

# **THE AIRPLANE**

a novel by

***portersteve***

*(10k sampler)*

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All song lyrics quoted are by Paul Weller,  
except *David Watts*, by Ray Davies

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*Also by portersteve*

**SOCIAL WALLPAPER**

**FIREWORKS**

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## **FYI**

### **The Jam – All Mod Cons**

**Released November 1978, Polydor Records**

1. All Mod Cons
2. To Be Someone
3. Mr Clean
4. David Watts
5. English Rose
6. In The Crowd
7. Billy Hunt
8. It's Too Bad
9. Fly
10. The Place I Love
11. 'A' Bomb In Wardour Street
12. Down In The Tube Station At Midnight

**PART ONE**  
**A COMING-OF-AGE STORY?**  
**Narrated by John O’Clock**

**1**

**The Coffin**

**Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> August 1978**

There’s a boy in the wardrobe. He’s locked in. The wardrobe is led outside, on its back, on the patio. It’s a hot day. Mum is up the garden, way up there, gardening. She can’t hear him banging on the door. She can’t hear what he’s saying, either. He wants to be let out, but I’ve left it too long.

I’m stood here holding the key. He’s probably really hot in there and red and sweaty. And he’s going to punch me when I open up the door, and I don’t want him to punch me.

We were only playing vampires. I already had my turn. He opened the door and I sat up and did the voice, the accent, like off the film. I know it has to be night for vampires and not some hot summers day, but the wardrobe is a coffin and the house is the castle and whoever is the vampire wants blood, which turns into a chase and then we swap over. It’s a good game.

But this vampire actually really wants blood now. He stops banging and shouting for a minute. I crouch down- with the key aiming it at the lock but then I remember what he did to David

Watts when he wouldn't swap The Liverpool Badge and David Watts ended up with a punch in the face and *still* had to swap The Liverpool Badge.

“Come on John. I'm really hot, I'm dying in here.”

He has said the word: *death*. He's going to kill me. I don't say anything.

“Are you there, you idiot?”

He starts banging and shouting again. I drop the key and run inside, up the stairs quick and into the bathroom, the only room in the house with a lock. Melody isn't home, or she would be in here.

Out of the bathroom window I can see Mum coming down the garden. She's going to hear the banging and the shouting soon, but she won't think anything is up. Banging and shouting usually means a game. She gets closer. I watch her face. Any second now she'll make out one of the words coming out from the coffin-wardrobe. And these are not words that are allowed in the house. Or the garden. Even by Dad. Even when the lawnmower won't start. There it is. Her face has changed. She moves quickly until she is over the wardrobe. She picks up the key and opens the door. A very red boy gets out. Mum is talking to him, but she is like all the other grown-ups who don't know what the blank face means. She thinks her words are important enough to have attention, but his eyes are up to me, glimpsing out through the blurry glass that they put in bathrooms to stop you seeing nude bodies. He nods a bit, but this is nothing to do with her. He will just want her out of the way so he can get me. They both come inside. Now it's me that's trapped.

But I'm not coming out while he's still here. At least I can get a drink of water in this coffin. And there's a toilet.

I can hear the thud of the stairs even with my mouth at the gush of the tap.

What is he *doing* here, playing, anyway? He's not one of my usual friends. He's not like David Watts. Normally Michael Sinking wouldn't even look at me unless he needed to walk where I was standing. Then he just shoves people out of the way. I said *yes* because I was too scared to say *no*. He asked lots of other kids as well as me, so there was nothing to worry about. That was weeks ago, before we broke up. Then today, he just turns up.

"John? You shouldn't have locked me in the wardrobe."

"John?" This is Mum, outside the door with him. "Open up love, I'll pour you boys a nice cold drink- with ice cubes and we'll all feel better, okay?"

I've just had a drink.

"Actually Mrs O'Clock, I've got to go. Thanks though."

"Oh, uh, all right Michael. It is Michael, isn't it?"

He'll have nodded: *yeah*.

"Well, it was nice to see you. I hope you can come round to play again?"

Michael laughs a really fake laugh. It's the same laugh he did when David Watts first said *no* to swapping The Liverpool Badge. Then he says: "Don't worry. I'll see John at school next week."

"They've gone so quickly, haven't they? The holidays."

"Yeah, they have. Anyway, better go."

“John?” This is Mum. “Can you come out and say goodbye to Michael?”

But Michael is already on the stairs, thumping down. “It’s okay. I’ll see him next week, at school. I’ll see him there, don’t worry.”

He’ll see me there. I know what that means. I feel sick in my stomach. It’s four days until we start back and that feeling isn’t going to go anywhere.

There is a moment of silence then he adds, laughing, “thanks for the tour.” This is meant for me, because he asked for a tour of the house before we played. We walked around and he looked in every room, like he was looking for something. It was a bit odd, but maybe that’s what they do, the kids from Abberd Way? And I was trying to be nice.

Anyway, I hear the door slam and he’s gone. It helps a bit, but Mum will turn now. She’ll be worried that Michael will report back to his parents and she’ll look bad. Maybe even get a phone call. But Michael Sinking won’t be reporting anything; he’ll be too busy planning how he’s going to get me back. He’ll see his fists on the end of his arms and get an idea. He can’t keep his hands in his pockets for ever, out of sight. If vampires are the undead, then Monday I’m going to be the *actually*-dead.

Mum is still outside the door. I unlock the door and she opens it before I can, yanking really hard. “What are you *doing*? Leaving Michael, that poor boy, out there locked in the wardrobe? What were you thinking?”

I wasn't thinking. I just didn't want to be punched like David Watts. "I dunno."

"He'll- well, what will his *mother* think? John!"

