

1

‘Y-Y-Y-YOU’RE CRAZY,’ TOM SAID, AND I could tell he was scared, seeing as he stammered one more time than he usually does.

I was still holding the Luke Skywalker figure above my head, ready to throw it upstream, against the current. A scream echoed from within the dense forest that surrounded the river on both sides, as if in warning. It sounded like a crow. But I wasn’t about to let myself be deterred, by either Toms or crows, I wanted to see if Luke Skywalker could swim. So now he was flying through the air. The spring sun had sunk towards the tops of the trees that had just come into leaf, and every now and then the light glinted off the slowly rotating figure.

Luke hit the water with a small *plop*, so he definitely couldn’t fly. We couldn’t see him, just the rippling circles on the surface

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of the river, which was running high with meltwater and made me think of a thick boa constrictor, an anaconda, slithering towards us.

I had moved to live with my relatives in this little shithole last year, just after my fourteenth birthday, and I had no idea what shitty little kids in shitholes like Ballantyne did to stop themselves from being bored to death. But seeing as Tom had told me that now, in the sp-sp-spring, the river was scary and dangerous and that he had been given strict orders at home to stay away, that gave me somewhere to start, at least. It hadn't been particularly hard to persuade Tom, because he was like me, friendless and a member of the pariah caste in class. During a break earlier today Fatso told me about castes, only he said I was in the *piranha* caste, and that made me think of those fish that look like they have sawblades for teeth and can strip the flesh from an ox in a matter of minutes, so I couldn't help thinking it sounded like a pretty cool caste. It wasn't until Fatso said that I and my caste were lower than him, the big lard-arse, that I was obliged to hit him. Unfortunately he told our teacher, Miss Birdsong, as I call her, and she gave the class a long lecture about being kind and what happened to people who weren't kind – the short version is that they end up losers – and after that there was basically no doubt that the new bully from the city belonged in the *piranha* caste.

After school, Tom and I had gone down to the river and out onto the little wooden bridge in the forest. When I got Luke Skywalker out of my bag, Tom's eyes opened wide.

'W-w-where did you get that?'

'Where do think, meathead?'

'Y-y-you didn't buy it at Oscar's. They've sold out.'

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‘Oscar’s? That little rathole?’ I laughed. ‘Maybe I bought it in the city before I moved here, from a *proper* toyshop.’

‘No, because that one’s this year’s model.’

I looked at Luke more closely. Was it true that the same figure had been issued in a new version? Wasn’t Luke Skywalker the same stupid hero Luke Skywalker the whole time, forever and ever, amen? I’d never thought about that. That things could change. That Darth and Luke could change places, for instance.

‘Maybe I got hold of a p-p-prototype,’ I said.

Tom looked like I’d hit him; I guess he didn’t like me imitating his stammer. I didn’t like it either, I just couldn’t help it. It’s always been like that. If people didn’t already dislike me, I soon made sure that they did, it’s the same sort of reflex that made people like Karen and Oscar Jr smile and be nice so that everyone liked them, only the opposite. It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to be liked, it was just that I knew they weren’t going to like me anyway. So I kind of pre-empted them: I got them to dislike me on *my* terms. So they hated me, but at the same time they were a bit scared of me and didn’t dare mess with me. Like now, when I could see that Tom knew I’d stolen the Luke figure, but didn’t actually dare say so out loud. I had taken it during the class party at Oscar Jr’s house, where everyone – even those of us in the piranha caste – was invited. The house was OK, it wasn’t so big and fancy that it was a problem, but the most irritating thing was that Oscar’s parents were so overbearing and the whole place was full of the very coolest toys, the best toyshop a father could ever provide, basically. Transformers figures, Atari games, Magic 8-Ball, even a Nintendo Game Boy, although that wasn’t actually on the market yet. What would Oscar care if he lost one of those toys? – he’d hardly even notice. OK, maybe he would care if he

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lost the Luke Skywalker figure I had spotted tucked up in his bed like a stuffed toy. I mean, how childish can you get?

‘Th-th-there it is!’ Tom was pointing.

Luke’s head was above water, and he was drifting towards us at great speed, as if he was doing the backstroke in the river.

