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Alien creatures, children. Half stranded in other worlds. What their eyes and ears tell them is only provisional. So when Dunc spoke his crucial words, I heard something else around them. A high trembling note. Maybe it was the singing of nearby telephone wires, maybe it was the hum of a far off motor cycle, but I doubt it. No, what I heard was something more dramatic, more essential.

“My mum says you’re nicer than me.”

That’s what he said: so simple, so huge.

For the moment I lost the sense of where I was, and needed to look about me at the nearby tarmac, the hedge and trees. But I couldn’t register them. The high trembling note was still hovering.

“My dad says you’re just putting it on, though.”

I came to myself. We’d stopped out bikes at the edge of a field, and my foot was resting on the grass. I remember how springy it felt and how the crossbar pushed against my leg. “How do you mean, Dunc?”

He sat moodily on the saddle of his bike. An old Austin passed on the road we’d just left. “He reckons you act like that to make me look bad.”

I fiddled with the gears. “But Dunc...”

“All that little angel act.”

Summer sweat on my forehead. “What angel act?”

Dunc shrugged. For the first time he looked directly at me. “Doesn’t matter,” he said.

“My dad’s a twat anyway.”

I didn’t know what a twat was, but there was a terrible feeling of freedom in the way he said it.

“C’mon,” he said, “let’s go down to that stream.”

We’d always done things together, Dunc and me. Even been born together – same day, same hospital. I remember how our mothers would tell the tale about lying in beds beside each other, rival sisters, racing to produce us. That made a weird bond between Dunc and me, so he’d always been closer than my brother – whose bike, by the way, I found myself trying to use that very day. Somehow Dunc had wheedled his way into borrowing mine. “Ar, go on,” he’d insisted half an hour ago – at me, at my parents, at my slightly amused older brother, “I like a bike with straight handlebars. Mine are drops. I wanna have straight.”

My parents had obliged on my behalf. “Of course Jon will lend you his bike. Jon, you can use your brother’s for the day, can’t you?” But my brother’s bike had drop handlebars, great for pretending you’re racing, whizzing along, all back-achey and limited of vision, but not so good if you’re like me and favour upright views of things like traffic and kerbs.

So off we rode to the edge of town, Dunc all imperial on the bike of his choice, straight handle-barred, upright of posture. And along I trailed, eleven years old, all drop handle-barred and uncertain of vision. In those days the town gave way to such evocative areas as fields, stiles, and – there, down a dip – the stream. Estates have been built over the lot of them now, and I can no longer revisit the scene of my decisive horror, but I can still feel it.

I can feel the ride before we got there. I can feel how streets led off to the sides, streets full of houses with unknown lives in them, unknown stories. Dramas would hang over the pavements like fumes, seeping onto them through inch-apart sash-windows, or bursting out in

commotion from suddenly opened doors.

But the dramas of the fields were more ancient. Rain had dissolved them and the sun had lifted them so they were as much in the atmosphere as in the soil, clinging to bushes, caressing the backs of cattle, breathed in by passers-by as they moved. And now Dunc wanted us to go bumping down this field towards an unknown stream. “C’mon,” he shouted as I struggled to get pedalling. “You gorra lift your feet off the ground, you know.”

Of course I knew. I could do it happily on my own bike. But the happy one on my bike was Dunc, and this set me wondering. Why did he always need to get the better of me? And what was that about his mum saying I was nicer?

“Whoa!” he called with sudden relish.

It didn’t take much to make me stop. I’d been hopping along, staring at the wretched pedals, trying to get them to turn for me, so I couldn’t make out what he saw, not yet. But something pleased him.

“Hey Jonny-boy, get yourself over here. Have a look at this.”

I clambered off the bike and walked it beside me.

“What you got off for?” he laughed. Suddenly Dunc was happy, and it wasn’t just at my ineptitude. No, he was looking down the slope where, beside the trees, he could make out some activity. “Do you see what I see?”

“Girls?” I answered.

“Three lasses in the stream,” he mused. Then he dismounted with a sly grin as if to mock my incompetence. “How old do you think they are?”

The girls were wading in the stream, skirts pulled into their knickers, although I couldn’t see why with water that shallow. A dim part of me wondered why girls kept needing to show

their knickers. But the more I looked the more strange I felt. It was like I was merging into a daydream. I didn't think anything definite, but three seemed suddenly such a perfect number. And a stream, with its ripples and shadows, seemed such a perfect place. And the trees, with their swaying leaves, seemed perfect too. And the legs of the girls looked better than perfect.

