

Nightingale's Playground



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My Gran gave me beans on toast but I couldn't eat it. She put her hand on my forehead and said "You're very hot."

I stared over my beans on toast at the sideboard. At the third drawer down. The huge rash on my wrist had gone completely now. I couldn't feel any remnants of it and there was no bruising. There was literally no trace of it.

"Do you want to just go to bed?" my Gran said, running her hand gently through my hair. "You look poorly love. You might be coming down with a cold."

I shrugged, still staring at the sideboard. "I don't know."

Then, "Gran?"

"Yes love,"

I hesitated. "Can I show you something?"



Before he disappeared off the face of the earth, Alex Nightingale gave me some expert advice about my science fieldwork book.

"Bury it", he said.

The book was relatively blank and untouched and had to be handed in as part of my school work the following week. It should have looked dirty and been packed full of sketches and scribbles – or at least shown some evidence of use during our many out-of-school trips – but it didn't. It looked clean and new and unused, like I'd just bought it. Alex said it counted towards a third of the exam result and had to look the business. "Unless of course you want an F," he said.

I didn't really want an F.

We were standing in my Gran's back garden and it was starting to rain. The book in question was lying on the damp scratchy grass in front of us, starting to get covered in dark rain dots.

"This is good," Alex said, holding his hand out, palm up. "This is really good, the wetter the better. Let's make a hole."

Alex had done some pretty impressive work to his own pad, including burning it at the edges and spreading some dog shit on it. It looked awesome.

"Thanks for this," I said, picking the book up and moving towards some of my Gran's rather overgrown-looking borders. "What about just there?"

"Sure," Alex said, wiping his wrist under his nose. "Not too deep though. You don't want to lose it."



I always saw Alex in science. He wasn't in any of my other groups and he wasn't in my form class. He didn't mix with any of my other friends, so whenever I played with Sniffer or Harding or Bailey at break or lunch, Alex didn't hang around. I didn't question where he was or who else he might be playing with, I just accepted the fact that he wasn't there. This didn't seem odd at the time, it was just how it was.

Science was my best lesson because Alex was in it – science without Alex was a shitty prospect. I didn't like any of the other kids in the class, I didn't like the teacher, I didn't like doing experiments or doing any work. Science for me was about swapping computer game cassettes under the table, scribbling rude shapes on Alex's exercise book, whispering about whether the teachers were really aliens trying to brainwash us or whether the entire school was some kind of hologram that folded up and disappeared after the bell for hometime.



One lunch time we were out in the playground throwing bits of sandwiches to the birds. It was hammering it down and thundering distantly and everyone else was in the canteen. Everything looked grey and drained like it needed colouring in. Alex turned to me with a soaking wet shiny face and said, "What if someone's already done it though? What if someone's already got pixels down to the size of atoms and like - that's what all of this is?" He pointed at me – the school – the playground – the playingfields – in a big 360 circle.

"You mean like we're in a game already?" I said. It sounded stupid but I quite liked it – I'd never thought of that before. "Good graphics," I said, stretching my arms out and spinning around in the rain. I was freezing. "Best graphics I've ever seen in my life Alex, you look so real," I laughed.

Alex didn't think it was funny. He looked lost in his own drenched thoughts and he was staring at me in a way he sometimes did that made me feel a bit strange, like he wasn't sure if he liked me or not anymore. "Thing is," he said. "If someone's done it already, then who's the player? Which person is actually playing?"

He carried on looking at me and then said a bit louder, "Bollocks, what if I'm the player and – like, you're not real, you're just a sprite designed to look like you?"

"I'm not a sprite," I said, feeling a bit annoyed he'd said that. I looked down at my trousers and then back up again like I was double-checking that I was real. "I can't be a sprite. I'm me – I know I'm me." I waited a moment and then said, "What if you're a sprite? I might be the player."

"But how do I know?" Alex said. "You might be programmed to say you're not a sprite, so I feel like you're real."

"But I AM real," I shouted. "Course I'm real you nob, this is stupid." I walked off.



