

FLAMINGO LAND

This Procedure Unit was one of the okay ones, ish – the big stained concrete building might once have been a real hospital. I knew the best place to park because it was right behind the FHO where we went for Assessment.

I scraped the dirty slush off my trainers, went in and gave Mum's name, and they sent me up to the third floor. I found her near the end of the ward, half-propped on a bottom bunk, looking at an old *Gourmet* magazine.

'How you feeling?'

'Oh, Tommy love, at last. Let's get gone before they bring that sandwich trolley.' She was obviously thinking straight, even though she was slurring a bit. 'Have you had anything?'

It went without saying that I hadn't. Trying to avoid her dressings, I helped her into her clothes and into the wheelchair: she was so light, as if she was totally empty. She gave a little wave to everyone as I wheeled her out.

Driving home, I glanced across to see she was snoozing, her head thrown back, mouth open wide like a hungry

chick, and I put the radio on quiet. I'd been the family driver since I turned seventeen, Dad presenting me with the keys to our old Sharan as if he couldn't wait to get in the back with Beth and the twins. It'd been the same with the bills and stuff. One parents' evening the school mentioned me maybe doing Maths AS-level early, and that weekend Dad handed over all his piles of paper and his notebook that he'd written PASSWORDS/PIN NUMBERS on, clapping me on the shoulder like I was finally becoming a man.

The kitchen was cold but felt freshly deserted, the tang of pickled onion Monster Munch staining the air. I knew it was hard for Beth to stop the twins: one would help the other onto the worktop to reach the cupboards, and I'd even come in once to find Kenny grilling cheese on toast, watching it through the glass with his oven gloves ready like a proper little expert. I didn't like leaving Beth in charge, especially as she benefited from me being around too – in terms of rules, keeping to them, and cupboards, keeping out of them.

I wheeled Mum through to the stairlift so she could go and have a lie down. Beth heard me put the kettle on and shouted from the telly room that she wanted two sugars.

Two matching notes on the table:

Dear Year 3 Parent or Guardian,

For our pre-Easter trip next month, we'll be taking the children to the wonderful world of Flamingo Land! We do hope you'll let your child participate, as we always find it stimulates a lot of excitement as well as beneficial classroom activities such as animal projects, colour work, introduction to simple physics concepts, etc. Only £27.50 per child. Please send full payment by the 20th at the latest.

The only thing to do was quickly hide these in the sideboard – otherwise the twins would start hoping, and I'd have another of those conversations to look forward to: Lily sniffing and wobbling, Kenny kicking the skirting board.

Dad's key turned in the door and he came in, that Daddy fondness in his thin face.

'Alright, Tom. What's that, then? Premium bonds come up, have they?'

'Yeah, right. Just school letters.'

'Your Mum alright?'

'Oh, you know.'

Dad nodded as if this was good. We'd been through four previous ops with Mum and although this one wasn't the worst, she was running out of things to have taken away. I'd never asked Dad if he might volunteer instead, but maybe that time was coming.

'Daddy!' Lily hurled herself across the kitchen towards him.

'Daddy, Daddy!' Kenny shouted, 'Flamingo Land!'

Oh shit.

'What about Flamingo Land?' he said, grabbing one in each arm and mashing their small faces against his chest.

'There's a school trip! Everyone in the whole world's going.'

'Well, isn't everyone in the whole world lucky?'

I turned to deal with the boiling kettle, got everyone's favourite mugs lined up.

'Kenny, Lily,' I said, calling them out from under Dad's armpits. 'What kind of twins are you again?'

They shrieked and piled over each other to get out and upstairs.

We had this thing: I'd say, or trick them into saying, *non-identical*, and they'd walk into it every time because they took it so seriously – who they were, how they came to be – and then I'd dive at them, fingers first, saying *what? What? Non-iden-TICKLE?! I didn't even have to say the full thing any more. It killed me the way they squealed and squirmed.*

Beth filled the doorway as they scrambled up the stairs. She was wearing those peach-coloured trousers that made me wince, and she tugged at her crotch when she saw my face.

