PART ONE

I thought I was weak because life frightened me. I thought the curses and cruelties of others was a genuine reflection of my own insignificant soul. Then I learned I stood among a small daring few who have the courage to call their dreams into aliveness. Those others threw their stones and the wounds they carved shaped me. The blood I shed became me. I was lost, defeated by life. And when, broken and beaten, I clawed my way back from that defeat, the victory was exemplary. And if no one knows it there are places that do. For we, the dreamers, we, so often called ridiculous, create the world and cast its measure. We are the unknown transformers of things, protected by fire, driven by love. Once I thought I was weak because life frightened me, down deep in a soul I thought so small. And life frightens me still. But as I stand beside you and the small daring few who have the courage to sustain their life as a dream, I know my soul is limitless.

There goes the child. There stands the man.

Gary Denton, Sociology Article, December 2020

Jude Hallogan, the beautiful boy with the knife in his hand, turned the corner and thundered along the high street.

A great screaming came across the sky as a raging storm raced to keep pace with Jude's angry march. But the storm, tearing up the skin of the grey London day, was nothing against the storm coursing through Jude's veins and threatening to erupt into his brittle heart at any second.

A large semi-circular burn sat around Jude's eye, his bottom lip split at the side. But the wounds knocked into the boy's face were nothing to the slices and cuts in his carved up, ripped to shreds, brutalised soul.

Passing an old iron fence, Jude turned the handle of the knife, dragging it along in a rattle of sickly noise. Eager for more sounds of chaos he turned the blade against the fence to make metal meet metal in an endless screech, horrifying as a devoured animal's dying scream.

The fence ended and a wall began. Jude jammed his hand hard against its rough unforgiving surface, letting the rows of tiny cement teeth carve great chunks out of his knuckles as he attempted to fight emotional agony with physical pain.

Further ahead in the high street a group of teenage girls, fresh out of their after-school street dance class, banded together practising their recently perfected routine, the energy and exuberance of youth alive in their eyes. Jude pushed passed them, knocking one of their number. The girls turned as one, gazelles at a waterhole, sensing a lion had charged. They threw shouts and insults Jude's way but he neither heard nor cared and continued his defiant march to nowhere.

On a low brick wall, outside a boarded-up graffiti covered shop front, Spike Mallory sat like a king among his minions. This boy-man was drain cleaner dangerous. His black face lit up by a stunning gold tooth set in the middle of his endless grin and a carved-out thunderbolt streak shaved through his hair. Spike lifted his head occasionally to ridicule any passing stranger then turned to receive dutiful laughter from the circle of friends surrounding him.

He caught Jude's approach from the edge of his eye and the mile-wide grin fell suddenly from his face.

Jude passed.

Spike sneered in Jude's direction, throwing some nonsensical insult his way like a drunk tossing an empty can in a half-hearted attempt to hit a rubbish bin.

Jude stopped with shocking abruptness, sniffing the insult out of the air like a shark sniffing the tiniest drop of blood out of an ocean of water, and, with equally shark-like alacrity turned, and he and Spike came face to face; all sinew and simmering rage.

Jude lifted the knife in his hand a little, showing it purposefully to Spike.

The gesture was all the invitation Spike needed and he pushed himself from the wall and flew to the front of the small group, pulling out his own knife and holding it in a mirror image of Jude's posture, his eyes hungry for the promise of violence to come.

Jude studied Spike, a teenage General at the front of his tiny army, without fear or concern. The intensity and growing menace between them seemed enough to make a nearby murder of crows screech and flap clumsily to the sky in a clatter of oily black wings.

The two boys pushed out their chests and defied each other, eyes locked and feet moving in small measured paces, wild jungle cats preparing themselves for the kill. Suddenly the standoff was broken as if a teacher had blown some starter whistle inside only their heads and they surged towards each other like express trains, their rising blades glinting in the stormy light.

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Rupert Ollerenshaw, Headmaster of St Edwards Secondary School stood behind his living room window watching the beginnings of the afternoon storm rattle against the cold glass. In the football field ahead of him a young black boy of about thirteen remained on the grass practising his football manoeuvres alone while his friends darted back to the safety of the clubhouse. As the boy danced about, raising his arms to the heavens, calling on the thunder, he became, in Rupert's eyes, a young African warrior performing a tribal rain dance on some great plain and a sadness ached within him that it was such a rare occurrence these days to catch a glimpse of the fearless innocence of youth.

A news item on the television imposed itself on Rupert's thoughts, stealing him from the moment. He turned to see images of an average suburban high street and the screaming headline:

TEENAGER STABBED

The newscaster's face carried a stony seriousness as he spoke, "…the boy, a pupil of St Edwards Secondary School, was involved in an altercation with a group of other youths. He was taken to St Andrew's Hospital and his condition is yet to be confirmed."

Rupert's wife rushed in from the kitchen with a gust of steam from boiling vegetables, the tea-towel in her hand flying to her face in fearful denial just as the telephone rang out like a warning.

