



# Reading for Pleasure

## Key Stage 4 Booklet

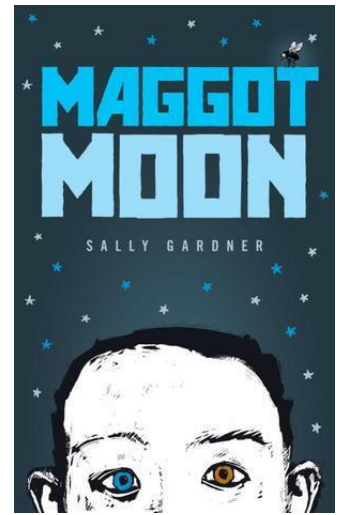


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## Extract 1: Maggot Moon, by Sally Gardner

A boy, a friendship, a lie and some hard choices. The Motherland is a world in which individuality and difference are crushed but Standish Treadwell won't be subdued. This extract is taken from the beginning of the book. Sally Gardner chose this epigraph to place at the beginning of her story:

**For you the dreamers Overlooked at school Never won prizes  
You who will own tomorrow.**



I'm wondering what if. What if the football hadn't gone over the wall. What if Hector had never gone looking for it. What if he hadn't kept the dark secret to himself. What if . . . Then I suppose I would be telling myself another story. You see, the what ifs are as boundless as the stars.

Miss Connolly, our old teacher, always said start your story at the beginning. Make it a clean window for us to see through. Though I don't really think that's what she meant. No one, not even Miss Connolly, dares write about what we see through that smeared glass. Best not to look out. If you have to, then best to keep quiet.

I would never be so daft as to write this down, not on paper. Even if I could, I couldn't. You see, I can't spell my own name. Standish Treadwell. Can't read, can't write, Standish Treadwell isn't bright. Miss Connolly was the only teacher ever to say that what makes Standish stand apart is that he is an original.

Hector smiled when I told him that. He said he personally had clocked that one straight away. 'There are train-track thinkers, then there's you, Standish, a breeze in the park of imagination.'

I said that again to myself. 'Then there is Standish, with an imagination that breezes through the park, doesn't even see the benches, just notices that there is no dog shit where dog shit should be.'

I wasn't listening to the lesson when the note arrived from the headmaster's office. Because me and Hector were in the city across the water, in another country where the buildings don't stop rising until they pin the clouds to the sky. Where the sun shines in Technicolor. Life at the end of a rainbow. I don't care what they tell us, I've seen it on the TV. They sing in the streets – they even sing in the rain, sing while dancing round a lamp post. This is the dark ages. We don't sing. But this was the best daydream I'd had since Hector and his family vanished.

Mostly I tried not to think about Hector. Instead I liked to concentrate on imagining myself on our planet, the one Hector and I had invented. Juniper. It was better than being worried sick about what had happened to him. Except this was one of the best daydreams I'd had for a long time. It felt as if Hector was near me again. We were driving round in one of those huge, ice-cream-coloured Cadillacs. I could almost smell the leather. Bright blue, sky blue, leather seats blue. Hector in the back. Me with my arm resting on the chrome of the wound-down window, my hand on the wheel, driving us home for Croca-Colas in a shiny kitchen with a checked tablecloth and a garden that looks as if the grass was Hoovered.

That's when I became vaguely aware of Mr Gunnell saying my name. 'Standish Treadwell. You are wanted in the headmaster's office.' Frick-fracking hell! I should have seen that coming. Mr Gunnell's cane made my eyes smart, hit me so hard on the back of my hand that it left a calling card. Two thin, red weals. Mr Gunnell wasn't tall but his muscles were made out of old army tanks with well-oiled army-tank arms. He wore a toupee that had a life of its own, battling to stay stuck on the top of his sweaty, shiny head. His other features didn't do him any favours. He had a small, dark, snot-mark moustache that went down to his mouth. He smiled only when using his cane – that smile curdled the corner of his mouth so that his dried- up leech of a tongue stuck out.

Thinking about it, I am not sure the word smile is right. Maybe it just twisted that way when he applied his mind to his favourite sport, hurting you. He wasn't that worried where the cane landed as long as it hit flesh, made you jump. You see, they only sing across the water. Here the sky fell in long ago.

But the thing that really scratched at me was this: I must have been so many miles away. I didn't even see Mr Gunnell approaching, although there was a runway between me and his desk. I mean, I sat at the very back of the class – the blackboard could have been in another country. The words were just circus horses dancing up and down. At least, they never stayed still long enough for me to work out what they were saying. The only one I could read was the huge red word that was stamped over the picture of the moon. Slapped you in the gob, that word did.

MOTHERLAND.

Being stupid, and not being anything that fitted neatly on to lined paper, I'd sat at the back of the class long enough to know I'd become all but invisible. Only when Mr Gunnell's army-tank arms were in need of some exercise did I come into focus. Only then did I see red.

There was no getting away from it. I'd got lazy. I'd got used to relying on Hector to warn me of oncoming doom. That daydream made me forget Hector had disappeared. I was on my own. Mr Gunnell got hold of my ear and pinched it hard, so hard my eyes watered. I didn't cry. I never cry. What's the use of tears? Gramps said that if he were to start crying, he didn't think he would stop – there was too much to cry about. I think he was right. Salty water wasted in muddy puddles. Tears flood everything, put a lump in the throat, tears do. Make me want to scream, tears do. Tell you this, it was hard, what with all that ear pulling. I did my best to keep my mind on Planet Juniper, the one Hector and I alone had discovered. We were going to launch our very own space mission, the two of us, then the world would wake up to the fact it was not alone. We would make contact with the Juniparians who knew right from wrong, who could zap Greenflies, leather-coat men and Mr Gunnell into the dark arse of oblivion. We had agreed we would bypass the moon. Who wanted to go there when the Motherland was about to put her red and black flag in its unsoiled silver surface?

Mr Gunnell didn't like me. I think it was personal. Everything is personal with Mr Gunnell. I was a personal affront to his intelligence. I was an affront to his sense of order and decency. Just to make sure everyone got the message about the affront that was me, he pulled my tie undone. He had that smile on his face, the tongue sticking out one, as he closed the classroom door behind me. I didn't have a problem with the caning. Or with the fact that my hands still smarted. I had a small problem with the ear pulling. I was only a tiny bit worried about the headmaster.

I didn't know then about the trouble, or how deep it went.

But maybe I got an inkling of it the moment Mr Gunnell pulled my tie undone, the git. You see, I can't do up my tie, and he knew it. That tie had not been untied for a personal record of one year.

That was the longest time I had ever managed to keep the knot intact. In fact the fabric had become so shiny that it moved with no problem just wide enough for my head to slip through and then close up as neat as a whistle at the top, so I looked spick and span. I mean, that was the idea. It had stayed this way because of Hector. He wouldn't let any boy mess with me. The days of torment I had believed to be behind me. That fricking, undone, hangman's rope of a tie made me feel like sliding down the wall on to the floor and giving up, letting the tears for once get some exercise. For there was one thing I couldn't do: go to the headmaster's office without a tie. I might just as well throw myself from the window head first. Say it came undone on the way down. Say due to concussion from the fall I had forgotten how to tie a tie.

I think I knew, if I was honest, then and there, that this was not just about the tie and the loss of a knot. It was the loss of Hector I couldn't stand. If only I knew where they had taken him. If only I knew he was all right, then maybe the knot in my stomach – the knot which got tighter every day – would go away.

Hector said the tie stood for something different. It was just the same as a collar round a dog's neck. It said you were a part of something more than you alone would ever be. Hector said a uniform was a way of making us all the same, just numbers, neat boy-shaped numbers to be entered in a book. Hector wasn't a neat number and I think they might have rubbed him out, but I can't be sure of that. What I knew was that Hector was right. The knotted tie represented survival. Now I was stuck, tie undone, my shirt buttoned wrong, my shoelaces a dead loss. I was a mess.

The corridor smelled of disinfectant, milk, boy's pee and polish. The striplights looked to me like loneliness. They were too bright, they revealed everything. They made the emptiness ten times worse, showed me there was no Hector. A glass door banged and Miss Phillips, one of the school wardens, came out of her office carrying a cup.

'What are you doing, Treadwell?' She had a hard, no-nonsense voice but I'd seen her in the queues like everyone else, getting a little extra on the side. She looked down the corridor and up at the camera that went round like clockwork. She waited until the all-seeing eye was turned elsewhere then without a word she tied my tie, re-buttoned my shirt. She checked the camera, put her finger to her lips and waited for it to turn back on us before saying in the same, no-nonsense voice, 'Good, Treadwell. Now that is how I expect you to arrive at school every day.' Never would I have thought that the hard-boiled Miss Phillips had such a soft, sweet centre.

The headmaster's office had a seat outside, a long bench, wood hard, bum sore, and just a bit too high. I reckon that was the genius of the seat because you ended up sitting there looking small and less of anything, with your feet dangling and your knobbly knees blushing red. And all you heard was the sound of your classmates hardly daring to breathe. I sat there waiting for the bell to ring, which meant Mr Hellman will see you now. I sat and waited, time drip-ticking away.

Before Hector came to this school, I hated it. I believed it was invented just so the bullies, with brains the size of dried-up dog turds, could beat the shit out of kids like me. A kid with different-coloured eyes: one blue eye, one brown, and the dubious honour of being the only boy in the whole of his class of fifteen-year-olds who couldn't spell, couldn't write. Yes, I know. Standish Treadwell isn't bright . . . How many times did the jerk-off bully boys sing that to me, egged on by the glory-arsed leader of the torture lounge, Hans Fielder. He knew he was important. Head Perfect, the teacher's pet. He wore long trousers, as did the rest of his gang. Tell you this for a bucketful of tar: there weren't many in our school who wore long trousers. Those that did thought themselves up there with the greats.

Little Eric Owen wore shorts like the rest of us but he made his shorts longer by doing everything Hans Fielder required of the runt. If Little Eric was a dog he would have been a terrier. His main duty was to see which way I was heading home every day and give the signal to Hans Fielder and his merry men. The boys needed something to get their teeth into. The chase would be on. I ended up being caught and beaten every frick-fracking time. Don't think I didn't give as good as I got, because I did. But I didn't stand much of a chance when there were seven of them.

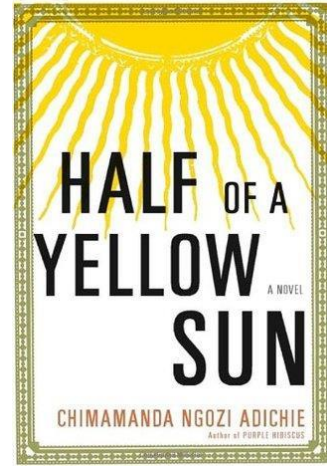
It was the day I first met Hector. They had me cornered under the old railway tunnel near the school. Hans Fielder thought he'd caught me good and proper, that there was no escape unless I wanted to risk being killed, for at the end of the tunnel was a sign. You didn't have to be able to read it to know what it said. It had a cross and skull bones on it, which meant keep out or you're dead. That day, down there in the stinking tunnel with Hans Fielder and his gang of nasties jeering and throwing stones at me, I came to the rapid conclusion that it might be safer to run into the long grass behind the sign and take my chance with the devil. There was no barbed wire or anything like that to fence it off. That notice alone had the power of a thousand scarecrows. I ran down the tunnel for all I was worth, past the sign into what I was certain would be a firing range. At least it would be over quickly. Mum and Dad were gone and Gramps . . . well, I didn't let myself think about Gramps, not right then. Because Gramps was the only person that still pulled at the gravity in me.

I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see Hans Fielder and his frickwits following me. What I saw was a murky group of lads drifting away. I stopped by a huge oak tree, out of breath, dizzy. It was only when my breathing became more steady that I realised what I'd done. I waited some time. If the Greenflies turned up I would put my hands up and give myself in. I sat down, my heart an egg bumping against the side of a pan of boiling water. It was then that I spotted it. A red football. Deflated, yes, but whole. I stuffed it in my school bag, a reward for my bravery. Not only that, but as I went further along the disused railway track I found raspberry bushes groaning with fruit. I took off my shirt, tied the sleeves together and filled it up until it couldn't take another raspberry. All the time I was expecting to feel a Greenfly's hand on my shoulder.

By now I was near the wall that runs along the side of the railway track. A word to describe that wall would be impenetrable. See. I might not be able to spell but I have a huge vocabulary. I collect words – they are sweets in the mouth of sound. The wall was built so high that Gramps and me, whose garden backed on to it, couldn't see over the fricking thing. You wouldn't know there was a wild meadow hidden behind it filled with flowers. Butterflies were doing the fandango like nature was having a ball and keeping the VIP list all to herself. I was seeing it for the first time and, cripes, it was eye-bending in its beauty. Well, I thought, if all mankind disappeared down a hole I knew who would be holding the celebration party. Why stop now, Standish? You have the raspberries, the football – why not the flowers? Twerp. Only then did it dawn in my daydreaming head that I hadn't the foggiest idea how I was going to get over the wall. I was up shit river with a hole in the boat and sinking fast. I mean, I couldn't climb the wall. It wasn't the height that concerned me, it was the glass at the top, the artery-cutting kind. You wouldn't be able to get over that wall and still claim to have hands. Frick- fracking hell. There were two choices: I would have to go back the way I came, which I wasn't doing; and the other . . . . . Standish, go on, tell me the other.

## Extract 2: Half of a Yellow Sun, by Chimamanda Ngozi

This book by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is set in Nigeria during the 1960s, more than fifty years ago, at the time of a vicious civil war in which a million people died. The three main characters in the novel are swept up in the violence during these turbulent years. As these people's lives intersect, they have to question their own responses to the unfolding political events. This extraordinary novel is about Africa in a wider sense: about moral responsibility, about the end of colonialism, about ethnic allegiances, about class and race; and about the ways in which love can complicate all of these things.



Master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair. Ugwu's aunty said this in a low voice as they walked on the path.

'But he is a good man,' she added. 'And as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day.' She stopped to spit; the saliva left her mouth with a sucking sound and landed on the grass.

Ugwu did not believe that anybody, not even this master he was going to live with, ate meat every day. He did not disagree with his aunty, though, because he was too choked with expectation, too busy imagining his new life away from the village. They had been walking for a while now, since they got off the lorry at the motor park, and the afternoon sun burned the back of his neck. But he did not mind. He was prepared to walk hours more in even hotter sun. He had never seen anything like the streets that appeared after they went past the university gates, streets so smooth and tarred that he itched to lay his cheek down on them.

He would never be able to describe to his sister Anulika how the bungalows here were painted the colour of the sky and sat side by side like polite, well-dressed men, how the hedges separating them were trimmed so flat on top that they looked like tables wrapped with leaves. His aunty walked faster, her slippers making slap-slap sounds that echoed in the silent street. Ugwu wondered if she, too, could feel the coal tar getting hotter underneath, through her thin soles. They went past a sign, ODIM STREET, and Ugwu mouthed street, as he did whenever he saw an English word that was not too long. He smelt something sweet, heady, as they walked into a compound, and was sure it came from the white flowers clustered on the bushes at the entrance. The bushes were shaped like slender hills. The lawn glistened. Butterflies hovered above.

'I told Master you will learn everything fast, osiso-osiso,' his aunty said.

Ugwu nodded attentively although she had already told him this many times, as often as she told him the story of how his good fortune came about: While she was sweeping the corridor in the Mathematics Department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help, speaking before his typist or office messenger could offer to bring someone.

'I will learn fast, Aunty,' Ugwu said. He was staring at the car in the garage; a strip of metal ran around its blue body like a necklace.

‘Remember, what you will answer whenever he calls you is Yes, sah!’ ‘Yes, sah!’ Ugwu repeated. They were standing before the glass door.

Ugwu held back from reaching out to touch the cement wall, to see how different it would feel from the mud walls of his mother’s hut that still bore the faint patterns of moulding fingers. For a brief moment, he wished he were back there now, in his mother’s hut, under the dim coolness of the thatch roof; or in his aunty’s hut, the only one in the village with a corrugated- iron roof. His aunty tapped on the glass. Ugwu could see the white curtains behind the door. A voice said, in English, ‘Yes? Come in.’ They took off their slippers before walking in. Ugwu had never seen a room so wide. Despite the brown sofas arranged in a semicircle, the side tables between them, the shelves crammed with books, and the centre table with a vase of red and white plastic flowers, the room still seemed to have too much space. Master sat in an armchair, wearing a singlet and a pair of shorts. He was not sitting upright but slanted, a book covering his face, as though oblivious that he had just asked people in.

‘Good afternoon, sah! This is the child,’ Ugwu’s aunty said. Master looked up. His complexion was very dark, like old bark, and the hair that covered his chest and legs was a lustrous, darker shade. He pulled off his glasses. ‘The child?’

‘The houseboy, sah.’

‘Oh, yes, you have brought the houseboy. I kpotago ya.’ Master’s Igbo felt feathery in Ugwu’s ears. It was Igbo coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often.

‘He will work hard,’ his aunty said. ‘He is a very good boy. Just tell him what he should do. Thank, sah!’

Master grunted in response, watching Ugwu and his aunty with a faintly distracted expression, as if their presence made it difficult for him to remember something important. Ugwu’s aunty patted Ugwu’s shoulder, whispered that he should do well, and turned to the door.

After she left, Master put his glasses back on and faced his book, relaxing further into a slanting position, legs stretched out. Even when he turned the pages he did so with his eyes on the book.

Ugwu stood by the door, waiting. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, and from time to time, a gentle breeze lifted the curtains. The room was silent except for the rustle of Master’s page turning. Ugwu stood for a while before he began to edge closer and closer to the bookshelf, as though to hide in it, and then, after a while, he sank down to the floor, cradling his raffia bag between his knees. He looked up at the ceiling, so high up, so piercingly white. He closed his eyes and tried to reimagine this spacious room with the alien furniture, but he couldn’t. He opened his eyes, overcome by a new wonder, and looked around to make sure it was all real. To think that he would sit on these sofas, polish this slippery-smooth floor, wash these gauzy curtains.

‘Kedu afa gi? What’s your name?’ Master asked, startling him. Ugwu stood up. ‘What’s your name?’ Master asked again and sat up straight.

He filled the armchair, his thick hair that stood high on his head, his muscled arms, his broad shoulders; Ugwu had imagined an older man, somebody frail, and now he felt a sudden fear that he might not please this master who looked so youthfully capable, who looked as if he needed nothing.

‘Ugwu, sah.’

'Ugwu. And you've come from Obukpa?'

'From Opi, sah.' 'You could be anything from twelve to thirty.' Master narrowed his eyes. 'Probably thirteen.' He said thirteen in English.

'Yes, sah.' Master turned back to his book. Ugwu stood there. Master flipped past some pages and looked up.

'Ngwa, go to the kitchen; there should be something you can eat in the fridge.'

'Yes, sah.'

Ugwu entered the kitchen cautiously, placing one foot slowly after the other. When he saw the white thing, almost as tall as he was, he knew it was the fridge. His aunty had told him about it. A cold barn, she had said, that kept food from going off. He opened it and gasped as the cool air rushed into his face. Oranges, bread, beer, soft drinks: many things in packets and cans were arranged on different levels and, at the top, a roasted, shimmering chicken, whole but for a leg. Ugwu reached out and touched the chicken. The fridge breathed heavily in his ears. He touched the chicken again and licked his finger before he yanked the other leg off, eating it until he had only the cracked, sucked pieces of bones left in his hand.

