

This is mine and Bruce's story.  
You don't have to believe it happened,  
but it did. All of it.

# CARDBOARD COWBOYS



**BRIAN CONAGHAN**

BLOOMSBURY

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# CARDBOARD COWBOYS

**BRIAN CONAGHAN**

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*For Toni D*

# Before the Beginning

Calling someone a legend is only an opinion, not a fact. I'm a fact. Which means I'm not a legend. Not yet anyway. But Bruce is. And even though I found Bruce living in a house made of cardboard, he's a massive legend. Fact.

This is mine and Bruce's story, you don't have to believe any of it happened, but it did. All of it.

Fact.



## Bench

Imagine being trapped in a world with everything you hate. Picture how that makes you feel. Well, that's school for me.

So, today in English Liam McAvoy called me Fatso. Sometimes he's swallowed a dictionary and says Chunky. Other times Blubber. But Fatso is the main one. Teachers have never called me it, but I know the word pinballs around their brain cells. I caught Mr Sutton, the PE teacher, giggling his head off when I was playing dodgeball once. He tried to hide it but I snared him, standing there like a human letter A, arms folded, legs spread and cheese-faced.

Our English teacher, Miss Kane, is quality though. Before the *Fatso* abuse she told us what a haiku poem was by writing this on the board:

- They came from Japan.
- They must have 3 lines.
- Line one = 5 syllables.
- Line two = 7 syllables.
- Line three = 5 syllables.
- So, they must have 17 syllables in total.

‘So, with haikus you tend to do a lot of syllable counting on your fingers,’ Miss Kane had said. Then did a wee syllable rap demonstration to show us what she meant, which was supposed to be funny. Nobody laughed. Except me, inside.

‘Miss?’ Liam McAvoy had thrown up his hand.

‘Yes, Liam?’

‘What kind of sad maddie writes poems?’ He then chucked a pencil, which could’ve speared my eyeball. *This* made people laugh.

She read my poem at her desk and kept me behind to say, ‘If you ever need to talk about anything you can always come to me, you know.’ She shoulder-squeezed me while saying it. It’s mad weird when a teacher touches you.

My poem was called ‘The Future’.

Here it is:

Here is what I think:  
People like me won't find love  
I will not be found

(by Lenny Lambert)

Afterwards Miss Kane wrote *Amazing stuff!* in my jotter and big-ticked a beauty underneath. Funny how one little red pen flick can make you feel all snuggly inside. But that feeling was taken away in a flash. Outside the window I spied Liam McAvoy scratching a line across his throat while Grace McKenna inflated her cheeks, and gave me the bad-word finger. But then Trisha Woods passed and smiled at me. Not a teeth-showy one, but still a smile. It all happened so quick that I didn't have time to return mine, which really gutted me.

Next up, French. Eh, *non merci!* Don't fancy an entire lesson hearing shouts like:

*Mademoiselle Murphy, how do you say 'whale boy' in French?*

*Mademoiselle Murphy, what do French people say for 'five-a-day'?*

*Mademoiselle Murphy, what's French for 'piglet'?*

That's when your topsy becomes turvy as fast as. And when things are turvy I don't want to think about haiku poems or learn stupid French or be in school. So, lots of times I go to my bench instead.

The green paint is peeling off and it's made of metal; it's super uncomfortable, but peaceful. I can eat without a thousand eyes peering at me. Since it's still autumn the weather is kind enough for stretching the mind and watching fish swim along the dirty canal. I've never been fishing. Loads of times I sing songs in a very low voice. You name it, I sing it.

It's supposed to be some type of nature trail, but it's too soggy and overgrown. Even the tree trunks look like misery statues. In all the times sitting here I've never seen anyone trail walking or chilling in nature. I saw a jogger once, who stared me down. *Should you not be in school?* Him and his skinny pins haven't returned.

I've just started big school, which is a bit of a madhouse. If I lived in America I'd be known as a 'freshman'. Fresh man. Like, brand-new man, innocent man, happy man. Not so here. In Scotland we are simply called *first years*.

I wish I could just stay in my bedroom and sing into the mirror instead of going to school. There's no way I'm telling

anyone this though. Not after what happened with our Frankie. So, he might not be living with us at the moment, but that doesn't stop Mum and Dad adoring the life out of him; thinking the sun shines out his bumbaleery, always chatting about him when they think I'm not listening:

'Des, I hope our Frankie's going to be safe,' she says to Dad, almost nightly.

'He'll be fine, we know he's a good lad,' Dad returns.

