GOOD GRIEF

AARON HAVILAND

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When I was young, I remember coming into your room at night and shaking you awake. You’d moan at me and ask if I knew what time it was. I would tell you it was 3 o’clock and that I couldn’t sleep. You said exactly, it’s 3 o’clock. Go to bed.

This routine played out many times, and it always ended with you getting out of bed and coming downstairs because, of the two of us, I was the more stubborn. You’d make us both a cup of tea. Camomile, so that we wouldn’t be up all night. You’d ask what was bothering me and I’d mutter something about school but mostly we would stay quiet, just sipping away at our drinks and enjoying the comfort that came with being together.

But things changed once you got sick. We didn’t have those midnight trips to the kitchen. Dad told me you needed the sleep more than I needed you at 3 o’clock in the morning. At the time, I was convinced he was wrong. But after a while, the sickness started to show, in your eyes, in the way you woke up. In the way you went to bed when it was still light, after barely touching your dinner. Cancer has a way of seeping into every corner of your life, staining every moment with the looming thought that it might be your last one together. That was how it felt. I saw you getting weaker as each day passed, though you tried your best not to let it show. I watched as my mother slowly faded, as her bleached blonde hair was taken over with grey roots, before falling out altogether.

Soon I started dreaming about them, our kitchen trips. It was so lucid that I’d question whether I was really asleep. In the dream, I shook you awake and you’d make a fuss, but inevitably you would join me downstairs like you used to. But over time, you got worse and the dream became a nightmare. When I shook you awake, you wouldn’t move. You just lay there. Your eyes were always open, fixated on the ceiling.

Mummy, I whispered. Mummy, get up. You can’t sleep now. My whisper grew into a panicky shout. Eventually you sat up and went to the door, dragging your feet like a zombie. I followed you into the corridor but when I reached it, you had disappeared.
Out of the corner of my eye, I could see both of you in the next room and I knew that something was wrong. Out of place. You were sitting down, eyes closed and were resting your head on your hand. Dad was pacing back and forth muttering to himself. I strained to hear what he was saying.

_Not true... Must have made a mistake.... Call themselves doctors!

Dad was still wearing his uniform, which made the pacing look even more serious. I had never found him scary, though other kids would often ask if I did. They said I had to be extra careful because he was my father, so it was like I was being watched constantly. Big Brother. But I never viewed it that way. When I saw him in town on duty, he was never a police officer. It was just Dad wearing a silly costume.

But as I watched him pace the room, with an expression on his face that could kill a lion, that was exactly how I felt. Scared. About what exactly, I wasn’t too sure. Something about the way he looked made me feel uneasy, like he might snap at any moment.

I had seen this routine before and prepared myself for yet another medley of _good cop, bad cop_, the same old rehearsed speech from Dad about what happens to people who take what isn’t theirs. I heard it every time you found something stashed away under the bed or behind my wardrobe. A book. A stuffed teddy-bear. Once, a cashmere jumper with a hole on its right sleeve where the security tag had been hastily ripped off. I couldn’t explain why I stole, other than that it felt good.

So there I was, creeping into the sitting room with my eyes to the floor, palms beginning to sweat as I prepared my alibi. _It was a gift from a friend at school_, I rehearsed. _No, that’s stupid. They’ll ask who._

Dad stopped in his tracks as he saw me walk into the sitting room. My eyes travelled between his and the floor. Silence hung in the air like a pin held to a balloon.

“Elly!” he said, surprised, as if forgetting that I lived there too. His face wasn’t what I expected. His skin was puffy and raw and red around the cheeks. He took a long, heavy breath. “Elly. We need to talk.”

I remained fixed in place, glued to the floor by some unknown force and the looming fear that any slight movement of the knees might send me plummeting. Already Dad had strayed from the script I had prepared in my head. I wanted him to play the bad cop. I wanted him to shout. Why wasn’t he shouting?
I kept silent, waiting for Dad to begin. Do you know how it makes me feel? What have I said about…? Why? How? Why? HOW? The quiet anticipation burnt through my ears like lava. It felt as if someone had put a megaphone up to my thoughts. I imagined myself running upstairs to my bed, pulling the sheets over my eyes and being cast into darkness. But as much as I tried, it was all I could do to stay where I was.

And that was when you said it.

You held my gaze. “I’ve been in for some tests-”

“It was a gift from a friend.” The words escaped from my mouth before I had even realised what I was saying.

A half-smile showed through your hand and you sat up straight in your chair. “No, this isn’t about that. We need to tell you something that’s rather difficult to explain.” You looked straight at me as you spoke, unlike Dad, who was fixated on the overhead clock as if conscious of the time. “Something has happened which could mean things will change for us. For you and me.” You sighed. “There’s no point in lying. You’re old enough to be told the truth.” Dad pulled his eyes away from the clock and gave you a worried look. “I have an illness that some people die from. Do you know what cancer is?”

I nodded along, though in truth I knew very little back then. And yet the very word was painful to hear.

“You’re grandma – my mother – had the same thing many years ago. You won’t remember her. You were so little at the time.”

My only memories of Granny were in fleeting glimpses, so lightly held in my mind that I wasn’t sure if I remembered her or just the stories you had told. But I knew enough to be scared. “She died.”

“Not from this,” you said. “She survived and lived for a while after.”

“But you could die.”

Several seconds passed. “Yes. But that won’t happen. I’ll fight it, like Grandma did.”

The ground beneath me began to tremble. Or perhaps it just was my knees giving way. My heart was running marathons in my chest as my brain gradually made sense of the conversation.

“I don’t want you worrying, because I know you do. I promise you everything will be back to normal soon.” I struggled to make out your expression but you looked to have a grin on your face, which only confused me even more. “The doctor is going to make everything okay again.”
I stood motionless, in the same spot I had landed on upon entering the room. You and Dad were staring at me, unsure of what to do or say, expecting a response that I wasn’t able to provide.

“We should stay positive,” Dad said. “There are lots of very clever doctors out there who know how to deal with this sort of thing.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said the first thing that came to mind. “I stole a book from Waterstones.”

Dad sighed. I assume it was him as I had already my eyes closed. But the voice was long and mournful. “We can speak about that later. Sit yourself down and I’ll make us some dinner.”

My head was spinning. I opened my eyes but could see nothing but a swirling screen of darkness and then the sound of my own heart beating like a drum. The ground shook again, this time taking my legs with it. As I fell, I wondered why only I had been affected by the earthquake. That was the last thing I remembered before my head hit the ground.

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It wasn’t long before I woke up. Somehow in my bed. The alarm clock said it was 3:33am. I remember because a kid at school told me that times with all the same numbers were lucky. I told him he was a moron. Then a teacher overheard and told me not to use the word ‘moron’. I assured her that a word isn’t offensive if it’s being used correctly.

A light dusting of snow had landed on my bedroom windowsill. Usually I loved when it snowed, since England rarely got any at all. This had been a particularly white Winter. But I found it hard to be excited by it that night.

I sat up, peeling my body from the wet sheets. My skin felt like it was made of bugs and my stomach had tied into a knot, either from skipping dinner or from the thoughts that now occupied my head.

My head. It was throbbing. I ran my hands my left ear and felt the brittle skin. There wasn’t any blood but the skin still felt rough and sensitive. It must have been the earthquake.

Nothing quite seemed real. I had memories of you sitting in front of me, with heavy eyes. And you told me you were dying. So why was I now in bed, as if it had all been a dream? I sat at the edge, struggling to piece together what had happened hours earlier. After a while, I came to only one solid conclusion: I was starving.
I snuck out into the hallway and crept past your bedroom where I heard Dad snoring loudly. Nothing new there. On tiptoes, I made my way down the stairs and into the kitchen. The stone tiles felt like dry ice under my feet, even with the thick slippers you’d bought me for Christmas. I opened the fridge door, far too hungry and tired to realise the overhead light was already on.

“Morning, sweetie.”

“Morning, mum,” I said without missing a beat. Then stopped in my tracks, closed the fridge door and turned around. You were at the kitchen table, with a cup of tea clutched firmly between your hands. Your hair was still perfectly straight, so I knew you hadn’t been to bed. “What are you-?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Neither could you, I’m guessing.”

“Oh really.”

“Your father’s snoring didn’t help much,” you said.

“He sounds like a train,” I laughed, though secretly I didn’t find it at all funny and was convinced he had a serious medical condition.

You leaned in closer to your tea. “I know that must have been a difficult thing to hear. It’s not easy for me either.”

“I’m used to it by now.”

“I didn’t mean the snoring, Elly.”

I knew what you meant. You took a long sip of your tea, not appearing to notice that the floor had once again started to tremble. It was softer than before, and I managed to gain my footing. “Grandma got through it, right?”

“She did.”

“So you’ll be fine.”

You smiled. “Yes. I will be.”

You pointed to the fridge, which was still open behind me. “Hungry?”

“Yes please,” I mumbled. “I mean, yes.”

“Of course, you must be starving. I’ll make some eggs.” You stood up and pottered over to the stove and grabbed a pan from the drying rack. “And a cup of camomile to help you sleep. You won’t want to be tired for the start of term tomorrow.”

I took a seat beside yours at the table and you started on dinner. After finishing a plate of eggs and bacon, I headed back to bed. I barely managed a few minutes of sleep before the alarm sounded at 7am. Dad’s snoring made it impossible.
It will be hard reliving everything. Telling you what I saw and felt. But I suppose it’s necessary. Dad and the school councillor say it isn’t normal to react the way I did. They’ve been saying it for years. “Elly, this isn’t healthy. You can’t ignore the world forever.” I hated them for saying it. How could they know what it was like? I can’t speak for the councillor, but I know Dad didn’t lose his parents until he was 41. Both Nan and Grandad were old by the time they died. He took the week off work and nearly lost his job. Why should he be so concerned that I reacted a similar way?

It makes me angry when people compare themselves to me. I don’t know anyone else my age who has lost a parent. That’s because you aren’t meant to. Not yet. Parents should grow old and their children should look after them or maybe put them in a home, depending on how much they like them. But I was never given the option.
The day was January 5, 2009. Monday. And for the first time as far as I could remember, it had snowed in Liverpool. But Mr Berry, headmaster at St Andrews, had insisted that any remnant of that Christmas miracle be removed in the name of health and safety. The grounds were salted to the point where you could no longer see the concrete beneath it. The only sign of snow was now reserved to the odd pile brushed up against the buildings, now a perfect ratio of mud, stones and ice. Everyone was unhappy about having to return to school. Even the teachers looked miserable, though they tried to hide it with unconvincing smiles and Christmassy bobble hats that fooled no one.

This was the case for everyone apart from the perpetually cheerful Miss Chapman, who would smile her way through an apocalypse, given the opportunity. There was a rumour that she lived alone with her two cats and a parakeet, so maybe seeing people at school was a welcomed change of pace to spending all Winter talking to her animals.

We had Miss Chapman for a double lesson of Maths on Monday afternoons. You never met her, lucky for you. She talked far too much and never about anything interesting. Some holiday she had been on, or was planning. She fancied herself a master storyteller, and would often spend entire lessons spouting nonsense about the time she visited the set of Coronation Street or when she met some F-list celebrity.

Normally those Monday afternoons were a blessing. It was a welcomed break, time to myself, since Miss Chapman rarely set us any work. But for the first time since the school year began, all it did was make me feel lonely. Trapped inside that classroom with nothing but my thoughts.

What made everything worse was the fact that I didn’t really have anyone to talk to, not that I believed it would have helped. I had always preferred my own company over others’ because I always knew what I was thinking. Other people are much too complicated. You can’t tell if they’re being nice or mean or if they just want something from you. Like the time I thought Sam Wilstrop was trying to be my friend at lunchtime, but all he wanted was some of my Haribo. It’s hard to trust people when everyone seems to want something from you, whether to make you look stupid or because they’re hungry. And you have a bag of Haribo.
Miss Chapman was minutes into a story about the time she holidayed in Benidorm and my attention was slipping. I looked about the room, searching desperately for a way to distract myself.

A few tables over, Sam Wilstrop was sitting with two other boys. All three of them had the same haircut, with gel spiking the fringe like a crown, and all had their ties so short that the knot was almost as wide as the tie was long. None of them were paying much attention. They were happy whispering at each other enthusiastically, likely about football, or whatever idiotic things boys speak about. Sam caught me staring and they all giggled.

I turned back to my table, where I had sat since the start of year 8. There were the same two faces. Melanie, the blonde, almost white-haired girl who could always be seen pouting her glossy lips as if expecting a kiss at any moment. And Toby, the fat boy who followed Melanie around everywhere like a dog, except with less personality. And, for the first time that year, there was someone else.

Charlie Little.

But he wasn’t little – he was one of the tallest kids in our year and had a face that shouldn’t belong to someone in year 8. He looked fourteen at least. Tucked just above his top lip was a matt of hair so patchy that it looked as if it had been drawn on by a blind man. His clothes, which were made for someone much larger and shorter than him, were clumsily thrown on his body and, of all things, smelt suspiciously like baked beans. His hair looked to be made of wires, thick and jet black like a bird had decided to nest on his head. You should be called Charlie Big, I thought to myself, but of course surnames don’t work that way.

This wasn’t the first time I had seen him, though it was by far the closest encounter. It was back in September, nearing the end of my first week at the new school and I had yet to hold a conversation with anyone that stretched beyond simple introductions. The bell had rung for lunch and I had sat at my usual spot in the canteen, the table by the bins, both for convenience and to deter any unwanted visitors. Feeling adventurous, I braved a glance about the room. People were laughing, tucking into their baked potatoes and questionable chicken curries.

And there he was. One table over, picking the crusts off a sandwich that looked to be 90% mayo. His lunchbox had pictures of the SpongeBob characters on the front. He was sitting all alone, and for the first time all week, I felt like maybe I would start the conversation.

Time passed. Far too much time. The end-of-lunch bell rang, and I watched as my wire-haired shot at friendship discarded his crusts in the bin and exited through the canteen.
door. Accepting defeat, I turned back to my food and made a rule that I would leave conversations up to the experts.

So when I saw him at my Maths table that Monday afternoon, after months of staring from across classrooms and playgrounds, it felt as if a unicorn had emerged from the wild and sat down beside me.

I let my eyes settle on him and immediately my mind lightened. The air felt clearer and less muddy, if only in fleeting moments before I felt the terrible thoughts knocking at my brain again. I pushed them out as best I could. Slowly, they faded, along with the whiny voice of Miss Chapman. Soon, all that existed was this rough-haired boy sitting opposite me like a celebrity that only I knew about.

I felt the seconds tick by. Then the minutes, but I all I could do was stare. I knew that at any moment the bell would ring and everyone would rush out the door and head home. It would only take a word. A simple hello. My stomach tightened and I made a noise that sounded akin to retching.

“Huh.” Terrible. Try again. “Hello.” Charlie looked up at me through his black hair, which was hanging from his forehead, covering much of his face.

“Quiet, please,” said Miss Chapman, who had since finished her story and begun handing out homework.

The bell rang. It was a beautiful sound after such a slow afternoon. Everyone spoke loudly as they hurried to their lockers. I must have been the only one not in a rush to leave. I would have happily spent the remainder of the week in school. The rest of the year, perhaps. Anything to avoid going home.

I dragged my feet in the direction of the lockers, fiddled with the padlock and grabbed my bag from inside, all the while feeling very adamant that no one had ever felt so terrible.

“Hi,” said someone behind me. I turned around, startled. His hair was the first thing I noticed. Then it was his clothes and then it was the subtle aroma of baked beans.

“I’m Charlie.”

“I know that.”

“And you’re Elly.”

“I know that too.”

There was a pause.

“How are you?” he said. He had started swaying on the spot and moving his hands around like he didn’t know where to put them.
“You looked sad before,” Charlie said
“Have you been watching me?”
“It’s hard not to notice,” he said. This came as a shock, as before that moment, I was sure that I had mastered the art of going unnoticed. Apart from the occasional jibe from Sam Wilstrop, no one spoke to me. Even bullies eventually lost interest when they realised there was no fun in picking on a girl who didn’t respond. “I figured anyone who talks as little as you do must have something interesting to hide.”
“I’m not hiding anything.”
“I doubt that. What’s in there?” He pointed to the SpongeBob pencil case which was still in my hand.
“Pencils, obviously. And pens,” I said.
“Then why didn’t you open it during class? I saw you. You keep your pens in your pocket. What’s with the case?”
“I’ve already told you. Pens. And, sometimes a calculator. And it’s none of your business anyway.”
“I knew you were hiding something.” He laughed to himself and reached for a neighbouring locker. I quickly shoved the pencil case into my backpack. “So, what is up with you anyway?”
“Nothing. I have a lot on my mind.” I could feel myself holding back, trying not to say how I actually felt. That I was in pain. That my heart was made of lead and my hands and feet were made of lead and walking anywhere or doing anything felt like a monumental task.
“And you think that being alone will help?”
Finally, a question I was comfortable with answering. “Yes. I’m fine on my own and I can’t see why silly conversations like these would ever make me feel any better.”
“So, there is something wrong.”
“I’m not asking for your help, or anyone else’s. Please leave me alone.” I slammed my locker and started down the corridor, hoping I might lose his interest. But, as I would quickly come to learn, Charlie Little’s perseverance is nothing short of infinite.