Next, he broke off some bread, a chunk that he would have been excited to share with his siblings if a relative had visited and brought it as a gift. He ate quickly, before Master could come in and change his mind. He had finished eating and was standing by the sink, trying to remember what his aunty had told him about opening it to have water gush out like a spring, when Master walked in. He had put on a print shirt and a pair of trousers. His toes, which peeked through leather slippers, seemed feminine, perhaps because they were so clean; they belonged to feet that always wore shoes.

'What is it?' Master asked.

'Sah?' Ugwu gestured to the sink. Master came over and turned the metal tap.

'You should look around the house and put your bag in the first room on the corridor. I'm going for a walk, to clear my head, i nugo?'

'Yes, sah.' Ugwu watched him leave through the back door. He was not tall. His walk was brisk, energetic, and he looked like Ezeagu, the man who held the wrestling record in Ugwu's village. Ugwu turned off the tap, turned it on again, then off. On and off and on and off until he was laughing at the magic of the running water and the chicken and bread that lay balmy in his stomach. He went past the living room and into the corridor. There were books piled on the shelves and tables in the three bedrooms, on the sink and cabinets in the bathroom, stacked from floor to ceiling in the study, and in the storeroom, old journals were stacked next to crates of Coke and cartons of Premier beer. Some of the books were placed face down, open, as though Master had not yet finished reading them but had hastily gone on to another.

Ugwu tried to read the titles, but most were too long, too difficult. Non-Parametric Methods. An African Survey. The Great Chain of Being. The Norman Impact Upon England. He walked on tiptoe from room to room, because his feet felt dirty, and as he did so he grew increasingly determined to please Master, to stay in this house of meat and cool floors.



He was examining the toilet, running his hand over the black plastic seat, when he heard Master's voice.

'Where are you, my good man?' He said my good man in English. Ugwu dashed out to the living room.

'Yes, sah!'

'What's your name again?'

'Ugwu, sah.'

'Yes, Ugwu. Look here, nee anya, do you know what that is?' Master pointed, and Ugwu looked at the metal box studded with dangerous-looking knobs.

'No, sah,' Ugwu said.

'It's a radiogram. It's new and very good. It's not like those old gramophones that you have to wind and wind. You have to be very careful around it, very careful. You must never let water touch it.'

'Yes, sah.'

'I'm off to play tennis, and then I'll go on to the staff club.' Master picked up a few books from the table. 'I may be back late. So get settled and have a rest.'

'Yes, sah.' After Ugwu watched Master drive out of the compound, he went and stood beside the radiogram and looked at it carefully, without touching it. Then he walked around the house, up and down, touching books and curtains and furniture and plates, and when it got dark, he turned the light on and marvelled at how bright the bulb that dangled from the ceiling was, how it did not cast long shadows on the wall like the palm oil lamps back home.

His mother would be preparing the evening meal now, pounding akpu in the mortar, the pestle grasped tightly with both hands. Chioke, the junior wife, would be tending the pot of watery soup balanced on three stones over the fire. The children would have come back from the stream and would be taunting and chasing one another under the breadfruit tree. Perhaps Anulika would be watching them. She was the oldest child in the household now, and as they all sat around the fire to eat, she would break up the fights when the younger ones struggled over the strips of dried fish in the soup. She would wait until all the akpu was eaten and then divide the fish so that each child had a piece, and she would keep the biggest for herself, as he had always done.

Ugwu opened the fridge and ate some more bread and chicken, quickly stuffing the food in his mouth while his heart beat as if he were running; then he dug out extra chunks of meat and pulled out the wings. He slipped the pieces into his shorts' pockets before going to the bedroom. He would keep them until his aunty visited and he would ask her to give them to Anulika.

## Extract 3: The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas

Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor black neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend, Khalil, at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed. Soon afterward, Khalil's death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer. Starr's best friend at school suggests he may have had it coming. When it becomes clear the police have little interest in investigating the incident, protesters take to the streets and Starr's neighborhood becomes a war zone. What everyone wants to know is: What really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr. But what Starr does—or does not—say could destroy her community. It could also endanger her life. This extract describes what happens on the night when Starr and Khalil leave a party together and get stopped by the police.



When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me. One was the usual birds and bees. Well, I didn't really get the usual version. My mom, Lisa, is a registered nurse, and she told me what went where, and what didn't need to go here, there, or any damn where till I'm grown. Back then, I doubted anything was going anywhere anyway. While all the other girls sprouted breasts between sixth and seventh grade, my chest was as flat as my back. The other talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me. Momma fussed and told Daddy I was too young for that. He argued that I wasn't too young to get arrested or shot.

"Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do," he said. "Keep your hands visible. Don't make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you."

I knew it must've been serious. Daddy has the biggest mouth of anybody I know, and if he said to be quiet, I needed to be quiet.

I hope somebody had the talk with Khalil. He cusses under his breath, turns Tupac down, and manoeuvres the Impala to the side of the street. We're on Carnation where most of the houses are abandoned and half the streetlights are busted. Nobody around but us and the cop. Khalil turns the ignition off. "Wonder what this fool wants." The officer parks and puts his brights on. I blink to keep from being blinded.

I remember something else Daddy said. If you're with somebody, you better hope they don't have nothing on them, or both of y'all going down.

"K, you don't have anything in the car, do you?" I ask. He watches the cop in his side mirror.

"Nah."

The officer approaches the driver's door and taps the window. Khalil cranks the handle to roll it down. As if we aren't blinded enough, the officer beams his flashlight in our faces.

"License, registration, and proof of insurance."

Khalil breaks a rule – he doesn't do what the cop wants.

“What you pull us over for?”

“License, registration, and proof of insurance.”

“I said what you pull us over for?”

“Khalil,” I plead. “Do what he said.”

Khalil groans and takes his wallet out. The officer follows his movements with the flashlight. My heart pounds loudly, but Daddy’s instructions echo in my head: Get a good look at the cop’s face. If you can remember his badge number, that’s even better. With the flashlight following Khalil’s hands, I make out the numbers on the badge – one-fifteen. He’s white, mid-thirties to early forties, has a brown buzz cut and a thin scar over his top lip. Khalil hands the officer his papers and license. One-Fifteen looks over them.

“Where are you two coming from tonight?”

“Nunya,” Khalil says, meaning none of your business. “What you pull me over for?” “Your taillight’s broken.”

“So are you gon’ give me a ticket or what?” Khalil asks.

You know what? Get out the car, smart guy.”

“Man, just give me my ticket—”

“Get out the car! Hands up, where I can see them.”

Khalil gets out with his hands up. One-Fifteen yanks him by his arm and pins him against the back door. I fight to find my voice. “He didn’t mean—”

“Hands on the dashboard!” the officer barks at me. “Don’t move!”

I do what he tells me, but my hands are shaking too much to be still. He pats Khalil down.

“Okay, smart mouth, let’s see what we find on you today.”

“You ain’t gon’ find nothing,” Khalil says.

One-Fifteen pats him down two more times. He turns up empty.

“Stay here,” he tells Khalil.

“And you.” He looks in the window at me. “Don’t move.” I can’t even nod.

The officer walks back to his patrol car. My parents haven’t raised me to fear the police, just to be smart around them. They told me it’s not smart to move while a cop has his back to you. Khalil does. He comes to his door. It’s not smart to make a sudden move. Khalil does. He opens the driver’s door.

“You okay, Starr—”

Pow! One. Khalil's body jerks. Blood splatters from his back. He holds on to the door to keep himself upright. Pow! Two. Khalil gasps. Pow! Three. Khalil looks at me, stunned. He falls to the ground. I'm ten again, watching Natasha drop. An earsplitting scream emerges from my gut, explodes in my throat, and uses every inch of me to be heard. Instinct says don't move, but everything else says check on Khalil.

I jump out the Impala and rush around to the other side. Khalil stares at the sky as if he hopes to see God. His mouth is open like he wants to scream. I scream loud enough for the both of us.

"No, no, no," is all I can say, like I'm a year old and it's the only word I know. I'm not sure how I end up on the ground next to him. My mom once said that if someone gets shot, try to stop the bleeding, but there's so much blood. Too much blood.

"No, no, no." Khalil doesn't move. He doesn't utter a word. He doesn't even look at me. His body stiffens, and he's gone. I hope he sees God. Someone else screams. I blink through my tears. Officer One-Fifteen yells at me, pointing the same gun he killed my friend with. I put my hands up.

They leave Khalil's body in the street like it's an exhibit. Police cars and ambulances flash all along Carnation Street. People stand off to the side, trying to see what happened.

"Damn, bruh," some guy says. "They killed him!"

The police tell the crowd to leave. Nobody listens. The paramedics can't do shit for Khalil, so they put me in the back of an ambulance like I need help. The bright lights spotlight me, and people crane their necks to get a peek. I don't feel special. I feel sick. The cops rummage through Khalil's car. I try to tell them to stop. Please, cover his body. Please, close his eyes. Please, close his mouth. Get away from his car. Don't pick up his hairbrush. But the words never come out.

One-Fifteen sits on the sidewalk with his face buried in his hands. Other officers pat his shoulder and tell him it'll be okay. They finally put a sheet over Khalil. He can't breathe under it. I can't breathe. I can't. Breathe. I gasp. And gasp. And gasp.

"Starr?" Brown eyes with long eyelashes appear in front of me. They're like mine. I couldn't say much to the cops, but I did manage to give them my parents' names and phone numbers.

"Hey," Daddy says. "C'mon, let's go." I open my mouth to respond. A sob comes out. Daddy is moved aside, and Momma wraps her arms around me. She rubs my back and speaks in hushed tones that tell lies.

"It's all right, baby. It's all right." We stay this way for a long time.

Eventually, Daddy helps us out the ambulance. He wraps his arm around me like a shield against curious eyes and guides me to his Tahoe down the street. He drives. A streetlight flashes across his face, revealing how tight his jaw is set. His veins bulge along his bald head. Momma's wearing her scrubs, the ones with the rubber ducks on them. She did an extra shift at the emergency room tonight. She wipes her eyes a few times, probably thinking about Khalil or how that could've been me lying in the street. My stomach twists. All of that blood, and it came out of him. Some of it is on my hands, on Seven's hoodie, on my sneakers. An hour ago we were laughing and catching up. Now his blood... Hot spit pools in my mouth. My stomach twists tighter. I gag. Momma glances at me in the rearview mirror.

“Maverick, pull over!” I throw myself across the backseat and push the door open before the truck comes to a complete stop. It feels like everything in me is coming out, and all I can do is let it. Momma hops out and runs around to me. She holds my hair out the way and rubs my back. “I’m so sorry, baby,” she says.

When we get home, she helps me undress. Seven’s hoodie and my Jordans disappear into a black trash bag, and I never see them again. I sit in a tub of steaming water and scrub my hands raw to get Khalil’s blood off. Daddy carries me to bed, and Momma brushes her fingers through my hair until I fall asleep.

Nightmares wake me over and over again. Momma reminds me to breathe, the same way she did before I outgrew asthma. I think she stays in my room the whole night, ’cause every time I wake up, she’s sitting on my bed. But this time, she’s gone. My eyes strain against the brightness of my neon-blue walls. The clock says it’s five in the morning. My body’s so used to waking up at five, it doesn’t care if it’s Saturday morning or not. I stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, trying to recap the night before.

The party flashes in my mind, the fight, One-Fifteen pulling me and Khalil over. The first shot rings in my ears. The second. The third. I’m lying in bed. Khalil is lying in the county morgue. That’s where Natasha ended up too.

It happened six years ago, but I still remember everything from that day. I was sweeping floors at our grocery store, saving up for my first pair of J’s, when Natasha ran in. She was chunky (her momma told her it was baby fat), dark-skinned, and wore her hair in braids that always looked freshly done. I wanted braids like hers so bad.

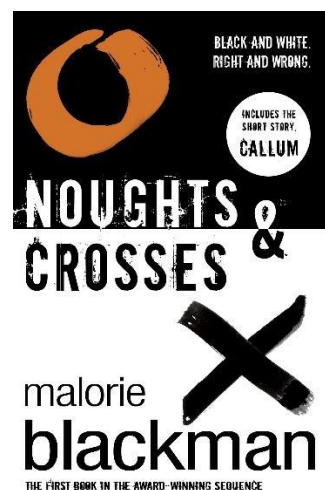
“Starr, the hydrant on Elm Street busted!” she said. That was like saying we had a free water park. I remember looking at Daddy and pleading silently. He said I could go, as long as I promised to be back in an hour. I don’t think I ever saw the water shoot as high as it did that day. Almost everybody in the neighborhood was there too. Just having fun. I was the only one who noticed the car at first. A tattooed arm stretched out the back window, holding a Glock. People ran. Not me though. My feet became part of the sidewalk. Natasha was splashing in the water, all happy and stuff.

Then— Pow! Pow! Pow! I dove into a rosebush.

By the time I got up, somebody was yelling, “Call nine-one-one!” At first I thought it was me, ’cause I had blood on my shirt. The thorns on the rosebush got me, that’s all. It was Natasha though. Her blood mixed in with the water, and all you could see was a red river flowing down the street.

## Extract 4: Noughts and Crosses, by Malorie Blackman

Sephy is a Cross – a member of the dark-skinned ruling class. Callum is a nought – a ‘colourless’ member of the underclass who were once slaves to the Crosses. The two have been friends since early childhood. But that’s as far as it can go. Against a background of prejudice and distrust a romance builds between Sephy and Callum – a romance that is to lead both of them into terrible danger.



‘Honestly, Mrs Hadley,’ said Meggie McGregor, wiping her eyes. ‘That sense of humour of yours will be the death of me yet!’

Jasmine Hadley allowed herself a rare giggle.

‘The things I tell you, Meggie. It’s lucky we’re such good friends!’

Meggie’s smile wavered only slightly. She looked out across the vast lawn at Callum and Sephy. Her son and her employer’s daughter. They were good friends playing together. Real good friends. No barriers. No boundaries. Not yet anyway. It was a typical early summer’s day, light and bright and, in the Hadley household anyway, not a cloud in their sky.

‘Excuse me, Mrs Hadley.’ Sarah Pike, Mrs Hadley’s secretary, approached from the house. She had shoulder-length straw-coloured hair and timid green eyes which appeared permanently startled. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you but your husband has just arrived. He’s in the study.’

‘Kamal is here?’ Mrs Hadley was astounded. ‘Thank you, Sarah.’ She turned to Meggie. ‘His fourth visit home in as many months! We’re honoured!’

Meggie smiled sympathetically, making sure to keep her mouth well and truly shut. No way was she going to get in the middle of another inevitable squabble between Kamal Hadley and his wife. Mrs Hadley stood up and made her way into the house.

‘So, Sarah, how is Mr Hadley?’ Meggie lowered her voice to ask. ‘Is he in a good mood, d’you think?’

Sarah shook her head. ‘He looks about ready to blow a fuse.’

‘Why?’

‘No idea.’ Meggie digested this news in silence.

‘I’d better get back to work,’ Sarah sighed.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ Meggie pointed to the jug of ginger beer on the patio table.

'No, thanks. I don't want to get into trouble ...' With obvious trepidation, Sarah went back into the house. What was she afraid of? Meggie sighed. No matter how hard she tried, Sarah insisted on keeping her distance. Meggie turned back to watch the children. Life was so simple for them. Their biggest worry was what they'd get for their birthdays. Their biggest grumble was the time they had to go to bed. Maybe things would be different for them ... Better. Meggie forced herself to believe that things would be better for the children, otherwise what was the point of it all?

On those rare occasions when she had a moment to herself, she couldn't help but play 'what if' games. Not the big 'what if's that her husband sometimes liked to indulge in, like, 'What if a virus wiped out every single Cross and not a single nought?' or 'What if there was a revolution and all the Crosses were overthrown? Killed. Wiped off the face of the planet.' No, Meggie McGregor didn't believe in wasting her time on big, global fantasies. Her dreams were more specific, more unattainable than that. Her dreams were all around one subject. What if Callum and Sephy ...? What if Sephy and Callum ...? Meggie felt a peculiar, burning sensation on the back of her neck. She turned to find Mr Hadley standing on the patio, watching her with the strangest expression on his face.

'Is everything all right, Mr Hadley?'

'No. But I'll survive.' Mr Hadley moved forward to the patio table to stand over Meggie. 'You were deep in thought there. Penny for them?'

Flustered by his presence, Meggie began, 'I was just thinking about my son and your daughter. Wouldn't it be nice if ...?' Appalled, she bit back the rest of the sentence, but it was too late.

'What would be nice?' Mr Hadley prompted, silkily.

'If they could ... could always stay as they are now.' At Mr Hadley's raised eyebrows, Meggie rushed on. 'At this age, I mean. They're so wonderful at this age – children, I mean. So ... so ...'

'Yes, indeed.' Pause. Kamal Hadley sat down.

Mrs Hadley emerged from the kitchen to lean against the door frame. She had a strange, wary expression on her face. Meggie felt nervous. She started to get to her feet.

'I understand you had a wonderful time yesterday.' Mr Hadley smiled at Meggie. 'A ... a wonderful time?'

'Yesterday evening?' Mr Hadley prompted.

'Yes. It was quite quiet really ...' Meggie replied, confused. She looked from Mr to Mrs Hadley and back again. Mrs Hadley was watching her intently. What was going on? The temperature in the garden had dropped by several degrees and, despite his smiles, Mr Hadley was obviously furious at something – or someone. Meggie swallowed hard. Had she done something wrong? She didn't think so, but God only knew that being around Crosses was like walking on eggshells.

'So what did you do?' Mr Hadley prompted.

'P-pardon?'

'Last night?' Mr Hadley's smile was very friendly. Too friendly.

'I ... we stayed home and watched telly,' Meggie said slowly.

'It's nice to have a relaxing evening at home with your own family,' Mr Hadley agreed.

Meggie nodded.

What did he expect her to say to that? What was going on? Mr Hadley stood up, his smile now a thing of the past. He walked over to his wife. They both stood just watching each other as the seconds ticked by. Mrs Hadley began to straighten up. Without warning, Mr Hadley slapped his wife full across the face. The force of the blow sent Mrs Hadley's head snapping backwards to strike against the door frame. Meggie was on her feet in a second, her horrified gasp audible, her hand out in silent protest. Kamal Hadley gave his wife a look of such contempt and loathing that Mrs Hadley flinched back from it. Without a word passing between them, Mr Hadley went back into the house. Meggie was at Mrs Hadley's side in an instant.

'Are you OK?' Meggie's hand went out to examine the side of Mrs Hadley's face. Mrs Hadley knocked her hand away. With a puzzled frown, Meggie tried again. The same thing happened.

'Leave me alone,' Mrs Hadley hissed at her. 'When I needed your help, you didn't give it.'

'I ... what ...?' And only then did Meggie realize what she'd done. Mrs Hadley had obviously used Meggie as an alibi for the previous night and Meggie had been too slow to pick up on what Kamal Hadley had really been asking her. Meggie's hand dropped back to her side.