Breathing in mental strength, Rupert gave his wife's forlorn face a wary glance and picked up the receiver, "Ollerenshaw".

Rupert's wife edged closer, her eyes fixing firmly on her husband's harrowed expression as she listened to his half of the conversation.

"Who was it?" Rupert asked.

Rupert nodded his head with great dignity and his wife knew, with a knowing that comes from thirty years of marriage, that he was fighting a war within himself to remain composed.

"Is he dead?" Rupert said calmly.

The headmaster listened and then finally closed his eyes.

Immediate tears shot to Rupert's wife's eyes. She let out a sharp gasp and rushed towards her husband, clenching his hand.

Chapter 1

Before…..

3 weeks earlier - beginning of that term

Seventeen-year-old Joseph Bentley took the dusty winding stairs to the top deck of the bus two at a time but couldn't catch up with the excitable pace of his younger stepbrother (also named Joseph) eleven-year-old Joseph 'Baby Joe' Bentley.

Joseph emerged at the top deck and his look of irritation soon changed to slick-nerve dread at the sight of Baby Joe settling eagerly into the seat behind Jude Hallogan.

Sensing the movement, Jude looked round and peered over the top of his sunglasses at Baby Joe, then further up the bus to Joseph, still frozen in the aisle. A cruel smile came to sit on his face. The smile became less cruel and more natural, open, honest and warm, just as Joseph felt himself roughly knocked from behind by another passenger.

Jude held his fist out in front of him, 'Alright my blud?'

Spike Mallory continued to push his way passed Joseph and smashed his own fist up against Jude's before slumping in the double seat opposite 'Wah gwan gangsta?'

Baby Joe looked at the two boys in front of him then back to Joseph, the eager excitement of his first day at school already knocked from his face. Reluctantly, Joseph took his seat beside Baby Joe and turned to stare out of the window, feeling the relentless smirking stares of Jude and Spike crawling across his face like insects.

Jude and Spike finally took their eyes from Joseph and turned them towards each other and smiled.

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"Come on Biscuit, you can do it"

A.J. Shah sat with his camera pressed up at the window of his father's corner shop, whispering words of encouragement as he willed on Moody Carlson, a homeless man and long term resident of the local area, who was teaching his small mongrel dog Biscuit to jump through an old hula hoop.

A.J. kept his camera pointed intently at Biscuit who only yapped excitedly and wagged his tail before trotting to the other side of the hoop to beg for the meagre treat his master had been encouraging him with.

"A.J. Get the door for the customer." Ashish Shah's voice broke the moment and A.J. jerked the camera away from his face.

"Sorry dad", A.J. opened the door and a middle-aged woman exited the shop without bothering to thank him for his courtesy. A.J. watched her continue down the street and shouted at the window "You're welcome!"

"A.J.!" Ashish's face turned uncharacteristically angry.

"Sorry dad".

Ashish shook the irritation quickly away and reached for a large striped paper bag. "It's tonight you're seeing Mr Papavasiliou?"

"Mondays, Wednesday and Thursdays."

Ashish pulled a large hardbound book out of the paper bag and showed it proudly to A.J.

"Daddy you didn't?"

Melody Taylor, A.J.'s best friend and St Edwards resident heart pounding beauty, came into the shop and bent over Ashish's shoulder to read the title of the book in his hands. "Modern Day Economics in the 21st Century." She lowered her tone and whispered to A.J. "Bet they're queuing in the streets for that one. "

A.J. elbowed Melody to be quiet and stood in front of his father. "Dad that book was two hundred pounds."

Ashish smiled off his son's concerns. "The set was two hundred pounds. This one was only a hundred and twenty five." A frown of deep thought came to him. "Maybe we should ask Mr Papavasiliou if we need volume 2 to go with this."

"*Dad.*"

Melody linked her arm into A.J.'s as a less than subtle hint she was ready to leave and the two walked like a bride and groom towards the door.

"Hey!" Ashish called after them like a disgruntled bridesmaid, "aren't you forgetting something?"

A.J. sighed with a heavy heart and reached back for the Economics book.

Ashish laughed. "I didn't think you saw Mr Papavasiliou on Fridays." He opened out his arms to his son. "I meant a hug."

A.J. stepped into his father's arms and for a second seemed reluctant to ever leave the safety of his embrace. Ashish slapped him affectionately on the backside, ushering him towards Melody

again. As A.J. opened the door for her, he turned back to see Ashish proudly studying the book and running his hand over its smooth surface. The sadness came back to A.J.'s young face and he turned and followed Melody out into the sunlight.

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Jude leant over the back of the bus seat studying the Josephs like a cartoon wolf studying two innocent piglets, all the while visualising them as a pair of steaming pork chops.