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“You can’t be alone forever,” Charlie shouted. I could hear him running up behind me as I walked down the road from school.

“Maybe I want to,” I said, not bothering to turn around.

“That’s very dramatic of you.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“You’ve said more in the last few minutes than you’ve probably said all year. That has to mean something. Everyone here already has their mates from last year. You’re starting from scratch.”

“They’re just stupid kids. I don’t want to hang out with them.”

Charlie sped up and started walking backwards in front of me, then made a body-builder pose with his arms. “Good thing I’m a man,” he said in his best ‘adult’ voice, with an added American twang thrown in for good measure. In the giggling that followed, he lost his footing on the icy pavement and went crashing to the floor. A group of sixth formers on the other side of the road noticed and laughed.

“Knobhead!”

“See what I mean?” I said, helping him to his feet.

Charlie brushed snow from his trousers, then smiled at me and clicked his tongue sarcastically. “Such a good friend.”

“Shut up.”

“How about we give it a trial run? I’ll be your friend for a bit. I promise to do most of the talking. And if you still don’t like me, swear on my turtle’s grave, I will leave you alone.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh, trying my hardest not to make it seem like an obvious decision. “Fine. If it means I get to walk home in peace.”

He offered out his hand, and I shook it.

“Perfect. And if it all goes well, you show me what’s in that pencil case.”

“Not a chance.”

Then we parted ways and I went home to an empty house that was as cold as the ice outside.
There was a student at our school called Ivan, who joined the same year I did. His family moved over from Russia. To make things worse, he joined in year 9. Partnering that with the fact he was a bit weird meant he had even fewer friends than I did.

No one spoke to him very much, and I can hardly blame them. During lunch time, he’d either be in the library reading, or outside playing by himself. One time I saw him huddled over a mound of soil in the lunch yard and asked what he was doing. He turned around and replied with “chopping the little snakes” in his thick Russian accent. After closer inspection, I realised that by snakes, he actually meant worms. He explained that he’d read in a book that worms could survive after having been cut in half and he wanted to test it for himself.

I didn’t speak to Ivan much after that, but I think about him sometimes.
“Smells funny in here,” Dad joked. And it did. Like old people and washing up liquid. You hear stories about hospitals and they make you fear the worst. People come in with broken bones and leave HIV positive with two months to live.

Dad and I were in the waiting room whilst you spoke to the doctor. It was over a month since you had started the first round of treatments and it was beginning to show. Not just in your face, but in how you acted. Everything was so serious now. You didn’t laugh as much as you used to.

You made me stay in the waiting room with Dad so you could speak to the doctor in private. The waiting room was the worst place in the building. There were about thirty people in there with me, most sitting down, reading magazines with covers that told them they were too fat. A few were standing, pacing the room, others leaning against walls with their earphones in. No one was talking. The only sound that broke the silence was the occasional cough or phone call to reception. The woman at the desk was an unsettling level of jolly.

I prodded Dad to get his attention, but he didn’t notice me. He was too busy locked in a staring contest with the floor to notice that I was shivering from a non-existent blizzard on the seat beside him. That’s what it felt like anyway. Like a cold had taken over me, crept into my skin like a thousand needles, digging into me every second we were made to wait.

This was the second check-up in the past month and I was already more familiar with the place than I would have liked. The faces were always different, apart from the nurses and the caretaker, who’d usually be chatting to one of them. But the room always stayed the same. The magazines, the uncomfortable chairs, the muddy footprints on the floor that were walked in from outside. There were somehow even footprints on one of the walls. They should probably fire their caretaker.

“King,” said the receptionist in her usual cheerful voice. Dad stood up. “Dr Jacob will see you now. It’s just down the corridor on your right. Room 54.”

We made our way through the double doors. Dad knocked three times marked 54, and entered. You were sitting on that strange bed, with the paper that rips with even the slightest breeze. Dad greeted the doctor and sat down. I hovered around the door for a moment, unsure where to place myself.
I was surprised the learn that the oncologist Dr Jacob had turned out to be a woman. I had always struggled with the concept of surnames as a kid. For longer than I cared to admit, I was convinced that each member of the family got a version of their last name depending on their gender. When I started primary school, I would always introduce myself as Elly Queen. The teachers had to correct me, reminding me that it was in fact Elly King. I’d take great offence to this, insisting with stubborn enthusiasm that I was indeed a girl, and that they should address me correctly.

Dr Jacob looked awkwardly at you, raising her eyebrows, then mouthed something discretely.

“It’s fine. She should be here,” you said. “Come sit down, Elly.” I found a chair at the back of the room.

The air was silent. I could feel the dust settling. Dr Jacob was shuffling through some notes on her desk, making a poor attempt at looking busy. Eventually she spoke, switching her gaze between me and Dad. “Unfortunately, we have some bad news. There never is an easy way to put these things. Lucy’s cancer is much further along than we’d realised. We’ll carry on with the treatment, but you might want to prepare for the worst possible outcome.”

Dad’s face remained unchanged. He asked the appropriate questions, about treatments, about the best dieting plans. And the doctor answered everything like she had likely done many times before. Not once in that time did he react. But I knew that behind his eyes, behind the mask, was a husband who feared to lose. I knew because it was how I felt.

They talked for what seemed like hours, covering the same topics several times like a broken record of the song you hated most in the world. But I had quickly tuned out and turned my attention to the small window that appeared to float just above Dr Jacob’s head like a square halo. Dotted all over were tiny speckles where the light refracted, like tiny spheres. This was nothing out of the ordinary. It rained a lot in Liverpool. But then I noticed a black speck clinging to its surface. It was a ladybird. We had talked about them in a biology lesson the previous week. We had learned that, in times when food is scarce, ladybirds sometimes eat their own kind. Except, because their shells are so tough, they usually must go for the younger ones. The babies, with their softer shells. All in the name of staying alive. Poetic, I thought.

“Mr King, we have been over this many times now,” the doctor said. “Lucy has already agreed to do the treatment. It is her body and her choice.”

“But chemotherapy… it’s just another way to die.”
“She’ll die if she doesn’t have this treatment,” Dr Jacob said abruptly, then gasped, as if shocked at the words that had come from her mouth. “I’m sorry. That was insensitive of me.” She didn’t say it, but I could tell it had been directed at me.

“We should get going,” you said, to the surprise of Dad and the doctor, as if they had forgotten you were in the room. “Thank you, Dr Jacob.” And that was the final word. The trip home was a sombre one. Conversation was reduced to Dad complaining about the poor state of the roads and how the council needed to get off their asses. No one bothered to respond, so he stopped after a while and the car was silent again. But the noise in my head was louder than it had ever been.

“It’ll be fine, El,” he said and gave me an unconvincing smile. But I was barely listening. I was staring out of the window, guessing which water droplet would fall fastest.
To begin with, it felt like you had already left. Part of me pretended you had, to see what it would feel like. Like when you play dead to see how your pet will react, only to find they don’t really care. Maybe I did it because it felt good once I stopped pretending and remembered you were downstairs, likely sipping a cup of tea and reading a book.

*Pride and Prejudice* made a regular appearance on our coffee table. You said you finally wanted to finish reading it after starting it at university years before. Then came *1984* by George Orwell. You wanted to stop pretending to have read it just to sound clever. Then came *Hamlet*. Then *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking. Soon followed by *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, a couple of Doctor Who novellas and then the Bible. The illness made you tired and short of breath, so you read. Especially in the last few months. It was as if you were trying to make up for something, to squeeze what little life was left and to experience what you could manage without leaving your bed.

You built quite a library. I counted them recently and the total came to 247 books. Some you never got a chance to read. *Jane Eyre, On the Road, Lord of the Rings*. Now they just sit there, unread, with no one willing or alive to open them.

You’d hate the dust.
It was now February, exactly one month since the trial of friendship had begun, and I had spent more time with Charlie than I’d ever spent with anyone in my entire life, minus you, Dad and perhaps Aunty Di. We had taken to calling ourselves the Little Kings and designed our own logo on pieces of cardboard, to be kept on our person at all times (‘protection against the forces of evil and homework’, if I recall.)

Charlie kept his promise and did most of the talking. I much preferred to listen to him anyway. He had good ideas about things – inventions he’d like to make one day, or what he imagined trees would say if they could talk. Without him, I’d never have considered the private conversations of plants. But it makes sense that they would communicate, I suppose. If only to warn other plants of nesting birds or nearby dog poo.

We spent most of our time playing games, a particular favourite being where we would make up first names and life stories for teachers. The more ludicrous, the better. One afternoon in the canteen, Charlie whispered in my ear, “what do you think Miss Gardner’s first name is?”

I struggled to speak, having stuffed several shortbreads into my mouth just seconds earlier. Trying my best to say something that would make him laugh, I pushed the word “fah-ty” through crumb-covered lips. Miss Gardner, the fifty-year-old French teacher with a cane, was quite big. Part of me felt guilty for saying it, but those feelings soon washed away when I saw it had made Charlie smile.

“We’re friends now, right?”
“I don’t hate you,” I replied. “So yes.”

He proceeded to do an exaggerated dance which, had he been standing up, would have looked like one of those inflatable dancing tubes outside car shops. “You know what that means,” he said.

“That you get to stop dancing like an idiot?”
“It means you have to show me what’s inside that pencil case.”

My smile faded and I hugged my backpack where I knew the pencil case was. “No. I never agreed to that.”

“But we’re friends now. Friends tell each other their secrets.”

“I don’t have any secrets to tell.”

“Lies.”
“What about you?” I hovered an accusing finger just inches from his nose.


We shook on it. I rattled my brain for something to interesting to ask. What I really wished to know was how he was so happy all the time. Did he have access to a secret pool of regenerative powers that gave the drinker endless energy? Some kind of spiritual Red Bull?

He rolled his eyes and tapped his Scooby Doo watch. “Come on. The school year’s nearly over.”

“Fine,” I said, then in a panic, asked the dumbest possible question. “What is your home like?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“I mean, what’s it like in your house? Your parents? Just answer the question.”

For perhaps the first time ever, Charlie Little, the boy who seldom shut up, hesitated to speak. “Good. Excellent, actually.”

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my seat. “Details.”

“Depends what you want to know. My parents are both in their forties and work full-time. Sometimes they’ll both be away for entire weekends on business trips, so that’s when I stay with my grandma.” His voice had nothing of its normal volume, and he spoke much slower, as if being careful choosing his words. “Granny’s house is great. She has hundreds of comic books in her attic. Some first editions, I think.”

There was no definite end to Charlie’s story. He switched between talking about his parents and his grandmother, eventually trailing off into an uneasy silence.

Now for the part I was dreading. “Your turn,” he said with renewed energy. “What’s in the pencil case?”

I wasn’t sure what to do. I knew I couldn’t show him. He would laugh at me if he knew its true contents, call me a baby and shout for the other kids. *Come take a peek at Elly King’s pencil case. Come take a look at this pathetic little girl.*

So, I lied.

“It’s a photo,” I said, finally. “Of my mother.”

“Your mother? That’s boring. I was expecting a severed hand.”

“A severed hand?”

“Or toe. I just thought, why else would you be so secretive about it unless it had a body part in it?”
“You think the only possible reason for someone to hide anything is because they’ve recently cut off someone’s hand?”

“Or toe,” Charlie corrected. “So why your mother?”

I was unsure of what to say. The truth was so close to bursting out, dancing on my tongue with too much energy, that I couldn’t contain it. I closed my eyes, and let my mouth run away.

Charlie spoke again before I had even opened my eyes. “Your mum is dying then?”

I nodded.

“That’s a proper secret,” he sighed. “Mine’s rubbish now. Here. I am secretly scared of urinals.”

“What’s a urinal?” I asked.

“Oh, I forget you’re a girl. It’s where boys pee standing up. There. We’re even now.”

I took a nibble of another shortbread, realising that lunch was nearly over.

“Have you cried?” Charlie asked after a few minutes.

“Of course not.”

“That’s stupid. I would cry if I lost a parent. I cried when Bill died. And I cry at movies, especially movies about animals dying.”

“Was Bill a relative of yours?” I asked.

“Bill was my turtle.”

“My mum isn’t a turtle.”

“No. But I knew Sam all my life.”

“Hardly the same,” I grumbled. I know Charlie wasn’t trying to compare you to a turtle, but it felt good to be angry about something, even though I knew it was wrong and that he only wanted to help. He apologised and I polished off the remaining shortbread.

The bell rang shortly after and I walked back to registration, not feeling the slightest bit better for having shared.
Your favourite flavour of ice-cream was mint chocolate chip. I remember because I never liked it, but you’d always offer me some whenever we went to Lee’s Ice-Cream Parlour on the Liverpool docks. I’d shout “it smells like toothpaste!” and push it away. You’d laugh and insist it tasted nothing like toothpaste.

On Fridays at school they have two options for dessert: apple pie with custard, or mint chocolate chip ice-cream. Normally I’d go for the apple pie, but today I had the ice-cream. I was right. It tastes like toothpaste.
The Wednesday options in the canteen were macaroni, cottage pie or baked potato. The dinner lady highly recommended the macaroni, though I wasn’t too convinced. She gestured to the yellow slop with her hand and I tentatively accepted. She dropped a messy portion onto my plate and I joined Charlie at the back of the canteen. He always brought a packed lunch, often a ham sandwich.

It had been a week since I told Charlie about you, and I was feeling exposed, as if worried he might do something terrible with the information. But he hadn’t mentioned it since that day and we had resumed our normal discussions of teachers and the social habits of trees.

But that lunch, Charlie was particularly quiet, and seemed focused on making artwork from the crusts he tore off his sandwich. Unfortunately, I couldn’t replicate the same enthusiasm. The macaroni hadn’t lived up to expectations and after finding several lumps of powdered cheese floating in the sauce, I moved the bowl to the side.

Charlie looked up from his sandwich and gave me a quizzical stare. “Have you heard about the portal on the school grounds?”

“Portal?”

He nodded, as if it were a completely normal thing to ask. I stared blankly at him, trying to figure out what he meant. I couldn’t decide if he was being serious or thought he would play a prank on the new kid at school. His tone was so matter-of-fact that I wondered if I might have misheard.

“Yeah – a portal to another dimension,” he gestured at the air as if to find the right words, “another Earth”.

“I’m not sure those exist, Charlie,” I said, worried that I might hurt his feelings, but I needn’t have worried. My doubt seemed to fuel him and he went on to explain in immense detail the logistics of portals and inter-dimensional travel. It was as if he had said these exact same words over to himself a hundred times before. He appeared so convinced it was real that a tiny part of my brain was starting to believe and had begun to wonder how on earth I had spent my entire life believing otherwise.

Then I felt a sudden shiver of embarrassment. I was so lost in his story that I had almost forgotten where we were. Sitting all around us were dozens of prying ears belonging to teachers and students who would have laughed at the words coming from Charlie’s mouth.
My eyes wandered over to the other tables but, to my surprise, no one appeared to be listening to us. Behind me, Miss Chapman and Mr Peal, the geography teacher, were chatting away about her plans to travel around Asia. Mr Peal added the occasional *hmm* whenever there was a pause in the conversation, letting Miss Chapman know she should start talking again at an alarming pace. I turned back to Charlie. He was in the middle of recounting the fifteen planets in our solar system, many yet undiscovered by science. He explained with great pride that Earth was the only inhabited one whose government did not actively encourage cannibalism.

“How do you know it’s a portal to another dimension?” I asked, feeling a bit ridiculous that I was going along with it.

He leaned in closer. It felt like we were spies. “Because I’ve been through it,” he said, in a voice that struggled to remain a whisper. “I’ll show you!”

That was the final word on the subject. Once Charlie had finished his sandwich and I had poked at the lumps of powered cheese a few more times, we rushed out of the canteen door.

He took us to a part of the school I’d never seen before, largely because it was off-limits to students. There was an old house on the school grounds that belonged to the chaplain. The house itself was very small – only large enough for one person – but the gardens made up half of the grounds. And no one was allowed in, except teachers. This didn’t bother Charlie, who continued into the gardens without any sign of caution. I, on the other hand, was terrified. My heart knew we were up to something. It felt heavy, threatening to burst from my chest and fall to the earth.

As we walked past the chaplain’s house, I could see into the sitting room. On the table was a fresh, steaming pot of tea and one cup. I gulped. *Someone is going to spot us*, I thought. *They’ll tell the headmaster and then Mum and Dad will find out.*

“I really don’t think we’re meant to be here,” I stuttered.

“Of course not. If students were allowed, everyone would know about the portal by now.”

“Obviously,” I agreed, though not entirely convinced that that was the reason. “This isn’t the time to be silly, Charlie. What if someone sees us?”

“No one is going to see us. But someone might hear us if you don’t stop talking.”

I shut up. We had already broken school rules by getting this far, so I decided it was best to avoid making things worse by getting caught.
We made our way through the garden, past budding trees and grasses that reached up to my waist. In one section, there were tall hedges that roped around and gave us cover from any prying eyes. The gravel path was now a perfect mix of stone, moss and yellowing grass, which helped to mask the sound of our running.

