

1

The others were already there, waiting in the darkness, and Garvie Smith went through the park gate and across the slippery grass towards them. Haphazardly arranged on the tiny swings and miniature roundabout of the Old Ditch Road kiddies' playground, dim, low-slung and damp, Smudge, Felix, Dani and Tiger raised hands and touched knuckles with him, one by one, and he settled down among them, yawning.

Smudge looked at him. 'What you got for us, big shot?'

Garvie shook his head.

'What, not even the Rizlas?'

'Next time.'

'Next time! Might not be a next time, mate. The world's a strange and uncertain place. Who knows what's going to happen in the future?'

Garvie looked at him; yawned again. 'We all know, Smudge. Nothing, that's what. And, if we're not that lucky, maybe a bit less than nothing.'

He took out his Benson & Hedges and offered them round, and Smudge passed him the almost-empty half-bottle of Glen's cheapest and the sherbet

lemons, and they sat there smoking, drinking, sucking sweets and grumbling.

Ten o'clock on a Friday evening in Five Mile. The wind getting up, drizzle, a few smokes and a bit of banter before the cop car came by to chuck them off.

Half an hour passed.

Smudge had another go. 'Come on, Garv, you haven't said hardly nothing since you got here. Anyone'd think you were fretting about your exams.'

No one who knew anything about him would think Garvie was fretting about his exams; he was not only the boredest but also the laziest boy in the history of Marsh Academy, perhaps of the whole city, or even the whole history of boys anywhere. Slacker Smith, all brain and no energy, the despair of his school. Black-haired, blue-eyed and sixteen years old, sloppy in slouch jeans, hooded sweatshirt and broken-down high tops, he sat on his stamped-metal circus horse with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his beautiful mouth, rocking gently, breathing out smoke, gazing in quiet boredom across the black grass towards the city lights downtown. The truth was, exams didn't bother him. What bothered him was the people who talked about them. His mother, for instance. Uncle Len. Miss Perkins, Marsh Academy's principal enforcer. A few weeks earlier, as a result of some bother with the police, during which, through no fault of his own, he'd missed a good deal of school work, he'd been officially assured that his exams would be deferred – only for the school to

decide a few days later that he'd be sitting them anyway. He would sit his exams as scheduled, Miss Perkins had told him, he would fulfil his potential as required, he would at long last show the world the abilities of a boy with a certified record IQ and famous photographic memory. Only he wouldn't. He didn't like Miss Perkins. He didn't like the world either and he wasn't going to do anything for it. What had it ever done for him?

'So what's your problem?' Smudge asked.

'Nothing,' Garvie said. 'Or a bit less.'

A disturbance came from down Old Ditch Road, a bass bumping noise shaking the ground. After a moment a car appeared alongside the hedge that divided the park from the street and came to a throbbing, brightly lit standstill by the park gate a few metres away, a tall black Cadillac Escalade Platinum with limo tint windows and Lexani wheels in electric egg-yolk yellow, hi-vision headlamps pulsing, coloured light panels racing like lasers along the roof. It fumed with music for twenty, thirty beats and suddenly fell silent. Transfixed, the boys stared at it as the nearside back window slid down with a thin whine and a face appeared, grinning and blinking. Smudge let out a small burp of fear.

The face looked at Garvie.

'Got a light for me, boy?' A hoarse, whispery voice.

Garvie looked back, puffing smoke, thinking about it. 'No,' he said at last.

Smudge stifled a moan.

The back door swung open and a short, skinny guy stepped out and stood there. He was wearing a black leather jacket over an outsized retro tracksuit in turquoise and a Dirty Rat swag hat, and his glasses flashed in the streetlight as his head bobbed, idiot eyes blinking big and slow. He was no longer grinning.

‘You got a light,’ he said, nodding towards Garvie’s cigarette.

Garvie took a long drag on his Benson & Hedges, dropped it and ground it out with the heel of his shoe.

‘No, I haven’t,’ he said.

Smudge groped hastily in his pocket for matches and made a few faltering squeaks, but fell silent as more car doors opened and two men in matching vests got out. They were big men, blank-faced behind shades, and they stood in the road as if waiting for instructions.

Blinkie grinned again. He was a fool. Everything about him was idiotic: his gangster outfit, monster bling, dental grille, those enormous, inhuman eyes. His teeth were too big for his mouth. He was the only white man in Five Mile with cornrows. But he was a fool no one laughed at. People were very careful around Blinkie. He was what was commonly known as ‘a bit psycho’.

The street was quiet for a moment, no sound but a car on the other side of the park. Blinkie looked at his watch.

‘Shouldn’t you be in bed, boy?’ he said to Garvie.

‘Shouldn’t you be in prison?’ Garvie said.

