according

to David Lodge. However, it is a decision not as commonly taken with Aspie fictions, and especially not in Aspie fiction targeted at children. In fact, so far, Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* is the only work of pre-teen Aspie fiction that I have come across to be told in first person narrative from the point of view of its Aspie protagonist.

It might be imagined that this aversion from Aspie first-person narrative is because non-Aspie authors do not wish to presume upon Aspie perspectives, but evidence would not support this hypothesis, since there is no clear correlation between Aspie authors writing Aspie fictions in first person from the point of view of the Aspie protagonist, and non-Aspie authors not doing this. Erskine is not an Aspie herself, yet she writes in first person from Aspie Caitlyn's perspective. Conversely, Brenda Boyd *is* an Aspie herself, and yet she writes *Asperger Syndrome, the Swan and the Burglar* in third person narrative.

There is, however, a rich tradition in both fiction and non-fiction, of other voices impinging on the Aspie and autistic voice. Experts on Asperger's have frequently provided forwards to Aspie memoirs, with Tony Attwood writing the foreword to Luke Jackson's *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*, Ken Kerr writing the foreword to Kenneth Hall's *Asperger Syndrome, the Universe and Everything*, and Oliver Sacks writing the foreword to Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures*. This is not uniformly the case – Donna Williams writes her own foreword to her work, *Autism: An Inside Out Approach* – and it becomes less and less the case as the movement for self-advocacy gains momentum in the Aspie and autistic world. Nevertheless, the case remains that in the past, Aspies have narrated themselves, whilst non-aspies have narrated their narratives of the Aspies, drawing the reader's attention to those experiences particularly associated with the condition, and therefore ostensibly rendering these works particularly informative in an educational setting concerned with Asperger's and autism.

Useful as this may be to people studying Asperger's, as far as the Aspie themselves is concerned, there is no clear boundary between Aspie and non-Aspie related aspects of their day-to-day experiences. Whilst non-Aspies may be able to construct for themselves a map with which to navigate Aspie difficulties in situations relevant to them, Aspies do not have such a map for navigating life because they are immersed within their Aspie way of being in the world all the time. Therefore when the intention is not so much to educate about Asperger's as to draw a reader into an experience of Aspie consciousness (and I stress here that no two Aspie consciousnesses are the same, whether fictional or real), this detached view of Asperger's, and the overt signification of the manifestation of relevant characteristics, hinders rather than helps the writer's purpose.

I wanted *Anna* to create a continual experience of Anna's mindset as lived from her perspective, so that through her narrative the reader vicariously experiences the story world through her lens. Therefore I did not switch viewpoints throughout the majority of the story, and I did not include any overt narration of Anna or of her characteristics courtesy of any of the characters with whom she meets. Like Anna, the reader's eye is only drawn to things which may be associated with Asperger's, through Anna's references to things worked on by her with her outreach worker and her father, such as personal space and time and place. I included these hints with full knowledge that rehabilitative intervention to 'pass for normal' is a highly divisive and sensitive practice in the autistic and Aspie world. However, I wanted the reader to experience the feeling of mixed attitudes, and narratives of attitudes, to assistance, as having been introduced and fed to Aspies from various sources.

Towards the end of the book, though, I take the decision to introduce two short passages written in first person narrative, from the point of view of Anna's mother. The placing of these passages, when the rest of the book is written in one voice, may be jarring at first to the reader, but there are several good reasons for it.

Firstly, there would have been an irony in avoiding the narration of an Aspie character from the outside, whilst simultaneously narrating a second character portrayed as having significant social difficulties – albeit of a different kind and with different origins – entirely from the outside. The link between trauma and mental dissociation from a traumatic situation is well established in the field of psychology, as is the connection between length and depth of trauma and length and depth of dissociation (Lerner, 2014). Moreover, Giesbrecht *et al.* (2004) observe that: "...[H]abitual tendency to dissociate is considered a defensive manoeuvre to withdraw from the effect of traumatic events". This is exactly how I imagined dissociation to have functioned in Patty.

What might the effects of so much dissociation be for Patty? Giesbrecht *et al.* note the impairing effects of extensive dissociation on task absorption and memory, from which I infer that if significant trauma were to occur repeatedly throughout childhood and/or adolescence, the development of everyday problem-solving skills may be delayed or even halted at a certain stage, leading to an adult far less equipped to cope with the practical and social complexities of independent life.