Charlie led the way around a hedge and up to a small building. We arrived at the entrance to a wooden shed, large enough to house a car or two, which was tucked away in the corner of the garden. It was surrounded on both sides with bramble bushes that crept up its panels like snow after a blizzard. The path leading to it was buried almost entirely under thick weeds, with only the occasional stone poking out. It was perfect in some ways. Hidden from the world, slowly becoming one with the plants around it. It gave me some relief, knowing nobody would find us here, because no sane person would go near it. Apart from Charlie, of course.

“Is that it?” I muttered. It didn’t look much like a portal. Though, admittedly I had never seen one before. Perhaps all interdimensional doorways look like abandoned sheds to discourage the wrong people from walking through them.

The shed looked like it hadn’t been used in years. There was one small window which was cracked and smeared with mud. I tried peering in but could make out very little of what was inside. A sign above the door had the words ‘keep out’ carved into it. It was weathered and moss had begun to grow into its grooves. The only thing keeping us out was a small padlock on the door.

“Won’t someone find us here?” I asked as Charlie made a start on getting us inside. Wind from the night before had left a damp pile of leaves at the entrance.

“No one comes here,” he said. “It belongs to the chaplain and I don’t think he uses the garden much. Too old now.”

I looked around and saw that the garden was even more decayed than I had realised. The sandstone walls that marked the edge of the school grounds were dotted with trees, many of which had broken branches dangling by their side. The only plants still in the flowerbeds were sick and shrivelling, like they had never seen colour.

The shed door opened with a jolt. “How did you do that?” I asked. Charlie’s face beamed as he held up a small key.

“Where did you get that?”

“Found it,” he said.

“I doubt that.”

“Do you want to see what’s inside or not?”
“This was your dumb idea,” I muttered under my breath. Hesitantly, I followed him into the shed. The inside was full of junk, softly illuminated by what little light managed to find its way through the tiny window. Strewn about on the ground were pieces of broken tools, buckets and watering cans, hoses that had no beginning or end. They looped endlessly around the room and disappeared into dark and dirty corners. Charlie took a seat next to an old garden rake. The wooden floor was damp and at the edges I could see the beginnings of rot. Picking the cleanest spot I could find, I sat down and waited for something to happen.

“Now what?”

“Shh.”

“What are we doing exactly?” I asked after what seemed like ages. “We’ve been坐 here for five minutes doing nothing. I’m cold.”

“I said, shh!” Charlie’s head was tilted up and he was staring unblinkingly at the ceiling as if in a trance.

I sighed. “This is stupid.”

“It won’t work if you keep talking. Try to relax.”

Trying as best I could, I let any doubt float to the back of my head.

“Where do you want to go?” Charlie asked. “Pick a place, or time.”

“I don’t know.”

“Can’t you at least pretend you care about something?”

I slouched and gave a resigning huff. “I don’t know, Charlie. Pick something or take me back to the canteen. Lunch is nearly over anyway.”

He shot me a look that suggested I wasn’t taking this seriously and took a deep breath. “Close your eyes.”

I closed them. “Nothing’s happening.”

“Have you always been this impatient?”

“I’ve never been through a portal before,” I said.

“Just keep your eyes shut.”

I did as he said and let my mind go blank. Which is very difficult to do, if you’ve ever tried. My mind turned to a pad of paper, my school notebook at the beginning of the year, with the words ‘year 8’ freshly written in crisp, clean letters. Boring, I realise. But it relaxed me.

“What are you thinking about?” Charlie asked.

“Paper.”
The word lingered uncomfortably. “Have a look at this.” I opened my eyes to see Charlie was waving his finger around the shed. “The ceiling.”

“What about it?”

“It’s gone. Can’t you see it? We’re in a forest!” His face lit up like someone experiencing snowfall for the first time. “Trees everywhere. The tallest you’ve ever seen, taller than any on Earth. Like skyscrapers. I can’t even see the sun through them.”

“Are there any animals?”

Charlie placed his hand above his eyes and squinted. “Monkeys,” he said. “With red eyes and tails made of fire.”

“That’s so unreal...” I began, then paused. “Fire, huh?”

He nodded. “And I think there’s a river nearby. Can you hear it?”

I closed my eyes again, letting go of any doubt that was lingering at the back of my mind, and began counting to ten in slow, voiceless breaths.

One. Two. Three.

A cool breeze ran along my skin. Four. In the distance, I heard what sounded like trickling water. It was very faint. A whisper. Five. Six. I took a big gulp of air, filling my lungs to their capacity with the sweet smell. Grass. But different somehow, like it had grown in the soil of another world and drank the rays of a foreign sun. Seven. Eight. Nine. I could taste its sweetness in my mouth.

Ten.

The first thing I noticed as I opened my eyes was that the walls had disappeared and been replaced by thick forest. Trees, some as black as night, stretched on into infinity. I wondered how big the forest was. Perhaps it made up the entire planet.

Charlie looked up at me and smiled. “What do you see?”

“How...” I began, looking back at Charlie for an explanation. “We’re... in a forest.” I jumped to my feet and scanned the ground beneath me to find that the shed’s floor had receded, sinking into the forest as the undergrowth began to grow into the wood. Slowly, surely being consumed. Thick vines, that looked as tough as rock, wrapped around the edges as if they had been there for centuries.

“I don’t understand. It doesn’t make sense!” I yelled. But my voice was echoless, dampened by the surrounding trees and bright yellow mushrooms the size of houses.

Charlie folded his arms across his lap, seemingly unfazed.

“Tell me how,” I demanded.
He looked up at the trees that soared above us, his attention drifting away with the warm wind. “I’ve already told you.” His eyes were fixated on a point in the far distance. I turned around to catch what it was. A wall of blackness, swaying very softly in the wind. “It’ll be easier if you figure it out for yourself.”

The portal had taken us to a small clearing where the forest wasn’t as dense. I walked over to the nearest tree, just a few meters from where we had landed. Its trunk was so wide that it took me several seconds to walk around it, running my hands along the bark as I went. It felt strange on my fingertips, almost soft, like it wasn’t made from the same substance as trees back home. The bark itself looked like a night sky, dotted with specs of white and blue. My fingers left a trail of light on its surface like shooting stars, which slowly faded.

I turned around to see Charlie still on the shed floor as the forest vines grew ever thicker around it. He was lying down with his arms nestled under his head, staring at the canopy above.

“This is incredible!” I said. Charlie smiled.

In the distance, I heard the faint sound of running water again, though I couldn’t guess the direction it was coming from. I continued my way through the forest, making sure not to lose sight of Charlie and the portal, walking the circumference of another tree. This one was even larger than the last, easily capable of fitting our entire house within its base. The monkeys Charlie had mentioned earlier were nesting on its lowest branches, staring at me with their piercing red eyes and whipping their flame tails in an arch of light.

Less than a hundred meters from the portal, the ground quickly sloped downhill, leading to an opening where the forest gave way to a shallow valley and where the wind picked up in speed. At its lowest point was a stream. The water was so clear that, had it not been for the sound, I doubt I would have noticed it.

The wind at the water’s edge was even stronger and was making a hissing noise. “Hello?” I said, my mind suddenly rushing with thoughts of predators who might see me as an easy opportunity. The hissing continued, getting louder as I followed the flow of water. The wind pushed at my feet, encouraging me to go further, until finally I was forced to stop when I realised where I was. Just a few inches from where I was standing, the forest floor quickly dropped over a precipice. It was so dark that I could barely see where the ground ended, but I could feel the air being dragged below. The river, which was no more than a foot deep, ran off the edge and disappeared into the abyss with barely a sound. Hovering on the horizon, illuminating an endless sea of forest below, was a moon, much larger and much bluer than our own.
I quickly backed away from the edge, tripping over my own feet. *Hss.* It continued. But it wasn’t the wind. Something was stalking me. I could feel a pair of eyes, deep within the forest. Somewhere. *Hss.* Something. *Hssss.* In the water.

I knelt by the side of the stream, but the light bounced off the water in a way that made it difficult to see what was beneath. I noticed that there was something not right about the reflection. I dipped my hand into the current. It was warm and uneven, like it wasn’t made of water at all but thousands of soft marbles.

My hand skimmed the riverbed. I was terrified, but at the same time, something urged me to find the source of the noise, that dreaded snakelike-

*Hssssss.* The current began to slow down and the water became thick like glue, until eventually it had stopped entirely. I pulled back my hand, and watched the water leak down my arm. Then, hovering my hand above the still water, I dipped my hand lightly on the surface. It had become as hard as glass.

As the water became clearer, I realised that the reflection I saw before hadn’t belonged to me, but instead to the thing that was lurking just inches beneath the shimmering surface. It wore a dark hood and held its skeletal hands in the same place as mine. My heart was pounding as I leaned closer, my nose nearly touching the glass, hoping to catch a glimpse of the face beneath its hood. But as I did, the glass melted and I was plunged into the water, now much deeper than before. I tried to reach the surface but something was pulling me down, snaking around my arm. Desperately clawing at the shore, I clung to whatever I could find, and managed to drag myself beyond the creature’s reach.

Suddenly, a siren blared through the forest. It was faint at first but it quickly grew until it was all around me, tearing through the forest like a hot knife through butter. I ran up the hill, tracing my steps back to the portal and found Charlie resting on the floor.

“Charlie, get up,” I said. “Lunch is over. How do we get back?”

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Easier than getting here. Just close your eyes and say to yourself: *Take me home.*”

I shut my eyes and clenched my muscles until they started to hurt. *Take me home.* I focused my mind on those words alone. I opened my eyes gradually, adjusting to the change in light. The forest had vanished and had once again become the dusty walls of the shed. The end-of-lunch bell was sounding in the distance. We had only been gone for fifteen minutes, though it had felt longer still. Perhaps hours.
“It’s easy to get lost in there,” Charlie told me as we walked back to class.
But this only made me more anxious. “What if I do get lost?”
“Just don’t get lost,” he said nonchalantly, which wasn’t in the slightest bit reassuring, since getting lost was the sort of thing that happened without intention. This advice was about as helpful as telling a fish not to get caught on a hook. When I said this to Charlie, he told me that the fish ought to know better.

Concentration was an impossible task that afternoon. My mind was elsewhere, still left wandering that forest, with its rivers of glass and trees made of galaxies. In the end, I decided not to tell Charlie about the hooded creature in the water.
You used to write little messages on the napkin you put in my packed lunch. I loved those. They made it seem as if you were at school with me, but in a way that meant only I could see you. You’d whisper sweetly in my ear and the rest of the day would be fine, like nothing on earth could possibly hurt me. Because you were there. Then one day a kid in the year above saw one of the notes and ran off with it, showing it to all his friends.

“Mummy loves you very much, little cub!” they mocked, waving the napkin like a flag. For the next few weeks, I couldn’t go anywhere without hearing those words shouted from behind a classroom door as I walked past. Once or twice I even witnessed the odd teacher attempt to stifle a laugh as kids shouted it out at registration when my name was called.

_Elly King._

_Yes, miss._

_Little cub!_ They sniggered.

I loved that name. Little Cub was mine and they took it away from me. If we hadn’t moved schools, I would have lost it forever.

One day I told you I had become too old for little messages scribbled on lunchtime napkins. That was a lie and I hated myself for telling it. All I ever wanted every day was to open my lunchbox and attempt to decipher the scribbles of an early morning rush. _I love you, little cub_ or _Have a great day_. It didn’t matter what it was because no matter what, I would get to carry it around with me all day and pretend that you were there.
“They’re hobnobs,” I said. Charlie was pointing quizzically at the half-eaten packet of biscuits poking out from my blazer pocket. “I get hungry.” Portal hopping, or so Charlie called it – a phrase I found rather ridiculous – was quite tiring work, and so I had taken to bringing the occasional snack for the road.

It was lunchtime and as had become our usual routine over the past couple months, we had snuck through the chaplain’s garden and met up outside the shed. By the time I arrived, Charlie had already cleared the doorway, which was regularly covered in fresh leaves each night.

Passing up my offer for a hobnob, Charlie turned to the shed and yanked the door open so that it made an uncomfortable scraping noise against the floor. “I did a bit of cleaning up after last time,” he said. “Figured it was getting a bit messy.” Last Thursday, Charlie and I had used the portal to go pigeon shooting on Jupiter. As you could expect, I had my reservations, but they were short-lived. Those scientists have got it all wrong. It’s not as hostile as they like to think. It’s a bit like Earth, only it’s mostly comprised of sand and the air tastes perpetually like cherries. Also, yes. Pigeons are aliens from Jupiter. Of course.

Walking into the shed, I pulled the door shut behind me and took a seat on the blanket I had brought a few trips before. To my surprise, the room had lost its usual muddy aesthetic. The tools had been stacked neatly away against the back wall and the floor was free from unwieldly hoses. The table, which we often used to assemble rocket launchers on especially dangerous missions, had been wiped clean of any stray soil or wandering woodlouse.

After adjusting the blanket to a more comfortable position, I placed the biscuits on the floor beside me, along with a packet of Jelly Babies and a candy necklace. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“Somewhere dangerous!” he said, rocking back and forth with enthusiasm, his eyes lighting up like a child’s on Christmas morning. This didn’t instil me with the greatest confidence, but nothing bad had happened so far. Apart from the occasional run-in with carnivorous wildebeests from Planet Whatever-He-Called-It, Charlie’s version of ‘dangerous’ usually involved a great deal more restraint than his crazed expression might suggest.

We closed our eyes. “Next stop, the City of Slaves! Ever been?”

“Obviously not, Charlie,” I groaned.
“Just warning you. It might get a bit chilly.”

A cool breeze ran under the door and eddied around the room, dancing across the floor like a stampede of weightless mice. The breeze was calm, but quickly grew into a shuddering wind that pounded at the door angrily. I shuddered as snow battered the walls outside and the air became bitingly cold.

“Take this!” Charlie shouted.

Opening my eyes, I found a jacket dangling in front of me. Dark grey and metallic, like a suit of armour that had been bent out of shape. I threw it on over my uniform, being sure to avoid the rows of blinking red buttons on the chest and sleeves. It hung clumsily on my tiny body, barely keeping the cold from running up my chest. Charlie huddled towards me and pressed one of the buttons on the jacket, which immediately began to shrink until it was a perfect fit.

The temperature had dropped so low that I was sure it couldn’t get any colder. The snow shot at the tiny window like millions of icy bullets. “Where are we?” I shouted, barely able to hear myself over the noise.

“I told you. The City of Slaves.”

After struggling to fight open the door, we waddled single-file into the storm. The wind screamed, the snow rushed and the cold bit at our faces with no sign of stopping. I was just about able to see.

“It doesn’t look much like a city,” I said. Through squinted eyes, not far from where we had landed, was an enormous object that jutted out of the ground and towered above us. It thought it must have been a giant tree of some kind, like the ones in the forest of galaxies, reaching such a great height that its tallest point was lost somewhere amongst the clouds.

Charlie pulled out a device from his jacket pocket, a thin cube that he folded out over his entire hand like a glove. He typed something into the machine and it beeped a response. “This way,” he said, pointing in the direction of the trees.

“Shouldn’t we stay here?” I asked, already feeling cold and wet and very sorry for myself. “This doesn’t look very safe. We should wait in-”, I started. But my words were cut short as I noticed the shed, inches behind me mere seconds ago, was now nowhere to be seen. I tried calling out to Charlie, but in the panic, the only noise that escaped from my mouth was nothing more than a sharp squeal.

“What’s wrong?”

“The portal’s gone!” I yelled. “I don’t understand. We didn’t walk very far.”
“Yeah, it does that sometimes,” he said, barely looking up from his device, as if the prospect of being stranded in the middle of frozen-nowhere were no more inconvenient than forgetting to bring your bag for life on your weekly shopping trip.

With nowhere else to go, we set off through the snow. It wasn’t long before we reached the base of the towering structures. But they were nothing like the trees I had imagined – white, almost translucent, and as hard as stone. And there were hundreds of them, shooting out from the earth, lining our path like an orchard planted by the gods.

“You ever seen ice do this?”

“This isn’t ice,” Charlie said, holding his device close to the silvery wall. “It’s diamond.”

“Diamond? That’s impossible. Look at the size of it!”

“We’ve just come through a portal to a different plain of existence. We can’t rule out impossible yet.”

“You said we’re on Earth.”

“We are and we aren’t. It’s an alternate reality. On this Earth, hundreds of years ago, there was a war between the two greatest powers: the humans and the Cat people. It waged for decades but it was finally ended when a human constructed a weapon that was so powerful, it destroyed the Cat King altogether. But the weapon was so devastating that it threw the entire planet into an eternal winter,” Charlie said. I didn’t bother to ask how he knew all of this.

When he had finished, Charlie picked up a broken piece of diamond from the floor and handed it to me. It was the size of my hand and as sharp as a dagger. I slid it into my back pocket, and we set off through the diamond vineyard.

It wasn’t long before the ground began to shift upwards. The snow beneath our feet slowly gave way to the icy rock. In the distance, I could see the faintest light breaking through the mask of white. “Look, Charlie!” I yelled. We trudged on until we found the carved stone arch that marked the entrance to a cave. Dangling from its highest point was a dimly lit oil-lamp, swaying with the wind, threatening to come loose.