‘Good for Luke,’ I said.

The figure disappeared under the bridge. We moved to the other side, and he reappeared. Looking up at us with that stupid half-smile. Stupid, because heroes aren’t supposed to smile, they’re supposed to fight, they’re supposed to have tough fighters’ faces, they’re supposed to show that they hate their enemies as much as they hate . . . whatever.

We stood and watched as Luke drifted away from us. Towards the world out there, towards the unknown. Towards the darkness, I thought.

‘What do we do now?’ I asked. I already had ants in my pants, and I needed to get rid of them, and the only way for that to happen was if something *happened*, something that made me think about something else.

‘I-I-I have to go home,’ Tom said.

‘Not yet,’ I said. ‘Follow me.’

I don’t know why I found myself thinking about the telephone box that stood on the hill next to the main road at the edge of the forest. It was a strange place to put a phone box in somewhere as small as Ballantyne, and I had never seen anyone use it, I’d hardly ever seen anyone near it, just the occasional car. By the time we reached the red telephone box, the sun had sunk even lower, it was so early in the spring that it still got dark early. Tom was trudging reluctantly after me, he probably didn’t dare

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contradict me. And, as I said, neither of us was exactly drowning in friends.

We squeezed into the phone box, and the sound of the world outside became muffled when the door closed behind us. A truck with muddy tyres and huge logs sticking off the end of its trailer passed by. It disappeared along the main road, which ran like a straight line through the flat, monotonous arable landscape, past the town and off towards the county boundary.

There was yellow phone book on the shelf beneath the phone and coin box; it wasn't very thick, but it was evidently enough to contain the numbers of all the phones not only in Ballantyne, but the entire county. I started leafing through it. Tom looked demonstratively at his watch.

'I-I-I promised to be home by –'

'Shhh!' I said.

My finger had stopped on a Jonasson, Imu. Weird name, probably a weirdo. I lifted the receiver, which was fixed to the coin box with a metal cable, as if they were afraid someone was going to tear it to pieces and run off with the grey receiver. I tapped Jonasson, Imu's number onto the shiny metal buttons on the box. Only six digits, we used to have nine in the city, but I suppose they didn't need any more out here seeing as there were four thousand trees for every inhabitant. Then I passed the receiver to Tom.

'H-h-huh?' he simply said, staring at me in terror.

'Say "Hi, Imu, I'm the devil, and I'm inviting you to hell, because that's where you belong".'

Tom just shook his head and passed the receiver back to me.

'Do it, meathead, or I'll throw you in the river,' I said.

Tom – the smallest boy in the class – cowered and became even smaller.

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‘I’m kidding,’ I said, laughing. My laugh sounded alien even to me in the cramped, vacuum-like phone box. ‘Come on, Tom, think how funny it will be when we tell the others about it at school tomorrow.’

I saw something stir inside him. The thought of impressing people. For someone who had never impressed anyone about anything, this was obviously a serious consideration. But also the fact that I said ‘we’. He and I. Two friends who played jokes together, who had made a prank phone call and stood there giddy with laughter, who had had to hold each other up to stop ourselves collapsing when we heard the poor guy at the other end of the line wonder if it really was the devil making the call.

‘Hello?’

The sound came from the telephone receiver. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman, a grown-up or a child.

Tom looked at me. I nodded eagerly. And he smiled. He smiled a kind of triumphant smile and raised the receiver to his ear.

I mouthed the words as Tom looked at me and repeated them without the slightest trace of a stammer.

‘Hi, Imu. I’m-the-devil-and-I’m-inviting-you-to-hell. Because-that’s-where-you-belong.’

I put my hand over my mouth to indicate that I could hardly contain my laughter, then gestured with the other hand for him to hang up.

But Tom didn’t hang up.

Instead he stood there with the receiver pressed to his ear, but I could hear the low hum of the voice at the other end.

‘B-b-b-b-but . . .’ Tom stuttered, suddenly deathly pale. He held his breath, and his pale face had frozen in a stunned expression.