With this hypothesis in mind I created some of Patty's outward behaviours to resemble those of a difficult teenager. A teenager may be feeling confused and stressed, but may not have the emotional maturity to identify or articulate their emotions, or the self-awareness to trace the more complex roots of these and move forward with wisdom in

accordance. On top of this, they may attempt to mask their difficulties and insecurities for fear of being ridiculed or seen as weak or incompetent by those around them.

I created Patty as being profoundly delayed and damaged from a social development point of view: although she can function as an adult in terms of paying bills, feeding herself and Anna, maintaining a house and car, driving and holding down a job, she is very sensitive to losing face, to damaging her image (as is shown by her actions following information about her miscarriage having been leaked), and to feeling incompetent (as is shown by her self-blame over her children, her marriage, and her letting down of Anna). When these things occur her reaction is to aggressively withdraw into herself, away from people and from having to interact with and answer to them. She also avoids attaching to people out of fear of being hurt. Anna represents a sudden and unexpected change, a direct link with past traumas, a responsibility far beyond Patty's coping skills at the time of Anna's arrival back into the neighbourhood, and a potential, though by no means guaranteed, source of happiness that could end up hurting her again, and which she could end up doing wrong by. As such, Patty struggles to connect and to navigate looking after Anna as a mother should.

This psychological profile constitutes a highly debilitating way of being in the world for Patty, but also superficially creates a very unsympathetic impression of her that is only partly mitigated by hints in Anna's early narrative, that she may be masking deeper feelings and actively resisting attachment to Anna, without total success.

After sustaining this ambiguity of characterisation for such a long time I felt that Patty's position, intentions and internal conflicts needed to be definitely resolved, or at the very least demystified in some definite way for the reader, and coupled with the revelation concerning the losses of Patty's babies and her failed relationships, I felt the final way to emphasise that Patty is, in fact, a good though damaged character trying hard to reform, would be to allow readers to spend some narrative time in her head, where some of her more intimate thoughts could be shared concerning how she sees Anna, and how she feels about her. In other words, Patty's narrative would provide the definitive account of her own intentions, about which Anna and supporting characters could only speculate in their narratives of her, with incomplete knowledge.

Incidentally, Anna's accident and its consequences also functioned as a catalyst to bring these elements out of Patty to the surface whilst the narrative is being told from her point of view. Had I stayed in Anna's point of view it would not have been possible for the reader to experience Patty's interiority, but it would also not have been possible to convey to the same intimate degree, the events that took place around Anna's accident whilst she was unconscious, or Patty's moment at the grave of her children, or her visit to the minister's

wife, all of which constitute key functions within the conclusion of various sub-plots of *Anna*.

Another aspect of Patty that I wanted to become more apparent in her own narrative is that she does not merely appear dysfunctional on the outside, but that she has difficulties on a deeper internal level as well. After twelve years she still experiences strong negative emotional reactions when referred to as ‘Mrs Whitear’, and interprets a medic’s reassurances that crying would be normal as another implication that she is not normal – something that connects back to the grounds on which she lost custody of Anna, and her own self-consciousness about not being able to give Anna all she wanted to as a baby. She has exaggerated startle reflexes to being touched by Ben at Anna’s bedside, suggesting a high level of ongoing stress and nervousness, and a habitual resistance of intimacy. She even implies that she feels she would have to end her life if Anna were to die from her injuries, since she blames herself for them and for all her losses up until this point – something that does not suggest a balanced mindset. Finally, she has a strong evasive reaction to children in general, as is shown by her reaction to the minister’s new baby, as well as to Joanne’s baby, thereby showing to a small degree the type of aversion she has had to battle in taking Anna in.

In order to draw the sub-plot of her dysfunctionality to a close, as well as the sub-plot of Patty’s faith, I included the second section from her viewpoint in which she visits the minister’s wife, confesses how guilty she feels, and lets go of her guilty feelings. Anna’s voice could not have told this section as appropriately, as her character would not have had the insight into Patty’s mindset, or the life experience to interpret the significance of the moment, in order for this passage to have the full resolving effect it needed to have. It was my hope that in demonstrating how deep Patty’s problems ran, I could dispel any impression created that her coldness towards Anna was in some way a consciously acted front, and deliberately manipulative or mean-spirited in nature.

Finally, as is stated in the story’s narrative, the inclusion of Patty’s voice simply serves as a narrative bridge for an important time period with important plot events in it, of which Anna was oblivious due to being unconscious. In other words, it serves a function as a practical device of the kind that novelist E.M. Foster alludes to in his academic discourse, *Aspects of the Novel* (1905; 2016 e-book edition, Hooper & Stoughton, UK) as part of his discussion of the logistics of ending a novel, hence its pace and level of detail, justified in the story world by Patty’s inferior storytelling abilities as compared to Anna. I will talk more about the pacing and level of detail towards the end of *Anna* later on.