'I think I should get back to work ...'

'Yes, I think that would be best.' Mrs Hadley's look was venomous before she turned and walked back into the house. Meggie turned around. Callum and Sephy were still playing at the other end of the vast garden, oblivious to everything that had just happened. She stood and watched them, trying to capture for herself some small part of their pure joy in each other. She needed something good to hold on to. But even the distant sound of their laughter couldn't dampen down the deep sense of foreboding creeping through her. What would happen now?

That night, Meggie sat at the table sewing patches over the patches in Jude's school trousers.

'Meggie, I'm sure you're worrying about nothing,' Ryan, her husband, sighed.

'Ryan, you didn't see the look on her face. I did.' Meggie bit off the thread and picked up another patch. Jude's school trousers were more patch than original material. The phone started to ring. Meggie picked it up before the first ring had even died away.

'Hello?' 'Meggie McGregor?'

'That's right.' Meggie's sewing fell unheeded to her feet.

'It's Sarah Pike here ...' Meggie couldn't help but notice the apology already in her voice.

'How are you, Sarah?'

'Fine, er ... OK. Look, I've got some bad news ...'

Meggie nodded slowly. 'I'm listening.'



Sarah gave an embarrassed cough before she continued.

'Mrs Hadley has asked me to inform you that ... that your services at the Hadley household will no longer be required. She will pay you four weeks' wages in lieu of proper notice, plus give you a good reference.'

Meggie's blood turned to ice water in her veins. Whatever else she'd been expecting, it wasn't this. Heaven only knew it wasn't this.

'She's ... she's really sacking me?'

'I'm sorry.'

'I see.'

'I'm really sorry.' Sarah's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Between you and me, I think it's grossly unfair.'

From one nought to another ...

'It's OK, Sarah. It's not your fault,' Meggie replied.

She looked across at Ryan. His expression grew harder and tighter by degrees. Let him get upset. Let him be angry. All she could feel was ... nothing. A nothing that went way beyond the numbness enveloping every part of her body.

'Sorry, Meggie,' Sarah said again.

'That's OK. Thanks for letting me know. Bye, Sarah.'

'Bye.' Meggie put down the phone.

The clock on the TV counted out the silent moments that passed.

'That's the end of Jude's education,' she sighed at last.

'But we promised him we'd pay for him to carry on at school,' Ryan said, aghast.

'Pay with what?' Meggie rounded on her husband. 'The leaves off the trees? The hairs off our legs? What?'

'We'll find a way ...'

'How? We're barely managing to survive as it is. What will we do without my wages coming in? Jude will have to forget about school. He'll have to go out to work.'

'You'll get another job,' Ryan tried.

'Not with another Cross family I won't. D'you really think Mrs Hadley will stand idly by whilst I get another job with one of her friends?'

There was dawning horror on Ryan's face as he realized what his wife meant.

'Yes, exactly,' Meggie sighed.

She stood up and moved to sit next to her husband on the old sofa in front of the fire. Ryan put his arm around her. They sat in silence for a long, long time.

'Ryan, we're in trouble,' Meggie said at last.

'I know,' Ryan replied.

Meggie jumped to her feet, her expression hard and determined.

'I'm going to see her.'

'What're you talking about?' Ryan frowned.

'I've worked for that woman for fourteen years, ever since she was pregnant with her daughter Minerva. Seeing me is the very least she can do.'

'I don't think that's a good idea ...' Ryan's frown deepened.

'Ryan, I need to get my job back. And if I have to beg, then so be it,' Meggie insisted, pulling on her coat. Her expression was now so hard, it might've been carved in granite.

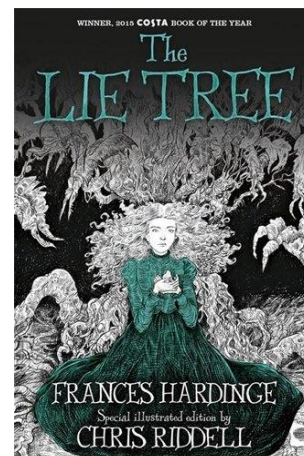
'No, Meggie ...'

'I don't like it any more than you do, but we have no choice.'

Meggie didn't wait for any further argument. She headed out of the door. Ryan watched his wife leave the house. No good would come of this. He could feel it. Two hours later, Meggie was back. And that was the night that Lynette disappeared ...

## Extract 5: *The Lie Tree*, Frances Hardinge

Faith's father, the Reverend Sunderly, a famous paleontologist who specialises in ancient fossils, is found dead under mysterious circumstances. As she is searching through his belongings for clues she discovers a strange tree. The tree only grows healthy and bears fruit if you whisper a lie to it. The fruit of the tree, when eaten, will deliver a hidden truth to the person who consumes it. The bigger the lie, the more people who believe it, the bigger the truth that is uncovered. The girl realizes that she is good at lying and that the tree might hold the key to her father's murder, so she begins to spread untruths far and wide across her small island community. But as her tales spiral out of control, she discovers that where lies seduce, truths shatter. This extract is taken from the beginning of the book, before Faith's father dies. At this point, the whole family is accompanying the Reverend Sunderly to an isolated island where he is going to dig for fossils.



The boat moved with a nauseous, relentless rhythm, like someone chewing on a rotten tooth. The islands just visible through the mist also looked like teeth, Faith decided. Not fine, clean Dover teeth, but jaded, broken teeth, jutting crookedly amid the wash of the choppy grey sea. The mailboat chugged its dogged way through the waves, greasing the sky with smoke.

'Osprey,' said Faith through chattering teeth, and pointed.

Her six-year-old brother Howard twisted round, too slow to see the great bird, as its pale body and dark-fringed wings vanished into the mist. Faith winced as he shifted his weight on her lap. At least he had stopped demanding his nursemaid.

'Is that where we are going?' Howard squinted at the ghostly islands ahead.

'Yes, How.' Rain thudded against the thin wooden roof above their heads. The cold wind blew in from the deck, stinging Faith's face.

In spite of the noise around her, Faith was sure that she could hear faint sounds coming from the crate on which she sat. Rasps of movement, breathy slithers of scale on scale. It pained Faith to think of her father's little Chinese snake inside, weak with the cold, coiling and uncoiling itself in panic with every tilt of the deck.

Behind her, raised voices competed with the keening of the gulls and the phud- phud-phud of the boat's great paddles. Now that the rain was setting in, everybody on board was squabbling over the small sheltered area towards the stern. There was room for the passengers, but not for all of the trunks. Faith's mother Myrtle was doing her best to claim a large share for her family's luggage, with considerable success.

Sneaking a quick glance over her shoulder, Faith saw Myrtle waving her arms like a conductor while two deckhands moved the Sunderly trunks and crates into place. Today Myrtle was waxen with tiredness and shrouded to the chin with shawls, but as usual she talked through and over everybody else, warm, bland and unabashed, with a pretty woman's faith in others' helpless chivalry.

'Thank you, there, right there – well, I am heartily sorry to hear that, but it cannot be helped – on its side, if you do not mind – well, your case looks very durable to me – I am afraid my husband's papers

and projects will not endure the weather so – the Reverend Erasmus Sunderly, the renowned naturalist – how very kind! I am so glad that you do not mind . . .’

Beyond her, round-faced Uncle Miles was napping in his seat, blithely and easily as a puppy on a rug. Faith’s gaze slipped past him, to the tall, silent figure beyond. Faith’s father in his black priestly coat, his broad-brimmed hat overshadowing his high brow and hooked nose.

He always filled Faith with awe. Even now he stared out towards the grey horizons with his unyielding basilisk stare, distancing himself from the chilly downpour, the reek of bilge and coal-smoke and the ignominious arguing and jostling. Most weeks she saw more of him in the pulpit than she did in the house, so it was peculiar to look across and see him sitting there. Today she felt a prickle of pained sympathy. He was out of his element, a lion in a rain-lashed sideshow.

On Myrtle’s orders, Faith was sitting on the family’s largest crate, to stop anybody dragging it out again. Usually she managed to fade into the background, since nobody had attention to spare for a fourteen-year-old girl with wooden features and a mud-brown plait. Now she winced under resentful glares, seared by all the embarrassment that Myrtle never felt.

Myrtle’s petite figure was positioned to impede anybody else trying to insert their own luggage under cover. A tall, broad man with a knucky nose seemed about to push past her with his trunk, but she cut him short by turning to smile.

Myrtle blinked twice, and her big, blue eyes widened, taking on an earnest shine as if she had only just noticed the person before her with clarity. Despite her pink-nipped nose and weary pallor, her smile still managed to be sweet and confiding.

‘Thank you for being so understanding,’ she said. There was the tiniest, tired break in her voice.

It was one of Myrtle’s tricks for handling men, a little coquetry she summoned as easily and reflexively as opening her fan. Every time it worked, Faith’s stomach twisted. It worked now. The gentleman flushed, gave a curt bow and withdrew, but Faith could see he was still carrying his resentment with him. In fact, Faith suspected that her family had antagonized nearly everybody on the boat.

Howard shyly adored their mother, and when she was younger Faith had seen her in the same honeyed light. Myrtle’s rare visits to the nursery had been almost unbearably exciting, and Faith had even loved the ritual of being groomed, dressed and fussed over to make her presentable for each encounter. Myrtle had seemed like a being from another world, warm, merry, beautiful and untouchable, a sun-nymph with a keen sense of fashion.

However, over the last year Myrtle had decided to start ‘taking Faith in hand’, which appeared to involve interrupting Faith’s lessons without warning, and dragging her away on impulse for visits or trips to town, before abandoning her to the nursery and schoolroom once more. Over this year, familiarity had done its usual work, picking off the gilded paint one scratch at a time. Faith had started to feel like a rag doll, snatched up and cast down according to the whims of an impatient child with an uncertain temper.

Right now the crowds were receding. Myrtle settled herself down on a stack of three trunks next to Faith’s crate, with an air of deep self-satisfaction.

'I do hope the place that Mr Lambent has arranged for us has a decent drawing room,' she remarked, 'and that the servants will do. The cook simply cannot be French. I can scarcely run a household if my cook can choose to misunderstand me whenever she pleases . . .'

Myrtle's voice was not unpleasant, but it trickled on, and on, and on. For the last day her chatter had been the family's constant companion, as she shared it with the hackney- carriage driver who had taken them to the station, the guards who had stowed the family's luggage in the trains to London and then Poole, the surly custodian of the chilly inn where they had spent the night, and the captain of this smoky mailboat.

'Why are we going there?' interrupted Howard. His eyes were glassy with tiredness. He was at the fork. Ahead lay either compulsive napping or helpless tantrums.

'You know that, darling.' Myrtle leaned across to stroke wet hair out of Howard's eyes with a careful, gloved finger. 'There are some very important caves on that island over there, where gentlemen have been discovering dozens of clever fossils. Nobody knows more about fossils than your father, so they asked him to come and look at them.'

'But why did we come?' Howard persisted. 'He did not take us to China. Or India. Or Africa. Or Mongolia.' The last was his best attempt at Mongolia.

It was a good question, and one that a lot of people were probably asking. Yesterday a flurry of cards carrying excuses and last-minute cancellations would have turned up in households all over the Sunderlys' home parish like apologetic, rectangular snowflakes. By today, word of the family's unscheduled departure would be spreading like wildfire.

In truth, Faith herself would have liked to know the answer to Howard's question.

'Oh, we could never have gone to those places!' Myrtle declared vaguely. 'Snakes, and fevers, and people who eat dogs. This is different. It will be a little holiday.'

'Did we have to go because of the Beetle Man?' asked Howard, screwing up his face in concentration.

The Reverend, who had shown no sign of listening to the conversation, suddenly drew in his breath through his nose and let it out in a disapproving hiss. He rose to his feet.

'The rain is easing, and this saloon is too crowded,' he declared, and strode out on to the deck.

Myrtle winced and looked over at Uncle Miles, who was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

'Perhaps I should, ah, take a little constitutional as well.' Uncle Miles glanced at his sister with a small, wry lift of the eyebrows. He smoothed down his moustache at the corners of his smile, then followed his brother-in-law out of the saloon.

'Where did Father go?' asked Howard in piercing tones, craning his neck round to peer out towards the deck. 'Can I go too? Can I have my gun?'

Myrtle closed her eyes briefly and let her lips flutter in what looked like a small, exasperated prayer for patience. She opened her eyes again, and smiled at Faith.

‘Oh, Faith, what a rock you are.’ It was the smile she always gave Faith, fond but with a hint of weary acceptance. ‘You may not be the liveliest company . . . but at least you never ask questions.’

Faith managed a flat, chilled smile. She knew who Howard meant by ‘the Beetle Man’, and suspected that his question had been dangerously close to the mark.

For the last month the family had been living in a frozen fog of the unsaid. Looks, whispers, subtle changes in manner and gently withdrawn contact. Faith had noticed the alteration, but had been unable to guess the reason for it.

And then, one Sunday while the family were walking back from church, a man in a brown homburg hat had approached to introduce himself, with much bobbing and bowing and a smile that never reached his eyes. He had written a paper on beetles, and would the respected Reverend Erasmus Sunderly consider writing a foreword? The respected Reverend would not consider it, and became ever more coldly irate at the visitor’s persistence. The stranger was ‘scraping an acquaintance’ in breach of all good manners, and at last the Reverend flatly told him so.

The beetle enthusiast’s smile had drooped into something less pleasant. Faith still remembered the quiet venom of his reply.

‘Forgive me for imagining that your civility would be the equal of your intellect. The way rumour is spreading, Reverend, I would have thought that you would be glad to find a fellow man of science who is still willing to shake you by the hand.’

Remembering those words, Faith’s blood ran cold again. She had never dreamed that she would see her father insulted to his face. Worse still, the Reverend had turned away from the stranger in furious silence, without demanding an explanation. The chill haze of

Faith’s suspicions began to crystallize. There were rumours abroad, and her father knew what they were, even if she did not.

Myrtle was wrong. Faith was full of questions, coiling and writhing like the snake in the crate.

Oh, but I cannot. I must not give way to that.

In Faith’s mind, it was always that. She never gave it another name, for fear of yielding it yet more power over her. That was an addiction, she knew that much. That was something she was always giving up, except that she never did. That was the very opposite of Faith as the world knew her. Faith the good girl, the rock. Reliable, dull, trustworthy Faith.

It was the unexpected opportunities that she found hardest to resist. An unattended envelope with the letter peeping out, clean and tantalizing. An unlocked door. A careless conversation, unheeding of eavesdroppers.

There was a hunger in her, and girls were not supposed to be hungry. They were supposed to nibble sparingly when at table, and their minds were supposed to be satisfied with a slim diet too. A few stale lessons from tired governesses, dull walks, unthinking pastimes.

But it was not enough. All knowledge – any knowledge – called to Faith, and there was a delicious, poisonous pleasure in stealing it unseen.

Right now, however, her curiosity had a focus and an urgent edge. At that very moment, her father and Uncle Miles might be talking about the Beetle Man, and the reasons for the family's sudden exodus.

'Mother . . . may I walk on the deck a little while? My stomach . . .'

 Faith almost made herself believe her own words. Her insides were indeed churning, but with excitement, not the boat's jarring lurches.

'Very well – but do not answer anyone who talks to you. Take the umbrella, be careful not to fall overboard, and come back before you catch a chill.'

As Faith paced slowly alongside the rail, the faltering drizzle drumming on her umbrella, she admitted to herself that she was giving in to that again. Excitement pumped dark wine through her veins and sharpened all her senses to painful edges. She wandered slowly out of sight of Myrtle and Howard, then dawdled, acutely aware of each glance directed her way. One by one these gazes wearied of her and slid off once more.

Her moment came. Nobody was looking. She sidled quickly across the deck and lost herself among the crates that clustered at the base of the boat's shuddering, discoloured funnel.

The air tasted of salt and guilt, and she felt alive.

She slipped from one hiding place to another, keeping her skirts gathered close so that they did not flare in the wind and betray her location. Her broad, square feet, so clumsy when anybody tried to fit them for fashionable shoes, settled silently on the boards with practised deftness.

Between two crates she found a hiding place from which she could see her father and uncle a mere three yards away. Seeing her father without being seen felt like a special sacrilege.

'To flee my own home!' exclaimed the Reverend. 'It smacks of cowardice, Miles. I should never have let you persuade me to leave Kent. And what good will our departure do? Rumours are like dogs. Flee from them and they give chase.'

'Rumours are dogs indeed, Erasmus.' Uncle Miles squinted through his pince-nez. 'And they hunt in packs, and on sight. You needed to leave society for a while. Now that you are gone, they will find something else to chase.'

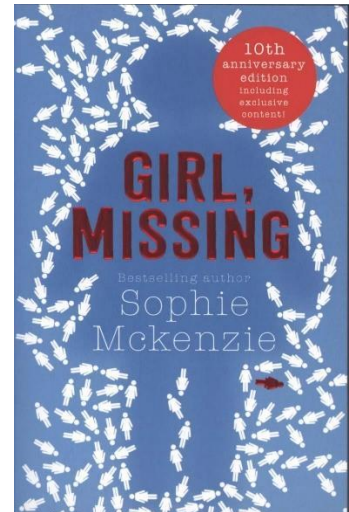
'By creeping away under cover of darkness, Miles, I have fed these dogs. My departure will be used in evidence against me.'

'Perhaps it will, Erasmus,' answered Uncle Miles with unusual seriousness, 'but would you rather be judged here on a remote island by a couple of sheep farmers, or in England among persons of consequence? The Vane Island excavation was the best excuse I could find for your departure, and I remain glad that you chose to accept my arguments. Yesterday morning that article in the *Intelligencer* was read out at breakfast tables all over the country. If you had stayed, you would have forced your entire circle to decide whether they would support or snub you, and the way rumour has been spreading you might not have liked the decisions they would have made.'

'Erasmus, one of the most widely read and respected newspapers in the nation has decried you as a fraud and a cheat. Unless you want to subject Myrtle and the children to all the barbs and trials of scandal, you cannot return to Kent. Until your name is clear, nothing good awaits any of you there.'

## Extract 6: *Girl, Missing*, by Sophie McKenzie

Lauren is adopted and eager to know more about her mysterious past. But when she discovers she may have been snatched from her family as a baby, her whole life suddenly feels like a sham. Why will no one answer her questions? How can she find her biological parents? And could her adoptive parents really have been responsible for kidnapping her? Running away from her family to seek out the truth, Lauren's journey takes her deeper and deeper into danger as she realises that someone wants to stop her uncovering what really happened when she was a baby... at any cost...



1-Who am I?

I sat at the computer in Mum's office and stared at the essay heading. New form teachers always give you homework like that at the start of the year. Who am I? When I was younger it was easy. I'd just write down obvious stuff like: I am Lauren Matthews. I have brown hair and blue eyes. But now we're supposed to write about what interests us. Likes and dislikes. Who we are 'inside'.

I needed a break. I texted my friend Jam.

*hw u dng w/ stpd 'who am i' thng?*

A minute later he texted back:

*We are sorry to inform you that James 'Jam' Caldwell died from boredom while working on his homework earlier tonight.*

I laughed out loud. Jam always cheers me up. Some of the girls in my class tease me about him. Make out he's my boyfriend. Which is like the stupidest thing ever. Jam and I have been friends since Primary.