"Yes?"

"I'm talking to you."

"He won't tell his Mum. I know he won't."

She accepts this as true and makes her way downstairs, saying something about Melody as she goes, something critical. Melody is not flavour-of-the-month because of her bad moods and her lies.

**2**

**The Grave**

**Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1978**

Now that I am eight, I am allowed to cross the main road and get over the fields as long as I look both ways and listen and keep looking and listening as I cross. There is the squirrel in the advert. I get reminded about that. The camera was my birthday present and it takes a 126 film that comes in a cartridge. There are these massive tree stumps in the corner of one of the fields and I want to stand on one and get David Watts to take a photo of me with my gun firing. There might even be some smoke showing when we get them developed.

We reach the tree stumps and I climb on, posing with my gun. "My name is Duel-y," I say, meaning that I am the cowboy that does duels, like gunfights. But it comes out sounding like my name is *Julie*.

"What?" David Watts says, starting to laugh.

It's stupid to try again but I do, shouting, "my name is Duel-y! *Duel-y!*"



“Julie?” He has tears in his eyes from laughing, nearly falling off his stump.

“Duel-y.”

We take photos then we chase around, shooting the stinky caps from behind the tree stumps, laughing. That’s when I see them, in the distance, running towards us. We’re in the corner where the bog is, so there’s nowhere to run and anyway we can play here, this is our field. Then I see who it is and the fear is running through me like a sword. And cowboys don’t have swords. I look at David Watts who is shaking his head at me in tiny little shakes, mouthing the word: *no*. Because this is so terrible that he can’t even talk it out loud. I told David Watts about the vampire game.

It’s worse than it *just* being Michael Sinking though. He’s with a really big boy. The big boy is wearing punk clothes and is smoking, actually smoking. And though I’ve never actually seen him before in real life, I know exactly who he is. They walk up to us and stop, both of them laughing.

“Is this him?” Michael Sinking’s brother says.

Michael Sinking can hardly believe his luck, finding me out here. He nods, “Yeah, that’s him,” still laughing.

Michael Sinking getting me at school seems like a good thing, compared to this. With just me and David Watts and no one else around. And absolutely no adults at all.

“You should’ve let me out of that wardrobe when I said.”

“I’m sorry, Michael, please, I’m sorry.”

“What’s that he’s got?” This is Michael Sinking’s brother, pointing at me.

“What’s behind your back Cock?” Michael Sinking says this like he’s bored and insulted that I would even put something behind my back. I bring it round, the black Kodak, with flash. I’ve got no choice.

“Well, well.” Michael Sinking’s brother is grinning his face off. I feel really really sick but there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. I think for just a second that I wish my cap gun was real because no one would hear me kill them out here in the fields and David Watts wouldn’t say anything, after The Liverpool Badge and everything.

“I don’t think you’ve met Rob, my brother, ‘ave you Cock?”

“Why’s he Cock?” Rob Sinking asks. He isn’t laughing anymore. He has a deep voice. Almost an adult’s voice. His jacket is made of jeans and there are rows of studs pointing out of it, pointing at me and David Watts.

“His name’s O’Clock, so we call him *Cock* or *Oh Cock!*”

“Stupid name.”

“Yeah.”

“Hang on though,” Rob Sinking says, squinting his eyes suddenly, like *he’s* thinking something difficult. “Aren’t you the one with the sister?”

Lots of people have sisters. I shrug. I don’t get why we’re talking about Melody, all of a sudden.

“Yeah you are. I knew that name rang a bell.” He looks at Michael and winks. “Anything worth anything?”

“Yeah,” Michael Sinking says, tapping his nose. “I wrote it all down- jewellery- cameras.”

This is a shock because I have never actually seen Michael Sinking write anything down.

“Well done little bro, we’ll do that next week then.”

Michael Sinking nods, a big smile beaming.

Rob Sinking looks at me. “You better let me have a look at *that* camera, don't you think?”

Michael Sinking takes a step forward. David Watts takes a step back by the side of me, even though he hasn't even got a camera. Or a Liverpool Badge. But he won't be going anywhere. That bog is massive and probably like sinking sand.

Michael sticks his hand out, expecting me to fill it. “Give me the camera, Cock.” He nods, telling me that any delay now- any delay *at all*, will make things much much worse.

I hand him the camera, which he hands straight to his brother.

“Twenty one. Three left. Well-”

“What about on those tree stumps over there?” Michael points.

“No, no. Here is good, here is perfect. And-” Rob Sinking pauses. “Hang on, this could be even better. What have you been taking photos of Cock?”

The film's been in there a long time. I don't waste them because it's three weeks pocket money to get them developed down the chemists.

“Well?”

“*Well?*” Michael Sinking says as well, underlining.

“I don't know. Family. The cat. The garden.”

Rob Sinking sort of licks his lips. “Family?”

“Yeah.”

“You got any of your sister Melody on there?”

Melody again. Why is he talking about her? “I suppose there is, yeah.”

Rob Sinking laughs. “What about in her bra? You got any of her in her bra?”

Michael Sinking nods. “In her bra.”

“No, ‘course not.”

Rob Sinking repeats what I say in a baby voice, and then his face changes. “All right Michael, go on then.”

Michael steps forward, looking at me. “No point doing Watts again is there?”

“Do both, for starters.”

“All right.” Michael Sinking punches me in the face. Right on the nose. Pain blasts around and tears start from my eyes.

“And again, you’ve got to bleed it.”

So Michael Sinking punches my nose again, harder this time. My hands go up and when I look into them, they are covered in red. Michael Sinking is laughing.

So is Rob Sinking. “That’s it. And the other one.”