I remember a few times walking home with Alex. He lived on a small red bricked housing estate not far from the school – about a quarter of a mile from my gran’s flat. Although I’d said see you later a few times and watched him disappear behind the front door of his house, I had never been invited in. I had never seen Alex’s mum or dad. I assumed he had no brothers or sisters. I’d never seen his Commodore 64 either. Saying that, he’d never seen mine – and I’d never invited him into my Gran’s flat, even though he’d definitely been in my Gran’s garden before, loads of times.



On Tuesday September 14th Alex didn’t show up for science. I remember feeling gutted throughout the whole miserable, never-ending lesson. Had I seen him at all that day? I couldn’t remember. I didn’t think so. In fact had he ever been off school before? I couldn’t remember that either. It felt weird without him being there though. I felt a bit lost.

I was paired up by the teacher with some girl I’d never even noticed was in the class. A small scruffy brunette who smelt of cigarettes and just stood there chewing gum whilst I did the whole science experiment myself. Magnesium and a bunsen burner. Everyone had to wear these cheap knackered Science Experiment Sunglasses because the metal shone so dangerously brightly when it was heated up.



My Commodore 64 was wired up to an old TV in my Gran’s back room. Mum didn’t even know it was there. My Gran threw a blanket over it in the evenings after I’d brushed my teeth to make sure no “radiation” came off it. She didn’t understand what I did on it, but she liked the colours and sounds the games made. She worried I spent too long on it though. She said I always looked pale when I came off it and that I sometimes had nightmares about it. “No I don’t,” I said laughing. “What nightmares?”

I had a small collection of original cassette games on a low shelf clamped between a really old dictionary and a book about British birds. I ran my fingers along the games boxes until I came to The Sentinel, which was Alex’s. I pulled it out.

Alex loved The Sentinel. I found it really hard to play. You had to use the keyboard so I found it complicated and fiddly. I didn’t like games that didn’t let you use a joystick. What was the point?

The Sentinel was the only game I’d ever seen featured in Zzap 64 magazine which hadn’t been given a score out of 100%. The reviewers had said it was “too unusual and unique” to actually give it an overall percentage. They’d given it a Gold Medal Award for being so amazingly original, but they hadn’t had a clue how else to score it.

How mad was that? How could they have not scored it?

The Sentinel had 10,000 levels. That was a lot compared to most other games with levels.

However, with the Sentinel being so hard to play and complicated to understand, I found it hard to imagine anyone even attempting to try and complete it. Surely those 10,000 levels weren’t really levels that

had been properly, carefully designed by someone? That would have taken years.

Those 10,000 levels had to have been *generated* I thought. By the computer. Maybe at random. Or maybe there was some kind of formula inside the program that generated them from the beginning and then sort of expanded them out when the game loaded - blew them up, like blow-up beach toys squashed inside a suitcase.

Whatever, 10,000 was still an impressive number. I looked at The Sentinel's cassette tape. It was black with The Sentinel written on it in bright red writing. It also had a symbol of a red firebird on it. That was the name of the software publisher - "Firebird". They'd published all sorts of pretty good games, but never anything as weird as The Sentinel.

On average, the The Sentinel took one minute twenty five seconds to load. Sometimes, when I'd got the position of the screw right inside the cassette player attached to the C64, it loaded a bit quicker than that.

One minute and twenty five seconds was amazingly quick for 10,000 levels.

I held the cassette up to my face and studied it.



The location of my science fieldwork book came back into my mind several weeks after Alex disappeared – when it was announced in science that we all had about two days to hand in our coursework before the final exam. I felt my stomach churn; until that moment I had totally forgotten that we'd buried my book, and I really didn't like the prospect of having to dig it up.

My Gran gave me an old trowel which helped. She was very used to me going out into the garden to potter around and sometimes do a bit of digging. My Gran's garden wasn't really a garden, it was more of an overgrown grass-heap littered with patches of nettles and dandelions and other such weeds. But I loved it for that. It was beautifully wild and unmanaged.