Joseph felt Jude's hot stare plastered on his face like heat from an electric lamp and for a fleeting moment wished he hadn't been quite so liberal in applying the dark line of eye makeup he had been smearing on his bottom lids since the school trip to France last term and his illicit liaison with a pouty lipped nineteen year old French girl who looked like she'd stepped right out of a virgin's wet dream. She had told him, in her creamy honey-licked voice, that they should try the style out on him, certain it would make him look like a *belle ange aux yeux* whatever that might be. *'What are you gay now Bentley?'* Jude had hollered at him from the other side of the classroom the first time he'd tried it himself. And his dusty archaic aunt Mary had questioned the same thing, with none of Jude's slack jawed bemusement, but a disturbed horror that sat quietly in her eyes and made his father shift uncomfortably in his seat. Only Shauna, his new stepmother, had come to his aid in quiet defiance, announcing loudly to his father, aunt Mary and the rest of the assembled Bentley clan that only a real man could carry the look off quite so elegantly. It was the first time his father had brought Shauna round to meet them all as well. They had looked at her, after she'd said it, like she'd just taken a shit on the couch. The new Mrs Bentley was perhaps the coolest woman that ever walked the earth. If there was an archetypal wicked stepmother, she was its antonym completely. It always made Joseph laugh whenever his late mother's ridiculous best friend made the token effort of coming round for her awkward stilted visits, looking disapprovingly at the contemporary new furniture Shauna had introduced to the house and raising her eyes as if to ask him *'Do you think if Elizabeth were alive she'd approve of this person?'* Approve! By crikey, she'd probably kick his father out of bed and make a quick conversion to bisexuality!

Joseph had kept the makeup going ever since and left his extended family to ponder whether he was in need of some form of therapy. *He could be a rebel in his own little way.* Screw Jude Hallogan and screw his aunt Mary. If a little bit of guy-liner made him gay, he thought as his mind drifted back to the furious wanks he'd enjoyed at the memory of the eyeful of French cleavage he'd been treated to as he '*looked down mon cheri'* upon her sultry command for the makeup's application, then hand over the spectrum ribbon – he'd wear the badge with pride.

Jude suddenly reached over and pulled the iPad out of Baby Joe's hands. Baby Joe let out a sudden gasp, forcing Joseph to turn away from the relative safety of the window and the private enjoyment of his thoughts and face Jude.

Making an exaggerated show of studying the iPad Jude read out the name on the label at the back. *"Baby Joe's iPad. Property of Joseph Bentley"*.

Joseph braced himself, knowing what was coming, as Jude turned purposefully towards him. "Baby Joe? That what daddy's calling you these days?"

Spike, Jude's sole audience member, smirked from the opposite seat.

Joseph spoke in his customary soft gentle tone, as if wanting no one on earth to ever hear the things he had to say. He nodded towards Baby Joe. "His name is Joseph too. He's my stepbrother. It's just a coincidence."

Jude grinned moronically. "Oh, is it now, for a second there I thought your old man was a fucktard as well as a . . . " Jude made a comic pretence of putting a finger up to his own lips and nodding down at Baby Joe. "Shush, well, we won't say what he is front of the younger".

Baby Joe looked up at Joseph's face for comfort and protection. Joseph felt the yearning stare coming from Baby Joe and it made him want to be smaller, to disappear, to shrivel up like a dead flower, to not be him, not there.

Jude had found one of the roots of his soul and his teeth were firmly fixed into it now. He exaggerated his show of manhandling the iPad and winked at Baby Joe. "You don't mind do you? See my old man can't afford to buy me no iPad."

Spike smirked again. "He can't afford to buy you no fucking milk."

Amy Roberts, a classmate who had previously been in the midst of constant chatter on her mobile phone leant up to chip in. "Spends the milk money on ganja that's why."

Having had a hopeless crush on Amy for years Spike laughed heartily at her interjection, regardless of the risk of offending his oldest friend.

The smug superiority cracked from Jude's face momentarily like a mask suddenly split in two. "What d'you say that for you stupid little slag?"

Amy gave him a smile that showed venom, raised a stiff middle finger defiantly his way and went effortlessly back to the flow of her phone conversation.

Jude glared at Amy a moment longer then turned back to the Josephs with a look that almost showed apology for the sudden interruption, but his eyes still burned from the unexpected humiliation, a humiliation which he would not allow a home in his heart, so quickly threw it to a new host recipient. "So," Jude held the iPad up at Baby Joe, "this for all the *special time* your new daddy spends with you while mummy's out getting her pussy waxed?"

Baby Joe had no idea what the strange new boy was talking about, but he knew deep down in the fresh young seeds of his soul that everything about it, every word, every syllable, and every look in his eye was wrong. As wrong as any wrong could possibly be. He ached to bury his face in Joseph's lap and go to sleep then wake up back at home with his mummy.

Jude turned his savage attention to Joseph "Bet all the fresh meat in the family's taking the heat off you Bentley. You must be gutted though. All you ever got as an *'it's our little secret'* keep quiet bribe was a place on the French trip."