Michael Sinking thumps David Watts hard in the gut and David Watts folds in half and lets out a horrible noise.

“You’re getting good at this little bro. Right, how do you work this thing?”

Me and David Watts are both crying now. Crying for what has happened and the pain of it. Crying for what might still happen. Because this doesn't seem over.

Rob Sinking gets his thumb and winds the film forward. He points the camera, with his eye pressed up to the viewfinder and presses the button. The click sound that I usually love sounds nasty now. It's a click that says: *yes, you have caught that picture, like an animal in a trap.* But now, I feel like it's me that's the animal in the trap. It's me and David Watts that are captured.

I'm wiping away the snot and blood from my face. It's all over my tee shirt, which means everyone will know what has happened. David Watts is snivelling next to me.

"Trousers down boys."

Michael Sinking steps forward to me, clapping his right fist into his left palm. I'm sorry to say that I'm wailing now. Tears are streaming from my eyes, snot and blood and tears are all over my face.

"Last chance?" Michael says.

I nod, hands on my jeans button.

"Quickly then," says Rob Sinking.

I can see in the corner of my eye that David Watts has done the same. Our jeans are round our knees. Michael is laughing his head off. Then he starts doing a noise while putting his hand on and off lips quickly, just like the Indians.

"And the pants. Let's have them down as well."

Michael does a bit more of the Indian noise and a bit more of the fist in palm thing, to remind us of that. It's the worst feeling in

the world, pulling my pants down. I keep my hands over it, but I'm still out.

"Oh Cock!" says Michael Sinking.

"Or cocks," Rob Sinking corrects him. Rob Sinking puts the camera up to his eye. "It's not right though." He scratches his head. Michael Sinking looks confused because maybe his brother has changed his mind? A little bit of hope flashes in my head like this *is* going to be over now. But Michael Sinking's brother isn't talking about right and wrong in the way of doing bad things, he means it's not right as in the *photograph* won't be right.

"Make them go in the bog?" Michael suggests.

Rob Sinking is grinning. He likes the idea.

"It stinks," I say, which comes out sounding like I am *helping* them.

"Yeah, shove 'em in," Rob Sinking tells Michael.

"No," I say but the voice is a wimpy voice in between cries and sniffs of snot and blood and tears.

David Watts is first. Michael says something about The Liverpool Badge as he shoves him backwards, but football stickers don't matter now. Not out here. Not now. David Watts stumbles back, his hands and arms waving about, trying to regain his balance but he loses it and goes into the bog, on his back, crying and shrieking as he goes. Before I can think of what it's going to be like for me, Michael Sinking's hands are on my chest and I am falling back, waving my arms in the same way.

Rob Sinking can hardly hold the camera for laughing, but I hear the click sure enough. And this is worse than losing your soul.

*The Airplane by portersteve (10k sampler)*

The mud of the bog is warm on the top and then cool as it seeps up between my legs and past my neck to my ears. I can only watch as Rob Sinking does what he has to do to get the 126 cartridge out. He chucks the empty camera into the grass, the smoking gun.

“Come on Mike,” he says.

And they leave.

3

**The Judo Police**

**Friday 8<sup>th</sup> September 1978**

“He’s got to learn to stand up for himself!” Dad says, pointing at me, covered in mud and blood.

I did stand up, after I’d been pushed in the bog.

“Well, you going up the school isn’t going to help with that, is it?” Mum has no idea how right she is.

Dad shrugs.

I’ve had an idea, on the walk home. Now seems a good time. “I could do *judo*? David Watts does it.” Not that it had done David Watts any good at the bog or in saving his Liverpool Badge.

Dad nods. “What night do they do it on?”

“Friday. It’s up The Sports Centre.”

Dad nods more, as if this is becoming his idea, not mine, or Mum’s.

“That’s a good idea,” Mum says, making it definitely happening, looking at Dad, telling him with her look that it’s *his* idea and that yes, he can sort this mess out.

Next thing, I’m on the big green mat.



Mr Bassett who runs the judo clears his throat and welcomes all the new kids starting. He points out that we are all wearing white belts and that he knows we'd all like to be black belts. He gives the knot on the front of his belt a little rub. I lean forward and catch David's eye. He grins at me because everyone knows that everyone wants to be a black belt. It's good that Mr Bassett knows this too. He coughs a cough that is a look-at-me-I'm-still-talking cough.

"So next week, if you ask your Mum to dye them black, please feel free to come to judo wearing your *black belt*."

Lots of little chats start up at this. There are lots of smiles and nods. Mr Bassett watches us and grins. My mind is shouting all over the place. How can it be *that* easy? Is the belt actually what makes you good? The thoughts of years of practice and training become blurry. I could be a black belt *next week*! It's the colour that gives you the power. The secret is shared. But how come David Watts didn't tell me?

The kids with the yellow and orange and green belts are laughing and in the madness I can see that the kids with the little yellow lines sewn on are laughing too.

So it's a joke then, which explains Mr Bassett's grin.

"I'm not joking boys and girls. Please feel free to come next week wearing your black belts, only-" he grins again and seems to get a bit bigger, like a bear with less fur, "-only be sure that I will *throw* you like a black belt if you do!"