'Mum texted to say she'll just have it black.' At Christmas we'd drawn lots to see who could have the phones, and the winners were Mum and Beth.

'Okay. Do you still want sugar?'

'Yes. Why?'

I stirred it in for her, handed over the two mugs. 'Let me know if she wants anything else.'

'Obvs.'

She sloped back into the telly room. We used to call it the living room, and we used to mute the telly when the adverts came on, and we'd eat together at the table – with Radio 4 on – but we kind of let all that go when Grandma finally died.

I put Dad's mug in front of where he sat. 'Don't get them all excited. It's nearly sixty quid.'

'Ach–' He has this habit of waving away complete impossibilities as if they're just bad smells.

'We can't...' I started.

'Tom, son, don't be so... We're going to have a good month this time. I can feel it. Look at me!'

He stood and pulled his shirt against his torso, sucking in air, and crabbed his arms like a bodybuilder. A curve of

ribs, a hollow, the shock of his belt buckle.

‘Dad.’

‘I’m down a whole notch, you know. At work I have to sit on a cushion.’ He winked. ‘The future’s bright, kiddo. Go on, do your sum thingies, just see what comes out. You can put me down for a straight sixty kilos. Yes! I reckon, don’t you? Then with your Mum, I mean, the swelling and that’ll be gone by Monday, she can’t come out more than, what, forty-five now, can she? And then there’s, there’s-’

He trailed off when his thoughts reached the four of us. He dropped his voice. ‘How’s Beth?’

Beth – well. The old Beth was under there somewhere, the one I used to bounce with on the trampoline when we were small. She’d clutch my slightly bigger hands in hers and we’d jump and she’d giggle up into my face, so delighted, until I nearly wanted to die with happiness. But she wasn’t small any more. And I hadn’t heard that laugh of hers for months.

I tried really hard not to get on her case, but as she’d widened into her teens she’d really become a problem, Formula-wise. What made me mad was that she did it to herself, she kept doing it, and she hid it. I’d go in to join her watching telly and catch her stuffing something down the side of the settee; she’d crush Creme Egg foil into tiny nuggets before putting them in the bin. It was pointless – I still knew what they were – we all did, we were fine-tuned to those special confectionery colours, all of us on a hair-trigger of sweet wanting.

I admit I had my own bad habits: at work I’d pick the biggest jacket potato I could see, smush three pats of butter into it and, if the right canteen lady was on, get cheese as

well as beans. So it's not like I didn't understand where Beth was coming from. But don't teenage boys need more food than, like, anyone? And I'm not being funny, but at least my clothes had a bit of leeway, unlike hers.

Basically, when it came to the Formula and all the hard work we did to get our numbers right each month, Beth kept messing things up. But it was all a nightmare, and right now I didn't want to get into it with Dad. 'Well, Assessment's this Monday,' I said, 'so I suppose we'll see.'

'We will that, son, we will that,' he said, happily.

I took my tea through to the telly room. The screen flaunted a close-up of a fork dividing a golden sponge pudding to release a melting centre, a velvety voice-over telling us how good it was. Beth stiffened. She was plopped low in the cushions, chewing the rope of her hair, one hank of thigh slumped over the other. These days that's all she did: just sat, texting, with this furious air about her, jagged lines daggering around her head. I checked her phone once when she went to the loo – I was worried she was getting into arguments at school, or being bullied on the social media she said she hated – but it turned out she was in about twenty different Whatsapp chats and her contributions were long and witty, full of quick, sharp comments and clever emojis. So it seemed the fury that hung around her was just for us.

Someone would have to say something soon, but no one wanted to tell her directly. I definitely didn't – she'd bite my head off. Dad would never shake himself into it, and Mum, well, Mum would rather have something else removed than make one of us feel bad. Still, if Dad was right and he was coming in under sixty kilos... maybe it wouldn't have to be this month, or next month. Maybe we could hold out until

April and the twins' birthday, which would put us in the next category and give us a tiny bit of breathing space before the shit hit the fan and we were put in Special Arrangements.