Especially one of the girls.

I realise now, of course, she was just an ordinary girl – nobody in particular – but at the time she seemed special. I couldn't have specified a single detail of her – length of hair, colour of clothes, shape of face – but everything added up. I sensed she was good, she was right.

Meanwhile, the other two girls seemed exactly the proper companions for her, one more burly, the other more delicate, as though specially chosen to act as contrasts. As for their ages – ah, that's what Dunc had been asking – they looked really old, maybe even fourteen. Certainly they were a lot bigger than me. They looked – well – like they were loaded with years, loaded with experience, loaded with...

To be honest, I didn't know what older girls were loaded with, but it was something I didn't have. "I think they might be fifteen," I exaggerated.

"I know what," decided Dunc, "let's shout at them." He didn't pause to hear me squawk "No!" He was Dunc and he did as he wanted. "Hey, yer knickers are dirty!" he yelled. And he gave a "Haw haw" of triumph – like he'd scored a victory over an unyielding world, like he'd proven he was right and everyone else was wrong.

The girls looked up. The perfect one appeared calm, the delicate one appeared puzzled, but the burly one just looked big. "Yer what?" she bawled, and I realised her bigness was partly muscular, as if she could achieve more than simply wading in a stream and displaying – as I suddenly realised – her powerful thighs. I bet she could run. I bet she could fight. I bet she could

run up, grab hold of Dunc and give him what for. I wouldn't want to be Dunc right now, not for anything. I knew he was strong, loads stronger than me, but that girl looked like trouble.

He wasn't bothered, though. "Hah, you old prossy!" he yelled and I wondered what that meant.

"Yer fookin what?" Now, that was a word I knew. I sometimes heard it from rough boys, even Dunc.

He seemed happy to trade rough words. "Hah, yer tits are so big I bet yer couldn't run more than two yards!"

Tips I'd heard of. They were spelt with a 'p' and were the pointed bits in the middle of bosoms.

"Coom on!" ordered the girl to the others – to my perfect one and her delicate companion. Her voice had the sort of boom to it that told you something really important was going to happen. It was the sort of voice you'd hear from that lady in the next street when she called in her nasty sons – the way she shouted, you'd think everyone was guilty and was going to get horribly punished. That's what the big girl sounded like right now, and she was running towards us with the other two just behind.

But Dunc was laughing. In one easy movement he lifted round his bike – *my* bike. "Come on Jonny-boy!" he called as I struggled to manoeuvre my brother's machine. I was worried about its gears. They weren't the easy sort that sit on the handlebars. They lived somewhere under the crossbar and had a name like Deralia, and I thought that meant you might de-rail them, and I wondered how I'd ever get going if that happened.

Dunc, meanwhile, mounted in cowboy style, one foot on a stirrup, leg swung over the saddle, and he was away, bumping over the tussocky grass to the safety of the path and then

road. He got there while I was still pushing my bike in a panic of incompetence. I knew I couldn't mount it cowboy fashion, not with those handlebars. And I knew I couldn't pedal it over a field, not with those gears. I had to push and run for the road before they caught me. Should I let go of the bike and pelt for it as fast as I could? But they were already so close that only a bike would outpace them.

By now my breathing was like lumps in the chest. Each breath came rising up like something huge, and I'd have to retch it off because it was too big to get out any other way. Then along would come another in its place. I half tried to mount the bike but abandoned the idea. I flung it down and tried to run, but everything got mixed up. "No no," went my legs. "Stumble stumble," went my voice.

Then they had me.

"What you fookin say?" demanded the big girl.

I wanted to reply I'd said nothing but couldn't find a voice to tell her.

She wasn't looking at me, though. "Hey you," she called to Dunc. "You berra coom back or this little weed gets it."

My face wasn't a face, it was a plea, and it was turned to Dunc, who sat out of range on his bike, studying the situation with distant curiosity. Just that, like he was watching it happen somewhere else.

"Ah'm warnin you!" she boomed.

Still no response from Dunc.

"Right then," she told her friends. "Pull his pants down."

She said it to the perfect girl. She said it to her delicate attendant. And I couldn't understand why they obeyed. I was sure they didn't really want to, because they'd seemed so

nice before, and I expected them any moment to say “Let’s stop, he’s getting upset.” I’d have done that in their place. I wouldn’t have wanted anyone getting scared like I was, because by the time they got down to my underpants I began weeing myself.