Lack of Chapter Breaks in *Anna*

Initial drafts of *Anna* were split into chapters, in keeping with the conventions of most contemporary novels. The removal of these from later drafts was both a practical and a representational creative decision. As previously discussed, the narrative is already filmic in terms of its descriptions of characters' dialogue and superficial behaviours, as well as its visual descriptions. I wanted to enhance certain aspects of the filmic style in my editing process – such as the level of visual detail – whilst reducing other aspects. One thing I wished to reduce within the writing was the element of snapshot-like scenes such as those that occur in a film. When writing in chapters I experienced an overwhelming instinct to break the chapters at points at which the emotion of an incident or moment reached its dramatic climax, and to begin the next chapter a short time later with the aftermath of the climax, rather than depicting such moments in full detail. Breaking chapters off at these points had the effect of pulling the reader out of the story at its most crucial points, depriving them of the emotional gratification promised in the build-up to them. Doing this too often risked eventually losing the reader's interest. I also felt it was lazy writing on my part, since it provided me with a means to avoid directly confronting and capturing the most complicated and crucial emotions and thoughts of my characters.

Another difficulty I encountered with dividing the book into chapters was that the level of detail inherent in Anna's narrative made it difficult to engineer equal chapter lengths. For example, from the beginning of the novel until '...[B] ut in all honesty, I wasn't sure I liked it' formed the first chapter naturally, and was just under four thousand words long – a suitable chapter length for a work of fiction in the 'young adult' genre. This natural chapter break set a structural precedent for the chapters of the book to top and tail each day Anna spent living with her mother. However, in order for Anna's grieving process and the bonding process between Anna and Patty to be plausible, the number of days, and thus the number of chapters narrated in the specific detail of Anna's narrative voice, would have made for far too long a novel. There had to be abridgements of time – it was an editorial necessity; however, I did not want these abridgements to be too conspicuous, as they would have been at the starts and ends of chapters. Rather, I wanted the reader to somewhat forget about them, so that they had the impression of flowing through time with Anna on her journey.

The day on which Anna and Molly visit the library in the next town, for example, is told in the space of just under five thousand words, which is considerably longer than earlier chapters. This fact, coupled with the change in format with the advent of the two passages narrated by Patty – which cover time in a different way from those earlier sections narrated

by Anna – meant that I needed more freedom to vary the length of sections, the narrative pacing and the level of detail, than regular chapter breaks afforded.

I could have experimented more with different ways of breaking up chapters in the novel but I felt that ultimately, the removal of chapter breaks altogether better served my representational purposes in capturing Anna's view of the world, and also paid homage to more experimental approaches to writing conventions as seen in much post-modern fiction. To immerse a reader deeply in one character's way of seeing the world, I believe, requires as little overt authorial signification of different aspects of that way of seeing as possible (e.g. not overtly signposting Aspie traits whenever they manifest particularly strongly) – because there is no such signification or clear-cut division of significances in the experiences of our day to day consciousness. I also wanted as little editorial breaking up of prose as possible, because, again, our day to day consciousness is not divided into subheadings that pull us out of one stretch of time and into the next, or that signify to us which aspects of each section we should especially focus on and remember.

Drawing *Anna* to a Close

I have already discussed one reason why I chose to include a huge plot development – Anna's paraplegia – at the end of the novel, rather than introducing it earlier, or rather than ending the story with the Skeleton Man's having dropped the custody challenge against Patty, and the subsequent proper bonding of Anna with her mother. Aside from its cardinal function within Porter's *Pollyanna*, earning it an automatic place in *Anna*, it closed the circle of Anna's travels and her loss, as well as illustrating the completion of her integration into her new life.

Additionally, just as Pollyanna's paraplegia served, among other things, as a catalyst to bring Aunt Polly and Doctor Chilton together, thus closing the sub-plot of their thwarted love, it was also the catalyst for Mr Pendleton to adopt orphan Jimmy Bean – thus resolving Mr Pendleton's loneliness and Jimmy Bean's impending homelessness due to the imminent closure of the orphanage in which he lives.