Who am I? I put my head in my hands. How can anyone work out who they are, unless they know where they come from? And I have no idea where I come from. I was adopted when I was three. A minute later and Mum was ca'Lauren. Tea's ready.'

I raced down, glad to get away from the essay. I didn't get away from it for long. 'How's the homework going?' Mum asked, prodding something in a frying pan. 'Mmmn,' I mumbled.

'For goodness' sake, Lauren,' Mum sighed. 'Why can't you speak properly?'

I looked at her. Same old Mum. Short. Bony. Thin-lipped. I look nothing like her. I spoke

very clearly and slowly.

'Who is my real mother?' Mum froze. For a second she looked terrified. Then her face went hard like a mask. No emotion.



'I am,' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing.' I looked away, wishing I hadn't said anything.

Mum sat down, the frying pan still in her hand.

'I thought you weren't bothered about knowing,' she said.

I rolled my eyes. 'I'm not.'

Mum ladled scrambled eggs onto my plate.

'Anyway, I can't tell you. It was a closed adoption. That means neither side knows anything about the other.'

She got up, replaced the frying pan on the cooker and turned back to me. Her face was all anxious now.

'Has someone said something at school?'

'No.' I bent over my eggs.

Trust Mum to assume somebody else was putting ideas in my head. It would be too much for her to imagine I might have started thinking about it for myself.

'What's for tea?' Rory pelted in from the garden, his fat cheeks red from the cold air. Rory's eight and the spit of my dad.

'My little test-tube miracle,' my mum calls him.

All I can say is, a lot of unpleasant things grow in test tubes. Rory skidded to a halt at the table, then made a face. 'Scrambled eggs stink.'

'Not as much as you,' I said.

Rory picked up his fork and prodded me with it.

'Ow. Mum, he's hitting me.' Mum glared at us both.

'Sit, Rory.'

Sometimes I wonder if she thinks he's a dog. I heard her say once to a friend, 'Boys are like puppies. All they need is affection and fresh air. Girls are much harder work.'

So why choose me – a girl – in the first place? I remembered all the times when I was little that Mum talked to me about being adopted – about how they picked me out of some catalogue. It used to make me feel special. Wanted. Now it made me feel like a mail-order dress. A dress that didn't fit but that was too much trouble to send back.

'Can Jam come round later?' I asked.

'When you've done your homework – if it isn't too late,' came Mum's predictable reply.

'These eggs look like your puke,' Rory said.

Sometimes I really, really hate him. I emailed Jam as soon as I went back upstairs.

C u l&r?

His reply came back in seconds:

ill b thr @ 7.

I checked the time on the corner of the screen: 6.15. I was never going to finish my essay in forty-five minutes.

Who am I? Adopted. Lost. I typed the words into the search engine box. I'd been thinking about it a lot recently. Last week I'd even checked out some of the adoption information websites. You'd have laughed if you'd seen me: heart thumping, palms sweating, stomach screwed up into a knot. I mean, it's not as if there's going to be some site that says: Lauren Matthews – click here for your adoption details. Anyway. D'you know what I found out? That if I wanted to know anything about my life before I was three, I needed Mum and Dad's permission. How unbelievable is that? My life. My identity. My past. But their decision. Even if I asked, there's no way Mum would say yes. Well, you've seen how she is about the subject. Gets a face on her like a smashed plate. It would serve her right if I went ahead and did it anyway.

I clicked on the search icon. Adopted. Lost. Nearly a million hits. My heart thudded. I could feel my stomach clenching again. I sat back in my chair. Enough. I was just wasting time. Putting off the homework. I reached over to close the search. And that's when I caught sight of it: Missing-Children.com. An international site for lost or missing children. I frowned. I mean, how do you lose a child and them not turn up? I can see how you might lose one for five minutes. Or even an hour. And I know sometimes children go missing 'cause some psycho's murdered them. But Mum's always saying that only happens like once or twice a year.

I clicked through to the homepage. It was a flickering mass of faces. Each face the size of a stamp; each stamp turning into a new face after a few seconds. My jaw dropped. Did all these faces belong to missing children? I saw a search field. I hesitated. Then I tapped in my name. Lauren. I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing. Just messing about – seeing how many missing Laurens there were out there. It turned out there were one hundred and seventy-two. Jeez. The computer was flashing at me to refine my search. Part of me wanted to stop. But I told myself not to be stupid. The flickering faces on the screen weren't adopted children like me – with no past. They were missing kids. Kids with only a past. I just wanted to see who was there.

I added my birth month to the search criteria, then watched as three Laurens appeared on the screen. One was black, missing since she was two weeks old. One was white with blonde hair – she looked about nine or ten. Yeah – she'd only been missing five years. I stared at the third child.

Martha Lauren Purditt Case type: lost, injured, missing

Date of birth: March 12 Age now: 14

Birth place: Evanport, Connecticut, USA

Hair: brown Eyes: blue

I looked at the face above the words. A chubby, smiling little girl's face. Then at the date she'd gone missing: September 8. Less than two months before I was adopted.

My heart seemed to stop beating.

The birth date was a couple of days out. And I was British, not from America like the missing girl. So it wasn't possible. Was it? The question seeped like a drug through my head, turning me upside down and inside out, filling me up. Could I be her?

## 2-Telling Jam

I stared at the little girl on the screen, searching her face for signs that she might be me.

'Lauren, Jam's here.'

Mum's shout made me jump.

My heart raced as Jam's footsteps pounded up the stairs. I reached forward and minimised the screen. I ran to the door, just as Jam got there.

'Hi Laurenzo.' Jam smiled. His dark hair was gelled back off his face and he smelled of soap.

'Finished your homework?'

'Yeah. Er . . . no, actually.' I was hardly listening. 'I need something from downstairs.' Jam frowned, but followed me down to the living room. Mum was sitting on the sofa watching the news on TV.

'Mum, where're our photo albums?' She stared at me.

'End of the cupboard.' She pointed to a pair of wooden doors in the corner of the room.

'Why the sudden interest?'

I raced over and started pulling out albums, flicking through the pages. 'Where're the oldest ones of me?' I said.

Silence. I glanced up.

Mum and Jam were both looking at me as if I was mad.

'What's this about, sweetheart?' Mum's voice sounded tense.

I put down the album I was holding.

'It's for this "Who am I?" essay,' I said slowly.

'It's finished, but I thought it would be nice to put in a picture of me when I was younger, alongside one of me now. I'm only hurrying 'cause Jam's here.'

Mum's face relaxed. 'That's a good idea,' she said. 'Though I think I told you to get everything done before he came round. Try the green album at the end.'

I pulled it out and opened it at the first page.

There I was. Serious little face. Wispy brown bob. I showed Mum. 'When was this taken?' I asked, trying to sound casual.

'Just after we got you,' she said. 'Christmas time.'

This was the best I was going to get. 'Can I take it?'

'Sure,' Mum said. 'But make sure you bring it back.' She smiled. 'Those pictures are precious.'

I stood up. 'I'll be back in a minute.' I looked from Mum to Jam. He stared back at me suspiciously. 'I just want to scan this in.'

I raced back up to Mum's study and pulled up the Missing-Children.com site. I held the photo of me next to the picture on the screen of Martha Lauren Purditt. I think I'd expected this would prove things one way or the other. It didn't. Martha Lauren was chubby and dimpled and laughing. In the photo from Mum's album my face was thinner and I wasn't smiling. And yet there were similarities: the shape of the eyes, the crease under the lips. It could be me. It all, almost, fitted. I felt like I was on one of those funfair rides that spin you round in so many directions at once that you can't tell which way is up.

If that was me, I wasn't who I thought I was. I had a different name. A different nationality. Even a different birthday. None of the facts of my life were certain.

'What are you doing?' Jam was staring at me from the doorway, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Nothing.' I quickly minimised the screen.

I was being ridiculous. The whole thing was too bizarre. Jam would laugh at me if I told him – tell me to beam back up to planet Egotrip or something. And yet I wanted to show him. I wanted to know what he thought.

'Don't give me that.' Jam narrowed his eyes. 'You've been freaking out since I got here. All that crap with the photo albums. You just wanted me out of this room.'

'No I didn't, Jam.' I tried to smile. 'It was just this weird – thing . . .' I tailed off.

Jam walked over to the computer. 'What kind of weird thing?' He grinned, but the grin didn't quite reach his eyes. 'Like some weird guy asking you out? What did you say?'

'What? No. Ew. No way.' What was Jam going on about? He knew I was, like, totally uninterested in dating and boys and all that stuff.

'Then why . . . ?' Jam's eyes focused on the minimiser lozenge at the bottom of the

screen. 'Why are you looking at a missing children site?' 'Promise you won't laugh?'

He nodded.

I clicked on the minimiser lozenge. Martha Lauren Purditt appeared on the screen. Jam glanced from her to the photograph of me on the desk beside the computer. He frowned.

‘What?’

His eyes widened. ‘You don’t think that’s you, do you?’

I looked away, my cheeks burning. ‘I don’t know,’ I whispered. I looked up. Jam was clicking on a link marked: age-progressed photograph. ‘Wait,’ I cried out. But it was too late.

A new picture was on the screen, showing Martha Lauren Purditt as she might appear now. I didn’t want to look at it and yet I couldn’t stop myself. It was me. But at the same time, it wasn’t. The face was too long and the nose too cutesy and turned-up looking.

‘Mmmn,’ Jam said. ‘It’s hard to say, isn’t it? I mean it looks a bit like you. But . . .’

My heart was beating fast. OK, so he wasn’t any more certain than I had been. But at least he wasn’t laughing at me. I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. Without looking at me, Jam clicked back to the first picture and pressed the print icon. As the printer spewed out the page, Jam held it up to show me.

‘It’s like a “missing” poster,’ he said. ‘And look – there’s a phone number at the bottom here. Maybe you should call up and—’

‘No. No way.’ I jumped up and tore the paper out of his hand. This was all moving too fast. Jam was being too practical. Too logical about everything.

‘I need time to think,’ I said.

‘Chill out, Lazerbrain.’ Jam rolled his eyes – like he does when his mum and sisters start screaming at each other. ‘I was only trying to help. Don’t you want to find out if that’s really you?’

‘Maybe.’ I shrugged.

The truth was that I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything any more.

‘I guess your mum and dad might be able to tell.’ Jam put his head to one side and studied the picture.

‘I’m not showing them,’ I gasped.

‘Yeah. S’probably not a good idea, anyway.’ ‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well.’ Jam hesitated. ‘If that Martha Lauren girl is you, how d’you think it happened? I mean, back then when you were three, how did you go from being in America in September to being in London by Christmas?’

I shook my head. Trust Jam to start asking all the practical questions. I couldn’t even get my head around the idea that I might be a completely different person.

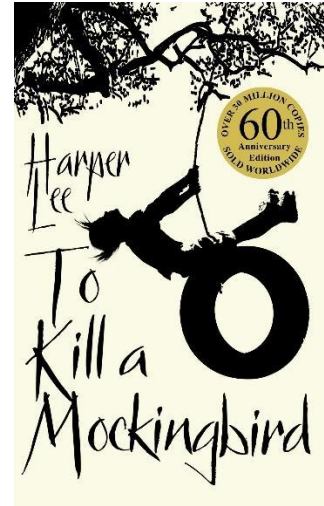
'Think about it, Lazerbrain,' Jam smiled weakly. 'Children don't just vanish for no reason. You must have been taken deliberately.'

'What's that got to do with my mum and dad?' I asked.

Jam took a deep breath. 'I think you have to consider the possibility that your parents were somehow involved.' Iling from downstairs.

## Extract 7: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee

Set in the American Deep South in the 1930s, nearly a hundred years ago, this novel tells the story of the childhood of Scout and her brother Jem. When their father, the lawyer Atticus Finch, defends a black man falsely charged with the rape of a white girl, the irrationality of adult attitudes to race and class interrupt their carefree childhood. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina of one man's struggle for justice. This extract comes some way into the book, as their father explains to them that he has taken on a controversial case. The text contains an offensive term for black Americans. The author's message is a condemnation of racism, and she includes the offensive term in order to reflect the racism of the time.



Atticus sighed. 'I'm simply defending a Negro – his name's Tom Robinson. He lives in that little settlement beyond the town dump. He's a member of Calpurnia's church, and Cal knows his family well. She says they're clean-living folks. Scout, you aren't old enough to understand some things yet, but there's been some high talk around town to the effect that I shouldn't do much about defending this man. It's a peculiar case – it won't come to trial until summer session. John Taylor was kind enough to give us a postponement ...'

'If you shouldn't be defendin' him, then why are you doin' it?'

'For a number of reasons,' said Atticus. 'The main one is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again.'

'You mean if you didn't defend that man, Jem and me wouldn't have to mind you any more?'

'That's about right.'

'Why?'

'Because I could never ask you to mind me again. Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess. You might hear some ugly talk about it at school, but do one thing for me if you will: you just hold your head high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don't you let 'em get your goat. Try fighting with your head for a change ... It's a good one, even if it does resist learning.'

'Atticus, are we going to win it?'

'No, honey.'

'Then why –'

'Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win,' Atticus said.

'You sound like Cousin Ike Finch,' I said. Cousin Ike Finch was Maycomb County's sole surviving Confederate veteran. He wore a General Hood type beard of which he was inordinately vain. At least once a year Atticus, Jem and I called on him, and I would have to kiss him. It was horrible. Jem and I would listen respectfully to Atticus and Cousin Ike rehash the war.

'Tell you, Atticus,' Cousin Ike would say, 'the Missouri Compromise was what licked us, but if I had to go through it again I'd walk every step of the way there an' every step back jist like I did before an' furthermore we'd whip 'em this time ... now in 1864, when Stonewall Jackson came around by – I beg your pardon, young folks. Ol' Blue Light was in heaven then, God rest his saintly brow ...'

'Come here, Scout,' said Atticus. I crawled into his lap and tucked my head under his chin. He put his arms around me and rocked me gently. 'It's different this time,' he said. 'This time we aren't fighting the Yankees, we're fighting our friends. But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they're still our friends and this is still our home.'

With this in mind, I faced Cecil Jacobs in the school yard next day: 'You gonna take that back, boy?'

'You gotta make me first!' he yelled.

'My folks said your daddy was a disgrace an' that nigger oughta hang from the water-tank!'

I drew a bead on him, remembered what Atticus had said then dropped my fists and walked away, 'Scout's a coward!' ringing in my ears. It was the first time I ever walked away from a fight. Somehow, if I fought Cecil I would let Atticus down. Atticus so rarely asked Jem and me to do something for him, I could take being called a coward for him. I felt extremely noble for having remembered, and remained noble for three weeks.

Then Christmas came and disaster struck. Jem and I viewed Christmas with mixed feelings. The good side was the tree and Uncle Jack Finch. Every Christmas Eve day we met Uncle Jack at Maycomb Junction, and he would spend a week with us. A flip of the coin revealed the uncompromising lineaments of Aunt Alexandra and Francis. I suppose I should include Uncle Jimmy, Aunt Alexandra's husband, but as he never spoke a word to me in my life except to say, 'Get off the fence,' once I never saw any reason to take notice of him. Neither did Aunt Alexandra. Long ago, in a burst of friendliness, Aunty and Uncle Jimmy mproduced a son named Henry, who left home as soon as was humanly possible, married, and produced Francis. Henry and his wife deposited Francis at his grandparents' every Christmas, then pursued their own pleasures. No amount of sighing could indulge Atticus to let us spend Christmas day at home.

We went to Finch's Landing every Christmas in my memory. The fact that Aunty was a good cook was some compensation for being forced to spend a religious holiday with Francis Hancock. He was a year older than I, and I avoided him on principle: he enjoyed everything I disapproved of, and disliked my ingenuous diversions. Aunt Alexandra was Atticus's sister, but when Jem told me about changelings and siblings, I decided that she had been swapped at birth, that my grandparents had perhaps received a Crawford instead of a Finch.

Had I ever harboured the mystical notions about mountains that seem to obsess lawyers and judges, Aunt Alexandra would have been analogous to Mount Everest: throughout my early life, she was



cold and there. When Uncle Jack jumped down from the train Christmas Eve day, we had to wait for the porter to hand him two long packages.

Jem and I always thought it funny when Uncle Jack pecked Atticus on the cheek; they were the only two men we ever saw kiss each other. Uncle Jack shook hands with Jem and swung me high, but not high enough: Uncle Jack was a head shorter than Atticus; the baby of the family, he was younger than Aunt Alexandra. He and Aunty looked alike, but Uncle Jack made better use of his face: we were never wary of his sharp nose and chin.

He was one of the few men of science who never terrified me, probably because he never behaved like a doctor. Whenever he performed a minor service for Jem and me, as removing a splinter from a foot, he would tell us exactly what he was going to do, give us an estimation of how much it would hurt, and explain the use of any tongs he employed. One Christmas I lurked in corners nursing a twisted splinter in my foot, permitting no one to come near me. When Uncle Jack caught me, he kept me laughing about a preacher who hated going to church so much that every day he stood at his gate in his dressing-gown, smoking a hookah and delivering five-minute sermons to any passers-by who desired spiritual comfort. I interrupted to make Uncle Jack let me know when he would pull it out, but he held up a bloody splinter in a pair of tweezers and said he yanked it while I was laughing, that was what was known as relativity.

‘What’s in those packages?’ I asked him, pointing to the long thin parcels the porter had given him.

‘None of your business,’ he said.

Jem said, ‘How’s Rose Aylmer?’ Rose Aylmer was Uncle Jack’s cat. She was a beautiful yellow female Uncle Jack said was one of the few women he could stand permanently. He reached into his coat pocket and brought out some snapshots. We admired them.

‘She’s gettin’ fat,’ I said.

‘I should think so. She eats all the left-over fingers and ears from the hospital.’

‘Aw, that’s a damn story,’ I said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Atticus said, ‘Don’t pay any attention to her, Jack. She’s trying you out. Cal says she’s been cussing fluently for a week, now.’

Uncle Jack raised his eyebrows and said nothing. I was proceeding on the dim theory, aside from the innate attractiveness of such words, that if Atticus discovered I had picked them up at school he wouldn’t make me go. But at supper that evening when I asked him to pass the damn ham, please, Uncle Jack pointed at me. ‘See me afterwards, young lady,’ he said. When supper was over, Uncle Jack went to the living-room and sat down. He slapped his thighs for me to come sit on his lap. I liked to smell him; he was like a bottle of alcohol and something pleasantly sweet. He pushed back my bangs and looked at me.

‘You’re more like Atticus than your mother,’ he said. ‘You’re also growing out of your pants a little.’

‘I reckon they fit all right.’

‘You like words like damn and hell now, don’t you?’ I said I reckoned so.

'Well I don't,' said Uncle Jack, 'not unless there's extreme provocation connected with 'em. I'll be here a week, and I don't want to hear any words like that while I'm here. Scout, you'll get in trouble if you go around saying things like that. You want to grow up to be a lady, don't you?'

I said not particularly.

'Of course you do. Now let's get to the tree.' We decorated the tree until bedtime, and that night I dreamed of the two long packages for Jem and me. Next morning Jem and

I dived for them: they were from Atticus, who had written Uncle Jack to get them for us, and they were what we had asked for.