“Urgh! Dirty little rat’s pissin hissen!” announced the big girl. Then she looked over at Dunc. And Dunc looked over at her.

It was at that moment I realised something. I don’t say I had any definite thoughts, but it was like a lot of awareness was crowding round me. And I realised Dunc could make things happen whatever way he wanted. All he need do was sit on his bike, out of range, and let others be his servants. So when the big girl announced her news about me weeing myself it got no obvious reaction. Just, if anything, an added strength to his gaze. I felt like he was controlling events and he was glad they had already turned wet and repulsive.

“Yer better not fookin shit yerself!” the big girl boomed at me, and her companions stepped back. I sensed this was beyond anything they wanted to know.

Maybe Dunc sensed it too, because he finally decided to answer her. “What did you say,” and there was decision in his voice, “you fat prostitute?”

“Right then!” and the big girl tugged down my dripping underpants. “Let’s pull his willy off him.”

By now emotions seemed a lot more real than anything else, so I could feel the hesitation of the other girls like some sort of kindness on the wind. There was a whole world of soothing and normality just waiting for me. I could almost see its colour, light blue, or maybe violet like a bottle of medicine.

“Coom on!” ordered the big girl.

It seemed like Dunc was howling with triumph. He didn’t move, didn’t speak, but I could

almost hear his howl. It was like he and the big girl were doing bad things together, things that grown-ups do. It was like some sort of dirty magic. And it all seemed red – misty, dirty, blood red. It hung in the air like the insistence of an old ghost, some species of greedy spirit summoned up from the ancient earth and eager to sate itself on new horrors.

Then Dunc gave another nudge. “Go and stuff cucumbers up your fannies, you three pregnant old cows!”

It was enough. In the reeking atmosphere, charged as it was with puberty and experimentation, the two milder girls caught the force of the lust and were neither strong enough nor experienced enough to resist it.

What happened next I couldn't say. There must have been pain, but I didn't register it because I blanked out of my body and found myself in the sky. I remember wondering what was going on and thinking maybe it was one of those accidents I'd heard my parents talk about. OOBes they called them, or Out Of Body Experiences. Well, that's what seemed to be happening to me. It was like I'd had a crash and was knocked right out of my skin.

The next thing I remember was looking down and wondering how my body ended up by the stream. That's where it had moved to, and the girls were walking away. By that stage I don't think I recognised them any more. My body didn't mean much to me either, although next moment I was sucked down to it.

Eventually Dunc was guiding me up the field and away from the stream. I couldn't move too well, but I didn't want to think why. As for Dunc, he was wheeling my bike and grinning as if everything was fine. “I've cleaned you up,” he was saying, “and the sun'll soon dry you off.” As we got further away he stopped to ask something. “Go on, tell me again. What do you remember.”

“Um” – had I said this already ? – “it was like” – I pointed up – “I was floating in the sky.”

Dunc followed the line of my finger, and his forehead went slow and wrinkly. Then he turned back to me. “Really?” he said. “Is that all you remember?”

My hands hovered in front of my groin like they were carrying some bad treasure. “Think so.”

He stared down as if he could see the bad treasure and his forehead went all wrinkly again, then he announced his verdict: “You fell on the crossbar of your bike, Jonny-boy. You banged yourself between the legs.”

So that was it! I knew he must be right because I felt really horrible. “Yeah!” It all made sense.

When we reached the road Dunc impressed me with his skill. He bent down to pick his bike off the verge and didn’t even need to let go of mine. Then with a sort of twisting flourish, he got them both pointing the right way. He wheeled them along, one either side, and whistled some happy tune. He was still whistling when we got home. His mother had arrived to collect him so he told her and my mum how he’d wheeled the bikes. They both stood there, sisters together, and they said, “That was nice of you, Dunc.”

And it’s a strange thing but the physical damage was relatively little. Everyone believed I had clouted myself on the crossbar of my bike. It was a credible enough story, especially when I showed such a clear and authentic detestation of that bike forever. “Must have caught himself a real crack,” confided Dad to Mum, semi-out-of-earshot some time later – a week, a month, a year? – I’ve no idea – the bike remained forever a source of horror.

Another strange thing is I could remember to hate the bike but not why. Dreams are such

vanishing things. You try to catch hold of them and they are gone, and the only way to call them back is to wait in suspended thought, and even then you might not succeed. So it was with the three girls by the stream. They were a dream, and they had slipped beyond my reach.