I heard the twins thudding around upstairs, giggling, and I had to scrunch my eyes shut at the thought of that.

The adverts finished and some programme called *Sick – or Trick?* came back on for its second half. Beth flicked her chin at the telly and said, 'Stupid idiots,' and I knew she didn't mean the poor bloke with stage 4 cancer, or the woman who was agoraphobic, who'd been told they were fit for work; she meant the white-toothed presenter and his handheld-camera team who were shouting through their letterboxes for comment, waving court papers in their grey, frightened faces.

Two nights after, Dad came in and shook my arm, whispering so he wouldn't wake the twins in their bunks. 'What's the number now, to ring for a doctor?'

His face was pale in the strip of light coming between the curtains. I knew it was Mum. I followed him to the bathroom where she was hunched in her wheelchair in her nightie, eyes squeezed shut, one hand twisted backwards to grip the edge of the sink. A thin, high sound was coming out of her and I had to swallow and look back out into the hall before I could go in.

I put my arm around the bones of her shoulders and told Dad the new out-of-hours medical advice number. He stood in the doorway and rang it on speakerphone, but there was a message saying the advice service had closed down, please phone your GP. I thought it had only been going a few months, but anyway, Dad did what they asked. The GP's

surgery message gave us their opening hours and advised ringing the out-of-hours medical advice number.

‘We must have got it wrong,’ said Dad, and went to phone back, but I told him not to bother, and I sat holding the damp strands of Mum’s hair as she leaned from her wheelchair over the loo. I could feel the heat coming off her. She smelt like vinegar and off milk.

‘I don’t think this should be happening,’ Dad said. ‘I don’t think this is right at all.’

Mum, panting, turned her head towards him and tried to say something, then retched again and groaned. With her new stitches every gip must have been like a knife stabbing.

She finished throwing up and sat shivering. Dad seemed stuck in the doorway. ‘Can you get her a clean nightie?’ I asked him. ‘The one in the airing cupboard should be dry by now.’

‘Oh! Yes, son, of course.’

While he shuffled around in the airing cupboard I stripped off her soaking nightie. Her eyes were rolling but they met mine for a second and I wanted to make a joke of it, something about me having to see her naked and her having to let me, anything to make it a bit better, but I couldn’t say anything except something pathetic like it’s okay. I was busy thinking Right, Tom, practical steps: get Mum comfortable, find out what’s wrong, get the solution, get things back to normal. She whimpered as I lowered her naked body back down to the plastic of the wheelchair and I nearly lost it. Do not fucking lose it, Tom. I had to loosen her fingers – she was holding onto me like I was the edge of a cliff – so I could turn and get the shower running warm. Finally, Dad came back in, waving the clean nightie, and I got him to

help me lift her onto her special shower seat and told him to help her get clean and dry. He could manage that.

I knew we hadn't used up all of February's internet credit, so I went down to the kitchen and dug out the Procedure Unit's scribbled discharge note to remind myself exactly what she'd had done this time. I Googled *problems post-hysterec-tomy, partial hepatectomy, cholecystectomy*. Antibiotics seemed like the first option. I'd pop down to Anwar's before work and get them; I had an old prescription I'd managed not to use.

If she was still like this in a couple of days, though, we wouldn't make it over to the FHO for Assessment on Monday. It wasn't technically the end of the world to miss an appointment – they'd let you miss one a year, enter your own provisional data online, and they'd sort it all out at the next appointment – but it meant I'd have to officially do the Formula myself.

Even unofficially doing the Formula gave me a headache. I did it each month between Assessments to see where we were; I'd get out the Family Guide and the calculator and plug in our info. It meant each month I had to chivvy the twins to get on the scales – the worst weight of three, I'd take – and get a written note from Beth, after asking about a million times, because she wouldn't tell me her number to my face. She only gave in because she knew Assessment would reveal everything anyway, and we'd had enough bad scenes in the past after a surprise result – all of us sniping blame, storming through the waiting area past other anxious, dehydrated families. We'd drive home in silence, staring out at the golden arches, the Wild Bean cafés, the ten-metre hoardings sighing *eat, eat* – but not stopping, because we didn't have the spare calories, and having just failed Assessment

for the month, we wouldn't have the spare cash. No one wanted that kind of surprise.