'Think he misses us?'

'Course he does.'

'Breaks my heart, all this.'

'Don't, love. Don't.' And then Dad'll pat Mum's lower arm. Without that arm pat I think she'd be sobbing the walls wet.

Sometimes I wonder what they'd be like if it were me who was in Frankie's position:

'Think our Lenny is going to be OK, Des?'

'Aye, probably.'

'Right, let's see what's on the telly.'

On the bench next to me I place a chicken and mushroom pie, a can of Irn-Bru and a packet of Flamin' Hot Mega Monster Munch. Four quid from the wee shop next to school. They know me in there now. The guy always asks,

'How's it hangin'?' and I always answer, 'Hangin' good.' That's our banter, which I quite enjoy. He knows I dodge school but doesn't give a monkey's cos I'm crossing his palm with dosh.

I'm not thinking about school or the Liam McAvoy's of this world. No, I'm thinking about how our Frankie and me are so different. He's got a handsome face, stomach muscles and jaggy chin stubble. In five years' time, when I'm seventeen, I'd really like to look like him. Wouldn't want to be him though. Not on your nelly.



## Leftovers

I know I shouldn't be breaking the law and killing our planet, but after sinking the Irn-Bru I hold the can over my head like a javelin thrower and launch it down the canal bank. Bet the place is full of empty Buckfast bottles and shopping trolleys, what's a harmless can going to do? Next I toss the Monster Munch packet and then the pie tray.

I feel like a criminal.

A crim who's still hungry.

I begin to saunter back to school for the afternoon classes, but I'm stopped when a voice shouts, 'Hey, you!'

I turn.

Double gulp.

'Did you just throw that?'

He's holding the Irn-Bru can like a gun, aiming right at my face. He's walking towards me with his straggly beard,

red bobble hat and clunky boots. His face could be doing with one of Mum's mammoth ironing sessions. He's getting closer. Where did this dafty appear from? Canal man. Swamp man. Swampy. He steps nearer. I back away.

'Come here,' he says.

Got the look and skin of a murdering kidnapper. A face perfect for a police line-up.

I don't go near him. I shake my head. He lowers his Irn-Bru gun.

'Come here, I'm not going to hurt you.'

THAT'S WHAT THEY ALL SAY ... UNTIL –  
BOOM! – A WORLD OF HURT HAPPENS.

I make to run. But what's the point? I'm hardly a butcher's whippet.

'No point in scarpering, son. I'll catch you,' Dafty says.  
'Even at my age.'

He stops. I stop. Ten metres between us.

'I'm, er, not going to scarper,' I say.

My bahookie hasn't collapsed in fear; I'm not scared. Actually, and I wouldn't say this to another living soul, I quite like the idea of being kidnapped and everyone stressed out their nut wondering where I am; scratching their heads trying to figure out how to pull together the vast ransom fee.

Problem: Mum and Dad wouldn't have the moolah to pay any ransom.

Solution: I wouldn't cost much.

Reality: who'd want to kidnap me in the first place?

The bobble-hat dafty flings the Irn-Bru can at my feet.

'Would you like me to treat your house like a dumping ground?' he says.

'What?'

'Would you like me to come to your place and litter the bejeezus out of it?'

'Er, no. No, I wouldn't.'

'Right, so, don't enter mine and mess it up with your leftovers.'

'I was just –'

'There's plenty of bins around here.'

He flicks his fingers for me to pick up the can. I go on one knee and scoop it into my hand.

'Sorry, I won't do –'

'Why aren't you in school anyway?' He checks his bare wrist, where a watch would be if he had one.

'Just going,' I say.

I don't want two hooks to the jaw or to be booted down below, so I swivel, and make to skedaddle. I'm honestly not

scared though. Honestly. I know he's watching me but I force myself not to glance back.

'Hey!' he shouts.

I'd say he's about twenty to twenty-four metres away from me. I turn.

'You might want to pack that stuff in as well.' He's pointing to the Irn-Bru can in my hand. 'That stuff will stop your brain from working.' He then points at my head.

'Right.'

'And next time make sure you find a blinkin' bin,' he hollers.

Next time?

When I'm sure he's over 160 metres away I look back. He's gone. Where did he go? Where did he come from? A part of me wants to return. He better not be thinking that bench is his now; we've got a problem if he does. There's a new bench sheriff in town. I scrunch the can more, squeeze it into my blazer pocket and start singing 'Vossi Bop' by Stormzy. But rap's too hard for me to sing so I stop.

It's only when the school comes into view that my bahookie does collapse.