'Don't point them in the house,' said Atticus, when Jem aimed at a picture on the wall.

'You'll have to teach 'em to shoot,' said Uncle Jack.

'That's your job,' said Atticus. 'I merely bowed to the inevitable.'

It took Atticus's court-room voice to drag us away from the tree. He declined to let us take our air rifles to the Landing (I had already begun to think of shooting Francis) and said if we made one false move he'd take them away from us for good. Finch's Landing consisted of three hundred and sixty-six steps down a high bluff and ending in a jetty. Farther down stream, beyond the bluff, were traces of an old cotton landing, where Finch Negroes had loaded bales and produce, unloaded blocks of ice, flour and sugar, farm equipment, and feminine apparel. A two-rut road ran from the riverside and vanished among dark trees. At the end of the road was a two-storeyed white house with porches circling it upstairs and downstairs.

In his old age, our ancestor Simon Finch had built it to please his nagging wife; but with the porches all resemblance to ordinary houses of its era ended. The internal arrangements of the Finch house were indicative of Simon's guilelessness and the absolute trust with which he regarded his offspring. There were six bedrooms upstairs, four for the eight female children, one for Welcome Finch, the sole son, and one for visiting relatives. Simple enough; but the daughters' rooms could be reached only by one staircase, Welcome's room and the guestroom only by another. The Daughters' Staircase was in the ground-floor bedroom of their parents, so Simon always knew the hours of his daughters' nocturnal comings and goings.

There was a kitchen separate from the rest of the house, tacked on to it by a wooden catwalk; in the back yard was a rusty bell on a pole, used to summon field hands or as a distress signal; a widow's walk was on the roof, but no widows walked there – from it, Simon oversaw his overseer, watched the river-boats, and gazed into the lives of surrounding land-holders.

There went with the house the usual legend about the Yankees: one Finch female, recently engaged, donned her complete trousseau to save it from raiders in the neighbourhood; she became stuck in the door to the Daughters' Staircase but was doused with water and finally pushed through. When we arrived at the Landing, Aunt Alexandra kissed Uncle Jack, Francis kissed Uncle Jack, Uncle Jimmy shook hands silently with Uncle Jack, Jem and I gave our presents to Francis, who gave us a present. Jem felt his age and gravitated to the adults, leaving me to entertain our cousin. Francis was eight and slicked back his hair.

'What'd you get for Christmas?' I asked politely.

'Just what I asked for,' he said. Francis had requested a pair of knee-pants, a red leather booksack, five shirts and an untied bow tie.

'That's nice,' I lied.

'Jem and me got air rifles, and Jem got a chemistry set —'

'A toy one, I reckon.'

'No, a real one. He's gonna make me some invisible ink, and I'm gonna write to Dill in it.'

Francis asked what was the use of that.

'Well, can't you just see his face when he gets a letter from me with nothing in it? It'll drive him nuts.' Talking to Francis gave me the sensation of settling slowly to the bottom of the ocean. He was the most boring child I ever met. As he lived in Mobile, he could not inform on me to school authorities, but he managed to tell everything he knew to Aunt Alexandra, who in turn unburdened herself to Atticus, who either forgot it or gave me hell, whichever struck his fancy.

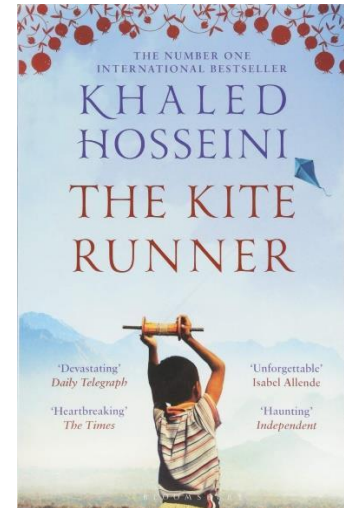
But the only time I ever heard Atticus speak sharply to anyone was when I once heard him say, 'Sister, I do the best I can with them!' It had something to do with my going around in overalls. Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches: when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life.

I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Aunty said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively

worse every year. She hurt my feelings and set my teeth permanently on edge, but when I asked Atticus about it, he said there were already enough sunbeams in the family and to go on about my business, he didn't mind me much the way I was.

## Extract 8: *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini

Afghanistan, 1975, nearly fifty years ago: Twelve-year-old Amir is desperate to win the local kite-fighting tournament and his loyal friend Hassan promises to help him. But neither of the boys can foresee what will happen to Hassan that afternoon, an event that is to shatter their lives. After the Russians invade and the family is forced to flee to America, Amir realises that one day he must return to Afghanistan under Taliban rule to find the one thing that his new world cannot grant him: redemption.



Something roared like thunder. The earth shook a little and we heard the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire.

“Father!” Hassan cried. We sprung to our feet and raced out of the living room. We found Ali hobbling frantically across the foyer.

“Father! What’s that sound?” Hassan yelled, his hands outstretched toward Ali. Ali wrapped his arms around us. A white light flashed, lit the sky in silver. It flashed again and was followed by a rapid staccato of gunfire.

“They’re hunting ducks,” Ali said in a hoarse voice. “They hunt ducks at night, you know. Don’t be afraid.”

A siren went off in the distance. Somewhere glass shattered and someone shouted. I heard people on the street, jolted from sleep and probably still in their pajamas, with ruffled hair and puffy eyes. Hassan was crying. Ali pulled him close, clutched him with tenderness. Later, I would tell myself I hadn’t felt envious of Hassan. Not at all.

We stayed huddled that way until the early hours of the morning. The shootings and explosions had lasted less than an hour, but they had frightened us badly, because none of us had ever heard gunshots in the streets. They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gunfire was not yet born. Huddled together in the dining room and waiting for the sun to rise, none of us had any notion that a way of life had ended. Our way of life. If not quite yet, then at least it was the beginning of the end.

The end, the official end, would come first in April 1978 with the communist coup d’état, and then in December 1979, when Russian tanks would roll into the very same streets where Hassan and I played, bringing the death of the Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting.

Just before sunrise, Baba’s car peeled into the driveway. His door slammed shut and his running footsteps pounded the stairs. Then he appeared in the doorway and I saw something on his face. Something I didn’t recognize right away because I’d never seen it before: fear.

“Amir! Hassan!” he exclaimed as he ran to us, opening his arms wide. “They blocked all the roads and the telephone didn’t work. I was so worried!”

We let him wrap us in his arms and, for a brief insane moment, I was glad about whatever had happened that night. They weren’t shooting ducks after all. As it turned out, they hadn’t shot much of anything that night of July 17, 1973. Kabul awoke the next morning to find that the monarchy was a thing of the past. The king, Zahir Shah, was away in Italy. In his absence, his cousin Daoud Khan had ended the king’s forty-year reign with a bloodless coup. I remember Hassan and I crouching that next morning outside my father’s study, as Baba and Rahim Khan sipped black tea and listened to breaking news of the coup on Radio Kabul. “Amir agha?” Hassan whispered. “What?” “What’s a ‘republic’?” I shrugged. “I don’t know.” On Baba’s radio, they were saying that word, “republic,” over and over again.

“Amir agha?”

“What?”

“Does ‘republic’ mean Father and I will have to move away?”

“I don’t think so,” I whispered back. Hassan considered this.

“Amir agha?”

“What?”

“I don’t want them to send me and Father away.”

I smiled. “Bas, you donkey. No one’s sending you away.”

“Amir agha?”

“What?”

“Do you want to go climb our tree?” My smile broadened. That was another thing about Hassan. He always knew when to say the right thing—the news on the radio was getting pretty boring. Hassan went to his shack to get ready and I ran upstairs to grab a book. Then I went to the kitchen, stuffed my pockets with handfuls of pine nuts, and ran outside to find Hassan waiting for me. We burst through the front gates and headed for the hill.

We crossed the residential street and were trekking through a barren patch of rough land that led to the hill when, suddenly, a rock struck Hassan in the back. We whirled around and my heart dropped.

Assef and two of his friends, Wali and Kamal, were approaching us. Assef was the son of one of my father’s friends, Mahmood, an airline pilot. His family lived a few streets south of our home, in a posh, high-walled compound with palm trees. If you were a kid living in the Wazir Akbar Khan section of Kabul, you knew about Assef and his famous stainless-steel brass knuckles, hopefully not through personal experience.

Born to a German mother and Afghan father, the blond, blue-eyed Assef towered over the other kids. His well-earned reputation for savagery preceded him on the streets. Flanked by his obeying friends, he walked the neighborhood like a Khan strolling through his land with his eager-to-please

entourage. His word was law, and if you needed a little legal education, then those brass knuckles were just the right teaching tool. I saw him use those knuckles once on a kid from the Karteh-Char district. I will never forget how Assef's blue eyes glinted with a light not entirely sane and how he grinned, how he grinned, as he pummeled that poor kid unconscious.

Some of the boys in Wazir Akbar Khan had nicknamed him Assef Goshkhor, or Assef "the Ear Eater." Of course, none of them dared utter it to his face unless they wished to suffer the same fate as the poor kid who had unwittingly inspired that nickname when he had fought Assef over a kite and ended up fishing his right ear from a muddy gutter. Years later, I learned an English word for the creature that Assef was, a word for which a good Farsi equivalent does not exist: "sociopath." Of all the neighborhood boys who tortured Ali, Assef was by far the most relentless. He was, in fact, the originator of the Babalu jeer, Hey, Babalu, who did you eat today? Huh? Come on, Babalu, give us a smile! And on days when he felt particularly inspired, he spiced up his badgering a little, Hey, you flat-nosed Babalu, who did you eat today? Tell us, you slant-eyed donkey! Now he was walking toward us, hands on his hips, his sneakers kicking up little puffs of dust. "Good morning, kunis!" Assef exclaimed, waving. "Fag," that was another of his favorite insults. Hassan retreated behind me as the three older boys closed in. They stood before us, three tall boys dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Towering over us all, Assef crossed his thick arms on his chest, a savage sort of grin on his lips.

Not for the first time, it occurred to me that Assef might not be entirely sane. It also occurred to me how lucky I was to have Baba as my father, the sole reason, I believe, Assef had mostly refrained from harassing me too much.

He tipped his chin to Hassan.

"Hey, Flat-Nose," he said. "How is Babalu?"

Hassan said nothing and crept another step behind me.

"Have you heard the news, boys?" Assef said, his grin never faltering. "The king is gone. Good riddance. Long live the president! My father knows Daoud Khan, did you know that, Amir?"

"So does my father," I said. In reality, I had no idea if that was true or not.

"So does my father," Assef mimicked me in a whining voice. Kamal and Wali cackled in unison. I wished Baba were there. "Well, Daoud Khan dined at our house last year," Assef went on. "How do you like that, Amir?"

I wondered if anyone would hear us scream in this remote patch of land. Baba's house was a good kilometer away. I wished we'd stayed at the house.

"Do you know what I will tell Daoud Khan the next time he comes to our house for dinner?" Assef said. "I'm going to have a little chat with him, man to man, mard to mard. Tell him what I told my mother. About Hitler. Now, there was a leader. A great leader. A man with vision. I'll tell Daoud Khan to remember that if they had let Hitler finish what he had started, the world be a better place now."

"Baba says Hitler was crazy, that he ordered a lot of innocent people killed," I heard myself say before I could clamp a hand on my mouth.

Assef snickered. "He sounds like my mother, and she's German; she should know better. But then they want you to believe that, don't they? They don't want you to know the truth."

I didn't know who "they" were, or what truth they were hiding, and I didn't want to find out. I wished I hadn't said anything. I wished again I'd look up and see Baba coming up the hill.

"But you have to read books they don't give out in school," Assef said. "I have. And my eyes have been opened. Now I have a vision, and I'm going to share it with our new president. Do you know what it is?"

I shook my head. He'd tell me anyway; Assef always answered his own questions. His blue eyes flicked to Hassan. "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood." He made a sweeping, grandiose gesture with his hands. "Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision."

Assef shifted his gaze to me again. He looked like someone coming out of a good dream. "Too late for Hitler," he said. "But not for us." He reached for something from the back pocket of his jeans. "I'll ask the president to do what the king didn't have the quwat to do. To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, kasseef Hazaras."

"Just let us go, Assef," I said, hating the way my voice trembled. "We're not bothering you."

"Oh, you're bothering me," Assef said. And I saw with a sinking heart what he had fished out of his pocket. Of course. His stainless-steel brass knuckles sparkled in the sun. "You're bothering me very much. In fact, you bother me more than this Hazara here. How can you talk to him, play with him, let him touch you?" he said, his voice dripping with disgust.

Wali and Kamal nodded and grunted in agreement. Assef narrowed his eyes. Shook his head. When he spoke again, he sounded as baffled as he looked. "How can you call him your 'friend'?"

But he's not my friend! I almost blurted. He's my servant! Had I really thought that? Of course I hadn't. I hadn't. I treated Hassan well, just like a friend, better even, more like a brother. But if so, then why, when Baba's friends came to visit with their kids, didn't I ever include Hassan in our games? Why did I play with Hassan only when no one else was around? Assef slipped on the brass knuckles. Gave me an icy look.

"You're part of the problem, Amir. If idiots like you and your father didn't take these people in, we'd be rid of them by now. They'd all just go rot in Hazarajat where they belong. You're a disgrace to Afghanistan."

I looked in his crazy eyes and saw that he meant it. He really meant to hurt me. Assef raised his fist and came for me. There was a flurry of rapid movement behind me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hassan bend down and stand up quickly. Assef's eyes flicked to something behind me and widened with surprise. I saw that same look of astonishment on Kamal and Wali's faces as they too saw what had happened behind me.

I turned and came face to face with Hassan's slingshot. Hassan had pulled the wide elastic band all the way back. In the cup was a rock the size of a walnut. Hassan held the slingshot pointed directly at Assef's face. His hand trembled with the strain of the pulled elastic band and beads of sweat had erupted on his brow.

“Please leave us alone, Agha,” Hassan said in a flat tone. He’d referred to Assef as “Agha,” and I wondered briefly what it must be like to live with such an ingrained sense of one’s place in a hierarchy. Assef gritted his teeth. “Put it down, you motherless Hazara.”

“Please leave us be, Agha,” Hassan said. Assef smiled. “Maybe you didn’t notice, but there are three of us and two of you.”

Hassan shrugged. To an outsider, he didn’t look scared. But Hassan’s face was my earliest memory and I knew all of its subtle nuances, knew each and every twitch and flicker that ever rippled across it. And I saw that he was scared. He was scared plenty.

“You are right, Agha. But perhaps you didn’t notice that I’m the one holding the slingshot. If you make a move, they’ll have to change your nickname from Assef ‘the Ear Eater’ to ‘One-Eyed Assef,’ because I have this rock pointed at your left eye.”

He said this so flatly that even I had to strain to hear the fear that I knew hid under that calm voice. Assef’s mouth twitched. Wali and Kamal watched this exchange with something akin to fascination. Someone had challenged their god. Humiliated him. And, worst of all, that someone was a skinny Hazara.

Assef looked from the rock to Hassan. He searched Hassan’s face intently. What he found in it must have convinced him of the seriousness of Hassan’s intentions, because he lowered his fist.

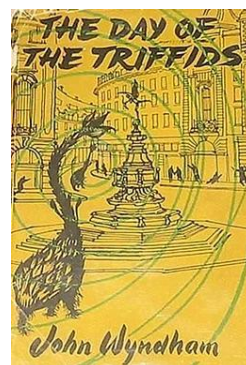
“You should know something about me, Hazara,” Assef said gravely. “I’m a very patient person. This doesn’t end today, believe me.” He turned to me. “This isn’t the end for you either, Amir. Someday, I’ll make you face me one on one.” Assef retreated a step. His disciples followed. “Your Hazara made a big mistake today, Amir,” he said. They then turned around, walked away.

I watched them walk down the hill and disappear behind a wall. Hassan was trying to tuck the slingshot in his waist with a pair of trembling hands. His mouth curled up into something that was supposed to be a reassuring smile. It took him five tries to tie the string of his trousers. Neither one of us said much of anything as we walked home in trepidation, certain that Assef and his friends would ambush us every time we turned a corner. They didn’t and that should have comforted us a little. But it didn’t. Not at all.



## Extract 9: *The Day of the Triffids*, by John Wyndham

This horrifying story is a science fiction classic. Bill Masen, bandages over his wounded eyes, misses the most spectacular meteorite shower England has ever seen. Removing his bandages the next morning, he finds masses of sightless people wandering the city. He soon meets Josella, another lucky person who has retained her sight, and together they leave the city, aware that the safe, familiar world they knew a mere twenty-four hours before is gone forever. But to survive in this post-apocalyptic world, they must survive the Triffids, strange plants that years before began appearing all over the world. The Triffids can grow to over seven feet tall, pull their roots from the ground to walk, and kill a man with one quick lash of their poisonous stingers. With society in shambles, they are now poised to prey on humankind. This extract comes from the first chapter of the novel, as Bill Madsen removes the bandages from his own eyes in hospital after he realises that none of the doctors or nurses are doing their normal rounds.



There's one thing I put to my credit. I was not far enough gone to tear them off wildly. I had the sense and the self-control to get out of bed and pull the blind down before I started on the safety-pins. Once I had the coverings off, and had found out that I could see in the dimness, I felt a relief that I'd never known before. Nevertheless, the first thing I did after assuring myself that there were indeed no malicious persons or things lurking under the bed or elsewhere, was to slip a chair-back under the door-handle.

I could, and did, begin to get a better grip on myself then. I made myself take a whole hour gradually getting used to full daylight. At the end of it I knew that thanks to swift first-aid, followed by good doctoring, my eyes were as good as ever. But still no one came. On the lower shelf of the bedside table I discovered a pair of dark glasses thoughtfully put ready against my need of them. Cautiously I put them on before I went right close to the window. The lower part of it was not made to open, so that the view was restricted. Squinting down and sideways I could see one or two people who appeared to be wandering in an odd, kind of aimless way farther up the street. But what struck me most, and at once, was the sharpness, the clear definition of everything – even the distant housetops view across the opposite roofs. And then I noticed that no chimney, large or small, was smoking ...

I found my clothes hung tidily in a cupboard. I began to feel more normal once I had them on. There were some cigarettes still in the case. I lit one, and started to get into the state of mind where, though everything was still undeniably queer, I could no longer understand why I had been quite so near panic.

It is not easy to think oneself back to the outlook of those days. We have to be more self-reliant now. But then there was so much routine, things were so interlinked. Each one of us so steadily did his little part in the right place that it was easy to mistake habit and custom for the natural law – and all the more disturbing, therefore, when the routine was in any way upset. When getting on for half a lifetime has been spent in one conception of order, reorientation is no five-minute business. Looking back at the shape of things then, the amount we did not know and did not care to know about our daily lives is not only astonishing, but somehow a bit shocking. I knew practically nothing, for instance, of such ordinary things as how my food reached me, where the fresh water came from, how the clothes I wore were woven and made, how the drainage of cities kept them healthy. Our life

had become a complexity of specialists all attending to their own jobs with more or less efficiency, and expecting others to do the same.