Joseph looked at Jude, knowing his face was betraying him and turning vicious scarlet. Despite the small bubble of hell he now sat in, he searched Jude's dark blue eyes and, in a strangely surreal moment, couldn't escape finding them beautiful. An entwining mix of blues not found in nature, nameless blues, yet to be discovered blues, blues still to be added to the Dulux colour chart with some audacious moniker like 'Summer Night in Heaven' or 'Violently Aching Azure'. If Joseph Bentley hadn't feared Jude Hallogan as he did, he'd have wanted to immortalise him in a poem or two.

The bus came to a clunky stop and a mass rising and sudden exodus of school kids meant they were at the St Edwards bus stop. Jude clambered up, holding the iPad high aloft.

"You don't mind do you Baby Joe? I'll give it back at lunchtime."

Baby Joe watched powerlessly as his iPad was carried high up and out of his reach; a helium balloon escaping to the sky.

Spike got up and knocked Joseph's school bag off the seat. Like the second half of a long-term double act, Jude immediately took his cue and kicked the bag to the other end of the bus, knocking the scattering contents around the top deck with his feet while making a mocking pretence of an apology. "Oh Bentley, oh Jeez, sorry Bentley."

Joseph scrambled to his bag, desperately trying to retrieve his possessions, which were now rolling from side to side like items on a listing ship.

Spike and Jude flanked Baby Joe and ushered him towards and down the stairs.

"Come on Baby Joe, don't want to be late on your first day." Jude's words were carried away along with Baby Joe as Joseph desperately grabbed the last of his things. Clumsily carrying them in his arms, he turned for the stairs. From the deck below he could hear the doors hiss shut and could do nothing more than stare desperately through the window as the bus rattled away carrying him with it and breaking irrevocably the promise they had made to Shauna, that they would not leave each other's side until they were safely through the school gates.

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Jude pushed his sunglasses up his nose and sauntered off the bus like a film star arriving at a red-carpet premier knowing the cameras and eyes of the world were on him. He lifted Baby Joe's iPad and took a picture of Melody Taylor without her permission or approval. She and A.J. Shah scowled furiously at him. Jude's Hollywood smile only spread further across his face, unapologetic and unashamed at the small snapshot of her beauty he had just stolen for himself and, with Spike close at his side, as always, he headed towards the school doors to complete his grand arrival.

Baby Joe watched the bus that had imprisoned his stepbrother disappear into the distance. He remained by the bus stop, clinging to it and shivering in the late summer breeze like a spring lamb hovering by the carcass of its dead mother without a clue where to go or what to do.

He looked nervously around for someone to guide him. Someone to explain. To reassure. But the only *'someone'* there to answer the silent prayers of an eleven-year-old were the grey ghosts of St Edwards, they who'd lived through childhood's war, stretching back across the centuries.

They raised their voices and screamed to be heard above the wind, screamed for reasons too many to count. *'Go home! Go back to the womb. Little ship don't break your mooring. Stay curled up in your mother's insides. Resist the urge, and the voices outside demanding she 'push'. Don't let her push you too hard babykins. You'll come busting out and slip right through her blood slickered thighs. Out of the dark and into a crueller kind of light. Where the wolves are waiting, licking their teeth. Waiting for the day they can curl up beside you, call you their friend, then pummel your face with fat fists like kisses, and kindly apologise, with every root-torn, blood dripping tooth that wobbles and dies as you spit them to the stony ground. Don't wait around for flowers to grow from those seeds babykins, shrubs can't take root in the stony ground. Only more wolves will grow from those sprouts. You'll raise yourself an army. And they'll show you their rage in criminal ways. Growing up hungry, hungry for the gun. Turn away, babykins, don't look at them. Look only for the gingerbread crumbs we've dropped to show you the way.'*

Baby Joe felt his backbone crumbling under the sudden strain of his heart as all around him the various clans showed up in their packs; the cigarette smelling six formers, the stunning Sallys and the lowly Plane Janes, the hot pink cherry flavoured lip-gloss thirteen year olds, chattering out their giggle-fantasies, their hormone raging cousins, the beefcake 'all bone and bollocks' rugby players and the exchange students; eyes wide with their mysteries and wonder.

Don't worry babykins, someone will find you, broken children can spot each other across oceans. And if they don't spot you, don't panic, these wounds will scab over in time.

Finally, through the hordes of arriving pupils, the tall slender mixed-race girl and the sweet-faced boy beside her, noticed his distressed state and made their way towards him.

Melody bent down to the little boy standing alone by the bus stop to ask if he was okay. But before she managed to speak, he looked up into her soft gentle features and his face erupted in a torrent of tears.

As she led him by the hand to the hoary cinder block building, the grey ghosts of St Edwards' voices stilled. But even with his hand in the warm gentle clutch of a girl he didn't know, but sensed would protect him, he felt like a tree stripped bare by a bitingly cold November, and knew, somehow, in the hollows of his heart, that the haunting had just begun.

Chapter 2

"Oh give me a mother fucking god damn break!"