The online timer told me I had a while still, so I went to the DWP website to check for Formula updates. They changed it every now and again, so you never knew: an early threshold change, maybe. But no. I logged in to college, to see how far behind I was. Then email, but no surprise pay rise announcement, ha ha, and no secret admirer messages from fit local girls, ha even more ha. Finally, I went to look at the news, because Mum never let us put it on the telly anymore. When she was with us downstairs she'd veto anything other than David Attenborough or Strictly, and we could hardly argue.

Dad appeared behind me as I skimmed the headlines.

'Oh dear,' he said. 'There's always someone worse off, eh?' And he gave my shoulder a squeeze.

I turned, so he'd stop.

'Well,' he said, 'your mum's settled down. Better get to sleep myself if I'm to be up and at 'em tomorrow, eh?'

Something flared up in me as he ambled out. His relentless happy-man good humour. He never seemed to stop and question his life: our tiny terrace, his embarrassing job in the recycling plant. He used to teach art history at the uni, but somehow got himself made redundant, and then something happened to his personality and it was like he couldn't get back to where he was before. Grandma used to call it 'a little local difficulty' and turn her nose up and change the subject.

I'd only ever heard Dad say there was a lot of competition out there, a man couldn't expect to be on top all his life, he was lucky to even have a job, blah blah. 'There's zero

stress in this job, so I can focus on my book.' His book, as he called it, sat on the shelf above the sideboard in a lever arch file, sort of looming. I'd never seen him touch it, though I remember him a few years ago shut in the bedroom during the day, Mum saying he was trying to write. I suppose we were living on his redundancy then – I was only eleven, I didn't think about it – and then Mum got her little surprise, then the bigger surprise that there were two of them, and it all coincided with the Formula coming in, so he had to find something and the recycling plant was all there was at the time. Then he just settled for it. We struggled month after month and Dad just said, 'Ah well. No fault of our own.' Maybe not, but he never thought about whose fault it was, or if there was anything we could do about it.

I was starving. I went back to bed.

After dropping Beth and the twins at their schools, I headed to Anwar's. Although it was going on for nine, his shutters were down, which was worrying. We'd been using Drugworld for a while because it was next to the big Asda, but I'd stopped at Anwar's for paracetamol a few weeks ago and he was open then. I got a lucky parking space and sat looking at the dead shop. Anwar was never exactly joyful, especially since his family was made to go into Special Arrangements and his granddaughter got put with a family of vegans in Colne, but that day he looked really grim, told me Drugworld had put in some official query about his dispensing licence. Troublemakers, he'd said, bullshit merchants. It sounded funny in his accent, coming from under his kind white moustache.

I drove off to the retail park. Drugworld, so brightly lit,

had the biggest range of everything you can imagine. A relief: Mum would get what she needed today. The price of prescriptions now, though. After I paid I had to sit down for a minute on the plastic waiting chairs. I must have had my head in my hands, because I didn't see Erin until she was standing right in front of me saying my name in this concerned way.

'Oh,' I said, sitting up.

'Alright?'

'..Yeah.'

'I'm just getting...' She lifted her basket – four different flavours of Slimfast, which no way did she need.

'Right. I had to get some stuff for my Mum.'

'She have another op?'

'Yeah.'

She nodded.

'How's Beth?'

'Alright. You know.' I always sounded like an idiot when I talked to Erin, but she nodded again. We said nothing for a minute.

'So how's college? Top of the class?' she said, jaunting out one hip.

I got a little flip in my stomach. 'Ha, yeah. Well, actually not really.'

'Come on.'

'No, I haven't gone for ages, had extra shifts and that.'