“We made it,” Charlie shouted, head facing the clouds. I looked up at the magnificent beast that towered above us. Miles high, likely hundreds of miles across, was a sight that would make the gods of Mount Olympus shiver. “Welcome to the City of Slaves.”

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Taking shelter in the nearby cave, Charlie began running his hand along the stone walls.

“Trying to find the door,” he said, without my having to ask.

The door! Of course. It was beginning to make sense. The lamp, the cave. This was the way in. I hurried after him as quickly as my numb feet would allow and joined him in searching, though clueless as to what I should look out for. Who was to say that people of this world made doors like we did back home? Theirs could be invisible, or perhaps require the user to sacrifice a limb every time they wished to enter.

My search led me deeper into the cave until I had lost all sight or sound of Charlie. The calm air was a welcomed addition and, for the first time in what felt like hours, I was able to think clearly. I ran my hands along the floor until they found an area which seemed smoother than the rest, like it had been cut out from the stone. Familiar letters had been carved into it:

\[
\text{Knock once if you come in peace.} \\
\text{Knock twice for a cup of tea.} \\
\text{Knock thrice to enter me.} \\
\text{Knock four times if all three.}
\]

“You found the door!” Charlie walked up cheerily behind me and proceeded to knock twice without sparing a moment of consideration for the words carved in the stone beneath his feet.

“No!” I shouted. To my surprise, a small section of the wall opened, followed by the delicate sound of bone china clinking against a hard surface. As promised, a steaming cup of tea was now waiting for us on the stone ledge, delivered by unseen hands.

“Thanks. I’m parched,” Charlie said, and reached for the cup.

“Don’t drink it!” I yelled. With one swoop of my hand, I knocked the cup to the floor, but not before he had taken a sip.

The startled Charlie simply shrugged. “They put too much milk in.”

“Will you pay attention? Read this,” I said, crouching down to the markings.

“Knock once if... it’s a riddle! Well, clearly we’re supposed to knock ten times,” Charlie said. And without allowing any time for discussion, he did just that. But, despite my worrying, the door very slowly creaked open. The minimal light that made its way to that part of the cave seeped into the crack and illuminated the tip of a very long, floating nose.
“Password?” the nose grumbled.

I panicked, but Charlie remained calm. Giving himself time to think, he eventually said, “All children are evil.” Immediately, the door swung open to reveal the nose’s owner – a man no taller than five feet – who ushered us in from the cold.

“How did you know that?”

Charlie shrugged. “It will take a bit of explaining. For now, all you need to know is that things will get confusing in here. You’ll think you see people you know, but they aren’t really them.”

And as we were speaking, the long-nose man waddled up to us and very loudly cleared his throat. He wasn’t dressed the way you’d expect of a doorman, unless doormen usually wore bowler hats and black dinner jackets. Perhaps they did. Resting just below his bushy nostrils was a thick moustache, one I was sure I had seen before.

“Mr Barts?” I asked. Charlie nudged me hard. But it was him – Mr Barts, the IT technician at school. Usually he wore dad jeans and a Pink Floyd t-shirt. I recognised his distinctive smell. An unpleasant blend of cigarettes and coffee. And he had that same bushy moustache, though not so neatly groomed as it was now.

“Welcome, sir. Ahem, and lady sir,” he said. “Sorry for the precaution. Not many people using this door no more, but you never can be too careful. Spies, ya’ see.” Mr Barts led us deeper into the cave. “Here on business, I presume. You’ve come to the right place! Best workers on the whole planet can be bought here.”

We arrived at a small room, marked by another oil lamp. “In here,” he said and we entered. A sign on the wall said Don’t give money to stray cats. Lining one wall of the room were dozens of small, square buttons, each with something different written on them.

Upper City Cat Crematorium
Royal Palace
The Museum of Historical Slavery
The Museum of Modern Slavery
The Institute of Enslaving Children
Lower City Warehouse
Insanity Hospital no. 3
Sainsbury’s

“They seem to like their museums,” I said as I read the panel. “And slaves.”
“It’s the City of Slaves,” Charlie said. “They were hardly going to talk about anything else. This seems like a good place to start.” He pressed the button that said Lower City Centre and the room shook. I barely had enough time to grab onto something before we were shot upwards through the heart of the mountain at an incredible speed. For a brief moment, the lift passed through a gap in the mountainside and overlooked the planet’s vast white wastelands below. Dotted across the horizon were a handful of other mountains that rose into the sky like exclamation points, each with twinkling city lights perched atop their peaks. But the lift was once again engulfed by the mountain. By the time it had come to an abrupt stop, Charlie and I were a tangled mess on the floor, clinging onto each other desperately since the box had failed to provide anything to hold onto.

The lift doors creaked open, revealing a cobbled courtyard. The air up there was calm and appeared unaffected by the storm that raged below. Buildings surrounded us for as far as I could see. Dozens of them. Not far from the courtyard, further into the city, the mountain rose higher still. Along the way were structures that didn’t belong together. Skyscrapers, castles, colosseums. Towering statues of strong men with swords and women with slightly smaller swords. And perched atop the highest peak was the most extravagant of them all: a tower, hundreds of meters high, shaped like a giant golden head.

“The King’s royal palace,” Charlie said. “They say the first King had it modelled off his own face.”

“It’s a bit overkill though, right?”

“I think it’s perfectly reasonable.”

It took several moments after having exited the lift to regain composure. We walked the edge of the courtyard, which was surrounded by black and white wooden housing, until we found the entrance to a narrow alley. Several signs had been nailed to the wall and on the arch above. One said:

*Reward for lost cat: grey/white tabby.*

*If found, kill him. He stole my pocket watch.*

Another, which had an arrow pointing upwards beside to it, said:

*This way to Helga’s Help. Best quality children in the city.*
“This looks promising,” Charlie said, starting down through the entrance. The alley was narrow in places where the walls either side looked as though they might at any moment buckle under their own weight. After a minute of meandering alleyways, we were met with the sounds of loud chattering as our path led us into a busy high-street. Scattered along it were market stalls, each one selling something more peculiar than the last. One woman was shouting about her legendary prices on magical chicken eggs. Another man claimed to be selling invisible fruit, though I suspected he was a conman.

But the most peculiar sight wasn’t anything for sale. It was the people themselves. Most of the men were sporting fancy three-piece suits and a few of them had monocles. The women mostly wore ugly black or grey dresses that looked as though they had been made from curtains. There were only two exceptions to this: two men, neither of them taller than four-foot, appeared to be wearing something similar to the metallic jackets that Charlie and I had on. In fact, they were exactly the same. And poking out from behind their hoods were two great bushy beards the length of my arm.

“Who are these people?” I asked.

But Charlie ignored my question. “Just keep close to me, okay? And do as I say.”

A loud screeching noise cut through the air, followed by the heavy footsteps of the balloon shaped woman who was running over to us with open arms. She was wearing an enormous blue-feathered hat. “You must be here for the show!” she yelled, clapping her hands furiously. “I’m Helga.”

“I’m El-”

“So glad you were able to make it!” she continued. “You won’t be disappointed with the batch we’ve just caught, I’m quite sure. Best on the market!” She guided us over to a building across the street. She pushed open the iron-studded double doors of Helga’s Help and ushered us through. “I think you’ll find everything you need in here. The show is this afternoon,” she said with a smile that looked like it had been sown on.

“What show?” I asked tentatively.

Helga laughed a long and ear-piercing laugh. “Very funny, ambassador! It’s the gladiator show tonight, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be back soon to help you get ready. Make yourselves at home.” Helga left the building, closing the door behind her.
Charlie and I remained perfectly still in the corridor of Helga’s Help, both clueless as to what had just happened. “Did she just call me ‘ambassador’?”

“It’s possible she thinks we’re someone else.”

“It must be these jackets!” I said, tugging at the fabric. The lights that ran down its side beeped away. “She couldn’t see our faces. Where exactly did you get these?”

“I acquired them on my last visit.” He sighed. “Okay, stole them. From some dwarves. They’re some of the biggest buyers of slaves on the planet. They mustn’t have realised we’re children yet, otherwise the whole city would be after us.”

“Why would they be?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? This place is called the City of Slaves.”

“And…”

“And the people they most enjoy enslave are children!”

The words sent a shiver down my spine. “Why exactly did you bring us here?”

“I needed something. Something that will help bring an end to this entire mess.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’m going to steal the King’s heart.”

“Charlie, you mean you…” I paused. “You’re going to kiss him?”

“Not his real heart. The Heart of the Sun. A jewel as black as night, crafted by dark magic.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Legend says it was forged by trapping a blackhole inside the crystal tear of a god.”

“That seems very unlikely.”

“Not if you know anything about crystal tears. They’re very powerful.”

Charlie looked as serious as ever.

“So, what does this Heart thing do?”

“Glad you asked,” he said, his face blushing with joy. “It has the power to manipulate people’s desires. He wears it everywhere he goes. And people do what he wants. Against their will!” His tone ranged from angry to excited. “He has this whole city under his control. It’s the weapon that ended the great war between humans and the Cat people.”

“And you expect he’ll just hand it over to you.”
“Of course not. I’m going to steal it from around his neck,” he said. “At every gladiatorial show, the entire city comes to watch. That means the King will be there.”

“So what?” I said.

“So… if they think you’re an ambassador, we’ll be seated with the King. I’ve been planning this for a long time. But I needed help to do it. Your help, Elly.”

“But what can I—”

A sharp shrieking noise, like a crying baby, interrupted me before I could finish.

EEEEEK, it sounded again, echoing down the long, winding corridor of Helga’s Help.

I hurried to where the sound had come from, behind a wall covered in dozens of cat paintings, all dressed in orange prison outfits. And protruding from the wall at waist-height was a door handle shaped like a lion. After giving it the softest nudge, it very slowly creeped open, revealing a dark emptiness and the putrid smell of rotting flesh. Charlie pressed a button on his jacket and a torch appeared on his arm, shining light on the room full of children, each of them chained to the wall.

Their faces were battered and bruised, but I could still recognise them clearly. Fifteen of them in total, including Sam Wilstrop and several others from my class.

“Melanie! What are you all doing here?” I shouted, but heard no reply. They stared straight through me with cold, unblinking eyes, pupils dilated so much that there was little colour left in them at all. Their clothes were so torn that the deep slash marks across their chests were clearly visible. Melanie was nursing a fresh wound just below her ribs, where presumably she had tried to struggle free. She let out another cry, softer. Weaker.

Don’t, she whispered, her voice more delicate than a feather. Don’t hurt. It was barely loud enough to push through the heavy air, thick with the odour of vomit and blood.

“I promise, we’re going to get you out of here!” I spoke to the room, but every one of them shuddered, their eyes bloodshot with fear. “It’s us. Don’t worry!” I pulled my hood down and stepped into the light shining from Charlie’s torch. But it made no difference.

“We need to get these off!” I said, scanning the room for anything that might cut through the tough metal chains.

A sharp hissing noise started behind me and I turned to find a line of red light shooting from Charlie’s jacket sleeve. The ground turned red hot where the beam landed. “This should do it,” he said, and aimed it at Melanie’s chains. Within seconds, the metal started to glow and with one fell swoop, he tore the chain cleanly in two. We started on the rest of them, the chains quickly piling up in the centre of the room.
“Now get out of here!” I shouted. But they remained in their spots. Melanie, with one arm tightly clutching her wound, surrendered the other above her head with what little energy she could muster.

“They’re scared of us,” Charlie said as he freed the final prisoner. “They think we’re going to make them fight in the gladiator pits.”

“That’s crazy. Run! Now’s your chance!” But every effort I made to reassure them only made things worse. And before long, we knew we had run out of time as heavy footsteps stomped their way down the corridor outside, followed by a distinctive screech. *Quiet in there!*

The footsteps came to a halt just outside the dungeon’s entrance. The room waited in silence, before the door flung open. All I could see was the silhouette of the enormous woman, her body almost too large for the door itself.

“The next person who speaks loses a limb!” Helga flipped a light switch, and for the first time, I saw the full extent of the dungeon. A perfectly square room of ugly black stone, muddy water dripping from the ceiling. Chains and hooks filled every spare foot along the wall. All fifteen children lay waiting. Stunned. Scared. Silent.

What followed next was the loudest, most ear-bursting screech of all. “Ambassador!”

I froze.

“The King will love to hear about this!” she said. After pushing her giant body through the doorway, Helga charged towards me with outstretched arms. “He’ll throw you in with the rest of these worthless maggots!” I edged slowly backwards until there was nowhere left to run. Helga ignored everyone, bounding her way towards me. But in the panic, and with her balloon belly, she failed to avoid the pile of broken chains beneath her. With one clumsy step, she all two-hundred pounds of the monstrous Helga came crashing to the floor with a thud.

Her body slumped awkwardly as the metal began charred her skin, slowly burning as she struggled to lift herself up. She screamed out in pain, but her cries became softer and softer, as if she were no more than a balloon that was gradually being squeezed of its air. Before long, every piece of hair had been lost from her head and her face looked a terrible age. Trying as she best could, Helga managed to utter one final thing.

“Kill. Me.”

We couldn’t allow her to live. I knew that. Charlie knew that. If we did, she would go straight to the King and tell him about us and all of this would be for nothing.
I leant over her body, pulled Helga’s head above the burning metal, and grabbed the diamond shard from my jacket pocket.

“Elly, don’t!” Charlie yelled.

I ignored him as I ran the shard along her throat.
“You killed her,” Charlie said. A horrible silence hung in the air as all seventeen pairs of eyes stared at the lifeless body of Helga, barbequing on the sizzling chains. No one quite knew what to do. Charlie, the boy who always had something to say about everything, looked as though he were struggling to understand what had just happened. “You… killed her.”

“And what would you have done?”

“Not try slitting her throat with my knife.”

“She was going to tell on us, and then you’d never have found that heart thing,” I said. “Plus. She asked me.”

Charlie slumped to the ground beside Helga’s burnt corpse. The blood that was still seeping from her neck had cooled the hot chains and begun to collect in a pool. It was the most beautiful colour I had ever seen. The thickest shade of red, branching out as it poured through the grooves in the stone like viscous lava.

“We have to get out of here,” he said. “The plan has changed. We need to move before someone finds us.”

“S….s….saved us,” a voice spoke softly. It was Melanie. She, and all the other prisoners, were stood in a circle around the body. “You saved us from the witch.”

I couldn’t hide the look of pride of my face. “I guess I did.” But Charlie remained unimpressed, still kneeling on the floor. “Now we need to get you guys out of here.”

I peered out through the dungeon entrance and scanned the row of doors lining the hallway and pushed open the one marked Cloakroom. Inside it were suits, dresses, top hats. Everything we would need. Enough for an army of slaves, or at least enough for fifteen of them. “Take these, all of you,” I said as I begun throwing clothes into the dungeon. “No one will recognise you if you dress like them. You need to find a way out of here!”

One by one they filed out of the building, throwing on their oversized three-piece suits, and dispersed amongst the buzzing market crowd.

At last, the front door closed and I breathed a sigh of relief. Feeling pleased with myself, I returned to Charlie, who was standing above Helga’s body, his shoes now stained red.

“They’ll find out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No one knows we’re here,” I said.

“You don’t get it. They know everything that goes on in this city.”
“Who’s they?”
“The Caretakers.”
I smiled politely. “They don’t sound too scary. I promise you, we’ll be fine.”
A voice burst through the dungeon. “It’s rude to make promises you can’t keep.” I turned to the entrance, where half a dozen men had appeared, clad in the finest suits and each sporting a monocle. “Your friend is right to be scared. You ought to follow his example,” one of them spoke. On their jackets was the letter ‘C’ sown in bright gold. If these were the caretakers Charlie spoke about, they looked nothing like those at school.
There were seven of them in total, towering above us, each holding a police baton tucked ceremonially under their left arms. At the front of the group was the man I assumed to be the head caretaker. Whilst the others had two piece suits, he wore a matching waistcoat with several chains than ran along the inside. Whilst the others were clean shaven, the head caretaker sported a bushy moustache that curved at the ends, and a bowler hat that nearly touched the ceiling.
“What exactly are you doing in here?” he asked, bending over so that his face was hovering just above my own. His teeth were yellow and his gums were brown, giving a horrible odour of rotting flesh. The flowery scent of perfume radiating off his clothes did little to mask the smell.
“Shopping, are we?” His lips slowly twisted until they loosely resembled a smile, then dropped again before either of us could respond. “No. That can’t be it. Because that would mean you two were legal citizens. And you,” he prodded my head with his baton, “you are just children.”
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It had been twenty minutes since Charlie and I had left Helga’s Help, been loaded onto a horse-drawn carriage and had bags placed over our heads. The journey had taken us down cobbled streets, past smell of bakeries and the loud cries of shouting pedestrians. Even with my knowledge of the City’s geography limited to a courtyard and the inside of one private dungeon, it didn’t take a genius to guess where they were taking us.
“Charlie?”
“I’m still here,” he replied.
“Very clever what you did back there, dressing as dwarves. Everyone knows they’re the richest. And they always need slaves to work their mines.” The voice took me by
surprised. It was the Head Caretaker, sitting in the carriage with us. He had remained silent up until that point that I had almost forgotten he was there. His rotten breath was unbearable even with a bag over my head.