I found the patch of soily ground where Alex and I had buried my book and rammed the trowel into it. I felt sad that he wasn't around to see this. The soil had hardened a little in the cold and it seemed to take a lot of effort to make even a shallow hole.

After about ten minutes, with filthy hands and still no book I wondered whether I was actually digging in the right place. But then I saw a dirty page-corner poking out of the earth and started to bulldoze my way around it. I managed to loosen the ground around it enough to actually pull the book out, at which point I felt a sharp pain in my stomach: on the front cover where it said NAME in black print followed by a long _____ space was scribbled Alex Nightingale Science Class 4B.



The girl I got paired up with in Science was called Joanne Pickle. All the other girls called her 'The Onion'. Mr Worthington got us doing glass bending. I had quite a long thick tube of glass which I was hovering over our bunsen burner. The collar was closed on the burner and the flame was bluish-purple and roaring. All

of a sudden my glass tube sagged, glowed orange slightly and then snapped in half and landed in a hissing sticky clump on the work surface. Joanne started laughing hysterically. It was the first time I'd ever seen her laugh and I watched her for a moment then started grinning. She had really nice teeth, I thought.

“Sod off,” I said quietly, “it’s really hard.”

“That was funny,” she said, holding her stomach. “Man, that was so funny.”



I stood shivering, my mouth wide open in the porch of my Gran’s flat, turning the pages of Alex’s science fieldwork book. I had never seen anything like it. I felt a strange heat enter my face and my hands begin to explode with pins and needles. I closed the book and looked at the name written on the front and turned it around a few times, and then opened it again randomly and started slowly turning the soiled and tatty pages, smoothing my fingers over the cuttings and drawings to make sure they were physically real. My fingers came away lightly pencil-smudged. My Gran called “Are you alright down there?” and I snapped the book shut and hid it behind my back. “Yes.” I said. “Yes, I’m fine just... I’m coming in now.” Little insects and bits of soil slipped off the book and pattered onto the lino behind me.



I hid Alex’s fieldwork book in my Gran’s sideboard, in the third drawer down (the second to last one) underneath the fragranced liner at the bottom. My Gran’s sideboard was packed with junk – she collected ornaments and trinkets from second hand shops and stashed them away alongside bits of material and apparently random articles from newspapers that seemed to be crammed in and amongst each other in no particular order.

In some ways I wanted my Gran to find it. I wanted her to experience the same mad thrill that I’d had when I’d first opened it and paged through it. Maybe when she was having a clear out (if she had clear outs, I wasn’t sure) when I was at school she might come across it. What the hell would she think. What if she had a heart attack? Shit, surely not.

I just didn’t want Mum to find it, or she might have binned it. Mum did things like that. Mum never went anywhere near Gran’s sideboard though. Mum’s idea of Interesting Things didn’t include sideboards.



Joanne leaned over, put her arm on my shoulders and drew a big pair of tits in the middle of my text book. I couldn’t help laughing. As usual she was chewing gum and she chewed it really loudly in my ear whilst she added detailed nipples with her biro. “Hey, these are great,” she said.

I fought her pen off with mine and scribbled the whole lot out and elbowed her out of my face. “Will you sod off?” I said.

Mr Worthington looked up from his desk. He was marking someone’s work and he lifted his eyebrows at

me, indicating, I assumed, that it would be a good idea to shut up.

“What’s up with you?” Joanne whispered, a bright red clump of gum pinched between her teeth. She looked genuinely concerned for a moment and I considered – for the first time ever – telling her about Alex’s book. But then she rolled the gum onto the end of her tongue and stuck it right out and started moving the grungy thing slowly left and right like some hideous slug with a protruding brain, and I could see bubbles of spit on it and I thought actually, no – not a good idea.



The bell rang for lunchtime and I walked out into the playground the back way – past the bins to avoid James Wilcocks who was hanging around with his gang of pricks near the canteen.

“Hey,” someone said. It was Joanne. She was leaning against one of the bins smoking a cigarette.