Similarly, Anna's paralysis serves as the catalyst that forces Patty and Ben to reconcile out of both practical and emotional necessity. As in *Pollyanna* the Skeleton Man fosters Jamie Bean, but unlike Pollyanna, Anna's paraplegia and the return to London happen around the resolution of a sub-plot unique to my adaptation of the story – Anna's disillusionment with her father following the revelation of how he treated her mother. Anna needs help in finding a truly good legacy to take forward from her time with her father, after

hearing the truth about him. The minister's helping of her to see that it is in her own capacity to find happiness and to love people that her father's sincere legacy lives on, draws the sub-plot of Anna's Happy Game to a close.

Incidentally, the translation from 'Glad' to 'Happy' raised a question as to whether the two were in fact the same thing, the word 'glad' having theological connotations for some people, where the word 'happy' does not. The Oxford English Dictionary defines both as a feeling of pleasure, with the addition that happiness connotes a feeling of contentment – contentment being associated, for me, with a deep, long-term state of being. Personally, 'glad' connotes to me a short and superficial act or burst of positive feelings, whereas 'happy' connotes a slow-burning, sincere, deeply rooted and thus chronically sustainable feeling. It is the pursuit of such a feeling, rather than the reflection of short bursts of superficial positivity, around which I wished to centre Anna's conduct and personal quest following the death of her father, and which I believe is a greater force for good in the world and thus more worth telling stories about.

As can be seen, Anna's paralysis plays several important functional and thematic roles within the story. However, its occurrence near the end of the story, coupled with the fact that it performs so many functions in such a short space of time, had the effect of appearing to considerably speed up the narrative pace towards the end of the novel, coupled with reducing the level of detail within the narrative, as compared to earlier passages. Part of this is simply a function of ending a long work. E.M. Foster notes the tendency of novel endings to pull away from specificities of story world detail and characterisations relative to the rest of the work, purely as a matter of practical necessity:

There is this disastrous standstill while logic takes over the command from flesh and blood...The characters have been getting out of hand, laying foundations and declining to build on them afterwards, and now the novelist has to labour personally, in order that the job may be done to time. He pretends that the characters are acting for him. He keeps mentioning their names and using inverted commas. But the characters are gone or dead. (Foster, 190, p95)

This inevitability of practical function, then, was one reason that I chose to allow the pace to increase and the level of detail and character immersion to diminish towards the end, without too much concern.

Another reason that could be grounded within the story world was to do with the chronology of events depicted, coupled with characterisation: Anna has been telling the story retrospectively, casting her eye back and drawing upon the notebook in which she has written since arriving at her mother's house. Until the end of the story this is implied only in narrative hints which suggest Anna's narrative is an ongoing act of reminiscence. However,

the reader finds out at the end of the book that Anna has in fact turned her notebooks into a piece of life-writing with the help of creative writing students who are visiting patients at the hospital.

Anna's mother also alludes to Anna having asked her to write an account of events to do with her accident that she cannot remember, thereby showing that the entire act of Anna's writing the book and of her mother's collaborating began and took place (within the story world) quite a considerable time after the events being narrated. The implication is that Anna's notebooks are sketchier in their nature than the polished narrative the reader is reading, and that, therefore, if she narrates events that are still taking place (as it is revealed she is doing in her open letter at the close of the novel), the level of detail will also be sketchier and less immersive, as she hasn't had the distance needed to be able to see them in editorial terms, such as to be able to write as literary a narrative of them.

Thus although towards the end I increase the pace and decrease the level of detail in Anna's narrative as E.M. Foster asserts is a common feature of the endings of many novels, I have ensured that this change in narrative style is accounted for within the story world, too.

Concluding Remarks

Aspie fictions need not be constrained by the legacy of the medical model, or by fears of writing damaging representations. Stories featuring Aspie protagonists may instead make use of the heritage of narratives older than medical labels but still relevant to their portrayal, that intrinsically celebrate, indeed take pains to protect, unmodified difference, in their constructions of plot and characters with Aspie-like differences. *Anna* proves that.

In terms of different ways of being in general, the acceptance of the fact that there are many different, equally valid and valuable ways to interpret, move, co-exist within and represent the world would go a long way to achieving safer, more relaxed, more empowered, less cluttered and guilt-ridden, and more peaceful interpersonal relations – on both a small level and a large one. It would also help to preserve creative freedom – cultural philosophy influences fiction just as fiction influences cultural philosophy, and an embracing of this philosophy would itself be a safeguard against damaging representations in fiction; readers aren't just empty vessels into which works of fiction pour dangerous ideas for which authors must be fully responsible. There are also social aspirations to which fictional representations can, and do, and will continue to, significantly contribute – and for which both the writer in their representations, and the reader in their interpretations, must carry responsibility.

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