That made it incredible to me, therefore, that complete disorganization could have overtaken the hospital. Somebody somewhere, I was sure, must have it in hand – unfortunately it was a somebody who had forgotten all about Room 48. Nevertheless, when I did go to the door again and peer into the corridor I was forced to realize that whatever had happened it was affecting a great deal more than the single inhabitant of Room 48.

Just then there was no one in sight, though in the distance I could hear a pervasive murmur of voices. There was a sound of shuffling footsteps, too, and occasionally a louder voice echoing hollowly in the corridors, but nothing like the din I had shut out before. This time I did not shout. I stepped out cautiously – why cautiously? I don't know. There was just something that induced it. It was difficult in that reverberating building to tell where the sounds were coming from, but one way the passage finished at an obscured french window, with the shadow of a balcony rail upon it, so I went the other.

Rounding a corner, I found myself out of the private-room wing and on a broader corridor. When I first looked along it I thought it empty, then as I moved forward I saw a figure come out of a shadow. He was a man wearing a black jacket and striped trousers, with a white cotton coat over them. I judged him to be one of the staff doctors – but it was curious that he should be crouching against the wall and feeling his way along.

'Hullo, there,' I said. He stopped suddenly. The face he turned towards me was grey and frightened.

'Who are you?' he asked, uncertainly.

'My name's Masen,' I told him. 'William Masen. I'm a patient – Room 48. And I've come to find out why –'

'You can see?' he interrupted, swiftly.

'Certainly I can. Just as well as ever,' I assured him. 'It's a wonderful job. Nobody came to unbandage my eyes, so I did it myself. I don't think there's any harm done. I took –'

But he interrupted again.

'Please take me to my office. I must telephone at once.' I was slow to catch on, but everything ever since I woke that morning had been bewildering.

'Where's that?' I asked.

'Fifth floor, west wing. The name's on the door – Doctor Soames.'

'All right,' I agreed, in some surprise. 'Where are we now?'

The man rocked his head from side to side, his face tense and exasperated.

'How the hell should I know?' he said, bitterly. 'You've got eyes, damn it. Use them. Can't you see I'm blind?'

There was nothing to show that he was blind. His eyes were wide open, and apparently looking straight at me.

'Wait here a minute,' I said. I looked round. I found a large '5' painted on the wall opposite the lift gate. I went back and told him.

'Good. Take my arm,' he directed. 'You turn right as you come out of the lift. Then take the first passage on the left, and it's the third door.' I followed instructions. We met no one at all on the way. Inside the room I led him up to the desk, and handed him the telephone. He listened for some moments. Then he groped about until he found the rest, and rattled the bar impatiently. Slowly his expression changed. The irritability and the harassed lines faded away. He looked simply tired – very tired. He put the receiver down on the desk. For some seconds he stood silently, looking as though he was staring at the wall opposite. Then he turned. 'It's useless – dead. You are still here?' he added.

'Yes,' I told him. His fingers felt along the edge of the desk. 'Which way am I facing? Where's the damned window?' he demanded, with a return of irritability.

'It's right behind you,' I said. He turned, and stepped towards it, both hands extended. He felt the sill and the sides carefully, and stepped back a pace. Before I had realized what he was doing he had launched himself full at it, and crashed through ... I didn't look to see. After all, it was the fifth floor.

When I moved, it was to sit down heavily in the chair. I took a cigarette from a box on the desk, and lit it shakily. I sat here for some minutes while I steadied up, and let the sick feeling subside. After a while it did. I left the room, and went back to the place where I had first found him. I still wasn't feeling too good when I got there.

At the far end of the wide corridor were the doors of a ward. The panels were frosted save for ovals of clear glass at face level. I reckoned there ought to be someone on duty there that I could report to about the doctor. I opened the door. It was pretty dark in there. The curtains had evidently been drawn after the previous night's display was over – and they were still drawn.

'Sister?' I inquired.

'She ain't 'ere,' a man's voice said. 'What's more,' it went on, 'she ain't been 'ere for ruddy hours, neither. Can't you pull them ruddy curtains, mate, and let's 'ave some flippin' light? Don't know what's come over the bloody place this morning.'

'Okay,' I agreed. Even if the whole place were disorganized, it didn't seem to be any good reason why the unfortunate patients should have to lie in the dark. I pulled back the curtains on the nearest window, and let in a shaft of bright sunlight. It was a surgical ward with about twenty patients, all bedridden. Leg injuries mostly, several amputations, by the look of it.

'Stop fooling about with 'em, mate, and pull 'em back,' said the same voice. I turned and looked at the man who spoke. He was a dark, burly fellow with a weather-beaten skin. He was sitting up in bed, facing directly at me – and at the light. His eyes seemed to be gazing into my own, so did his neighbour's, and the next man's ... For a few moments I stared back at them. It took that long to register.

Then: 'I – they – they seem to be stuck,' I said. 'I'll find someone to see to them.'

And with that I fled the ward. I was shaky again, and I could have done with a stiff drink. The thing was beginning to sink in. But I found it difficult to believe that all the men in that ward could be blind, just like the doctor, and yet ... The lift wasn't working, so I started down the stairs. On the next floor I pulled myself together, and plucked up the courage to look into another ward. The beds there were all disarranged. At first I thought the place was empty, but it wasn't – not quite. Two men in nightclothes lay on the floor. One was soaked in blood from an unhealed incision, the other looked as if some kind of congestion had seized him. They were both quite dead. The rest had gone.

Back on the stairs once more, I realized that most of the background voices I had been hearing all the time were coming up from below, and that they were louder and closer now. I hesitated a moment, but there seemed to be nothing for it but to go on making my way down. On the next turn I nearly tripped over a man who lay across my way in the shadow. At the bottom of the flight lay somebody who actually had tripped over him – and cracked his head on the stone steps as he landed.

At last I reached the final turn where I could stand and look down into the main hall. Seemingly everyone in the place who was able to move must have made instinctively for that spot either with the idea of finding help or of getting outside. Perhaps some of them had got out. One of the main entrance doors was wide open, but most of them couldn't find it. There was a tight-packed mob of men and women, nearly all of them in their hospital nightclothes, milling slowly and helplessly around. The motion pressed those on the outskirts cruelly against marble corners or ornamental projections. Some of them were crushed breathlessly against the walls. Now and then one would trip. If the press of bodies allowed him to fall, there was little chance that it would let him come up again.

The place looked – well, you'll have seen some of Doré's pictures of sinners in hell. But Doré couldn't include the sounds: the sobbing, the murmurous moaning, and occasionally a forlorn cry. A minute or two of it was all I could stand. I fled back up the stairs. There was the feeling that I ought to do something about it. Lead them out into the street, perhaps, and at least put an end to that dreadful slow milling. But a glance had been enough to show that I could not hope to make my way to the door to guide them there. Besides, if I were to, if I did get them outside – what then? I sat down on a step for a while to get over it, with my head in my hands and that awful conglomerate sound in my ears all the time.

Then I searched for, and found, another staircase. It was a narrow service flight which led me out by a back way into the yard. Maybe I'm not telling this part too well. The whole thing was so unexpected and shocking that for a time I deliberately tried not to remember the details. Just then I was feeling much as though it were a nightmare from which I was desperately but vainly seeking the relief of waking myself. As I stepped out into the yard I still half-refused to believe what I had seen. But one thing I was perfectly certain about. Reality or nightmare, I needed a drink as I had seldom needed one before.

There was nobody in sight in the little side street outside the yard gates, but almost opposite stood a pub. I can recall its name now – 'The Alamein Arms'. There was a board bearing a reputed likeness of Viscount Montgomery hanging from an iron bracket, and below, one of the doors stood open. I made straight for it. Stepping into the public bar gave me for the moment a comforting sense of normality. It was prosaically and familiarly like dozens of others.

But although there was no one in that part, there was certainly something going on in the saloon bar, round the corner. I heard heavy breathing. A cork left its bottle with a pop. A pause. Then a voice remarked: 'Gin, blast it! T'hell with gin!' There followed a shattering crash. The voice gave a

sozzled chuckle. 'Thash the mirror. Wash good of mirrors, anyway?' Another cork popped. "'S' damned gin again,' complained the voice, offended. 'T'hell with gin.' This time the bottle hit something soft, thudded to the floor, and lay there gurgling away its contents.

'Hey!' I called. 'I want a drink.' There was a silence.

Then: 'Who're you?' the voice inquired, cautiously.

'I'm from the hospital,' I said. 'I want a drink.'

'Don' 'member y'r voice. Can you see?'

'Yes,' I told him.

'Well then, for God's sake get over the bar, Doc, and find me a bottle of whisky.'

'I'm doctor enough for that,' I said. I climbed across, and went round the corner. A large-bellied, red-faced man with a greying walrus moustache stood there clad only in trousers and a collarless shirt. He was fairly drunk. He seemed undecided whether to open the bottle he held in his hand, or to use it as a weapon. "'F you're not a doctor, what are you?' he demanded, suspiciously.

'I was a patient – but I need a drink as much as any doctor,' I said.

'That's gin again you've got there,' I added. 'Oh, is it! B — gin,' he said, and slung it away. It went through the window with a lively crash.

'Give me that corkscrew,' I told him. I took down a bottle of whisky from the shelf, opened it, and handed it to him with a glass. For myself I chose a stiff brandy with very little soda, and then another. After that my hand wasn't shaking so much. I looked at my companion. He was taking his whisky neat, out of the bottle.

'You'll get drunk,' I said. He paused and turned his head towards me. I could have sworn that his eyes really saw me.

'Get drunk! Damn it, I am drunk,' he said, scornfully. He was so perfectly right that I didn't comment. He brooded a moment before he announced: 'Gotta get drunker. Gotta get mush drunker.' He leaned closer. 'D'you know what? – I'm blind. Thash what I am – blind's a bat. Everybody's blind's a bat. 'Cept you. Why aren't you blind's a bat?'

'I don't know,' I told him. '

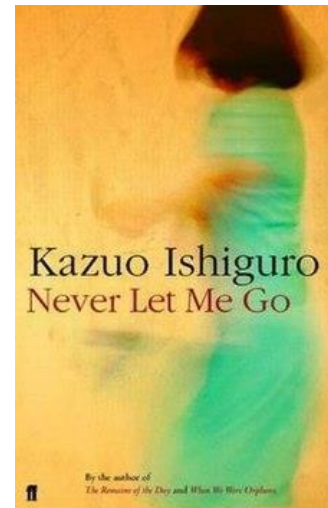
'S that bloody comet, b — it! Thash what done it. Green shootin' shtarsh – an' now everyone's blind's a bat. D'ju shee green shootin' shtarsh?'

'No,' I admitted.

'There you are. Proves it. You didn't see 'em: you aren't blind. Everyone else saw 'em' – he waved an expressive arm – 'all's blind's bats. B — comets, I say.'

## Extract 10: *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro

Hailsham seems like a pleasant English boarding school, far from the influences of the city. Its students are well tended and supported, trained in art and literature, and become just the sort of people the world wants them to be. But, curiously, they are taught nothing of the outside world and are allowed little contact with it. Within the grounds of Hailsham, Kathy watches and listens, and spots the clues that this is not any ordinary school. Then, one day, one of the teachers, Miss Lucy, cannot keep the secret any more, and everything becomes clear.



We were fifteen by then, already into our last year at Hailsham. We'd been in the pavilion getting ready for a game of rounders. The boys were going through a phase of 'enjoying' rounders in order to flirt with us, so there were over thirty of us that afternoon. The downpour had started while we were changing, and we found ourselves gathering on the veranda – which was sheltered by the pavilion roof – while we waited for it to stop. But the rain kept going, and when the last of us had emerged, the veranda was pretty crowded, with everyone milling around restlessly. I remember Laura was demonstrating to me an especially disgusting way of blowing your nose for when you really wanted to put off a boy.

Miss Lucy was the only guardian present. She was leaning over the rail at the front, peering into the rain like she was trying to see right across the playing field. I was watching her as carefully as ever in those days, and even as I was laughing at Laura, I was stealing glances at Miss Lucy's back. I remember wondering if there wasn't something a bit odd about her posture, the way her head was bent down just a little too far so she looked like a crouching animal waiting to pounce. And the way she was leaning forward over the rail meant drops from the overhanging gutter were only just missing her – but she seemed to show no sign of caring. I remember actually convincing myself there was nothing unusual in all this – that she was simply anxious for the rain to stop – and turning my attention back to what Laura was saying.

Then a few minutes later, when I'd forgotten all about Miss Lucy and was laughing my head off at something, I suddenly realised things had gone quiet around us, and that Miss Lucy was speaking. She was standing at the same spot as before, but she'd turned to face us now, so her back was against the rail, and the rainy sky behind her.

'No, no, I'm sorry, I'm going to have to interrupt you,' she was saying, and I could see she was talking to two boys sitting on the benches immediately in front of her. Her voice wasn't exactly strange, but she was speaking very loudly, in the sort of voice she'd use to announce something to the lot of us, and that was why we'd all gone quiet. 'No, Peter, I'm going to have to stop you. I can't listen to you any more and keep silent.'

Then she raised her gaze to include the rest of us and took a deep breath. 'All right, you can hear this, it's for all of you. It's time someone spelt it out.' We waited while she kept staring at us. Later, some people said they'd thought she was going to give us a big telling-off; others that she was

about to announce a new rule on how we played rounders. But I knew before she said another word it would be something more. 'Boys, you must forgive me for listening. But you were right behind me, so I couldn't help it. Peter, why don't you tell the others what you were saying to Gordon just now?'

Peter J. looked bewildered and I could see him getting ready his injured innocence face. But then Miss Lucy said again, this time much more gently: 'Peter, go on. Please tell the others what you were just saying.'

Peter shrugged. 'We were just talking about what it would feel like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be.'

'Yes,' Miss Lucy said, 'and you were saying to Gordon you'd have to go to America to stand the best chance.'

Peter J. shrugged again and muttered quietly: 'Yes, Miss Lucy.'

But Miss Lucy was now moving her gaze over the lot of us. 'I know you don't mean any harm. But there's just too much talk like this. I hear it all the time, it's been allowed to go on, and it's not right.' I could see more drops coming off the gutter and landing on her shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice. 'If no one else will talk to you,' she continued, 'then I will. The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. So you're not to talk that way any more. You'll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it's not so far off, the day you'll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.'

Then she went silent, but my impression was that she was continuing to say things inside her head, because for some time her gaze kept roving over us, going from face to face just as if she were still speaking to us. We were all pretty relieved when she turned to look out over the playing field again.

'It's not so bad now,' she said, even though the rain was as steady as ever. 'Let's just go out there. Then maybe the sun will come out too.'

I think that was all she said. When I was discussing it with Ruth a few years ago at the centre in Dover, she claimed Miss Lucy had told us a lot more; that she'd explained how before donations we'd all spend some time first as carers, about the usual sequence of the donations, the recovery centres and so on – but I'm pretty sure she didn't. Okay, she probably intended to when she began talking. But my guess is once she'd set off, once she'd seen the puzzled, uncomfortable faces in front of her, she realised the impossibility of completing what she'd started. It's hard to say clearly what sort of impact Miss Lucy's outburst at the pavilion made. Word got round fast enough, but the talk mostly focused on Miss Lucy herself rather than on what she'd been trying to tell us. Some students thought she'd lost her marbles for a moment; others that she'd been asked to say what she had by Miss Emily and the other guardians; there were even some who'd actually been there and who thought Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda.

But as I say there was surprisingly little discussion about what she'd said. If it did come up, people tended to say: 'Well so what? We already knew all that.' But that had been Miss Lucy's point exactly. We'd been 'told and not told', as she'd put it. A few years ago, when Tommy and I were going over it all again, and I reminded him of Miss Lucy's 'told and not told' idea, he came up with a theory. Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly. It's a bit too much like a conspiracy theory for me – I don't think our guardians were that crafty – but there's probably something in it.

Certainly, it feels like I always knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it's curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It was like we'd heard everything somewhere before. One thing that occurs to me now is that when the guardians first started giving us proper lectures about sex, they tended to run them together with talk about the donations. At that age – again, I'm talking of around thirteen – we were all pretty worried and excited about sex, and naturally would have pushed the other stuff into the background. In other words, it's possible the guardians managed to smuggle into our heads a lot of the basic facts about our futures. Now to be fair, it was probably natural to run these two subjects together. If, say, they were telling us how we'd have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside. And that, of course, would bring us onto the donations.

Then there was the whole business about our not being able to have babies. Miss Emily used to give a lot of the sex lectures herself, and I remember once, she brought in a life-size skeleton from the biology class to demonstrate how it was done. We watched in complete astonishment as she put the skeleton through various contortions, thrusting her pointer around without the slightest self-consciousness. She was going through all the nuts and bolts of how you did it, what went in where, the different variations, like this was still Geography.

Then suddenly, with the skeleton in an obscene heap on the desktop, she turned away and began telling us how we had to be careful who we had sex with. Not just because of the diseases, but because, she said, 'sex affects emotions in ways you'd never expect'. We had to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren't students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things. Out there people were even fighting and killing each other over who had sex with whom.

And the reason it meant so much – so much more than, say, dancing or table-tennis – was because the people out there were different from us students: they could have babies from sex. That was why it was so important to them, this question of who did it with whom. And even though, as we knew, it was completely impossible for any of us to have babies, out there, we had to behave like them. We had to respect the rules and treat sex as something pretty special.

Miss Emily's lecture that day was typical of what I'm talking about. We'd be focusing on sex, and then the other stuff would creep in. I suppose that was all part of how we came to be 'told and not told'. I think in the end we must have absorbed quite a lot of information, because I remember, around that age, a marked change in the way we approached the whole territory surrounding the donations.



Until then, as I've said, we'd done everything to avoid the subject; we'd backed off at the first sign we were entering that ground, and there'd been severe punishment for any idiot – like Marge that time – who got careless. But from when we were thirteen, like I say, things started to change. We still didn't discuss the donations and all that went with them; we still found the whole area awkward enough. But it became something we made jokes about, in much the way we joked about sex. Looking back now, I'd say the rule about not discussing the donations openly was still there, as strong as ever. But now it was okay, almost required, every now and then, to make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front of us.

## Extract 11: *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson

Melinda is friendless, outcast, because she busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops, so now nobody will talk to her, let alone listen to her. As time passes, she becomes increasingly isolated and practically stops talking altogether. Only her art class offers any solace, and it is through her work on an art project that she is finally able to face what really happened at that terrible party.



WELCOME TO MERRYWEATHER HIGH

It is my first morning of high school. I have seven new notebooks, a skirt I hate, and a stomachache.

The school bus wheezes to my corner. The door opens and I step up. I am the first pickup of the day. The driver pulls away from the curb while I stand in the aisle. Where to sit? I've never been a backseat wastecase. If I sit in the middle, a stranger could sit next to me. If I sit in the front, it will make me look like a little kid, but I figure it's the best chance I have to make eye contact with one of my friends, if any of them have decided to talk to me yet.

The bus picks up students in groups of four or five. As they walk down the aisle, people who were my middle-school lab partners or gym buddies glare at me. I close my eyes. This is what I've been dreading. As we leave the last stop, I am the only person sitting alone.