“What?” I said.

She blew out smoke and shrugged at me.

No wonder she smelt, I thought.

“Stop drawing tits in my book,” I said and walked straight past her.

“I’ll draw as many as I like.” she shouted after me. “Massive ones.”



I had this fantasy about taking Joanne back to my Grans. Gran smoked, so maybe they could offer each other cigarettes? Maybe they’d sit together at the kitchen table and smoke.

That was a weird thing to imagine.



I took Alex’s fieldwork book out of the sideboard and put it into my school bag. Bits of muck and spiders were still dropping off it, so I wrapped it in a carrier bag first.

At lunchtime, I found Joanne smoking by the bins. I ran over to her pushed her around the back of them.

“What the hell?” she shouted. “What you doing?”

“Look at this.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to see this.”

“I don’t want to look at it.”

“What do you mean?” I had my rucksack off my shoulders and was rummaging through it for Alex’s book at high speed. “You don’t even know what I’m on about.”

“So?”

“Look at this.” I said, pulling the carrier bag out that had Alex’s book in it. “You have to see this. You know Alex?”

“What?”

“Alex, remember Alex in our class?”

“Which class?”

“Science, from Science.”

“What?”

“For god’s sake,” I held the book up for her to see and opened it at a random page. “Look at this,” I said. I felt breathless. My heart was hammering. I kept looking around the corner of the bins to make sure nobody was coming. “You ever seen anything like this?”

“What is it?” Joanne squinted at it and blew smoke out all over it. She took another drag from her dwindling cigarette and chuckled.

“What?” I said. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t interested. “Look at it,” I said. “Don’t you think it’s mad?”

She chuckled again in an annoyingly false kind of way. “You’re weird,” she looked me up and down. She took another speedy drag and blew out.

“You’re not looking at it.”

“What?”

“I said you’re not looking at it!”

She narrowed her eyes at me, looking really annoyed now. “It’s some doodles in a book you idiot.” she flicked her fag end at me and shoved her way past.



Alex’s fieldwork book was plastered with numbers. Even on the pages that contained his amazing sketches there were lines and lines of numbers scribbled in the margins - or scrawled diagonally in the blank spaces around the sketches. Each number was between eight and ten digits long and apparently random. For example, 9024268648 was next to 5965581831. And below those two numbers was 33588996. They were all written quite neatly in pencil.

At first I wondered if they were telephone numbers as they looked about the right length, but there were no gaps in them for area codes and no names accompanying them to indicate whose numbers they might have been.

I tried adding some of the numbers together using the old calculator I'd found on the Dump to see if they totalled anything significant. Most of the time they generated an E message which my Gran said meant the number was too big to fit on the calculator's screen. I even tried keying the numbers in and then holding the calculator upside down to see if they spelt anything. I knew you could spell LESLIE on a calculator - and BOOBLESS - but none of the numbers in Alex's book seemed to spell anything at all.



I slid *The Sentinel* off my shelf and put it into my school rucksack. I said to my Gran I was going to school a bit earlier to meet up with Harding and she said, "Okay then love."

I was about to open the front door at the bottom of the stairs and go out into the cold when I had a sudden thought. *Codes.*

I slid my rucksack down off my back, unzipped it and took out the game. I looked on the back of the cassette box, then opened it and slipped out *The Sentinel's* funny little black instruction booklet. I opened the booklet and ran my finger down the tiny white text until I found the following paragraph:

"Each level has a special security code -- given after you have destroyed the Sentinel. By using these codes, you can progress through the 10,000 levels without having to start from the first level every time."

I dropped my bag and ran back up the stairs to the spare bedroom. My Gran was in the hallway carrying a cup of tea. "Goodness me," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I think they're codes!" I said breathlessly.

"Okay love."

I threw the cover off the computer and turned it on.

About a minute and a half later, it was proven that the numbers were definitely codes.

"Yes!" I shouted.