There is laughter but it's not all that funny because it means that my black belt has been snatched away and there must be

something in my face he doesn't like because Mr Bassett is looking at me and beckoning me to join him in the centre of the mat. I am being volunteered. Which is not the same as *volunteering* and is something adults often confuse. Mr Bassett didn't even play by the rules and *ask* for a volunteer. This would give everyone a chance to look away or at the floor, or even for some mad person to actually volunteer. My legs don't want to but they are moving. Mr Bassett is laughing. All the other kids are laughing. Nervous laughs, but they're still laughs. It's a laugh that says *it's not me*. Phew, *it's not me*. Like when a herd of animals gets chased and the lion gets one and the others are happy because it's not them. I look at the older boy with the green belt. His face is a knowing-what-is-about-to-happen face. The orange and yellow and whites with yellow lines are the same. David Watts is one of them and he has the face that says maybe he should have warned me. Maybe he's still a little bit angry about being pushed into the bog.

Mr Bassett asks my name and I tell him. My name is not that funny but he still says *pardon* and makes me say it louder so that it echoes around the hall. A nearby Badminton player grins at me as his friend walks to the back of the court to pick up a shuttlecock. I grin back automatically and wish I could control my face.

Mr Bassett grabs the front of my judo pyjamas with his massive bear hands.

I get a tiny whiff of his cologne as I am dragged past his chest, and then I'm going up there like a rocket like I weigh nothing at all, high up to the ceiling of the massive sports hall. And then I'm

falling to earth without a parachute and *wham* I hit the mat and I can't breathe and Mr Bassett is gripping the front of my judo pyjamas and I think I'm going up again but he lifts me onto my feet and I stand swaying by his side, gasping for air.

He lowers his voice, "all right, son?"

Then Michael Sinking and Jason Winterton walk in to the sports hall. The doors whoosh and echo. One of the Badminton player's shoes makes a massive high-pitched mouse-squeak. Michael Sinking and Jason Winterton are wearing judo pyjamas. Next they are on the mat saying sorry to Mr Bassett like they are the nicest most well-behaved boys in the world. Mr Bassett nods and smiles and they join the line of us without looking at me. I catch David's eye and he has a face that says: something that was once just his now has to be shared. Why did this have to happen? Because now whatever judo moves I learn, Michael Sinking will know as well.

Before we leave, Mr Bassett gets us all to line up and says that he has something very serious to say. It can't be worse than his broken collar bone poking through the skin story.

"Judo is a Martial Art," he begins.

Even with what has happened, it feels good to hear him say it. It's good to hear the words. So now it's totally true. I am doing Martial Arts.

Boys whisper their *yes's*.

He does his cough thing. "What you have learned today must only ever be used here, in the class. You must never, ever, do judo outside of here. Understand?"

There are nods and *umm*'s.

“And if I hear that anyone here *has* been doing judo- well-” he blows his cheeks out and looks up to the ceiling where I was for a while when I was a black belt. “Well, they will be *banned* from the class immediately. *Immediately*. Am I clear, boys? Clear?”

*Clear*, the group mumble, which sounds unclear, but we are all clear.

Mum hums to the radio in the front, which is good because she was really upset that someone broke into our house yesterday and took lots of her jewellery and a camera. Dad was really cross. The police came around because that is what happens if there is a robbery, just like on the telly. One of them winked at me and ruffled my hair and I think I would like to be in the police when I grow up.

The jewellery the robber stole did not count as treasure, because it wasn't real diamonds. It was from Mum's Mum, my Gran, who I don't remember but Melody does. The camera that got taken was Dad's. It had a long lens for taking photos of faraway things.

David Watts and me are walking to school heading up William Street towards the Tiches row of shops. We're talking about judo and what'll happen in the second and third lessons. David Watts has been going two months, so he knows. He even knows a couple of the Japanese words. He tells me about one of the proper throws he knows but I can't quite make sense of what bit goes where. David Watts isn't very good at saying how the throw works and it's probably best to let Mr Bassett show it, for me to copy. But then he says it again and I sort of get it, realising now that I have

to grip and twist the front of his shirt with my left hand, put my right arm around and sort of roll him up over my hip so that he tumbles over onto the ground. It's nothing like the going-into-space judo that Mr Bassett did on me, but it is something, just in case.

We cross over. Kids are flooding out from Titches. Most of the boys have packs of stickers in their hands, dreaming of getting the badges. Doing judo makes me feel like we're in a secret world of our own- a world of Martial Arts. David Watts is telling me that he can break-fall like a black belt now and that I should try the throw on him, slowly, so I know it. I grip the front of his shirt and very slowly follow the moves and David Watts tumbles slowly and safely onto the dry ground break-falling like an expert, just like he said, saying a bit more Japanese.

A few kids passing by clap and cheer a bit. Everyone loves a bit of Martial Arts, even the girls. David Watts is laughing as he goes over and laughing as I help him up and it's good because he hasn't laughed this much about anything since going backwards with his trousers down into the muddy bog. We're staring at each other's faces when the cheering and clapping around us stops a bit suddenly and I look away from David Watts to see them stood there: Sinking and Winterton, the judo police.

"What's all this then?" Michael Sinking has been watching the telly.

"Ello 'ello 'ello," says Jason Winterton, a bit too late. He's been wearing the *D* hat all week in the corner.

"It was nothing. David was just telling me about a throw that he did for his grading."

“Judo outside of judo,” Michael Sinking shrugs. The law is the law.

“But it wasn’t even a proper throw- it was in slow motion!”

“What about all them other kids?” He waves his arm about to show me them, gathered around, watching. “You’ve just *shown* them how to do judo- you gave them a judo lesson! That’s worse than proper judo fighting.”

“And,” this is Jason Winterton, “you taught them the words.”

Michael Sinking has everything he wants: us and a load of kids watching. And it’ll be like he is in the right because *yes* David Watts and me *did* do judo. And there are no teachers here, to break it up.

For a tiny second before the punching starts I wonder if there is a way I can do judo. Then the punching starts. When it is over Michael Sinking is in David’s bag. He has his football sticker album out and starts shredding it over the rubbish bin, making sure that everyone is looking, with us still on the ground.

