

'ROADKILL'

I'm not sure if I should be doing this, seeing as it's a sort of competition and everything, and seeing as I'm not usually that clever at writing and stuff, but Jayden says it'll be good for me. She says it'll get it out of my system and then it'll all be alright, so here I am doing it and we'll just have to see. Jayden's still my best friend even if she is nearly a year older than me. We went all through Bog Lane Primary together – it's not really called Bog Lane, it's called Brouhalgh Lane but nobody round here knows how to say that so we just call it Bog. Anyway, me and Jayden, we sat at the same desk together, we ate our sandwiches together, we bunked off together - we did everything together until some old fart in the office said I was too young to go on to Secondary so I had to stay back and repeat the whole sodding year while Jayden went on without me. That was, oh my god, that was just awful.

Now, Jayden is just, like, Miss-Too-Cool-for-School-Slap-My-Arse-And-Put-Me-On-Britain's-Got-Talent, you know what I mean? She's the sort of girl who wears her school uniform like she's the one who actually designed it and only for herself. Always the skirt a bit shorter and a bit swingier, always the belt a bit tighter and the tie a bit looser and the hair not quite as tied up off her face as it should be. One time, Miss Hampton pulled her over because we're not supposed to wear any sort of make-up, and Jayden has just had her nails done in Ombre. That's when it's not really a colour but it's sort of shaded from the base up like a sort of shadow. That's what Ombre means.

Anyway, Miss Hampton comes up and she says 'Are you wearing nail-polish, Jayden?' and Jayden looks her right back in the eye and says 'No, Miss.' And Miss Hampton looks at Jayden's fingers and says 'Then why do your nails look like that?' and without missing a beat, Jayden says 'I got a kidney complaint, Miss. That's what happens to your nails when you got a kidney complaint'. And there's a long silence and Miss Hampton raises her eyebrows and says 'Really?' and Jayden looks her straight back in the eye and says, 'Yes Miss.' Another silence, then, 'You disrespecting me for having a kidney complaint, Miss?' And I can see Miss Hampton's jaw start to twitch, because she knows we all know the Catherine Tate Shows off by heart and can go on like this for hours, and it's just a question of how much time we can make her waste, so eventually she gives in and off she goes. That's the thing about Jayden – she can generally make bad things stop happening.

Only Jayden wasn't there last Thursday.

It was just me and Amber and Shona after school, standing right at the bus stop, and T.J., Byron and a couple of other year-eight boys a yard or two away, goofing around on the pavement in front of the mobile phone shop – shoving, punching, grabbing each other's bags – you know the sort of stupid stuff they do before they start shaving.

Anyway. I'd noticed the car a few minutes earlier, mainly because it was quite old and you don't get many old cars round here. Not deliberately old, I mean. Most people want you to think they can afford something nice and new, but this was proper old and so uncool it wasn't true. All dark red and shiny chrome trim like it'd been polished with a pair of silk knickers. That sort of shiny. And I'd heard it before I'd seen it – boom-chukka-boom-chukka-boom coming through the closed windows. I mean, that's not unusual round here, but the shiny was. So first time round it comes down the road from Poundland toward the traffic lights, and Byron obviously knows who's in it, because he gives it a raised eyebrow and a 'You got a problem?' look, and we all just turn our backs because it's all just so embarrassing, you know? And then, ten minutes later, it comes back up the road from the traffic lights and the boom box has gone off, but I still notice it crawling along and now it's got its window

open. *Third* time it comes past, I nudge Amber to make her look. I mean, sure, it's a warm summer afternoon and everyone's out on the street and starting to cruise, but this is something else.

Then I see something come out the window and I don't know what it is at first, a stick or something, and then there's a loud cracking noise and suddenly Byron's down on the pavement and there's blood on his shirt and the blood keeps getting bigger and bigger and we're all just standing there staring and the shiny car puts its foot down and screams away round the corner, and Amber's the first to speak and she says, 'Shit, I'm out of here'.

And Shona and Amber and T.J. and the others sort of melt away and out the corner of my eye I can see grown-ups on their phones- and some of them's taking pictures - before they melt away as well as the police sirens start getting closer. But all I can do is look at Byron, which is daft because Byron's not actually there any more, but his body is and his blood is and it's spreading over the pavement and some of it's gone on my new shoes. It's only when the police arrive and one of them shoves me out the way so's he can get a better look, that my legs start working again.