Having never even got past level one on *The Sentinel*, I hadn't realised that the game involved writing down numbers. I picked a number out at random from Alex's book - 88187167 - entered it into *The Sentinel's* interface. I was immediately taken to level 335. I couldn't believe it.

I shouted again. "Yes, it works!"

My Gran was standing in the doorway of the spare room looking flummoxed. "Have you done it?" she asked, taking a sip of tea. "Well done, lovey. Well done."



I paged through Alex's book and entered the following code at random - 98288136. This took me to level 9998, the second to last level in the entire game.

I felt a lump in my throat. Holy shit, what would happen if I completed it? Would there be some kind of amazing end sequence? A bonus mini-game perhaps? A picture of a naked woman? Or would it just start again from level 0000?

Excitedly, I had a crack at level 9998 and got zapped by The Sentinel within a few minutes. There didn't seem to be anywhere to go on this level - it was hugely mountainous, like a giant digital valley with no escape route. I flexed my fingers above the keyboard until they clicked, and then had another go.



It was starting to rain when I knocked on the door of Alex's house. I had The Sentinel in a plastic bag ready to just post through the letterbox if nobody answered.

The door was dirty white and glass-panelled in a grid of nine squares of frosted glass. It looked dark behind the glass and I couldn't make anything out.

I knocked, quickly. Then I heard a man shouting and took a few steps back away from the door. Christ. Was this the right house?

A key jangled behind the lock and the door opened. A bald man in a white vest poked his head out. He was unshaven and looked like he needed a bath. He looked me up and down, chewing something. "What?" he said. He didn't sound as aggressive as I thought he would, but he didn't look at all happy that I existed either.

"I brought this back for Alex," I said, holding out the game in the bag.

The man narrowed his eyes at me. "What? What do you want?"

"I'm returning a computer game, it's Alex's."

The man shook his head. "Computer game? What game jack, we don't even have a computer."

His head disappeared and the door closed again. He shouted something back into the house and I heard a girl shout back. The door opened again. "Look jack, I haven't got time for this, OK?"

"Does Alex live here?" I asked.

"No Alex doesn't live here, you got the wrong house, now go on."

"Are you sure?" I heard myself say. I almost dropped the game.

"Course I'm bloody sure, I live here you tit. Now go on, before I get annoyed."

"So where does he live?"

"I don't know!" he shouted and closed the door, harder this time.

I watched his grey-white bulky shape disappear behind the glass panels. I heard more muffled shouting and what sounded like something smashing. The rain started coming down harder.



“Stop it,” Joanne whispered. I was writing numbers all over my science book. I felt a bit sick. I didn’t know if they were Sentinel codes or not, I just wanted to write numbers.

Joanne snatched my pen off me and slid it under her bottom. “Stop it,” she hissed.

“Give it back,” I whispered and nudged her. The whole class was extraordinarily quiet. We were catching up with the homework that nobody had bothered to do over the weekend - something about volumes of liquid.

“No,” she whispered back. “You’re not having it.”

“Sir!” I shouted, putting my hand up. The whole class made a sighing noise like everyone was relieved someone had made a bit of noise.. Joanne snatched the pen out from under her arse and slammed it on the table.

Mr Worthington was in the middle of writing something on the blackboard. He half-turned around and slid his glasses down his nose and looked in my direction. “Will you please be quiet,” he said. He stared at me for a moment before turning back round and carrying on.

“Keep scribbling numbers then you mad bastard, see if I give a shit,” said Joanne.

She slid her work as far away from me as she could and carried on with it.

I carried on writing numbers.



It was break time and I saw Joanne getting hassled by Wilcocks near the bins. He was with his mates and they were huddled up in a gang all around her - about six of them altogether. Wilcocks was prodding Joanne on the shoulder and pushing her back and saying something about how she owed him and that he’d been waiting weeks and that she stank and it was disgusting and she was a scrubber. Joanne was trying to keep her cool and not looking at him and still smoking like it was no big deal.

It looked like she was handling it pretty well, until Wilcocks struck her in the face and she let out a high pitched cry.