Mr Gregory Howard, the English teacher and, great man, *as he liked to think of himself*, rose defiantly to loom over Mr Ewan Trevelian, the Art teacher, and, free thinker, creative genius and spirit warrior, *as he liked to think of himself*.

Ewan leaned calmly back in his chair, taking great pleasure in the exacerbating state of hot temper his opinions were working his older colleague into. "So you're saying they were right to leave a dictator in power that long - to rule by force?"

"Ah, Ah, Ah," Mr Howard's repetitive bark was like a metal detector finding tin. "Back off lady! Back off lady! The '*threat'* of force - not force itself."

"With ideals like that it's a shame you weren't around at the time. You wouldn't have inspired rebellion within the empire now would you?"

Mr Stephen Taylor, the history teacher and Melody Taylor's father, frowned at his colleagues' continuing debate and turned to the I.T. and Sociology teacher, Mr Gary Denton, for explanation. "The Byzantine Empire? Constantine? Ottoman?"

Gary got up and smiled as he put Stephen out of his misery. "Inter-galactic. They're arguing about Star Wars again."

Gary was a young man of about thirty-two with a great gentleness about his eyes. He carried the rare mix of equal measures of sensitivity and strength. A strange sadness pervaded his aura; a face scrubbed with regret. A sadness and regret, which he alone understood, came from saying goodbye to the final days of his youth knowing the grand dreams and promises of his younger years had never come to fruition, and numb routine and sterile sense of the ordinary would be the thing that now filled his days.

Mr Howard banged his set of books into a straight pile on the desk and threw out one last snipe at Ewan. "Trying to have a laugh at my expense are you sonny?"

Ewan winked at Gary and Stephen "Mr Howard, if I wanted a laugh at your expense, I'd follow you into the mens' room and watch you take a piss."

Mr Howard opened his mouth to respond but was prevented from doing so by a knocking at the door.

Gary opened the door to see Melody and A.J. holding a young year nine boy by the hand, his face strewn with tears.

Melody spotted her father within the staff room. "Daddy."
Stephen looked at the tearful young lad then back to his daughter. "Darling, what's wrong?"
Over Melody's shoulder Gary saw the school back doors being pulled frantically open and Joseph Bentley hurry in, his eyes darting anxiously around the reception until they found Baby Joe holding Melody's hand.

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Jude Hallogan was comfortable in shadows.
Deep at the back of the boys' toilets behind the rough cement wall and the broken wooden board; this was where he liked it best. Here he was king of they who walk in darkness, they who are never quite sure where they belong. The only sounds in his muddy-gloom world were the low humming spin of Spike's laptop and the occasional click of its mouse as he downloaded the pictures containing Joseph from Baby Joe's iPad. The only light being the small rectangle of bluish white from the laptop's screen and the occasional glint from Spike's gold tooth every time he grinned with self-satisfaction at the task at hand. The only smells were the faint traces of stale piss and tapioca from last term's urine, splashed up the nearby tiles, and the canteen's leftovers still permeating through the neighbouring wall. Yes, this was where he liked it best. His kingdom of inky blackness, atop his throne of cardboard packaging, revelling in his knowledge that while he enjoyed his private palace the rest of the St Edwards student body where scurrying like mice to registration in their starched shirts, shiny shoes, bright ties and silly blouses.
"The chi-chi man got him a taste for nigga juice."
Jude's near meditative state was broken by the sudden statement and he looked up for explanation, still, even after all their years of friendship, finding himself lost in the miasma of Spike's language.
Spike responded by spinning round the laptop to show Jude how many pictures of Joseph he had found standing just beside or just behind Melody Taylor, staring shyly at her quiet beauty with an air of gentle longing.
The outer doors opened and Jude peered through a crack in the board to see Gary Denton come into the toilets with that idiot Bentley and his equally idiotic new little runt of a brother. Denton, like the pathetic prick life had tailored him to be, immediately wetted a cloth and dropped to his knees to wipe it over the runt's blotchy red face.
Jude mouthed silently to Spike "It's Denton." The two boys lifted their feet onto the packaging and pulled back further out of sight.

Baby Joe looked up from the teacher and over to Joseph who was leaning against the back wall.

"Am I going to be in trouble with your dad?"

Joseph smiled and shook his head. "Of course not."

"But he just bought me that iPad."

Gary interjected. "What's happened to your iPad?"

Baby Joe looked to the floor, his first Secondary School experiences already having instilled some primal sense into him that you never tell tales to a teacher, especially not on a boy like the one he'd sat behind on the bus.

Gary, in no way content to let it go, beleaguered the subject. "Did you lose it? Break it?" He glanced over at Joseph and his sheepish expression told Gary all he needed to know. He sighed heavily and turned back to Baby Joe. "I'll have it back for you by lunchtime."

Baby Joe suddenly blurted out the deeper issue that was still squeezing at his heart and his eyes sprouted fresh tears. "But why was he saying those things about him?"

Gary looked warily to Joseph just as A.J. bustled in saving him from having to explain. "Sir, I found his form, he's in Mr Trevelian's class."