And then-

And *then*-

With those pictures gone Michael Sinking reaches into his coat and starts showing everyone still gathered some *other pictures*. Anyone who gets anywhere near them is sent into hysterics of laughter, looking between me and David Watts, with our faces all covered in snot and blood and tears, just like in the photos.

4

**The Airplane**

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July 1980, 10am**

It should be warm because the sun says so, up there in the sky making everything bright, but the wind takes all the heat away up here on the downs. It's like the grass is the fur of a massive animal and an invisible giant is stroking it.

I'm ten years old, in *double figures*. But-

"They're for snack," Dad says, about the crisps. And the law is the law is the law. Just like all the other laws that get made. You can't do this now, but you can do it later. It's okay to do it here, but not there. The world keeps moving the goalposts so you have to be on your toes at all times even to have any hope of getting what you want.

Dad doesn't even look at me when he says *no* again and that I should *Stop Going On*. But there is something about going on that makes you get stuck in it, going round and round, going on and on.

The Airplane does another low swoop and Dad lets out a *phewee* sound because he's pleased with the bit of radio controlling that he's done, thumbs on sticks. It was a low swoop, but it wasn't a

dangerously low swoop. We shouldn't really be up here flying it in this wind, Dad had said.

Then I know what to do. Dad has his hands full with *The Airplane* on the big swoop out before the next *phewee*. The crisps are in his big coat pocket. So I grab.

"No!" Dad says, twisting around a bit. I didn't expect this. My hand stays on the crisps, which are still in his pocket.

"Dad!" I shout into the wind.

He bends his body sideways, trying to get his elbow over the pocket to block me. "I said they're for snack!"

I can feel the jagged point of his elbow pushing onto the top of my hand through his coat. But then- then-

He straightens up. He gives up. He gives in. I get the crisps. The first mouthful goes in and is unbelievable. Then the crisps don't actually taste that nice.

"Oh, no!" Dad says. My ears see the problem before my eyes do, because something is missing from this sound-picture. He's been working on it for weeks. Arranging the flimsy balsawood skeleton, laying the paper over for skin, just right. Painting and painting and varnishing it yellow and black with logos and labels.

His fingers are going mental at the control sticks, sending it come-back-please bits of whatever-it-is up through the aerial and up into the clouds. I follow the point of the aerial, up, up, up into nearly-space, where a tiny shape is flying away from us.

Then his motions slow, the thumbs, the absolute captains of radio-controlled flying have given up, knowing that *The Airplane* is beyond them.



The sick feeling of being in trouble takes on a whole new life of fairground whirling upside down horrors. Because the two most recent events in the world seem to have a bit of a friendship happening. They are not separate. They are linking. The crisps. The Airplane getting out of control. The jigsaw of what happened is not one for adults with thousands of pieces that will take weeks to do. It's a child's jigsaw, a baby's jigsaw. It's so simple. When I grabbed the crisps, Dad lost control of The Airplane. Dad lost control of the plane *because* I grabbed the crisps. Now the trouble I thought I'd be in because of the crisps by themselves seems like something that might be in a holiday brochure compared to the trouble I'm in over The Airplane going.

Dad hasn't even looked at me yet. He just stands still, watching the dot of The Airplane going away, away, away.

Then he springs into action. "Back to the car!" he says, and we turn and tramp up the downs, back to the car, not quite running but making every third or fourth step into a bound. The car gets opened and into and started and turned and we're back out on the road but not heading for home.

"I'm sorry," I say, because apart from the *back to the car* command, he hasn't said a word. His face is somewhere between terrified and angry. I've never seen this face on him before. Dad is a slow driver, but not today. We overtake one car and then another. "Dad, I'm sorry, I didn't mean-

"Stop talking."

"But, Dad-

"John. Stop talking, please. *Now.*"

I purse my lips together unless they try to speak by accident. I can taste Smokey Bacon crisps and it's the worst taste in the world.

We overtake a third car. Dad calls the driver coming towards us that beeps a *bloody idiot*.

"No!" Dad says loudly and suddenly so that I jump.

The traffic is suddenly heavy as we approach the village. Now we are stopped. We sit and wait for a bit, but the traffic doesn't move. I can hear a couple of people beeping their horns up ahead. But it's not us- it's not because of us now. We're not even moving.

Dad is shifting in his seat, like he has itches all over his body. We sit and he gets worse and worse, rubbing his face saying swearwords under his breath. He hates sitting in queues of cars I suppose, and it means that we won't catch The Airplane. He grips at his hair with his hands, and then lets go, grips at his hair with his hands and then lets go.

If *Dad* is scared, then *I* am scared. Adults- especially Mum and Dad are how I know that things are okay or not okay. Things are not okay.

Then there is a sound. A high-pitched sound. But it doesn't stay high-pitched. It rolls down-down-down before coming up-up-up again. Where's it coming from? There's a big electric baby crying, out there, somewhere. I crane around, looking and sensing. Dad isn't craning, but I know he's heard it. Whenever these sounds are in the air, whenever the blue lights that come with them happen, someone is having a bad time. They might be ill or on fire or doing a crime. But it's all about a bad time. That's what Mum said once.

That those lights and sounds are never about parties and holiday things.

Dad is looking really wild now. His hands are on the steering wheel. His eyes are open very wide. And he is saying: *no, no, no*, under his breath, as if by saying *no no no*, he might be able to stop something bad from happening. I feel stupid for a second as I realise: he's not trying to *stop* something bad from happening, because it's obviously already *happened*. The blue lights and sirens don't come out on the off-chance. They come because they are *called*. Which is *after* whatever has happened has happened.