“You managed to fool the rest of this city. But I saw past your disguise and followed you. Sadly, I wasn’t quick enough,” he sighed. “Poor girl. Helga was a good woman. Good heart.”

“She had children locked away in chains!” I shouted.

“And such a fantastic businesswoman. The City will not see another like her for many years.”

“I’ll do the same to you if you don’t—” But my threat was cut short by a sharp punch in the arm.

“Shh! You’ll get us into more even trouble!” Charlie said.

“Your friend is very wise,” the Caretaker continued. “Or perhaps a coward. The line is not always clear.”

The carriage came to an abrupt halt and two unwelcomed hands pulled me from my seat. Whatever they planned to do with us, I was happy at least for the fresh air. The Head Caretaker’s rotting odour had been too much to handle inside that tiny compartment.

“Get a move on, you ugly mutts!” someone shouted. And once again we were on the move, led by unseen hands through a series of rooms. I could feel eyes on me. Watching. Ridiculing. Making snide comments as we were being escorted to our deaths. When eventually they removed the bags, Charlie and I found ourselves in a room filled with weapons of every imaginable kind. Spears. Swords. That stick with the spiky ball at the end. Crossbows. And a large bowl of under-ripe bananas.

“Have one. It will give you energy.” The Head Caretaker shoved the fruit in our faces and then demanded that we choose something to fight with.

“We’re not fighting anyone, and I’m not hungry,” I said, and threw a banana at him as hard as my arms could manage.

The fruit bounced off the Head Caretaker’s chest and he stared at me with unblinking eyes, the slightest shred of amusement in his lips. He pulled out one of his many pocket watches, stared into it, and gave an ugly laugh. “That just means you’ll die sooner, which would be a shame. The people like a show,” he said, then looked at Charlie. “What have you got there?”

“Nothing,” Charlie replied, who was attempting to conceal his device under his sleeve.
“We won’t be having any cheating. Give it here.” After a struggle, he managed to loosen the device from Charlie’s grip and placed it in his side trouser pocket. “You’ll have it back. If you win. But I very much doubt that.” He let out a snort as he walked away.

I tightened my fists in anger. “You are very ugly when you laugh!” The slurry of words burst from my mouth almost without my realising.

He paused, and still facing away, said “Better to be ugly than dead.”

My rage was building. But I knew it would be useless to do anything now. Not when the odds were so heavily stacked against me. Taking a deep breath, I turned back to the table and searched for a piece of armour that would fit me. The one closest to my size was still too big. Even after pulling the adjustment straps as tight as they would go, the metal shook clumsily as I moved. Then, finding the spear and shield as the only two items I could lift, I nodded to one of the caretakers standing guard nearby.

“This way,” he said and led us to the end of the room, where half a dozen children were already standing, clad head to toe in cheap armour. Sam, Melanie, Toby. Half a dozen others; none of them had managed to escape.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, before the caretaker made an aggressive salute and pulled a giant wooden lever on the wall. The ground became unsteady beneath our feet and white dust started to fall around us, twinkling in the growing light. Looking up, I saw the ceiling edging open, as the platform slowly began to rise to the surface. The first thing I noticed was the smell; a pungent odour of freshly dead bodies, sweat, and the very faintest hint of cat litter.

The rising podium came to a stop and at last, I saw it – the arena, stretching for hundreds of meters into the sky. The pit at the arena’s core was easily the size of two football fields and was dusted with a thin sheet of snow, not enough to hide the streaks of blood and the occasional severed finger.

Rows of people lined the stadium, each of them dressed in the same Victorian fashion and each shouting as loud as their lungs would allow. Vermin! Let them die! Several hundred of them could be seen waving cups and saucers in the air, presumably delivered by one of the many tea trollies at the entrances.

At the heart of it all was a grey stone tower which grew out from the sandy floor, the top of which looked high enough to touch the clouds. A trumpet sounded and our eyes were drawn upwards. Even from far below, we could see a man step forward, dressed in a purple cape. Resting on his chest was a golden necklace and at its centre, a jewel as black as night.
The Heart of the Sun, I thought, barely noticing the familiar neck around which it was resting. “Is that… Mr Berry?!” And it was, though he looked nothing like he did on our Earth. Much more regal than your average headmaster.

“They call him King here;” Charlie said. “Now we need to find a way to get to him.”

I thought for a moment and considered the spear in my hands. It could work, but I had never been any good at sports. “Can you throw?”

Charlie shook his head defeatedly. “It wouldn’t work. If we killed him now, they’d shut this place down and then we’d never get to him.” He paused. “But I may have an idea.”

“Welcome, citizens,” Mr Berry spoke, “to the greatest show on Earth!” The crowd erupted into applause and began stomping their feet so aggressively that the ground threatened to give way. Those with cups of tea were now thrashing the sides violently with their spoons.

Mr Berry raised one hand and the crowd fell silent. “For centuries, this City has flourished through the strength of its people. Ever since we flushed out the tyrannical King Cat, we have built an empire free from the toxic creatures that once lived among us as equals. But those days are gone, my fellow citizens. Gone! are the days when we must live with vermin! Cats! Rats! And the worst of all – children!” Mr Berry, struggling to speak over the growing voice of the crowd, raised both his arms to the sky. “So today we celebrate the end of their days, and the continuation of our glorious people!”

The crowd screamed. Some threw their cups into the pit. “We love you!”, they cried.

“Gladiators,” he said, looking down at the shivering students many meters below, clinging desperately to their weapons. “So kind of you to join us. I hope that you’ve all eaten your bananas. You will need your strength.”

“Why is everyone trying to feed us fruit?” I asked.

Charlie shrugged. “Better than Hobnobs.”

Mr Berry continued. “You all know the rules. The one left standing will be crowned champion and granted their freedom. Fight well, gladiators.” The crowd began chanting even louder than before.

“Rip them in two!” yelled one elderly woman, who looked remarkably like the school dinner lady who kept trying to feed me subpar macaroni.

Charlie turned to me, but before he could speak, a horn sounded from the podium above.

And begin! Everyone scurried around helplessly. At the far end of the arena, black gates opened and from deep within, a giant creature paced gently into the light.
“Ladies and gentlemen, from the forests plains of Greer, I give you the dreaded manticore!” A few members of the audience fell back in their seat. One of them, presumably fainting from shock, had to be carried out on a stretcher.

The animal, with muscles as wide as my entire body, stood up on its hind legs and cried out in a painful, tortured tune. The sound was somehow familiar, produced by a mouth not unlike mine. Its face was human, its body was lion. A great long tail, tipped with two scissor-like knives, whipped from side to side behind it. Pawing at the ground, the creature gave one last whimpering cry and bounded towards us, tail swinging in its wake. The crowd could barely contain its excitement.

“That is adorable,” I said, mere seconds before the beast had reached its first victim and sliced her cleanly in two. Her name was Carrie Whyte, the weird girl from our class who always picked her nose and wiped it on her sleeve. Even as she laid there, intestines seeping out from her severed body, I couldn’t help but think that she had had it coming.

The crowd squealed with joy at the first taste of blood, but the creature continued unflinchingly towards the centre of pit where Charlie and I were standing. Its perfect brown fur was now dotted with Carrie’s blood.

“Everyone, stay together!” someone shouted, before their body was flung meters into the air, as if weighing no more than a feather, and flopping back down to the ground. Dead. Through the shaggy mess of fresh blood and hair, I realised the voice had belonged to Toby.

Panic was finally beginning to seep in. “How are we meant to kill this thing? We don’t have a chance.”

“I don’t think we’re meant to. You start fighting. I need to figure out how to get up there.”

“What are you doing?”

“We need to find a way up that tower. And I may have a few tricks up my sleeve,” he said as he ran off towards the tower.

The two creatures had started running in circles around the arena, forcing everyone closer to the centre. Few people were bothering to fight. The ones that did became quick targets.

“Hurry up, Charlie!”

Looking back, I saw Charlie standing by the tower with the smuggest grin as he stared at the door that had miraculously appeared at its base. He had found a way in.
Perfect! I thought, as I started towards him, clutching my spear in hand. But the victory was shorted lived as I noticed two men emerge silently from the doorway. Seven-foot tall, strong, dressed in suits and a single monocle tucked in one eye. All the while, Charlie was completely oblivious to the men towering behind him. Caretakers. I recognised them from the corridor in Helga’s Help.

“Look ‘ere, Mud. We’ve got ourselves an escaper!” one of them said, before resting their baton on Charlie’s shoulder. He spoke with a strange accent, as though he hadn’t ever properly learned to speak. The other, presumably named Mud, giggled like a child. “This is the one what killed Helga!”

I watched as Charlie’s expression switched from joyful to terrified. He opened his mouth, but the silver-tongued boy struggled to produce a sound.

“He’s lost fer words!” the caretaker said. “No matter. A tongue ain’t no use to the dead!” In one violent motion, he shoved the baton deep into Charlie’s spine, sending him crashing to the floor. He screamed, barely able to move his legs. But his calls for help were nothing more than whispers in the arena, drowned out by the crowd of thousands. The caretakers snorted with laughter as Charlie twitched on the ground, before they sealed the door shut once again.

It was all I could do to watch. My legs had seized up and refused to move from their spot. Charlie, I mumbled as I saw his body writhe, heard him cry out in pain. Charlie! The battle raged on around me. Less than a hundred feet away, Sam was running towards the manticore with a dagger in each hand, flinging them through the air. “Die, pussies!” he shouted, and slashed at the creature, successfully cutting both its front legs. It howled, and slowly fell to its knees.

The crowd held its breath. No slave ever won a gladiator battle. Not against a manticore.

Sam raised his arms to the sky. “I killed it! I am your champion!” he yelled. But this wasn’t met with cheer. The arena was deadly still. Every pair of eyes was already fixated on the creature as it raised its knife-like tail, dripping with blood, in an arch over its body. “Not fair,” Sam managed, before the tail descended at whipping speed onto his head, crushing him into a pulp.

“It’ll take more than a measly dagger to take down a manticore, ladies and gentlemen!” a voice boomed from the podium. “Just eight gladiators remaining now.”

The creature was unstoppable. Sam had given his life and all it had done was slow it down. It wasn’t long before the beast was back on its feet and continuing its task. One by
one, the rest of the children fell. Soon it would be me. I wasn’t a fighter, but I couldn’t let that stop me from trying. I held the spear firmly above my head.

*You can do this, I thought. You’re better than this. Now kill this f*cking cat!*

The spear made it farther than I had expected. At least twelve meters, only another twenty shy of its intended target. Members of the crowd laughed. One voice stopped me in my tracks. *What’s wrong, Little Cub?* it shouted. *Not ready to die?* The laughter grew and grew.

*Little Cub!*

*Little Cub!*

I had found him, hiding amongst the crowd like a coward. The hooded figure, dressed from head to toe in black.

*You didn’t even get to say goodbye!* it said, with a voice like knives on my skin. *What will Mummy think, Little Cub?*

The screaming continued until it was all I could hear, pounding at my ears like a drum. “Shut up!” I said. But as much as I screamed, my voice came out quieter than a whisper. “Leave me alone!”

Through the haze of noise, I saw the creature turn to my direction, its dark yellow eyes locked on its next target. Me. But I could barely focus. The voice from the crowd raged on in the distance. Then I remembered it. The item tucked away beneath my armour. The diamond shard! I reached inside and pulled it out. The blade was still red with Helga’s blood. This was the key.

I can’t explain it. This urge I felt inside me. But I knew I couldn’t win the battle as I was. Not as Elly – this five-foot twig, barely capable of throwing a spear. Sure, I killed Helga. But this was something bigger. Charlie told me I could be anything I wanted. And at that moment, it was clear what I had to do.

Taking a deep breath, I spoke the words aloud, “I can save you.” Then, holding it firmly above my head, I plunged the diamond shard straight into my hand.

“What the hell are you doing?!” I heard Charlie shouting behind me, but his voice had already begun to fade as my body morphed, shrunk, melted away until nothing was left but a cloud of steam. Nothing, except for the delicate rustle of feathers and a feeling of euphoria.

I was a phoenix climbing from the ashes. Only instead of ashes, it was sweaty armour and snow. It felt as though the entire world had been muted. The crowd, the King, the
creature. None of it mattered for that one split second before the world came rushing back in.

The beast was running towards me at greater speed now, flinging dust in its wake. I stretched out my new-born wings and took to the air, barely escaping the ground before it had reached me. From above I saw the corpses and scattered limbs of my classmates. Circles of blood ran around the arena like skid-marks on a racetrack.

I had the tower in my sights. Atop it, Mr Berry and his gang of caretakers. There it was, sitting comfortably around his neck. The Heart of the Sun. Picking up speed, I soared through the air and shot past them, picking off the caretakers with my claws and dropping them to the ground. Soon there was only the king left standing.

I landed just in front of him. He dropped to the ground, trembling. “Who are you?”

But in the rush, I hadn’t thought to give myself a name. “Birdgirl,” I said tentatively. “That’s a stupid name,” he replied.

“Just give me the necklace.” With his caretakers gone, the King was quick to surrender the jewel. He placed it on the floor, his hands shook, and I flew it down to Charlie at the base of the tower. He was now the last remaining gladiator.

“Charlie!” I shouted, and dropped the necklace. He caught it and held it in front of the manticore which was only a few feet in front of him.

“Stay back!” he shouted. The beast immediately ran away, back through the gates.

Charlie held out the jewel to the crowd. “This man is no true king!” he said, pointing to the tower. “He has tricked your minds, forced you into something you’re not.” Silence fell in the arena as Charlie waved the jewel through the air. “Be free, all of you!”

A head poked out from the tower entrance where the guards had come through earlier. It was the same monocled man as before, with his yellow teeth now chattering with fear. Clutched in his shaking hands was the device Charlie had used to get us here.

“I suppose we get to keep this now,” Charlie said, taking the device from the man. “Fancy going now? I’m hungry.” I squawked in agreement. He pressed a button and the machine hummed into action. A bright orb appeared in mid-air and we walked through it, single file. Upon reaching the other side, we found ourselves back inside the shed, human and alive.

“Registration started two minutes ago!” Charlie said, rushing out of the door. I followed shortly after, throwing the shard of wood away into the corner, where it landed next to my discarded candy necklace.
That night I lay in bed, unable to sleep. The deep cut in my hand made it impossible, even after I had removed the splinters. One night at dinner Dad asked me about it. I made up a story that I had tripped at school and landed on my hand. It might have sounded more convincing if I hadn’t already used that excuse before.
On my 11th birthday, Dad bought me a record player, with the promise that I’d stop stealing his and taking it to my room.

It came with two records: David Bowie’s *Heroes*, which was an old one of Dad’s that I really liked. Then a new one: *Live at Sin-e* by Jeff Buckley. I had never heard of it before, but the name sounded nice. The entire album is very long. About two hours, but it’s like a story and you can listen to it from beginning to end without realising time has passed.

When I’m feeling sad, I pretend I’m in a music video. I put Buckley on, throw all my bedding on the floor and lie down with my arms and legs sprawled out. A lot of the album he spends talking, about dreams and Miles Davis and his thoughts on music. I let myself believe he’s talking to me and let nothing else matter.

One time Dad walked in and looked stunned for a moment. Presumably because I was starfishing on my bedroom floor with *Hallelujah* on at full volume. Then he asked if I wanted a cup of tea and I said *yes, of course.*
March 16 – 20 was *worm week*. Every day I’d walk to school and see this worm dying by the side of the road. On the first day, it looked like it was still alive, though looking a little pale. I wanted to help it, but I was in a rush to get to school and it was a worm and worms aren’t nice to touch. The next day when I passed the same spot, I saw that it was still there. This time it had been cut in half and its guts had spewed out onto the pavement. I felt bad for it. It would just rot on the pavement, unwanted by anything. Several times, I felt like picking it up and throwing it and its entrails over the wall into someone’s garden. But I never did. By the end of the week, it had changed beyond recognition. The rain from the night before had left it floating colourless in a puddle. No one would have known what it was apart from me.

That week Charlie and I fought dinosaurs from the Jurassic Era. But it also was the week you went into hospital. Nothing too serious, Dad reassured me. Otherwise he would have let us visit you more often. But with exams coming up soon, he didn’t think I needed the distraction.

But it was *all* I needed. Eventually, Friday came around. The school bell rang and everyone rushed home for the weekend, except for me. Which was why I was surprised to find Dad parked outside the gates in his police car, waiting to pick me up. Sam Wilstrop sniggered as I stepped into the back seat.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” Dad said. “My shift doesn’t finish until 6pm. I’ll drop you off at the hospital and ask someone to take you in. Can you get the bus home after that?”

“Yes!”

Dad peered out of the window at the school gates. “Who’s that?”

Sam Wilstrop was blowing raspberries at the car and laughing. “Just this stupid boy.”