‘No,’ he whispered, then raised his elbow and looked like he

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was trying to pull the receiver away from his ear. Then he repeated, getting gradually louder: 'No. No. No!' He put his free hand against the glass of the phone box, as if he was trying to use it as leverage. Then – with a wet, ragged sigh – the receiver came free, but I saw something go with it. Blood was running down the side of his head, under his shirt collar. Then I noticed the telephone receiver. I couldn't believe my eyes. Half his ear was stuck to the bloody, perforated listening end, and what happened next was beyond comprehension. First the blood was sort of sucked up by the tiny black holes, then – little by little – the chunk of ear disappeared, like when you rinse leftover food down the plughole in a sink.

'Richard,' Tom whispered in a trembling voice, his cheeks wet with tears, apparently not realising that half his ear was gone. 'H-h-h-he said that you and I . . .' He cupped his hand over the speaking end of the receiver to stop the person at the other end from hearing. 'W-w-w-we're going to –'

'Tom!' I cried. 'Your hand! Drop the phone!'

Tom looked down and only now realised that his fingers were halfway through the holes in the receiver.

He grabbed hold of the listening end and tried to free his trapped hand. But it was no use, instead the phone started to make a slurping sound, like when my uncle Frank eats soup, and more of his hand disappeared inside the receiver. I grabbed hold of the receiver too, and tried to pull it away from Tom, but to no avail, the receiver had now eaten his lower arm almost all the way to his elbow, it was as if he and the phone were one and the same thing. As I screamed, something strange was happening to Tom. He looked up at me and laughed, as if it didn't hurt that much, and was so ridiculous that he couldn't help smiling. There was

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no blood either, it was as if the receiver did what I had read some insects do with their prey: they inject something that turns the flesh to jelly which they can then slurp up. But then the telephone receiver reached his elbow, and it sounded like when you put something in a blender that shouldn't be there, a brutal crunching, grinding sound, and now Tom was screaming too. His elbow buckled, as if there was something under the skin that wanted to get out. I kicked the door open behind us, stood behind Tom, grabbed his chest with both arms and tried to back out. I only managed to pull Tom halfway out, the metal cable was stretched out of the box, and the receiver was still gnawing at his upper arm. I slammed the door shut again in the hope that it might smash the telephone receiver, but the cable was too short and I just kept hitting Tom's shoulder. He howled as I dug my heels into the ground and pulled as hard as I could, but, centimetre by centimetre, my shoes were slipping on the wet soil, towards the phone box and the disgusting crunching sound that Tom's howling couldn't drown out. Tom was slowly dragged back into the phone box by unknown forces – I had no idea where they came from or what they were. I couldn't hold on, I had to let go of my grip around his chest, and soon I was standing outside pulling on the arm that was still sticking out through the gap in the door. The telephone receiver was about to consume Tom's shoulder when I heard a vehicle approaching. I let go of Tom's arm and ran towards the road, screaming and waving. It was another truck loaded with logs. But I was too late, all I saw were the rear lights disappearing into the dusk.

I ran back. It was quiet, Tom had stopped screaming. The door had swung closed. There was condensation on the inside of the small panes of glass as I pressed my face against them. But I

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could see Tom. And he saw me. Silent, with the resigned look of prey that has stopped struggling and accepted its fate. The telephone receiver had reached his head, it had taken one cheek, and there was a cracking sound when it made a start on Tom's exposed dental brace.

I turned round, leaned my back against the phone box and slid down until I felt the ground beneath me and saw the wetness seeping through my trousers.

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2

I WAS SITTING ON A chair in the hallway of the police station. It was late, past bedtime, so to speak. At the other end of the passageway I saw the sheriff. He had small eyes and a turned-up nose – I could see his nostrils, which automatically made me think of a pig. He was stroking the moustache that hung down from the sides of his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. He was talking to Frank and Jenny. That's what I call them, it would have felt odd to call them Uncle and Aunt when you'd never seen them before the day they came to pick you up and told you you're going to be living with them from now on. They had just stared at me when I burst in and told them what had happened to Tom. Then Frank had called the sheriff, and the sheriff had called Tom's parents, then asked us to come in. I had answered a load of questions, then sat and waited while the sheriff sent his people

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out to the telephone box and started the search. Then I had to answer even more questions.