We pull over as the sirens and lights go by, the sounds going blurred for a second, the blue dancing everywhere and all over the place. One ambulance, one police car. A little convoy of crazy. Convoy is a word I got from a film on the telly. There were lots of trucks and it was in America. But a convoy can be small, too. The man in the passenger seat of the police car looks at me as he drives past. He has a beard and his eyes are asking questions. My eyes are probably answering: *I don't know*, because I am just a kid and I don't know.

As soon as they're past, Dad indicates to say he's pulling out but then suddenly he lurches the car out into the middle of the road and pulls the gear-stick back into reverse. There are no cars coming the other way. I catch the eye of the driver behind us as we end up across-ways across the road. I see his look change from confused to knowing in a second. We're turning around. Nothing to worry about. Forward gear in a fist of white knuckles and we lurch forward again as Dad twists and twists the wheel. The front tyre on

my side goes up and over the low grassy bank and then we're speeding up, speeding away from the queue of cars, still stuck still.

I shift around and look at the back window. A couple of other cars are doing the same thing, shunting forward, reversing back, shunting forward again and free. The queue isn't moving.

"Dad?" I ask him again because there are now lots of gaps in what is happening. He still has the haunted-house seen-a-ghost look on his face, but it is mixed with the no-one-is-changing-his-mind face too.

Dad's eyes are on the road. We pass the downs and make it to the crest of the hill that will go down-down-down past the Cherhill White Horse on our left, past Cherhill itself on our right and into Quemerford and then Calne. We're driving very fast.

"Dad. Are we going home now?"

"Yes."

It's a relief to hear his voice. He doesn't sound angry anymore either, which is good, whatever else is going on. "What about The Airplane? I'm sorry about The Airplane. I'm sorry about the crisps." I can see him twitch a bit when I mention The Airplane and the crisps, but he doesn't become angry.

Dad speaks quietly and firmly. "John. Listen to me- stop crying. Stop crying and listen. We don't *know* that anything has happened. The police and the ambulance *might* have been going somewhere else for a different reason altogether- it's just-

I wait. His voice is tight-sounding, like when he is telling me something really important. He's making these tiny nods, probably getting his thoughts in order.

“Are you listening? Really listening to me?”

I nod.

“Okay. Right. This is what we’re going to do.”

## 5

### The Pyre

Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July 1980, 11am

Up the top of the garden, near the shed. We get it lit inside an old rusty incinerator drum. There is newspaper from the shed, matches.

I think he's gone a bit mad. "Dad?"

But there he is stuffing the fuselages into the flames, wings snapping off as he stuffs them in. The paper *whoofs* off and peels back revealing the balsawood that goes off in seconds. Then it's wings and tails and another fuselage.

"Dig a hole. Over there."

I push the spade into the dry earth and make a pile by the side of a small hole. Little landslides of dusty broken-up soil tumble back in so now I know I have to make the pile a little bit further away. The hole gets deeper and deeper. The blue sky has a hot sun in it and this is mad, mad, mad. He's destroying all his work, all his models! Because of the crisps. All because of me wanting those crisps.

Then he hands me the propellers, the radio controllers (aerials shrunk back to almost nothing) the tiny engines, one object at a time for me to place at the bottom of the hole. The spare

balsawood and paper sheets go in the drum. The paints and tools go in the hole.

A bit of me is shouting inside saying, or shouting, well why don't you burn the whole shed or the whole house? Because what is burning and burying the bits going to do? Hasn't he seen it on the telly? Of course he has! We've watched them together. What happens? There is a mystery. What happens? They solve it. And where the *criminals* try to hide it, well it just makes things worse, it just makes them seem more guilty. He must know this. And the ones that bury stuff at home- well that's the first place they'll look. And the neighbours will say *yes* they had a bonfire. And the traffic will say *yes* he did a mad turn around. And the walkers up the downs will say *yes* they had an airplane. And everyone else will say *yes* that's what he does, that's his hobby. He's in a model airplane CLUB.

It's the lie that needs the bigger lie that needs the bigger lie, over and over again.

"Dad?"

His face is red, from the moving around, from the heat of the fire, still burning, still burning. "Yeah?" His voice is breathy. His eyes are weird. It's like he doesn't know where he is.

"Dad. I'm telling Mum. No one else has to know. But we've got to tell Mum."

His head bows, blowing his cheeks out.

*But you know what she's like*, his bow says.

Yes, I know what she's like and there is no way in the world we can keep a secret like this from her. If she knows, it won't be as

bad. If the police come and she doesn't know, it'll be worse. And most importantly, she will know what to do. Dad thought he knew what to do, but actually he has just gone a bit mad. And his face says that he knows this.

“All right John, okay, you're right. You go inside, then. I'll be down in a minute.”

Dad said he would be down in a minute, but he didn't come down in a minute and he didn't come down in an hour, either. He was still up there when it was dark and Mum finally went up to talk to him. She came back without him and only said two words: *he's drunk*. I don't know what drunk is, exactly, but the people that are drunk on the telly are never having a very good time.



**6**

**The Swine**

**Monday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1980**

On Monday morning I walk through the classroom door I'm still wondering whether something *did* happen with The Airplane and whether any of the kids know about it, if it did.

David Watts looks up, grinning, as I join his group. David Watts grinning does not mean something bad has not happened. One smile does not get me off the hook.

"All right?"

David Watts is still grinning. "Yeah! Did you hear about it? Everyone's talking about it!"

My guts turn back the other way. A wave of sick. "What?"

David Watts turns back to the group of kids. "He doesn't know!"