'I bet you'll get all A-stars anyway, with your big maths brain. You love all that stuff, don't you?'

Some old woman with a crutch came up, aiming herself at my seat.

'Well, I'd better...'

'Yeah.'

‘See you.’

Last June, I’d helped her revise for her exams, lying on the grass outside her flat. I was trying to find another way to explain binomials when her boyfriend turned up on his bike and I got up to go, but she told him she was going to be busy all day and after he’d gone she nudged me in the side and gave me this long look. It was the moment, but I’d not said anything, not done anything. Now, as I watched her walk off towards the self-checkouts, I kicked myself yet again.

Mum started to get better after a week or so, but we’d missed Assessment. So after work on the last day of February, instead of going to college, I sat at the kitchen table and did the Formula.

When the Formula first came in, I found Dad hunched over the Family Guide, close to tears. The Guide helps you make your own Action Plan to pass Assessment, and it includes the actual Formula they use. I’d sat down with him and had a look, tried to explain it. Each family member gets a number of points, depending how their weight compares against the national average, given on tables in the back of the Guide. You add them all together and you get a number, W, which you plug in to the Formula:

$$\frac{W}{(N+A)} * \left(1 - \frac{((N - 3 * INT(\frac{1.1}{(1+2^{-N}))))}{N}\right) + 25 * (A - 2)$$

Where N is the number of children, A the number of adults and so on, obvious. There’s a penalty for one-parent families, and, hard cheese for us, a penalty for having more than three children. Dad rang up to double-check about the

twins, because he couldn't believe they really counted as two, but they did. To be fair, I could see the logic both ways.

If you achieve your ideal weights, you get your full amount, but if you fail it's cut, really cut. Then, if you keep on failing, Special Arrangements.

It was a bit complicated, the Formula, and that's what had upset Dad – not understanding the maths. Once he saw I could do it, he relaxed. But that was the problem. There were two horrible months in a row where we all seemed to have a growth spurt and we failed – took us a year after that to get straight with the payday loan people – and Dad didn't get that if we kept on the way we were going, they'd break us up. I wanted to hammer it home to him, but whenever I tried to talk about it he'd wave his hands in the air and do a stupid Halloween voice – 'Ooh, Special Arrangements!'

Now, sitting at the table with the calculator, I put my pen down and sat for a minute with my eyes closed. Even after everything Mum had done, even though I'd gone all day without any water to cut a couple of pounds, we weren't going to make it.

I'd have to go online to enter the final figures, but I couldn't bring myself to do it just then. I drank a huge glass of water, then refilled it and joined the others in the telly room. Jamie Oliver was on, beating a massive steak through some cling film with a rolling pin. When he'd finished, beaming, the ads came: stuffed crusts oozing mozzarella, buckets of crispy chicken. Then came one of those low-quality montage adverts, showing stills of local Easter attractions: the model railway, the mining museum, the petting zoo.

'So,' Dad said. 'Flamingo Land?'

'Dad!'

I couldn't believe him. A fortnight ago I'd had to say no – Lily had cried for two hours – but they'd moved on, the twins, and accepted it. Now they sat up and looked at each other as if they'd heard Santa's sleighbells.

'Oh Tom,' he waved me away, 'let them tell me about it.'

Kenny panted down his mouthful of Five Alive. 'It's the whole of Year Three, it's like a whole day and we have to go in a coach at six o'clock in the morning!'

'It's half past six it sets off, Kenny,' Lily said. 'But Tom said we can't go.'

'Well,' said Mum from the corner, looking at me. 'Let's see. It's a whole day? Won't you need a packed lunch? And a bit of spending money?'

Kenny was already shaking his head, his eyes wide. 'Nope, there's this place there where the children go, to eat, they have crocodile soup and pelican pie and like, armadillo something, I can't remember, but you get this like voucher for the shop too, and Miss said to tell our mums and dads it was all inclu- included.'

Mum and Dad glanced at each other. The twins jumped to the edge of their seats.