I saw her cigarette burning away on the ground and felt my heart began to hammer and a hot blast of piss rise up in my groin. Shit. Oh shit.

I was standing a few yards away by the side of the canteen building. There was a first year boy stood near me and he noticed what was going on and made a run for it. “Hey wait,” I said to him, but he just ignored me and swiftly disappeared.

I walked a bit closer to the gang, squeezing my dick through my trousers. I wished and wished and wished

that they would disperse and leave Joanne alone now. But they didn't. Wilcocks started hitting Joanne again and she started crying that she was sorry, she was really sorry please she was sorry.

Numbers started to pour through my head - Sentinel codes, hundreds of them, randomly generated, everything created and expanded out of nothing. Tens of thousands of codes for tens of thousands of levels that didn't exist until the game started and then they all poured into the computers memory. I started scratching my wrist furiously and moving closer to the gang, scratching and scratching until I could see the skin turning into a rich red rash.

But the gang didn't even see me. They kicked Joanne a few times then reversed out from the bins in a fluster of loud shouts and laughs and ran off with their backs to me.

Joanne was curled up on the ground now, her cigarette a few feet away still releasing feeble wisps of smoke. She had a maroon cut above her eye.

"Joanne?" I said. My voice sounded tiny. "Joanne are you alright?"

I went over to her and crouched down.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" she screamed. I fell backwards and scrambled back up onto my feet. "GO AWAY! JUST GO AWAY!"

I stared at her for a moment, then turned and ran off in the same direction the first year had.



I was tucking Alex's book back into the sideboard - the cupboard bit this time to keep its location varied - whilst my Gran was washing up in the kitchen when I noticed a large, bright red object hiding underneath one of my Gran's pink cardigans.

I lifted the cardigan up a bit so I could see it better. It was some kind of old fashioned vanity case. I couldn't believe I'd never noticed it before.

I heard my Gran coming back into the livingroom from the kitchen. She was coughing loudly. I put the cardigan back, double-checked that Alex's book was hidden away sufficiently, then banged shut the cupboard door.

"Everything okay love?" Gran said, hobbling over to her chair and easing herself backwards into it. The chair creaked loudly. She started coughing again. "Gosh... I think I've got a tickle in my throat."



There was a barren area of wasteland just a few yards down from the school field, a dumping ground full of ripped carrier bags, broken glass and random junk. We called it simply the 'Dump'. Alex and I sometimes wandered down there at hometime just to kick a bit of dust and chat some more before heading back.

Occasionally there were interesting bits of crap lying around in and amongst the soggy binliners and

scraps of rusting metal. We'd both found some good stuff in the past. The biggest item at the moment was an old washing machine; an upsidedown grey/white chunk with various twisted plastic and rubber innards hanging out of it.

"Someone could have stashed a severed head in that," Alex said, taking hold of one of the grey crinkled tubes. It made a weird noise as he tugged at it.

"Nice thought." I said.

"I wouldn't put it past Wilcocks." Alex went on.

I sniggered, "Wilcocks is a tit, but he wouldn't kill anyone."

"Hey, look at this," Alex crouched down. I wandered over to him quickly. He'd found a small silver cross that looked like it had come off a necklace.

"You could paint that gold," I said, taking it out of his palm. It was about the size of a ten pence piece.

"Why would you though?"

"To sell it."

"Are you serious? Who'd buy it?"

"I dunno. Richard Dunn probably. You can sell that dick anything."

We spent a while rummaging around in all the crap, seeing if we could find anything else. The wind kept rattling a loose rag of bin liner trapped between the spokes of an old bike wheel, giving us a strange soundtrack as we shuffled and kicked and flicked things.

"Do you want to play the Sentinel?" Alex asked all of a sudden.

"Do I hell," I said. I looked around. "Are you kidding? I'd spot you a mile off here anyway."

"Not necessarily," Alex said.

"Come on," I said. "It's as flat as hell around here. Where would you hide? Behind that tree up there?"

"Maybe I wouldn't need to hide." He stopped scraping something metal with his shoe and looked at me.