It looked like Frank and Jenny were discussing something with the sheriff, occasionally glancing in my direction. But evidently they had reached some sort of agreement, because Frank and Jenny came over to me, both with serious expressions on their faces.

‘We can go,’ Frank said, and set off towards the exit while Jenny put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

We got in their small Japanese car, me in the back seat, and drove in silence. But I knew it wouldn’t be long before it started: the questions. Frank cleared his throat. First once, then again.

Frank and Jenny were kind. Too kind, some would say. Like last summer, when I had just got here, and set fire to the long, dry grass in front of the abandoned sawmill. If my uncle and five neighbours hadn’t got there so quickly, there’s no way of knowing what might have happened. Obviously it was extra embarrassing for Frank, seeing as he was in charge of the fire station. All the same, I didn’t get told off or punished, but comforted instead, they probably thought I was beside myself because of what had happened. And then, after supper, the same throat-clearing thing as now, followed by some vague remarks about not playing with matches. Like I said, Frank was the fire chief, and Jenny was a junior-school teacher, and I have no idea how they managed to maintain discipline. Assuming that they did, of course. Frank cleared his throat again, he clearly wasn’t sure where to start. So I decided to make it easier for him.

‘I’m not lying,’ I said. ‘Tom got eaten by the phone.’

Silence. Frank shot Jenny a resigned look, kind of playing the ball to her.

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‘Sweetie,’ Jenny said in a low, gentle voice. ‘There was no evidence there.’

‘Yes there was! They found the skid marks from my heels on the ground.’

‘Not from Tom,’ Frank said. ‘Nothing.’

‘The telephone swallowed everything.’ Obviously I could hear how crazy it sounded. But what was I supposed to say? That the telephone *hadn’t* eaten Tom?

‘What did the sheriff say?’ I asked.

Jenny and Frank exchanged another glance.

‘He thinks you’re in shock,’ Frank said.

I couldn’t say anything to that. I guess I *was* in shock; my body felt numb, my mouth dry and my throat sore. As if I felt like crying, but there was some sort of blockage stopping the tears from getting out.

We reached the hill where the telephone box was. I was expecting to see loads of lights and search parties, but it just stood there, dark and deserted, as usual.

‘But the sheriff promised they were going to look for Tom!’ I exclaimed.

‘They are,’ Frank said. ‘Down by the river.’

‘The river? Why?’

‘Because someone saw you and Tom heading into the forest towards the bridge. The sheriff said that when he asked if you’d been down by the river, you said no. Why did you say that?’

I gritted my teeth and stared out of the window. I watched the phone box disappear into the darkness behind us. The sheriff hadn’t told me someone had seen us. Perhaps he only found out about that after he’d spoken to me. And the talk hadn’t been a formal interview, he kept stressing that. So I thought I didn’t

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have to tell him absolutely everything, at least not the stuff that had nothing to do with what had happened, like the stolen Luke Skywalker figure or Tom doing something his parents had told him not to. You never grass on friends. But now we had been found out anyway.

‘We just stood on the bridge for a while,’ I said.

Frank flicked the indicator and pulled over at the side of the road. He turned towards me. I could hardly see his face in the darkness, but I knew it was serious now. For me, anyway, because Tom had already been eaten up.

‘Richard?’

‘Yes, Frank?’

He hated it when I used his name, but sometimes, like now, I couldn’t help it.

‘We had to remind Sheriff McClelland that you’re a minor, and threaten him with a lawyer to get him to let you go. He wanted to hold you overnight for questioning. He thinks something happened down by the river. And that that’s why you’re lying.’

I was about to deny that and say I wasn’t lying, then I realised that they had already found out that I had been.

‘So, what happened by the river?’ Frank asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘We looked at the water.’

‘From the bridge?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve heard that youngsters like trying to balance on the railing.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Well, it’s not like there’s much else to do around here.’

I carried on looking into the darkness. That was what had struck me when autumn arrived, just how dark it got here. In the city it was always light, but here you could stare into black night

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where there was absolutely nothing. I mean, obviously there was something there, but you couldn't help thinking it was hidden by all this strange dark stuff.

'Richard,' Jenny said, very, very softly. 'Did Tom fall in the water?'