'Tommy?' said Dad, 'How's it looking?'

I drank some water, tried to steady myself. 'Well, I put all the numbers in –'

'Did you put me in at sixty?'

'Yeah, sixty dead on, and Mum at forty-five –'

'Oh, I don't even know if I'm that, now,' Mum said, and she went into this coughing fit. Beth got up and rubbed her back for her.

'But, you know how complicated it is, and I mean, we're all still growing, even me –'

I was trying so hard not to look at Beth.

‘So,’ Dad said, ‘what did you come up with? We’ll get our full lot this month, won’t we?’

‘I can’t– I don’t know exactly.’

Then Lily turned her small face up to me. ‘Is it– So are we still not going?’

Seal pup eyes.

I filled in the online form, ticked the box to swear the numbers I’d entered were true and accurate, sat for a minute before I clicked submit, and then it was done. No alarms went off, no police came to the door.

It felt so nice, a week later, to log in to the account and see a positive figure. It felt completely new to have two purple twenties in my wallet, to actually plan for real how I was going to ask Erin if she fancied a drink sometime, maybe even a Pizza Express. And it felt amazing to be able to tell the twins they could go on their trip – we had a whole evening at the computer, the twins leaping all over my knees, poking their fingers on the screen and turning to me open-mouthed at the sights and promises of the theme park wonderland – and to send them off to school the next morning with a cheque each in their little backpacks.

And then somehow, like any month’s money, it just ebbed away. Dad a bit freer with his debit card; Mum’s internet bits and bobs she’d been waiting to get; cash for store cupboard stuff; petrol at Asda; shoes for Kenny and Lily; the standing orders; bit by bit it dwindled, and then it was all gone.

In the Family Health Office there was a big green poster headed *The Fantastic FORMULA for Family Fitness!* Clip-art

party hats and streamers either side of the header, and a graph. I stood up to have a proper look. Before I realised why, I felt my face go red, there was this scent I recognised and I turned round, and it was Erin with her sisters and her Mum.

‘Wow – hi.’

‘Don’t normally see you,’ she said.

‘They changed our day. Because of Mum, the other week?’

‘How’s she doing?’

‘Better. Thanks. You going in?’

‘Yep, when they call us.’

‘What do you think?’ I nodded toward the Assessment room.

‘Oh yeah, we’re well under. What about you? Did you have to do it yourself? What do they do today then, just confirm what you put in?’

‘Yeah yeah, should be good, should be fine, it worked out okay, it– yeah.’ Nodding and nodding, toeing the nylon carpet. It probably *would* be fine; we’d been so close to the line I’d only had to round down a tiny amount to get us under.

‘Pain, innit? It does work, though.’ She nodded toward the graph and its downslope. ‘Says BMI rates have gone down so they’re going to reset all the averages soon.’

It was like a silver bell in my brain. But there was another thing biting at me – now or never Tom, or you are an utter waste of space. ‘Look, I wanted to ask you something, are you, would you –’

‘Taylor-Peel?’

We were being called in. It was the Assessor with the ankles and the shiny hair down the back of her white coat, and I didn’t want to keep her waiting.

Someone had left one of those tipping trolleys full of plastic

crates on the wheelchair ramp, so me and Dad carried Mum down the steps. It was snowing again, settling on the slope of daffodils behind the rank of cars. Kenny and Lily bundled each other through the revolving door like they had when we'd come in, but quiet. With a jerk of my head I got them to follow us. Beth was already at the car, jabbing at her phone.

I wasn't going to be the first one to speak. Whatever I said, Beth would say I was having a go at her. And, well, I *would* be. It was her fault. She was the one who cost us so much in food, the one who'd done most to take us over the line today, the one who just kept getting heavier like she didn't care.

I slammed my door. As I reversed out of the car park, scattering slush, Dad muttered, 'Steady on, Tom.' We set off on the ring road, first drop-off the twins' school.