No matter how many times I tried to complete level 9998, I just couldn't do it. There were about nine Sentries dotted about along the top of a hugely steep digital mountainside and there didn't seem to be any way to get to their height. Each time I got spotted by a Sentry and had to move, another one saw me from a different angle, and I couldn't shift myself into a different position quick enough without them absorbing all my energy.

I started whacking the computer keys quite hard and cursing that a joystick would help if the stupid game

allowed it, but that didn't do any good, and in the end the game jammed - the screen went a funny green colour and nothing I pressed or did made any difference at all, except the POWER OFF button.

"You alright love?" my Gran said from the doorway. I jumped - I hadn't realised she'd been standing there, and I hoped she hadn't heard me swearing.

"Fine," I said, turning the TV screen off and covering the whole set up with my Gran's blanket. "Just fed up with that game, I hate it."

"Why play it then?" she said.

I looked at her. She sounded strange saying that. It didn't seem like the sort of thing Gran would say. She'd never really said anything about me "playing" on the computer before. She'd mentioned me "making" or "doing" things on it. But she'd never said I'd "played" on it.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

She smiled. She slid a cigarette box out of her cardigan pocket and flicked the top open. "I smoke all the time and I don't know why."

I felt a chill down my back. She sounded a bit like Alex.

"Are you alright Gran?"

Gran had a cigarette pinched between her fingers now and was trying to find her lighter. "I'm fine love. You ready for bed?"



Alex and I were standing in the cold empty playground eating our sandwiches again. It wasn't raining, but it looked like it might. My next lesson was P.E.

"It's a game." Alex said after a long moment of quiet.

"Really," I said. Then, "Shit game."

"Well, maybe it's a dream, not a game."

"Shit dream, then."

"I'm serious," Alex said. "I've sussed it."

I didn't respond. I carried on chewing my sandwich. It was corned beef.

I was hoping that Alex would drop the subject of dreams/reality and talk about something else. Or carry on being quiet (which I was actually rather enjoying). But he didn't.

"We're asleep right now," he said. "We're not even awake."

“Course we’re awake,” I said sharply.

I was fed up of all this bollocks. It was like Alex was really keen to argue about things that were totally obvious just for the sake of it.

“Why do you keep on talking about this stuff?” I said, looking at him. “If we weren’t awake, we’d be asleep. That’s why we go to bed. We rest after being awake for ages. *This* is being wake, *now*, right here. We’re both awake. You’re awake, I’m awake.”

“But how do you know when you go to sleep that you’re not *really* waking up?”

“Because I’m going to sleep.”

“Are you?”

“SHIT!” I said and threw a crust across the playground. “You are so annoying sometimes! Don’t you think someone would have - like, *noticed* if we were asleep?”

“Not necessarily,” Alex insisted.

“Jesus christ,” I said, pacing around in a circle. The playground looked massive and empty and I wondered for a moment why I was standing next to Alex when there was all this amazing open space around me. Why was I standing right next to him? I didn’t have to.

“We might be dreaming the same dream,” Alex continued, more to himself than to me. “Or maybe not dreaming but sort of... I don’t know, *trancing*. Like - existing in a kind of trance.”

“Trancing,” I said.

“Like - completely missing the *real* reality.”

“Real reality,” I said.

“Reality might not be actually that real,” he went on. “I mean, in all the lessons we have at school, we never talk about any of this do we? Nobody questions any of this. Nobody talks about it. None of the teachers ever say anything about it.”

I laughed. “About being in a trance?”

“Maybe they’re in a trance.”

“Maybe *you’re* in a trance.” I said.

Alex didn’t often look surprised but he did look quite surprised I’d said that. He put his hands in his pockets and stared at me and then (and this just annoyed me even more) he started to nod slowly like he was intelligently digesting what I’d said and that what I’d said might actually be a theory worth considering.

“Chrissake,” I whispered, turning away from him.