What did that man mean when he said, *Don't enter mine and mess it up with your leftovers?*



## Portrait

No one notices that I haven't been to the previous classes, not even the teachers. It's hard being invisible, but much harder being visible.

Mr Fox, who teaches Art, doesn't take the electronic register cos he's 'not got a head for technology'. All the girls fancy him, all the guys think he's a howl. I think he has sad eyes and wears weird shoes. Mine are these big clunky things with Velcro straps across them, so I'm not one to talk. I hate them, but I can hardly go to school barefoot, can I? I'm not Jesus.

'Right, first year,' Mr Fox shouts. 'You've been here almost two months. And, now that I know you all by name, we're going to do something important.'

'What, sleep?' Liam McAvoy pipes.

'You wish, Mr McAvoy,' Mr Fox says, and stares him

down. 'No, today and for the rest of the week we're going to be doing self-portraits.'

'Aw, sir,' about six people whine.

Shona McCabe and Grace McKenna, who are sitting at my table, swear under their breath.

'Simmer down, first year. These are going to be self-portraits with a difference.'

'Aw, sir,' the same six squeal.

'Sim-mer down.' He waits until he can hear pins dropping. 'These self-portraits don't have to be what you look like now –'

'Thank God for that – eh, Lenny?' I can't be sure if it's Shona or Grace's voice. Mr Fox holds out his arms and tries to flap away the laughter.

He tightens the man bun in his hair. A sure sign not to mess with him.

'What I want you to do is draw a self-portrait of what you think you'll look like in twenty, thirty or even forty years' time.'

Shona McCabe and Grace McKenna swear again. They're not the best at art.

Loads of groans and tutting.

He squeezes his eyes and stands really straight.

Silence.

Mr Fox plonks a batch of paper in the middle of the tables, along with some sketching pencils. And already I've got the image in my head; I'm going for the forty-years-in-the-future idea. I begin with a roundish, thin face. YES, THIN. Then I start creating.

'Sir?' Grace McKenna puts her hand up.

'Yes, Grace,' Mr Fox says, strutting to our table.

'Think Lenny's going to need a bigger piece of paper for his self-portrait,' she says, then puffs her cheeks out. Her and Shona are the only ones who snigger. Trisha Woods looks at me from across the class and presses her lips together. I can tell she's no fan of Grace and Shona.

'Just get the head down, Grace,' Mr Fox says. 'How you doing, Lenny?' he looks at my portrait. 'Not bad, not bad at all.'

'Thanks, sir.'

He sees me. I try to maintain my neutral face, but he knows that I'm all bruised on the inside. That's why he's a good teacher.

'Well, keep it up.' He soft-punches me on the bicep, as if we're buddies.

Buddies. Now there's a thing.

When he goes, Shona McCabe leans herself towards me and mimics Mr Fox's voice. '*Not bad, not bad at all.* You've got a disease, Lambert, know that?' she whispers. Smiles. There's a smear of lipstick on one of her front teeth. I don't tell her.

I turn down everyone's volume and concentrate. Plug myself into my portrait. Noses are so hard to get right. I sketch and shade until I'm done.

When the bell rings I pretend to be still etching, hoping everyone will slink past me without comment. I've already decided there's no way I'm going to the last class of the day, PE. Not on your puff. In another life maybe an afternoon of Art and PE would be a magic thing, but there's no point in thinking this way, cos who actually gets to have another life? I keep sketching until I'm done.

'That's really good, Lenny,' Trisha Woods says over my shoulder as she's leaving. Once again everything speeds up and I don't get an opportunity to reply. No *Thanks, Trisha*. No *Cheers, Trisha*. Just a big blank expression of stupidity. What's wrong with me?

I hand the drawing to Mr Fox. He examines it, holds it above his head, like he's an art doctor or something. Nods, which makes his bun wobble. I know his game. He's trying

to make me feel like I'm worthy. Classic teacher trick.

'It's really good, Lenny,' he says. 'Friendly eyes.'

'Thanks, sir.'

'So, this is you in ...'

'Forty years, sir.'

'Looking good, my friend, looking good.'

I think we both know that Mr Fox is taking the mickey. We both know that this drawing is not me in forty years' time.

'I think you've got potential, Lenny,' Mr Fox says.

Is he extracting the urine or what?

'Erm ...'

'Everyone has to start somewhere, right?'

'Erm ... don't know, sir.'

'Well, I think this is a good start, so that's somewhere, isn't it?'

'Erm ... not sure, sir.'

