

Some Are Born

*Some are born to peace and joy
And some are born to sorrow
But only for a day as we
Shall not be here tomorrow.*

Stevie Smith
from *The Collected Poems*
& Drawings of Stevie Smith
(Faber, 2015)



MONDAY

Hex wasn't entirely sure how the girl had come to be hurt.

That morning he and Tommo had got on their bikes and they'd headed over the level crossing and down the hill, down to the woods.

On a map, the woods were a fat finger pointing away from town.

A brook ran through the middle and the trees formed a strip, a couple of hundred metres wide on either side, but dwindling

and narrowing, closing in and petering out the further you went. Beyond them, on the left, was the road that led off to the next town. Beyond them, on the right, were wide, flat farmer's fields.

It wasn't big enough to get lost in, but it *was* big enough to forget yourself in.

The trees towered over you, little specks of blue twinkling high above like stars in the night sky, saying nothing.

As smoke and squeals had poured off Hex and Tommo's brake pads at the bottom of the last road, they had seen the girl in her front garden.

She was some years younger than they were. Down the bottom of the school, probably still in the infants, while they were up at the top.

She was called Sascha Something-or-Other and had been sat on the lawn of her front garden pretending to read from a book to her toys. ('Pretending' only because Hex couldn't believe the story was actually in the book, which looked like one about tractors.)

'There was a prince who killed a giant,' the girl had said, 'and he got sent to prison because killing is wrong, and when he was in prison he fell in love with the prison boss's daughter, but she wouldn't marry him because he had killed a giant and killing is wrong. But he said, "The giant was going to eat the king," and she said, "The king should be more careful." And she married an apple and ate it all up and was happily ever after. The end.'

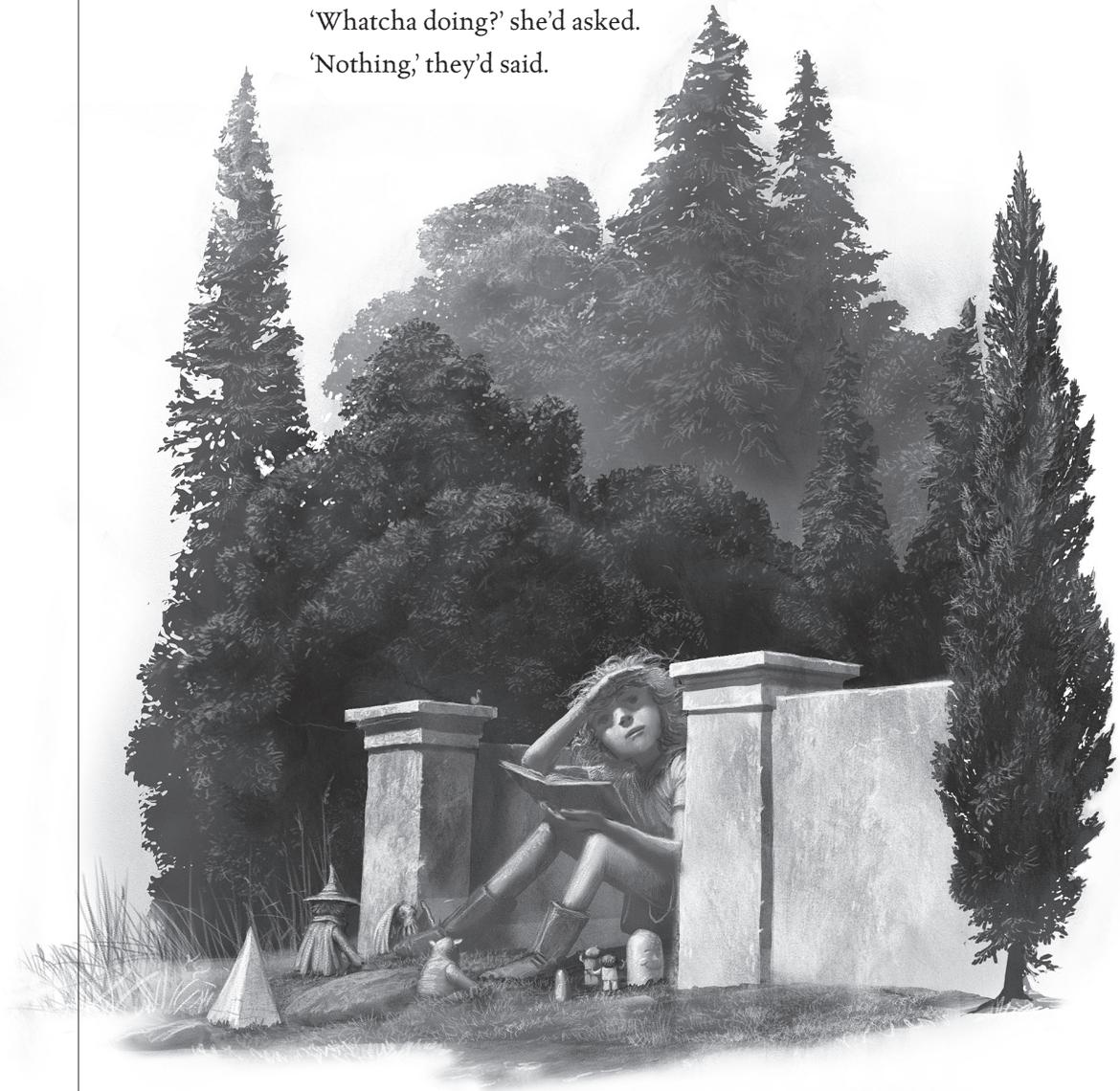
The front door had been open a crack and they'd heard