"Ah," Gary got up, "you're in safe hands there."

Joseph leant away from the wall and turned to go.

"Actually A.J. would you mind taking him?" Gary asked.

A.J. nodded and held the door open for Baby Joe.

"I'll see you at lunchtime with your iPad." Gary called to Baby Joe as he and A.J. walked out of the toilets.

Baby Joe turned back and gave him a small smile of pathetic hope as the door closed behind him.

Jude leant forward in his darkness; eager to hear what is was the twat Denton was so eager to talk to the twat Bentley about.

"Everything okay Joseph?" Gary asked.

Joseph nodded.

Gary stepped towards him. "Anything going on at home?"

Joseph sighed, knowing Mr Denton to be a teacher of such strong compassion and genuine interest in his pupils that there was no option for him other than to be anything other than honest. "My dad's new wife's always moaning at him to be more open with his feelings - especially towards me. Last term, after we got back from the French trip, he gave me a kiss and cuddled me when I got off the coach. I think he only did it to make her happy, but everyone was there. Everyone saw."

"Is that when the problems with the websites started?"

Joseph nodded. "It was the same week he had to make Jude Hallogan's father redundant." Intense irritation shot like a dart to Jude's face. He looked quickly over at Spike with the immediate expectation his best friend, come brother, would be as incredulous as he was over the sheer injustice that he was about to be blamed wholesale for something that, as Spike well knew, he had actually had had no part in. And yet Spike's toothy grin was set into an even wider smirk and he looked in agony from having to fight the urge to belly laugh. Jude studied him coldly and for the first time in their many years of solidarity and '*to the death'* friendship, his fist burned to whack him one.

"What's happening with them now?" Gary asked.

Joseph looked at Gary with neither self-pity nor shame. "They think they can get the host site to remove 'Joseph Bentley is Gay' but they can't do anything about 'Reasons to Hate Joseph'. It's part of a cloned site."

Gary found himself without words as he looked at Joseph's calm face and he ached not to be a teacher, but to be brother, or a friend, to put his arms around the boy and tell him that this would all mean something one day. That the hatred and the hell he endured was carving his shape and his substance and he would wake up in his adult world thankful for all it had made him.

Joseph smiled awkwardly at Gary and turned for the door.

"Joseph," Gary said.

Joseph turned back to look at his teacher.

"I think you might just be the strongest boy at this school."

Gary's statement took Joseph by genuine surprise. "My father's always telling me I've got to learn to be tougher."

Gary shook his head. "It's the weak that are cruel. The Jude Hallogans and Spike Mallorys of this world are cruel. Gentleness you can only ever expect from the strong. And Jude Hallogan probably won't realise that till the day he turns thirty five, if he's not in prison that is, and, indeed, if he's managed to stay alive. And he'll look out the window of the supermarket where he stacks shelves for a living and the full horror of his life will finally hit him and he'll have to find the nearest corner to sit down in and cry."

Joseph looked silently up at Gary, wanting to hear the words all over again, wanting them to linger a while longer in the air between them, wanting them to wrap themselves around him, wanting to give Gary his genuine thanks and tell him that it was the first time anyone's words had made a difference. That the advice of his father *'just rise above it'* his grandparents *'there's always someone worse off than you'* his cousins *'why don't you just kick their arses up and down the street'* had

served only to pick the scabs off his wounds and coat him with an embarrassment and self-loathing far worse than any desired state his tormenters had managed to induce.
Gary's deep eyes looked at Joseph and he hated himself, wishing he could pull his stupid worthless words back from the air and spend an evening trying to come up with something clever, something human, something real. Something that would actually help the poor little sod, lay a balm on his wounded spirit.
Joseph gave Gary a further awkward shy smile and walked out.
Gary turned back to look at himself in the dirty mirror, rubbing a hand over his face, his first morning back at work already feeling like a thousand years.

When Jude was sure the bathroom door had shut on Gary's departure he gave Spike the nod and they spilled out of the darkness.
Spike angrily opened his laptop back up and began furiously accessing the back end of an internet site, oblivious to Jude's now zombie like state and the hurt in his eyes. "Punk arse pussy arse emo freak's a dead man. And Denton too."
Jude glanced over Spike's shoulder to see him opening up the site 'Reasons to Hate Joseph' and adding a new scrolling banner which screamed:
'I HOPE YOU CATCH AIDS OFF YOUR DAD'S PRICK AND DIE YOU FREAK.'
Jude looked sombrely up at Spike. "He'll know that's you. Or he'll think it's me."
"No long ting." Spike made his fingers into a pretend gun and pointed it in the mirror. "Like dat. Ghosts."
Jude shook his head, for once finding Spike's gangster act ridiculous rather than impressive.
Spike glared at him, "Alie?" and pulled open his jacket to show him the handle of a small gun protruding from his pocket.
Jude's eyes flew open in little boy shock. "Where did you get that?"
"My cousin's 9milly. Caddying for him while he's on a burglary beef."
A group of Year Eleven boys bustled in, chattering excitedly, whipping out their soldiers and taking aim on the tiles before the doors had even shut behind them.
Revelling in his friend's stunned gawp Spike pulled his jacket loosely over the gun and swaggered out of the toilets with the confidence of a young god.