'No, Jenny,' I replied, mimicking her gentle tone. 'Tom didn't fall in the water. Can we go home now? I've got school tomorrow.'

Frank's shoulders rose up, then relaxed, I could see he was getting ready to say something.

'Sheriff McClelland thinks it might have been an accident, that you pushed Tom and feel that it's your fault, and that that's why you're lying.'

I sighed deeply, hit my head against the back of the seat and closed my eyes. But all I could see was the telephone eating Tom's cheek, so I opened them again.

'I'm not lying,' I said. 'I lied about the river because Tom wasn't supposed to go there.'

'According to McClelland, there's proof that you're lying about something else as well.'

'Huh? What?'

Frank told me.

'He's the one lying!' I said. 'Drive back, I can prove it!'

When Frank pulled off the road, the headlights lit up the phone box and the trees on the edge of the forest, making it look like huge, shadowy ghosts were running past them. The car had barely stopped before I jumped out and ran to the phone box.

'Careful!' Jenny called. Not that I think she believed me, but her motto in life seemed to be that you could never be too careful.

I opened the door and stared at the telephone receiver, which

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was hung up next to the metal box. Someone – one of the sheriff's people, presumably – must have put it back, because when I left it was hanging down towards the floor and Tom was gone, leaving not so much as a shoelace behind.

I took a cautious step inside, grabbed the yellow telephone directory and backed out again. In the light from the car headlights I looked up Ballantyne, then found the entries for J and ran my finger down the same page I had opened that afternoon.

Johansen. Johnsen. Jones. Juvik.

I felt an icy chill in my chest, and started again. With the same result. Was I on the wrong page?

No, I recognised the other names and the advert for lawnmowers.

But Frank was right about what the sheriff had said.

I peered closer to see if someone could have removed the name, but there still wasn't enough space between *Johnsen* and *Jones*.

There was no longer a Jonasson, Imu in the phone book.

3

‘SOMEONE SWITCHED THE PHONE BOOK,’ I said. ‘That’s the only explanation I can come up with.’

Karen was sitting with her back against the oak tree, looking at me.

It was break time, and in front of us the boys were playing football and the girls were playing hopscotch. Next year we would be starting high school, but that just meant we would be moving to the building on the other side of the schoolyard, where there was a smoking area I was fairly confident I was going to end up in. Among the rebels. Among the losers. Karen was a bit of an exception. A rebel, but definitely not a loser.

‘How does it feel that no one believes you?’ she asked, brushing her boyish blonde fringe away from her freckled face. Karen was the crazy girl in class. And the smartest. She was always full

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of energy, laughter and mischief. She couldn't help dancing when she walked, she wore strange, home-made clothes that anyone else would have been teased about. She answered rude teachers back just as rudely, and laughed when they couldn't keep up with her. Because Karen had always done her homework and a bit more, so you sometimes got the feeling that she knew more than the teachers. She was top in English and top in PE, and top in everything in between. And she was tough. I noticed that on my very first day at the school: she wasn't afraid of me, just inquisitive. She talked to everyone, even those of us in the piranha caste. I could see Oscar Rossi Jr – who I'm pretty sure had a crush on Karen – casting long and rather curious glances at her during breaks when she stalked over to us on her long, thin legs rather than hang out with Oscar and the other popular kids. During the first break on my first day, she had just stood in front of me with her hands on her sides, tilted her head with a wry smile and said: 'Being new sucks, huh?'

She was like that with all of us in the bottom layer. Asked questions. Listened. And I think she was genuinely interested, because otherwise I couldn't see the point in expending energy to be liked by kids like us. All she got in return was us getting used to it and wanting even more of her attention. But she was fine with that too, and said things bluntly in such a Karen-way that no one got offended: 'We've talked enough for today now, Tom – bye!'

Obviously I made a real effort to make sure she wouldn't suspect me of wanting her attention.

The problem was that I suspected she had already figured that out.

She never said it, just looked at me with a half-smile of

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recognition whenever we had exchanged a few words and I took care to walk away from her before she walked away from me. It wasn't easy, because – unlike her – I didn't have anywhere else to go. But perhaps it still worked, perhaps she got curious about the city boy who was trying to resist her charms, because she came over to me more and more often.