They all seem very excited by this. Someone that doesn't know means that there is someone to *tell*. Another wave of sick. The worse it is the more excited they would get.

"Know *what*?"

"Really?" David Watts asks, his face can't believe it. "You *really* don't know?"

Nothing has really changed in the last five seconds. I still don't know for sure. Even though inside my head a voice is screaming:

They know  
they know  
they know!

Mum might have the power to take newspapers away and turn off the radio and telly, but she hasn't got anything like enough power to stop kids in schools talking. No one has that kind of power. Except maybe Mr Rodge.

When they say what it is they know- if it is *anything* to do with The Airplane- I'm going to go so red then they will know that it was all because of me. That I'm guilty.

David Watts takes a deep breath. "The Swine are back."

I've *heard* of The Swine. I've heard people talking. And it's nothing to do with The Airplane.

"So that's what everyone's-" I sweep my hand about to include everyone.

"Yeah! Of course. It's amazing!"

I haven't heard David Watts this excited since we got the news that we were *not* going to be in the same class as Michael Sinking this year. The price was being in Mr Rodges' class. Michael Sinking is still out there at playtime, but he picks on a lot of people, so he's really busy. Even though Michael Sinking is not in our class, Mr Rodge usually has a reason to hit him on most days. He finishes his coffee early. Comes out on to the playground on the off chance. Last week someone heard Michael Sinking tell Mr Rodge that his

brother didn't like Mr Rodge hitting him and so he'd better stop, like a threat. Mr Rodge actually *growled*, out loud, they said.

But *The Swine*?

"They were seen and heard on Saturday morning, running through Phelps Parade! In *broad daylight*. Hundreds and hundreds of them screaming and howling, running really fast." David Watts lowers his voice and everyone stands in closer. "My Dad says it's because of the statue they put up there, at the end—"

I picture the metal statue. Three or four pigs on a round brick base. The pigs in the statue are alive. Mum said they put it up to celebrate the Harris' factory, just closed down. Harris' factory made things out of pigs. Food, like bacon and sausages. I remember walking by it- the Harris' factory- and hearing the pigs in there making all these squealing noises. It was the noises that happened just before they got ready to be bacon and sausages.

"And the pigs want revenge!"

All the kids are nodding. Mr Rodge comes in and everyone sits down as quick as they can. A couple of kids have faces on like they don't have to hurry just because Mr Rodge has come in, but whatever their faces are showing, their feet are still carrying them to their desks just as fast.

The day begins and we copy stuff off these cards and then do a picture.

At playtime David Watts wants me to go with him on a hunt, he says.

"What for?"

He taps his nose. Makes me wait a few seconds. Then he tells me. "Smokey Bacon crisps!" He is holding a packet of Salt and Vinegar.

On Saturday it didn't seem possible that I could ever eat crisps again.

David Watts laughs. "Dad said you can *call* The Swine *using* Smokey Bacon crisps. You can make them appear!"

After the sticker album trouble a couple of years ago, David Watts' Dad started sending him to a Boxing Club in Chippenham down the road, where he punches the bag and pretends it's Michael Sinking's face. Punching the face of someone else is very important, David Watts' Dad has said, a few times, but not as part of any funny story he was telling.

There were no Boxing Police around when David punched Jason Winterton in the face, out of the blue, like a shock.

David Watts said afterwards that he thought that when Mr Rodge dealt out his punishment- it had all happened in full view- Mr Rodge had hit him slightly less hard as a *thank you* for David punching Jason Winterton in the face. When David Watts told me this he made he swear that I wouldn't tell anyone. I swore. No one wants to be known for spreading rumours about Mr Rodge going soft.

The wind blows, the sun is bright and there is shouting and running and madness. A sharp whistle goes but it's not the end, just a bit of local trouble. There is a moment of quiet as kids all stop to realise this. It's like when you're in the car and it's raining hard and you go under a bridge. On, off, back on...

We spot a kid with the tell-tale orange packet and run over the playground towards him shouting stop, stop, don't eat, don't eat! The kid has his eyes wide open and a fingers-full of crisps stopped just before his mouth with his mouth wide open and ready.

David Watts tells him all about the curse of The Swine and how they appeared in Phelps Parade on Saturday morning and that everyone is saying the Smokey Bacon crisps can make them cross and cause them to appear again. The kid looks at his crisps like he is still planning to eat them when we go away again, but he might not enjoy them quite so much.

“What are they so cross about?” the kid asks.

David Watts looks at me with a serious face and looks back at the kid. “Sausages!” he says, like that dog off the telly that can talk. “Sausages!”

All the talk of The Swine makes me forget all about Saturday morning on the downs and losing The Airplane for a bit. Then I remember. I want to tell David Watts, but I can't. Mum made me swear and swear and swear that I would not tell David Watts. Why? Because the secret is just too big for David to have to keep, and she said that it would be unkind to tell him and then demand that he keep it.

Then that little orange plastic packet of Smokey Bacon crisps makes a little flimsy bridge between the two stories, between me and Dad losing The Airplane and The Swine appearing down in Phelps Parade. And my brain runs over the bridge and back again, over the bridge and back again until it seems impossible that they *aren't* to do with one another. But all this is just silly. Nothing bad

has happened, not with The Airplane, not with anything. And the Smokey Bacon bit, well it's just a *coincidence*.

That's what they call it, to explain the links people make with things that are just separate things. I heard about it on the telly. It was on a programme that was on before the programme I wanted to watch came on. They said that people automatically look for patterns in things, and so put things together that aren't linked. You have to remember all the times where the coincidences *aren't* happening. In that you have the proof that a coincidence is just that- a coincidence.