The driver downshifts to drag us over the hills. The engine clanks, which makes the guys in the back holler something obscene. Someone is wearing too much cologne. I try to open my window, but the little latches won't move. A guy behind me unwraps his breakfast and shoots the wrapper at the back of my head. It bounces into my lap—a Ho-Ho. We pass janitors painting over the sign in front of the high school. The school board has decided that “Merryweather High—Home of the Trojans” didn't send a strong abstinence message, so they have transformed us into the Blue Devils. Better the Devil you know than the Trojan you don't, I guess. School colors will stay purple and gray. The board didn't want to spring for new uniforms. Older students are allowed to roam until the bell, but ninth-graders are herded into the auditorium.

We fall into clans: Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas, Suffering Artists, Thespians, Goths, Shredders.

I am clanless.

I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with.

I am Outcast.

There is no point looking for my ex-friends. Our clan, the Plain Janes, has splintered and the pieces are being absorbed by rival factions. Nicole lounges with the Jocks, comparing scars from summer league sports. Ivy floats between the Suffering Artists on one side of the aisle and the Thespians on the other. She has enough personality to travel with two packs. Jessica has moved to Nevada. No real loss. She was mostly Ivy's friend, anyway. The kids behind me laugh so loud I know they're laughing about me. I can't help myself. I turn around.

It's Rachel, surrounded by a bunch of kids wearing clothes that most definitely did not come from the EastSide Mall. Rachel Bruin, my ex-best friend. She stares at something above my left ear. Words climb up my throat. This was the girl who suffered through Brownies with me, who taught me how to swim, who understood about my parents, who didn't make fun of my bedroom. If there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it's Rachel. My throat burns. Her eyes meet mine for a second. "I hate you," she mouths silently. She turns her back to me and laughs with her friends. I bite my lip. I am not going to think about it. It was ugly, but it's over, and I'm not going to think about it. My lip bleeds a little. It tastes like metal. I need to sit down.

I stand in the center aisle of the auditorium, a wounded zebra in a National Geographic special, looking for someone, anyone, to sit next to.

A predator approaches: gray jock buzz cut, whistle around a neck thicker than his head. Probably a social studies teacher, hired to coach a blood sport.

Mr. Neck: "Sit."

I grab a seat.

Another wounded zebra turns and smiles at me. She's packing at least five grand worth of orthodontia, but has great shoes.

"I'm Heather from Ohio," she says. "I'm new here. Are you?"

I don't have time to answer. The lights dim and the indoctrination begins.

#### THE FIRST TEN LIES THEY TELL YOU IN HIGH SCHOOL

1. We are here to help you.
2. You will have enough time to get to your class before the bell rings.
3. The dress code will be enforced.
4. No smoking is allowed on school grounds.
5. Our football team will win the championship this year.
6. We expect more of you here.
7. Guidance counselors are always available to listen.
8. Your schedule was created with your needs in mind.

9. Your locker combination is private.

10. These will be the years you look back on fondly.

My first class is biology. I can't find it and get my first demerit for wandering the hall. It is 8:50 in the morning. Only 699 days and 7 class periods until graduation.

#### OUR TEACHERS ARE THE BEST

... My English teacher has no face. She has uncombed stringy hair that droops on her shoulders. The hair is black from her part to her ears and then neon orange to the frizzy ends. I can't decide if she had pissed off her hairdresser or is morphing into a monarch butterfly. I call her Hairwoman. Hairwoman wastes twenty minutes taking attendance because she won't look at us. She keeps her head bent over her desk so the hair flops in front of her face. She spends the rest of class writing on the board and speaking to the flag about our required reading. She wants us to write in our class journals every day, but promises not to read them.

I write about how weird she is.

We have journals in social studies, too. The school must have gotten a good price on journals. We are studying American history for the ninth time in nine years. Another review of map skills, one week of Native Americans, Christopher Columbus in time for Columbus Day, the Pilgrims in time for Thanksgiving. Every year they say we're going to get right up to the present, but we always get stuck in the Industrial Revolution. We got to World War I in seventh grade—who knew there had been a war with the whole world? We need more holidays to keep the social studies teachers on track.

My social studies teacher is Mr. Neck, the same guy who growled at me to sit down in the auditorium. He remembers me fondly.

"I got my eye on you. Front row."

Nice seeing you again, too.

I bet he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Vietnam or Iraq—one of those TV wars.

#### SPOTLIGHT

I find my locker after social studies. The lock sticks a little, but I open it. I dive into the stream of fourth-period lunch students and swim down the hall to the cafeteria. I know enough not to bring lunch on the first day of high school. There is no way of telling what the acceptable fashion will be.

Brown bags—humble testament to suburbia, or terminal geek gear?

Insulated lunch bags—hip way to save the planet, or sign of an overinvolved mother?

Buying is the only solution. And it gives me time to scan the cafeteria for a friendly face or an inconspicuous corner. The hot lunch is turkey with reconstituted dried mashed potatoes and gravy, a damp green vegetable, and a cookie. I'm not sure how to order anything else, so I just slide my tray along and let the lunch drones fill it. This eight-foot senior in front of me somehow gets three cheeseburgers, French fries, and two Ho-Hos without saying a word. Some sort of Morse code with his eyes, maybe. Must study this further.

I follow the Basketball Pole into the cafeteria. I see a few friends—people I used to think were my friends—but they look away. Think fast, think fast. There's that new girl, Heather, reading by the window. I could sit across from her. Or I could crawl behind a trash can. Or maybe I could dump my lunch straight into the trash and keep moving right on out the door. The Basketball Pole waves to a table of friends. Of course. The basketball team. They all swear at him—a bizarre greeting practiced by athletic boys with zits. He smiles and throws a Ho-Ho. I try to scoot around him.

Thwap! A lump of potatoes and gravy hits me square in the center of my chest.

All conversation stops as the entire lunchroom gawks, my face burning into their retinas. I will be forever known as “that girl who got nailed by potatoes the first day.”

The Basketball Pole apologizes and says something else, but four hundred people explode in laughter and I can't read lips. I ditch my tray and bolt for the door. I motor so fast out of the lunchroom the track coach would draft me for varsity if he were around. But no, Mr. Neck has cafeteria duty. And Mr. Neck has no use for girls who can run the one hundred in under ten seconds, unless they're willing to do it while holding on to a football.

Mr. Neck: “We meet again.”

Me: Would he listen to “I need to go home and change,” or “Did you see what that bozo did”? Not a chance. I keep my mouth shut.

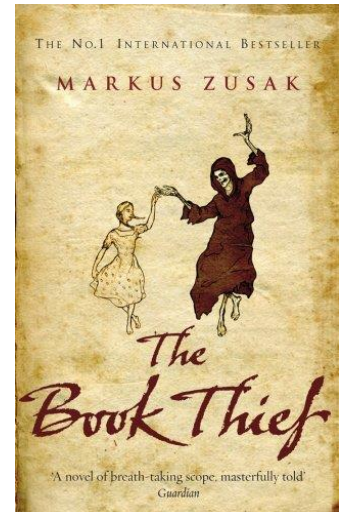
Mr. Neck: “Where do you think you're going?”

Me: It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say.

Mr. Neck makes a note in his book. “I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you. I've taught here for twenty-four years and I can tell what's going on in a kid's head just by looking in their eyes. No more warnings. You just earned a demerit for wandering the halls without a pass.”

## Extract 12: *The Book Thief*, by Markus Zusak

This book is set in Nazi Germany in 1939, less than a hundred years ago. The country is holding its breath. Death has never been busier, and will be busier still. By her brother's graveside, Liesel's life is changed when she picks up a single object, partially hidden in the snow. It is *The Gravedigger's Handbook*, left behind there by accident, and it is her first act of book thievery. So begins a love affair with books and words, as Liesel, with the help of her accordion-playing foster father, learns to read. Soon she is stealing books from Nazi book-burnings, the mayor's wife's library, wherever there are books to be found. But these are dangerous times. When Liesel's foster family hides a Jew in their basement, Liesel's world is both opened up, and closed down. This extract is taken from the beginning of the book as the narrator, Death, describes his meetings with Liesel.



### DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colours. Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things. Or at least, how I try.

HERE IS A SMALL FACT You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely can be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the As.

Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT Does this worry you? I urge you – don't be afraid. I'm nothing if not fair.

Of course, an introduction. A beginning. Where are my manners? I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away. At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying? Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

A SMALL THEORY People observe the colours of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing

moment. A single hour can consist of thousands of different colours. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've suggested, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski-trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday. Needless to say, I holiday in increments. In colours. Still, it's possible that you might be asking, Why does he even need a holiday? What does he need distraction from? Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans. The survivors. They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs. Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and colour.

It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors – an expert at being left behind. It's just a small story really, about, amongst other things: a girl some words an accordionist some fanatical Germans a Jewish fist-fighter and quite a lot of thievery.

I saw the book thief three times.

#### BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind. Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a colour and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a colour, and personally, I don't think you want to argue.

A REASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT Please, be calm, despite that previous threat. I am all bluster – I am not violent. I am not malicious. I am a result.

Yes, it was white. It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a jumper. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice. As you might expect, someone had died. They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on. There were two guards. There was a mother and her daughter. One corpse. The mother, the girl and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

'Well, what else do you want me to do?'

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

'Well,' was the response, 'we can't just leave them like this, can we?'

The tall one was losing patience. 'Why not?'

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, 'Spinnst du? Are you stupid!?'

The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened.

‘Come on,’ he said, traipsing through the snow. ‘We’ll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We’ll notify the next stop.’

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can’t explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I’d done everything right: I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically inhaled it, but still, I wavered. I buckled – I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched. Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them. A small soul was in my arms. I stood a little to the right. The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath was loud that day. I’m surprised the guards didn’t notice me as they walked by.

The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten metres to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken. Her mouth jittered. Her cold arms were folded. Tears were frozen to the book thief’s face.

#### THE ECLIPSE

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn. This time I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs. When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

SOME OTHER SMALL FACTS Sometimes I arrive too early. I rush, and some people cling longer to life than expected.

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give. A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolkit. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was.

The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later. Years had passed, but I recognised her. She was panting.

From the toolkit, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear. He reached in through the torn windscreen and placed it on the pilot’s chest. The smiling bear sat huddled amongst the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right. I walked in, loosened his soul and carried it gently out. All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast. The man, in comparison, was the colour of bone. Skeleton-coloured skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown – like coffee stains – and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature. The crowd did what crowds do. As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns. When I glanced



back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling. A final dirty joke. Another human punchline. He remained shrouded amongst his uniform as the greying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse – the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colours that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies. I've seen millions of them. I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.

## THE FLAG

The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked amongst the redness. Earlier, kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages.

When I arrived I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the road. The children- voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast. Then, bombs. This time, everything was too late. The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late. Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood. They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls. Was it fate? Misfortune? Is that what glued them down like that? Of course not. Let's not be stupid. It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

For hours, the sky remained a devastating, home-cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth. Clearly, I see it.

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there. A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book. Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it – the safety, the home of it – but she could not move. Also, the basement no longer existed. It was part of the mangled landscape.

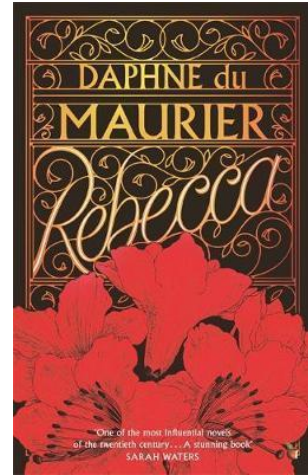
Please, again, I ask you to believe me. I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say. 'I'm sorry, child.' But that is not allowed. I did not crouch down. I did not speak. Instead, I watched her a while.

When she was able to move, I followed her. She dropped the book. She kneeled. The book thief howled. Her book was stepped on several times as the clean-up began, and although orders were given to clear only the mess of concrete, the girl's most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realising that I would read her story several hundred times over the years, on my travels. I would watch the places where we intersected, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived.

That is the best I can do – watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time. When I recollect her, I see a long list of colours, but it's the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes, I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds towards clarity. That's when I see them formulate.

## Extract 13: *Rebecca*, by Daphne Du Maurier

Working as a lady's companion in the 1930s, less than a hundred years ago, the orphaned heroine of *Rebecca* learns her place. Life begins to look very bleak until, on a trip to the South of France accompanying her employer, she meets Maxim de Winter, a handsome and wealthy widower whose sudden proposal of marriage takes her by surprise. Whisked from glamorous Monte Carlo to his brooding estate, Manderley, on the Cornish Coast, the new Mrs de Winter finds Max a changed man. And the memory of his dead wife Rebecca hangs like a dark cloud over the new Mrs de Winter's life. . . This extract is taken from the point, shortly after the narrator has met Maxim De Winter. They have spent some time together, and now he invites her to have breakfast with him.



'What are you going to have?' he said.

'I've had mine already,' I told him, 'and I can only stay four minutes anyway.'

'Bring me coffee, a boiled egg, toast, marmalade, and a tangerine,' he said to the waiter. And he took an emery board out of his pocket and began filing his nails. 'So Mrs Van Hopper has had enough of Monte Carlo,' he said, 'and now she wants to go home. So do I. She to New York and I to Manderley. Which would you prefer? You can take your choice.'

'Don't make a joke about it; it's unfair,' I said; 'and I think I had better see about those tickets, and say good-bye now.'

'If you think I'm one of the people who try to be funny at breakfast you're wrong,' he said. 'I'm invariably ill-tempered in the early morning. I repeat to you, the choice is open to you. Either you go to America with Mrs Van Hopper or you come home to Manderley with me.'

'Do you mean you want a secretary or something?'

'No, I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool.'

The waiter came with the breakfast, and I sat with my hands in my lap, watching while he put down the pot of coffee and the jug of milk.

'You don't understand,' I said, when the waiter had gone; 'I'm not the sort of person men marry.'

'What the devil do you mean?' he said, staring at me, laying down his spoon. I watched a fly settle on the marmalade, and he brushed it away impatiently.

'I'm not sure,' I said slowly. 'I don't think I know how to explain. I don't belong to your sort of world for one thing.'

'What is my world?'

‘Well – Manderley. You know what I mean.’

He picked up his spoon again and helped himself to marmalade. ‘You are almost as ignorant as Mrs Van Hopper, and just as unintelligent. What do you know of Manderley? I’m the person to judge that, whether you would belong there or not. You think I ask you this on the spur of the moment, don’t you? Because you say you don’t want to go to New York. You think I ask you to marry me for the same reason you believed I drove you about in the car, yes, and gave you dinner that first evening. To be kind. Don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘One day,’ he went on, spreading his toast thick, ‘you may realize that philanthropy is not my strongest quality. At the moment I don’t think you realize anything at all. You haven’t answered my question. Are you going to marry me?’

I don’t believe, even in my fiercest moments, I had considered this possibility. I had once, when driving with him and we had been silent for many miles, started a rambling story in my head about him being very ill, delirious I think, and sending for me and I having to nurse him. I had reached the point in my story where I was putting eau-de-Cologne on his head when we arrived at the hotel, and so it finished there. And another time I had imagined living in a lodge in the grounds of Manderley, and how he would visit me sometimes, and sit in front of the fire.

This sudden talk of marriage bewildered me, even shocked me I think. It was as though the King asked one. It did not ring true. And he went on eating his marmalade as though everything were natural. In books men knelt to women, and it would be moonlight. Not at breakfast, not like this.

‘My suggestion doesn’t seem to have gone too well,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I rather thought you loved me. A fine blow to my conceit.’

‘I do love you,’ I said. ‘I love you dreadfully. You’ve made me very unhappy and I’ve been crying all night because I thought I should never see you again.’

When I said this I remember he laughed, and stretched his hand to me across the breakfast table. ‘Bless you for that,’ he said; ‘one day, when you reach that exalted age of thirty-six which you told me was your ambition, I’ll remind you of this moment. And you won’t believe me. It’s a pity you have to grow up.’

I was ashamed already, and angry with him for laughing. So women did not make those confessions to men. I had a lot to learn.

‘So that’s settled, isn’t it?’ he said, going on with his toast and marmalade; ‘instead of being companion to Mrs Van Hopper you become mine, and your duties will be almost exactly the same. I also like new library books, and flowers in the drawing-room, and bezique after dinner. And someone to pour out my tea. The only difference is that I don’t take Taxol, I prefer Eno’s, and you must never let me run out of my particular brand of toothpaste.’

I drummed with my fingers on the table, uncertain of myself and of him. Was he still laughing at me, was it all a joke? He looked up, and saw the anxiety on my face.

‘I’m being rather a brute to you, aren’t I?’ he said; ‘this isn’t your idea of a proposal. We ought to be in a conservatory, you in a white frock with a rose in your hand, and a violin playing a waltz in the

distance. And I should make violent love to you behind a palm tree. You would feel then you were getting your money's worth. Poor darling, what a shame. Never mind, I'll take you to Venice for our honeymoon and we'll hold hands in the gondola. But we won't stay too long, because I want to show you Manderley.'

He wanted to show me Manderley ... And suddenly I realized that it would all happen; I would be his wife, we would walk in the garden together, we would stroll down that path in the valley to the shingle beach. I knew how I would stand on the steps after breakfast, looking at the day, throwing crumbs to the birds, and later wander out in a shady hat with long scissors in my hand, and cut flowers for the house. I knew now why I had bought that picture post-card as a child; it was a premonition, a blank step into the future. He wanted to show me Manderley ... My mind ran riot then, figures came before me and picture after picture – and all the while he ate his tangerine, giving me a piece now and then, and watching me.

We would be in a crowd of people, and he would say, 'I don't think you have met my wife.' Mrs de Winter. I would be Mrs de Winter. I considered my name, and the signature on cheques, to tradesmen, and in letters asking people to dinner. I heard myself talking on the telephone: 'Why not come down to Manderley next week-end?' People, always a throng of people. 'Oh, but she's simply charming, you must meet her—' This about me, a whisper on the fringe of a crowd, and I would turn away, pretending I had not heard. Going down to the lodge with a basket on my arm, grapes and peaches for the old lady who was sick. Her hands stretched out to me, 'The Lord bless you, Madam, for being so good,' and my saying, 'Just send up to the house for anything you want.' Mrs de Winter. I would be Mrs de Winter. I saw the polished table in the dining-room, and the long candles. Maxim sitting at the end. A party of twenty-four. I had a flower in my hair. Everyone looked towards me, holding up his glass. 'We must drink the health of the bride,' and Maxim saying afterwards, 'I have never seen you look so lovely.' Great cool rooms, filled with flowers. My bedroom, with a fire in the winter, someone knocking at the door. And a woman comes in, smiling; she is Maxim's sister, and she is saying, 'It's really wonderful how happy you have made him; everyone is so pleased, you are such a success.' Mrs de Winter. I would be Mrs de Winter.

'The rest of the tangerine is sour, I shouldn't eat it,' he said, and I stared at him, the words going slowly to my head, then looked down at the fruit on my plate. The quarter was hard and pale. He was right. The tangerine was very sour. I had a sharp, bitter taste in my mouth, and I had only just noticed it.