Smudge flinched so hard he almost fell off the swings, and Blinky stopped grinning. He took a step towards Garvie, and one of the men behind him leaned forward and muttered something, and he hesitated and glanced down the road.

He looked back at Garvie. ‘Know what I like?’ he whispered.

Garvie shrugged. ‘I’m guessing it’s not normal clothes. Or mirrors.’

‘Fun,’ Blinky said. ‘So I’ll be seeing you.’

He slipped back into the car, the door closed with a satisfyingly shushy clunk, the music pumped out again and the rocking car slid away down Old Ditch Road like a fairground ride.

Garvie got to his feet and sauntered towards the gate after it, and Smudge and Felix called after him, anxious as baby birds.

‘What you doing now? Are you insane? What if he comes back?’

‘Relax. He’s not coming back.’

‘How do you know?’

Garvie reached the gate as the squad car drew up with its lights turned down low, and he went up to it and tapped on the window.

The window came down and a policeman in a bullet-proof turban looked out, and Garvie looked at him in surprise for a moment.

‘You’ve just missed them,’ he said. ‘They went that way,’ he added.

Detective Inspector Singh made no reaction. He said, 'What are you and your friends doing here?'

Garvie said, 'What are *you* doing here, on the night shift? It's usually Constable Jones here who comes along to move us on.'

Jones, the driver, scowled, but Singh simply asked again, 'What are you doing in the park?'

'Swings, mainly. Sometimes we go on the roundabout.'

Singh waited patiently.

'OK, you've got me,' Garvie said. 'Smoking, drinking, occasionally doing drugs.' He stretched his arms out wide. 'Do you want to search me?'

Constable Jones made a move to get out of the car, and Singh put a hand on his arm to stop him.

To Garvie he said, 'Go home, Garvie, and tell your friends to go home too.'

The window went up, and the squad car pulled away, and Garvie stood there a moment thoughtfully, before returning to the playground.

'That was lucky,' Smudge said. 'Plod turning up just in time to scare Blinkie off. Thought you'd successfully killed yourself, talking like that.'

'You need to check your watch, Smudge. Half ten. That's the time Plod usually turns up.'

'Not always, mate. Not always at this time neither.'

Garvie shook his head. 'Ignore the noise, Smudge. Find the signal.'

'What signal?'

‘Plod shows up, what, four times a week? Weekdays it’s half past, Saturdays eleven, Sundays he doesn’t come. That’s a two in three chance of him turning up exactly when he did.’

‘Yeah, but . . .’ Smudge fell silent.

‘Also,’ Garvie said, ‘proves I’m not stoned.’

‘Does it?’

‘I know it’s Friday. If all I knew was it wasn’t Sunday, it’d be one in two, wouldn’t it? If I was so out of it I didn’t know what day of the week it was, it’d be three in seven. But I’m not stoned, so I get better odds.’

Smudge said warily, ‘Well, if you put it like that . . .’

‘Besides,’ Garvie said, ‘I saw the car on the other side of the park before it arrived.’

Nodding, he left them there and walked back to the gate, out into Bulwarks Lane and along Pilkington Driftway, homeward.

The wind had picked up. Clouds tore themselves to pieces and tossed the bits across the dark sky, wire fences chattered as he went past, litter scudding across the road. The flats at Eastwick Gardens were dim in the darkness. Garvie let himself into the lobby, retrieved the book he’d left under the stairwell, *Modern World History Student Book*, and went up the stairs to Flat 12, where his mother was preparing to go out for her shift at the hospital. She was an imposing lady from Barbados with a broad face, greying hair clipped into a halo and a Bajan

accent thick as pork pepperpot, and she regarded Garvie mistrustfully.

‘You were a long time fetching that book,’ she said.

Garvie shrugged. ‘Felix hadn’t finished with it so I had to wait a bit.’

‘Two hours? What was he doing, rewriting it?’

‘And then we got caught up discussing the French Revolution and stuff.’

Her mistrustful look grew more mistrusting, but she looked at her watch and went to get her coat, hanging by the door.

‘OK. At least you’re back now. You can do a bit of revision and get to bed at a reasonable time for once.’ She looked at him through narrowed eyes. ‘You’re not thinking of going out to the kiddies’ playground, right?’

Garvie returned her stare. ‘What would I want to go there for? There’s nothing going on there.’

For a moment longer she regarded him with that flat look of disbelief. Then the door closed behind her. Sighing, Garvie drifted into his room, kicked his way through discarded clothing and lay down on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. The incident with Blinky had been a momentary diversion. There was nothing to do at the kiddies’ playground, nothing to do at home.

He sighed again, put his hands behind his head and focused on the ceiling.