Chapter 3

Headmaster Rupert Ollerenshaw stood majestically on centre stage eyeing his assembled students. "Teen spirit." The words seemed to be a statement and a question at the same time. "The immature pre-frontal cortex is the last region of the brain to fully develop. It may be responsible for an increased craving for speed, danger, rebellion and an indifference to planning and priorities. These traits can be harmful and destructive, but also make teens unconventional, creative and daring thinkers. The worlds of film, sport, music, would all be missing something were it not for the sheer force of teen spirit."

Rupert pushed his glasses further up his nose and peered out at the mass of faces before him, trying to pick one child out with his eyes. "Amy, Amy Roberts, where are you Amy? I've heard you exist."

Amy grimaced, knowing what was coming, and put her hand half-heartedly in the air.

"Ah" Rupert smiled, delighted. The projector screen behind him began playing footage of a young black man in dark glasses and a long leather coat rapping in a music video and looking the epitome of classy street cool. The school let out a communal gasp. "As many of you know Amy is cousin of Randall Roberts, also known as The Poet."

Amy slid down in her seat, embarrassed and awkward, as most of the school turned to leer at her.

"And" Rupert gave a dramatic pause "Mr Roberts has agreed to come and view the finals for the Scholarship Competition this term."

The communal gasp rose to a crescendo, led by Spike who jumped to his feet with a cry of "Pap pap! Bare sick!" and spun around to Amy. "Sistren! Sistren! I've gotta meet him."

"Settle down Mallory." Mr Howard barked form the side-line of teachers.

Oblivious, or ignoring Mr Howard's command, Spike continued to emphasize his point. "I've gotta meet him. Overstand?"

Amy only slid further down in her chair putting her hand over her eyes.

"Mallory!" Mr Howard barked louder.

An excitement was spreading through the hall as uncontainable as water and many children laughed and nudged and retold the news to their neighbour as though they hadn't been present to hear it from the Headmaster themselves. The neighbouring child in turn repeated it all over again to his until there was a whispering chatter sweeping through the school like a bush fire.

"Settle down all of you! Ungovernable little savages." The school eventually stilled at Mr Howard's final retort.

"Rap music. Yes. I think it's marvellous!" beamed Headmaster Ollerenshaw and he peered over the top of his glasses at Mr Howard. "I believe Eminem and Puff Daddy are the individuals to model ourselves on Mr Howard.

"Duly noted Headmaster." Mr Howard raised an obliging hand.

A bell rang from outside the hall, Headmaster Ollerenshaw nodded and the students rose and shuffled out, their low chatter of excitement rising to a crescendo again.

Gary weaved his way through the departing crowd, eager to catch up with Jude. "Hallogan". Jude continued to shuffle morosely out with the crowd.

Gary tried to keep the irritation in his voice to a minimum. "Hallogan." Finally, Gary realised Jude was intentionally ignoring him as he strolled away. "Hallogan!"

Jude turned to Gary and offered him his typical scowl.

"Know anything about a Year Nine boy missing his iPad?" Gary raised his eyebrows questioningly at Jude.

"No sir. Why would I know anything about that?"

Gary's temper was a rare commodity. He wasn't about to start wasting any of it on a human being as pointless as this wretched boy. "Alright Hallogan, don't get smart, just give me the iPad."

From the right Jude and Spike's so-called *friend*, but to be more accurate *stooge* Martin 'Asbo' Greene scampered towards them grinning from ear to ear and holding Baby Joe's iPad eagerly out for Gary's perusal.

He delivered the lines he'd been given by Jude and Spike with such a cheese grating lack of authenticity he sounded like a six-year-old hamming it up in his first school play. "Sir, sir, I found this outside. I think one of the new kids might have dropped it out of his pocket like."

Gary glared at Jude, who scowled defiantly back. Gary begrudgingly took the iPad out of Asbo's hand and looked at him. Asbo was a boy of paralyzing stupidity. He put a cuffed wrist, already stained with ink and food, even though he'd only been inside school less than hour, up to his mouth but was still unable to hold back a bubble of laughter.

Gary nodded reluctantly and sent Asbo, still sniggering, away. Expecting Jude to follow, he was surprised to find him still standing there, scowling at him with those intense dark blue eyes of his.

"Excuse me sir," Jude began in an unusually dramatic tone, "but I've a job application to make to the local supermarket. They're looking for someone to stack shelves. Wait a second. The full

horror of my life has just hit me. I need to go and find a corner somewhere so I can sit down and cry."

Sickly realisation crept across Gary's face.

Jude began walking backwards away from Gary, keeping his eyes intently on him as he went.

Gary took a small step forwards not quite sure whether to apologise, reprimand or explain.