'Trust me, it is,' he says, and does that soft-punch thing again.

I'm unsure if this a compliment or not. It doesn't give me the same snuggly feeling inside as Miss Kane's compliments, that's for sure.

He grins, looks at his watch, does more bun tightening,

and says, 'Right, better run or you'll be late for your next class.'

'OK.'

'And, Lenny.'

'Yeah?'

'Don't let them get to you,' he says, hands still on his head.

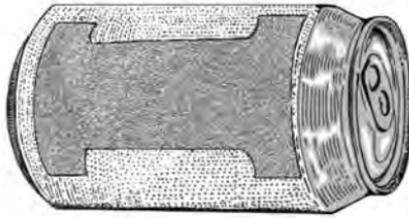
If I were Mr Fox I'd just cut the stupid thing off instead of spending most of the time faffing around with the top of my napper. Must be a total pain in the neck. Not to mention costing a bomb in shampoo. Just chop it off, man.

'Let who get to me?' I say.

'Run along now.'

But I never run, do I?

My portrait was called *Canal Dafty*, and it kind of looked like *him*.



## Skimming

It's called being super intrigued, an explorer of all things dangerous. A spy. A sleuth. On my way home I walk past the bench, then detour down the steep banking; stroll against the canal's current. And stop. Wait. No sign of the dafty.

I skim two stones on the water. They don't skip, they plop. Might as well have chucked a giant boulder. Skimming always reminds me of our Frankie.

'Guess what I did today, Lenny boy?' he'd said to me about three years ago, in the days when I think he used to do the same canal walk on his way home from school.

'What?'

'You're not going to believe this,' he'd said.

'Go, I will. What did you do?'

'A ten-skimmer.'

‘No way, ten?’

He then jumped off his bed and showed me his amazing technique: down low on his hunkers, arm and wrist lighting fast, he flashed an imaginary stone across the room.

‘A perfect ten,’ he said again, then winked.

I’d loved to have seen it. I’d love for him to see me now. He’d tear strips off me for being a champion duffer at skimming.

I wait some more. Nothing doing. No sign of any dafty in a bobble hat.

It’s torture getting back up the banking slope, sure takes it out of you. When I make it I’m sweltering and breathing out my you-know-what. I slap my blazer for a hanky to wipe my brow. And – know what I find instead? Only the crushed can of Irn-Bru in my pocket. And – know what I do? I scrape it across my sweaty forehead like Dad does to his lorry’s windscreen in winter. And – know what I do after that? I launch it down towards the canal as far as I can. And – guess what happens? It skims twice on the surface before sinking.

‘Ya beauty!’

Absolute stonker.

I might even tell Dad when I get home. Might even tell

him what Miss Kane thinks about my haikus.

I'm hot on my heels when I hear it:

'Hey!'

It's the dafty again. I don't wait to say howdy. I run as fast as I can, which isn't that fast, believe me. Stuff being an explorer of danger. A herd of buffalo couldn't stop me from getting away from there.

'I see you, I know who you are,' he bellows.

No way do I look back.



## Pointless

My shirt's sticking to my back. My inner thighs are raw red from the rubbing together. I'm not used to sprinting. When do you ever hear of someone being killed for littering? I could have made the news. Front page of the *Advertiser*. That man really doesn't like cans being thrown, does he?

'Would you look at the state of you,' Mum says when I burst through the door. She's lounging on the sofa scribbling in her notebook.

'State of what?' I say.

'You're soaking, Lenny.'

'It's sweat. I'm sweating.'

Dad appears from the kitchen with a dish towel draped over his shoulder in his classic *I'm cooking* pose. Spag bol, soup and curry are his speciality. He likes to do the 'odd bit of chopping' when he's not off driving his lorry long

distances; apparently, 'anything's better than the monotony of that bleedin' road'. He goes to France and Italy sometimes. Once he brought our Frankie an AC Milan scarf home. I don't like football so I wasn't bothered. And once he took him to South Wales and back when Frankie was the same age as me. That gives me wee goosebumps, knowing and hoping that it'll be my turn soon.

I'm thinking, cos of the dish towel, it'll be a curry tonight. Then I will be boiling. We all will.

'Sweating doing what?' Dad says.

'Running,' I say. 'I was running. Sprinting, in fact.'

He twists and twirls the dish towel in front of him like it's pizza dough before slapping it over his shoulder again. He chuckles, then disappears into his curry without giving me time to ask him if he needs anything chopped or stirred. 'Sprinting. I've heard it all now,' he booms from the kitchen.