distant voices somewhere inside.

She'd lowered her book and looked at them, squinting at the sun and shading her eyes with a hand.

'Whatcha doing?' she'd asked.

'Nothing,' they'd said.



But she'd asked again and so they'd told her they were going into the woods. There was a rope-swing set up on the high bank, over the brook. It was a good place to spend a hot day.

'I'll come,' she'd said, putting a plastic horse between the pages of her book and laying it down carefully on the grass.

'Nah,' they'd said.

But she'd just stood up and brushed her bottom with both hands.

She'd sniffed her palms and said, 'Mmmm, don't you love that fresh smell?'

She'd probably meant the grass, but it was still weird.

Tommo and Hex had looked at one another at that point. A half-chuckle, nervous and uncertain.

'Nah, you're OK,' they'd said, shaking their heads.

Pulling their bikes up they'd walked off, not looking back.

And she had followed them.

They hadn't invited her, hadn't forced her, hadn't encouraged her, hadn't *wanted* her to come, but there she was, a little kid suddenly in their care.

And now they were in the woods and it had all gone wrong.



Hex often wondered why adults insisted on there being *reasons* for things.

That didn't match the world he saw.

Sometimes he'd stand up in class, in the middle of doing something else, and point at a squirrel out the window or do a little dance or ask a question about something they *weren't* studying that day, and the other kids would laugh, and Miss Short, his teacher (or, ten minutes later, Mr Dedman, the head), would look him in the eyes and say, 'What on earth did you do that for, Hector?'

And he'd shrug and say, 'I dunno,' and they'd tell him he was being smart and answering back, but he was simply telling the truth.

As he stood there, in front of the head's desk, sometimes an answer *would* come – something like 'Because I thought the squirrel was about to jump' – but these *reasons*, these *answers*, only ever came to him *after* the event, only when he was interrogated about it. They were never there in the moment.

And it seemed most of life was like that – you did things and then thought about why you'd done them later on, when someone asked, or when you got caught, or caught out.

Even with Tommo, they'd meet up each morning and just see where they ended up.

Today they'd ended up in the woods, with Sascha at their heels.



They'd walked their bikes down the twittern, the alley that ran between two houses at the end of the close, down to the edge of the woods.

There was a bin for dog owners and a sign that said the local council were being ever so generous by not selling the place off to build more houses. And there was a path in, under the trees. Well-trodden earth, made bare by feet, out of the sunshine, into the shade.

They'd been here a hundred times before, over the years, so they hadn't hesitated as they'd gone in, turning at all the right places, Tommo panting and rattling his inhaler as they climbed uphill, between trees, heading to the bank above the stream. With, to their almost-amusement, Sascha following, running round their ankles like a puppy, asking questions, laughing, singing.