“I could always have him arrested for interfering with police business, you know,” he said. This made me smile, the first time I’d done so all day. I held up a middle finger to the glass and we drove off.

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Dad parked outside the hospital and walked with me into reception.
“We’re here to see Mrs Lucy King, please,” he spoke to the receptionist, who seemed a little flustered by the sight of a policeman. “Family visit.” The woman bobbed her head and said yes, yes, of course. She asked for ID and then directed us to the appropriate ward.

Dad held my hand as we made our way down the winding hospital corridors, which were busy with nurses, doctors and other visitors. We turned a corner and there you were, sitting up in bed, waiting. The ward was largely empty apart from two older women, both sound asleep.

“Hi, sweetie,” Dad said and kissed you on the forehead. “I can’t stay for long. I’m only here to drop Elly off.” Within a couple minutes, he had said his goodbyes and left.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, taking a seat on the edge of your bed. You were more spritely than I had expected. The surgery had clearly been a huge success.

“Better. They’ve put me on these strong drugs which help out with the pain,” you said. Your voice was still very weak. I sat a little close. “I bet it’s been a lot quieter at home without me around.”

“The cooking could be better.” We both laughed. You asked how school was, to which I replied with something like fine, except Miss Chapman set us too much homework as always.

“Elly, I want you to be honest with me,” you said. “I know you don’t ever want to talk about what’s happening. But I’m supposed to be the brave one, not you. Please, tell me what’s going on. I miss you.”

And you were right. I should have told you everything. I wanted to tell you everything. About how I had had detention twice in the past two weeks for skipping classes. I wanted to tell you about the portal, about my trip to the City of Slaves and my battle with the manticore. I wanted to tell you about the phoenix and the fact that I now knew how to save you, from him. The man in the black hood.

But I remained silent, holding back the rush of thoughts in my head, all fighting to burst from my mouth in one long stampede of words. I took a deep breath. “There’s a boy.”

That made you smile.

“Not like that,” I blushed. “He’s a friend.”

“Of course, a friend who’s a boy. I know how it goes. And what’s his name?”

“Charlie.”

“What’s he like?” you asked.

I thought for a moment, trying to piece my mind together. “He helps me with stuff.”

“Help as in with homework?”

“Yes,” I said. “Something like that.”
It wasn’t long before the painkillers had sent you to sleep, at which point one of the hospital staff walked me to the bus stop outside the hospital. It was another half an hour before I opened the front door to my cold and empty house.
The greatest storm of my life happened when I was six years old. I can't say for sure how strong it was, but at that age, it felt like the world was ending. That night, after lightning had struck a tree in the garden and winds were threatening to break through the windows, I was sure this was the worst thing that had ever happened to anyone. Ever.

It was late October and we were on our way back from a trip to the London. But a storm had forced us off the roads and so we stayed the night at Aunty Di’s house, who lived just outside the city. There was nothing to worry about, you assured me. It would pass by before long. We played board games in the sitting room because the power had gone out. But a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos wasn’t going to make me forget the monstrous winds that raged outside.

I was on the toilet when it happened. Aunty Di’s bathroom was on the first floor of the house, at the end of a long hallway. The wind howled at the windows all around me. Sticks and rocks were being flung at the glass. Tick, tick, tick, tock, they said.

After what seemed an age, I finally reached the toilet and sat down. The room was cold and the wind was louder still. Lightning struck outside. And for those few minutes, I was alone. That was when I heard you scream.

“Elly!” You burst through the bathroom door and immediately pulled me from the toilet before I had had time to pull up my pants. When we made it downstairs, I saw Aunty Di hovering nervously. There was glass on the kitchen floor and the window had broken through. She hurried us both into the small closet beneath the stairs and shut the door behind us.

You held me tightly and told me not worry. The storm wouldn’t pass for another two hours. “I’m hungry,” I complained, but you told me I’d have to wait until it was safe to leave. In the panic, Aunty Di had forgotten to bring food but had still found time to pack Hungry Hungry Hippos. We played a few games to pass the time. And despite everything, I loved it.
On the Sunday of the same week, just two days after my visit to the hospital, I had spent much of the day by myself. Dad, who was always busy on Sundays, had asked our neighbour to check up on me every now and then. Before long, it had grown dark outside. Dad sent me a text to say he was running overtime at work and that there was food in the fridge I could reheat. After watching an hour of TV and nibbling at leftover fish pie, I went up to my room. The bedside alarm clock read 9pm. Dad still wasn’t home, so I climbed into bed, and pulled the duvet tightly around my body. The air was bitterly cold for mid-March.

The only light in my room came from the moon beams shining through the cracks in the blinds. There was just enough to see.

I thought back to a conversation I had had with Charlie earlier that week.

“There’s a way to travel to different worlds,” he said, “using only your mind.”

This came as a shock, as until that point, we had always used the portal. “How?” I asked.

But Charlie seemed reluctant to say. “You have to concentrate very hard on where you want to go. But it’s very difficult. Only the most skilled of travellers should even try it. Or else…”

“Else what?”

“Well,” he said, “some people have gone insane after their first attempt.”

Even though I was sure he had made this last part up, the thought alone was enough to give me shivers. But it wasn’t long before nervousness was overcome by impatience. I could do it. After all, I was Elly King. I had killed beasts and freed cities!

Don’t do it, a voice whispered in my head.

Why not? Charlie does it.

That’s different. He’s better at it than you are.

I’m good at it too.

Lies. You’ll freak out and I’ll have to deal with it. Use your head.

I’m sick of using my head all the time. I want to be spontaneous like other kids.

Spontaneity is for stupid people. People who make mistakes and get into trouble. Is that who you want to be?

Maybe.

Lies!
Shut up!

I threw my pillow across the room, where it hit a picture on my bedside table and sent it crashing to the floor. Look what you’ve done now, I thought. Pulling the duvet tightly around me, I climbed out of bed and hobbled to the other side of the room where I knelt beside the picture. Two pieces of the frame had broken off, but luckily the glass cover was intact. It was decorated with penne pasta and smelt strongly of PVA glue. The photo was of the three of us. I was no more than two years old, wearing the ugliest dress you could find and a large hat to cover up the fact I had barely any hair.

I hopped back to bed, clutching the picture firmly under my duvet.

Clear your mind of anything, Charlie had told me. Concentrate on where you want to go. I closed my eyes and thought of the photo that was now nestled under my bedsheets. I pictured the oversized hat perched atop my hairless head, then my tartan dress and how it didn’t quite sit right on my toddler body. I thought about Dad and that fake smile he always does for photographs. I thought about you and your red lipstick and how your hair looked like brown waves. Take me there, I whispered.

I opened my eyes. My dotted blue walls and white ceiling had disappeared, giving way to endless black. The bed beneath me was now nowhere to be seen. Both the picture and my duvet had vanished into nothingness. I was falling through space.

There was a faint sound coming through the darkness. Sound can’t travel through space – I learned that at school – so I couldn’t explain the strange humming noise. The humming grew steadily louder, accompanied by a breeze which lightly danced along my skin. No air in space. I learnt that in year 4. Where was I? I could feel myself speeding up, drifting through the cosmos. Stars passed me by like droplets of glowing rain, falling into the void beneath my feet. Nebulae, in every possible direction, lightyears away from me and yet close enough to touch. They were painted across the sky in the richest shades of yellow, red, purple, a womb for new stars and the beginning of all life in the universe. Or star farts, depending on how much you believe Charlie.

Directly above my head, beyond the billions of falling lights, was a spiralling mass of light, hazy and beautiful. At its centre: perfect darkness. A worrying thought consumed me. I was going to collide head on with a black hole.

I tried my hardest to slow down, flapping my arms to change course, but it did nothing to halt my progress. I could feel my body begin to stretch as I got closer. Soon the darkness was all around me. The ring of colour surrounding it was now far, far below me as I descended further.
I was inside the monster.

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Everything was still. As still as death. I patted my body and legs to see that I was still in one piece. I had made it to the other side, but was floating in the vacuum with no hope of getting out. The humming started again, though much closer now.

I was starting to feel cold and wishing that I’d wrapped up a little warmer for my trip to a black hole when I noticed something strange. A tiny ball of light, no larger than mouse, had formed in front of me. But it wasn’t like the other balls of light. This one was different. It was speaking to me, though I couldn’t quite make out what it was saying.

“Hello,” I said. It hummed. “My name is Elly.” Once again, the orb responded and begun expanding, quickly engulfing me in its light until I was blinded and could see nothing but white in every direction.

A hard surface had materialised beneath my feet. I looked around, expecting and wishing to be back in my bedroom. The room I found myself in was very different. I knew it well, though not from memory. In every corner there were large lights suspended on metal poles. Hanging from the ceiling was a curtain like a clear blue sky, with three stools placed on the floor in front of it. But the most peculiar feature was the colour of the studio walls – a sickly shade of yellow. Upon a closer inspection, I saw that it wasn’t from paint, but rather penne pasta, looping about the room.

Behind me, a door opened and I heard the *dick-dack* of shoes that followed. “Nice to meet you!” someone said. But to my surprise, the words had come from my own mouth. “Please take a seat over here.” I could feel myself saying the words.

They did as I asked, each taking a seat on one of the stools. There were three of them: mum, dad, and a squirming toddler wearing an ugly tartan dress and a large black hat.

“I hope the hat is okay. She hasn’t got much hair under there.” The woman had a familiar laugh. Somehow, against all odds, I had achieved what most could only dream of. I had transported my mind to another world – another time. Charlie was wrong to doubt me. I was a prodigy.

“Smile,” the photographer said.

Everyone did as I said. Even Dad, whom I could barely remember smiling. But he looked happy here, surrounded by his family and endless rows of penne pasta wallpaper.
I started moving about the room, searching for the best angle, when I heard a noise like the beating of a drum. It sounded three times, then stopped. I looked up from my camera to see you, Dad and infant Elly stomping furiously on the floor.

“Everything okay?”

The drumming continued, always in sets of threes.

“Mrs King,” the photographer said, “what are you doing?” Still, there was no reply. All three of you looked directly into the studio lights, your faces illuminated to the point where I could no longer bear to look without hurting my eyes. I looked back down at my camera, flicking through the photos quickly. Meanwhile, the drum beat continued blaring. I scanned the images as they moved across the screen, but I didn’t recognise anyone in the photos. Where you, Dad and infant Elly had once stood, three identical figures had since taken their place. The figures were tall, at least six feet high, and clad in the same black clothes from head to toe, their faces hidden beneath hoods. Even little Elly, had joined her parents in pointing their fingers directly at me.

The drumming grew louder, drowning out any whimpers of fear that escaped the mouth of the photographer.

“Elly!” they shouted. “Open the door!”

I closed my eyes and whispered the words to myself:

\[ \text{Take me home, take me home, take me home.} \]

I opened my eyes again. The hooded figures had vanished. I found myself lying on the floor of my bedroom, duvet sprawled out around me, a tangled mess of sweaty arms and legs.

“Elly!” said dad. “Elly, why aren’t you answering? Unlock the door. I need to tell you something.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I cried. “I’m not dressed.” Peeling myself away from the duvet, I made my way to the door and opened it. Dad was standing there with the phone.

“Mum has some good news for you.”
You arrived home looking beautiful. Your hair had fallen out and you had this perpetual look in your eyes that betrayed how tired you were. But you were beautiful, and you were home.
I remember the day everything started to change. I woke up feeling that something had changed, but in a minutely profound way, like someone who had started seeing another shade of yellow. But that one extra shade made the world look entirely different.

When you arrived home, the house became a brighter place. I had started seeing colours again. You were tired, but happy. Dad smiled a lot more often and I didn’t feel so guilty all the time.

You insisted on making breakfast. Your reasoning was that you didn’t want Dad making your first breakfast back home and burning everything in sight. Dad insisted otherwise, saying you ought to rest. But I had rarely seen an argument that didn’t end with you getting your way, so it wasn’t long before you began working on breakfast. In truth, I think you just wanted to pretend that nothing had changed. That everything could go back to the way it was.

“Elly’s made a friend,” you said, once everyone had sat down. “Charlie.”

Dad raised his eyebrows at me. “Is she in your year?”

“Charlie is a boy’s name, sweetheart,” you said, grinning ear to ear. “Elly has quite the crush.”

Dad’s expression became softer, having cottoned on to your evil plan. “Is he handsome?”

At this point, I had already stuffed my face with bacon and eggs, so was unable to formulate a reply. I mumbled unintelligibly, trying all I could to force words from my mouth.

“Oh, she hasn’t stopped going on about how cute he is! He even helps her with homework.”

“I guess we’d better meet this Charlie then,” Dad said. “You should invite him around for dinner one night.”

I swallowed. “He is just a friend! We go on adven.” I started, but had to catch my tongue before it spilled too much information. You would have laughed at me. Or told me to grow up. Luckily, it was already time to leave for school. After thanking you for breakfast, I made my way out of the door and just managed to catch the bus.

By the time I arrived at class, Miss Chapman had already started the morning register. I stumbled into the room and the class made tutting sounds, but I ignored them. Miss Chapman shot me a stern look and motioned to an empty seat at the front of the class.
Jake.
Yes, miss.
Sam.
Which Sam, miss?
Bishop.
Yes, miss.
Wilstron.
Miss.
Eleanor.
Yes, miss.
Charlie. No answer.
“He’s not in, miss.”
“Does anyone know where he is?” Miss Chapman asked. A few people shrugged their shoulders. She made a mark in her book and continued with the register. After that, no one cared any more. Students were late or absent all the time. No student ever bothered asking questions.

Later that morning during English class, there was a knock and someone popped their head through the door. “Sorry to disturb, um. Just needed to ask. Has anybody here seen Charlie Little this morning?” It was one of the ladies from admin. She was a small, balloon-shaped woman. She had unnaturally red hair and was wearing an alarmingly bright floral dress that was a few sizes smaller than she ideally needed. “His mother said he set off for school this morning but he wasn’t in registration.”

Her message was met with unified silence, apart from a half-hearted snigger from one student at the back who assumed Charlie had bunked off school. A few students looked around the room, as if he might have been hiding in plain sight. The English teacher, Mr Davis, pointed at the register on his desk. “Hasn’t turned up to my lesson, sorry,” he said.

“And none of you have seen him?” the woman continued. “Not around school this morning?” When no one responded, she thanked the room and quickly left, trying and failing to conceal the look of panic in her eyes.

Classes that morning went on as usual, without too much thought from the other students regarding the whereabouts of Charlie Little. A few people offered suggestions. Melanie made a comment that he had likely gone back home once his mother left for work, which made no sense to me, since Charlie was proud of his perfect attendance and wouldn’t
miss school without a good reason. Toby offered nothing useful at all and by the afternoon, everyone had appeared to lose interest entirely. Everyone apart from me. And I had an idea.

Once the bell had rung for lunch, I rushed up to the shed in the chaplain’s garden. As I approached the door, I heard something on the inside. Whatever it was, it sounded like it was crying. Or maybe laughing.

The door scraped along the ground as I opened it. There he was, in a heap on the floor, his head nestled between his knees.

“Charlie!” I said. “What the hell are you doing? Everyone’s been looking for you!”

He mouthed words but nothing came out. I closed the shed door and sat beside him. Ten minutes passed as Charlie’s crying started to die down into the occasional sniffle. I was relieved, as not only could we finally talk, but I learned that day that Charlie is a very ugly crier. I’ve found that it’s hard to comfort someone when they’ve got snot dripping from their nose.

He lifted his head and stared at the floor. “My parents are getting divorced. And it’s all my fault.”

“Slow down. What happened?”

“Dad stormed out last night and stayed over at a friend’s house. But he never came home this morning. Mum told me it was nothing to worry about. But I’ve never seen him this angry. And I’ve never seen my mum cry. Before he left, he was throwing stuff in the kitchen and swearing. He called her a whore for what she did.” His head sunk back into his knees. “Mum said I didn’t have to go to school today if I didn’t want to. Said she’d phone in and explain it was a personal matter. But I didn’t want to be at home. I don’t want to go home ever again.”

“Do you really mean that?” I asked.

“No. I don’t know. I don’t think I want to be anywhere right now.” Charlie sighed. “Sorry. You’ve got things worse than me. At least my parents will both be alive.” His expression changed from helpless to worried in a split-second. But I just shook my head and told him not to worry. For once, the problem wasn’t mine. And I was fine with that.

He started crying again, so I waited. “Did they say they were getting a divorce?”

“No. But they are. They don’t love each other anymore. They say it, but that doesn’t always mean they do. You know? People lie about how they feel. They lie and it hurts.”

In a way, he was right. People lie. Everyone does. Probably because they’re scared of what will happen if they open up. They worry that telling the truth will eat them alive.
“Charlie, I want to show you something.” I reached into my backpack and pulled out the SpongeBob pencil case. “You wanted to know what was inside this.”

He sniffled. “A photo of your mum, right?”

I unzipped the case and pulled out its contents. Dozens of napkins spilled onto my lap, each with a handwritten message scribbled in messy letters. “I was embarrassed to show you because I thought you would make fun of me.”

Charlie examined one of the napkins closely. “What’s ‘Little Cub’?”