'Well, I think it's good that you're trying out new sports, Lenny,' Mum says.

'No, no, I wasn't running to try out new –'

'Eh?' Mum mutters. Her head's deep in her notebook thoughts. 'What was that?'

'Nothing.'

If I told them that I'd been chased twice in the same day

by some mentalist and life flashed right in front of my eyes as I was trying to escape his bobble-hatted clutches, they'd be vomiting with worry. Not to mention it would scupper their curry joy.

I stand over Mum on the sofa, still battling to get my breath back.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'Nosy noses get chopped off.' She cuts imaginary scissors towards my face. 'It's nothing.'

'Doesn't look like nothing to me,' I say, craning my neck.

She rams the notebook shut and looks at me with comedy eyes, pretending to be annoyed.

'Beeswax, Lenny.' She taps her nose three times. 'Mind yours. Go upstairs and get out of those clothes,' she says, shooshing me as if I'm some begging dog.

I loosen my tie and wrist-dry my forehead. I think I need to lie down for a bit. Mum peers at me. I'm still panting.

'I think it's great that you've taken up running,' she says. 'But I'd suggest not overdoing it to begin with. You need to build up your stamina first.'

I screw up my face.

'Mum, I haven't taken up –'

'What?'

‘Doesn’t matter.’

She opens the notebook again and slashes her pen across the page.

‘Now, does *occasionally* have one L or two?’ she says without looking at me.

Sometimes Mum is in a wee world of her own.

‘I’m going,’ I say.

After I skoosh water on my face, I take my clothes off and chuck them into the dirty laundry. I stand in front of the mirror wearing only my Minion boxers. Mum got them after I saw the film. There’s a picture of a one-eyed Minion that covers my willy. It’s supposed to say *Ladies’ Man* in squiggly writing, but since my belly covers the *ies* bit it reads as *Lad Man*. What a hoot. Not. Thank God no one gets to see me in this state.

I didn’t really like the *Minions* film, and I don’t really like mirrors either, unless I’m singing into them pretending to be mad famous, which only happens when I’m feeling good about myself.

Why doesn’t Mum want me to see what she’s writing about? I mean, what’s the big secret?

Curry smells waft up to my bedroom. It’s definitely going to be a hot one. Dad’s talents are astounding: he’s a highly skilled driver, especially at reversing his lorry, which, let me

tell you, takes some serious talent and composure; his cooking ability could definitely get him on to *Masterchef*. I keep telling him to apply, but I think he'd be too busy. One benefit of having a dad who's a lorry driver is that you get to taste all these exotic foods from places he's been to: chicken tikka masala, Yorkshire pudding, crêpes and spicy wonton soup.

'Ten minutes, Lenny,' he shouts up.

'OK,' I scream back.

I squeeze myself into some joggy bottoms and a T-shirt, sit at my desk, which is really my bed, and take out Miss Kane's English homework task. Can't be bothered writing a haiku about myself though; I might body-swerve her class tomorrow.

I keep thinking about that man who hates cans. I mean, what's his deal? He can't take away the only place I've found safety in. He can't just rock up and nick my bench, my peace. Life doesn't work like that, mate. And so, before I singe the roof of my mouth with Dad's vicious curry, I make a decision. A decision so big, so dangerous, that the Sky News cameras could be perched outside our house in jig time awaiting info about the missing boy: tomorrow I'm going back to my bench to reclaim my spot. I won't bring any cans or empty packets of anything. Just me and my school bag.

'Lenny, dinner!' Dad bellows from below.

'Down in a sec,' I shout.

'What was that?'

Basically, this means *Get your cakehole down here pronto or else.*

'Just coming.'

You should see the size of the portion; he must've piled it on with a digger. I know that our Frankie no longer eats with us, but it seems there's always enough for him, in case, you know, he bursts through the door ready to eat an ox. We sit with our dinner on our laps. Mum has a tray, thinking she's dead posh.

'Right, boy, get tucked into that,' Dad says, ramming a mouthful of curry into his gob. Mum's nibbling at hers while still scribbling on that piece of paper from earlier. I bet I know what it is. It's one of her 'Dear Frankie' letters. She never shows me them, or wants me to see what she's written.

I put a spoonful on to the tip of my tongue. Gee whizz, it would blow the knickers right off you; it's rocket hot.

'What? Too fiery for you?' Dad asks.

'A bit.'

'Oh, don't be such a –'

But before he can complete his insult Mum stops him with the power of silence, and the flat of her hand. Dad

sniggers. I munch away. Dad seems impressed with how I attack the curry.