'Am I going to break the news to Mrs Van Hopper or are you?' he said. He was folding up his napkin, pushing back his plate, and I wondered how it was he spoke so casually, as though the matter was of little consequence, a mere adjustment of plans. Whereas to me it was a bomb-shell, exploding in a thousand fragments.

'You tell her,' I said; 'she'll be so angry.'

We got up from the table, I excited and flushed, trembling already in anticipation. I wondered if he would tell the waiter, take my arm smilingly and say, 'You must congratulate us, Mademoiselle and I are going to be married.' And all the other waiters would hear, would bow to us, would smile, and we would pass into the lounge, a wave of excitement following us, a flutter of expectation. But he said nothing. He left the terrace without a word, and I followed him to the lift. We passed the reception desk and no one even looked at us. The clerk was busy with a sheaf of papers, he was talking over his shoulder to his junior. He does not know, I thought, that I am going to be Mrs de Winter. I am going to live at Manderley. Manderley will belong to me.

We went up in the lift to the first floor, and so along the passage. He took my hand and swung it as we went along.

'Does forty-two seem very old to you?' he said.

'Oh, no,' I told him, quickly, too eagerly perhaps. 'I don't like young men.' 'You've never known any,' he said. We came to the door of the suite.

'I think I had better deal with this alone,' he said; 'tell me something – do you mind how soon you marry me? You don't want a trousseau, do you, or any of that nonsense? Because the whole thing can be so easily arranged in a few days. Over a desk, with a licence, and then off in the car to Venice or anywhere you fancy.'

'Not in a church?' I asked. 'Not in white, with bridesmaids, and bells, and choir boys? What about your relations, and all your friends?'

'You forget,' he said, 'I had that sort of wedding before.'

We went on standing in front of the door of the suite, and I noticed that the daily paper was still thrust through the letter-box. We had been too busy to read it at breakfast.

'Well?' he said, 'what about it?'

'Of course,' I answered, 'I was thinking for the moment we would be married at home. Naturally I don't expect a church, or people, or anything like that.' And I smiled at him. I made a cheerful face. 'Won't it be fun?' I said.

He had turned to the door though, and opened it, and we were inside the suite in the little entrance passage.

'Is that you?' called Mrs Van Hopper from the sitting-room. 'What in the name of Mike have you been doing? I've rung the office three times and they said they hadn't seen you.'

I was seized with a sudden desire to laugh, to cry, to do both, and I had a pain, too, at the pit of my stomach. I wished, for one wild moment, that none of this had happened, that I was alone somewhere, going for a walk, and whistling.

'I'm afraid it's all my fault,' he said, going into the sitting-room, shutting the door behind him, and I heard her exclamation of surprise. Then I went into my bedroom and sat down by the open window. It was like waiting in the ante-room at a doctor's. I ought to turn over the pages of a magazine, look at photographs that did not matter and read articles I should never remember, until the nurse came, bright and efficient, all humanity washed away by years of disinfectant: 'It's all right, the operation was quite successful. There is no need to worry at all. I should go home and have some sleep.'

The walls of the suite were thick, I could hear no hum of voices. I wondered what he was saying to her, how he phrased his words. Perhaps he said, I fell in love with her, you know, the very first time we met. We've been seeing one another every day.' And she in answer, 'Why, Mr de Winter, it's quite the most romantic thing I've ever heard.' Romantic, that was the word I had tried to remember coming up in the lift. Yes, of course. Romantic. That was what people would say. It was all very sudden and romantic. They suddenly decided to get married and there it was. Such an adventure. I smiled to myself as I hugged my knees on the window seat, thinking how wonderful it was, how happy I was going to be. I was to marry the man I loved. I was to be Mrs de Winter. It was foolish to

go on having that pain in the pit of my stomach when I was so happy. Nerves of course. Waiting like this; the doctor's ante-room.

It would have been better, after all, more natural surely to have gone into the sitting-room hand in hand, laughing, smiling at one another and for him to say 'We're going to be married, we're very much in love.' In love. He had not said anything yet about being in love. No time perhaps. It was all so hurried at the breakfast table. Marmalade, and coffee, and that tangerine. No time. The tangerine was very bitter.

No, he had not said anything about being in love. Just that we would be married. Short and definite, very original. Original proposals were much better. More genuine. Not like other people. Not like younger men who talked nonsense probably, not meaning half they said. Not like younger men being very incoherent, very passionate, swearing impossibilities. Not like him the first time, asking Rebecca ... I must not think of that. Put it away. A thought forbidden, prompted by demons. Get thee behind me, Satan. I must never think about that, never, never, never.

He loves me, he wants to show me Manderley.

Would they ever have done with their talking, would they ever call me into the room? There was the book of poems lying beside my bed. He had forgotten he had ever lent them to me. They could not mean much to him then. 'Go on,' whispered the demon, 'open the title-page; that's what you want to do, isn't it? Open the title-page.' Nonsense, I said, I'm only going to put the book with the rest of the things. I yawned. I wandered to the table beside the bed. I picked up the book. I caught my foot in the flex of the bedside lamp, and stumbled, the book falling from my hands on to the floor. It fell open, at the title-page.

'Max from Rebecca.'

She was dead, and one must not have thoughts about the dead. They slept in peace, the grass blew over their graves. How alive was her writing though, how full of force. Those curious, sloping letters. The blob of ink. Done yesterday. It was just as if it had been written yesterday. I took my nail scissors from the dressing-case and cut the page, looking over my shoulder like a criminal. I cut the page right out of the book. I left no jagged edges, and the book looked white and clean when the page was gone. A new book, that had not been touched. I tore the page up in many little fragments and threw them into the waste-paper basket. Then I went and sat on the window seat again. But I kept thinking of the torn scraps in the basket, and after a moment I had to get up and look in the basket once more. Even now the ink stood up on the fragments thick and black, the writing was not destroyed. I took a box of matches and set fire to the fragments. The flame had a lovely light, staining the paper, curling the edges, making the slanting writing impossible to distinguish. The fragments fluttered to grey ashes. The letter R was the last to go, it twisted in the flame, it curled outwards for a moment, becoming larger than ever. Then it crumpled too; the flame destroyed it. It was not ashes even, it was feathery dust ... I went and washed my hands in the basin. I felt better, much better.

## Extract 14: *One of Us is Lying*, by Karen M. McManus

Pay close attention and you might solve this.

On Monday afternoon, five students at Bayview High walk into detention.

**Bronwyn**, the brain, is Yale-bound and never breaks a rule.

**Addy**, the beauty, is the picture-perfect homecoming princess.

**Nate**, the criminal, is already on probation for dealing.

**Cooper**, the athlete, is the all-star baseball pitcher.

**And Simon**, the outcast, is the creator of Bayview High's notorious gossip app.

Only, Simon never makes it out of that classroom. Before the end of detention Simon's dead. And according to investigators, his death wasn't an accident. On Monday, he died. But on Tuesday, he'd planned to post juicy reveals about all four of his high-profile classmates, which makes all four of them suspects in his murder. Or are they the perfect patsies for a killer who's still on the loose? Everyone has secrets, right? What really matters is how far you would go to protect them.

Bronwyn Monday,

September 24, 2:55 p.m.

A sex tape. A pregnancy scare. Two cheating scandals.

And that's just this week's update. If all you knew of Bayview High was Simon Kelleher's gossip app, you'd wonder how anyone found time to go to class.

"Old news, Bronwyn," says a voice over my shoulder. "Wait till you see tomorrow's post."

Damn. I hate getting caught reading About That, especially by its creator. I lower my phone and slam my locker shut.

"Whose lives are you ruining next, Simon?"

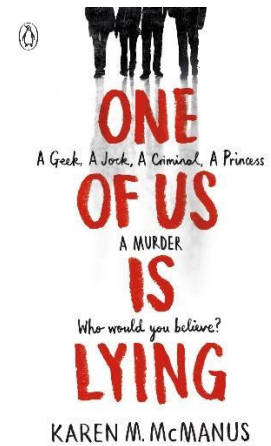
Simon falls into step beside me as I move against the flow of students heading for the exit.

"It's a public service," he says with a dismissive wave. "You tutor Reggie Crawley, don't you? Wouldn't you rather know he has a camera in his bedroom?"

I don't bother answering. Me getting anywhere near the bedroom of perpetual stoner Reggie Crawley is about as likely as Simon growing a conscience.

"Anyway, they bring it on themselves. If people didn't lie and cheat, I'd be out of business."

Simon's cold blue eyes take in my lengthening strides.



“Where are you rushing off to? Covering yourself in extracurricular glory?”

I wish. As if to taunt me, an alert crosses my phone: Mathlete practice, 3 p.m., Epoch Coffee. Followed by a text from one of my teammates: Evan’s here. Of course he is. The cute Mathlete—less of an oxymoron than you might think—seems to only ever show up when I can’t.

“Not exactly,” I say.

As a general rule, and especially lately, I try to give Simon as little information as possible. We push through green metal doors to the back stairwell, a dividing line between the dinginess of the original Bayview High and its bright, airy new wing. Every year more wealthy families get priced out of San Diego and come fifteen miles east to Bayview, expecting that their tax dollars will buy them a nicer school experience than popcorn ceilings and scarred linoleum.

Simon’s still on my heels when I reach Mr. Avery’s lab on the third floor, and I half turn with my arms crossed.

“Don’t you have someplace to be?”

“Yeah. Detention,” Simon says, and waits for me to keep walking. When I grasp the knob instead, he bursts out laughing. “You’re kidding me. You too? What’s your crime?”

“I’m wrongfully accused,” I mutter, and yank the door open.

Three other students are already seated, and I pause to take them in. Not the group I would have predicted. Except one. Nate Macauley tips his chair back and smirks at me.

“You make a wrong turn? This is detention, not student council.” He should know.

Nate’s been in trouble since fifth grade, which is right around the time we last spoke. The gossip mill tells me he’s on probation with Bayview’s finest for ... something. It might be a DUI; it might be drug dealing. He’s a notorious supplier, but my knowledge is purely theoretical.

“Save the commentary.” Mr. Avery checks something off on a clipboard and closes the door behind Simon.

High arched windows lining the back wall send triangles of afternoon sun splashing across the floor, and faint sounds of football practice float from the field behind the parking lot below. I take a seat as Cooper Clay, who’s palming a crumpled piece of paper like a baseball, whispers “Heads up, Addy” and tosses it toward the girl across from him. Addy Prentiss blinks, smiles uncertainly, and lets the ball drop to the floor.

The classroom clock inches toward three, and I follow its progress with a helpless feeling of injustice. I shouldn’t even be here. I should be at Epoch Coffee, flirting awkwardly with Evan Neiman over differential equations. Mr. Avery is a give-detention-first, ask-questions-never kind of guy, but maybe there’s still time to change his mind. I clear my throat and start to raise my hand until I notice Nate’s smirk broadening.

“Mr. Avery, that wasn’t my phone you found. I don’t know how it got into my bag. This is mine,” I say, brandishing my iPhone in its melon-stripped case.



Honestly, you'd have to be clueless to bring a phone to Mr. Avery's lab. He has a strict no-phone policy and spends the first ten minutes of every class rooting through backpacks like he's head of airline security and we're all on the watch list. My phone was in my locker, like always.

"You too?" Addy turns to me so quickly, her blond shampoo-ad hair swirls around her shoulders. She must have been surgically removed from her boyfriend in order to show up alone.

"That wasn't my phone either."

"Me three," Cooper chimes in. His Southern accent makes it sound like thray.

He and Addy exchange surprised looks, and I wonder how this is news to them when they're part of the same clique. Maybe überpopular people have better things to talk about than unfair detentions.

"Somebody punked us!" Simon leans forward with his elbows on the desk, looking spring-loaded and ready to pounce on fresh gossip. His gaze darts over all four of us, clustered in the middle of the otherwise empty classroom, before settling on Nate.

"Why would anybody want to trap a bunch of students with mostly spotless records in detention? Seems like the sort of thing that, oh, I don't know, a guy who's here all the time might do for fun."

I look at Nate, but can't picture it. Rigging detention sounds like work, and everything about Nate—from his messy dark hair to his ratty leather jacket—screams Can't be bothered. Or yawns it, maybe. He meets my eyes but doesn't say a word, just tips his chair back even farther. Another millimeter and he'll fall right over. Cooper sits up straighter, a frown crossing his Captain America face.

"Hang on. I thought this was just a mix-up, but if the same thing happened to all of us, it's somebody's stupid idea of a prank. And I'm missing baseball practice because of it." He says it like he's a heart surgeon being detained from a lifesaving operation.

Mr. Avery rolls his eyes. "Save the conspiracy theories for another teacher. I'm not buying it. You all know the rules against bringing phones to class, and you broke them." He gives Simon an especially sour glance.

Teachers know About That exists, but there's not much they can do to stop it. Simon only uses initials to identify people and never talks openly about school.

"Now listen up. You're here until four. I want each of you to write a five-hundred-word essay on how technology is ruining American high schools. Anyone who can't follow the rules gets another detention tomorrow."

"What do we write with?" Addy asks.

"There aren't any computers here."

Most classrooms have Chromebooks, but Mr. Avery, who looks like he should have retired a decade ago, is a holdout. Mr. Avery crosses to Addy's desk and taps the corner of a lined yellow notepad. We all have one.

"Explore the magic of longhand writing. It's a lost art."

Addy's pretty, heart-shaped face is a mask of confusion.

"But how do we know when we've reached five hundred words?"

"Count," Mr. Avery replies. His eyes drop to the phone I'm still holding. "And hand that over, Miss Rojas."

"Doesn't the fact that you're confiscating my phone twice give you pause? Who has two phones?" I ask.

Nate grins, so quick I almost miss it.

"Seriously, Mr. Avery, somebody was playing a joke on us."

Mr. Avery's snowy mustache twitches in annoyance, and he extends his hand with a beckoning motion.

"Phone, Miss Rojas. Unless you want a return visit." I give it over with a sigh as he looks disapprovingly at the others.

"The phones I took from the rest of you earlier are in my desk. You'll get them back after detention."

Addy and Cooper exchange amused glances, probably because their actual phones are safe in their backpacks. Mr. Avery tosses my phone into a drawer and sits behind the teacher's desk, opening a book as he prepares to ignore us for the next hour. I pull out a pen, tap it against my yellow notepad, and contemplate the assignment. Does Mr. Avery really believe technology is ruining schools? That's a pretty sweeping statement to make over a few contraband phones. Maybe it's a trap and he's looking for us to contradict him instead of agree. I glance at Nate, who's bent over his notepad writing computers suck over and over in block letters. It's possible I'm overthinking this.

Cooper

Monday, September 24, 3:05 p.m.

My hand hurts within minutes. It's pathetic, I guess, but I can't remember the last time I wrote anything longhand. Plus I'm using my right hand, which never feels natural no matter how many years I've done it. My father insisted I learn to write right-handed in second grade after he first saw me pitch. Your left arm's gold, he told me. Don't waste it on crap that don't matter. Which is anything but pitching as far as he's concerned. That was when he started calling me Cooperstown, like the baseball hall of fame. Nothing like putting a little pressure on an eight-year-old.

Simon reaches for his backpack and roots around, unzipping every section. He hoists it onto his lap and peers inside.

"Where the hell's my water bottle?"

"No talking, Mr. Kelleher," Mr. Avery says without looking up.

"I know, but—my water bottle's missing. And I'm thirsty." Mr. Avery points toward the sink at the back of the room, its counter crowded with beakers and petri dishes.

“Get yourself a drink. Quietly.” Simon gets up and grabs a cup from a stack on the counter, filling it with water from the tap. He heads back to his seat and puts the cup on his desk, but seems distracted by Nate’s methodical writing.

“Dude,” he says, kicking his sneaker against the leg of Nate’s desk. “Seriously. Did you put those phones in our backpacks to mess with us?”

Now Mr. Avery looks up, frowning. “I said quietly, Mr. Kelleher.”

Nate leans back and crosses his arms. “Why would I do that?”

Simon shrugs. “Why do you do anything? So you’ll have company for whatever your screw-up of the day was?”

“One more word out of either of you and it’s detention tomorrow,” Mr. Avery warns. Simon opens his mouth anyway, but before he can speak there’s the sound of tires squealing and then the crash of two cars hitting each other. Addy gasps and I brace myself against my desk like somebody just rear-ended me. Nate, who looks glad for the interruption, is the first on his feet toward the window.

“Who gets into a fender bender in the school parking lot?” he asks.

Bronwyn looks at Mr. Avery like she’s asking for permission, and when he gets up from his desk she heads for the window as well. Addy follows her, and I finally unfold myself from my seat. Might as well see what’s going on. I lean against the ledge to look outside, and Simon comes up beside me with a disparaging laugh as he surveys the scene below. Two cars, an old red one and a nondescript gray one, are smashed into each other at a right angle. We all stare at them in silence until Mr. Avery lets out an exasperated sigh.

“I’d better make sure no one was hurt.” He runs his eyes over all of us and zeroes in on Bronwyn as the most responsible of the bunch.

“Miss Rojas, keep this room contained until I get back.”

“Okay,” Bronwyn says, casting a nervous glance toward Nate. We stay at the window, watching the scene below, but before Mr. Avery or another teacher appears outside, both cars start their engines and drive out of the parking lot.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Simon says. He heads back to his desk and picks up his cup, but instead of sitting he wanders to the front of the room and scans the periodic table of elements poster. He leans out into the hallway like he’s about to leave, but then he turns and raises his cup like he’s toasting us.

“Anyone else want some water?”

“I do,” Addy says, slipping into her chair.

“Get it yourself, princess.” Simon smirks. Addy rolls her eyes and stays put while Simon leans against Mr. Avery’s desk.

“Literally, huh? What’ll you do with yourself now that homecoming’s over? Big gap between now and senior prom.”

Addy looks at me without answering. I don't blame her. Simon's train of thought almost never goes anywhere good when it comes to our friends. He acts like he's above caring whether he's popular, but he was pretty smug when he wound up on the junior prom court last spring. I'm still not sure how he pulled that off, unless he traded keeping secrets for votes. Simon was nowhere to be found on homecoming court last week, though. I was voted king, so maybe I'm next on his list to harass, or whatever the hell he's doing.

"What's your point, Simon?" I ask, taking a seat next to Addy. Addy and I aren't close, exactly, but I kind of feel protective of her. She's been dating my best friend since freshman year, and she's a sweet girl. Also not the kind of person who knows how to stand up to a guy like Simon who just won't quit.

"She's a princess and you're a jock," he says. He thrusts his chin toward Bronwyn, then at Nate. "And you're a brain. And you're a criminal. You're all walking teen-movie stereotypes."

"What about you?" Bronwyn asks. She's been hovering near the window, but now goes to her desk and perches on top of it. She crosses her legs and pulls her dark ponytail over one shoulder. Something about her is cuter this year. New glasses, maybe? Longer hair? All of a sudden, she's kind of working this sexy-nerd thing.

"I'm the omniscient narrator," Simon says.

Bronwyn's brows rise above her black frames.

"There's no such thing in teen movies." "Ah, but Bronwyn." Simon winks and chugs his water in one long gulp. "There is such a thing in life."

He says it like a threat, and I wonder if he's got something on Bronwyn for that stupid app of his. I hate that thing.