When I get home, my Mum's waiting in the hallway, mad as a snake because I'm late and that means she'll be late for work, but I see she's got her strappy shoes in her bag, which means she's going clubbing after the bar closes so she probably won't be home tonight at all. She slams out the door, and I wander past the living room where Petal's watching Teen Titans, sitting way too close to the TV so she'll ruin her eyes, and out into the back yard. My step-dad Lucas is sitting out on the white plastic chairs with his mate Billy, and the air's so thick with weed you can't hardly smell the garbage bins. Billy swings back in his chair and holds his arm open to me with a grin. 'Come and say hello to Uncle Billy!' he says. 'Fuck off', I say, and turn back to the house. I look over my shoulder though, just in time to see Lucas kicking Billy's chair so Billy tips over and falls into the nettles. Lucas is alright.

Pearl is starting to grizzle, so I put her in her high chair and give her some mashed rusk and banana, and Petal comes into the kitchen to stand beside me. 'Why was you so late? I was really hungry!' I tell her I'm doing her tea right now, but she must hear something wrong in my voice, because she says 'You ok?' and I tell her I'm fine, and I start doing her beans on toast. She looks at me, dead serious for a long moment, then says, 'Can I have an egg as well, please?'

Later on, when I've put Pearl down for the night and read Petal a story, I tell Lucas I'm going out and I head off down the Rec. That's where me and Jayden sometimes hang out in the bus-shelter thing they got there. And I want to tell her all about what happened at the bus-stop because she wasn't there, but the reason she wasn't there was because she'd bunked off to do an audition for a Pringles advert and that just seems more important.

'Look,' she said -and she blew her cigarette smoke right up in the air - 'You wasn't hurt, was you? it wasn't you got shot.' 'No, but-' I started, but she just steamrolled over me. 'You didn't even know him that well. I mean, Byron was a scumbag and he hung out with scumbags and come on, girl, shit happens when you do that.' Well, no, I thought. Even if you are a scumbag it doesn't mean you deserve to get shot dead at the bus-stop on a Thursday afternoon. But Jaden was trying to show me how she'd held her head and smiled in the audition, so we never had that conversation.

That night in bed, for some reason I just started crying. Yeah, 'course it's stupid because like Jayden said, I hardly knew the bloke, but I just couldn't help it. And then there's this shuffling of bedclothes and the smell of kiddie toothpaste approaching and there's Petal standing by my bed. 'You crying?' she says. 'No' I said. 'Yeah you are,' said Petal, 'What's the matter?' 'Nothing,' I said.

Then she's flipped back my bedclothes and wriggled her little body in beside me and she's stroking my hair away from my face and saying 'There, there', just like I used to do to her. And I just lost it. And I'm heaving and sobbing and little Petal – and she's, like, *six*, man, she's fucking *six years old*-Petal's wrapped her arms round me and she's holding my head against her skinny little chest and she's saying 'Hush, hon, it's ok... there you go.. hush now, I got you.'

When I finally get myself together about half an hour later, Petal climbs out of my bed and grunts. 'Can you get me a clean top, please?' she says. 'This one's soaked.' She's got lovely manners, Petal. She never forgets to say please. I'm really proud of her for that.

The worst thing about next day is that when I get off at the bus-stop, the blood's still there. I mean, there's police incident tape all over the place, so nobody's walked through it or anything, so most of it's just dried where it was, but in one place it's sort of trickled away and gone down the drain. That's really bad.

And school is just, like, awful. Everyone's twittering around like starlings. 'Oh my god!' says Candice Taylor, 'Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, I was even just *talking* to him at dinner time, and now he's just, like, dead. Oh my god, I can't believe it!' And Jaz Nguyen says 'Shut up! You was just talking – I was, like, thinking of going out with him next week!' and Pikey Jones spots Miss Hampton coming down the corridor and yells, 'Miss! Miss! We going to get Counselling like they did over at Castle Street last month?'

Now it's like, the hot topic, Jayden's happy to talk about it. 'You got to let yourself grieve,' she says, 'And then you got to let go.' I tell her she's been watching too much Oprah. Because it's not about grieving or letting go, or nothing like that. It's just that, I don't know - it's not every day a kid your own age gets shot dead in front of you and gets their blood on your new shoes. It's never happened to me before and I don't know what to do with it.

That's when Jayden spots the competition notice on the school board and rips it off to show me. 'There you go,' she says. 'Write it all down, get it out of your system, win the ten quid, you'll feel better and we can go down Maccy D's for the afternoon. Result all round!'

So here I am, and I'm going to have a go at it, because I really do need to feel better.

I only hope it don't take too long.