'You know what?' I said. 'I don't give a damn what they think, they can go to hell. I was there, I saw what happened. Tom got eaten, and the name Imu Jonasson was in that damn phone book.'

'That's a lot of swearing in three sentences,' Karen said with a smile. 'Why are you so angry, do you think?'

'I'm not angry.'

'No?'

'I'm angry because . . .'

She waited.

'Because they're all idiots,' I said.

'Hmm,' she said, and looked at the others in the schoolyard. The boys in our class were evidently trying to play football against the year below, and were calling for Oscar Rossi Jr, who, although he was only the third or fourth best player, was still captain of the team. But Oscar waved them away. He was sitting on a bench with Henrik, the maths genius of the class, who was explaining something as he pointed at Oscar's algebra book. Even so, their body language suggested that it was Oscar doing Henrik the favour rather than the other way round. Oscar was evidently trying to concentrate; he pushed his thick, dark fringe back, looked down at the book with his brown, girlishly pretty eyes that made even some of the girls in high school cross the yard in an attempt to catch his eye. But at regular intervals, Oscar Jr looked up from the algebra book towards Karen and me.

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‘You’ve never said anything about your parents,’ Karen said, running a long, slender hand over some roots that were sticking out from the trunk like thick veins before diving back into the ground.

‘There’s not much to say,’ I said without looking away from the bench where Oscar Jr and Henrik were sitting. ‘They died in a fire, I can hardly remember them.’

Oscar looked up again, and his eyes met mine. My cold, blue eyes. Oscar Jr was always such a friendly, effusive and charming guy, but in a way that clearly didn’t annoy anyone but me. So when I now spotted a glimpse of hostility in his eyes, at first I assumed it was an automatic response to him seeing the same hostility in mine. Because it occurred to me that he – seeing as he was third or fourth smartest in class, even if he was light-years behind Karen – must have somehow figured out that I was the one who had stolen Luke Skywalker. Then I realised that it wasn’t that. He was – and the thought delighted me – jealous, pure and simple. Jealous because Karen was sitting here listening to me instead of hanging out with the alpha male. I suddenly got the urge to put my arm round Karen, just to see Oscar’s face turn green. But obviously she would have pushed my arm away, and I didn’t want to give him that satisfaction. I heard Karen’s calm, pleasant voice: ‘You mean you don’t remember anything about your parents?’

‘Sorry, I have a really bad memory. That’s why I do so badly in tests. That and the fact that I’m stupid, obviously.’

‘You’re not stupid, Richard.’

‘I was joking.’

‘I know. But sometimes if you tell a lie enough times, it becomes a bit true anyway.’

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The bell rang and I felt my heart sink. Not because we had to go in and listen to Miss Birdsong talk about geography – anything that could take my mind off Ballantyne was good – but because I would have liked this, what was happening here and now, to last a bit longer. As Karen stood up, two books slipped out of her bag.

‘Hey!’ I said, leaning forward to pick them up. I looked at the covers. One, with the name William Golding and the title *Lord of the Flies*, showed a severed pig’s head on a spike. The other, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, had a grotesque insect, a cockroach, maybe.

‘Nice. Where did you get hold of those?’

‘From Mrs Zimmer in the library,’ Karen said.

‘Wow, I didn’t know they had scary stuff like that there.’

‘Oh, Mrs Zimmer has much scarier stuff than these. Have you heard about black and white word magic?’

‘Yes. Well . . . er, no. What is it?’

‘Magic words that can destroy people or fix them again.’

‘And the lady in the library has books about that?’

‘So rumour has it,’ Karen said. ‘Do you read?’

‘No, I’m more of a cinema guy.’ I handed her the books. ‘What about you – do you like films?’

‘I love films,’ she said with a sigh. ‘But I haven’t seen many.’

‘Why not?’

‘For a start, it’s an hour and a half to Hume, and everyone I know only wants to see action films and comedies.’

‘If there was a cinema here, what would you go and see, then?’

She thought about it. ‘Anything except action and comedies. I like old films, the ones that get shown on television. I know I sound like an old woman now, but Mum’s right. If a film hasn’t been forgotten, it’s probably good.’

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