The fit Assessor had smiled nicely as she handed me the leaflet about Preparing for Special Arrangements. She also gave us an updated Family Guide. What Erin had said was true: thanks to the success of the Formula, average BMIs were down, so the points tables were going to be adjusted in a couple of months.

Erin was still in the waiting room as we left, and I wanted to stop and say, hang on, think about it, if they're going to make the average lower, wouldn't everyone who was doing just about okay suddenly be above average? And then be guaranteed to fail Assessment? But of course it couldn't work that way, surely, that would be stupid, and unfair. And anyway, I'd remembered Erin's mouth twisting up funny when she said about my big maths brain, so I hesitated. And then the Assessor had bent over to unbolt the double doors for Mum's chair and we'd had to thank her and go.

Of all people, it was Dad, sitting in the middle seat, who started. 'I s'pose we have to, then.'

I still didn't say anything. I was thinking about the Special Arrangements leaflet, how it would tell us whether we'd have any choice, or whether they chose for us, and if so, how; whether we could visit; how long it would go on for – all the terrible answers to all the terrible questions would be in there, but how would I even be able to look at it?

'Can we, Tom? Can we pay it back?'

'Not really, Dad, no.' Even if somehow we could avoid Special Arrangements in the future, there was the problem we'd come away with today, which was that we had to pay back the money we'd had last month, after I'd done the Formula.

'We kind of spent it, didn't we, on staying alive.'

Lily whispered something no one could hear.

'What'd you say, sweetheart?' said Dad.

'Are we not going to Flamingo Land now then?' Her little voice, full of hope and hopelessness at once.

I couldn't help it then. 'No. I'm sorry, but you'll have to go tomorrow and ask the school for the money back, because none of us can have anything nice now, can we? Not when we need that money so we can keep eating and eating, and pretending we're not, and pretending everything's fine.'

Beth in the far back seat pulled out her earbuds. 'Well, it's not *me* who pretends everything's fine. Don't blame *me*.'

'Course not, lovey,' Dad said. 'No one said it was your fault.'

'You don't have to say it though.' She was rattling the seats in front of her, almost standing. 'I can see the way you all look at me, like I'm the problem. Like you want me to die.'

Kenny's voice was high. 'Don't die!'

'Don't die, Beth!'

'Beth's not going to die, Lily, Kenny, it's all right.'

'But you all want me to. Admit it. It'd all work out if it wasn't for me and my big fat disgusting body.'

'Beth, please, sweetheart.'

'If anyone's going to die anytime soon, I think you'll find it'll be me.'

Mum's voice was so small these days, but it cut through us all. I turned so fast to look at her that I screwed the wheel round too far and nearly drove onto the pavement. I stamped the brake, and the sudden shock of the stop made Lily finally start crying.

I had thought it'd be all right. I had thought we'd match up today with what I'd put on the form – really, we'd been so close, it wasn't fraud. But they'd told us it wasn't all right. And now they were changing the rules, because they could do whatever the hell they wanted, as if the country were some fantasy land for them to play around in and we were all just cartoon characters.

'Beth, it's not you. It's never you,' I told her in the rear view mirror. And I meant it. Beth was so bright, so pretty, when you actually looked at her. It killed me that she had so many friends, attracted all that love for being who she was, while we all silently punished her for the same reason. Maybe she sat in the telly room and ate, but it wasn't laziness, I suddenly realised, it was an act of giant rebel energy. Refusing to play by their stupid rules, refusing to let them reduce her. Thank fuck one of us had some resistance in us.

We were more or less in a lay-by so I turned off the engine. 'It's my fault, I must have done the sums wrong. I don't know. The really big problem is, next month, and the month

after – they’re changing the rules, we’ll be way over the average, I don’t know how we can...’ I stopped and took a breath. ‘It’s all right. There’ll be some way... I’ll sort it. I’ll get another job. Dad, maybe if you, you could’ – and a big lump came up like I was about to be sick, but I swallowed it and carried on – ‘Dad, you’ve got to get a better job. You could earn so much more.’