“It’s a nickname my mum gave me.” Charlie looked bewildered. “When I was really young, about four or five, we went to the Chester zoo. Just the two of us. We found this one enclosure which had a single jaguar in it. The zookeeper told us there used to be two, a mother and a daughter. But the daughter had died after just a few months. My mum says that I stuck my face up to the glass and blew raspberries at it. It came running over to me. Everyone was worried, even though we were safe. But the leopard just watched me intently. Then it rolled on the ground, feet in the air, pounding on the glass.”

“She liked you.”

“My mother likes to think that the leopard wanted to adopt me,” I said. “The zookeeper made a joke that I was little cub. And the name sort of stuck.”

Charlie and I sat together for a few minutes, with only the occasional sniffle. After a while, he stood up. “Oh god, my mum is going to be worried sick. I need to tell everyone.” He opened the shed door and ran back through the garden. I was beginning to place the napkins safely back inside my pencil case when he poked his head around the door. “Thanks, by the way,” he said, before disappearing once more.
The school chaplain once asked me if I believed in God. I said yes. I figured it was easier than explaining the truth, which was that I didn’t know what I believed. I wanted to, but the more real the world became, the harder it was to trust in something I couldn’t see. I could swallow stories about portals and dwarf lords and forests made of galaxies, but I struggled to wrap my head around this all-powerful being that governed everything. So, I lied.

I lied a lot because the truth had a habit of getting people into trouble.

I mostly lied about things that didn’t matter. Things that made no sense to lie about and that, if anything, made the situation worse.

I would tell everyone that I knew how to read an analogue clock, when I couldn’t and still can’t. Even now I refuse to wear a watch in case someone asks me for the time.

I told Charlie that my favourite flavour of crisps is prawn cocktail, even though I hate prawn cocktail. Occasionally he would bring two packets to the shed for us to have, and I would eat mine because I couldn’t bring myself to tell him how much I hated prawn cocktail. Which was stupid, because I know he wouldn’t have cared.

I lied to Sam Wilstrop when I said I’d kissed a boy in year 7.

I lied to several teachers about the reason why I was regularly late to lunchtime registration. I told them I was helping out the librarian, rather than admitting that I had been smoking cigarettes in the school carpark.

I lied to the chaplain about my name because I was scared he would tell someone that I had been breaking school rules and visiting the garden.

I lied to Charlie about not being scared more times that I’d care to admit.

I lied to myself. But over time, I began to believe those ones.

Sometimes I lied about things that made me feel terrible. So terrible that I refused to talk about it for five years. I remember it perfectly. You were lying in bed, needles in your arm and a plastic tube hugging your naked head. And you said you loved me and would wait to see me again in the heaven I struggled to believe in. But I didn’t say anything back. Not a single I love you, or please don’t go. I just stood there, staring at you with an expression that couldn’t choose between anger or sadness.

Until your heart finally stopped.

I said nothing. And that was the biggest lie of all.
The girl had been sitting under the tree for a couple hours now, as she had done almost every month for years. Beneath it was a plaque.

_Lucy King – Mother, wife, superhero (1964 – 2010)_

Her school uniform was scuffed and muddied where it had touched the ground. But she didn’t mind. Nothing mattered in that place.

A butterfly hovered above for a few seconds before landing on the ground mere inches from the girl’s hand. It was brown with streaks of red running along its delicate body.

“Hi, mum,” the girl said, smiling as it flexed its wings. Part of her felt a bit silly saying hello to a bug, but another part felt like it was right. Her logical self knew it wasn’t really her mother. But she was done with being logical.

“I think you’d really like it here,” she said. “It’s peaceful. People respect it, even kids.”

There was a long silence as the girl waited, as if expecting a response, from the tree, the plaque. The bug. “I’ve been writing again. It’s been a while. But I wanted to get it done.” She didn’t say anything more after that point apart from “happy birthday” as she got up to leave.

The next day, the girl got the bus to school. She replied _yes, miss_ when her name was called out in registration. She went out for a smoke during her free period. That lunchtime, she didn’t get the cottage pie like she normally would. Instead, she ordered the macaroni and cheese. She sat down at the same place she always had. On her own by the door. She picked at the macaroni.

The canteen was bustling, as loud as ever, dozens of energetic conversations, each one vying to be the most dramatic. Most were about other people, relationships, holidays that some of them were planning. None of it interested the girl, so she stood up and made her way out the door.

There wasn’t long left of lunch. Just ten minutes. With no purpose, she wandered wherever she could think, letting her feet carry her around the school grounds and eventually up carrying her up to the gardens. She knew she wasn’t allowed in, but she had managed it before without getting caught. Making sure no one saw her, she ran across the grass, through the broken branches and tangled weeds, through hedges long overgrown and roots that
knotted along the path. Eventually she found a shed, tucked away amongst brambles and ivy, hidden from prying eyes.

*Keep Out* was carved in mossy letters above the door. She took no notice and proceeded to work the door open. It gave way with little resistance, revealing a room full of scattered tools and half dead plants. And a boy, no older than her, sitting by himself on the muddy floor.

“Hi, Charlie.”
Exploring the Use of Fantasy
and Coping Mechanisms in *Good Grief*

By
Aaron Haviland

INTRODUCTION

*Good Grief* is a novel extract which follows twelve-year-old protagonist Elly King as she tries to deal with the news of her mother Lucy’s terminal illness. Fearing the idea of a future without her mother, Elly looks for a distraction in the form of fellow student Charlie Little. Her fears lead her even further from reality when Charlie introduces her to a portal on the school grounds, which they use to travel to alternate worlds and to leave the real world behind. Whilst the events of the story take place when Elly is twelve, she is narrating *Good Grief* retrospectively as an eighteen-year-old, reflecting on the way she handled her mother’s eventual death.

In the narrative, fantasy and grief are intrinsically linked, since Elly’s emotional development hints at Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief. This model outlines the five stages experienced by those going through bereavement: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (1969). The model can also be applied to anticipatory grief, which is the phenomenon in which someone experiences symptoms of grief before an expected death: “once death is on the horizon, even as a possibility, it is natural that we begin to grieve” (What’s Your Grief, n.d., pp. 1.) This provided the theoretical backbone of *Good Grief*. Linking with this is the concept of coping mechanisms, which in this story plays an important part in Elly’s journey of bereavement.

The primary source of inspiration for *Good Grief* came from the two years I spent volunteering as a Samaritan. I regularly spoke to people who suffered personal tragedies, such as family deaths, which affected them even years later. The common denominator for the stories was the mention of coping mechanisms, such as music or other creative outlets.

McKee states, “you want the world to leave your story convinced that yours is a truthful metaphor for life” (2014). Long before I first developed ideas for *Good Grief*, I wanted to write something that I was passionate about and that reflected my own views. I
believe that the themes of a story can often leave the most lasting impression on the reader. For example, in the *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (Rowling, 1997), the reader, beyond the plot itself, is left with underlying messages of love and the importance of family, since these are often used to overcome the story’s primary antagonisms. With this, I set out to write something which reflected my own views, whilst also providing a unique and interesting story. In summary, I aimed to explore:

- ideas of loss of innocence and the way grief affects young children;
- how fantasy can be used as a coping mechanism for grief;

This essay will discuss the way I have portrayed grief and the stylistic choices that aided the portrayal. I will be referencing examples of existing literature to contextualise my analysis of *Good Grief*, namely *A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2011) and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (Porter, 2015). I used these in my research because I wanted to gain an understanding of the way themes in *Good Grief*, such as loss of innocence, are dealt with by other writers. For academic research, I focused mainly on *Real Life Issues: Self-Harm* (Pilgrim, 2007) and *On Death and Dying* (Kubler-Ross, 1969). These were the core of my research into grief.

**1.0 DISCUSSING YOUNG ADULT FICTION**

Although I did not set out to write a Young Adult (YA) novel, *Good Grief* (GG) conforms to many YA novel characteristics, such as a teenage protagonist and a relative absence of adult influence. YA itself is not a genre, but rather a category, applying to a primary demographic of teenagers and young adults. It encompasses any genre within it, such as dystopian sci-fi *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and romance in *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green, 2012). GG is specifically a YA fantasy novel. This genre-flexibility means that it can be difficult defining YA fiction.

A universal trait of YA fiction is that the protagonists are either teenagers or young adults. Several YA novels present their characters’ young ages and subsequent coming-of-age as the story’s inciting incident, which McKee (2014) describes as a first major event that is “the primary cause for all that follows” (p. 181). *The Hunger Games* is set in the dystopian, futuristic country of Panem in which 24 children (ages 12-18) are chosen to compete against each other in a fight to the death. It begins as protagonist Katniss Everdeen’s younger sister Primrose is selected to compete, having since come of age, and leading Katniss to take her place: ““I volunteer!” I gasp. “I volunteer as tribute!”” (Collins, p.25). Primrose’s selection is
the inciting incident. Therefore, the characters’ ages are intrinsically linked to the storyline as a direct causality.

_The Book Thief_ (Zusak, 2005), a YA historical fiction novel set in Germany during WW2, is another example of when age plays a crucial role. Protagonist Liesel Meminger is 9-years-old at the start of the novel and witnesses the death of her father, brother and the Nazi-regime’s disregard for humanity. The backdrop of war and the reader’s pre-existing knowledge of the Holocaust is juxtaposed with Liesel’s naivety and limited understanding of the war’s brutality, highlighted in her attempt to recapture the innocence of her childhood through books:

“When Liesel came down she found the book sitting next to him… and curiosity got the better of her” (p. 288).

Liesel’s innocence is conveyed through her curiosity about books, suggesting a desire for escape. Therefore, her young age is crucial to the story as it shows the innocence of childhood and, in the context of WW2, emphasises the brutality of the time.

The target demographic for YA fiction, predominantly young adult themselves, will be likely to associate with characters who are similar in age. By taking the emphasis away from adult characters, the focus is shifted onto the younger protagonists as they overcome obstacles and gain their independence. In much of YA, including _The Hunger Games_ and in _Good Grief_, this lack of adult control can evoke a feeling of isolation. YA readers might empathise with this because it emulates their own experiences. Not only do YA characters face difficult situations, such as in _The Hunger Games_, but “underpinning their situation are the same problems faced by all teens”, such as self-confidence (Newman, 2010). The importance of the relationship between parent and child is evident in _GG_. Dunn (2006) states that adolescence is the time to “develop physical and emotional independence from our parents” (p. 85). It can therefore be detrimental when a parent dies because it goes “against all the rules” (p. 86) and challenges the child’s emotional development. I believe this epitomises the meaning of Young Adult in _GG_, because Elly’s emotional independence is challenged by the news of her mother’s illness.

### 1.1 PRIMARY INFLUENCES

During my research into existing literature, I chose not to focus solely on YA fiction, as I wanted to increase my scope of influences. My primary influences were _A Monster Calls_
Aaron Haviland  

(Ness, 2011) and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (Porter, 2015). Both deal with grief differently, but share a common element: the use of fantasy as a catalyst for emotional development.

*A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2011) is a YA fantasy novel which deals with the theme of grief. It was influential to *Good Grief* because both protagonists are similar in age (thirteen and twelve, respectively), and both incorporate elements of fantasy. The novel follows protagonist Conor O’Malley as he supports his mother through her cancer treatment, another link with *GG*. Despite outwardly appearing to cope, Conor struggles with the likelihood of her death and one night encounters a monster outside his bedroom. The monster helps Conor to express his repressed anger at not being able to save his mother from dying and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the emotional monsters within us all. Conor is forced to mature because of his experiences, dealing with themes of loss of innocence. Conor’s grandmother, upon seeing how he cleans up after dinner, comments:

“thirteen-year-old boys shouldn’t be wiping down counters without being asked first” (p. 59).

This alludes to the fact Conor’s mother is too ill to look after him and therefore he must take on extra responsibilities. His loss of innocence is further shown when he says that:

“if [my] mum had had a rough night, then [I] should have been there to help her” (p. 87)

In this second example, the reader might view Conor as a parental figure in the relationship, since it defies conventional expectations that someone of his age should be a carer. This loss of innocence is contradicted by his use of fantasy as a means of dealing with his distress:

“Open up, the monster said, its voice as clear as if the window wasn’t between them. *I want to talk to you.*” (Ness, 2011)

The monster is a physical manifestation of Conor’s imagination and represents the emotional turmoil he feels due to his mother’s illness. The fantasy highlights his immaturity and suggests to the reader that he is struggling with the idea of death. Tugendhat (2005) states “children need permission to express the anger they feel because it is frightening feeling this way” (p. 58). In *A Monster Calls*, this is experienced with the aid of Conor’s monster. An example is when it encourages him to cause damage his grandmother’s furniture, leading Conor to “tear
the whole thing down” (p. 137). Dunn (2006) suggests that these strong emotions are evidence of anxiety linked to losing a parent. He explains that, unlike adults who can have “time to prepare for the deaths of [their] parents”, young children may not have had time to contemplate the idea (p. 80-81).

Grief is the Thing with Feathers (Porter, 2015) explores the link between grief and fantasy. Unlike A Monster Calls and GG, the characters experience actual grieving rather than the anticipation of grief. It follows the story of protagonists Dad and Boys as they mourn the loss of their wife and mother, respectively, for years after her death. The story draws on the link with Ted Hughes’ Crow (1970), a sequence of poems that has connotations not just of death, but of resilience and hope. It is made explicit that Crow is a fantasy: Dad states he is “trying to entertain the notion of Crow a bit less since I read a book about psychotic delusions” (p. 68). Therefore, when Crow says “I won’t leave until you don’t need me anymore” (p. 7), it is presumed that the fantasy serves the specific function of helping Dad and Boys deal with their bereavement. It has been said by Roberts (n.d.), amongst other scholars, that Crow was Hughes’ way of dealing with the deaths of Assia Wevill and Sylvia Plath. Porter draws on this connection by giving the extra-literary character a voice in his novel, subsequently creating connotations of grief through the reader’s existing knowledge of Hughes’ work.

Porter deals with grief in a way that shows the characters’ isolation. Although both Dad and Boys share the fantasy of Crow as a means of dealing with their loss, the characters often experience Crow independently rather than together. Stylistically, this is achieved through the use of separate narrative viewpoints, allowing for each narrator to focus on their own emotions and actions:

“We pissed on the seat… We did these things to miss her, to keep wanting her.” (Porter, p. 49)

In this example, the narrator Boys reminisces about their own personal experiences of their mother, thus conveying a view of grief specific to that character. The action described here is distinctly rebellious, suggesting a caring relationship with their mother that was largely about caring for them. This foregrounds their emotional struggle surrounding her death as a case of loss of innocence. This contrasts with Dad’s narration, which instead chooses to focus on their marital relationship: “we will never fight again, our lovely, quick, template-ready arguments” (p. 20). This differentiates from Boys’ narration. By focusing individually
on the actions of each narrator, Porter isolates the characters from each other. This effect of isolation within their own narrative viewpoints helps to portray grief as a personal journey.

These texts share many parallels with *Good Grief*. Firstly, they show a reliance on fantasy as a means of escape, and explore its potential for emotional healing in times of bereavement. *A Monster Calls* in particular follows a similar pattern to *GG* in that both protagonists are initially reluctant to accept their fantasy, but eventually prefer it for the escape that it offers. However, *GG* takes this concept further by completely ignoring the truth. Whilst the protagonist in *A Monster Calls* uses their fantasy largely as a means of discussing death, Elly’s fantasy in *GG* seeks to distract her from reality entirely. This is illustrated by the characters’ use of “a portal to another dimension” (p. 21), thus in a sense, leaving their reality behind.

### 2.0 UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Lodge says that choosing the appropriate point of view “is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist can make” (1993, p. 26) because it changes the way a story is received and how we perceive character. In *Good Grief*, I chose to make Elly an unreliable narrator (UN). This is when a narrator’s account of events, either consciously or otherwise, is “distorted so that it departs from the ‘true’ understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author” (Baldick, 2015). UN is a common feature in literature and is utilised in multiple forms. The protagonist in *The Girl on the Train* (Hawkins, 2015) is an unreliable narrator because the character is drunk for much of the novel: “It’s Friday, so I don’t have to feel guilty about drinking on the train” (p. 7). The effect created is that reader is forced to question the protagonist’s narration due to potential inebriation and a resultant blurring of the true nature of events.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2004) is an example of an unreliable narrator. This first-person narrative follows the story of teenager Christopher Boone as he tries to unravel the mystery surrounding his neighbour’s murdered dog, Wellington, leading him to discover more about his own family. What makes the story stand out is the unique perspective of its protagonist. Christopher exhibits certain traits of Asperger’s Syndrome. The National Autistic Society (2016) lists facial expressions and tone of voice as elements of human interaction that people with Asperger’s struggle to grasp. This behaviour is reflected in Christopher’s narration. When referring to a piece of paper he was given to help understand the meaning of different human expressions, he says: “I kept the piece of paper in my pocket and took it out when I didn’t understand what someone was
saying” (p. 3), explaining it is often “difficult to decide” which emotion they are expressing. Thus, it becomes clearer to the reader when Christopher misinterprets certain information and create dramatic irony, where the reader is privy to information that Christopher is not.