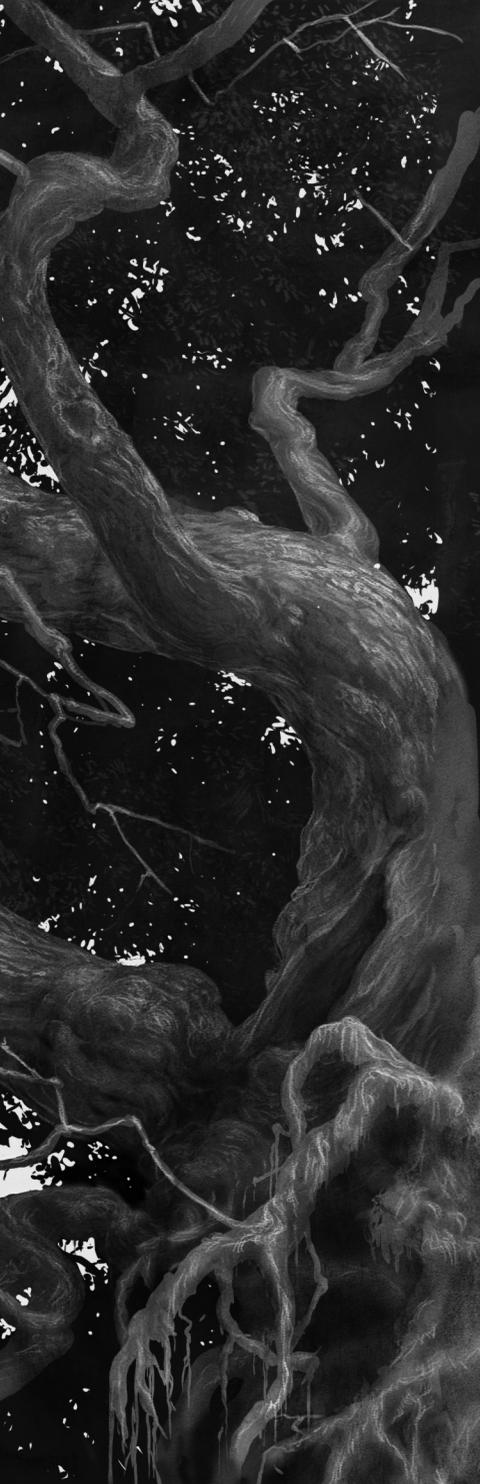
Her eagerness had been embarrassing, and Hex had felt that embarrassment settle on him like a bird on his shoulder (it had almost looked like worry). It had pecked at his ear and said nothing.

Eventually they'd dumped their bikes on the ground.

There was a big tree, an oak, right on the edge, on the high lip of the riverbank. Its roots stuck out of the mud wall below, like rungs on a ladder.

From one of the high branches someone had tied a rope, a tatty thick blue nylon rope. And at the bottom of the rope was a crossbar, a sturdy stick held in place by a fat knot.





Below that, curling round at the base of the high bank, was the brook, a spotty dark mirror snaking through pale earth.

It hadn't rained for weeks, a long, dry spring after a sharp, cold winter, and the water was low. Pebbles poked dry heads into the air.

You could scramble down, using roots as footholds, and that's what Hex had done.

He'd got the crossbar in one hand (it had been at about head height), and had pulled it behind him as he climbed back up the bank.

At the top he'd cocked his leg over the wooden bar and, just as Tommo had shouted, 'Oi, I was gonna be first!' had pushed off.

'Geronimo!'



Sometimes Hex dreamt about flying.

He'd be running along the street or in the school field and he'd jump, just a normal jump, a hop-skip-and-a-jump sort of jump, and he'd stay up.

With a thought, with a push of his will, he'd rise a bit higher.

Not flying like a superhero, arm out in front, cloak flapping behind, but just like a boy who's jumped and decided not to come down yet.

And he'd steer, turn back and rise up higher, over his friends below, and look down on the black, tarmac-ish school roof, or at the tiled roofs of the houses, and will himself on, light and happy, between television aerials and on, up, out, over the town.

And that was all there was to the dream, that freedom and the feeling of joy, never an adventure,

never a drama, never anyone shouting or wanting anything.

If the people below were pointing at him, if they were saying something, he never noticed – it was just him in the air with the wind in his hair, touching his toes on the crests of the roofs as he pushed off to sky-run some more.

But then, always, sooner or later, he'd wake up.



The rope-swing was the closest real life brought him to those dreams.

The freedom at the end of the upswing, as gravity forgot about you for a second or two ... before it called you back, and then the acceleration in the mouth of your stomach, fluttering as you zoomed down ... and through ... and up again ... the riverbank calling you back and then ... the pause, again, at the top, where you could reach out and step off ... but you don't, and you plunge back down again ... The speed, the speed, the joy.

(It was different to the feeling on the swings down the rec because of the coarse rope in his hands, the irregular, knobbly stick under his thighs, the organic creak and sway of the thick branch above, the green light of the trees all around, the *risk* of relying on some stranger's knots holding the whole experience together. It was like being a caveman, not a boy of the present with schoolwork and tests and a bedtime.)