7

**The Waterfall**

**Friday 7<sup>th</sup> May 1983**

It's after judo and we're out and about as we're allowed to do now, being thirteen. I say I'm allowed, but actually really most of the time I just do what I want. So it's Friday night and it's me, David Watts and a couple of others, Chris and Simon, running around in the streets near the sports centre. Chatting about nothing much.

Now school is even more like the adults on the telly because now there are girls. Where had they been hiding?

Not up the shed like Dad, for the last three years.

*It is not okay to be at work after drinking wine.*

David Watts said that his Dad had said that you don't have to drink wine before work to get *on-the-dole*, but it helps.

Why are we in Wessington Park at nine in the evening? Because *she* lives here. The amazing Sarah-Jayne. Not my words, but David Watts'. I have my eye on someone else. An older girl. Or an *older woman*, as the telly would say. Sixteen is three years older than me but she seems like an adult almost. Mum and Dad must be late thirties and she seems closer to them. She wears a green parka coat with a big hood. She has dark brown hair cut into a bob.

She is: Hayley Comet, Queen of the Mods.

Does she know Melody? I don't know. Melody is in the sixth form now, and they're even further out there on the edges of the adult world. Hayley seems to be older than Melody. But that might be because I live with Melody, so I see her, or have seen her at her worst. And there are photographs of her as a kid around the place, tying her to childhood like balloons. And Mum and Dad are always going on about her childish behaviour. Or at least Mum is.

We stand outside Sarah-Jayne's house, under the streetlight at the pavement at the end of her drive. One nice car sits there, in total silence. David Watts huffs and puffs about going to ring the doorbell.

"She's definitely in," I encourage him. I can see her light is on. How do I know it's her bedroom light? Ah, we've been here before. Last week and the week before that.

David strides forward, finger out like a sword, making for the button.

We hang back by the streetlamp, in a little hush, admiring his bravery.

But then a window opens above with a scrape and David's finger is called back from the button, last minute.

We all make waves at the two girls leaning slightly from the upstairs window. They don't automatically look down- why would they? They must have heard us laughing and talking.

"Where's David tonight?" Sarah-Jayne says. She actually says that!

Oh, he's going to be talking about that forever now. Those three words. He'll probably get a tattoo of it or draw one on with a



biro. She knows he wants to be her boyfriend, of course she does. Most boys do if you ask them. So she's right to assume.

Now we get our swords out and point. Ha, not like that. Fingers.

And the girls look down.

"Hi!" David calls up.

"Hi!" they both call down in unison, almost like they rehearsed it, like a song. Sarah-Jayne and Becky. The thing you notice about Becky is that she has bigger boobs than most grown women. She also has bigger teeth than most grown women.

David grins at us. David grins at me. I know, I nod at him. I heard what she said: "*Where's David tonight?*" Like something off the telly. Like the book by William Shakespeare that is a play.

"Hey Romeo," I hiss-shout, so he hears but the girls won't.

David gives me the thumbs-up. He likes that thought, being the hero. But this hero won't be climbing up, or dying out of love, so the question is: *Are they coming down?* And, more importantly: *Can they come out?*

Sarah-Jayne leans out and looks down to David. "Can you wait a minute?"

"Yeah, 'course."

David's thumb comes up for air again because she did say it in an I-have-to-ask-permission-for-something voice. And, yes, he can wait a minute. Maybe two.

Sarah-Jayne reappears for a moment in a swish of curtain and light. Checking David is still there? Of course he's still there. His thumbs are up again, both of them. Luckily there are no

passing cars. Sarah-Jayne grins and disappears again. Maybe they're asking? Maybe they're actually really asking, seeing if they can come out. Chris and Simon are talking about something to do with Becky but I can't hear exactly what they're saying. I can guess. There are two of them. That's a boob each.

David looks at me and nods. "Shall I ask her then, do you think- shall I ask her now?"

I'm saying *yeah* and keeping eye contact with him while the girls reemerge in the window. I can see the Duran Duran posters on her wall in the brief moment that the curtains open and then close again behind them. Sarah-Jayne and Becky are holding something. I look, but it can't be.

David squints his face. It's dark but I know him so well- he squints his face again asking me: *What? What?* He's right below the window.

And then something suddenly lurches out from what they're holding- a *bowl*, it's a bowl- and the something- it's *water*. And it makes a long shape in the air between the bit first out and the last bit to be tipped. Then it's all over David Watts. Not a drip of it misses him. Not a single drip. Water hits head and shoulders, blasting out all around.

The sound from David Watts makes me think the water must be freezing because it is shock. "Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

The girls laugh. Sarah-Jayne is all restrained but still committed to it. Becky is just laughing her boobs off with this bark-silence-bark-silence-bark laugh that seems to echo all around the

estate, coming off all the identical-looking houses. Maybe it was her idea?

Chris and Simon explode next to me. They're with Becky on this. Or they'd like to be. I might sound like I'm not laughing, but I am, I am! David Watts is laughing too, of course he is. What else can he do? He even *thanks* her. He says something about not having time for a shower earlier, which is actually really witty when you're embarrassed.

Later, I lie in bed thinking about Hayley Comet, Queen of the Mods.

I make a plan.

First things first. I've got to talk to her.

And then I've got to win her.

Of course she won't go out with someone who is thirteen (nearly fourteen). Of course she won't. But she *might*. She's free to choose anyone she wants. Does she have a boyfriend? I don't know. But maybe she's actually bored of the older boys with them always trying to be like adult-men with their behaviour, with their motorbikes and money.

Maybe she wants someone *younger*?

I imagine her wearing a necklace that I've given her.

The lacey edges of her white bra become visible as she unbuttons...