‘Delicious, eh, son?’

His voice softens when he calls me *son*. When our Frankie was here it was *son* this, *son* that, *son* in every room of the house. Now I only hear it once in a blue moon. But what a feeling though. One of the best ever.

I continue to eat, even though my face is contorted. It’s clear I’m in some highly spiced discomfort.

‘Put hairs on your chest, a dinner like that, Lenny,’ Dad says, flicking the TV remote. ‘Nothing on except *Pointless*.’ He watches for a few seconds, scoffing curry and semi-snarling at the TV. ‘Is it any wonder it’s called flamin’ *Pointless*?’

This is not a proper question.

I try to eat as much as I can, but I leave over half.

‘Think I’m done, Dad. It was great but I’m stuffed.’

He glares at my half-eaten plate of food, then takes aim. Fires.

‘Imagine what Frankie would give to have a dinner like that.’ The words whack me full force in the belly. ‘Can you, Lenny?’

I lower my head, cos I know he’s bang on. Our Frankie would love nothing more than to have a mouthful of volcano.

'Well?' he adds.

Mum does her STOP-sign hand gesture again. Honestly, she'd make a tremendous indoor traffic warden.

'Just put it in the kitchen,' Dad says. 'I'll take it to work with me.' For a split second I thought he was going to say that he'd take *me* to work with him. Imagine, two of us on a quiet roadside chomping on our curries. Could life get any better?

After putting the plate in the kitchen, I tell them I'm going to my room to do my homework. Mum barely registers; she nibbles her curry and eyes her notebook. Dad gives me a *Righto* nod.

'Fancy a trip into town later this week?' Dad says to Mum.

'For what?' Mum doesn't lift her eyes.

'I need to pick up some new work gloves and overalls.'

'New work gloves and overalls? It's good to see that romance is still alive and well, Des.' She looks at Dad and grins. 'It's very tempting, but I think I'll give it a miss.'

'I'll go,' I blurt.

'Yeah, take Lenny,' Mum says.

Dad's face drops a bit.

It's not easy being someone's booby prize.

'You'll be bored,' he says.

'I won't be, I promise.'

Dad inflates his cheeks and puffs out a huge gust of air.

‘Don’t start tugging at my shirt and asking to go to McDonald’s, OK?’ he says. What does he think I am? A toddler?

‘I won’t, honestly.’ Cripes, I can feel tingles up and down my spine. ‘Can we take the lorry, Dad?’ I ask.

‘Don’t be silly. We’ll walk.’

‘Brilliant.’

Dad gives me another nod before I head to my room.

My English homework is mostly mental word twiddling and syllable counting.

Here it is:

Teen, wearing boxers,  
Wants to kill his reflection  
Mirror always laughs

It grew and I grow,  
This lump, this thump, this figure  
Grows big to bigger

Know what?

That canal dafty doesn’t scare me one bit.



## Calais

Mum thinks I don't have a clue what she's writing about. Well, she'd be right. And wrong. See, I did a terrible, shocking thing. I snuck downstairs in the middle of the night for a glass of water, shifting like a ninja. Obviously that bit's made up. While guzzling the icy water, I saw her notebook peeking out of her bag. I looked at it for ages and heard it crying out to me: *Read me, Lenny! Read me!* So – and I'm not proud of myself, cos if the sock was on the other foot I'd be raging like a rodeo bull – I lifted it out of her bag.

Here's what I read:

*Hiya Frankie love*

*Hope you're good today, son. Hope you're keeping your strength up. Hope you managed to*

*get to the gym for your workout. Hope hope hope is sometimes all we have. Never lose it, son. Never lose it.*

*Same old here, just a different day. Your dad's been to Calais in France this week, said the place was desperate. Sometimes I feel heart sorry for him, I really do. And you too, of course.*

*Lenny's started at the big school now. I think he's doing fine, he only talks about it occasionally so we can only guess if he's liking it or not. We don't want anything that happened to affect his transition to high school. With that in mind, son, we think it's best if he doesn't phone or write any letters. Probably too painful for you as well. It's just so he can ease himself into this year without everything weighing on him. He's taken up running so it's good that he's showing an interest in other things ...*

There was a last paragraph about bingo and other dull stuff, which I read only once. But the part that Mum says

about not phoning or writing to him, well, I read that about twenty times. And all that stuff about it being too painful for our Frankie almost broke my throat muscles. I call that blame.

It was a nightmare trying to get back to sleep.