He'd swung over the stream half a dozen times before Tommo had grabbed him, and they'd swapped places, and he'd watched his best friend close his eyes and grip the rope, and Hex had guessed how Tommo felt and had laughed again.

And then Sascha had said, 'My turn now.' And she'd bounced on her toes saying it, a stripped twig in her hands, which she waved like a magic wand, and her words became a command for the boys.

Hex had felt something in the world shift slightly to one side as he'd held the crossbar and Tommo had hoicked her up and helped her hook her legs over. First one, then the other.

They had held her there, in the air, by the great oak, her feet up off the ground, a vast open space before her, the stream below, the far-off trees on the other side, and just space, space, fresh air between here and there.

'You ready?' Hex had asked.

And for the first time there'd been something like nervousness in her eyes.

But he'd let go by then, just before Tommo did, and so she'd spun round and round as she'd swung out.

And she'd said nothing.

And the forest had said nothing.

And the brook below had said nothing.

And then Sascha had laughed and the silence went away as she pendulumed and pirouetted high up in the green woods.

She had tried to swing, to move like you do on a swing to go higher, to keep moving, but because she was spinning she sent the whole rope-swing round and round in crazy circles.

And the boys had laughed, because they'd just helped someone have fun and were Good People because of it.

And then ... And then it had gone on a bit too long.

The rope-swing was settling down. She was now in control, no longer spinning so much. Swinging backwards and forwards, mostly, but not quite within reach of the bank. Slowing, despite her efforts.

And Hex had climbed down the root-ladder, down to the stream, and had tried to catch her as she went past, to drag her back over to the bank so she could climb off.

But she'd banged into him, by accident, knocking him on to his backside.

Water had soaked the seat of his jeans, giving him sudden, cold, damp underwear.

And up on the bank Tommo had laughed loudly, slapping the tree trunk, getting breathless, pointing down at him.

And Sasha was laughing too, looking down on him as the swing swung slowly back and forth.

It was a real crowd-in-the-playground moment – the world watching and you shrinking.

And Hex had felt microscopic.

Looking up into the canopy above he'd seen a squirrel jump

from one high branch to another, free-flying, landing, pausing, turning ... its bead-like black eye watching him, deciding if he was a nut to store for winter.

And Hex was small.

Sascha was still swinging above him and she was singing as she swung, oblivious to the harm she'd done.

His heart hammered strange rhythms in his ears.

His cheeks burned.

And then, as he clambered up the low bank on the other side, his hand closed around a dry clod of mud. And as he stood he turned and he threw it.

It whizzed past Sascha, crumbling with a puff of dust on the opposite bank.

Her back was to him. She didn't see.

But Tommo did, and for whatever reason (for no good reason at all) he replied with a dirt-clod of his own.

The last few weeks had been dry, so the mud crumbled as it left your hands. Smoke trails in the air, explosive puffs as they hit the ground.

And Sascha dodged them all, through luck or chance or wriggling skill.

Until ...

Hex's last mud-clod wasn't a mud-clod, it was a stone. Fist-sized, flinty-blue.

His jeans dribbled icy cold water down the backs of

his legs into his socks.

And, without aiming to, without meaning to, the stone struck Sascha on the shoulder.

Sent her spinning.

And she lost her grip and turned upside down before she fell.

Dangled for a while.

Such a slow fall.

The world paused to watch.

So slow.

Hex saw everything.

And he heard the crack of a stick breaking as she landed in the stony stream.

And then the world let out its breath and Sascha let out a cry.

And Hex turned to clay.



He looked up and saw Tommo clinging to the oak tree's trunk, suddenly and seriously sick and pale and staring.

He looked down and saw Sascha lying on her back in the stream, wailing.

Her face was red and wet, and her chest was heaving sobs between the wails, and her right arm was ... the wrong shape.

It had a second elbow.

And the stream was bleeding, a thin tentacle of red coiling



away from her, tangling among the stones.

He looked up again and Tommo had vanished.

It was just him and the girl and the water and the woods.

And he couldn't move.

His feet wouldn't lift and he didn't know where they'd take him if they did.

Was he going to run away, leave the scene, deny all knowledge, or was he going to run over and help?

And if he were to help, what would he do? He didn't know what you did for crying kids with weird-shaped arms.

He couldn't move and he couldn't speak. His whole body had hollowed out to a hole. He'd turned from clay to glass. Had become transparent and fragile. One move and he'd shatter into pieces.