"Hallogan."

Jude lifted his head a little and for a second his face seemed to show uncharacteristic pain. The untouchable can at times be touched, the unbreakable can break, if you truly smash them hard enough. "Was I born stained?" Jude asked Gary.

Knowing it was a question he had no answers for Gary could do nothing but stand and watch Jude as he finally turned his back on him and walked away.

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As the lunch bell rang beside him, Mr Howard put his diary down atop the set of lockers and pushed a box of science equipment into Joseph's arms. "Put this back in the store cupboard for me would you Bentley? There's a good chap."

Joseph, not the type to refuse a teacher, took the box but looked anxiously over at the boys' toilet doors.

"It'll only take a second. I've a meeting with the Headmaster." Mr Howard said.

Joseph nodded reluctantly and hurried off with the box.

Spike and Jude watched from their lockers as Joseph carried the box clumsily into the store cupboard leaving the door wide open behind him. The double act returned to form and, without needing to explain their malicious plan to each other, swooped on the door from either side. Jude pushing it shut, Spike pushing the bolt across.

The triumphant grin on Jude's face quickly dropped as Mr Denton walked by.

"Sociology's that way isn't' it Hallogan?" Mr Denton nodded to the end of the corridor behind Jude.

Jude tossed his eyes and began walking after Mr Denton, only turning back to mouth to Spike the words 'Let him out.'

Spike nodded and once his friend and the other pupils had vacated the reception area he reached for the bolt, only to be stopped by Mr Howard's booming voice; "What are you loitering around there for boy? There's nothing in there you can sell on eBay!"

Spike glared fiercely at Mr Howard and wished the fat prick knew just how easily he could pull out his shank and stick him like a pig. Take that stuck up white man's haughty sneer off his face once and for all. Spike found himself smiling at the sudden mental image of him wiping

Howard's blood off his blade on his school trousers, or perhaps on Howard's own pathetic pink and white striped cotton shirt – that would be the greater indignation. Then they could both sit together and watch every last fluid ounce of blood bubble out of the gash in his heart like it was a hole in a dyke's wall. The *'great man'* suddenly nothing but a *'great baby'* gawping up at Spike like a dumb open-mouthed trout, starving for oxygen in the choking world, staring a befuddled unblinking stare as he pissed his pompous pants and felt his whole life slip away.

Mr Howard's fury snapped at the grin on Mallory's face. "I said there's nothing in there you can sell on eBay!"

"It's always me isn't it?" Spike fired back.

"Invariably." Mr Howard agreed and grabbed his forgotten diary from the top of the lockers and walked away.

Spike watched him go, turned back to the door, reaching for the bolt.

He stopped. His brow furrowed in thought. He scratched the lightning bolt shaved into his hair and grinned maliciously at the locked door, turned and disappeared quickly down the corridor.

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"Not up to your usual standard Bentley." Joseph could just imagine the face and disapproving frown of an amalgam of his teachers should they see the haphazard way he had plonked the box of science equipment down on the shelf. And, in truth, they would have been right. Any other time Joseph would probably have lined the box up with military precision and, while he was there, rearranged it with its neighbours in order of size, or perhaps colour, maybe even subject if that felt more appropriate; Maths, English, Science, History (the big ones first). Then Geography, Psychology, Sociology, IT and Art (the industrialists and free thinkers mattered too). Woodwork, Metalwork (and anything else on Jude Hallogan's opted curriculum) he would have stuck last in the line and an inch, maybe two, further back than the rest – well he could be a rebel in his own little ways! Maybe his late mother's annoying best friend was right, perhaps he was the youngest sufferer of O.C.D. in the country.

This time however, he was governed by the burning pressure and aching need that came from a bladder full of urine and opted for the careless placement in order to dart frantically back to the boys' toilets to take target at the tiles.

He tried the handle and the door remained firmly shut.

Couldn't be.

He tried it again. The same.

No.

This was one of those moments you fight to wake up from, half knowing you're in a dream. Joseph stupidly shut his eyes tight and opened them again. *Crap*. This was no dream. Lapsing deeper into further acts of random stupidity he looked behind him, half expecting to find some wise old sage, or the Yoda to his Luke Skywalker, materialised and hovering there in a miasmic blue glow to give him mystical instruction on what to do now.

Joseph kicked the door in uncharacteristic temper, an unwise move as his bellyful of piss seemed to bounce within him and pound more furiously against his bladder walls.

"Please!" he called out to no one and pounded hard at the door with his knuckles, turning the handle madly.

A light sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt his breathing become more rapid and his chest become more compressed. Why hadn't his late mother's idiot best friend diagnosed his apparent claustrophobia the same day she diagnosed his O.C.D. She, along with every other person in his life was normally so quick and happy to point out every other single thing they found wrong with him.

Joseph was still knocking and pounding at the door, despite the drops of blood that were being left on its surface from his now splitting knuckles, when the clock on the wall beside him reached 1.32pm.