I was hoping that might be the end of the conversation. Sometimes the talks I had with Alex came to

oddly abrupt conclusions that didn't feel like conclusions at all but rather satisfyingly open-ended questions that might be picked up on next time. They had a tendency to be followed by wonderfully light-weight comments like "So what's your top score on Cybernoid?" or "Did you watch Red Dwarf last night?" but this time the discussion dragged on.

"I'm going to test that idea," he said, putting his face quite close to mine.

"What?" I said. I didn't like the way he was coming so close to me. It was uncomfortable.

"You and me. Let's do an experiment."

"What experiment?"

Suddenly I could smell his breath which didn't smell very nice and I started walking backwards. "Will you stop it Alex, you're being stupid."

"Stupid?" He looked pissed off at that comment. His face seemed to have changed completely, like I'd irritated him to the point of anger. I felt a bit scared. I didn't like it.

"Alex please, come on."

He kept edging towards me, his top lip curling slightly. "You think I'm full of shit."

"I don't, it's just - you go on about this bollocks all the time - it's just - it's doing my head in."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Really?"

"Look I'm sorry."

I was on the brink of turning around and making a full-on run for it. I couldn't believe how this conversation had gone. How the hell had it ended up like this? Had we ever been like this with each other before? I couldn't remember. In fact, I was starting to get jumbled up about everything to do with Alex. Hadn't he disappeared? When did I think that? Was he my friend or was he someone I hated? I felt the playground starting to spin around me.

"Alex I feel sick,"

"Don't turn around."

"What?" I felt vomit starting to rise in my stomach. Something was happening here. Something I didn't understand. Was Alex making me ill? Who was Alex? Was he even really here?

"I said don't turn around!" He was shouting now. Alex was shouting at me. "The Sentinel - it's after you. You turn around now it'll fucking kill you, understand?"



I skimmed my fingers across the back of my gran's hand. Her skin was dry and sharp in places but the veins inside seemed soft and weak. I pressed her biggest vein down gently and watched the skin slowly rise back up. She started to whisper to me in a hoarse, smoker's voice that there were things in the world, happenings, that she didn't understand, and neither would I, and neither would anyone else, and that sometimes it was best to just leave them alone.

"Like we leave Mum alone," I murmured. She didn't answer that, and looked a little hurt, so I whispered "sorry" and she started talking to me again quietly, her breath heavy with the stench of cigarettes. "You need to promise me you won't go rooting in my sideboard anymore," she said. "Please love, promise me."

"But what's that red case? What are those papers?"

"They're nothing," she said insistently. "They're from a long time ago, they don't make any sense and they're private love, they're just private."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay love. It's fine."

"I didn't mean to look... I just found them."

"I know."

"How come they're private?"

"They just are."

"Private about what?"

"About private things, now come on, let's tuck you in."

"Gran?" I kept sitting back up every time she eased me back onto my pillow. "Gran?"

"What love?"

"What private things?"

She stopped trying to get me into bed and looked a little bit impatient. "Private things that if I told you about wouldn't be private any more. Now let's--"

"But I won't tell anyone,"

"It's not that," she closed her eyes in desperation at my relentless questions and shuffled back a bit from the bed. "It's not that lovey."

"Then what?"

“Carl,” she looked away from me, at the curtains. “Night night.”

“Gran?”

Still not looking at me, she walked slowly towards the bedroom door.

“Gran!” I sat right up now, alarmed that she was ignoring me. I had never seen her like this and I felt a little bit frightened. “Gran I didn’t mean it.”

“Night night,” she said, edging the door open. “Don’t ask me any more questions, I need to go now, night night.”

I watched her disappear behind the door.

As I felt a heavy wave of sleep start to advance in on me, I tried to remember what it was that I’d even seen in my gran’s sideboard that had prompted the conversation I’d just had.

But I couldn’t remember. A letter maybe. Or a book.

Yes. A book. My science fieldwork book. I just needed to take it out of the sideboard and hand it in. That’s all I needed to remember. Alex had done a good job on it. It looked authentically shitty and well-used.



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