And then, before the spell broke, the biggest dog he'd ever seen came padding on huge grey feet out of the shadows towards him.

Splash, splash, went its feet along the red-running stream-bed, its nose low, its tongue lolling, its eyes gleaming black.

'Leafy,' called a voice, a woman's voice. 'Leafy! Where've you got to?'

And approaching him was a small bright jolly-looking woman, not *old* old, but older than his mum and dad, a tall walking stick in one hand.

'What've you found there?' she said.

The dog, Leafy, sniffed around the sobbing Sascha and looked



back at its owner, saying nothing.

'Oh my,' said the woman, seeing the girl.

She made her way over, slowly half-scrambling down the shallow bank, leaning on the stick as she went.

'Um,' said Hex, standing there, unmoving.

The dog was almost as tall as he was. It came up to his shoulder, at least. Grey and fuzzy and dim and wiry. Wet eyes sparkling black like stars.

'What's happened?' the woman said, as her great dog *snurfed* at Sascha's face.

Hex didn't know if she was talking to him or to the girl or to the dog.

'Um,' he said again.

Sascha was crying and giggling as the dog stuck its nose in her ear.

The forest looked at him and said nothing.

The woman looked at him and said, 'What did you do?'

Stupid girl, Hex thought, suddenly, angrily. *Why'd she have to let go? It's all her fault. Stupid, stupid little girl.*

But he said, 'She fell off the rope-swing.'

'And broke her arm, by the looks,' the woman said.

'Um,' he said, taking a step backwards.

The woman knelt down and touched Sascha's forehead, lifted her up by the shoulders so she was almost sitting, murmured something to her.

'What?' she said, in answer to something Sascha murmured back. Hex's hollow insides had filled with sick.

If he moved he would spill.

'Who are you?' the woman asked him severely, jolliness having left her.

The dog sat beside her, a hairy grey boulder staring at him with glistening black eyes.

She's seen you, he thought. *You can't just say nothing. You can't just leave. Run off. Not like Tommo did. You're in this. Stuck in the middle. You're in trouble, now. All the trouble.*

So he found himself telling a lie.

'She's my little sister,' he said. 'We were mucking about and she slipped ... and ... fell.'

He looked at what he'd just said.

Why *that* lie?

The woman looked at him, looked him up and down.

'You need to go get help,' she said, after having said nothing. 'Don't you?'

And it was like he'd been waiting for permission.

And he was off, running.

He didn't get far before he hit a problem.

Ahead of him, up the path through the woods, were people,

coming his way, hurrying.

It was Tommo and a grown-up man and a teenager, and there was a buzz about them. Worry. Static in the air.

He dived into a patch of ferns and scabbled behind a tree, hoping they'd not seen him.

He knew, in his stomach, who they were.

It was Sascha's dad and her older sister, led by Tommo.

Tommo had *gone for help*.

He was a *hero* and Hex was in *hiding*.

He watched as they went by. They didn't see him.

He felt empty and full at the same time.

He waited a little longer. A minute. Two. And then he crept out, back to the path.

He was free to go now, Sascha was safe, he didn't need to call an ambulance or anything, but ...

His bike was back by the big oak.

He'd forgotten it when he ran.

It would be a long walk home without it, and what would he say to his dad?

And so ...

He followed the path back, through the woods, taking the fork that led up to the top of the high bank. And from up there he saw Sascha's dad kneeling beside her. She was out of the stream now, propped up on the opposite bank.

Her sister, some years older than Hex, was looking pale and

itchy, pulling at her sleeves.

Tommo was sheepish at the back.

The woman and her dog, Leafy, weren't there.

Tommo and Hex.

They'd been a pair since the day dot.

The two of them against the world, they said.

Dynamic duo.

Everyone knew it.

Born in the same hospital within days of one another.

When their parents had brought them home they'd all kept in touch.

Babysitting duties had been shared, when needed, and the boys had a combined birthday party almost every year.

When they'd gone to school, people had thought they might start to split up, go off and find other friends, that the friendship would dissolve, the way friendships do, naturally and painlessly and with time, but it hadn't.

Even when Tommo's mum had left and his dad had grown cold they kept on, just with Tommo coming round for tea more often than Hex went to his.

After ten years or so they were still best mates.

Hex and Tommo. Tommo and Hex.

Although neither of them would have said it, they loved one another, like brothers.

Hex could've picked his bike up and gone.

Tommo wouldn't do him in, he knew that.

He could just vanish and no one would ever know. He'd never be blamed.

And, besides, the girl was all right now, wasn't she?