‘But Tom, I –’

‘No. You’ve got to at least try. Look at Mum! And Mum, you’ve got to stop doing this. Those so-called Procedure Units... I’m not going to take you again. Look at the state of you...’

Mum got hold of my fist that was beating the dashboard. We sat like that for a minute. Kenny reached over the back of my seat and stroked my neck with a little finger. I glanced at him in the mirror. Lily had crawled onto Dad’s knee and was sniffing into his chest. The windows started steaming up as traffic zoomed by.

I reached round, clawed my fingers. ‘What kind of twins are you again?’ And I got the instant sunlit squirm from them both.

Behind us all, Beth unsnapped her seatbelt and opened the door into the road.

Shit.

I scrambled out and dashed after her. Cars were honking all over the place. It was the ring road, for god’s sake, slippery already from the new snow. She skipped the crash barrier and stopped as if to check the traffic but she looked down at herself, not at the road. A bus slowed right in front of me and I was faced with a giant Lindt ball being filled with molten caramel, blocking my path.

I got this sort of surge.

I saw exactly what the driver shouted as I ran round. I skidded to the barrier. Beth stepped out into the other roadway but I did it, I got her, I grabbed her arm, then I pulled her to me and just hugged her soft self. We were there a full minute, ten minutes, a lifetime, in the slackening snow, between the oblivious streams of cars. Eventually I felt the buzz of her speaking into my chest. I let her go. Her nose was running.

‘Where you going, you big idiot?’ I said.

A probationary little smile. ‘...Burger King?’

‘—’

‘Joking, duh.’ She semi-punched me, wiped her nose with the underside of her wrist, and then the smile came properly.

I hugged her again. I glanced back at the car, at the pale faces of our family. Beth squeezed me with her strong arms, squeezed and squeezed until some life came back into me.

On Saturday as the streetlights blinked out we were all back in the car, sitting in the same seats but going the other way round the ring road, heading for the A1, everyone jiggling about to Jessie J. And I thought about February’s money that we’d have to give back and March’s money that we wouldn’t get, and then what was looking more and more likely, Special Arrangements, the twins, how would we, how could we? Unless that other party got in and stopped the Formula. I mean there were elections coming, my first time voting, so.

The evening of the failed Assessment, I’d hoovered in the telly room and moved all the furniture around and we’d had a family meeting. Mum sat propped on cushions in

the big armchair with the twins on her lap, Beth and me sat together on the small sofa, and Dad brought in a kitchen chair but actually stood up as he tried to come up with some ideas about what we might do. We talked for a couple of hours, no rules, everyone got to say what they wanted to say.

In the end we all agreed. There was nothing we could do.

I was surprised at some of the things that came out of my mouth. Like the idea about this weekend – that was me.

‘But Tommy love,’ Mum said, with a little laugh, ‘after everything, we can hardly afford that.’

‘Technically, we can’t afford to *eat*,’ I said. ‘So what do we do? What do they want from us?’

‘Yesss, Tom,’ Beth hissed then, digging her nails into my knee and shaking it.

Driving up there now, seeing the first sign which made the twins scream so hard that everyone laugh-shouted at them to shut up, I thought about how I’d put our petrol on the credit card again, and that we’d have to pay full admission price which was like eighty quid for a family, no schools discount, and then there’d be hot dogs and milkshakes and soft toys and branded pencils from the shop. I thought about how we’d have to sneak Mum onto the Octopus because there was a height minimum, and for a second I wondered whether we should just have let the twins go with school instead, and whether this whole thing wasn’t a massively irresponsible, maybe even illegal, thing to do. And then I pictured Lily and Kenny screaming happy in the whirly teacups, and Dad reaching for Mum’s hand in the café, and me and Beth the spitting image of each other in the gormless photo they take of you at the scariest bit of the Doomacoaster, and us all pointing out the flamingos as if

they were a surprise – clue in the name and everything – and so I thought, you know what? I don't care, because no one, not even the people with the power, can force things to be exactly the way they want them to be – not always, maybe not ever.