An unreliable narrator can evoke certain feelings in the reader, such as worry for a character’s wellbeing. This is the case in A Curious Incident and is caused by the perception of the protagonist as autistic. Lodge (1993) states that UN can be an unintentional distortion of truth and can reveal character traits. By foregrounding Christopher’s autistic traits through use of UN, the reader might feel pity if it becomes the reason behind an issue, due to a misunderstanding of information (p. 155). In chapter 167, Christopher’s father confesses: “I killed Wellington” (p. 150), stating that he was letting go of “everything [he’d] been bottling up for years” (p. 152). Christopher’s response shows a misinterpretation of the situation:

“I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me.” (Haddon, p.152)

From the context, the reader infers that his father’s frustration was due to marriage failure. However, Christopher assumes that since his father had murdered the dog, then this made him capable of killing his own son. Since the reader is aware of Christopher’s struggles with reading social cues and would not make this jump, this shows his unreliability as a narrator. [tidy up] This is because he unknowingly provides a distorted view of the true nature of the story’s events, creating an underlying tension, as the reader sees Christopher come to the wrong conclusion and make poor decisions as a result.

Nünning (2015) points out that the use of an unreliable narrator can have an array of effects. It can “make [the reader] aware of personality traits of the speaker” (p. 13). In Curious Incident (Haddon, 2004), UN has the effect of highlighting the protagonist’s unique perspective as someone with potential Asperger’s Syndrome. Nünning explains that this type of UN can “evoke pity” for the character rather than question their moral compass (p. 13). This is the effect I hoped to create in Good Grief by encouraging the reader to empathise with Elly’s situation upon realising the reasons for her unreliability. As Lodge states, UN can show “the gap between appearance and reality, and [shows] how human beings distort or conceal the latter” (1993, p. 155). Elly shows a reliance on her fantasy, suggesting a preference for the world of her imagination, as it offers an escape from the reality in which her mother is dying.
Elly is an unreliable narrator because she makes it intentionally ambiguous as to whether her adventures are part of reality or fiction. This ambiguity stems from the fact her narration is inconsistent in the way it views these adventures:

“I closed my eyes again, letting go of any doubt that was lingering at the back of my mind, and began counting to ten in slow, voiceless breaths” (p. 25)

In this example, Elly shows a hesitation to believe Charlie’s stories about the portal. This is conveyed by her active attempt to resist her logical conclusions and “[let] go of any doubt”. However, Elly often gives the impression that her experiences through the portal are tangibly real. The line “panic was finally beginning to seep in” (p. 46) describes Elly’s feelings when confronted with a manticore in the City of Slaves’ gladiatorial pit. Despite her initial hesitation to believe, this appears to contradict this because it conveys actual a real sense of panic. If Elly accepted it as nothing more than fantasy, she would not report such a strong emotional reaction.

This transition from doubtfulness into strong belief conveys two key possibilities. Firstly, Elly’s suppression of her logical judgement shows that she actively chose to believe in the portal. This highlights her desire for escape into a fantasy world to deny her reality and emotional distress. Secondly, by narrating fantasy as if it were real, Elly blurs the line between the two and implies that she is no longer able to make the distinction. Nünning (2015) states that if a narrator is unreliable, the reader is compelled “to look for the causes of this unreliability” and presume a link to “some mental or social feature” (p. 52). In GG, the reader will notice Elly’s sudden preference for fantasy over reality, thus viewing her as an unreliable narrator. However, due to the cause for this preference being her mother’s illness, the reader will assume Elly to be emotionally traumatised by that reality. Therefore, UN might encourage empathy for the protagonist. *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (Porter, 2015) uses this technique to great effect. The protagonists Boy and Dad narrate the presence of Crow as if he were real: “Dad and Crow were fighting in the living room” (p. 40). This observation is stated as factual. The failure of the characters to acknowledge their fantasy, and their implied reliance on it when Crow states that they “need [him]” (p. 7), foregrounds their emotional distress in dealing with their bereavement. This makes them unreliable narrators and, like in *Good Grief*, “evokes pity” (Nünning, 2015) in the reader for the characters and encourages them to empathise with their situation.
Another factor contributing to Elly’s unreliability is the fact she is narrating retrospectively as an eighteen-year-old, six years after the events of the story. A retrospective narrator may be distant from themselves in the story. Booth (1983) states that “they may differ… temporally” (p. 156), providing the example of Great Expectations (Dickens, 1861), in which the protagonist Pip is narrating the events of his younger self. This time difference allows for a discrepancy between the personality of the older and younger versions. Another example in modern literature is Atonement (McEwan, 2001). Protagonist Briony Tallis is a retrospective narrator, reflecting on the time in her childhood when her actions led to a man being falsely convicted of having assaulted Briony’s sister. The narration reveals a discrepancy between the younger and older versions of the protagonist, as the latter is aware that the two were in fact engaging in sexual relations. After both her sister and the convicted-rapist die in WW2, Briony seeks to atone for her mistake by fabricating a happy ending in which they survive. Thus, her guilt leads her to provide an altered version of the truth, making Briony an unreliable narrator. This style of unreliability, achieved through a retrospective narrator, is what I hoped to emulate in Good Grief. Making Elly a retrospective narrator allows for the potential for her to reflect on her behaviour:

“you said you loved me and would wait to see me again in the heaven I struggled to believe in. But I didn’t say anything back” (p. 65)

This line, nearing the end of the novel, summarises Elly’s guilt at the way she behaved towards the news of her mother’s illness. She reflects on her actions and feels regret at having ignored her in her final months. This is reinforced by the line, “I said nothing. And that was the biggest lie of all” (p. 65), supporting this idea of guilt. This feature of UN will become more prominent in future chapters. Overall, the unreliable narrator provides a sense of detachment to the protagonist’s voice. The distance created by the retrospective narration helps to highlight certain aspects of their mental health by allowing the older narrator to comment on their younger self, suggesting a change in their attitude. In Good Grief, this change comes as Elly realises the mistake she made in denying her mother’s illness. This concept of denial is important in the discussion of grief.

3.0 DISCUSSING GRIEF

In this essay, the term ‘grief’ is not used in the conventional sense because the events in this excerpt take place whilst Elly’s mother is alive. Firstly, Elly is narrating retrospectively,
years after her mother’s death, and is therefore grieving. Secondly, I believe that people can exhibit traits of grief before a death has occurred. This section will explain the relevant theories relating to what is referred to as ‘anticipatory grief’ (Davenport, 2002), in which the expectation of death can cause symptoms of grief.

Anticipatory grief can occur in cases when a death is expected, such as by terminal illness. Wells (1988) discusses how people, especially young children, can experience anger and anguish “even before the parent dies” (p. 24). I sought to explore this idea in Good Grief by having Elly undergo the processes of grief as if already bereaved herself. Davenport uses her own experience of her mother dying to explain this phenomenon:

“My grief… came from recognizing that the vibrant and healthy woman who enjoyed living in so many ways… had already lost the ability to do those things” (2002, p. 123).

This shows how those surrounding someone with a terminal illness can experience grief long before their death, often prompted by changes in their physical environment. This can be through a change in the patient’s routine, personality and even their appearance. In A Monster Calls (Ness, 2011), the protagonist comments on how his mother has become more forgetful as a side-effect of her illness: “that’s a yew tree, you know” (p. 19). Referring to the tree in their garden, which we learn is secretly the story’s monster, Conor’s mother repeats this line throughout the narrative, supporting Conor’s suspicions that she is not improving, since her treatments “had carried on longer than they’d originally thought” (p. 89) and were not working. The same happens in GG, such as when Elly reminisces about the books her mother read before dying:

“You read… especially in the last few months. It was as if you were trying to make up for something” (p. 16)

Here Elly describes the changes in her mother’s behaviour, hypothesising that the increased reading was a sign of her desire to “squeeze what little life was left”. The proximity of this line with the claim that Lucy would “hate the dust” settling on the books since her death allows the reader to infer that her death was a swift transition. This provides a sense of detachment to Elly’s narration, because of how she reflects on Lucy’s actions, and gives the impression that she felt helpless to prevent her death.
Despite GG’s focus on anticipatory grief, I chose to research theories on post-death grief, as I believe the two share many parallels. One of the leading theories is Kübler-Ross’s ‘five stages of grief’ (1969) model, which proposes that those going through bereavement experience 5 distinct stages: 1) denial and isolation, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression and 5) acceptance. Although this model refers specifically to traditional rather than anticipatory grief, I found it useful to draw comparisons with GG and consider how it might apply to someone who is expecting bereavement. The two elements which I believe apply most to Elly are denial and bargaining, which I believe are used interchangeably in GG.

Denial in GG is the driving force behind Elly’s desire to escape. This is implied by the stylistic proximity of Elly learning of her mother’s illness with her finding the portal. When Elly states that she is “searching desperately for a way to distract [herself]” (p. 8), the reader can infer that this desire for a distraction, caused by the emotional distress surrounding her mother’s illness, manifests as a fixation with Charlie: “I let my eyes settle on him and my mind immediately lightened” (p. 9). Tugendhat (2005) states that children react in various ways to difficult emotions, being likely to “act out their distress rather than expressing it in words” (p. 59). She says that they may “cling” to certain people for fear of abandonment: “if they lost one person, why not another” (p. 60). This is exemplified by Elly’s infatuation with Charlie, both because he offers her an escape from her reality and because she hopes to make a connection for fear of abandonment.

Despite this analysis stating that Elly uses her fantasy as a way of escaping/denying the truth about her mother’s illness, it eventually develops into a tool for her to confront this fear. Upon her first encounter with the portal, Elly discovers a river made of glass, in which she sees the image of a hooded figure staring back at her:

“I tried to reach the surface but something was pulling me down, snaking around my arm.” (p. 27)

This is the first mention of the story’s principle antagonism. Later described as a faceless figure “clad in… black clothes from head to toe” (p. 59), this alludes to depictions of the Grim Reaper in popular culture, typically shown in a dark robe and holding a scythe. If the reader assumes that the hooded figure is Death, then given that Elly describes being dragged into the river and her effort to “return to safety”, this implies a reluctance, almost fear, at the prospect of accepting death. In A Monster Calls, the Monster plays a similar role. When it first visits Conor, he rejects the notion, stating that he is “too old for monsters” (p. 17). However, as his mother’s condition worsens, he accepts its help. The Monster states: “It is not what I want from you, Conor O’Malley, it said. It is what you want from me” (p. 48). This implies a greater purpose to the Monster. If it is part of Conor’s fantasy, we presume that the monster’s existence is
Conor’s way of dealing with his mother’s illness by helping himself to admit to his feelings. This leads him to express his anger by wrecking his grandmother’s house, encouraged by the Monster to “tear the whole thing down!” (p. 120). This demonstrates how Conor’s fantasy is a catalyst with which to work through his grief. Grief is the Thing with Feathers does this with ‘Crow’ (Porter, 2015). Alluding to Ted Hughes’ portrayal of Crow as a tool for mourning the death of his wife (Hughes, 1970), Porter uses Crow as a way for his characters to move on. ‘Dad’ narrates this to Crow: “You… told me to get back on it, find a lover, buck my ideas up, think of the boys” (p. 90) This shows the role Crow plays in the characters’ emotional growth and demonstrates the importance of fantasy by encouraging Dad to carry on.

The persistent reminders of death are prevalent in these stories and they act as a tool for emotional growth because they encourage the protagonists to confront the difficult emotions that they would rather suppress. In Good Grief, Elly develops a relationship with death as the story progresses:

“‘You killed her,” Charlie said. A horrible silence hung in the air as all seventeen pairs of eyes stared at the lifeless body of Helga, barbequing on the sizzling chains” (p. 41)

This example depicts a gory death, which creates a sense of irony because it appears to contradict her character’s motivation: to distract herself from the thought of death. Therefore, Elly’s murder of Helga suggests an underlying dissonance between fantasy and fiction by implying that her death is emotionally incomparable to the fear of losing her mother. I believe that this seeming contradiction should be treated as another step for Elly towards dealing with her deep-rooted psychological trauma surrounding the likelihood of her mother’s death.

### 3.1 COPING MECHANISMS

The use of fantasy in Good Grief can be viewed as a coping mechanism for Elly in dealing with the news of her mother’s illness. This phenomenon refers to a specific action by an individual which helps them to cope. Self-harm is an example of this, described by Pilgrim (2007) as “an expression of personal distress… by an individual who hurts him or herself” (p. 2). Another example is the use of fantasy, in which the person seeks to escape from reality through their imaginations. Dunn (2006) suggests that this act is common in times of grief, as sufferers feel the need to escape into an activity, that the “disruption… may lead us to feel that we need to ‘do’ something” (p. 48). Both types of coping mechanisms are
witnessed in *GG* and play a role in understanding how fantasy is linked with anticipatory grief.

Self-harm is mentioned subtly in *Good Grief*, due in part to its history as a secretive act, carried out “in a hidden way” (Pilgrim, 2007). People who self-harm often do to gain control of their emotions. Pilgrim calls it a “safety valve that stops them blowing up” (p. 2). Therefore, it may be used by someone when they feel helpless to control events around them, such as during anticipatory grief, and may provide an illusion of control. In *GG*, self-harm is implied when Elly stabs herself in the gladiatorial arena:

> “holding it firmly above my head, I plunged the diamond shard straight into my hand.” (p. 48)

This causes Elly to transform into a phoenix, which has connotations of being reborn from a weaker body. This suggests the control that Pilgrim discusses. However, she later reveals:

> “The deep cut in my hand made it impossible [to sleep], even after I had removed the splinters” (p. 50)

From this the reader can infer that the splinters are linked to the previous incident in the arena, implying that she caused damage in the real world: “[I threw] the shard away into the corner [of the shed]” (p. 49). Combining our understanding of self-harm and anticipatory grief, Elly likely feels helpless to prevent her mother’s death and thus wants to gain control. She does this by self-harming to make herself stronger, portrayed by her transformation into a phoenix “climbing from the ashes” (p. 48). I believe that this depiction of self-harm shows a desire for the protagonist to trade the complex, psychological pain of their anticipatory grief with a more manageable, tangible pain. This interpretation supports Pilgrim’s (2007) theory that self-harm is a “way of taking control” in their life. The irreversible fact of Lucy’s illness creates this feeling of helplessness in Elly’s life.

The decision to include the phenomenon of self-harm in *GG* was not made lightly. However, I felt it was important to include as a way of normalising the discussion, as it is still considered a taboo subject because it “goes against what we perceive to be instinctive
methods of survival” (Pilgrim, 2007, p. 2). This is what drove me to include it in my story, as I wished to have Good Grief reflect my own views on the increased awareness of mental health. One potential criticism for GG is that Elly is not seen to partake in self-harm more than the one time than is discussed here. It will become a more prominent feature in future chapters and therefore its sparsity should be considered the result of the novel being incomplete. However, I still find it to be a relevant point of discussion, as the mention of the phoenix is indication that self-harm will become more important in Elly’s coping strategy.

4.0 CONCLUSION

My initial aims for this essay were to explore ideas of loss of innocence surrounding grief in young children and to understand how fantasy can be used as a coping mechanism for grief. This was fuelled by my desire to write something that reflected my interest in grief and provided a unique insight for the reader in the way it affected young children. I wanted to show my protagonist navigate the world of anticipatory grief, through fantasy, in order to explore the way a child might cope with this difficult experience usually reserved for an older person of greater emotional maturity.

The way I approached this topic was greatly influenced by existing literature. A Monster Calls (Ness, 2011) and Grief is the Thing with Feathers (Porter, 2015) provided me with a great deal of inspiration, as they both looked at the link between grief and fantasy, showing how the protagonists’ imaginations can be used as an emotional ‘crutches’ in times of distress. In Good Grief, I expanded upon this idea by showing how fantasy can be used, not just as a catalyst for bereavement, but, initially as a means of escaping from one’s truth and denying reality. In A Monster Calls and Grief is the Thing with Feathers, the characters use their fantasies to explore and discuss the notion of death and its emotional impact. However, I wanted GG to show the prevalent role denial can play in the grieving process. I did this by having Elly avoid the discussion of her mother and instead to use her fantasy as a means of escape to other worlds. This is supported by theories of anticipatory grief, which suggest that someone expecting the death of a loved one can experience symptoms that mirror Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief (1969). Stage one of the model, denial and isolation, is a key element of Good Grief and provides a theoretical framework for the process of coming to terms with her mother’s inevitable death. I take this a step further by implying that Elly uses self-harm as a way of convincing herself that she is strong enough to save her mother, emphasising the emotional distress that she is experiencing at the thought of death. By having Elly narrate the events of the story
retrospectively as an adult, I show how damaging it can be for a child her age to experience a close-family death, since it took six years to reach a level of acceptance.

Overall, I aimed to explore the deep-rooted emotional damage that the death of a carer can have on a child. In my novel extract, the protagonist’s process of grief is depicted as complex and very personal to her character, since it is her own insecurities and fears that fuel her desire to escape the truth of her mother’s illness. I believe this demonstrates the unique ways in which human beings, particularly emotionally vulnerable children, deal with the reality of death.
Bibliography