The paramedics arrived, green uniforms glowing, and it was all hushed voices and jolly smiles. They were led by a boy he recognised, Sascha's brother ... Was it Jason? Jackson? Something like that. He was their age, but in the other class at school.

She'd get a lollipop and a sling and all would be well in the world.

Hex was free.

Off the hook.

Out of trouble.

And with that the tension broke and he gave a relieved laugh ...

... which came out louder than was sensible.

(*'Why can't you just be sensible, Hector?'*)

Everyone down by the brook looked up.

And there he was, a boy by the tree, looking down at them all and laughing. Loudly.

Sascha's big sister said something, pointed, grunted, snarled.

And she was off like a rabbit, like a ferret, like a snake splashing through the water and swerving her way up the root-ladder, even as her dad shouted to stop.

The last thing Hex saw was the look on Tommo's face: guilt, panic, fear, relief, fear, panic, guilt and *embarrassment*.

Hex lifted his bike and ran, again.

When he got home he was clammy and out of breath.

His dad touched his forehead with the back of his fingers as he came in the back door.

'You all right, old boy?' he asked. 'You're all hot and sweaty.'

'Just the cycling,' Hex said. 'You know, up the hill.'

'Ah! Good for the lungs! Fresh air and exercise,' said his dad, turning back to the hob. 'Now, go and wash your hands, lunch is almost ready.'

And then lunch *was* ready and, as it was just the two of them, they sat outside, on the doorstep, eating their fajitas.

Hex couldn't finish his.

'Dad?' he said.

'Yeah?'

He wanted to say something about this morning, but didn't know what.

'When's Frank coming back?'

'Next weekend,' his dad said. 'It's on the calendar.'

Frank was Hex's big sister. She was away on a school trip in France for the holidays.

Normally he didn't want to see her. She was an annoying teenager, playing her music too loud and burying her head in her school books, but right now his heart called for her.

Tommo had *abandoned* him in the woods. Laughed at him. Run off when they should've stuck together.

Hex would've stayed, if Tommo had been the one who'd thrown the stone. Of course he would've. That was what friends did. They stuck together.

And that's what they'd done for years. Forever.

Even when Hex did something that made Tommo groan in class (put both legs in one leg of his shorts when changing for PE, for example, and topple over into the reading corner beanbags), they'd be laughing about it five minutes later.

But ... once or twice, in class this last half-term, he'd noticed Tommo *shush* him and get on with his work instead of laughing. Arm down, head down, pen scratching.

Hex had a flash of Tommo's face as Sascha fell.

It was afraid, like a stranger's face.

He'd carried that face in him all the way back from the woods.

'I'm not angry with you, I'm just disappointed,' was what Tommo's face said, like a teacher's.

He was worried he'd burnt a bridge too far. That, without meaning to, he'd somehow gone too far, been too ... what? Thoughtless? After all those years, could Sascha's arm be the straw that broke their friendship's back?

He couldn't have *said* any of this to his sister, just as he couldn't say any of it to his dad, or to Tommo, just as he couldn't really say any of it to himself, not in *words*, just as a faint sick feeling swirling in his stomach.

But ...

But Frank would've smiled at him, as she sometimes did, and rub her knuckle on the top of his head and call him a dummy and tell him to get out of her room and the world would be *normal* again, not perfect, not sorted, but *normal*. It would be like it was before the stone had flown.

Normal.

But instead it was just him and his dad and his thoughts and the memory of the morning.

'You not gonna eat that, old chap?' his dad said, pointing at the wrap in Hex's hand.

'Not hungry.'

'You do look pale,' his dad said, looking at him. He softly touched Hex's forehead again. 'Perhaps, you should have a lie-down. I think you've maybe caught the sun a bit.'

And so that's what Hex did, while his dad finished his unfinished fajita.

Hex slept all afternoon and woke up just in time for tea.

He didn't dream.

And he didn't feel any better as he sat at the dining table.

His mum was home from work and as she pushed at the salad with her fork said, 'You look good, Hector dear, did you have a nice day?'

And he was halfway through thinking about what he could say when her mobile buzzed on the table and she looked down at the message that had just arrived and it was something she had to answer right away, to do with work, and he was let off the hook.



MONDAY NIGHT

As Hex tried to sleep, for the second time that day, he found one sound repeating in his ears, above the murmur of the talking book playing in the dark room.

Sascha's arm.

The cracking of a stick over your knee.

Sascha's arm.

The crack of a stick under foot.

Sascha's arm.